

Concise Essay on The Roman Empire in Syria (64 BCE-476 CE)

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The Roman Empire in Syria (1st century BCE-5th century CE)

Origins. A great deal had happened in Syria before the Roman Empire took over the region in 64 BCE. Modern civilization got its start there because agriculture – the precursor to cities, writing, nation states, and empires – began in the ancient Levant. Crop agriculture was first practiced about 8500 BCE in the Fertile Crescent, a then fertile region that arced through modern Israel, Lebanon, Syria, southeastern Turkey, and Iraq.



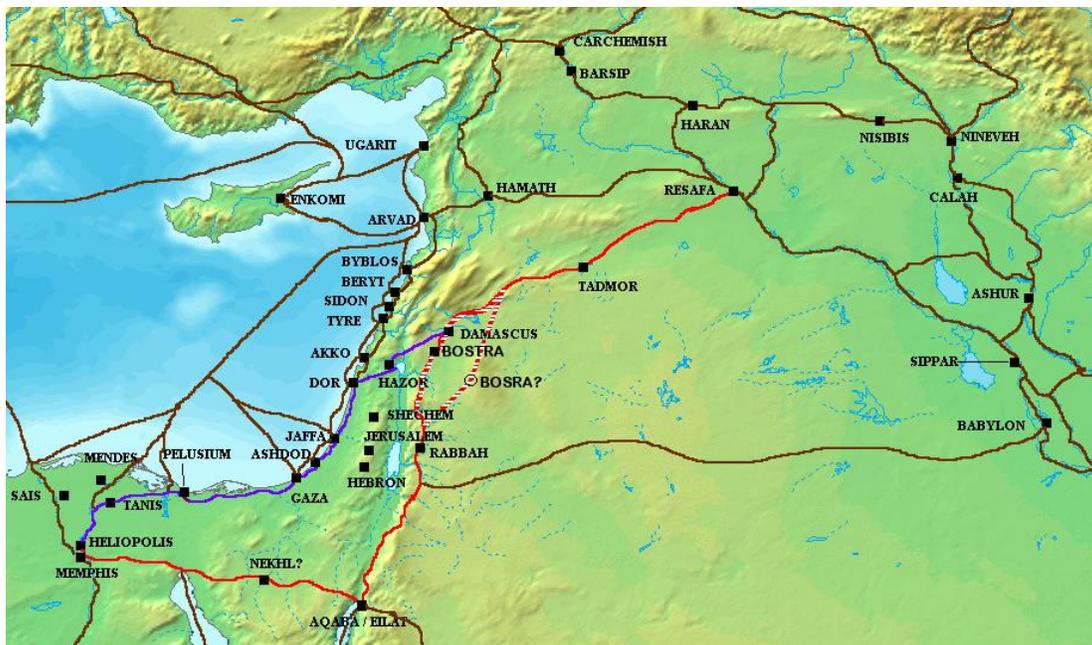
Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fertile_crescent_Neolithic_B_circa_7500_B_C.jpg>

The Fertile Crescent, c. 7500 BCE

With the surpluses available from productive agriculture, people in the Fertile Crescent gradually established the other three prerequisites for modern civilization – writing, advanced social organization, and cities.

Between 5000 and 3000 BCE, the Sumerians in southern Mesopotamia developed irrigated agriculture, introduced the plow and the wheel, and produced large agricultural surpluses. About 3000 BCE, the Sumerians invented pictographic writing with cuneiform symbols to assist mercantile accounting. At about the same time, the Egyptians developed a highly productive agriculture, based on the natural flooding and siltation of the Nile River, and hieroglyphic writing, probably derived from the Sumerian system. As a result, the Levant lost its early agricultural lead to Mesopotamia and Egypt and became a region squeezed in the middle of two imperial powers. Because of its strategic location, productive city-states, and artisanal manufacturing, the Levant became a trade crossroads and future battleground.

During the third millennium BCE, three dynasties – Sumer (2900-2350 BCE), Akkad (2350-2112 BCE), and Ur III (2112-2004 BCE) – ruled Mesopotamia. All were dependent on Levantine city-states for essential imports, notably timber, and all intervened in the Levant. During that period, however, the Levantine polities managed to retain their independence. None of the Mesopotamian dynasties was strong enough to control the Levant, and the Old Kingdom of Egypt was consolidating its power in the Nile Delta and Valley and in Nubia to the south.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ancient_Levant_routes.png>

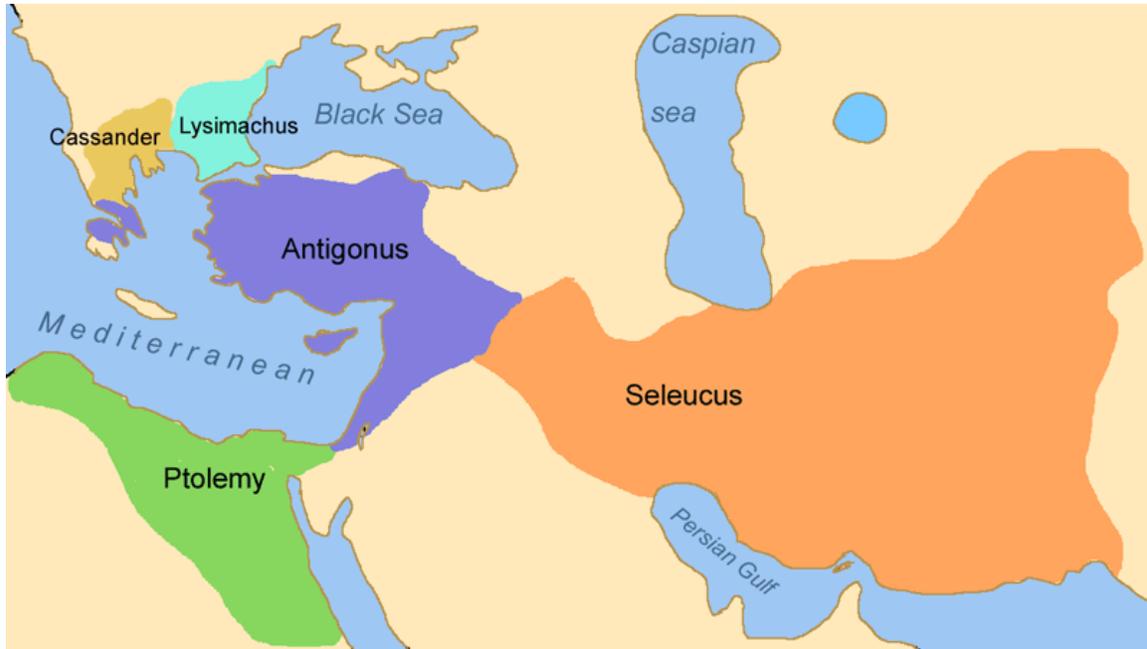
The Levant – Trade Crossroads, Linking Egypt with Mesopotamia

In the following millennium, however, the power balances changed and the Levant suffered. For the next 4000 years – until the region emerged in the 1940s as four independent countries – the Levant was ruled by foreign powers.

Between 2000 and 1500 BCE, the Amorites ruled Babylonia (southern Mesopotamia) and vied for control of the Levantine city-states with Assyria (northern Mesopotamia). Syria began its unhappy role as the locus of imperial power struggles. The three centuries, 1500-1200 BCE, were turbulent but prosperous for the Levant. Two Indo-European-speaking migrants from Central Asia, the Hurrians (in Mittani, northern Syria) and the Hittites (in Anatolia, modern Turkey) fought Egypt's New Kingdom for hegemony in the Levant.

During the millennium before the Romans took control in 64 BCE, the Levant was continuously under foreign imperial rule. Four foreign empires – Sargonid Assyria (911-626 BCE), Chaldean Babylonia (626-539 BCE), Achaemenid Persia (539-330 BCE), and the Hellenistic kingdoms (Ptolemaic Egypt and the

Seleucid Kingdom, 330-64 BCE) – superimposed governments to tax Levantine agriculture and trade.



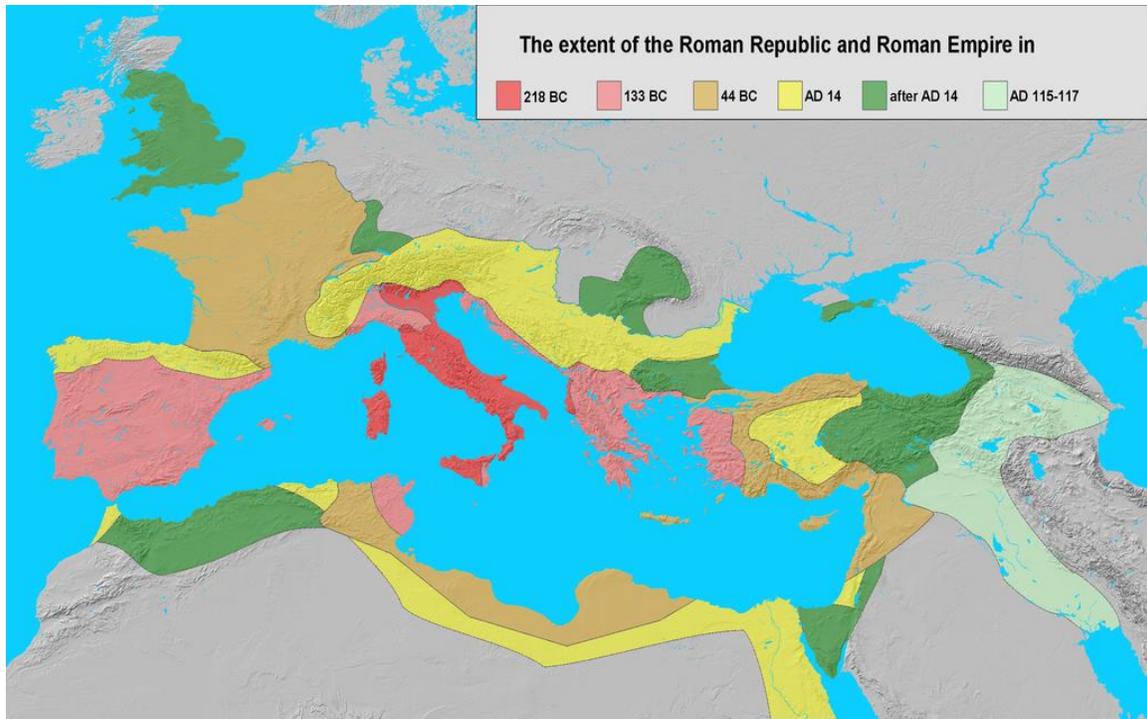
Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Diadochi.png?>

The Hellenistic (Seleucid, Antigonid, and Ptolemaic) Kingdoms, 2nd century BCE

The Roman Empire began in the 6th century BCE as a small city-state based on Rome and then expanded for five centuries throughout the Mediterranean. The Romans' imperial strategy was to use strong military power and effective public administration to create and transfer wealth from conquered provinces to Rome and the Italian peninsula. The Roman Empire expanded into Greece in

the 2nd century BCE. Gnaeus Pompey conquered Asia Minor (modern Turkey) and Syria by defeating the Seleucid Hellenes (Macedonians) in 64-62 BCE. The Roman takeover of Syria thus was a bold military conquest, not a gradual cultural intrusion.

The growth of the Roman Empire continued under Emperor Augustus (ruled 27 BCE-14 CE). His strategy was to expand the empire to its natural frontiers – rivers in the north and east, the Atlantic Ocean to the west, and the Sahara Desert in the south. In the Syrian east, the empire already extended to the Euphrates River, and Augustus chose not to fight the Parthian Empire across that boundary.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
 <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Extent_of_the_Roman_Republic_and_the_Roman_Empire_between_218_BC_and_117_AD.png>

The Roman Empire under Augustus, 14 CE (All Colored Areas Except Green and Gray) – Expanded To Its Natural Frontiers

Wealth. In the Roman Empire in Syria, what were the main sources of wealth and power – agriculture, foreign trade, and foreign conquest? Agriculture – producing cereals, olives, grapes, and animal products – was the main source of wealth in the Roman Empire. Agricultural profitability arose from intensification (greater labor use and shorter fallow periods) and specialization (the introduction of cash crops and better crop combinations). But

Syria was not an agricultural bread-basket for Rome. Most agricultural expansion occurred in the newly developed west and in Egypt, not in the previously settled east, including the Levant.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Western_Roman_Empire_395_Tribes.png

Agricultural Wealth – Concentrated in the Western Roman Empire

Agricultural taxation consisted of land taxes and head taxes that were paid in kind or in cash and amounted to one-tenth to one-fifth of the value of farm production. Roman officials used

agricultural taxes in Syria to cover the costs there of Roman administration and military occupation. Little was left over for transfer to Rome.

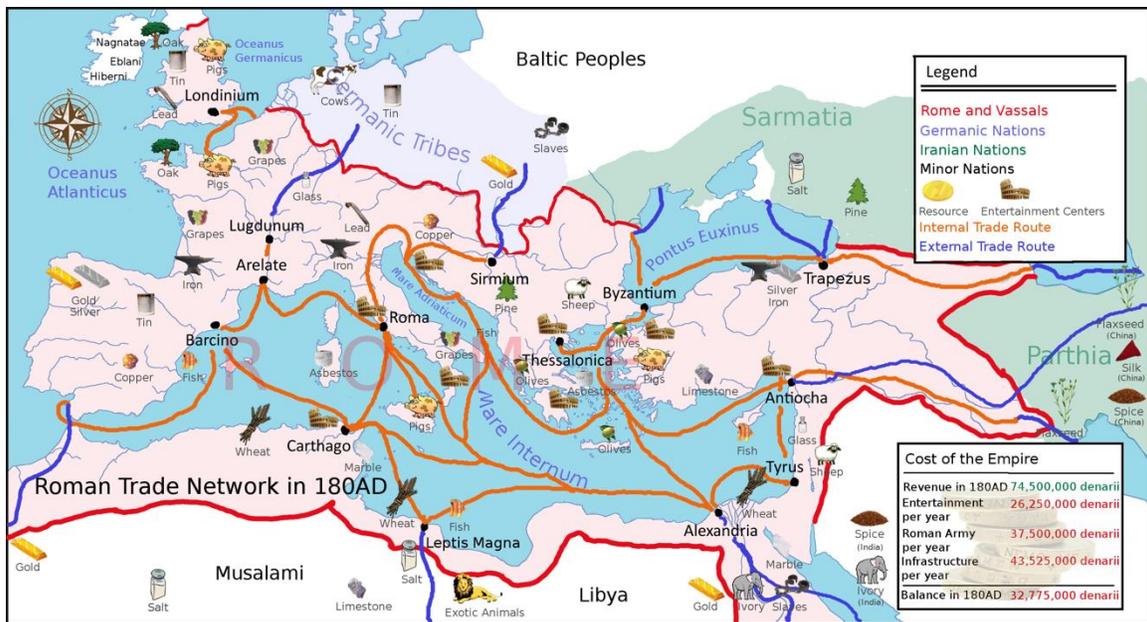


Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Amphi-Rome.PNG>

Amphitheaters of the Roman Empire, mid-3rd century CE – Constructed Mostly With Agricultural Taxes

The gains from foreign trade were only a minor source of wealth in the Roman Empire. The high costs of land transportation reduced traded volumes, especially in bulk commodities like grain

and timber, and led to trade by sea where possible. Roman policy, in the Levant and throughout the empire, was to encourage private merchants to finance and transact trade. Rome did not establish state trading monopolies. Imperial policy promoted the development of key port cities, including Ostia (the port for Rome), Alexandria (Egypt), Antioch (Syria), and Carthage (North Africa). Rome levied a 25 percent tariff on imports into the empire. But those trade taxes served only as a minor supplement to agricultural revenues.



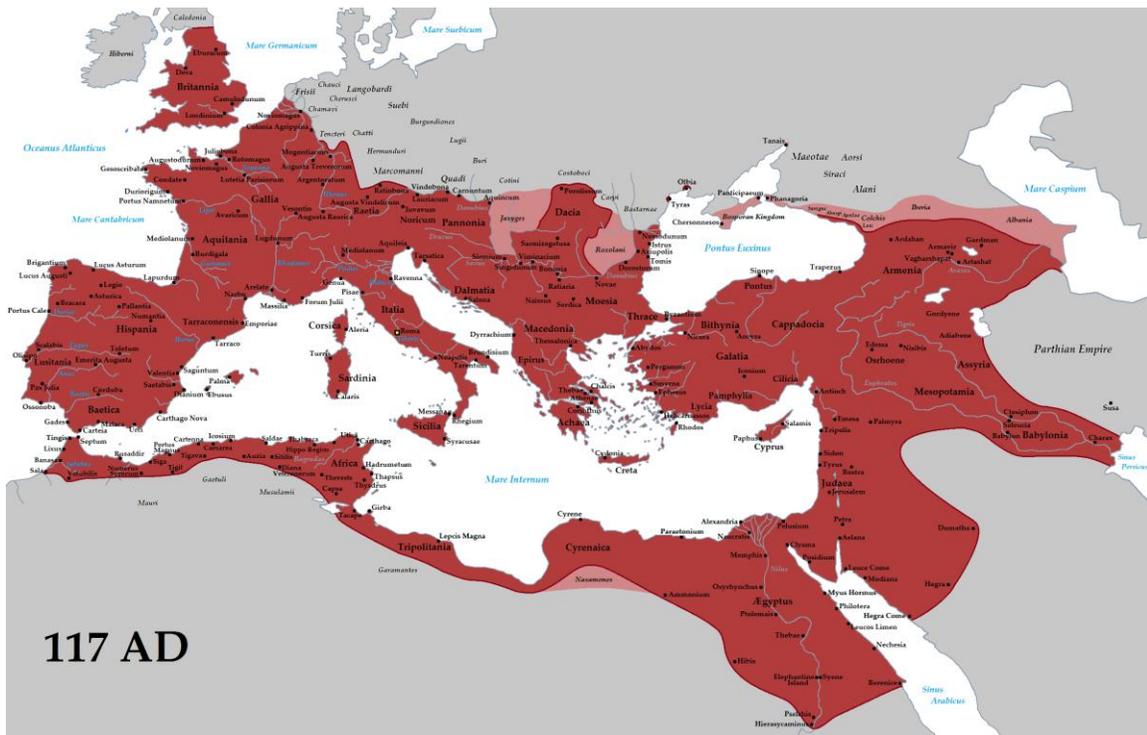
Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Europe_180ad_roman_trade_map.png

Roman Trade Routes, 180 CE

The Roman Empire grew between the 3rd century BCE and the 2nd century CE until the Mediterranean Sea became a Roman lake. The original pattern of foreign conquest was intended to provide perimeter security for the empire. Later expansion was meant to bring productive agricultural regions under Rome's imperial control. The political stability brought by the *Pax Romana* brought economic prosperity in the provinces but only modest population growth, because most of the new wealth was transferred to Rome. In the long-settled eastern part of the empire, Rome permitted local rulers to govern under the auspices of Roman jurisdiction. In the expanding western part of the empire, the Romans settled ex-soldiers and created new agricultural wealth. Throughout the empire, the provincial cities collected taxes, maintained law and order, and recruited soldiers for Rome.

Control. What forms of religious persuasion, political organization, economic sanction, and military coercion did the leaders of the Roman Empire in Syria use to extract wealth for the elite and maintain imperial power? The Roman Empire was based

on a disciplined army, a hierarchical society, and a small but effective bureaucracy to collect agricultural taxes. In the east – Greece, Asia Minor, the Levant, and Roman (northwestern) Arabia – Rome ruled indirectly through quasi-independent local governments and hoped that taxes would cover local military and administrative expenses.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Roman_Empire_Trajan_117AD.png

The Roman Empire At Its Peak, 117 CE

There, the Romans hoped to maintain control and break even.

Rome preserved the advanced Greek culture, made little effort to

impose Roman religious beliefs, ruled indirectly through existing local governments, and taxed enough to pay provincial expenses (including Roman troops). Roman occupation had little cultural impact in the Levant. Greek remained the language of government, the elite, and the cities, and Syriac and other local languages were spoken in the countryside.

Effective public administration was a central pillar of the pragmatic Roman Empire. The government maintained law and order, collected taxes, and ran on a cash basis without borrowing. The central bureaucracy was small, about one-twentieth that of contemporary Han China. The Roman state did not directly control production or trade and built no state factories. The effective enforcement of Roman law encouraged the development of private trade and enterprise. Rome carried out regular provincial censuses to facilitate the collection of agricultural (property and head) taxes. The government chose not to establish state monopolies to distribute food. Private trading companies

handled almost all of Rome's grain, wine, olive oil, and luxury foods.

Decline. What caused the Roman Empire in Syria to weaken and fall apart? The Roman Empire began to decline in the mid-3rd century, divided in half in the late 4th century, and the western part, centered in Rome, splintered and fell in the 5th century (476). The Roman Empire collapsed because a long process of internal decay softened the empire and made it an easy candidate for eventual foreign takeover.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Ancient_Rome_271_AD.svg>

Rome's Mid-3rd-century Crisis – Secession of the Gallic Empire (Green Area) and the Palmyrene Empire (Yellow Area), 271 CE

Internal decay resulted from extravagant aristocratic spending and the over-taxing of provincial agriculture. Wide income disparities existed in the Roman Empire. The annual income of a typical rich Roman senator was probably 100 times that of a fully-employed worker. As the income inequalities widened in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, the rural poor increasingly resented the heavy agricultural tax burden that funded aristocratic extravagance. Economic disparities created social unrest.

Beginning in the mid-3rd century, chronic instability of government and repeated foreign invasions undercut the political stability that had been the main benefit of Roman rule for the oppressed poor.

Tight central political control might have staved off these growing pressures. But Rome instead experienced political instability. Provincial military commanders vied for central leadership and caused imperial succession crises. Political instability was coupled with a loss of military strength. Rome's myopic leaders refused to reign in Roman extravagances – food doles, monuments, public games, and rich diets – and transfer

funds to the military. To keep their landed estates operating, aristocrats substituted cash for troops, exacerbating military manpower shortages.

Rome thus became ripe for foreign invasion. Fierce Barbarian invaders from central and northern Europe – Vandals, Huns, Anglo-Saxons, Visigoths, Franks, and Ostrogoths – took advantage of Roman military weakness, inflicted large losses on Roman armies, and dismembered the Roman Empire. The Ostrogoths took over Italy and Rome and forced the last western Roman emperor, Romulus Augustus, to abdicate in 476.



Source: *Wikimedia Commons*, available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Europe_and_the_Near_East_at_476_AD.png>

*Western Europe and the Byzantine (Eastern Roman) Empire –
After the Fall of the Western Roman Empire, 476*

Aftermath. After the fall of the Roman Empire in Syria, what local or foreign groups succeeded to power and how successfully did they wield power and extract wealth? Roman Emperor Theodosius (ruled 379-395) divided his empire into two halves in 395. Syria, like Egypt, became part of the eastern half of

the Roman Empire, known later as the Byzantine Empire because Constantinople was located in the area called Byzantium.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Justinian555AD.png>

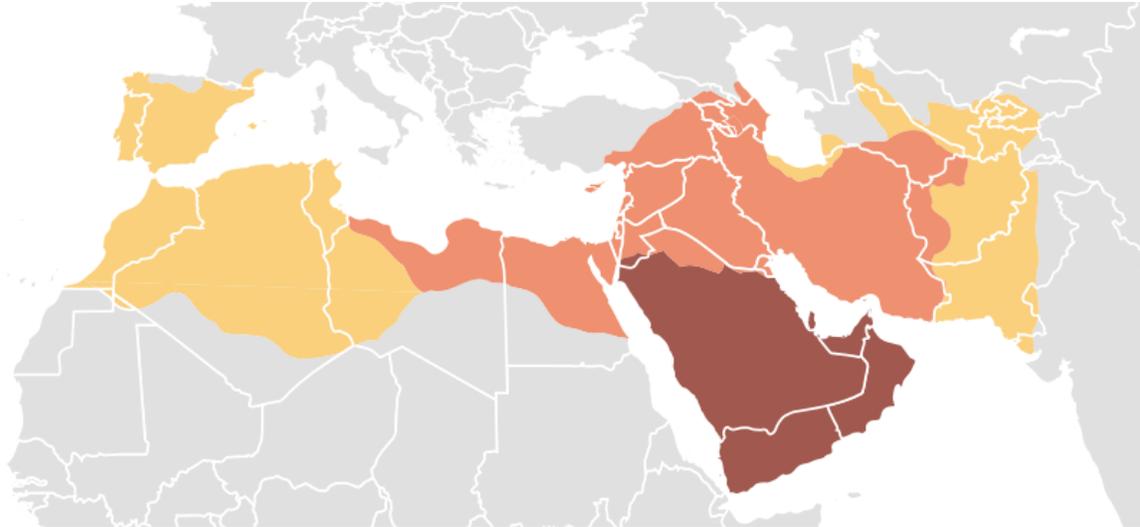
The Byzantine Empire At Its Greatest Extent – After Emperor Justinian’s Reconquest, 555

The Byzantine Empire remained a powerful force for seven centuries, until the Seljuk Turks defeated the Byzantines at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071 and claimed much of Anatolia. Syrians resented Byzantine rule even more than previous Hellene and Roman domination because loose Byzantine administration led

to political instability and the Byzantines taxed farmers and traders heavily.

Shortly after the death of Muhammad in 632, Muslim Arabs began a religious jihad. Islam originated in Medina and Mecca in the Hijaz region of northwestern Arabia. Because Syria abutted the Hijaz to the north, the Arabs viewed it as critical in their Muslim diaspora and they conquered it first, in 636. Syria fell easily because the Byzantine forces were weak, disorganized, and corrupt. The Syrian peoples resented Byzantine rule and were willing to accept Arab domination to end a millennium of Greco-Roman rule under the Hellenes, Romans, and Byzantines (332 BCE-636 CE).

In 661, Muawiyah, a capable Arab leader, established the Umayyad Caliphate and placed its capital in Damascus, Syria. Damascus and Syria reached their height of Islamic political and cultural significance during the Umayyad period (661-750).



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_expansion_of_Caliphate.svg>

*The Muslim Arab Diaspora –
622-632 (Dark Red), 632-661 (Light Red), 661-750 (Yellow)*

Power struggles within the Arab aristocracy led to the shift of the capital from Damascus to Baghdad (in Iraq) in 750. Syria declined under the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258) because the Levant was not as rich agriculturally as Egypt and Iraq, long-distance trade on the Silk Road routes through Syria had abated after the main route moved north to the Black Sea, and Damascus was no longer the Islamic capital.



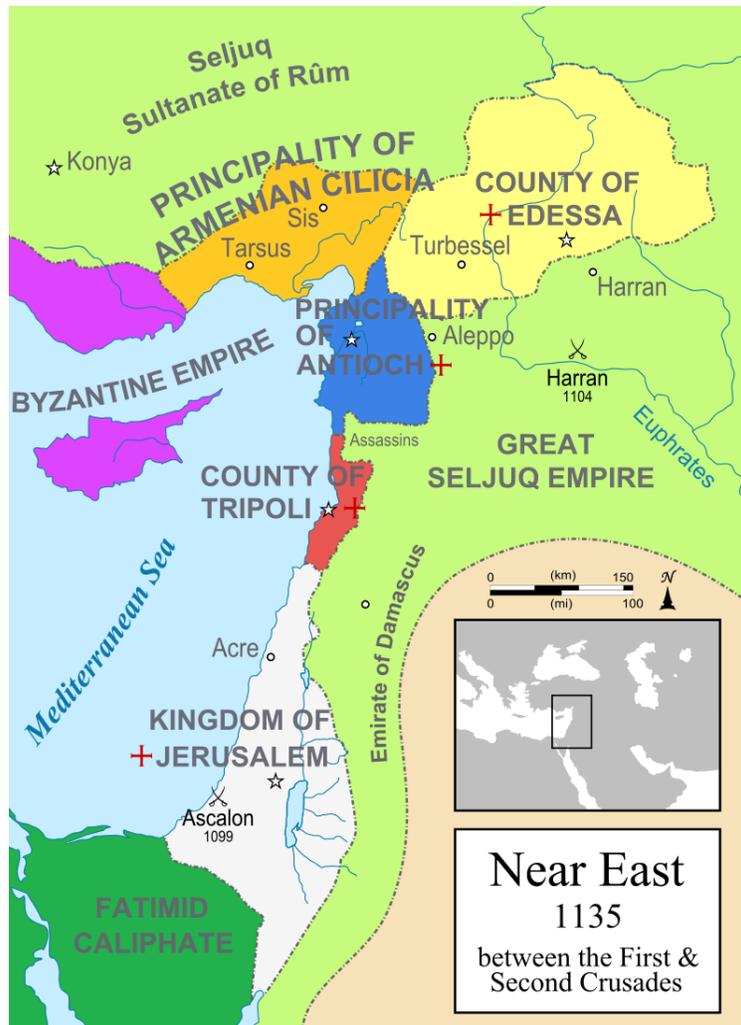
Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Abbasids850.png>>

The Abbasid Caliphate – At Its Peak , c. 850

In 868, Ahmad ibn Tulun, a capable leader of Turkish origin who ruled Egypt from 868 to 884, declared Egypt independent of Abbasid rule and set up his own sovereign dynasty. Two years later, ibn Tulun conquered Syria and began a pattern of Egyptian rule of Syria that continued for much of the following seven centuries. Syria gained an unwelcome respite from Egyptian rule when the Seljuk Turks in 1070 conquered Syria. The Seljuks had

taken effective control of the Abassid caliphate in 1055. They ruled much of Syria without distinction for more than a century.

The First Crusade in 1097 was an invasion by Frankish and Norman soldiers of Syria. Its goals were to prop up the beleaguered Byzantine Empire (that was under attack from the Seljuk Turks) and to liberate the Holy Land from Seljuk rule. Eight separate Crusades were launched from Europe during the two centuries of the Crusader era. Initially, the Crusaders accomplished their aims. They established a series of feudal kingdoms in western Syria along the Mediterranean coast, built around fortified castles. The Crusaders then forced peasants farming adjacent lands to become their feudal serfs. They eventually came under heavy counter attack.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
 <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_Crusader_states_1135-en.svg>

Crusader States in the Levant, 1135

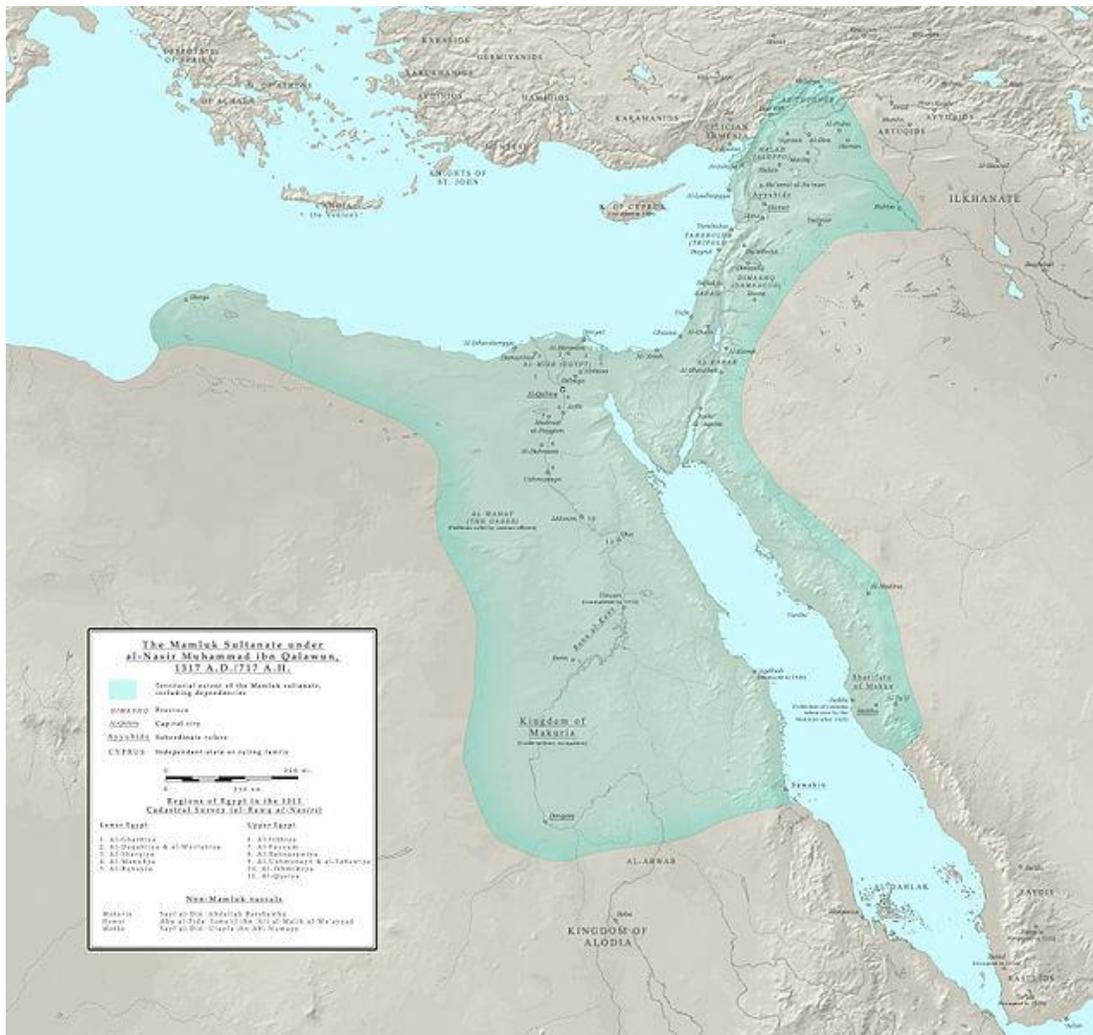
Salah al-Din (Saladin) was a Kurdish Sunni Muslim, a superb military leader, and a capable administrator. He effected a military coup in Egypt in 1171 and used his military guile to conquer Syria and the Hijaz in 1174 and Iraq in 1179. Salah al-Din then forged a

Muslim coalition to fight the Crusaders. At his death in 1193, he had forced the Crusaders back into a narrow coastal strip on the Mediterranean Sea in Syria. But thereafter, the Levantine region splintered into rival small states and the Crusaders were able to hang on for another century.

Syria next was ruled by Mamluks and invaded by Mongols and Turkomans. The Mamluks were a self-perpetuating military aristocracy that took power in Egypt and Syria in 1250 and held it for more than two and one-half centuries. The Mamluks were Turkish and Circassian recruits from the slave markets of central Asia who were brought to Egypt, educated in Arabic, Sunni Islam, and military tactics, and freed to lead the military and bureaucracy.

Hulegu, the grandson of Genghis Khan (Chinggis Qan), invaded Syria in 1260 and captured Aleppo and Damascus. Later in that year, Mamluk Sultan Qutuz and his leading general, Baybars, defeated the Mongols at Ayn Jalut (Goliath's spring) near Nazareth and stopped their westward advance. The Mongols then withdrew from Mamluk Syria. Timur the Lame (ruled 1370-1405

and also known as Tamerlane) created a Turkoman empire, centered on Samarkand (in modern Uzbekistan), which stretched from northern India to Persia. He led a massive army westward, routed the Mamluk armies, captured Aleppo in 1400 and Damascus in 1401, and appropriated considerable booty.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mamluk Sultanate of Cairo 1317 AD.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mamluk_Sultanate_of_Cairo_1317_AD.jpg)

Mamluk Egypt and Syria, 1250-1517

The Ottoman Empire followed the Mamluks in ruling Syria. In 1300, a powerful Turkish leader, Osman, set up the Ottoman dynasty in Anatolia. During the 14th and 15th centuries, the Ottomans expanded their control of Anatolia and of southeastern Europe. In 1453, they captured Constantinople, renamed the city Istanbul, shifted their capital there, and ended the Byzantine Empire. In a single swift campaign in 1516-1517, Ottoman Emperor Selim I defeated the Mamluk armies, took control of Aleppo and Damascus, and conquered all of Syria and Egypt.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:OttomanEmpire1600.png>>

*The Ottoman Empire in Anatolia, Eastern Europe, Syria, Egypt,
and North Africa – 1600*

Northern Syria, centered on Aleppo, had great strategic importance for the Ottomans because it bordered the entrance to Anatolia.

Southern Syria, centered on Damascus, was deemed critical because it served as the main entrepôt for the annual pilgrimages to Mecca, which were major trade fairs as well as significant religious events.

The decline of the Ottoman Empire resulted principally from technological backwardness, especially in building ships and making weapons. The Ottomans missed the commercial, agricultural, and industrial revolutions that occurred in Europe in the 15th through 19th centuries. They thus lost their earlier lead in science and technology. In the 1860s, the European powers intervened to force the Ottoman leaders to grant semi-independent status to the Mount Lebanon region, after 10,000 Maronite Christians had been massacred in a civil war. Thereafter, French and British businessmen and diplomats began to take an increasingly active interest in the possibility of imperial expansion

in Syria. Ottoman Turkish rule of the Levant ended after World War I. The Ottomans lost the war after they sided with Germany and Austria-Hungary against Britain, France, Russia, and (in 1917-1918) the United States. The question then was who would rule in the turbulent Levant and Iraq.

In 1920, Britain claimed League of Nations mandates to rule Palestine (including Transjordan) and Iraq, while France asserted mandates to rule Syria and Lebanon.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:French_Mandate_for_Syria_and_the_Lebanon_map_en.svg

*League of Nations Mandates, 1922 –
 French Mandates for Syria and Lebanon*

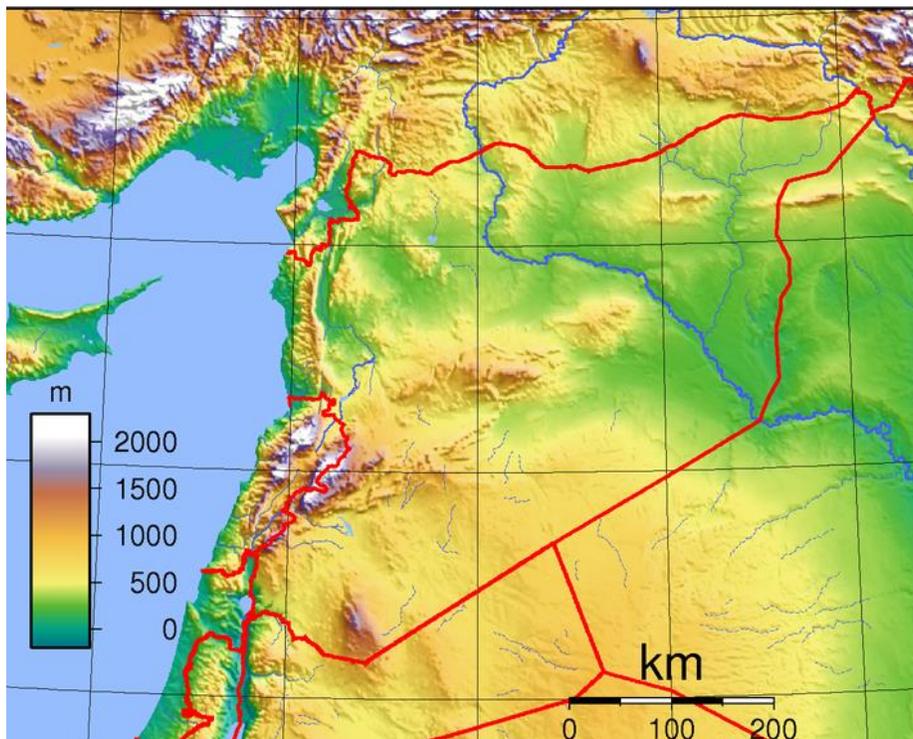
In 1921, Britain separated the Mandate for Palestine into the area west of the Jordan River (designated for Jewish settlement) and that east of the Jordan (renamed Transjordan). France added coastal regions and the Bekaa valley to Mount Lebanon to form the State of Greater Lebanon in 1920, and this area became the

Lebanese Republic in 1926. In that year, France merged the mandated provinces of Damascus and Aleppo to form Syria. In this British-dominated division of the Levant plus Iraq, Britain thus achieved its two primary objectives – control of the two key maritime links to British India – the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf – and control over Iraq’s oilfields and land-based access to them from the Mediterranean coast via Israel/Palestine.

In colonial Syria, France repressed political revolts, avoided land reform, and permitted 3,000 rich landed families to earn half of the agricultural income. French investment in infrastructure, communications, and banking in colonial Lebanon supported the Levantine Christian merchant elite (especially in Beirut) and the beginnings of modern industry. In colonial Transjordan, Britain had to build a new public administration in a peripheral, largely desert area where nearly half of the population was nomadic and most were illiterate. Britain struggled to create an orderly administration in Mandated Palestine in the face of Arab opposition to increasing Jewish immigration. But many of the new

arrivals used their capital and technical and management skills to establish a thriving capitalist economy in their new homeland.

Syria earned its independence from France in 1946. Land-owning oligarchs, mostly Sunni Arab, controlled rural votes to wield political power.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Syria_Topography.png

Topography of Syria and Lebanon

Hafiz al-Asad, a Ba’thist general from an Alawi peasant family, seized power in a military coup in 1970. Asad ran a brutal dictatorship for three decades. Syria made adroit use of its

geopolitical location to attract foreign aid from the USSR, Eastern Europe, and oil-producing Arab states. When Hafiz al-Asad died in 2000, his son, Bashar al-Asad, took over as the President of Syria.

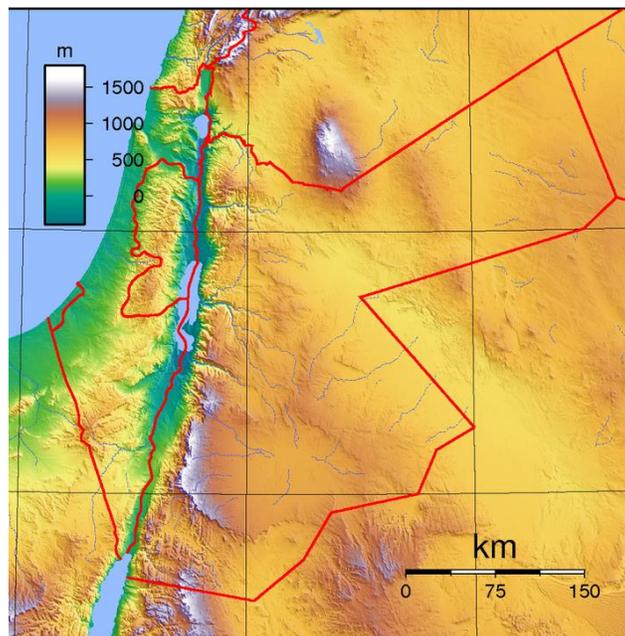
During the Arab Spring in 2011, Bashar al-Asad brutally repressed protesters who were demanding that he resign. Civil war ensued. In 2015, Russian military intervention saved al-Asad from impending defeat. The war created a humanitarian crisis. By late 2019, 400,000 Syrians had perished in the conflict, 6.2 million Syrians were internally displaced, and 6 million more were international refugees (Syria's pre-war population was 21 million).

At independence in 1943, Lebanese leaders concluded a National Pact to share political power. The compromise proved workable while the economy boomed. But the arrival of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1971 triggered extremism by both Muslims and Christians. Lebanon disintegrated in 1975 and struggled through horrible civil wars until 1990. The return of tenuous stability allowed Lebanon to begin

reconstruction. After peace was restored in 1990, Lebanon's per capita income grew at 4 percent per year through 2006 and at 8.2 percent annually for the next five years. But the crisis in Syria resulted in 1.5 million Syrian refugees entering Lebanon, a country with only 6.9 million people (in 2019). The severe strain on the Lebanese economy caused per capita income to decline at the rate of 3.1 percent per between 2011 and 2019. Lebanon's economy thus lost nearly all of the gains made since 2006.

Jordan received its independence from Britain in 1946. One extraordinary statesman, King Hussein, skillfully led Jordan for 47 years (1952-1999). King Hussein permitted Palestinian entrepreneurs to dominate Jordan's private sector within a framework of state-controlled capitalism. Jordan also benefited from emigrant remittances and from American and Gulf aid and trade. When King Hussein died in 1999, his son, Abdullah II, succeeded him as the king of Jordan. Abdullah carried out economic reforms – opening trade, encouraging private foreign investment, and privatizing state-owned industry – and Jordan's

per capita income level grew at an annual rate of 3.2 percent between 1999 and 2009. Beginning in 2009, global recession and regional turmoil negatively impacted Jordan's economy. Exports fell, tourism declined, and Jordan had to accommodate 1.3 million refugees and migrants from Syria. Between 1909 and 1919, per capita income (in constant prices) declined at the average yearly rate of -1.4 percent. In 2019, Jordan's per capita income was \$10,317 (58 percent of the world average) and Jordan ranked 111th of 187 countries in the World Bank's listing of per capita incomes.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jordan_Topography.png>

Topography of Jordan, Israel, West Bank, and Gaza

The United Nations created the independent Jewish state of Israel in 1948. During the next 25 years, four costly wars were fought between the Israelis and the Palestinians and their Arab supporters. Israel won them all. With the support of massive American military aid and the transfer of highly advanced American military technology, Israel has developed an overwhelming military capability.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Jewish_settlements_in_Palestine_in_1947.png

British Mandate of Palestine (1920-1948)

In 2019, Israel ranked 22nd of 189 countries in the UNDP's Human Development Index, which incorporates income, health, and education data. Israel's 9.1 million people had an average per capita income of \$42,194 – 65 percent of the US level. The Israeli economy has moved into the research and production of information technology with the help of foreign venture capital. In stark contrast, the 4.7 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are poor. Their per capita income was only \$5,795 in 2018 (one-seventh of the level in Israel). The most critical influences on the prospects for the future development of all of the nation states in the Levant will be the outcomes of the civil war in Syria and of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Lessons. What lessons for contemporary powers can be drawn from the experiences of the Roman Empire in Syria and of predecessor and successor rulers of the Levant? Two critical lessons emerge from the history of the Roman Empire in Syria and elsewhere in the Mediterranean region. One comes from what the Romans did right, the other from their mistakes. Roman policy

was quintessentially pragmatic. The empire was based on military conquest followed by effective public administration to promote agriculture and trade, run provincial cities, and transfer tax revenues to Rome. The Romans had a small and efficient government administration – only one-twentieth the size of that in contemporary Han China, which had about the same population as the Roman Empire. The Romans avoided state monopolies, encouraged private enterprise, and ran a balanced budget. For several centuries, the empire created wealth and ran well.

The Roman Empire disintegrated due to a number of interrelated pressures. But central in the decline was the widening of the gap in income between the rich and poor. Aristocratic Romans earned incomes that were at least 100 times those of average Roman laborers. Yet Roman taxation policy permitted many of the rich to avoid paying taxes. The mal-distribution of income – across income classes and between peninsular Italy and the outlying provinces – coupled with tax breaks for the rich bred increasing resentment and eventual political instability. Rich

Romans felt they were invincible in their political control of the empire and in their ability to stave off foreign incursions. Poor people in the empire, especially those in the heavily-taxed provinces, resented the extravagance of the rich. The Roman Empire had no middle class to pay most taxes and serve as a buffer between the rich and the poor. The *nouveaux riches* leaders in the provinces arose to vie for provincial and then imperial control. That mixture was not a recipe for success when Germanic foreigners invaded the Roman Empire.

Two additional lessons arise out of the six centuries of rule of the Levant by the Arab Islamic Caliphates – the Umayyads (661-750) and the Abbasids (750-1258). The first lesson is to be wary of newly-won allies, even when they have adopted your religion and profess to want to accept your leadership and culture. Arab leaders, practicing the new religion of Islam, had emerged from northwestern Arabia in 634 and quickly imposed their rule on richer and more sophisticated cultures in the Levant, Iraq, Persia, Egypt, and North Africa. During the Umayyad period, the Arabs

retained control of the dynastic leadership, the bureaucracy, and key parts of the regional economy. But that heady control soon dissipated. In the Abbasid period, real leadership in the east was effected by Persians and Turks and in the west by Berbers and Spanish Muslims.

The second insight is to establish sustaining government institutions that will prevent the usurpation of control from within. Muslim rulers, seeking loyalty in their armies and governing bureaucracies, created the Mamluk system of importing young male slaves and training them to become loyal soldiers and civil servants. That system worked well for the rulers until the Mamluks shifted their loyalties to their commanders who overthrew the rulers and set up their own governments. Sustainable militaries and bureaucracies need to be based on loyalties, incentives, and check-and-balances within societies, not imported from outside.