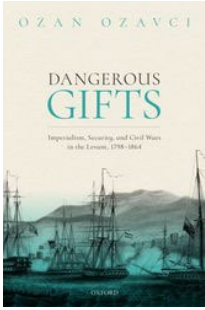




## Journal of Anglo-Turkish Relations Volume 3 Number 2 June 2022

Ozan Özavcı, *Dangerous Gifts: Imperialism, Security, and Civil Wars in the Levant, 1798-1864*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).<sup>1</sup>

Çiğdem BALIM<sup>2</sup>



The name of the book comes from Fouad Ajami's book *The Foreigner's Gift: The Americans, the Arabs and the Iraqis in Iraq*<sup>3</sup>, where he promotes the occupation of Iraq by the United States. Ajami claims that it was now the United States' moment in Iraq and its driving motivation should be 'modernising the Arab world'. He refers to the occupation as a legitimate 'imperial mission', a foreigner's gift to the Iraqi inhabitants. (p. 366). In *Dangerous Gifts*, Ozavci tells us how foreign power involvement in the Middle East in the 20th century is no different than that of the 19th century, when the self-defined Great Powers (Austria-Hungary, Britain, France, Prussia, and Russia) had assumed responsibility, either individually or collectively, for supplying security in the region even when the sovereign authority was opposed to their intervention.

The Eastern Question provides the framework of the book, and Ozavci gives an account of the evolution of the term over the years. In the late eighteenth century, before the term Eastern Question was coined, the Vienna order<sup>4</sup> held the rivalries between the Great Powers in check and the Eastern Question referred mostly to the Russian plans for the partition of the Ottoman Empire. After the invasion of Egypt by France in 1798, it referred to the French expansionism in the Levant. In the 1810s, it was about placing the Ottoman Empire under the guarantee of European public law in order to address Russo-Ottoman differences. In the 1820s, it referred to the diplomatic quandary over the 'Greek crisis'. A decade later it was used in relation to suppressing a civil war in the Ottoman world that had enabled Russia to establish dominant

<sup>1</sup> <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/dangerous-gifts-9780198852964?cc=nl&lang=en&>

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<sup>3</sup> Ajami, Fouad. *The Foreigner's Gift: The Americans, the Arabs and the Iraqis in Iraq* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> During the peace negotiations in Paris in March and May 1814, "the leading empires-Austria, Britain, Prussia, Russia, and later France-came to officially style themselves as a separate category, 'the Great Powers', and introduced new hierarchies into international politics on the continent. Nearly a century before the formation of the League of Nations, the five claimed managerial responsibilities to form an exclusive security system, the Congress or Vienna system, which aimed at precluding a return to the horrors of the Napoleonic Wars that had devastated Europe in the past three decades". p. 107



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## **Journal of Anglo-Turkish Relations Volume 3 Number 2 June 2022**

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control over the Porte. And then, in the 1840s, it was repurposed as an issue of ‘civilisation’ to be dealt with globally. (p. 10) By late 1855-6 the Ottoman Empire became financially dependent on European banks and syndicates, and it becomes clear that the history of the financial colonisation of the Middle East did not begin in the post-World War II Middle East after the independence of various colonies, but with the financial turn of the Eastern Question. Finally, in 1922-3, with the Lausanne Peace Treaty, which marked the end of the Ottoman Empire and the end of the World War I for the Middle East, the Eastern Question was laid to rest.

Ozavci’s poses the crucial question: in the history of the Middle East, were the roles played by the locals themselves only those of ‘bargaining chips’, ‘junior partners in the power game’, or ‘trouble-makers’? We barely read about ‘the lives, ideas, emotions and threat perceptions, and interests of Levantines themselves’ and therefore perhaps we should pay ‘particular attention to the part that the local actors played in enabling interventionism and in the production of violence in the Levant.’ (p. 4). The detailed accounts of the Ottoman imperial subjects, both in the Porte and outside, and power struggles and differences of opinion among them show that the men of power began to seek the aid of one or more Great Power against their rival pashas or their Ottoman overlords. The struggle and fights among these locals were heightened by Great Power involvement creating an ever-increasing demand for security in the Middle East. Starting with the invasion of Egypt by France in 1789, he details his answer to the question.

The book starts with Napoleon Bonaparte’s occupation of Egypt in 1798, which symbolises the beginning of intensified inter-imperial rivalries in the Levant. At the time the Great Powers, which had different interests and rivalries, were coming to realise that strategic cooperation was the only means to ensure European security while maximising their imperial interests. They had to act together, making concessions where they can for a greater good. But the invasion of Egypt was also significant because the Powers came to assume the right to supply security in the Middle East for the ‘benefit’ of the locals, whose realities and complex dynamics they failed to see. The invasion also carried the arrogance of Enlightenment thought that enlightenment can be taught to others, and it can be used to civilise others. Before the French invasion, Egypt had already been in turmoil and was suffering persistent civil wars, and the invasion only heightened existing hostilities. The book draws many parallels with the more recent American invasion of Iraq post 9/11 for regime change: in both cases there were some natives who welcomed this ‘gift’ from the West.

Mehmet Ali Pasha, the governor of Egypt, made use of the Napoleonic Wars politically (he managed to remain in power), economically (he made immense profits by selling grain and other agricultural products to warring European Powers), and he built on reforms introduced under the



## **Journal of Anglo-Turkish Relations Volume 3 Number 2 June 2022**

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French rule in 1798-1801. After the war he recruited former-French officers (from Bonaparte's disbanded armies) to help him reform his own army, navy, and bureaucracy. The book gives a detailed account of the Ottoman Empire's struggles and the role of Mehmet Ali in the downfall of the Empire becomes very clear to the reader. Mehmet Ali's aim was to expand his rule and control Syria with his more advanced army. Meanwhile the Ottoman elites such as the Ottoman ambassador to Paris, Mehmed Said Halet Efendi (1761–1822) had already been in dissidence when Mehmed Ali Paşa rose against Istanbul in 1831-2. (p. 106-12). In 1833 the Russian intervention divided the Powers: France was supporting Cairo, and the rest were supporting Istanbul. Meanwhile the civil war and sectarian violence in Mount Lebanon continued and the Great Powers intervened in 1840. Hence, the book is also very much about the local actors at the Porte such as Hüsrev Paşa, the Sultan's serasker (the Ottoman equivalent of Minister of War), an age-old personal enemy of Mehmet Ali of Egypt, or Mustafa Reşid Paşa, one of the architects of the Gülhane Edict that ushered in the Tanzimat reforms, and Sultan Mahmud II's son-in-law Said Paşa, as well as their followers and colleagues. The book follows these actors taking the side of different foreign powers as well as their struggles with each other.

A section of the book is devoted to Lebanon and its history, and Ozavci gives in detail how over the years sectarianism was already an important aspect of inter-elite, and the class struggles before the Tanzimat and finally the 1840 intervention. We read about Richard Wood, the Ottoman/British agent who arrived in Lebanon and distributed arms to the Christians of the region, who were traditionally under French protection. He was then appointed as the British Consul in Damascus where he would play a key mediating role between local and Ottoman authorities during the Maronite-Druze wars in 1842 and 1845. In late 1840 and early 1841, after the Ottoman rule was restored in Syria, for about six months, Wood was very influential. The French agents in Syria reported back to Paris, that Wood was acting like the 'de facto governor general of Syria'. (p. 246) Ozavci claims that the semi-autonomous administrative model implemented in Mount Lebanon in 1864 inspired the administrative model introduced through the mediation of Great Powers in Crete by 1869. Then again during the 1910s, when a civil war broke out between the Armenians and the Kurds in eastern Anatolia, the Powers intervened diplomatically, and again took their inspiration from the Lebanese experience.

Another interesting and useful point about Ozavci's book is that using primary sources and by placing the events in the Ottoman Empire onto a larger world stage, it helps us to understand and interpret important events like the Gülhane Edict, and the introduction of the concept of civilisation (medeniyet) to the Empire. The term 'civilisation' was coined and systematically invoked in international political thought after the French and Scottish Enlightenments in the



## **Journal of Anglo-Turkish Relations Volume 3 Number 2 June 2022**

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second half of the eighteenth century. It was translated as ‘medeniyet’ in Ottoman Turkish political lexicology, and introduced first in an editorial of the official newspaper Takvim-i Vekayi (The Chronicle of Events), and then with Reşid’s letters from Paris to Istanbul in the 1830 following its usage in French political thought. By the 1850s ‘medeniyetçilik’ (civilisationism) emerged as a semi-official ideology of the Ottoman Empire. (p. 184)

‘Dangerous Gifts’ is divided into three parts:

Part I, ‘Avant le mot’, discusses the beginnings of Great Power interventions in the eighteenth century under the shadow of the unfolding Eastern Question.

Part II, ‘The Invention of the Eastern Question’ scrutinises the implications of the formation of the Vienna Order in Europe for the Levant at the time when the term ‘Eastern Question’ was coined and gradually became prevalent in international political parlance.

In Part III, ‘The Mountain’, the author gives a detailed history of Lebanon (Mount Lebanon). Through the story of the Jumblatts, a Druze family that had lived through wars and violence in the Levant for centuries, it considers how the intervention changed the lives of the Lebanese themselves.

Ozan Ozavci<sup>5</sup> uses an extensive number of primary sources from the Russian, American, English, Scottish, Turkish, Egyptian archives, including embassy letters, official and private correspondence. He follows the events from the perspectives of different agents through the use of these primary sources, moving the reader gradually from 1798 to the end of the 19th century, before turning to the 20th century in the Epilogue. The thirty page select bibliography (p. 371-401) also contains practically every secondary source on the subject.

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<<https://thelausanneproject.com>> in 2023, a conference will be organised in London for the launch of the edited volume containing the contributions of the members of the project.