

## Unraveling the Tapestry of the Ottoman Empire

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### Abstract:

*Losing Istanbul: Arab-Ottoman Imperialists and the End of Empire* by Mostafa Minawi presents a comprehensive reassessment of the decline of the Ottoman Empire, with a particular focus on the agency of Arab-Ottoman imperialists. The study challenges established historiographical narratives and emphasized the proactive engagement of Arab-Ottoman actors in shaping historical trajectories.

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#### German Abstract:

*Losing Istanbul: Arab-Ottoman Imperialists and the End of Empire* von Mostafa Minawi bietet eine umfassende Neubewertung des Niedergangs des Osmanischen Reiches, wobei der Schwerpunkt auf dem Wirken der arabisch-osmanischen Imperialisten liegt. Die Studie stellt etablierte historiographische Narrative in Frage und betont das proaktive Engagement arabisch-osmanischer Akteure bei der Gestaltung historischer Entwicklungen.

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Minawi, Mostafa: *Losing Istanbul: Arab-Ottoman Imperialists and the End of Empire*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2022. 326 pages, 30 USD. ISBN: 978-1-50-363404-6.

In *Losing Istanbul: Arab-Ottoman Imperialists and the End of Empire*, Mostafa Minawi, Associate Professor of history and Director of Critical Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Studies at Cornell University, draws on a wealth of primary sources and archival materials to reconstruct the motivations and actions of Arab-Ottoman imperialists illustrate the role they played in the complex dynamics of the Ottoman Empire's decline and the tumult of the early twentieth century. Focusing on the minutest details of late Ottoman history, *Losing Istanbul* offers a "sense of life in its joys and sorrows, triumphs and losses, generosity of spirit, and moral depravity that stems from pride, prejudice, and the confusion of losing one's place in the world" (p. 18) The book makes readers feel like they are experiencing the era themselves and encourages them to understand and empathize with the people who lived in this time and place.

Minawi begins his study by describing the political situation of the Ottoman Empire in the 1880s, when Arab-Ottoman families he examines establish their dwellings in Istanbul. In the introduction, the reader's attention is drawn to the careful depiction of the transformation of the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the nineteenth century and to the opportunities that these changes created for people who had previously been on the margins of the Empire. This period also allows for a nuanced examination of the various factors that contributed to the demise of the Ottoman Empire, with a particular focus on the aspirations and actions of Arab-Ottoman figures. The study unfolds against the backdrop of early twentieth century groundbreaking transformations in the geopolitical landscape of the Ottoman Empire. Minawi directs attention towards the possibility of socioeconomic advancement and social mobility as envisaged by the two main characters of the study. Those are Sadik al-Mu'ayyad Azmzade and Shafiq al-Mu'ayyad Azmzade, who began their journey in the imperial capital (Istanbul) and positioned themselves in an advantageous environment to strategically navigate the Ottoman

administrative echelons. The former rose through the military ranks of the Empire, while the latter had a successful political and diplomatic career. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concept of habitus, the author examines the protagonists' internalized dispositions and behaviors that influence their decisions and actions, while still allowing "space for adaptation" (p. 106). And the protagonists of Minawi's study indeed needed to adapt, as unfortunately, the centuries-old Empire on which they depended and in which they had invested their careers would collapse within their lifetimes. As the Ottoman Empire struggled to cope with internal dissent, external pressures, and the aftermath of World War I, Arab-Ottoman imperialists emerged as major actors seeking to shape the fate of the empire.

The first three chapters explore one of the central themes of the book, the tension between pan-Arabism and Ottoman nationalism. The Arab-Ottoman figures, disillusioned with the centralizing tendencies of the Ottoman state and at the same time inspired by the idea of Arab unity, sought to assert their own vision of the region's future against the political agenda of the Ottoman Empire. Mostafa Minawi analyzes the complexities of Arab nationalism, highlighting the diverse motivations and aspirations that drove Arab-Ottoman imperialists. For example, in the life of one of the study's protagonists, Sadik al-Mu'ayyad Azmzade, who spent much of his life outside the Empire, encountering Russian royalty and experiencing the losses of the Ottoman army (cf. p. 100–106), we observe multiple layers of belonging. The author meticulously examines the strategies of the Arab-Ottoman imperialists, ranging from political mobilization to armed resistance challenging Ottoman authority. What is pivotal for Minawi "is understanding the how and the why of family members representing themselves, over the last few decades of the empire, through written records" (p. 17). Hence following these primary sources, he explores the ways in which crucial events for the Ottoman Empire, such as "major political upheavals after the Young Turk Revolution in 1908, World War I, and the breakup of the empire, impacted their [of Sadik and Shafiq] own notion of belonging and identification" (p. 17).

Minawi's book culminates with the fall of Istanbul in the early twentieth century. The result of this crucial event was the establishment of new nation-states throughout the Middle East and the forced Turkification of the Arab-Ottomans not only in the capital, but the rest of the Empire as well. However, rather than viewing these events as inevitable or solely the result of external intervention, Minawi emphasizes Arab-Ottoman agency and provides valuable insights into the

complexities of Ottoman decline. Given this perspective, some readers may find the focus on Arab-Ottoman imperialists somewhat limiting. A more comprehensive examination of the broader socio-economic, cultural, and geopolitical dynamics that shaped the Empire's decline might have further enriched the analysis. However, given the territory size, the intensified social mobility and multicultural mosaic within the Empire, one must admit that Mostafa Minawi's groundbreaking and unique research provides us with plenty of information and great insight into an insufficiently studied topic. Minawi's book not only breaks new ground but exceeds expectations in adding perspective to the understanding of the Ottoman Empire.

In summary, *Losing Istanbul* presents a critical reassessment of conventional narratives regarding the fall of Istanbul and the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. Minawi argues that traditional historiography often portrays Arab-Ottoman actors as victims or pawns at the hands of external powers; this book is a great attempt to counter this scholarship. By foregrounding their agency, Minawi offers a fresh perspective on Ottoman decline, emphasizing the complexity of intra-imperial dynamics and challenging deterministic interpretations attributing the empire's decline solely to external intervention or inherent weaknesses. Minawi's meticulous research, nuanced analysis, and interdisciplinary approach significantly contribute to our understanding of the complexities of identity, nationalism, and state-building in the modern era. Rich in detail and analytical depth, the book is essential for scholars and enthusiasts seeking deeper insights into this period of the Ottoman Empire, as well as its present legacies for the region.