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ROUNDTABLE
SOVIET–ARAB LINKAGES AND MIDDLE EAST STUDIES

Soviet Nationalities Policies and Post-Ottoman State Formation: A Scholarly Agenda

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In 1926, an official delegation of prominent Muslim scholars from the Soviet Union visited Mecca. The delegation came to the holy city just a few months after the Soviet Union had become the first country to recognize the rule of ʿAbd al-ʿAziz ʿAbd al-Rahman al Saʿud (1875–1936; Ibn Saʿud) over the Hijaz. The delegation's members attended an international Muslim congress, met with Saudi officials, and performed the hajj. Before departing they issued a statement supporting Saudi sovereignty, noting that Ibn Saʿud had "purified the [Islamic] holy lands" from the rule of the Hashemite dynasty (r. 1916–24), the Saudis' predecessors. The Saudi state warmly welcomed this Soviet support, publishing the delegation's statement in *Umm al-Qura* (est. 1924), their official weekly.[1]

The Soviet delegation's visit might seem like an anomaly. Here was an officially atheist state supporting a polity that was criticized as fanatically religious by many Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Historians of the Soviet Union and the Middle East have mostly explained this support as serving the Soviet goal of promoting anti-imperialism and socialism abroad through the hajj and international Muslim gatherings. These explanations are usually set against the backdrop of Ibn Saʿud's efforts to legitimize his rule over the Hijaz by securing the recognition of competing powers, most notably the British Empire and the Soviet Union.[2]

Although these explanations are apt, they tell only part of the story. Seen in a transregional light, such interactions between the Soviet Union and post-Ottoman polities illuminate a previously overlooked yet crucial feature of 20th-century history: the nexus between Soviet nationalities policy and transnational Muslim politics. This nexus, I contend, should be considered part of broader international debates on the management of religious and social diversity in the aftermath of World War I.[3]

[1] "Bayan Wafd Muslimi Rusiya," *Umm al-Qura*, 16 July 1926, 1.

[2] See, for example, Eileen Kane, *The Russian Hajj: Empire and the Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 157–82; Marsil N. Farkhshatov, "Diplomaticheskai͡a missii͡a Sovetskoĭ delegat͡sii na vsemirnom kongresse Musul′man 1926 g," *Problemy Vostokovedeniia* 86, no. 4 (2019): 19–26; and Norihiro Naganawa, trans. and introduction, "The Congress of the Muslim World, Mecca, June 1926, Reflected in Tatar and Russian Journals," in *Russian-Arab Worlds: A Documentary History*, ed. Eileen Kane, Masha Kirasirova, and Margaret Litvin (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023), 150–60.

[3] I address some elements of this nexus in my forthcoming monograph, *Muslims and the Minority Question: A Global History, 1856–1947* (under contract with the University of Chicago Press).

Central to these debates was the concept of "minority," which became a normative international term for defining various linguistic, ethnic, and religious communities in need of protection from the exclusionary policies of the new nation–states that governed them. Although the history of what came to be known as minority rights is typically framed through the lens of European colonial administration (e.g., the Mandate system) and the League of Nations' international system of minority protection treaties, the Soviet state added some significant twists to these debates.

The Soviet Union was built on a radical alternative to minority rights. Establishing a federal polity that pulled together a disparate set of ethno-territorial union republics (1922), Soviet officials understood national sovereignty in ethno-territorial terms. A polity, they argued, needed clearly defined boundaries and a majority population defined by a common ethnicity and language. The Soviets' policy of *korenizatsiia* (indigenization) during the 1920s and 30s institutionalized this vision by encouraging non-Russian ethnic groups to promote their cultures and languages within titular republics and autonomous zones. In other words, to "protect" nontitular nationalities from "national majorities" across its territories, Moscow bypassed the concept of minority rights, instead implicitly addressing the post-Versailles minority question by establishing autonomous areas (even, in some instances, at the level of villages) within the various Soviet republics.[4] Although in reality minority-majority tensions continued to exist within the emerging Soviet republics, this nation-building model of governance enabled the USSR to preserve and reorganize the territories of its tsarist predecessor, using federalism to support centralization and statist political projects.[5]

Studies of the Soviet Union have elucidated this history.[6] Historians have recently begun to explore how nationality policies affected Moscow's foreign relations and how, in turn, state-building projects in other countries shaped its officials' engagement with questions of national difference.[7] However, historians of the post-Ottoman Mashriq have not yet asked how Soviet nationalities policy interacted with state formation in the Middle East. In fact, Moscow's ethno-territorial concept of sovereignty and the alternative it posed to the post-Versailles international order provided Soviet diplomats with a rationale for supporting emerging polities in the region and participating in transnational Muslim politics. At the same time, ethno-territorialism bolstered claims for national sovereignty and anti-imperialism among post-Ottoman polities, creating a common denominator with the Soviet state, notwithstanding its official atheism.

In the aftermath of the October 1917 revolution, prominent Bolsheviks imagined "pan-Islamism" to be a useful tool against European colonial powers. This Soviet stance assumed that Muslims in colonial Asia and Africa faced oppression and that certain tenets of Islam were compatible with communist ideology.[8] Despite the diversity of Soviet perspectives on Islam in the initial decade following the October Revolution, a prominent view posited that Islam was a force that had consistently embodied communist principles throughout its

[4] Paul W. Werth, "What Is a 'Minority' in an Imperial Formation? Thoughts on the Russian Empire," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 41, no. 3 (2021): 325–31.

[5] See Krista A Goff, *Nested Nationalisms: Making and Unmaking Nations in the Soviet Caucasus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021).

[6] See, for example, Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); Francine Hirsch, *The Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); and Goff, *Nested Nationalisms.*

[7] Masha Kirasirova, *The Eastern International: Arabs, Central Asians, and Jews in the Soviet Union's Anticolonial Empire* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023).

[8] Michael Kemper, "The Soviet Discourse on the Origin and Class Character of Islam, 1923–1933," *Die Welt des Islams* 49, no. 1 (2009): 6–8. See also Vladimir Ulyanov (Lenin) and Joseph Dzhugashvili (Stalin), "Appeal to the All the Toiling Muslims of Russia and the East," in *To See the Dawn: Baku 1920: The First Congress of the Peoples of the East*, ed. John Riddel (Atlanta: Pathfinder Press, 1993), 283.

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history. As the Muslim communist couple Z. and D. Navshirvanov argued in the Russian-language Soviet Orientalist monthly *Novyĭ Vostok* (New East; 1922–1930), there were already strands of communism present at the time of the Prophet Muhammad. These included notions of shared property among a single-family group or small tribe.[9]

The Soviet state, however, ultimately rejected the idea of Islamic unity due to its evolving nationalities policy, which placed language and territory above religious solidarity.[10] This rejection was based on Joseph Stalin's view that a nation should have a shared language, territory, culture, and economy.[11] Religion, for the most part, was not part of this framework —it was deemed an untenable criterion for national self-determination. Soviet officials asserted that Muslims could form states only based on shared ethnic, linguistic, and territorial factors.[12] Yet, even as it downplayed Islam in favor of language and territory, the Bolshevik government sought to engage and co-opt Muslim institutions that had existed in the tsarist period, as well as Muslim movements in Central Asia, the North Caucasus, and other regions.[13] This policy coexisted with intrusive and so-called "reformist" interventions of Soviet officials in the lives of their Muslim subjects, such as the antiveiling campaigns in Central Asia during the 1920s.[14]

The Soviet Union's ethno-territorial view of Muslim politics also was central to its foreign policy. Although they objected to pan-Islamism, Lenin and his associates welcomed collaboration with Muslim-majority nation–states to broaden diplomatic contacts and weaken European colonial powers. The post-Ottoman Hijaz exemplifies this moment.

Before Ibn Saʿud seized the Hijaz, the Soviet Union had limited ties with the Hijazi Hashemite kingdom, exchanging representatives with it in 1924. Although it disliked the Hashemite collaboration with Britain, the Soviet state established ties with the Hashemite kingdom in an attempt to influence international Muslim politics from Mecca. Soviet officials justified these ties by analogy with their domestic nationalities policy: the kingdom was an independent Arab state recognized by the League of Nations.[15] The Soviet emphasis on the Hijaz's Arab identity echoed the Hashemite government's policy toward members of a variety of diasporic communities, mainly from South Asia and Southeast Asia. Although members of these communities had dwelled in the Hijaz for generations, the Hashemite government viewed them as "non-Arab foreigners" who represented the interests of foreign powers.[16]

Nevertheless, Soviet-Hashemite ties were short-lived. In 1924, Moscow shifted its support to the Saudi forces after the latter's victories on the battlefield. To justify this shift, Moscow now called Husayn, the Hashemite ruler, a pan-Islamist who had prevented the emergence

[9] Kemper, "Soviet Discourse," 6. The authors mentioned Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, one of the Prophet's companions (*sahaba*), whose communism, they suggested, was rooted in the pre-Islamic history of the region.

[10] Kirasirova, *Eastern International*, 23–59.

[11] J. V. Stalin, "Marxism and the National Question," in *J. V. Stalin*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953), 301–8.

[12] There were, however, some exceptions. As demonstrated by Harrison King in his forthcoming dissertation on the Sovietization of the Ajaran Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (also known as Ajaristan, a region in today's Georgia), the Soviet state recognized the region's autonomy on the basis of the Muslim religious identity of its majority population. I am grateful to Harrison King for generously sharing his insights on the Ajaran case study via email.

[13] See, for example Adeeb Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

[14] See, for example, Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

[15] Masha Kirasirova, trans. and introduction, "Memo to Stalin: Lev Karakhan's Argument for Establishing Soviet Diplomatic Ties with the Hejaz (1923)," in Kane et al., *Russian-Arab Worlds*, 145–49.

[16] For more on these debates, see Roy Bar Sadeh, "Worldmaking in the Hijaz: Muslims between South Asian and Soviet Visions of Managing Difference, 1919–1926," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 66, no. 1 (2024): 202.

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of an anticolonial Arab national liberation movement.[17] The Soviet Union regarded Ibn Saʿud as the sole ruler capable of uniting the Arabian Peninsula into a unified Arab nation–state and stimulating economic growth in the region.[18] Consequently, Soviet officials portrayed the Saudis as representatives of the impoverished populations of Najd, from which the Saudi state originated. In fact, Soviet officials justified the Saudi occupation of the Hijaz. They considered it a direct response to decades of anti-Najdi policies enacted by the Hashemite dynasty, which had economically and religiously segregated Najd from the Hijaz and its connection to the wider world.[19]

If the Najdi and Hijazis exhibited such marked regional differences (according to the Soviet position), it is pertinent to inquire how the Soviet Union justified the Saudi (i.e., Najdi) rule over the Hijazis. In February 1926, the Soviet Union addressed this contradiction when it officially recognized Saudi rule using the language of national self-determination; this required waiting for a group of Hijazi notables to acknowledge Ibn Saʿud's kingship. The official Soviet declaration noted that Moscow recognized Saudi rule "in accordance with the fundamental principle of national independence and freedom and the expressed desire of the people of Hijaz."[20]

The 1926 delegation of prominent Soviet Muslim scholars cemented this recognition. They came from various Soviet republics to an international Muslim Congress in Mecca called by Ibn Saʿud to discuss the future international status of the region. In accordance with the Soviet ethno-territorial organization of Muslim politics, each Soviet Muslim delegate was selected by his own Soviet national republic, but his name had to be approved by the Joint State Political Directorate (the Soviet secret police, or OGPU).[21] Including representatives from various regions of the union, such as Central Asia, Siberia, and Moscow, the delegation was headed by Rızâeddin bin Fakhreddinov (1858–1936), the internationally respected mufti of the Central Muslim Board of Ufa, the successor of the official tsarist Muslim institution. Georgy Chicherin, the commissar for foreign affairs, hoped that the illustrious delegation would convey that Muslims in the Soviet Union enjoyed religious freedom while supporting the Saudi state in the congress's committee work.[22]

Such support included denying the widespread allegations that Saudi forces had demolished and desecrated Muslim shrines and holy places across the Hijaz.[23] The Soviet delegates also opposed attempts to weaken Saudi sovereignty over the Hijaz, most notably those of the All-Indian Khilafat Committee (AIKC, est. 1919), a prominent South Asian Muslim movement. In response to the South Asian Khilafists' appeal to Ibn Saʿud to concede to the establishment of a World Muslim Council in Mecca, which would assume control of the Hijaz's foreign and religious affairs, the Soviet state and other advocates of the Saudi state castigated the AIKC's plans as "foreign intervention."[24]

This Soviet stance was not devoid of considerations pertaining to realpolitik, particularly the objective of deterring any European colonial involvement in the region. Concurrently, however, this stance relied on the ethno-territorial assumption that the Hijaz was primarily an Arab Muslim territory. Ethno-territorial logic helped rebut a plan for South Asian

[17] Ismail Zade, "Palomnichestvo v Mekku," *Novyĭ Vostok* 8–9 (1925): 234, 242.
[18] Ismail Zade, "Mekkanskiĭ Kongress: Pismo iz Dzheddi," *Novyĭ Vostok* 20–21 (1926): 401.
[19] M. Aksel′rod, "Ėvoli͡utsi͡ia Gedzhasa i ego konstitu͡tsi͡ia," *Novyĭ Vostok* 23–24 (1928): 278–79.
[20] "Al-Iʿtiraf bi Malakiyya al-Hijaz wa Sulatat Najd wa Mulhaqatiha," *Umm al-Qura*, 5 March 1926, 1.
[21] Farkhshatov, "Diplomaticheska͡ia missi͡ia," 22n7. The OGPU (1923–1934) later became the NKVD, then the KGB.
[22] Russian Foreign Policy Archive (hereafter AVPRF), f. 04, op. 12, d. 963, pa. 69/1926, l. 6–7, 13, 40.
[23] Some Soviet Muslim journals even justified Wahhabi religious prohibitions, such as the visitation of tombs. See, for example, al-Idara, "Fi Haqq Safar al-Hajj," *Bayan al-Haqaʾiq* 3, no. 10 (1927): 16.
[24] For more on these debates, see Bar Sadeh, "Worldmaking," 185–212.

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Muslims to preside over the region's destiny, even though British India was home to the world's largest Muslim population at the time.[25]

Despite its efforts to fit the Saudi state to the Soviet criteria of a nation–state, Soviet participation in the congress also reflected tensions in Moscow's nationalities policy. Karim Abdraufovich Hakimov, the Soviet ambassador to the Hijaz, noted that each delegate considered "himself a delegate of the Muslims of such and such a region," not of the whole Soviet Union.[26] He highlighted that the diversity of the delegation hindered the Soviet Union's ability to pursue a unified policy in Mecca, hinting that its organization along regional lines posed an obstacle to achieving Moscow's goals.

In addition, proposals to include the Saudi state within an anti-imperial alliance of Muslim-majority nation–states, including Afghanistan and Turkey, drew objections within and beyond the Soviet Union. For instance, the Turkish government, which was aligned with the Republican People's Party, did not concur with the Soviet Union's interpretation of the Saudi political model. Turkey shared with the Saudi state the model of ethno-territorial sovereignty, but Kemalist officials deemed the Saudi state "reactionary." Chicherin acknowledged that the Saudi state was not as "religiously progressive" as Turkey, hinting at his support for Ankara's schemes to divorce Islam from the public sphere. Yet he still advised Ankara to support the Saudis on the basis of what he perceived as the Saudi inclination toward anti-imperialism.[27] Not all Soviet officials agreed with Chicherin. Some viewed Ibn Saʿud as a British agent.[28] Despite Chicherin's success in discrediting these views (Saudi–Soviet diplomatic relations lasted until 1938), they reflected internal Soviet debates on this new friendship.

More than a historical episode, the Soviets' 1926 visit to Mecca illuminates the importance of examining Soviet nationalities policy as a process involving both domestic and external considerations. It also underscores the need to explore the Soviet Union's nationalities policy as a global intellectual history of religious and social difference, shaped by and impacting a multitude of governance models worldwide, including in the post-Ottoman space.

Furthermore, incorporating the Soviet Union (and Soviet archival sources) into the overarching narrative of the advent of post-Ottoman polities in the Mashriq could prove invaluable for historians of the Middle East. Notably focusing on questions of kingship, historical continuity, and local redrawing of boundaries, several recent studies have challenged prevalent Eurocentric and nationalist narratives about post-Ottoman state formation.[29] Adding the Soviet angle to this growing revisionist historiography can help illuminate the complex history of state-building processes and the management of differences across post-Ottoman political entities. Indeed, this scholarly trajectory can direct historians toward novel insights into the manner by which competing models of ethnonationalism and religious heterogeneity came to define the conditions that enabled the emergence of polities in the region.

[25] Muhammad Rashid Rida, "al-Radd ʿala al-Zaʿim Muhammad ʿAli al-Hindi," in *Maqalat al-Shaykh Rashid Rida al-Siyasiya*, ed. Yusuf Husayn Ibish and Yusuf Qasma Khuri, vol. 5 (Beirut: Dar Ibn ʿArabi, 1994), 2011–13.

[26] AVPRF, f. 04, op. 12, d. 963, pa. 69/1926, l. 31.

[27] Ibid, l. 62.

[28] V. V. Naumkin, "Sovetskie muftii na Vcemusul'manskom kongresse: Rabota nad dogovorom," *Minbar: Islamic Studies* 12, no. 2 (2019): 353–55.

[29] See, for example, Hasan Kayalı, *Imperial Resilience: The Great War's End, Ottoman Longevity, and Incidental Nations* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021); Jonathan Wyrtzen, *Worldmaking in the Long Great War: How Local and Colonial Struggles Shaped the Modern Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022); and Adam Mestyan, *Modern Arab Kingship: Remaking the Ottoman Political Order in the Interwar Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023).

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