

Who Made the Middle East the Way It Is Today?

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Brief Analysis

Local actors, not the Western imperialist powers, were the dominant players in the development of the modern Middle East. The clash between nationalism and imperialism drove events that shaped the region, and the local actors could be found on both sides of that clash: they were as eager imperialists as were the Great Powers.

Western Approaches to the Ottoman Empire. The West did not want to dissolve the Ottoman Empire. Quite the contrary, the Great Powers kept the empire alive; if it had not been for the West, the empire would have collapsed during the nineteenth century. Mohammed Ali, the governor of Egypt, wanted to establish his own empire at the expense of the Ottomans in the early nineteenth century; it was the intervention of Western powers that thwarted his imperialist dreams. Also in that century, national awakenings in Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina threatened the Ottomans—or at least their European holdings—but the Western powers worked to keep the empire from collapsing, even after the Ottomans' entry into the First World War. The British and the French were particularly cautious. In 1915, a British interdepartmental committee recommended keeping Ottoman rule alive, even in a somewhat reduced form. To be sure, the Russians wanted to control Constantinople, but even they did not promote the dissolution of the empire.

Ottoman Policy. The Ottoman Empire was an active player in Great Power politics, as illustrated by the Crimean War; it did not just respond to Western movement. The Ottomans joined World War I on the side of Germany because of the imperialist ambitions of the Young Turks, who wanted to regain Egypt in addition to territory in the Balkans and, at Russia's expense, in the Caucasus. Had the Ottomans stayed out of the war, they might have retained their rule for a decade or two more, but this decision proved to be a decisive mistake leading to a final disintegration of the empire.

When high politics or imperial interest demanded it, the Ottomans cooperated with non-Muslim governments against other Muslims. This pattern recurred during the First World War and the Gulf War of 1990-91, when Muslims joined the West to fight other Muslims.

Zionist leader Theodore Herzl met with Sultan Hamit, hoping for political backing for the Zionist cause in return for financial support for the Ottoman Empire. But the Ottomans viewed Zionism as a national movement and thus a threat. For example, during the First World War, many Jewish residents of Palestine were citizens of Allied states at war with the Ottomans (e.g., Russia) and were consequently forced by the Ottomans to immigrate to Egypt; many perished en route.

The Young Turks wanted a multinational empire; they were not out to create a homogeneous Turkey. To them, Armenian nationalism was a threat because it endangered the empire, not because they wanted an ethnically pure country. No evidence has been found that there was an organized plan by the Turkish government to kill the Armenians; however, the Turkish leadership must have realized that the deportation of the Armenian population to Syria would result in many deaths, amounting to a de facto genocide.

Kemal Ataturk, founder of the Turkish republic, was a visionary who understood that imperialism would lead to national ruin. Since Islam and Ottoman rule were intricately linked, he dissociated Islam from Turkey in order to

establish a "normal" Western nation-state. Ataturk abolished the caliphate in stages, a process that went smoothly because he established himself as a national liberator defeating the Greeks, the French, and the Armenians.

Arab Nationalism? Imperialism is not just a Western phenomenon. The Hashemites pretended to be nationalists, when what they really wanted was an empire under their own control. When Sharif Hussein saw that the Turks were losing World War I, he decided to rise against the Ottomans in order to fulfill his imperialist ambitions. Hussein prematurely began the revolt, and the British had to support him, but it would be misleading to call this an Arab revolt for two reasons. First, Sharif Hussein and his sons were not Arab nationalists and did not want to liberate the Arab nation; they wanted an empire for themselves. Second, the Arabs did not want to be liberated; most viewed themselves as Muslim subjects of the Sultan, and many considered the revolt an act blasphemy against him.

Arab nationalism did not exist before the twentieth century, due in part to an unwillingness among Arab elites to recognize diversity in the Arab world and the existence of several distinct Arab nations. During World War I, 300 or 400 Arab nationalists were active in the Middle East out of a population of 8 million to 10 million. Moreover, only 13 Arabs participated at an Arab Congress held in Paris in 1913, whereas in 1897, the Zionist Congress in Basle was attended by hundreds of representatives and received letters from 50,000 people.

The Sykes-Picot agreement was in part a British effort to get international acceptance for the promise they made to the Hashemites regarding an Arab empire; the promise was to have taken the form of a federation or confederation comprising Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia. But the agreement had little effect, because it was undermined by its signatories (the British and the French) and the local powers, especially Turkey.

Future of Nation-States in the Middle East. Nation-states in the Middle East will endure for a long time, and the present map will also likely persist, despite the desires of some to change it. Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad's ambition is to create a Greater Syria, and he already effectively controls Lebanon. The Lebanese, however, do not want to be part of Syria. A state of Palestine is inevitable. And the prospects for Jordan should not be underestimated; the Hashemites have been very clever at manipulating the strongest world powers to give them much with little in exchange.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Leon Saltiel.

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