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Imperialism, Self Determination, and the Future of the Nation State: European Influence in the Middle East at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century

In 2011, protesters across the Arab world rose up, seemingly simultaneously, in order to demand the right to self-determination and self-government. President Woodrow Wilson had defined self-determination in his Fourteen Points as the right of a people to create its own nation along with its “own political development and national policy” (Wilson). However, a shared history of European imperialism across the Middle East led to independent protests across the region. The totalitarian rule of Western-allied regimes “drew millions into mass political action for the first time in generations” (Hanieh). Cecil Rhodes, an English entrepreneur in South Africa famously said, “I contend that we are the finest race in the world and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race” (Flint). Only 40 years later, after the English economist John Maynard Keynes condemned the treatment of post-War Germany as “a Carthaginian Peace,” England and France continued their political and economic domineering in the Middle East. British and French diplomats Mark Sykes and Francois-Georges Picot chartered an agreement to divvy up the Middle East into tidy parcels ostensibly in the interest of its inhabitants, but in practice, to the economic and political gain of Sykes’ and Picot’s respective nations.

How has the historical landscape of the Middle East evolved in such a way as to allow the proliferation of such radical ideology? While a staggering myriad of factors have been involved over the course of thousands of years, British and French postindustrial imperialism must be brought to the forefront of the discussion. British and French imperialism and the desire to implement their ideology and influence in foreign spheres, creating nation states with regard

only to their own economic and political interests, has led to the continued instability of the Iraqi-Syrian-Israeli-Palestinian region.

Many respected scholars, politicians, and economic theorists have posited well-supported arguments in regards to the effects of European Imperialism. It was clear to the British Economic Advisor Keynes that total economic control of a people would result in the collapse of a state. In his *Economic Consequences of the Peace*, Keynes advised the British and those drafting the Versailles Treaty that their economic controls over Germany “engage[d] all the hidden forces of economic law on the side of destruction” (Keynes). Woodrow Wilson, the advisor entrusted to advise Europe on how to proceed in international relations after the Great War, observed that a people must be allowed to govern themselves without the influence of self-interested outside powers. In the first of his *Fourteen Points* brought to the Allied Powers drafting the Versailles Treaty, Wilson argued that in order to preserve peace “there [could] be no private international understandings of any kind” (Wilson). All people had a “right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety” (Wilson). Neither of these men, brought on to advise European powers on the effects of their impending actions, could dissuade imperialist powers from their intended destructive courses of action. Imperialism would continue, under one guise or another and wreak havoc across the globe for the centuries to come.

Britain’s action in the Middle East were in no way unprecedented. According to Edward Said, Professor of History and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, in the case of 16th century excursions into Asia, “What mattered was not Asia, so much as Asia’s use to modern Europe” (Said). Britain nor France had any interest in establishing new independent countries but to exploit people and lands perceived inferior to their own. According to observations by the modern critic of African colonialism, Franz Fanon, “Because [colonialism] is a systematic

negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly, ‘In reality, who am I?’” (Fanon).

Prior to the Great War of 1914-1918, the Middle East was composed of many landless peoples, some falling under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, and many in the Persian, Arabian, and Egyptian lands. These peoples, while divided by religion and ethnic backgrounds, had interacted for thousands of years across imperceptible borders. Peoples of various ethnic backgrounds, religious belief systems, and speaking innumerable dialects had managed on their own to establish economic trade vital to the bordering empires, and religions that would be exported around the world along with mathematical and astronomical concepts fundamental to the framework of modern science (Simon). The region, extremely rich in natural resources, had traditionally been a cultural crossroads of trade routes. Even regions of Mosul in Northern Iraq, thought in the nineteenth century “a backwater district” witnessed a hastening of attention with the discovery of oil (Simon). Regional conflicts which may previously have only concerned the primacy of local tribes now would have far reaching implications in the global economy as European powers invested themselves in territorial disputes.

In order to discuss the impending division of the Middle East, it is first necessary to establish the context of fierce nationalism percolating in Europe during the late 19th century. Like the Middle East, Europe, with particular regard to the Balkans and Caucasus region is composed of many peoples of various religious and ethnic backgrounds. During the slow collapse of the Ottoman and Austrian empires, disparate ethnic groups vied for establishment of borders in order to preserve disputed cultural homelands, as evidenced by Wilson’s defense of those peoples in his Fourteen Points presented at the Paris Peace summit following the First World War. In an

effort to stem the growing flood of violence in the region, Wilson proposed the self-determination of Austria-Hungarians, Romanians, Serbians, citizens of Montenegro, and Turks of the former Ottoman Empire (Wilson).

Under the guise of exporting the rights and sovereignty of nation states, Europe began to establish the Mandate system in former Ottoman lands, dissecting the Middle East into spheres of British and French control, presumably in order to prepare the lands for independence. The Mandate system was an early 20th century creation of International Law that established a tutelage system for those countries deemed unprepared for agency in the rapidly globalizing world. Lands formerly under Turkish and German control were now conveniently placed under the supervision of Britain (Iraq and Palestine) and France (Syria and Lebanon), ostensibly in order to prepare them for independence (McHugo).

To convince the populace of the need for political boundaries, especially in a region where traversing borders had been essential to trade for thousands of years, would require that diverse peoples would feel distinct separations from each other. In Europe, segregating and isolating those of differing backgrounds had become the prescription du jour. The unfounded espionage accusation of a Jewish French military officer in 1894, and organized mass violence against Jews in what became known as pogroms served to highlight the distrust felt towards European Jews. A perceived need to not only establish their sovereignty, but to do so in a separate region sprang to life. In 1917, the conservative Foreign Secretary of England, Arthur J Balfour declared to the Zionist leader, Lord Rothschild, the British desire to expel the Jewish population of Europe to a new “establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people” (“The Balfour Declaration”). Having recently acquired the ancestral homelands of a historically displaced ethnic group, England would be quick to suggest the reconnection. Muslim

fear and aversion to European influence would prove well founded as the Zionist movement would set the tone for instability in the region as a result of European influence for the century to come. Not only would the arrival of Britain in Palestine begin to make way for the influx of the Jewish population from Europe, it would also “create justification for the British to protect the Suez Canal,” a jewel of economic consequence to certainly be kept from German interest (Judis).

The Balkans, too, were segregated in an effort to dispel encroaching violence following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. However, there were more than Armenians in the region who felt they had fought long and hard for their sovereign claim to Middle Eastern lands. “Kurdish Muslim warrior Saladin drove the Crusaders out of Jerusalem in 1187,” which “For centuries... haunted the Muslim Middle East” (Judis).

In an effort to continue the tradition and competitive nature of imperialism previously established in Africa, British and French powers sought to exploit the strategic nature and oil rich sands and economically strategic waterways of the Middle East. The alignment and subsequent failure of Germany and the Ottoman Empire in the Great War proved fortuitous to Britain as Russia withdrew from the conflict early. The “British were unhappy with Ottoman indifference to piracy, slavery, and gunrunning” along the Persian Gulf, impeding British ability to harvest oil in the region and transport goods to and from India (Simon). Crucial to the longevity of these states was the unification of nationalism. Historian Adeed Dawisha points out, in reference to the failed state of Iraq in 2009, there “was not just a failure of state institutions, but one also of molding a unified Iraqi identity” (Dawisha).

A diversity of peoples did not prevent the British from perceiving the region as homogenous. Under the Ottoman Empire, the land now known as Iraq was composed of Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul, known to the Roman-Persians as Iraq in the north and Babylonia to

the south, and to the Arabs as al-Iraq, al-Jazira, and al-Sawad (Simon). “The area was home to Kurds, Turks, Arabs, and Persians, Semites and Indo-Europeans, Muslims, Christians, Jews...” (Simon). However, as General Maude of Great Britain entered Baghdad in 1917 he promised to unite Iraqis “with [their] kinsmen in the North, East, South, and West” (Simon). Despite many efforts to convince the people of a region envisioned by Europeans that they were one homogenous people, rebellions and sectarian violence, unimpeded by efforts by British backed amalgam governments have proven unsuccessful.

But Iraq was not the only disparate land to be summarily united in order to solidify European economic interest. To Iraq’s northwest lay the land of Syria, which “as a cursory glance at a map will show, contains the land route between Africa and Eurasia” (McHugo). A constant focus of European warfare over control of trade routes, France sought control over the region in order to link its supply routes between its own markets and factories and territory in northern Africa. Under Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, a mandate was granted to France over the land formerly known as Shaam. The mandate system gave oversight of the land, now known as Syria, to France in order to provide tutelage to peoples “not ready to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world” (McHugo). In the early 20th century, Syria was composed of Turks, Arabs, Kurds, Armenians, and Syriac Orthodox refugees to give names to a handful and had “longstanding historic links with Mosul and Baghdad,” in the British mandate, and Damascus and Aleppo in the French. As a result, “the border was meaningless for many people” and the crossing of the formerly imperceptible border was essential to the daily functions of trade to the traditionally nomadic indigenous forms of trade (McHugo). This trade, however, was unimportant to the French, who were in recovery after the First World War, who needed the stable inflow of resources and markets from the captive

economies of the Syria mandate. Counterintuitive to the premise of their Mandate, France actually sought to discourage Syrian nationalism which it thought would “make common cause against French rule” (McHugo).

Arab nationalism after all had been sought since the 19th century, even under the Ottoman Empire. Leaders such as Faisal I bin Hussein bin Ali al-Hashimi, who ruled over Syria in 1920 and Iraq from 1921-1933, were manipulated by both the French and British in an effort to unify peoples in respective regions (Simon). During the Second World War, when Syrians sought to assert independence along with Egypt and Iraq, Churchill even stepped in to suggest French appeasement. After “strikes and demonstrations in Damascus in Beirut... law and order were clearly breaking down. French troops and aircraft shelled and bombed Damascus” (McHugo). If there were ever any question as to the true motivations of European powers in the Middle East, who purportedly had been seeking to establish autonomy for indigenous peoples in the region for now thirty years, this event should serve to highlight the lies inherent in European declarations of exporting independence.

With a centralized population estimated at 17,110,000 in 1992, one would think the Kurdish people worthy of Wilson’s self-determination (Bulloch and Morris). But finding themselves at the terminus of new political borders with Turkey, Syria, Iran, Iraq, and the Soviet Union, this enormous people with a unifying language and cultural history actually find themselves to be the minority in five separate countries. Occupying the mountainous region of Northern Iraq, Eastern Syria, and Southern Turkey, the Kurdish manipulation was often sought as an independent perpetrator of various outside factions in the early twentieth century. Though Kurds and Armenians had coexisted for centuries prior to the Armenian genocide, the inclusion of Muslim Kurds in the Ottoman caliphate, intentionally created division with Armenians who

identified with the Christian West. Both were murdered by the hundreds of thousands in the years to come. In an effort to appease both Russia and France, the traditional mountainous homeland of the Kurdish people was divided between Eastern lands which would be given to the Russians, and Mosul, split between British Iraq and French Syria. Efforts towards Kurdish unification met with British Royal Air Force Bombings, and “The Kurdish nationalist movement emerged from World War I with its ranks depleted” (Bulloch and Morris). Presumably, under Article 22 of the League of Nations, this was all in an effort to unify indigenous peoples and prepare them for the rigors of living in a globalized world.

After all, the borders drawn in the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 that France and Great Britain “shall have priority of right of enterprise and local loans” (Sykes-Picot). As Admiral Mahan effectively demonstrates in his *Influence of Sea Power on History*, the goal of European colonial expansion was self-perpetuating. With the onset of the First World War, oil quickly became necessary not only to fuel industry, but to ensure the survival of Allied European powers. Were the efforts put into place after the First World War made in an effort as extolled to expand the ideals of the nation-state? Or, as demonstrated, were these efforts of expanding European influence simply further manifestations of European imperialism and economic control? A century after atrocities committed by European powers, after generations of initial actors set pieces in motion, Westerners are portrayed in modern media as mediators in conflict that has been raging since time immemorial. “Conflict in the Middle East” is undoubtedly one of the grossest over-simplifications in the modern English lexicon. Numerous genocides, deliberate political destabilization, and willful economic manipulation seem the tools of oppressive regimes, and they are. British and French imperialism and the desire to implement their ideology and influence in foreign spheres, creating nation states with regard only to their own economic

and political interests, has led to the continued instability of the Iraq-Syria-Israel-Palestinian region.

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