The Damascus Events

Eugene Rogan

The 1860 Massacre and the Destruction of the Old Ottoman World



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A NOTE ON TIME, DISTANCE, DATES, EXCHANGE RATES

They say that the past is a foreign land. Nineteenth-century Damascus was a very foreign land indeed. The modern historian continually runs into markers of difference between their time and ours.

Time was measured against the sunrise, not by a twenty-four-hour clock. The day began at dawn. One o'clock in the morning in 1860 Damascus would have been one hour after sunrise. In converting the time as recorded in my documents into times more recognisable to modern readers, I have consulted online almanacs to know when the sun rose on a given day of the year in Damascus. So when Dr Mishaqa reported that the riots broke out in Damascus at eight o'clock in the morning on 9 July 1860, I counted eight hours after sunrise, which in Damascus in July is around 5:30 a.m., which would correspond to about 1:30 p.m. For more on timekeeping in the late

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Ottoman Empire, see Avner Wishnitzer, *Reading Clocks, Alla Turca: Time and Society in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

Distance in nineteenth-century Syria was measured in time. Ottoman maps provide a scale demarcated in hours rather than in kilometres or miles. The standard assumption of Ottoman cartographers was that travellers could cover between five and five-and-a-half kilometres in one hour. For more on Ottoman map-making, see Yuval Ben-Bassat and Yossi Ben-Zrtzi, 'Ottoman Maps of the Empire's Arab Provinces, 1850s to the First World War,' *Imago Mundi* 70, no. 2 (2018): 199–211.

Two calendars predominated in the 1860s. Ottoman subjects and officials operated by the lunar Hijri calendar, and Europe and the Western Hemisphere worked by the solar Gregorian calendar. The Ottoman Mali fiscal calendar, though in existence since the 1780s, was not widely used in Ottoman documents in the 1860s and 1870s. In converting between the Hijri and Gregorian calendars, I have relied on the hijri.habibur.com website.

The standard currency of the Ottoman Empire was the piastre (Pt.). The Turkish *lira* or pound (£T) was worth between Pt. 115 and 130, and a 'purse' (*kis* in Arabic and Turkish) was a unit of Pt. 500. However, officials in different cities had the power to alter exchange rates to make ends meet. The government in Damascus devalued the local currency so that piastres from Beirut were up to 10 percent more valuable than those from Damascus. This also affected foreign-exchange rates. For most of the period covered in this book, the British pound sterling traded for between Pt. 110 and 130, the US dollar for about Pt. 22–26, and the French franc for Pt. 5–6. See

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Charles Issawi, ed., *The Economic History of the Middle East, 1800–1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 520–522.

In the nineteenth century, Turks and foreigners alike tended to refer to the Ottoman capital city of Istanbul by its Byzantine name, Constantinople, but the city was known by several other names. Many nineteenth-century Arabic sources refer to the Ottoman capital as al-Istana. In his consular correspondence, Mishaqa called the capital 'Islambul,' another variant of the name. In this book I will use modern Turkish place names—Istanbul rather than Constantinople, Izmir rather than Smyrna—but retain the usage as it appears within my historical sources. I use standard English spellings for the major Arab cities mentioned in the text—thus Beirut rather than Bayrut, Damascus rather than al-Sham, Aleppo rather than Halab. For more, see Bernard Lewis, *Istanbul and the Civilization of the Ottoman Empire* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963).

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The Ottoman Mediterranean. *Credit: Martin Davis*

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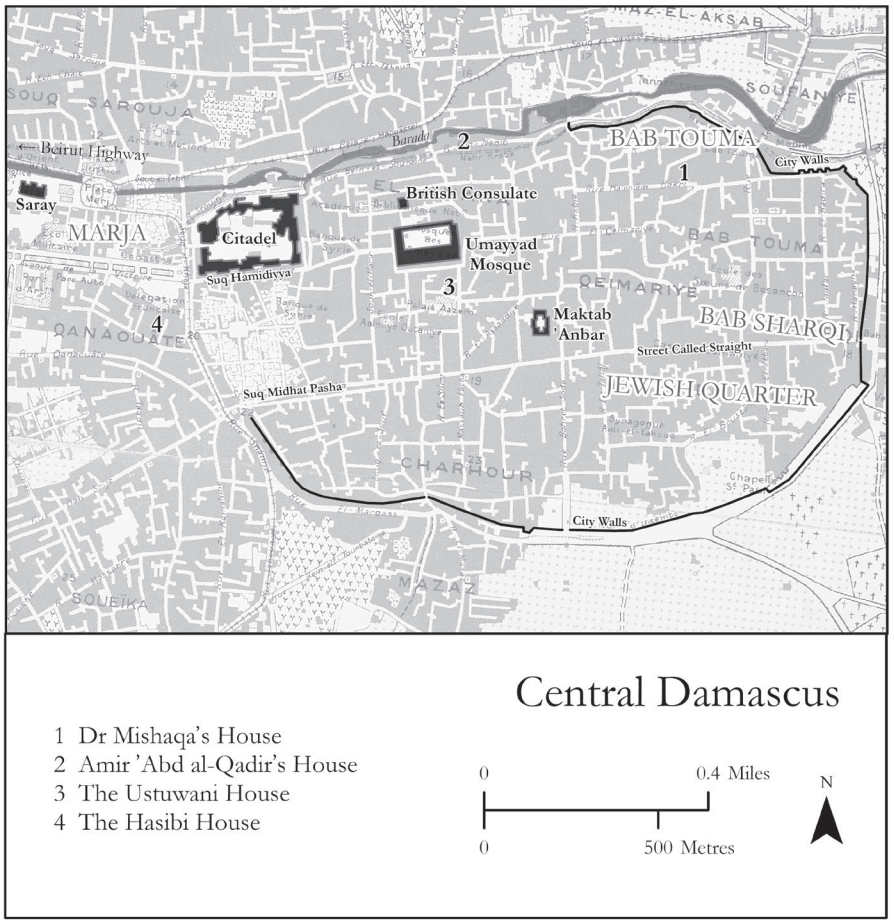
Syria and Mount Lebanon. *Credit: Martin Davis*

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Damascus and Its Quarters. *Credit: Martin Davis*

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The City Centre of Damascus. *Credit: Martin Davis*

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Introduction

Found in the Archives

I had a sense of occasion as I walked up the vast limestone steps into the National Archives in Washington, DC. The classical architecture impresses on the visitor that this is the repository of the memories of a great nation. Inside the broad domed lobby, display cases house copies of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights along with other select treasures on display for visitors, capturing the foundations and milestones of the American republic's journey.

On that January morning in 1989, I did not stop to take in the displays but made my way past the guards into the reading room. I had come in search of documentation for my doctoral thesis on Ottoman rule in Transjordan in the second half of the nineteenth century. At that time, Transjordan was a frontier region of the Ottoman province of Syria with its capital in Damascus. The United States opened its first diplomatic mission to Damascus in 1859, and

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I wanted to see if there was any material in the US consular archives that related to my research interests.

I was also interested in the first American vice-consul, a man named Mikhayil (Michael in Arabic) Mishaqa. The United States was a small power in 1859 and maintained a modest diplomatic corps overseas. In many jurisdictions, the Foreign Service hired local talent to represent US interests to economise on the number of diplomats posted abroad. But the man they chose for Damascus was one of the most celebrated intellectuals of his day.

Mikhayil Mishaqa (1800–1888) was a true Renaissance man. He served in the courts of the princes of Mount Lebanon and trained as a medical doctor. He published numerous books and tracts on theology, philosophy, and even Arabic musical theory. Yet his best-known work is a history of Syria and Lebanon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The book was written toward the end of his life, at the suggestion of friends and family who urged him to capture the stories told him by his father and the historic events to which he himself had been an eyewitness, and Mishaqa called it *A Response to the Suggestion of the Loved Ones* (the title works better in Arabic, where it rhymes).

Months before my visit to the National Archives, Mishaqa's book came out in a brilliant English translation by Harvard scholar Wheeler Thackston under the more sensational title *Murder, Mayhem, Pillage, and Plunder*. I had read the book from cover to cover as soon as it came out and, as I settled into my workspace in the archives reading room, was particularly curious to read Mishaqa's consular correspondence. The first two volumes from Damascus, spanning the years 1859–1870, coincided with Mishaqa's term of

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duty. I ordered the first several volumes of the Damascus records and waited in heightened anticipation as they were called up from the stacks.[1]

When I went to collect my records from the archive's circulation desk, I was disappointed to find the earliest volumes from Damascus missing. The archivist confirmed that no one else was reading them and assured me that there must have been a mistake. I renewed my request for the Mishaqa volumes and took the later correspondence back to my desk to read in the meanwhile. Yet this second request proved no more fruitful than the first. The Damascus records were not often consulted, the archivist explained. Perhaps the early volumes had been mis-shelved. She suggested that I request an appointment to enter the stacks with an archivist and look for myself.

My request to visit the stacks was granted, and later that week, accompanied by a specialist on diplomatic records, I entered the inner sanctum of the National Archives. It was no less impressive than the building's neoclassical exterior. Miles of shelves filled with the US government's standard-issue leather-bound volumes, their crested spines embossed with the city and country of their mission and the dates covered by the volume, gave the stacks an aura of order and authority.

We went straight to the bay holding the volumes from Damascus. As far as I could see, they were in good order. The volumes were in numerical order, and the volume numbers aligned with the dates they covered. A few volumes were missing from the shelf—the ones I had successfully called up earlier in the week and that now graced my workspace in the reading room. But, much to my disappointment, there was no sign of the earliest volumes—the Mishaqa volumes—on any of the shelves.

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Not wanting to waste the archivist's time, I was about to give up and return empty-handed to the reading room when I noticed three small notebooks at the end of one of the shelves. The three volumes took up less space than one of the standard-issue State Department registers. Curious, I took the first slender notebook of seventy-eight pages off the shelf and found a paper label glued to the leather cover. Written in Arabic, the label read: 'Register of the Dispatches of the Consulate in Damascus Beginning in July of the Western Calendar, 1859.' The second notebook, only fifty-six pages long, picked up in 1866, where the first volume ended. The third was smaller yet, and it spanned the years 1870–1873, when Mishaqa's son Nasif succeeded him as US vice-consul in Damascus. All three were almost entirely in Arabic, with nothing in English to provide either the location or dates to assist the archivists in shelving these precious first volumes of consular correspondence from Damascus. The archivist shared my delight in locating the missing registers, which until then had been lost in the archives.

I returned to the reading room with the three slender notebooks in hand. I was literally shaking with excitement as I leafed through the pages of the first volume, the first modern researcher to lay eyes on the documents since their deposit in the National Archives. For all I knew, Mishaqa himself might have been the last person to read them. It is always exciting to handle original autograph documents, knowing that their author had turned the same pages. It feels like a virtual handshake across the ages. But I had never experienced the distinctive adrenaline rush of discovering *new* autograph documents that had until then been lost to scholarship.

I knew where I wanted to start. I turned to Mishaqa's reports of July 1860. In that month, Damascus was swept up in a horrific

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massacre that Mishaqa himself only narrowly survived. We have his account, preserved in his book, written thirteen years after the events. But what did Mishaqa write *at the time*? I found his first entry after the outbreak of the violence on page 35 in a dramatic report drafted to his superior, Consul J. Augustus Johnson in Beirut:

> Your Excellency no doubt has heard of the disaster which befell the Christian residents of this city last Monday morning. The arson and plunder and killing began eight hours after sunrise and continues still. The *Mitawila* [the Syrian Sh`ia community] of our quarter attacked our house and plundered all they found and destroyed what they could. They did not set fire to the house, so as not to bring disaster on their own. They fired shots but did not hit any of us, though I was struck on the head by an axe and my eye was crushed by a club. One of my [Muslim] friends, al-Haj Muhammad al-Sawtari, arrived with a group of North African soldiers and took me from the mob to his house, stripped naked, barefoot and bareheaded as my God created me, where he reunited me with my family. I am now in his house under God's mercy, confined to my bed, my eye swollen shut so that I can't assess the gravity of the injury. One of my arms is injured.[2]

It is almost certainly the earliest Arabic account of the eight-day Christian massacre that is ominously remembered down to the present day as 'the Damascus Events.'

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The Damascus Events were part of a broader outbreak of communal violence that devastated Syria and Lebanon in the summer of 1860. In the more than five centuries since its founding, the Ottoman Empire had known its fair share of massacres. Sixteenth-century campaigns led by the Ottomans against the Persian Safavid Empire, and the Mamluk Empire in the Arab lands, were basically imperial expansion by massacre. However, by the mid-sixteenth century, when the pace of conquest slowed, the Ottoman Empire came to be known more for the rule of law than for state violence against its subjects. Sultan Suleyman I (r. 1520–1566), known in the West as 'the Magnificent,' is remembered in Turkey and the Arab world as 'Kanuni,' 'the Lawgiver.' For 250 years following the death of Suleyman, Ottoman Muslims exercised preeminence over Christian and Jewish minority communities in which non-Muslims were protected yet still second-class citizens, and such massacres were all but unheard of.[3]

It was only in the early nineteenth century, with the emergence of separatist nationalist movements, that the Ottoman rule of law collapsed into violence between Muslims and Christians. At that stage, the horror was confined to the Balkans, where, starting with Greece in 1821, Christian separatists and their Muslim neighbours engaged in reciprocal massacres. The impact of the Greek uprising (1821–1829) was felt across the Ottoman Empire. In retribution, the Ottoman government hanged the Greek Orthodox patriarch and many leaders of the Greek community in Istanbul for treason, and mobs swept through the Greek quarters in the southern port city of Izmir, massacring and plundering innocent civilians. Ottoman forces applied scorched-earth methods against Greek resistance in

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Crete and the southern Peloponnesian Peninsula in their attempt to quell the uprising. Where Ottoman Christians sought to subvert the sultan's authority, they were seen as an existential threat. Extermination became a reasonable solution.

Images of Turkish violence against Greek civilians captured in the graphic paintings of Eugène Delacroix and the poetry of Lord Byron enflamed European public opinion and provoked calls for military intervention on the side of the Greek insurgents. With foreign assistance, the Greek insurgents prevailed and secured the independence of the Kingdom of Greece from the Ottoman Empire in 1829. The success of Greek Christians inspired other Balkan Christian communities, as nationalist movements emerged to challenge Ottoman rule in Serbia, Bosnia, Bulgaria, and Albania. In each case, nationalist insurgencies gave rise to massacres of both Muslim and Christian civilians.[4]

Although Christian nationalist movements and massacres were confined to the Balkan provinces, communal relations in the Arab lands also came under strain in the first half of the nineteenth century. A series of shocks raised tensions between the Muslim majority and different minority communities in the Arab provinces. In 1831 the forces of Egyptian governor Mehmed Ali Pasha occupied all of Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan, disrupting both Ottoman rule and local government for nearly a decade. The European powers assisted the Ottomans in driving the Egyptians out of Syria and back to the Nile Valley, initiating a period of escalating European interference in Ottoman affairs known in diplomatic history as 'the Eastern question.' The Ottoman government sought to contain European intervention through an ambitious reform programme

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known as the Tanzimat (1839–1876), imposing radical changes on Ottoman society with little warning and less consent from the Muslim majority. The Ottoman economy also faced new challenges—and opportunities—through the rapid expansion of European trade in the eastern Mediterranean. Christians seemed the prime beneficiaries of the opportunities, leaving Ottoman Muslims to grapple with the challenges. This made local Christians increasingly wealthy and assertive, provoking growing hostility from the Muslim majority. Conscious of the Balkan experience of Christian separatism aided by European intervention leading to the fragmentation of Ottoman rule, many in the Arab Muslim community came to see their Christian neighbours as an existential threat to their very way of life. By 1860, this perception gave rise to a genocidal moment, in which the extermination of Syrian Christians seemed a reasonable solution.

The first warning signs came in the northern Syrian city of Aleppo, where Muslim rioters attacked the Christian quarters in October 1850, killing dozens (precise figures are not available, but estimates range from twenty to seventy killed). The Ottoman government was able to restore order in Aleppo but could not eliminate the risk of further violence elsewhere in Syria. Communal tensions in Greater Syria continued to mount across the 1850s, erupting in unprecedented violence in the summer of 1860 that claimed more than ten thousand Christians in Mount Lebanon and five thousand in Damascus—the 1860 Events.[5]

For Syria and Lebanon, two of the keystone states of the modern Middle East, the 1860 Events were a defining moment: a definitive break with the old Ottoman order and a violent entry into the modern age. Before 1860, the Ottomans left Syria and Lebanon to

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their own devices, with local institutions and factions competing with Ottoman governors for control. After 1860, both Damascus and Mount Lebanon came under far more centralised government, ruled through a bureaucratic state with elected officials, anticipating the statecraft of the twentieth century. Syrians and Lebanese trace the beginning of their fateful relationship with France, their twentieth-century imperial power, to the 1860 Events. Moreover, the Lebanese link the origins of their complex sectarian form of government to the 1860 Events and trace every subsequent civil war back to the 'original sin' of 1860. This is as true for the brief Lebanese civil war of 1958 as it is for the fifteen-year conflict spanning 1975–1990. In many ways, the modern history of Syria and Lebanon begins in 1860.

Unsurprisingly, the Events have commanded the scholarly attention of some of the greatest historians of the modern Middle East. Syria and Lebanon are central in Arab history, and the Events transformed both regions in ways that are still felt today. The violence of 1860 also presaged Armenian massacres in the 1890s and 1909, as well as the genocide of Armenians and Assyrians in World War I. Interest in the subject has only grown in recent years, with major new studies of the 1860 Events in French, English, Arabic, and Japanese. The 1860 Events remain a subject of perennial interest to scholars and policy makers alike. Hence my excitement, in January 1989, when I first discovered Mikhayil Mishaqa's consular reports. I recognised that I had uncovered the most important new source on one of the most momentous events in modern Arab history.[6]

The Mishaqa reports are unique documents, not least because of their celebrated author. A well-documented figure, Dr Mishaqa emerges from the obscurity that cloaks most of his fellow

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Damascenes as a three-dimensional character. We have his books and personal history, we have biographical essays by his Syrian contemporaries, and we have reports on him by Protestant missionaries. We even have a photograph of the man, from a time when perhaps fewer than one in ten thousand Syrians would have had their picture taken. Moreover, Mishaqa was the kind of person whose views a historian would most value. He was an eyewitness to remarkable historical events in his own lifetime. He was incredibly well connected. A trained physician, he enjoyed access to the Ottoman ruling elite, to the Muslim notables of Damascus, as well as to the Christian and Jewish communities of the city. He knew everyone, and everyone knew him.[7]

The timing of Dr Mishaqa's appointment as US vice-consul to Damascus was also fortuitous. He took up his post in September 1859. This means that his reports trace the breakdown in order in Syrian society over a nine-month period leading up to the violence of the massacre itself. Perhaps more valuable yet, Dr Mishaqa continued to file reports from Damascus for a full decade after the Events, providing the detail and texture of the social divisions and tensions that bedevilled both the reconstruction of the city and the reintegration of its displaced Christian survivors.

Whereas many survivors of the Events wrote memoirs, they tended to do so five to ten years after the events, with the full benefit of hindsight. The same is true for Mishaqa's own book, written thirteen years after the events. What makes Mishaqa's reports so special is that they reflect the writer's present, with no knowledge of what the future held. As such, they capture the fears and hopes of Damascenes in real time, standing as some of the most detailed accounts

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of the tortuous path the city followed from the brink of genocide to the restoration of communal balance between the city's Muslim majority and Christian minority.

Although they held little of value for my doctoral research, I recognised the Mishaqa reports for the historian's gold mine they were. I spent the day photocopying all three notebooks, determined to write a book on the Damascus Events.

Over thirty years have passed since I first discovered Mishaqa's reports. My photocopies gathered dust, but they were never forgotten. I first had to complete my doctorate, and I revised my dissertation for publication in 1999. With my first research project behind me, I was free to begin work on Damascus.

I secured a research grant to consult the archives in Damascus in 2001, to help place the Mishaqa reports in context. I had been a frequent visitor to the Syrian capital since my childhood in Beirut in the 1970s, but as part of my preparation for the book, it was important to familiarise myself with the urban landscape in which the events of 1860 transpired. I walked the Christian quarters of Bab Tuma and Bab Sharqi that had been the epicentre of the mob violence. I divided my time between research in the archives during opening hours, walks through the old quarters of the city when the archives were closed, and after-hours research in the rich library of the French Institute in Damascus, where I had taken one of the studio flats reserved for visiting scholars.

My research in Damascus was cut short when, on the eleventh of September, a group of hijackers flew jetliners into New York's World

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Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania. Anticipating a crisis after such an unprecedented attack on American soil, I packed my bag and headed straight to the airport. The Damascus airport was surreal on 9/11. There were no crowds in the terminal and practically no international aircraft on the tarmac. The departure boards showed the cancellation of all flights by European carriers to the Syrian capital. I managed to secure a seat on a flight to Tunis that evening and made my way home to Oxford with a suitcase full of photocopied documents from libraries and archives in Damascus.

I continued my research the following year with a visit to the Ottoman Archives in Istanbul in 2002. Working with a research assistant among recently catalogued sources, I managed to photocopy hundreds of pages of Ottoman documents for my project. I next went to Beirut, where I consulted manuscript sources on the 1860 Events from the American University of Beirut's Jafet Library. In the autumn of 2002, I even returned to the US National Archives, since relocated to a new facility in College Park, Maryland, to consult the consular correspondence from Beirut and Damascus. I was beginning to assemble the critical mass of material to put Mishaqa's reports into their proper context and tackle the complex history of the 1860 events in Damascus.

In addition to the materials by Mishaqa, I had collected accounts from several Ottoman and Damascene figures who lived through the Events and their aftermath. Balancing the Christian survivors' accounts, we have important Muslim narratives. There is the young notable, Muhammad Abu al-Sa`ud al-Hasibi, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, who suffered a year's imprisonment following the Events and recorded his experiences in a detailed memoir.

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Another Muslim notable, Shaykh Muhammad Sa`id al-Ustuwani, was a preacher in the city's ancient Umayyad Mosque. His memoir was published in Damascus in the 1990s and provides vivid detail on the Events and their aftermath. Amir `Abd al-Qadir, exiled by the French to Ottoman domains from his native Algeria, emerged as one of the most influential figures in the Damascus Events. He left a rich trove of letters and interviews that shed new light on Damascus in 1860 and after. The Ottoman archives hold extensive reports from such key officials as the governor of Damascus, Ahmad Pasha, and the foreign minister, Fuad Pasha, dispatched by the sultan to restore Ottoman control over Damascus and Mount Lebanon in the aftermath of the Events. These eyewitnesses, who will become familiar figures in the course of the narrative, have left such detailed accounts that Damascus emerges as a real city, a metropolis marked by history and culture as well as by deviance and criminality.

The September 11 attacks continued to cast a shadow over my Damascus project. With hindsight, I was beginning to see 9/11 as America's 'Events.' The shock of the unprecedented destruction to the urban fabric of New York and Washington and the magnitude of the loss of life (2,996 people died on 9/11, and thousands more were injured) inflicted a collective trauma on Americans that took years to heal. Living through those years sensitised me to the experiences of the Damascenes, who had suffered proportionally higher losses and material damage that took years to rebuild.

As much as I wanted to work on nineteenth-century Damascus, I believed it more important to challenge the assumptions underlying

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the post-9/11 American-led war on terror by writing a history of the Arab world for the general reader. I put down the Damascus project and wrote *The Arabs: A History*, which was published in 2009. A book on World War I in the Middle East, timed to coincide with the centenary of the war, further delayed my work on Damascus.

It is only now, after more than thirty years, that I return to the documents that I was so excited to find in 1989, and to the challenge of making sense of both a massacre and the process of reconstruction and reconciliation that followed the Damascus Events. One of the first questions that people ask me when I tell them about the book is why did the Muslims of Damascus massacre the Christians of their city? It is an obvious question but a difficult one to answer. The first four chapters of the book trace the changes that transformed Damascus from the 1830s to the 1850s and gave rise to murderous tensions between Muslims and Christians in the city. Chapter 5 provides a day-by-day account of the Damascus Events, from the outbreak of violence on 9 July 1860 to the massacre's end on 17 July. The last four chapters then trace Ottoman measures to restore the rule of law and bring those responsible for the massacre to justice, to provide for the needs of the destitute Christian survivors, to fund the reconstruction of Christian properties, and to reintegrate the Christians into the social structure of Damascus. The book is thus both a study of one city's descent to the brink of genocide and the road pursued by the Ottoman authorities to bring the city back from that brink.

The context in writing now is shaped less by America's traumas of 9/11 than by Syria's own tragedy of total war between the government and its citizens. In the wake of the peaceful protest movements of the 2011 Arab Spring, Syria has succumbed to a violent civil war

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that has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, levelled whole city quarters, and displaced millions from their homes and their homeland. For the first time since 1860, Syria's minority communities have suffered sectarian violence, caught between the brutality of the Baathist government of President Bashar al-Asad and the Sunni Muslim militias aspiring to create an Islamic state. The scale of the horror and destruction across Syria since 2011 is of an entirely different order of magnitude than the events of 1860. According to contemporary figures, the rioters destroyed some 1,500 houses in the Christian quarters of Damascus in 1860. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimated that nearly three million houses were partially or totally destroyed between 2011 and 2018. Yet the history of the Damascus Events and the nineteenth-century reconstruction of the city holds much of relevance to contemporary Syrians as they confront the magnitude of the challenges to end this conflict and rebuild their shattered country and restore their fragmented society. As Syrian historian Sami Moubayed has written, we study this history 'that we might learn from it, in the hope that we never repeat it.' History does not provide a road map for solving contemporary problems, but it does demonstrate what is possible.[8]

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Dr Mishaqa Opens the US Vice-Consulate in Damascus

The United States consul general in Beirut, J. Augustus Johnson, was in a fury. He had long sought access to the Damascus market for American trading companies. Without their own diplomatic mission in Damascus, however, the Americans systematically lost out to better-placed European competitors with consulates in the Syrian capital. Johnson had entrusted US interests in Damascus to the British consul there, Mr James Brant, who had done nothing to open the Damascus market to American traders. When a US company finally brokered its first contract in Damascus in 1859, the treacherous Brant pulled strings to get the Ottoman authorities to obstruct the deal. It was time, Johnson concluded, for the United States to open its own mission in Damascus.

The United States was a minor player in the Ottoman Empire in the mid-nineteenth century. Although its thirty-three states and ten

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