

Ottoman Colonialism? The Impact of Ottoman Rule in Arab Lands

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From about the second decade of the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire extended its rule to the predominantly Arabic-speaking regions of Middle East and North Africa. For almost four centuries, the Ottomans ruled these lands under a variety of regimes, including fiefdoms (timar) subject to direct taxation and indirect administrations paying annual tribute (salyane).

Often influenced by nationalist sentiments, scholars have offered conflicting assessments of the impact of Ottoman rule on economic activity in Arab lands. While some historians have condemned the Ottoman rule as having ruined economic welfare during this period, others have championed the Ottoman reign as being a boost to activity. The problem with these assessments is that they are typically based on speculations that have not been subjected to careful empirical scrutiny.

In this paper, we offer a quantitative analysis of the impact of Ottoman rule on Arab lands. The analysis is based on economic activity at the district level, proxied by the number of authors affiliated with the district. The data come from two historical sources, namely the author records contained in the Virtual International Authority File and the most well-known historical biographic dictionaries of the Middle East and North Africa. The database includes over 36,000 authors from the region. We examine author data during the period between 1300 and 1800 for the relevant Ottoman districts by assigning the Moroccan cities in 1517 as the control group for comparison. We run a simple difference-in-difference analysis of authors on time since conquest to estimate the differential growth between control cities and the directly and indirectly ruled Ottoman districts.