

MOSTAFA MINAWI, *The Ottoman Scramble for Africa: Empire and Diplomacy in the Sahara and the Hijaz* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016). Pp. 240. \$24.95 paper. ISBN 9780804795142.

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In *The Ottoman Scramble for Africa: Empire and Diplomacy in the Sahara and the Hijaz*, Mostafa Minawi offers an invigorating analysis of the Ottoman Empire's later and supposedly crepuscular decades. He takes the reader on a tour from Istanbul to Berlin, the eastern Sahara, the Lake Chad basin, and the Hijaz that revisits conventional knowledge about colonial history, international diplomacy, and Ottoman imperialism between 1880 and 1902. Rather than sick, old, semicivilized, and mute, the Ottoman Empire in Minawi's analysis appears agile, flexible, expansionist, and eager to reinvent itself as a global power dexterous with the "new tricks" of the post-Berlin age of "new imperialism," an era which the author characterizes as "marked by the significance of frontiers in determining the fate of empires" (12). Frontiers, or rather "frontiers-cum-borderlands," indeed play a central role in Minawi's analysis. First, he approaches them as privileged locales for imperial rivalry among different empires: after 1880, he argues, the Ottoman government was not simply surviving or sheepishly withdrawing from competitive imperialism along its edges. Rather, it was consciously and competitively deploying "a multileveled expansionist Ottoman strategy" on both its African and Arabian fringes (4). Second, Minawi considers both the Saharan and the Hijazi frontiers as lookout points over the attitudes of governmental administrators at various levels toward the Bedouin population, the negotiations that ensued, and the relationships that developed. Minawi also makes a convincing case for the necessity of a "transimperial" or "intraimperial" study of frontiers: in a word, for the need to examine the African and Arabian edges of the empire simultaneously and transversally. He argues that the outcome of the Ottoman expansionist experiment in central Africa

explains Istanbul's policies on the Red Sea. Minawi acknowledges that this might have been because the strategists experiencing the first and testing the latter were often drawn from the same relatively small circle. However, more importantly, the African-Arabian connection highlights the fact that Ottoman bureaucrats followed a logic that eschews the boundaries of post-imperial nation-states.

Chapter 1, mainly historiographical in character, is aimed at tracing the emergence of the Sanusi order as the *de facto* leader of the eastern Sahara at the end of the nineteenth century. It illustrates the vision of Abdül Hamid II's regime for expanding Ottoman sovereignty deep into the Sahara and Lake Chad basin after 1885. Minawi argues that "the Ottoman state's policy and the Sanusi philosophy of administration were ideologically synchronistic" and that "their work on the ground was complementary, cooperative, and at times even synergetic" (36). The success of the Sanusi order in coordinating trade, education, and political activity in the eastern Sahara, Minawi claims, must have been viewed favorably by Istanbul at times of post-1885 growing imperial competition over central Africa. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 linger on in the same region. The second chapter explains how Istanbul entered the race for Africa with a plan to expand its territorial claims south into the Sahara and the Lake Chad basin. Against much traditional historiography, it shows that tax revenue was not the main concern of Istanbul in the Libyan desert and it argues that Istanbul both established a partnership with the Sanusi leadership and built telegraph lines to assert the Ottoman state's presence. Chapter 3 analyzes the events leading up to the forging of a covert military alliance between Istanbul and the Sanusi order. Not only did Istanbul cultivate the Ottoman-Sanusi political alliance and create a secret Ottoman-Sanusi military front, but it also assumed a more aggressive diplomatic posture toward the empire's European competitors. Ultimately, Minawi argues, Istanbul relinquished the notion that it could expand its territorial claims in central Africa according to the standing international agreements and decided instead to forge a military alliance with the local population. Chapter 4 shifts from Ottoman efforts at territorial expansion to Istanbul's consolidation and resistance along the empire's southern borderlands. The chapter leads the reader up to 1899 and the French-British agreement stemming from the Fashoda Crisis, which rendered the Act of Berlin null and void. The chapter also includes a discussion of the ways in which the inter-imperial competition over Africa, and Muslim central Africa in particular, entered the Ottoman public domain via the press. Chapter

5 moves on to the Arabian “frontiers-cum-borderlands.” It focuses on the Damascus-Mecca telegraph line, exemplifying Istanbul’s shift toward the consolidation of its hold on the empire’s increasingly vulnerable frontiers. Minawi interprets Ottoman approaches toward its telegraph network from the standpoint of Ottoman participation into the scramble for Africa. By taking into account the opinions of imperial, provincial, and local power brokers, he incidentally puts to a test the idea that the Hamidian state was an autocracy. Chapter 6 reiterates the idea that Istanbul’s decision to undertake the bold telegraph project in the Hijaz needs to be interpreted in light of the Ottomans’ exclusion from the colonial race in Africa. It also proposes that the Hamidian regime’s approach to managing its relationship with the Bedouin tribes on the Arabian frontiers from 1900 to 1902 stemmed from its experience with the Saharan Bedouins between 1885 and 1900.

Imperial history is where the book’s historiographical contributions come to the fore. First, Minawi convincingly advocates for the inclusion of the Ottoman Empire in studies of late-nineteenth-century colonialism, and for the necessity to examine inter-imperial diplomacy. By showing that the Ottoman Empire’s reasons for colonial expansion were no less complex than those of the British and the French, he succeeds in adding nuance to the well-trodden literature on British-French rivalry in Africa. Second, he explores the ways in which infrastructure came to tie the colony to the metropole. Through his study of the expansion of the Ottoman telegraphic networks, he shows that telegraph lines were among the most practical and cost-effective ways to prove “effective occupation” in those vast areas that could not be directly colonized. Finally, he enriches imperial history by accounting for the multiplicity and multivocality of imperial actors: in his discussion of Ottoman imperial plans, he takes stock of the internal rifts among the various levels of the Ottoman government and includes an array of characters, ranging from diplomats, to telegraph technicians, to corrupt governor-generals. He does so by nimbly intertwining diplomatic history with the microhistories of a few illustrious men, the Ottoman diplomat Sadik al-Mouayad Azmzade especially. One wishes the book could have included more concrete details about the “trials and tribulations of Ottoman diplomats, international legal advisors, and men on the spot” (61), as well as Sanusi and Bedouin collaborators and rivals, in order to put a human face on diplomatic history and lend even further strength to the author’s claims on the contested nature and fallibility of Abdül Hamid II’s imperial policies. However, the author himself admits that the

book's perspective is that of Istanbul as the empire's epicenter of power because of the available sources. Unlike most scholarship on the Ottoman Empire's African frontiers, Minawi privileges Ottoman archival records, which he uses along with British archival sources and Arabic and Ottoman Turkish contemporary newspapers, journals, travelogues, and other publications from archives in Beirut, Damascus, Istanbul, London, Sofia, and Washington. Occasionally, he discusses the biases intrinsic in some of the sources he employs, as well as the distorted perceptions of contemporary observers, such as British consul Cecil Wood (58, 133). A more explicit discussion of the "important dimensions of world history that we miss when we assume that the Ottoman Empire can be dismissed or ignored in the study of imperialism in the Age of Empire" (3) might have added yet another layer to an already crucially important book. Apart from the interchangeable use of "transimperial" and "intraimperial," the author makes an appreciable effort to craft an enjoyable narrative. The book is accessible to a broad audience that includes fellow scholars and undergraduate students alike. *The Ottoman Scramble for Africa* is a must-go resource for those venturing out to the frontiers of imperial history, as well as those working in Ottoman history, Middle East history, and African history.