

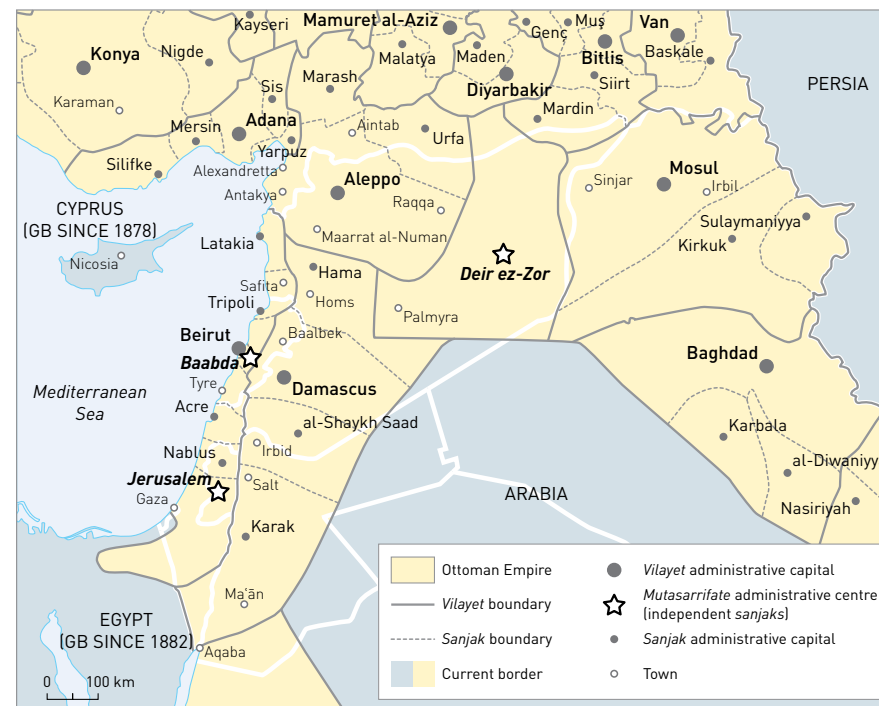
Foreign Domination

The Ottoman Empire: An Apparent Modernity

Following the Syrian offensive by Ibrahim Pasha, son of the viceroy of Egypt, Muhammad Ali, in the Near East (1832–40) and Ottoman military defeats in the Caucasus and the Balkans, the sultan decided to launch a policy of modernisation (the Tanzimat reforms of 1839) for his empire, in order to oppose the European powers that hoped to divide the Ottoman Empire among themselves. The fight against Bedouins, the establishment of a land registry (cadastre), and especially the transition from an indirect to a direct administrative structure were the three main axes of this program. However, the hostility of the populations and the pressure exerted by the European powers led the Ottomans to grant autonomy to two specific territories: the region of Jerusalem in 1856, after the Treaty of Paris that brought an end to the Crimean War, and Mount Lebanon in 1861, after the intervention of France in Lebanon in order to protect the Christians from a massacre. Both became autonomous territories (*mutasarrifates*). The Jazira Bedouins also attained a degree of autonomy, not due to the intervention of any foreign power but because the empire was unable to control them.

Aleppo and Damascus were the two main cities in the region, each with more than 100,000 inhabitants spread over a vast hinterland reaching well beyond the borders of present-day Syria. Aleppo ruled over a *vilayet* (T. province) that extended to the south of Anatolia, encompassing Urfa (Şanlıurfa), Aintab (Gaziantep), and Marash. The vilayet of Syria (or Damascus vilayet) in turn reached from Hama to Maʿān, at the edges of the Arabian Desert. Spurred by the Ottoman reformist policies, the sedentary population began to reconquer the land that had been abandoned to the Bedouins. The city oligarchies invested in the creation of large agricultural estates whose production compensated the reduced revenues of the transit trade, which had been in decline since the sixteenth century. The Levantine coastline achieved greater economic prosperity than the inland regions by developing its relations with Europe. Lebanon benefited particularly from the development of silkworm breeding and the delocalisation of the spinning mills of Lyon. From the middle of the nineteenth century Beirut gained an advantage over its rivals (Acre, Sidon, and Tripoli) as a result of the construction of a modern port that became the

ADMINISTRATIVE ORGANISATION OF THE MIDDLE EAST IN 1888

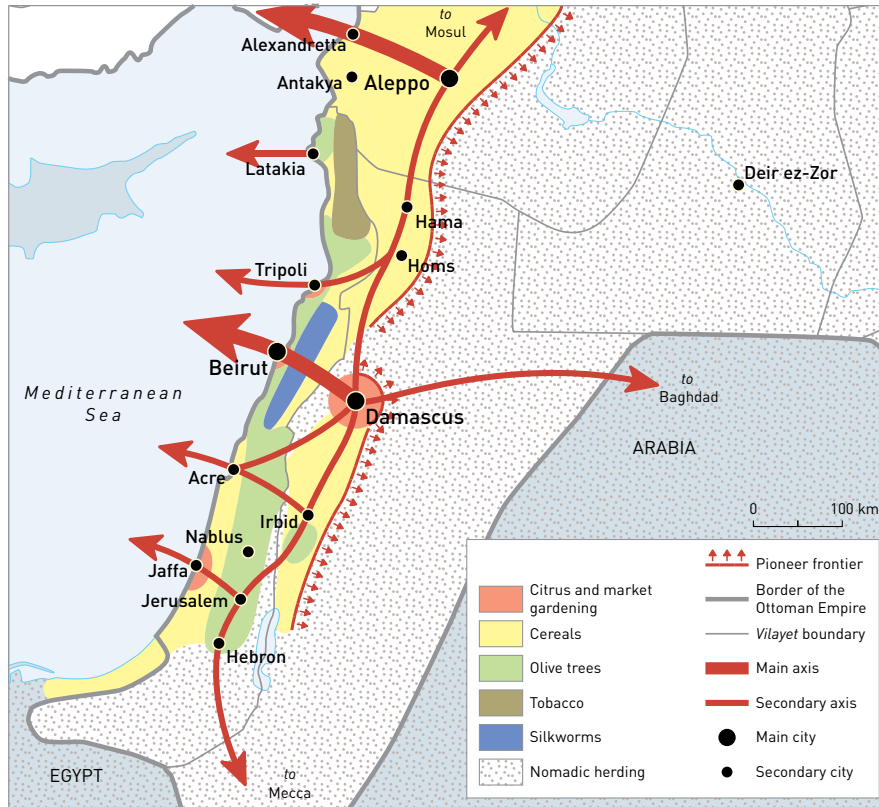


Source: *Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients*.

main seaport of the Levant. The city became the seat of a narrow but extended Ottoman province reaching from Latakia in the north to Gaza in the south.

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the military occupation of Egypt by Great Britain in 1882 increased the pressure on the Near East, subsequently perceived by the British as one of the most strategic zones. Jewish settlement in Palestine coincided with the imperial strategy of Great Britain, which supported the initiative, especially as the British prime minister could not refuse the Rothschild bank, which had facilitated Britain's repurchase of the shares of the Suez Canal held by Egypt in 1879. To counter Great Britain, the sultan favoured the interests of France and Germany in the region, most notably through the construction of a network of roads, then of railways, managed by companies from both countries. The Hejaz railway linked Damascus and Mecca, and, in 1912, by means of what the Germans called the *Bagdadbahn*

THE ECONOMY BEYOND AGRICULTURE

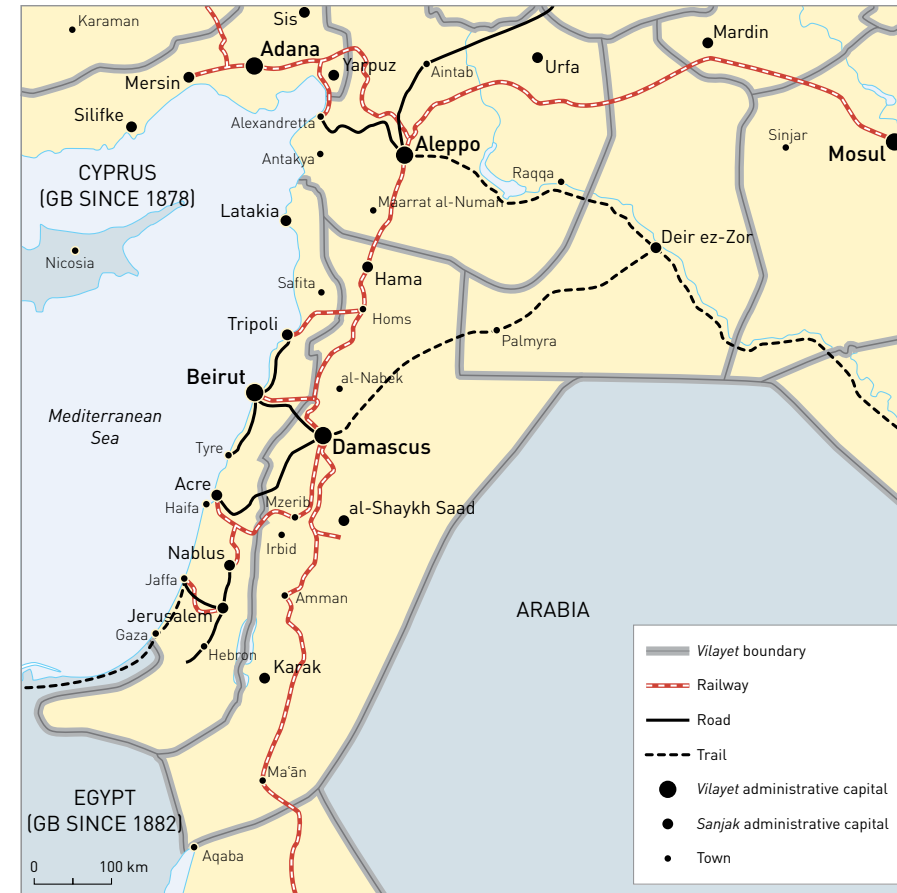


Based on Vital Cuinet, *La Turquie d'Asie* (Paris, 1890-95).

Istanbul and Baghdad were connected to Anatolia. The railway promoted trade between the port cities (Jaffa, Acre, Beirut, and Tripoli) and the main inland cities (Aleppo, Damascus, and Jerusalem). The east-west relations became significantly more important than the north-south ones. This prefigured the division of the region after World War I.

By the time the Ottoman Empire was dissolved in 1923 the Near East was an open space stretching from Anatolia to Egypt and from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. Nevertheless, this potential for easy movement did not produce any real economic development; this was due to social inertia and

LAND TRANSPORTATION NETWORK IN 1914



Source: *Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients*.

political obstructions from the Ottoman administration, despite its efforts at modernisation. In the early twentieth century the Arab provinces of the empire experienced a cultural renaissance (known as *al-Nahda*) that sustained the political demands of the young Arab nationalist movement. World War I was fatal to the old empire, incapable as it was to resist the appetite of the European powers as well as the nationalist pressures that shook it from within and, most notably, the movement of the Young Turks.