

Creating Arab Nationalism? Russia and Greece in Ottoman Syria and Palestine (1840–1909)

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Since late antiquity up to the late 1800s religion remained the dominant identity in Greater Syria as well as in many other parts of the Middle East and Europe. Western ideas of modern nationalism politicized ethnicity for the first time in history – the phenomenon often misleadingly described as ‘national awakening’. In this context of the late 1800s, Greece and Russia competed for the hearts, minds, and souls of Arab Orthodox Christians but for different reasons.

The Greek government and its local sympathizers sought to include them in the greater Hellenic nation and feared losing them to pan-Slavism. This modern ethnocentric logic was far less important to Russian intellectuals and government officials. Their cognitive map remained largely traditional because Russia was a multiconfessional dynastic empire¹ whose political prestige in the area had long depended on the promotion of Orthodoxy. For these cultural and political reasons, Russian diplomats and publicists had relied on cooperation with the Ottoman Greek high clergy and saw their main opponent in Syria not in pan-Hellenism but in other European great powers. Russia was slowly drawn into creating some of the earliest autonomous Arab national institutions² based on the patriarchates of Jerusalem and especially Antioch to prevent mass defections to Catholicism and Protestantism.

By contrasting Russian and Greek attitudes and policies to Syrian Christians, the article suggests that religion had remained a powerful element of culture and politics in Russia and the Ottoman Empire before 1914. This argument will contribute to the ongoing debate about the strength of dynastic and religious identities and institutions. As in historical studies, it is widely accepted in political science literature that national identity and the nation-state are key elements of modernity and as such they inevitably supersede traditional religious and dynastic institutions.³ Explicitly or implicitly they justify the break-up of multireligious and multiethnic empires as well as the resulting bloody conflicts as unstoppable and even progressive developments.

Recently, there has been some interest in resistance to the hegemony of nationalism. After a disturbing series of genocides and ethnic cleansings of the twentieth century, scholars are turning a more sympathetic eye to the experience of multiethnic

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