MURDER OF THE ORIENT EXPRESS

RAILWAY LINES ONCE CONNECTED THE MIDDLE EAST

Now the tracks that joined continents lie in wreckage

DEC 18TH 2021
MEDINA, OUJDA AND LYDDA

SHE LEFT her husband digging for pottery in Syria's northern desert, handed her passport to the uniformed Turk at Nusaybin, and, as the steam whistle blew, clambered aboard the Express bound for Aleppo. On arrival, she checked into the Baron, the city's only first-class hotel, and in room 203 began writing what is probably the most famous mystery novel of all time.

"It was five o'clock on a winter's morning in Syria. Alongside the platform at Aleppo stood the train grandly designated in railway guides as the Taurus Express. It consisted of a kitchen and dining-car, a sleeping-car and two local coaches." So Agatha Christie began "Murder on the Orient Express". Set on the homeward leg of her journey through the Middle East, it conjures a lost world of interconnecting cabins, liveried conductors, embroidered handkerchiefs and passengers who dressed for dinner.

The victim is an American swindler stabbed a dozen times in his sleeper car. But though the tale made Christie the world's best-selling novelist, it was a footnote compared to the crime unfolding around her—the dismemberment of the vast railway network that tied the Middle East together.

The passengers aboard the 0500 to Istanbul came from Baghdad, Kirkuk and Mosul. They might also have come from Khartoum, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Damascus and Basra. Maps from the time show a region criss-crossed with tracks. For the supposed "sick man of Europe", the Ottoman empire in its last decades was remarkably energetic. In 1888, Sultan Abdelhamid II embarked on the most ambitious engineering project in six centuries of Ottoman rule, to link the four corners of his empire by rail.

Abdelhamid began with Islam's holy sites. With the help of Christian and Jewish entrepreneurs, he cut a line from the Mediterranean through Judea's limestone hills to Jerusalem. It deposited its first load of pilgrims opposite the al-Aqsa mosque in 1892. Eight years later, he commissioned a track 15 times longer linking Damascus, the traditional starting point of the *haj*, or Muslim pilgrimage, to Medina, where the Prophet Muhammad is buried. Completed in 1908, the line changed the pilgrimage from a perilous 40-day camel trek through Arabia's deserts to a cushioned three-day ride. The Damascus terminal, renamed Allah's Gate, was a showpiece of Islamic baroque.

"From Morocco to Iraq not a single train crosses borders

This construction accompanied other feats. In the empire's twilight years, the sultans connected three booming Levantine ports—Tripoli, Beirut and Haifa—to ancient silk-road cities such as Damascus, Homs and Aleppo. On the eve of the first world war, the sultans allied with the German Kaiser to build a line from Berlin to Baghdad, bypassing Britain's choke point, the Suez canal. German engineers helped bridge the Taurus mountains in the last weeks of the war—too late to reinforce fronts against the British pushing north.

The European empires that overran the Middle East implemented much of what the Ottomans left on the drawing board. By the 1930s passengers could travel from the English channel to Cairo with only three changes of train. The last leg, in third class, cost the equivalent of about two days' work for a labourer. It left Haifa daily at 0830, steamed south to the Mediterranean port of Gaza by lunchtime, turned west into Sinai and arrived in the Egyptian capital by 2230.

From there, travellers could continue aboard one of the first air-conditioned carriages along the Nile to Luxor's Valley of the Kings and on to Sudan. "Direct and quickest route to Damascus, Beyrout, Baalbek and Aleppo," read a Palestine Railways brochure advertising the connections from Haifa. Sami Abu Shehadeh, a Palestinian historian and member of the Israeli Knesset, or parliament, says that "from Jaffa station you could commute across the Arab world."

THE SUSPECTS

The Middle East had been a cosmopolitan hotchpotch of languages, ethnicities and sects since civilisation began. The railroads tossed them together like fruit in a bowl. Christie's 13 suspects were "of all classes and nationalities". On these trains, Muslim pilgrims heading from Tulkarm shared carriages with Jewish workers on package holidays from Haifa to Damascus that were organised by the Zionist trade union, the Histadrut. The Lebanese tourist board competed by printing adverts for its ski resorts in Hebrew. As a child Mahmoud Zahar, a leader of the Palestinian Islamist movement, Hamas, remembers catching the sleeper from his mother's hometown of Alexandria to Gaza. The staff were no less diverse. Jews and Arabs worked under British command at Palestine Railways, along with 30 other nationalities. On Christie's Express, the conductor was a Frenchman.

Seventy years later the tracks that joined continents lie in wreckage. From Morocco to Iraq not a single train crosses borders. Rusting carriages and engine hulks litter the sands. Cypress trees sprout between Lebanon's lines. Rails were smelted into bullets like ploughshares into swords. Sleepers reinforced trench walls, and stations and repair yards became barracks and prisons. As in the murder on the Orient Express, the network fell victim to multiple blows. Tracing culpability is one of the region's great whodunits.

The first suspect was another guest at the Baron, in the room next to Christie's. For much of the first world war Thomas Edward Lawrence, a British intelligence officer, connived behind enemy lines to rupture the Hijaz railway to harry Ottoman troops. He raised a Bedouin band, fired them with jihadist zeal, blew up 79 bridges and derailed dozens of trains. Back home "Lawrence of Arabia" was a hero. His tactics were those of a terrorist. The wounded, many of them civilians, were left to die in the gorges. "This killing and killing of Turks is horrible," Lawrence wrote in a letter home.

That said, the British have alibis. They built railways in the Middle East before and after the Ottomans. Robert Stephenson, an English pioneer of the steam train, began laying Egypt's tracks in the 1850s. As British troops advanced they extended the lines.

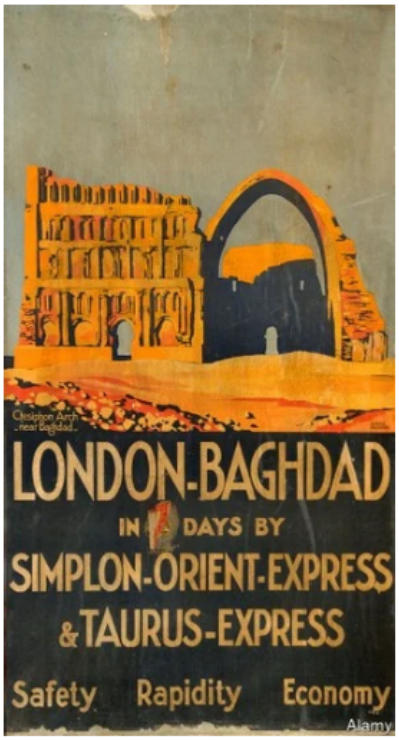
The investigation into Lawrence reveals other leads. Many of his Bedouin recruits hated the Hijaz line for breaking their monopoly on transporting pilgrims and grain. "Jahash al-Sultan," they called it, the Sultan's donkey. It brought foreign mores, too, that disturbed time-honoured codes. Under the puritanical Al Saud dynasty, the Bedouin ripped up tracks from their new border to Medina. Follow the line south of Jordan today and for almost 800km all that remains is the naked embankment snaking past rust-coloured mountains. In places, wind-swept Ottoman stations and forts wait for a train that last passed a century ago.

Yet the Saudis also have alibis. Once the Bedouin carved out his kingdom, King Abdelaziz Ibn Saud slaughtered them in their hundreds. The Saudis point to other beneficiaries from the Bedouin assaults. Britain and France had long sought ways to interrupt the flow of their Muslim subjects to Mecca and limit their exposure to anti-colonial Islamists.

Zionists could also be found at the crime scene. The more militant considered Britain's railways an iron spider's web ensnaring their land, and they killed scores in dozens of attacks. On the "Night of the Trains", on November 1st 1945, the three main Zionist militias blew up the lines at more than 150 points and planted bombs in the stations at Jerusalem and Lydda junction. Seven months later, a "Night of the Bridges" destroyed ten bridges connecting Palestine's railways and roads to the Arab world. A website honouring the fighters of the Irgun, the militia headed by a future prime minister, Menachem Begin, still hails the achievement: "The operation achieved its objective, and the country was cut off from all its neighbours."

The dismantlement continued with Israel's independence in 1948. Israel blew up the bridge at Rosh HaNikra to cut off Beirut and plugged the tunnel through the South Lebanon hills, severing the line that linked Europe to Africa. The Israeli government also dissolved the Palestine Railway Company and dismissed many non-Jewish workers. After the 1967 war Israel abandoned the Ottoman lines in the West Bank, used Sinai's tracks to fortify its Bar Lev defences along the Suez canal and locked Gaza—the old crossroads between continents—behind turrets and walls.

But the Israelis also have alibis. Had they not broken the lines, they say, the Arabs would have smuggled arms and men to destroy them. The Israelis argue that it was Arabs who undid the network. Palestinian militants targeted rail infrastructure during their revolt against the British in the 1930s. And with self-destructive zeal, Palestinians ripped up the last of Gaza's rails to make tunnels and rockets.



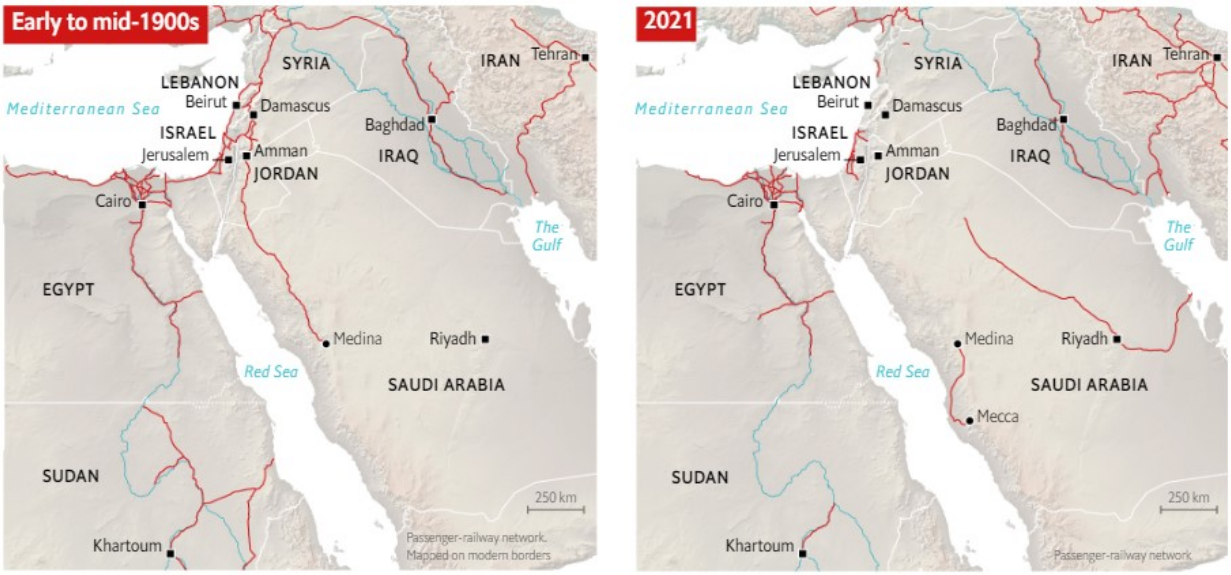
How it was once possible to cross the Middle East by train

Regional conflicts and civil wars finished the victim off. The French controlled their North African holdings with railways fanning out from Algiers. But after independence Morocco and Algeria battled over Western Sahara, and in 1994 the trans-Maghreb train to Tunis stopped 1,300km short. Two border towns, Oujda and Maghnia, face each other, united by ethnicity, religion, language and intermarriage but divided by army barricades. Their stations, once trading posts, are terminals. "Halte police," read the no-entry signs. Peacocks pick at rubbish between the lines.

The last train left Tripoli for Beirut at the start of Lebanon's civil war in 1975. Syria's invading forces converted Rayak, the big junction and repair centre near its border, into a military base and turned an adjacent hotel into torture chambers. Israel's offensive in 1982 finished off what remained of the line to Beirut.

For years, Agatha Christie's Express was the stubborn survivor. The leg to Baghdad folded in the 1980s, but the night train from Aleppo to Turkey limped on. Then came Syria's civil war in 2011. It terminated all but a fraction of Syria's 2,450km of track. The platform still stands in Aleppo where Christie's "Murder" began, but her route east to Iraq was damaged in the bombardment of Islamic State. Mosul station was destroyed. The Arab Union of Railways dissolved in 2016. After a spate of mortar attacks, Christie's writing retreat, the Baron hotel, shut its doors in 2014.

Like the 12 killers aboard the Orient Express, the region's rulers each had a motive. The colonial powers carved up the Middle East. The generals who succeeded them prioritised their parcels of territory over the common market and culture developed across millennia. Tinpot dictators saw cosmopolitanism and connectivity as threats to new national identities. Religion lost its universality and shrank into cults tied to plots of land. Syria expelled its French inspectors. Iraq's railway administration sacked its Jewish managers. Bereft of expertise, many lines fell into disrepair. Train lines became like ancient silk-road souqs and bazaars, relics of a past when riches came from regional trade rather than the rent of a single raw material, be it oil, gas or phosphates. Defence came not from neighbourly relations but from a superpower far away.



The new love was the motor car. In 2019 Egypt paved over its Victorian tramway between downtown Cairo and the suburb of Heliopolis. To cover their tracks, the culprits gentrified the ruins. In 2014 hipsters turned Beirut's Mar Mikhael station into a bar. Israel converted the old terminals in Jaffa and Jerusalem into nightclubs and swanky restaurants. With a nostalgic nod, each makeover sends the message that the original use had reached the end of the line.

THE VERDICT

Christie's novel ends when the crime is solved. The story of the Middle East, though, never ends. As the oil age draws to a close, there are signs the region is rediscovering the value of its old connections. Many states plan to diversify their economies towards trade and industries such as tourism. Rulers worry they can no longer rely on America and are investing in regional diplomacy. And after the horrors of sectarian bloodletting, identity politics is losing its currency. Governments and political movements are cautiously rediscovering the benefits of religious multiplicity. Jewish communities are sprouting across the Middle East. Israel has its first Muslim party in government.

In tandem, railway branches are reaching outwards again. Morocco opened the region's first high-speed network in 2018, with plans to extend it to west Africa within 20 years. "With access and movement comes trade," says Muhammad Rabie Khilie, the head of Morocco's rails. "It's the spinal cord of development." A century after the Saudis smashed the Hijaz line, trains with cars built in Spain race between the holy cities at 300km/hr. A line to Jordan's border should open in March, seemingly preparing for the day of peace when via Israel passengers can reach the Mediterranean.

Harbouring similar hopes, Israel is building four lines, stretching tantalisingly eastward. If the Chinese company operating the Haifa container terminal has its way, at least one line will extend China's belt-and-road via Jordan. Competing for influence, Iran says it has agreed with Iraq to fill the 32km gap in its railway to southern Iraq, also with Chinese help, and from there along the old silk road to Syria. In October Iraq reopened the line to Mosul and announced plans to push on to Turkey. There are plans for lines linking the Arab states along the Gulf. Egypt is pursuing a massive expansion, which includes the world's largest monorail and new lines to Libya, Sudan and Saudi Arabia. Unlike Christie's American swindler, the Orient and Taurus Express trains, and with them the Levantine dream, may yet ride the railways again. ■

PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES, ALAMY

This article appeared in the Christmas Specials section of the print edition under the headline "Murder of the Orient Express"