

# Commentary

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## The Eastern Question

Empires of the Sand:  
The Struggle for Mastery in  
the Middle East, 1789-1923  
by Efraim Karsh & Inari Karsh

Harvard, 409 pp. \$29.95

Reviewed by  
Daniel Pipes

IN A *tour de force* that offers a profoundly new understanding of a key issue in modern Middle Eastern history, Efraim and Inari Karsh review the relations between Europe and the Ottoman empire in the final century-and-a-half of the latter's existence, and in the process nearly reverse the standard historical interpretation. According to that interpretation, from about the time of the French Revolution until World War I, a dynamic, arrogant, imperial Europe imposed its will on a static, humiliated, supine East. This framework is common to nearly every leading historian, almost regardless of era or political disposition.

Thus, in the first half of this century, when diplomatic history was in vogue, the notion of an active Europe and a passive Middle East undergirded the whole study of the "Eastern Question": that huge set of international issues created by the weakness of the Ottoman empire and its gradual dissolution. Almost without exception, studies of this topic concentrated on decisions made in London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, and Moscow—with little notice given to Istanbul, Cairo, and Teheran, locales that basically serve as the background for European action. Right at the start of *A Peace to End All Peace* (1989), his excellent survey of the impact of World War I

on the Middle East, David Fromkin makes this point explicit: "Middle Eastern personalities, circumstances, and political cultures," he writes, "do not figure a great deal in the narrative that follows, except when I suggest the outlines and dimensions of what European politicians were ignoring when they made their decisions."

Even scholars who focus on the Middle East itself have accepted this premise. L. Carl Brown, the distinguished Princeton historian, observes that the modern Middle East "has been so continuously interlocked with the West as to have become almost an appendage of the Western political system." In his masterful survey, *The Middle East: A Brief History of the Last 2,000 Years* (1996), Bernard Lewis offers a more nuanced formulation, writing that after 1800, "the course of events in the Middle East [was] profoundly influenced, and in times of crisis dominated, by the interests, ambitions, and actions of the European Great Powers."

Here is where the Karshes, a husband-and-wife team, step in. In *Empires of the Sand*, they characterize the standard account as "fundamentally misconceived." Middle Easterners, they assert, "were not hapless victims of predatory imperial powers but active participants in the restructuring of their region." Put more directly:

Twentieth-century Middle Eastern history is essentially the culmination of long-standing indigenous trends, passions, and patterns of behavior rather than an externally imposed dictate. Great-power influences, however potent, have played a secondary role, constituting neither the primary force behind the region's political development nor the main cause of its notorious volatility.

DRAWING ON a wide range of original sources, and writing in a clearly organized fashion and in fast-paced prose, the Karshes make a very compelling case for their revisionist position, establishing it point by point and in elegant detail.

Let me draw attention to three points where their researches are of particular significance. First, why did the Ottomans decide—disastrously, as it turned out—to enter World War I on the German side? In the consensus view, this resulted from (in the phrasing of the historian Howard M. Sachar) a "stupendous" coup by Berlin, which pulled the wool over the eyes of the credulous Ottomans. The Karshes find this exactly wrong; they show how Ottoman leaders initiated talks with Germany to explore an alliance, and document the lukewarm reception accorded to these addresses by many German officials. Far from having been dictated by Berlin, the Ottoman decision was a supremely reckless gamble by headstrong young rulers engaged in "an imperialist bid for territorial expansion and restoration of lost glory." It was also "by far the most important decision in the history of the modern Middle East," leading as it soon did to the fall of the empire and the emergence of the strife-filled order that still prevails today.

A second point involves the modern Arab dream of a single Arabic-speaking country stretching from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf. The standard account blames European maneuvering for the failure of this grand ambition, but once again the Karshes turn the argument on its head. Left to their own fractious politics, the Arabs, they suggest, would actually have ended up with even more, and smaller, states than was the case: "great-power interference ensured the advent of a string of Middle Eastern

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\* This book would have been better served with a more accurate subtitle, for it deals not with the Middle East as such but with the Ottoman state—which explains why the Balkans receive more attention than Iran.



states that were significantly larger than the political entities that would otherwise have been created."

Finally, there is the notoriously disputed subject of Middle Eastern boundaries. Arabs routinely heap blame on the Sykes-Picot agreement of May 1916—a secret deal by Britain, France, and Russia to divide up the Middle East—for their still-festering border quarrels. In *The Arab Awakening*, a very influential study published in 1938, George Antonius denounced that agreement as a "shocking document" and a "breach of faith" by the great powers. Still today, the Assad regime ruling in Syria denounces the long-ago Sykes-Picot deal as the source of the "false borders" that divide the Middle East and have caused so many problems. Most scholars echo this view. But the Karshes boldly present Sykes-Picot as honorable—an honest attempt by the British to reconcile their prior obligations to

France with their new ones to the Arabs. In a statement bound to cause scholarly heartburn, they praise Sykes-Picot as the "first ever great-power recognition of the Arabs' right to self-determination."

On a wide range of other issues, too, this wall-to-wall revisionist account upends the conventional narrative. It establishes that Ottoman (and not Russian) aggressiveness caused the Turks to lose control of the Balkans; that Great Britain found itself ruling Egypt more on account of Ottoman mistakes than out of its own imperial desires; that the Arab Revolt of World War I was inspired less by nationalist sentiments or other "lofty ideals" than by "the glitter of British gold." More broadly, the Karshes also turn around the usual argument for British duplicity in World War I, pinning this charge instead on the Arabs. Arab leaders, they demonstrate, made fraudulent claims about the extent of their own political authority, gave empty promises of military action, and bargained continuously with the Central Powers with an eye to double-crossing the British.

IN ALL, I can hardly remember last reading so important and daring a reinterpretation of Middle Eastern history, or one so laden with implications. Already the Karshes' radical rejection of prevailing wisdom has prompted strong reactions from the scholarly community, as anyone visiting the relevant websites can attest. In time, indeed, some of their views may end up being refuted or heavily qualified. Nevertheless, their key ideas are likely to prevail, and even to become the new standard account. And who knows? This book could eventually affect the academic study of other areas of East-West contact, including Africa, India, and East Asia.

Conceivably it could affect political attitudes as well—and much for the better. *Empires of the Sand* shreds the main reason for Europeans to feel guilt-ridden toward the Mid-

dle East. If Sykes-Picot was not a "breach of faith," and if the British and French generally behaved with at least as much honor as their Middle Eastern counterparts, might not the British, the French, and other Europeans begin to rethink their stock responses to the issues that currently bedevil the region?

And why stop with Europeans? Arab Middle Easterners have long sought comfort in the notion of their victimization at the hands of the perfidious, conspiratorial West. By coming instead to accept that they themselves largely created their own destiny and made their own history in the 20th century, they might persuade themselves they can do the same in the 21st—only this time by throwing off their habitual sense of grievance, reigning in their autocratic rulers, reforming their moribund economies, and overcoming their radical ideologies.