



Understanding Contemporary Middle East

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Abstract: What do we mean by the Middle East? How should we study the political ambitions of nearly half a billion people? To what extent are their destinies linked to the politics of great powers, and why? Why is the Middle East in a state of permanent conflict, foggy, and a region filled with local and international attention? This paper aims to analyse the contemporary Middle East and look at the connection between the situation in the region and its colonial legacy. Building a substantial legacy of progressive political and economic institutions in the evolution of the region were gradually rooting both the rule of law and commercial, agricultural, and industrial developments in native soil, in the shadow of colonialism. The paper discusses the weight of the Middle East in global politics (world powers) and how each of these powers defined the Middle East according to their interests. It reveals various historical stages of the creation of the artificial states in the Middle East and the role of the colonial powers in the state-building processes. The paper examines the theoretical approaches and their underlying assumptions concerning the changes in the region (borders, nation-building, patriotism, anti-western culture movement) and the role of colonialism in the emergence of different movements. The paper is based on strategic documents, clarifying the world power policy towards the area. It provides a close look at liberal tradition and its reflections on international relations.

Keywords: The Middle East, Colonialism, Orientalism, Hegemony, Global Politics.

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I. INTRODUCTION

What we see today of modern nation states in the Middle East, especially in the Arab world, where are many artificial states, which are products of imperialism and power-sharing conflicts between the states that existed in the 19th century and the colonial greed that took no particularities of the region into account. Around century ago, many Arabic regions were part of the Ottoman Empire. Many historical and political events led to the end of the Ottoman Empire (formally 1924) and the emergence of the new bordered states across the Middle East. The role directly played by the British was far higher than any imperial state. There are

three separate events which resulted in existing political turmoil.

In the first section, the paper will show the historical background of the colonial era in the region, in the second section the paper will discuss the legacy of the colonialism in the Middle East, in the third section the paper will show the postcolonial Middle East, and the last section will discuss the world powers and the contemporary Middle East.

The paper concludes that there is a strong connection between the imperial legacy and the

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contemporary Middle East scene. The area will remain in a state of permanent conflicts, as long as the divisions remain as they are now. Perhaps the most significant tension in the Middle East is the Arab-Israeli conflict which has no solution in sight.

Therefore, the rivalry in the Middle East, whether at the level of states or in the composition of countries or the continuity of survival, remain determining factor.

The paper present the main features, furthermore, it focuses on the findings to examine a trend towards the extension.

II. Three Events that shaped the Region

Thinking of the origins of the word "Middle East" takes us straight into the early 20th century British colonial geopolitics. Great Britain's colonies in South Asia made the Middle East not only a region of strategic importance but also the crux of the journey to the east to India; hence the phrase "the Middle East" was coined. This British mark refers to a mysterious region in Asia between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean from its inception, i.e. the Middle East is the region between the "Far East" and the "Near East" [1].

Karen Culcas (2010), in her analysis in constructing and naturalizing the Middle East, tested every possible document, statement, paper, news, even maps mentioning the Middle East. As a result, she found that there is no specific area that could identify the Middle East as a region, according to documents she examined (from 19th until 20th century) [2].

This, in turn, reinforces our view, that the Middle East is only a term of geographical definition of the place but not for the borders, nor countries. Who determines is the colonial powers' point of view, and how they see the region depends on the interests and the benefits that they will gain.

The end of World War I (1914-1918) and its aftermaths are not the exclusive grounds for the contemporary Middle East, but also undermining the Ottoman Empire, which was a systematic process. It started in Algeria, occupied by the French in 1835, then in Egypt 1888, occupied by the British, and continued by the occupation of Libya in 1912 by Italy.

By the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire, because of its shrinking territories, economic decline

and growing reliance on the rest of Europe, was derisively called the "sick man of Europe" [3].

The decision of the Ottomans to align with the Central Powers (Germany, Austria- Hungary) against the "Allied" side (Britain, France, and Russia) in October 1914 motivated the British to make plans to eliminate the Ottoman Empire and expand their territory in the Middle East. They controlled Egypt since 1888 and India since 1857. The Ottoman Empire was between these two important colonies, and the British were determined to invalidate it as part of World War [4].

The three main events that genuinely shaped the Middle East are the McMahon-Hussein Correspondence, the Sykes-Picot Agreement, and the Balfour Declaration [5].

Between July 1915 and January 1916 Sharif Hussein bin Ali, the "Amir" – governor of Makkah – was communicating with the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, about the revolt against the Ottoman Empire for promises of supporting independence state and creation of kingdom.

This communication is later known as the McMahon-Hussein Correspondence. Roger Spooner (2015) pointed out that there are two crucial deals emphasized in the correspondence. The first is initiating an independent Muslim state in Arabia, second is whether Palestine is included in this treaty or not [6]. Whatever the correspondences included, the British did not implement any.

In the Sykes-Picot Agreement, publicly known in 1917, when the Russian Bolshevik government exposed it, the British and French agreed to divide up the Arab world between themselves.

On a symbolic level, the Sykes-Picot Agreement is associated with a powerful idea in the collective memory of the people of the region, it was an insult. Currently, after decades we face different problems, but their roots are found somewhere in the Sykes-Picot Agreement [7].

The Sykes-Picot Agreement transformed the region into colonial spheres of influence, dividing it between the mandate and protectorate, and demarcating the borders to serve the interests of the

¹ CULCAS 2010, p. 585.

² CULCAS 2010, pp. 585-591.

³ BLAKEMORE, ERIN 2019, pp. 1-3.

⁴ HINGORANI 2017, p. 94-95.

⁵ HINGORANI 2017, p. 94-97.

⁶ SPOONER, 2015, pp. 1-3.

⁷ ABDALHAKIM 2019, pp. 3-5.

British and French. The Agreement is until today considered as a classic mark of imperial dishonesty and betrayal [8].

In the Balfour Declaration on 2nd November 1917 Arthur Balfour, the Foreign Secretary of Britain sent a letter to Baron Rothschild, a leader of the Zionist community. The letter declared the British government's official support for the Zionist movement's goals to establish a Jewish state in Palestine.

The Belfour Declaration was the most dangerous shift in the region, not only geographically or demographically, but rather in a qualitative addition, by creating a new state that had never existed before. In the next years, Britain has played a unique role in bringing fundamental changes in the region. The creation of Israel was also a key factor in the agreements on the division of the region, which have changed the shape of the region forever.

Firas Alkhateeb (2016) describes this situation as "the quagmire that the British created would dominate Middle Eastern politics throughout the twentieth century" [9].

Fundamental and radical changes took place in the Middle East, changed the features of the region to the present day. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and the events and agreements that followed between the victorious powers in World War I, established a region that will be filled with endless conflicts. The contradictory agreements, the British did, in secret agenda, aimed at Sharing the Ottoman legacy, ensuring control of the region and taking advantage of available resources. Neither Britain nor France, in its division of the region did take any religious, ethnic, or cultural considerations. Rather, the goal of the division was to ensure their control.

III. Colonial legacy and the Contemporary Middle East

After the end of World War I, Yemen became a British colony, while Algeria was ruled by the French and Libya was under Italian rule. However, the rest of the region (with exceptions of Turkey, Iran and Arabia) was under the control of imperial powers which were exercised in various forms and under different names including "Mandates" and "Protectorate".

The effects of the Sykes-Picot Agreement on the region could be explained by the fact that it was

⁸ LOEVY 2017, p. 123.

⁹ ALKHATEEB 2016, p. 158.

hidden without any knowledge of the Arabs, and canceled Britain's central promise to the Arabs to gain independence if they rebelled against the Ottomans.

When this independence was not achieved after World War I, the Arab political orientation – in North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean – gradually shifted to Nationalism whose main objective was to get rid of the colonialists [10].

"A nation state" is a set of changing rhetorical and institutional practices consisting of citizens who have an emotional commitment and imagination of identity. The nation has a state that governs a specific territory and seeks to impose a collective identity on all citizens through state education, usually focusing on linguistic unity, it represents a political, diplomatic and economical unit with its sovereignty in all these areas [11].

The nationalism, in turn, created another struggle of identity among Arabs who also failed to address this dilemma as well [12]. Even if states gain their independence, it is illusory, because the fate of these countries was dependent on imperialist policies and foreign interference in various forms of life.

But what did the colonial powers did? Did they create a real nation state? None at all, because the Middle East is a geopolitical system that cannot be established, and that it has been developed and naturalized as a specific geographical location through the development of the term "Middle" East, the unclear, but continue meaning of its geographical location [13].

Imad El-Anis (2014) argues that there is a clear distinction between the contemporary system and the previous regimes that existed in the Middle East. The system that preceded the state system between the 15th century and the early 20th century was characterized by a regional empire, in the sense of a few internal borders and the claim of sovereignty. This observation is important when considering the argument that borders, sovereignty, and multiple "ways" of organising people in groups help define international relations. Such factors will cause the region to be less stable [14].

From then on, the Middle East-particularly the Arab states-began to enter a new phase, in fact,

¹⁰ TARIQ 2013, p. 3.

¹¹ COLE – KANDIYOTI 2002, p. 190.

¹² TARIQ 2013, pp. 1-5.

¹³ KAREN 2010, pp. 583-597.

¹⁴ EL-ANIS 2011, p. 13.

different in form and substance than in the past. This has left a massive impact on the present-day division of states, on the establishment of the national dimension, and ethnic and religious conflicts which were contrary to what was later stated by Colonial powers. Their behavior and actions suggested that their mission in the region is a humanitarian one, and they are promoting the people of the region to liberation.

In order to maintain control over these emerging countries, ensure the existence of these colonial states, and exploit the wealth of these countries, these powers divided the Middle East. Furthermore, to guarantee the hegemony of the colonial power, there should be some ideological changes.

The concept of imposing cultural hegemony through ideology distinguishes colonialism from imperialism. Imperialism is driven by ideology, while colonial powers used full technology of knowledge as one of the essential methods of exercising their power to subjugate the region for which the imperial project was intended [15].

The situation in which the region lived, due to the subjection of these areas to European control, that many centers were once considered centers of social and political life for Muslims – Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad – were transformed into places to converge new ideas, such secularism and nationalism [16].

Edward Said (2006) argues that the European position of supremacy over the region and its people contributed further to the unequal nature of the relationship with Europe, which he called "Orientalism" [17]. The Middle East was a British-French cultural project until the end of World War II, and the rise of the United States' role in its control of the region is part of Western civilisation on extending since ancient times [18]. Edward Said viewed Orientalism as an authoritative use of knowledge of the East, after "Sharqana" and domesticating it in preparation for colonization and control of it.

As mentioned earlier, the tutelage imposed by the European powers on the countries of the region and their support to reach stable nation-states was through the imposition of new forms of ideology that fit into Western norms, which in turn, created a state of contradiction in the Middle East

societies, mainly Islamic Arabs. Accordingly, the state of cultural alienation and the emergence of resistance movements to Western cultural influence created a new phase in the region.

Furthermore, the process of state-building in the Middle East was full of difficulties. Colonial rule challenged the foundation of Middle Eastern societies. Under the Ottoman rule, despite all of its shortcomings, the region had a certain was cohesive culturally and politically, while the idea of a nation-state was new and at least strange for the Islamic Arab societies.

Meanwhile, when European powers declared their arrival in the region as a "civilized mission", the colonial powers did little to educate the people. In fact, they have educated a small collaborating elite (benefit group). When the British left Egypt, 77 % of the population were illiterate, per capita income was £ 42 per year, and the average life expectancy of an Egyptian man was 36 years [19].

In sum, the legacy of colonial divisions has created lasting seeds of conflict in the region. The Middle East today is a permanent imbalance of powers, place of religious, ethnic and existential conflicts, not least the cradle of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Subsequently, the area was divided, and the people were separated in more than one country (Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, etc.) which is still the cause of many rebellions and warfare today.

V. The United States and the World Powers in the Middle East

The colonial era in the many Middle Eastern and Central Asian countries can be split into several periods: informal Imperialism, formal colonial domination, and neo-colonialism. The collapse of neo-colonialism in recent decades led to a postcolonial era in which the United States and the former Soviet Union (Russia) are unable to enforce their will on countries like Iran, Afghanistan, and Iraq, given the region's history of hegemony and the ongoing competition between the major powers of the Cold War [20].

The United States' ability to influence the region has become considerably less. It was not able to do it alone; and therefore they cooperated with other countries, as in the case of Iran's nuclear program (committee P5+1) [21] and the involvement of countries such as Russia and China [22].

¹⁵ JOUENNE 2018, pp. 2-3.

¹⁶ Alkhateeb 2016, pp. 153-154.

¹⁷ Said 2006, pp. 25-30.

¹⁸ SAID 2006, p. 31.

¹⁹ HARDY 2016, p. 2.

²⁰ COLE – KANDIYOTI 2002, pp. 190-191.

²¹ The P5+1 refers to the UN Security Council's five permanent members (the P5); namely China, France,

United States Foreign Policy towards the Middle East since the Iraq invasion of Kuwait in 1990 is different from the present U.S. administration policy. Thirty years of U.S. involvement in the Middle East policy has weakened its regional standing [23]. It became clear that the capabilities of the U.S. are limited, and an alternative developed approaches include the concept of regional power which appears to be exhaustive in the momentum of regions and actors in it [24].

The real change in U.S. policy in the Middle East has helped to raise the formation and rivalry for regional power and a new regional order in the Middle East. U.S. decline also would lead to filling the vacuum policy, which means giving more space and chances for world powers to start their polarisation and find new foot on the ground. This can be seen as unobstructed in the role of Russia in Syria. Russia interfered directly in the Syrian war, under the eyes of the U.S. administration, and established military bases and participated directly in fighting alongside the regular Syrian forces of President Bashar al-Assad.

VI. World Powers and the Middle East

After the end of World War II (1939-1945), the international scene turned into a bipolar between the United States and the former Soviet Union. The situation remained a bipolar, to some extent, until the end of the Cold War, when the world has transformed into unipolar with the U.S. at the head of power.

As mentioned previously, the United States became not the sole player of the political landscape in the Middle East, because of the several changes in the nature of international relations, and the emergence of the rising powers. We could see some measures about the U.S. policy decline, such as the Russian intervention and Syrian events since 2011.

Regarding the European Union, it dealt with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) according to many policies, including encouraging political and economic reform which is due to respect for its specific features and regional cooperation among the countries of the region themselves and with the EU [25].

Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States; plus Germany.

²² HAASS 2008, pp. 1-17.

²³ Cristol 2018, pp. 48-50.

²⁴ BECK 2014, pp. 4-5.

²⁵ European External Action Service (EEAS): Middle East and North Africa (MENA) §.1. Available at: <https://eeas.europa.eu/regions/middle-east-north->

The central policy is the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), in the framework of which the EU worked with its Southern and Eastern Neighbors to foster stabilisation, security and prosperity, in line with the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy which is a vital part of EU foreign policy [26].

On one hand, the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) has emerged as a compromise between EU member states concerning the EU's interests towards its Eastern and Southern neighbors, with the central values such as democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights and social cohesion [27].

On the other hand, most Europeans agree that the United States is the only powerful actor who is capable of changing the strategic role of regional actors and pushing them to resolve their disputes and bring progress to the Middle East. For example, the Israeli-Arab conflict will depend on regional ownership and full U.S. commitment.

Regarding Russia and China, traditionally Russia and China are united in their opposition to "destructive foreign interference" in regional affairs. China is engaged with all major regional powers in a complex system of military, technological and political fields. Because they have their interests everywhere, they cannot stand in the various ongoing rivalries [28].

In the Middle East regional order both Russia and China view the region from the convergence of interests, they would not interfere in the region's affairs profoundly.

Like Beijing's plans, Moscow's strategy for the Middle East relies on maintaining good relations with all countries in the region and focuses on increasing opportunities in the region with minimal commitment or the possibility of losses [29].

All the world powers agree that the Middle East is a region of conflict of interests, which means ensuring the stability of the countries of the Middle East guarantees the flow and benefit from the region.

VII. CONCLUSION

The role played by the British was far higher than any player in the region, in shaping the

[africa-mena/336/middle-east-and-north-africa-mena_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/regions/middle-east-north-africa-mena/336/middle-east-and-north-africa-mena_en) [accessed at: 18.10.2020]

²⁶ European External Action Service (EEAS) §.2.

²⁷ Soós 2016, p. 52.

²⁸ Suckov 2018, p. 2.

²⁹ Wormuth 2018, p. 2.

contemporary Middle East. The Sykes-Picot Agreement is until today considered a classic mark of imperial dishonesty and betrayal.

Beyond the current situation in the Middle East, colonial ambitions, cannot in any way understand what is happening in the Middle East today, without linking it to the beginning of a purely colonial point of view, which aims at sharing wealth, taking control of the natural resources. This will keep the primary motivation for world powers' policies towards the region.

After European powers participation in the region, the area started to enter in new multi phases of new norms, and new lifestyles, which were among the main reasons for Arabic Nationalism, Islamism, and also the terrorism.

The Middle East is a region of crucial permanent regional conflict for world powers; it is considered as the place to measure the power and influence and also exercise them at the same time. Some of the world powers – Russia and China – view the region from the convergence of their interests, not to interfere in the region's affairs profoundly.

A new regional order was established with the rising of the Regional Powers in the Middle East in parallel with the U.S. decline of its foreign policy towards the region after the end of the cold war (1947-1990).

The region will remain in a state of uncertainty as long as no viable solutions are taken on the ground which takes into account the complexity of the religious and ethnic issues, and the solution of intractable problems, especially the Arab-Israeli conflict.

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