

The Roots of Turmoil in the Middle East

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Ever since Islam sprung from its roots and began to dominate the Christian and Jewish holy land, Europe has felt obliged to be involved with the affairs of the Middle East, be it through war, diplomacy, or *de facto* control of the region. By the early 1900s, Europe's last major power to form, Germany, had evolved from a multi-state nation to a state more reflective of the German people (Kissinger 133). This marked an era of superiority for Europe in technology, commerce, and military power. The Arab lands, with the exception of the vast Ottoman empire, were still inhabited by tribes unfamiliar with modern machines. Ottoman rule, with its near European might, was able to dominate and influence the Arab peninsula and keep control of it. With the beginnings of a catastrophic war, Turkish nationalism, and the crumbling of the Ottoman Empire due to increased conflict, the fragile Arab lands were defenseless and open to political organization by any strong leaders. It was around the time following 1908 that the most significant events began to unfold, shaping the modern Middle East in a way which has scarred it and left it a major source of conflict for today and the future. European imperialism, the Arab revolt, and the rise of Zionism in Palestine are all leading causes to the turmoil found in the Middle East.

The imperialistic ambition of major European powers was among the most significant factors in reshaping Middle Eastern boundaries to those present today. Since the United Kingdom took control of India, they desired to be a dominant influence in the Middle East to establish land trade to South Asia (Melvin 2). It was also well known that the French had their own designs for conquest in the Middle East, given the impending break up of the Ottoman Empire from revolution and financial indebtedness to European bankers. It was in this spirit that Sir Mark Sykes, representing the British, and Georges Picot, representing the French, met on October 21, 1915 to discuss the division of the Arab lands. British intentions were not to set out border lines as of this time, rather, the UK's intent was to set up a postwar schema in the Middle East by which France would buffer the British sphere of influence from Russia and the postwar Ottomans. In this way, the British would safely establish their trade route from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf, and under such circumstances that France and Russia would be severely weakened by war, the British would be in a strong position to take advantage of their allies' geopolitical weaknesses, allowing British might to dominate the entire Middle East (Smith 68). The results of the agreement between Sykes and Picot was the allotment of Syria, northern Iraq, and Lebanon to the French, while the British would link the protectorate of Egypt to Trans-Jordan, through Southern Iraq on into Kuwait, and further into southern Iran, thus guaranteeing a secure trade route to India (Melvin 2). However, Picot demanded Palestine for France, something the British would not allow. Sykes would not end his discussion with Picot until the French agreed to internationalize Palestine, and let it act as a buffer between French and British interests in the Middle East. After strong consideration of Russian interests in the holy land, Picot agreed that internationalizing Palestine would appease French interests in the region, so long as no major power could dominate it (Smith 68). Contrary to the popular belief that the Zionist lobby in British parliament led Sykes to internationalize Palestine, Sykes' main concern was to provide a buffer against the French (Smith 69). Charles D. Smith, a renowned Middle East scholar, asserts that Zionism did not

gain an ear in British parliament until David Lloyd George became prime minister toward the end of 1916. After Sykes and Picot met, the British and French governments informed their allies, Russia and Italy, of the treaty to give them both a small piece of the postwar pie and assuage any territorial thirst to prevent a postwar conflict. Thus, Russia was given a sphere of influence that extended from Kurdistan to northern Iran. Italy was promised direct rule over the land in southern Turkey (Rich 15). Although Italy was *promised* direct rule over southern Turkey, Brady Miller, a graduate student at UC Berkeley, reminds us that "Their record in Africa speaks for itself, their claims in Turkey went nowhere, much as their claims to Tunis did."

At the end of the war, British military strength in the Middle East surpassed that of the French, and with the communist takeover of Russia, the British were left as the most dominant force in the Middle East. The postwar Middle East turned out precisely as the British had intended four years earlier when Sykes met with Picot to divide up the land in the Middle East. Sykes purposely put the French at a military disadvantage by using them as a buffer, leaving them with the greatest burden. Because the British obviously deviated from the Sykes-Picot agreement, Lloyd George met with French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau on December 1, 1918 to discuss an alteration of their countries' original agreement. Charles D. Smith describes the meeting to have been brief and victorious for the British, as Clemenceau was immediately willing to secede territorial gains in northern Iraq and Palestine. For little less than a year, the British had sought to control Syria as well, because British military occupancy of the region made it seem logical that the UK should retain official influence over Syria. This notion, although viable, was destroyed by British backing of Zionist claims in Palestine. King Faisal of Syria turned on the British, saying that British backing of Zionist claims in Palestine violated the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence, which formally guaranteed Arab control of Palestine. The British were caught in their own web of conflicting promises. Because of The League of Nations and popular Wilsonian logic of the time, self-determination was to be the most *relevant* factor over the establishment and control of new states. A mandate system was established by which the victors of war would "mandate" cultural, political, and economic independence in their regions of influence. This was to replace the old war notion that territories gained were "spoils of war." Alas, the British left Syria alone in the name of self-determination, while supporting a Jewish state in Palestine based on the exact same ideals and on an age-old Jewish historical claim to the territory. While British and French ambitions were shortly curtailed in the Middle East due to the Versailles Treaties, the League of Nations, and Wilson himself, these three hindrances to British and French ambition failed to take root due to the failure of the League of Nations and Wilson's death (Smith 82).

European imperialists did not think to draw territorial boundaries in line with ethnic groups in the Middle East, because the whole point of influence in that region was for economic gain through trade and oil, not for some altruistic concern of the future autonomy of the Arab people. Many of the mandates established by the UK and France later achieved political sovereignty, but not without great ethnic strife. It was the disinterest of European powers to draw borders congruent with ethnicities which has created much of the strife seen in the Middle East today (Melvin 3). The Turkish annexation of Kurdistan, and the lack of representation of the Kurdish irredenta in Iraq has made the Kurds worldly

recognized refugees, without a home, and repressed by formal institutions. Don Melvin of the Atlanta Journal makes a logical point in that

most of the world accepts that, as President Bush has said many times, Saddam has used chemical weapons on his own people... [however] ...the Kurds have long resisted domination by Saddam's Sunni Muslims, in whose country they were included in lieu of the independent nation they desired. It is doubtful that either Saddam or the Kurds would accept that they were "his own people". (Melvin 2)

British and French mandates have scarred the Arab world by separating and combining volatile combinations of ethnicities into newly recognized boundaries. A popular counter-argument might overlook the ethnic problems in the Middle East and criticize my harsh judgment of European imperialism; after all, shouldn't the Arabs be thanking Europe for helping them come so far by setting up formal institutions and infrastructure? The answer is no, because clashes of interest and the gradual dissolution of trust between Europe and the Arab people has permanently damaged international relations between Western democracies and the Middle East..

I briefly mentioned King Faisal's claim to Palestine as addressed in the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence. These series of letters between Sharif Hussein bin Ali and Sir Henry McMahon formally promised the recognition of a pan-Arab state with territory "...to include all of Syria (with Mersina and Alexandretta districts in the north), the entire Arab Peninsula (Apart from Aden, which was already a British protectorate), the entire Sinai Peninsula, all of Mesopotamia (Iraq), and the territories later to be designated Palestine and Transjordan (Rich 14)." In exchange for recognition of this pan-Arab state and its autonomy, the Arab people, with help from their British allies, would fight the Ottoman empire and Germans in the region, and rebel against Ottoman rule to establish their own state/s in the Middle East. This of course was far from modest, and though the British officially recognize this correspondence, spheres of influence which were set up as a result of the Sykes-Picot agreement contradicted these designs completely. (http://kinghussein.gov.jo/his_arabrevolt.html). In June 1916, Sharif Hussein began the Great Arab Revolt against Ottoman rule with support from British and French allies. It is important to note that the Great Arab Revolt wasn't just a facade for British interests. Arab nationalism had been on the rise since the Young Turk coup of 1908. Jordan's government website provides information on the sources of Arab nationalism, stating that "the Turks abandoned their pluralistic pan-Islamic policies, instead pursuing a policy of secular Turkish nationalism.", which included the suppression of the Arab language and culture (http://kinghussein.gov.jo/his_arabrevolt.html). Brady Miller of UC Berkeley mentions that an even more impending fear by the Arab nationalists and British was the construction of a Berlin-Baghdad railroad, which could easily facilitate the transport of German and Ottoman troops to outlying areas in Iraq. Faced with persecution by the Ottoman Empire, Arab nationalists embraced British sincerity with respect to postwar Arab self rule. Hussein's sons, Abdullah and Faisal, rallied the multitude of Arab tribes behind banners of Arab nationalism, and led them into battle. After the war, Abdullah and Faisal became prominent figures in their respective regions. They had succeeded in controlling most of the Arab Peninsula, southern Syria, and Trans-Jordan (http://kinghussein.gov.jo/his_arabrevolt.html). However, Arab success may be over

exaggerated due to continuing British and French influence. As indicated earlier, the Sykes-Picot agreement clearly went behind the backs of the Arabs in hopes to undermine any efforts of autonomy by the Arab people. King Faisal's recognition of the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence as being legally binding has imprinted an attitude of anti-imperialism in the minds of the Arab people (Smith 86). It basically showed that European powers meant to betray the Arabs all along. That, coupled with a newfound sense of Arab nationalism, has created a mindset detrimental to future relations between the Arab world and the West.

The controversy over Palestine has its own separate roots in the Middle Eastern dilemma and should be considered the third major factor contributing to disarray in the Middle East. A brief history of the Jewish people would explain that the Jews were scattered about in Europe due to the Roman Empire's destruction of their capital, Jerusalem. The Jewish people have since been the victims of Christian hegemony in Europe. Resentment and hatred for the Jews continued throughout Europe until the French revolution, when Jews were formally given equal rights like all citizens. Western Europe followed in the steps of France, but Eastern Europe lagged far behind. In 1881, Russia had a "Jewish problem." Though the Russian Czar pronounced the rape and slaughter of Jews in its southern regions to be illegal and punishable by law, anti-Semitism prevailed, causing the first wave of a large group of Jews to leave Russia for Palestine to start an agricultural community (Smith 35). Toward 1900 with the modern beginnings of anti-Semitism, Theodor Herzl wrote Der Judenstaat, which increased popularity in Eastern Europe for a Jewish state in Palestine. A second wave of Jews left for Palestine between 1904 and 1914. These Jews, led by David Ben-Gurion, established the group of Jews known as Zionists, which consisted mostly of Jewish-Russian immigrants and tourists who gradually began to exert their influence on the Ottoman Empire to take control of Palestine and re-establish the state of Israel (Smith 40). This state, however, was not recognized, not even by the British until the Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917. Charles D. Smith describes the Balfour Declaration as being "the result of intense activity and lobbying by several leading Zionists, the most prominent and persuasive being Chaim Weizmann.. (Smith 71)" The purpose of the Jewish lobby in the UK was to convince the British that generosity toward the Russian Jews in Palestine would result in a strengthening of war efforts in Russia against Prussia. This assertion, although unfounded and false, set a precedent for British attitudes toward the Jews in Palestine. This culmination of effort by prominent Jews eventually led to the Balfour Declaration, which officially recognized a Jewish home in Palestine (Smith 71). Though the borders agreed upon hardly reflected that of Zionist claims, the Jews finally had their home back; the problem of course, was that this land was home to a large contingent of Sunni Muslims, and over twelve percent of the inhabitants belonged to a major branch of Christianity. The Arab response to Zionism varied, mostly because the vernacular region of Palestine was acknowledged by only Christians and Jews in the area. Syria was recognized as the greater region which it belonged to (Smith 41). Charles D. Smith best summarizes the impression that Zionism left on the Muslim Palestinians.

Zionism as a European movement, came to be seen initially as another attempt by Western imperialism to subordinate Muslims to Europeans, and became even more threatening once it was realized that the Zionists wished to take part of what

had been Arab lands for centuries and remake it into a Jewish homeland. (Smith 43)

In effect, the Balfour Declaration along with British support of Zionism, hindered further relations between the West and the Middle East. Today, when Israel kills Palestinians on the West Bank or on the Gaza Strip, Arab feelings of hatred and remorse are not directed just at the Israelis, but to the West in general, and especially toward former imperialistic countries and those that supported them, such as England, France, Germany, and the United States.

With all the facts staring us right in the face, we can make the following assertions: a.) Ethnic conflict in the Middle East stems from the Sykes-Picot agreement which created mandates incongruent with many ethnicities, b.) the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence bolstered Arab nationalism and destroyed hopes for trust between the Arab peoples and the West, and c.) the rise of Zionism and formal recognition of a Jewish state by the UK in the Balfour Declaration has caused massive Arab resentment of the West and of the Jews. All of these implications point to one major theme, turmoil. With the effects of globalization and international fundamentalist Islamic terrorism linking us to the old world, nations across the globe now feel the repercussions of these three historical developments more than ever before, making the Middle East one of the greatest centers of conflict in the twentieth century.

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