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European Imperialist Ambitions: Unfulfilled

At the end of World War 1, the monarchical empires of Ottoman, Persian, and Arabian sovereignty, which for centuries had ruled the Middle East, were broken up into states. In the Levant and Mesopotamia--which encompassed modern day Syria, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, Jordan and Iraq-- Britain and France were tasked with construction.¹ However, the “remaining Middle East partitioned itself as a result of anti-imperialist struggle (Turkey), coupe d’ etat (Iran), revolution (Egypt) and conquest (Saudi Arabia).”² The European colonial powers, acting in their own self-interest, partitioned the once-Ottoman Empire with little to no regard for the future of the territory's indigenous people, a fact that would complicate developments later on.³ To fully understand the issues at play, it’s important to recognize that the Western World had been intervening in the Middle East for more than a century prior. The French inhabited parts of North Africa, the British had vast interests in Egypt, Cyprus and the Gulf, while the Italians conquered the region of modern-day Libya (in 1911).⁴ World War 1 was by no means the beginning of European intervention in the Middle East, but rather the opportunistic climax of long standing colonial ambitions.

On the surface, European imperialist ambitions appeared to have been secured, even enhanced, by the First World War, but as we see--the interwar years represented a period of constant struggle over the legitimacy of imperialism in the Middle East and the consistent use of force to sustain that legitimacy embodied the fragile influence of the colonial powers in the

¹ Gelvin, James L. *The Modern Middle East: A History*. 4th ed., Oxford University Press, 2016.

² [Ibid.]

³ [Ibid.]

⁴ [Ibid.]

region. While secret diplomatic arrangements during and after World War 1 made it seem like Britain and France would finally fulfil their colonial goals, through the rise of Middle Eastern nationalism, Wilson's Fourteen Points, and the general ambiguity of the agreements in place, European powers didn't succeed in colonialism to the extent in which they had originally hoped.

In 1915, the Entente powers began constructing transactional treaties to ensure their mutual support. Worried the Russians would withdraw from the war, Britain and France negotiated a deal known as the Constantinople Agreement, which gave Russia their long-desired Turkish Straits, not to mention, the city that overlooked them: Istanbul.⁵ In return, Britain was promised territory in Persia, while France claimed modern-day Syria. The Constantinople Agreement fell apart for several reasons, but it served an important role in the post war settlements. It standardized a transactional response for military support and conventionalized the idea that countries were entitled to territorial recompensation. Many similar arrangements followed: the Treaty of London, the Sykes-Picot Agreement, and the Treaty of Saint-Jean de Maurienne.⁶ The original idea was that European powers wouldn't rule the zones they claimed definitely, but would benefit from exclusive economic and political rights not granted to other countries.

The downfall of these agreements were four-fold. One, they were incredibly ambiguous. Many of the regions had never been previously defined as they were all territories within the Ottoman Empire. Two, they were somewhat (if not entirely) contradictory. The British promised Palestine to the Arabs in the Husayn-McMahon letters, but promised the same territory to the Zionist movement in the Balfour Declaration. To add further salt to the wound, France was promised Syria in the Sykes-Picot Agreement which (according to French interpretation of the agreement) was supposed to include Palestine as well. Another factor that undermined these

⁵ Rogan, Eugene. *The Arabs: a History*. Penguin Books, 2018.

⁶ Gelvin, James L. *The Modern Middle East: A History*. 4th ed., Oxford University Press, 2016.

agreements was the Bolshevik Revolution and the new party in charge of Russia post-World War 1. The Union of Soviet Socialists released the texts of many of these secret agreements to the embarrassment of France and Britain, who had clearly over-promised many of the regions in the Middle East, alienating a huge majority of the indigenous people.⁷ And lastly, was Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen points.

Allied with the Entente powers, President Woodrow Wilson intended to make his Fourteen Points the foundation for a post-World War peace. Among these points were three particularly detrimental points to European imperialist ambitions: his first point articulated a need for the end of secret diplomacy, his fifth point indicated the need for indigenous consent in the settlements that would form in the post-war Middle East, and his twelfth point explicitly called for the political autonomy of Turkey.⁸ This basically de-legitimized all the secret arrangements for pre-partition made during the war, making it incredibly hard to justify honoring any of them.

The "Big Three" powers were forced to compromise and (with the help of The League of Nations) established the mandate system, which effectively prevented the European powers from achieving all they had imperialistically hoped. Essentially Britain and France wanted fiscal priority in the provinces they claimed. They wanted a system of imperial trade preferences, where they'd enjoy special trade privileges that other countries wouldn't. The mandate system however, totally obliterated any hope of colonial trade advantages. It translated into an infrastructure that fostered "temporary 'colonies' with equal access for all in trade"⁹ What this meant was that European countries, most notably Britain and France, were mandated various Middle Eastern regions with the expectation that they'd eventually relinquish control and allow those states to govern themselves autonomously. Hence, Britain was mandated the territories of

⁷ Gelvin, James L. *The Modern Middle East: A History*. 4th ed., Oxford University Press, 2016.

⁸ [Ibid.]

⁹ [Ibid.]

modern-day Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Iraq while France was mandated the territory that now includes Syria and Lebanon.¹⁰

If mandated states were the eventual goal of European colonial pursuits (which they weren't), even then they'd have fallen short. The mandate system--in theory-- was a well intentioned arrangement among European powers to facilitate political autonomy in the Middle East, while simultaneously securing Western economic and strategic interests. For starters, the mandatory powers had absolute managerial power over their mandates, which meant they could sever and join territories within their allotted realms whimsically. Sure--they had to report their activities to a special committee of the League of Nations, but they did so with little regard for the social implications of the local residents. The best example of this was when France experimented by dividing Syria up into six religiously and ethnically distinct quasi-states, which for decades after proved to be a critical hindrance to Syria's eventual unity.¹¹ The mandate system was supposed to act with the sentiment of the community as the principal consideration, but as seen, France and Britain gave very little thought to ensuring their mandates were practically viable. They either made territorial decisions based on economic value or political value, but rarely took into account the repercussions of territories that only embodied one of these two very important facets. The greatest example of this is the inception of Jordan, which solved a political problem for Great Britain by appeasing 'Abdallah, but proved to be a terrible financial miscalculation as Jordan had relatively no economic resources to sustain itself. To this day it continues to rely heavily on foreign subsidies.¹²

Perhaps the single biggest barrier to European triumph in the Middle East colonial arena, was the unprecedented rise of nationalism and the anti-imperialist sentiment of the

¹⁰ [Ibid.]

¹¹ Gelvin, James L. *The Modern Middle East: A History*. 4th ed., Oxford University Press, 2016.

¹² [Ibid.]

indigenous people. Britain's experience with Iraq proves to be the quintessence of anti-imperialist sentiment. The Sunnis and Shiites demanded independence from Britain and in return Britain proposed a governance of "limited self-rule."¹³ The Sunnis and Shiites revolted against Britain in a struggle that lasted nearly four months. Frustrated, Great Britain agreed to fast-track Iraq's independence under a Sunni minority government (by doing so, ensuring the Sunni elite's continuous need for British support as they were--after all--a minority). In 1932 Iraq was granted independence. One year later it had its first religious massacre and four years later its first military coup.¹⁴

While on the surface Britain and France acted with a strategic premise, their inability to form meaningful, long lasting trust with the indigenous people, served as a constant struggle for political legitimacy in the already volatile region. Whether Britain's experience in Egypt (revolution) or France's experience with Syria (the Druzes), both imperial powers experienced countless complications in maintaining power over a region that--so clearly--had deeply-rooted oppositional tendencies towards Western intervention. Over the following years, France and Britain found it more financially viable to grant independence (or simply cut ties) to their mandates than to stick around and secure true colonial dominance.¹⁵

As illustrated, European powers walked away from World War 1 with far less than they had anticipated. Britain lost control of Egypt, Iraq, and Iran, while the French had tenuous relations with Syria which would eventually result in a revolution. Neither country was granted the colonial trade preferences they so desperately desired, ultimately leaving Western imperialistic ambitions disappointed and generally unfulfilled, while simultaneously depleting mass European resources to exert what little influence they still had in the region.

¹³ Rogan, Eugene. *The Arabs: a History*. Penguin Books, 2018.

¹⁴ Gelvin, James L. *The Modern Middle East: A History*. 4th ed., Oxford University Press, 2016.

¹⁵ Rogan, Eugene. *The Arabs: a History*. Penguin Books, 2018.

