THE ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS OF MIDDLE EASTERN HISTORY

Essays in Honor of Charles Issawi

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The Middle East in Nineteenth-Century World Trade

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THE CENTURY BETWEEN the Napoleonic Wars and the First World War witnessed the impact of the Industrial Revolution around the globe. For the economies of the Middle East, this was a period of rapid integration into the world markets. Between 1820 and 1913 the foreign trade of the Middle East expanded more than fifteenfold. The expansion in foreign trade was accompanied by considerable shifts in the patterns of production. In many areas of the Middle East, agriculture became increasingly more commercialized, and increasingly larger shares of agricultural production were directed toward the export markets. These changes had significant repercussions on the systems of land tenure and property rights. Another important trend associated with the expansion of foreign trade was deindustrialization. Traditional handicrafts resisted but for the most part declined under the competition of imported manufactures. On the other hand, the beginnings of the factory system remained weak.

After midcentury, European commercial penetration began to be accompanied by financial penetration. European direct investment concentrated in railroads and other infrastructure. There was also a good deal of indiscriminate borrowing by the Middle Eastern governments in the European financial markets, which led to increasing European control over state finances. Standards of living remained low, particularly in comparison to Europe. There was, however, some economic growth, at least during the decades before World War I.

If we know much more today than we did three decades ago about these economic processes and their far-reaching ramifications, this is above all due to the pioneering work of Charles Issawi. His work not only established the contours of European economic penetration and the specific forms of local response in Egypt, Iran, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and more generally in the Middle East, but it also set the agenda for further research in this field (Issawi 1961, 1966, 1971, 1981, 1988).

While the economic experience of the Middle East during the nineteenth century represented a dramatic break with its previous history, the Middle East was hardly alone in this respect. Virtually every region of the world was affected by the European expansion and each, in turn, developed its own response to the European challenge. A second and very important contribution of Charles Issawi's work has been his insistence on employing a comparative perspective in the economic historiography of the Middle East. He has emphasized that the economic experience of the Middle East shared many dimensions with other areas, particularly with those in the underdeveloped regions of the world during the nineteenth century. He has also argued that there were a number of special dimensions in the economic experience of the Middle East and that these special dimensions could be best understood by placing the Middle East in a comparative framework. Through intraregional and interregional comparisons, Charles Issawi has attempted to identify both the general and the specific in the economic history of the Middle East (e.g., Issawi 1968, 1970, 1981b).

This paper will adopt the same comparative perspective to reexamine a topic that has already received considerable attention from Professor Issawi: the expansion of the foreign trade of the Middle East during the nineteenth century. First, I will attempt to establish the basic trends both in absolute terms and in relation to worldwide trends during this period. In the second half of the paper I will discuss some of the reasons why the volume and the rate of expansion of the foreign trade of different countries in the Middle East diverged from long-term trends in other areas, particularly from those in the contemporary Third World.

Estimates for exports and per capita exports from the Middle East during different periods of the nineteenth century will be presented. Because of the poor quality of underlying data on trade and population, these figures are subject to a wide degree of potential error and must be treated with caution. For this reason the discussion in this paper will be concerned primarily with the broad, long-term trends, which these estimates can support and which are also supported by a larger body of secondary evidence.

The limitations of available data also determine the temporal and spatial dimensions of our inquiry. Since the reliability of the available estimates are particularly low for the earlier years, I have decided to focus on the period after 1840. Moreover, since the more reliable estimates on foreign trade are prepared in terms of the political boundaries that existed during the nineteenth century, I will define the nineteenth-century Middle East in terms of three political entities: Egypt, Iran, and the Asiatic provinces of the Ottoman Empire, including twentieth-century Turkey in Europe but excluding Arabia.

The century between the end of the Napoleonic Wars and World War I witnessed an unprecedented expansion in world trade. Although the available estimates differ somewhat regarding the extent and rhythms of this expansion, it appears that the rate of growth of world trade fluctuated from one period to another but averaged over 4 percent per year, leading to an approximately eighteenfold increase in volume terms for the period 1840 to 1913 (Rostow 1978, 67, 669; Hanson 1980, 14). A large part of this expansion involved the trade between the industrialized countries, particularly within Europe. However, exports from the underdeveloped areas expanded at approximately the same rates as total world exports during this period. The appropriate question concerning the Middle East, then, is not whether its commodity exports expanded during the nineteenth century but how their volume and rates of growth compared with the corresponding levels for world trade and for other underdeveloped regions of the world economy. Such a comparison will tell us more about the extent and the rate of integration of the Middle East into the world markets.

The estimates presented in Table 1 summarize the basic trends in the expansion of exports from the Middle East for the period after 1840. These figures also reflect broadly the expansion of the total trade of the region since for the Middle East as a whole, though not for the individual countries, the volume of imports followed closely the changes in the volume of exports. These estimates show that exports from the Middle East increased more than tenfold in constant priced and about sixteenfold in volume terms during the seven decades preceding World War I.

As shown in Table 2, this overall expansion is close to but somewhat lower than the growth of world trade during the same period;

that is, the share of Middle Eastern exports in world trade appears to have declined slowly but steadily until World War I. The divergence between the two rates of growth becomes more pronounced if levels of per capita exports are examined. As indicated in Table 3, although per capita exports from the Middle East exceeded per capita exports for the world by more than 20 percent in the early 1840s, they had

Table 1. Estimates for Commodity Exports from the Middle East During the Nineteenth Century[1]

(Annual Averages in Millions of Current British Pounds Sterling)

		1840–42	1860–62	1880–82	1900–2	1910–12
Ottoman	I	5.2	12.3	15.2	20.3	26.9
Empire[2]	II	2.4	8.6	12.0	16.4	22.0
Egypt		1.6	3.5	13.2	17.6	31.5
Iran		1.6	2.5	2.8	3.1	7.1
Total for Middle East[3]		5.6	14.6	28.0	37.1	60.6
Total in constant 1880 British Pounds Sterling[4]		4.6	12.9	28.3	49.9	73.2

Sources: For the Ottoman Empire: Pamuk 1987, chap. 2 and Appendix 1; Issawi 1981, 17–18, 82.

For Egypt: Issawi 1966, 373; Owen 1969, 168, 306; Great Britain, *Parliamentary Papers, Accounts and Papers*, "The Statistical Abstract of Foreign Countries," for 1904 and 1914.

For Iran: Issawi 1971, chap. 3; Issawi 1970, 1981; Great Britain, "The Statistical Abstract of Foreign Countries," for 1904 and 1914.

NOTES TO TABLE 1

1. Due to the quality of underlying data, all figures, particularly those for the earlier period, should be accepted as approximations.

2. For the Ottoman Empire, line I indicates total exports and line II shows exports from the area covered by twentieth-century Turkey in Europe and the Asiatic provinces of the Ottoman Empire, excluding Arabia. Total figures for the Middle East use line II.

3. The figure for the Middle East is the simple sum of the individual country exports. As a result, it includes intraregional trade, the relative importance of which declined steadily during the nineteenth century.

4. Imlah's price index for British imports was used in arriving at export figures in constant prices. See Imlah 1958, 94–99.

Table 2. Share of the Middle East and Other Selected Regions in World Exports (%)

Region	1840–42	1860–62	1880–82	1900–2	1910–12
Middle East	0.34	0.32	0.30	0.30	0.29
United Kingdom	22	21	17	14	n.a.
Other Western Europe	33	39	40	41	n.a.
Other Europe	9	9	8	7	n.a.
North America	12	11	14	16	n.a.
Central and South America	10	7	7	7	n.a.
Africa	1	<2	2	2	n.a.
Asia	12	10	10	9	n.a.
Oceania	<1	3	2	2	n.a.

Sources: Based on Table 1; Hanson 1980, 14, 21; Rostow 1978, 67, 669.

fallen behind per capita world exports by a similar margin by the turn of the century.

Table 3 also shows that per capita exports from the Middle East lagged far behind those of Western Europe and North America throughout the nineteenth century, although the rates of growth of per capita exports were higher for the Middle East. This is hardly surprising in view of the considerable differences in the per capita levels of production and income between the Middle East and the industrialized regions of the world. Higher rates of growth of per capita exports from the Middle East was in part due to the low levels of foreign trade of the Middle East in the earlier period.

As for comparisons with other areas of the world where levels of per capita income were closer to those prevailing in the Middle East, Tables 3 and 4 make it clear that in terms of the degree of integration into the world markets, the Middle East remained distinctly behind South America but ahead of Asia; and in terms of exports from the three countries in the Middle East, it was comparable to the average rates of growth of per capita exports from the medium-sized countries of Asia and South America. Table 4 does not attempt comparisons with smaller economies in the Third World since smaller economies were more easily integrated into the world markets and typically had higher levels of per capita exports during the nineteenth century.

The aggregate figures for the Middle East and these interregional comparisons can be quite misleading, however. What they do not reveal are the striking differences between the Mediterranean and Gulf areas of the Middle East and more specifically the differences between the three political entities of the region in terms of both the volume of foreign trade and its rate of growth during the nineteenth century.

As shown in Tables 1 and 3, on the one end of the spectrum lay Iran, whose links with the world markets remained relatively weak until early in the twentieth century. In contrast to worldwide trends, exports from Iran merely doubled in current prices or approximately tripled in volume terms between 1840 and 1900. Around the turn of the century, per capita exports from Iran stood at less than one-third of the levels for the Middle East and at less than one-sixth of their levels for Egypt. Despite a doubling of the volume of exports during the first decade of the twentieth century, per capita exports from Iran remained below one-half of the average for the region as a whole on the eve of World War I. Available evidence suggests that the differences between Iran and the rest of the Middle East with respect to levels of per capita production and income were certainly not that large. These differences in per capita exports, therefore, reflect differences in the degree of integration into the world markets.

In the early part of the nineteenth century levels of per capita foreign trade of the Asiatic provinces of the Ottoman Empire were comparable to those of Iran. However, exports from the Ottoman Empire are estimated to have increased twice as rapidly as those from Iran, by about eightfold in current prices or by more than twelvefold in volume terms between 1840 and World War I. The years of the Crimean War and more generally the 1850s was a critical time in the integration of the Asiatic provinces of the Ottoman Empire into the world trade network. Although Ottoman foreign trade continued to expand during the remainder of the century, the high rates of growth attained under the favorable world market conditions of the 1850s were not matched in later decades (Pamuk 1987, chap. 2).

Much more striking is the case of Egypt, which is often considered to be one of the most prominent examples of specialization in the exportation of primary commodities by an underdeveloped economy during the nineteenth century. Estimates presented in Table 1 indicate that exports from Egypt increased by about twentyfold in current prices and by about twenty-eightfold in constant prices between the early 1840s and the early 1910s. These rates were substantially higher

Table 3. Per Capita Exports from the Middle East and Other Selected Regions (In Constant 1880 British Pounds Sterling)

Region	1840–42	1880–82	1900–2	1910–12
World	0.16	0.91	1.55	n.a.
Middle East	0.20	0.85	1.28	1.65
Ottoman Empire*	0.20	0.78	1.17	1.25
Egypt	0.28	1.65	2.32	3.17
Iran	0.19	0.31	0.41	0.75
United Kingdom	1.49	6.38	7.46	n.a.
Other Western Europe	0.60	3.05	5.33	n.a.
Other Europe	0.26	0.88	1.22	n.a.
North America	1.06	3.90	5.51	n.a.
South America	0.41	1.87	3.10	n.a.
Asia	0.03	0.16	0.27	n.a.
Africa	0.02	0.32	0.49	n.a.
Oceania	0.51	n.a.	9.54	n.a.

Sources: Based on Table 1 and Hanson 1980, 21. The population of the areas covered in this study (twentieth-century Turkey in Europe, Anatolia, Greater Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Egypt) is estimated to have increased from approximately 23 million in 1840 to about 45 million on the eve of World War I. The population estimates for the Middle East are derived from the following: for the Ottoman Empire, Issawi 1981a, 17–18; Eldem 1970, 49–65; for Egypt, Issawi 1970, 1981b; for Iran, Issawi 1971, 20–34; Issawi 1981b; also McEvedy and Jones 1978.

* The figures for the Ottoman Empire are for the entire empire, whereas the figures for the Middle East exclude most of the European provinces as defined in the notes to Table 1. Per capita exports from the Asiatic provinces of the Ottoman Empire appear to be lower than those for the European provinces throughout the century.

than rates of growth of world trade and of total exports from the Third World during the same period. Similarly, Table 4 indicates that on the eve of World War I, per capita exports from Egypt were two and a half times as high as those from the Ottoman Empire and four times as high as per capita exports from Iran. It appears that early in the twentieth century per capita incomes in Egypt were higher than those in the Ottoman Empire and Iran. Nonetheless, these differences were not as large as the differences in per capita export levels.[1] It is clear that, in comparison with the other two countries, a larger share of the total production in Egypt was oriented toward exports.

Since cotton and cottonseed dominated Egypt's exports for most of the century, for better or worse, these high rates of export growth were due to the specialization in cotton. Egypt's emphasis on cotton started during the reign of Mohammad Ali, but it was the Cotton Famine during the American Civil War that catapulted the long staple varieties into worldwide prominence. The value of Egypt's exports tripled during the 1860s. Equally importantly, they did not decline

Table 4. Per Capita Exports from Medium-Sized Countries in the Third World, 1860–1910*

(In Constant 1880 British Pounds Sterling)

Country	Annual per Capita Exports 1860–62	Annual per Capita Exports 1910–12	Average Annual Rate of Growth of per Capita Exports 1860–1910 (%)
Ottoman Empire	0.66	1.25	1.3
Egypt	0.51	3.17	3.7
Iran	0.28	0.75	2.0
Weighted average for the Middle East	0.49	1.65	2.4
Algeria	0.49	4.96	4.7
Morocco	0.24	0.60	1.8
India	0.13	0.54	2.9
China	0.04	0.15	2.8
Ceylon	0.43	3.51	4.3
Dutch East Indies	0.37	1.26	2.5
French Indochina	n.a.	0.28	n.a.
Weighted average for Asia excluding India and China	0.36	1.14	2.3
Argentina	1.60	12.49	4.2
Mexico	n.a.	2.31	n.a.
Brazil	1.47	3.43	1.7
Peru	2.29	1.97	0.3
Colombia	0.51	0.87	1.1
Weighted average for Latin America	1.48	3.95	2.0
Overall average excluding India and China	0.62	2.15	2.5

after the American Civil War despite the fall in cotton prices. After the 1880s the economic policies of the British colonial administration further strengthened the specialization in and reliance on a single crop, as Egypt became one of the world's leading exporters of cotton, second only to the United States (Owen 1969).

What were the determinants of these long-term trends in exports from the Middle East as a whole and the substantial differences between the experiences of the individual countries in the Middle East? One can start with the external factors. A simple comparison of these trends with those of the eighteenth century makes it clear that the Industrial Revolution and the emergence in Europe of economies producing inexpensive manufactures and needing foodstuffs and raw materials was the primary reason for the unprecedented expansion of the foreign trade of the Middle East. This emphasis on external factors, however, can only be considered the beginning of an explanation, since the evidence summarized in Tables 2, 3, and 4 indicates that both within the Middle East and elsewhere the responses to the developments following the Industrial Revolution varied greatly. What needs to be explained, then, is not only the absolute rate of export expansion but the rate of export expansion in relation to trends elsewhere, for example, in relation to those of the medium-sized countries

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NOTES TO TABLE 4

* For purposes of this table, medium-size countries were defined as those with populations between 4 and 50 million in 1913. China and India were the only Third World countries with populations exceeding 50 million on the eve of World War I.

Sources: See Table 1.

Population: Great Britain, *Parliamentary Papers, Accounts and Papers*, "The Statistical Abstract of Foreign Countries" (annual publication); idem, "The Statistical Abstract of the Colonies" (annual publication); McEvedy and Jones 1978.

Exports: Great Britain, *Parliamentary Papers, Accounts and Papers*, "Commercial Reports"; idem, "The Statistical Abstract of the Colonies"; United States, *Commercial Relations of the United States with Foreign Countries* (all annual publications); also Hanson 1980, appendixes A and B.

The export figures in current prices obtained from the above sources were deflated by Imlah's index for British import prices to arrive at values in constant 1880 prices. See Imlah 1958, 94–99.

in the Third World that can be meaningfully compared with Egypt, Iran, and the Ottoman Empire

The problem of evaluating the contributions of internal and external factors to long-term expansion of exports has been addressed in studies of international trade. One technique employed by Maizels, Kravis, and others analyzes the changes in the volume of exports of a country in terms of four factors: (1) a world market factor, (2) a competitiveness factor, (3) a diversification factor, and (4) an "own performance" variable (Maizels 1968; Kravis 1970a, 1970b).

The world market variable provides a comparison of the country's actual exports at the initial date with what exports would have been at the terminal date if the country had maintained its share in world trade for each of its traditional exports. This variable measures the rate of growth of world market demand for the country's traditional export commodities. The competitiveness factor is a comparison of the value of the country's exports in the initial period with the hypothetical value in the terminal period if the value of world trade in each of the country's traditional exports stayed constant and the country's share in trade in each commodity had been allowed to change as it in fact did. In other words, this variable measures the country's performance against its competitors in its traditional exports. The diversification factor is a ratio of the share of traditional commodities in exports at the initial date to the share of the same commodities at the terminal date. This variable measures the extent to which the exports of the country shifted away from the traditional commodity bundle. Finally, the "own performance" variable is computed by multiplying the second and third variables. It summarizes total change due to supply factors.

In view of the quality and detail of the available foreign trade data for the Middle East, it would be difficult to obtain precise estimates for each of these variables. However, it is still possible to develop more qualitative estimates for each of these variables based on the data for leading commodity exports from the three countries.

In Egypt cotton was by far the most important export commodity during the nineteenth century. Its share in Egypt's commodity exports averaged around 30 percent in the 1850s. This share increased steadily to exceed 90 percent by the first decade of the twentieth century (Owen 1969). By contrast, the exports from the Ottoman Empire and from Iran were quite diversified. For the Ottoman Empire, tobacco, figs, raisins, opium, raw silk, and mohair were the leading commodities throughout the nineteenth century, and the share of any single commodity rarely exceeded 12 percent of the total value of exports for any given year (Pamuk 1987, chap. 2 and appendix 1). For Iran, silk and silk products (close to 40 percent), cotton and woolen cloth, and tobacco were the leading export commodities around 1850. The composition of exports changed rapidly in the later period. While the shares of silk and cloth declined, opium, raw cotton, and carpets became increasingly more important toward World War I (Issawi 1970, chap. 3).

How rapidly did world market demand for these commodities expand? Data for the earlier period is incomplete and ambiguous. For the half century between 1860 and World War I, however, simple calculations based on the foreign trade statistics of major European countries and on estimates of total exports from the Third World countries suggest that world market demand for the leading export commodities of the Middle East expanded more slowly than demand for all primary commodities and world trade as a whole. There is considerable evidence that after 1860 demand in the industrialized countries, while continuing to grow in absolute terms, was shifting in relative terms away from the traditional export commodities of the Ottoman Empire, Iran, and Egypt, as will be discussed below in the country by country review. These world market trends, then, can provide a partial explanation for the export performance of the Middle East. They cannot, however, account for the striking differences within the Middle East. For that we have to turn to internal factors and examine each case separately.

In the case of the Ottoman Empire, the relative decline in world market demand for its leading export commodities appears to have started after the 1870s. This relative decline in world market demand was compounded by a decline in the Ottoman share of world trade in these traditional export commodities. In other words, in the markets of industrialized countries the Ottoman Empire began to lose ground to other exporters of the same commodities, particularly after the 1870s. The composition of Ottoman exports remained unchanged, however. Until World War I there was little shift toward other commodities whose demand might be growing more rapidly (Pamuk 1987, 36–40).

In contrast to the Ottoman case, the commodity composition of Iran's exports changed substantially between the 1850s and World War I. But it also appears that world market demand in relative terms was shifting away from the leading commodity exports of Iran, with the exceptions of silk, cotton, and woolen manufactures. Moreover, in the world markets of its leading export commodities, Iran like the Ottoman Empire steadily lost ground to other exporters. In fact, the "own performance" variable, or factors specific to Iran, appear to be more important than changes in world market demand in explaining the relatively slow growth of Iran's exports until World War I (Issawi 1970, chap. 3; Hanson 1980, appendixes).

Nineteenth-century Egypt provides one of the most extreme examples of an underdeveloped country that did not diversify its exports in the face of slower rates of growth of world market demand for its export commodity yet still managed to maintain high rates of export growth by steadily increasing its share in the world markets at the expense of other exporters of the same commodity (Owen 1969; Hanson 1980; appendixes). In other words, in contrast to the cases of Iran and the Ottoman Empire, the rate of growth of Egypt's exports was above the rate of growth of world market demand for its traditional exports. Clearly, factors specific to Egypt were behind this trend, and in this respect Egypt differs sharply from the nineteenth-century export experiences of Iran and the Ottoman Empire.

Why did Egypt differ so sharply from Iran and the Ottoman Empire with respect to the "own performance" variable? An explanation cannot be attempted here. At the expense of a major generalization, however, one might point to the considerable differences between the Ottoman Empire and Iran on the one hand and Egypt on the other with respect to the political environment that accompanied the expansion of foreign trade.

During the nineteenth century the Ottoman Empire and Iran shared three interrelated characteristics:

1. Their governments did not place high priority on export expansion or greater integration with world markets. Exports were encouraged only to the extent that the recurring fiscal, political, and military crises pressured the governments to accept this alternative.
2. Formal poliltical independence was not completely lost; these countries did not become colonies.
3. The environment of Great Power rivalry between Great Britain and Russia in the case of Iran and between Great Britain, France, and later Germany in the case of the Ottoman Empire

> continued until World War I. Despite the changing balances between these powers throughout the century, none of them was able to eliminate its rivals. This environment allowed the local governments greater room to maneuver and they often resisted greater European penetration. Under these circumstances, commercial and financial penetration by the European powers proceeded more slowly.

In contrast, after the failure of Mohammad Ali's industrialization drive and even before his death, Egypt was already on the road to an export-oriented economy. Following the occupation of 1882, the colonial administration proceeded farther down the same road, as evidenced by its emphasis on irrigation projects aimed at expanding cotton production. In comparison with the environment of Great Power rivalry, the conditions of a formal colony enabled the British to bring about greater integration with the world markets.

These considerations inevitably lead to the link between the expansion of exports of primary commodities and economic growth. Does the experience of these three countries during the nineteenth century lend support to Nurkse's view (1961) of exports as an engine of growth? The examples in the Middle East do not add up to a strong case for this argument. First, it needs to be emphasized that the foreign trade sector remained too small for high rates of exports to translate into appreciable rates of increase in the aggregate levels of production and income. In the cases of Iran before World War I and of the Ottoman Empire until the turn of the twentieth century the share of exports in total production remained below 10 percent. If these economies experienced increases in per capita levels of production, as was probably the case at least for the Ottoman Empire in the decades preceding World War I, the primary explanation needs to be sought elsewhere. At best, export growth was only one of a number of factors contributing to economic growth.

In the case of Egypt the export sector was clearly larger in relation to the rest of the economy. Exports did expand more rapidly and levels of per capita income were rising in the decades preceding World War I. On the eve of World War I per capita income in Egypt was probably higher than in Iran and the Asiatic provinces of the Ottoman Empire. However, there is also considerable evidence that by the first decade of the twentieth century the cotton boom in Egypt had indeed reached its peak. The large irrigation projects favored by the colonial administration were beginning to face major problems, the area under cultivation reached its limits, and cotton yields were beginning to decline. In the longer term Egypt paid a heavy price for its inability to develop its industry, for its exclusive reliance on the world market, and for its specialization in one crop. Levels of per capita income declined considerably until the 1950s. In retrospect, it is clear that the economic growth that took place in Egypt until the First World War had indeed been brought about by a pattern of "lopsided development"—and hence the title of Charles Issawi's 1961 article on Egypt.

NOTE

1. Issawi 1968 provides estimates for per capita income levels in Egypt and the Ottoman Empire on the eve of World War I. For the Ottoman Empire, see also Eldem 1970, chap. 13.

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