

European Powers and the Creation of the Middle Eastern State System

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ANA HUERTAS FRANCISCO, MAR 16 2010

How Important was the Role of The European Powers in Creating the Middle East State System?

A states system can be created in two different ways which are not mutually exclusive; rather, the boundaries of a state, its population make-up and state instruments shape and define supra-national movements and identities, and vice versa. In the Middle East, the European powers played a very important role in both. The Ottoman Empire first shaped through the Tanzimat reforms the provincial network that would be used by Britain and France to create the state boundaries that we know today, drawn regardless of differences in ethnicity, religion or ascendancy of the native peoples. The imposition these boundaries, the partition of Palestine and the new reach of globalization were responsible for the birth and strengthening of phenomena such as nationalism or Islamism, which became one of the most prominent features in the creation of the non-geographical aspect of the Middle East state-system.

It is undeniable that the European powers had a great impact on both the creation of the (imaginary) concept of the Middle East and the formation of the actual state system (Meyer, 1991). The “greater Middle East” has been described by Kemp and Harkavy to comprise the Arab world, Iran, Israel, and Turkey plus the Horn of Africa, the Trans-Caucasus and western Central Asia (1997:4). Whether these topographical approximations are correct or not is contested for they do not always coincide with political, ethnic or religious borders (Shively, 2003). For this reason, two levels of analysis must be evaluated: the state system as the geographical boundaries and political instruments that limit and define state interaction, and the boundary-crossing interactions (Wiest, 2009) that produce equally lasting effects on international relations.

Northedge described a “system” in 1976 as an “orderly set of relationships between the parts [that make it up]” (24). When we conceptualise the parts of a system in terms of geographical boundaries, the state becomes the central actor of the structure (Reynolds, 1994). In the case of the Middle East, the Ottomans were the first to create a prototype of a state system based on the division of their Empire into provinces following the reforms of the Tanzimat (Rogan, 2009) in an attempt to centralise its territories: each province had relatively autonomous governance (Zubaida, 2002) and would “recognise the cultural and religious rights of the different ethno-religious groups” (Karpat, 1985: 94) when the concept of nation was alien to the region and boundaries were inexistent (Hinnebusch, 2003). Before the formal end of the Ottoman Empire, treaties were designed to divide and share its former territories amongst the European powers in the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916 even before the end of the First World War (Fitzgerald, 1994), whose plans were only implemented after the San Remo Conference in 1920 by hand of the League of Nations (Adespicabletruce.org.uk, 2009).

The role of these treaties was crucial: the European powers introduced the mandate system as an argued prelude to sovereign self-determination in the Middle East (Milton-Edwards, 2006) along the default lines of the Ottoman provinces (Rogan, 2009). They created “the essential features of a modern state” (Owen, 2007: 9) based on the subordination, suppression and forced cohabitation of differing social forces in new “artificial states” (Louis, 1969: 75). The case of Iraq is illustrative of the incongruence of state formation in the Middle East: constituted by the Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul, each being relatively self-sustainable prior to colonization, Iraq became a conflictive and fragmented state with imaginary boundaries (Ayubi, 1995), born out of the forceful

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coexistence of different ethnic and religious entities (Zubaida, 2002). There was a clear “inconsistency” between the all-encompassing Arab identity concept of Umma that existed previously and the imposed, and divisive by nature, “Westphalian state-system” (Davutoglu, 1999: 98). This tension was sharpened by the consequences of the Balfour Declaration of 1917 that guaranteed the Zionist movement a “Home for the Jewish people” in Palestine (Stork, 1972: 10), which meant new partition, colonization and unlimited migration into Arab land (Owen, 2007) – a new gear in the geopolitical scene, leading to one of the longest conflicts in world history.

Of course, geopolitics is not the only factor that defines a states-system: according to Bull’s definition, a state-system is also created through interdependence relations and the impact states have on one another (2002). Thus, Halliday stressed the importance of the “transnational” processes that link societies at supra-state levels (2005: 229) as part of state-system relations. The European powers first became important by aiming to “incorporate the Ottoman Empire into the capitalist world economy” (Ayubi, 1995: 86), attempting to create dependency on Western markets that would give Europeans a say in economic and political matters in the area (Milton-Edwards, 2006), which found its climax in colonization after the First World War (TNI, 2007). However, it was what happened after *decolonization* which contributed to nation-state formation by spurring “ethnically and religiously inflected nationalisms” (Blecher, 2006: 3) in response to the “cultural aggression of western imperialism”: this mirrored the needs, identity and strength of the peoples within the state (Halliday, 2005: 235). Halliday further explains that for example Islamism, undeniably one of the strongest forces within the Middle East, has spread by “mutual inspiration” regardless state boundaries (2005: 240) as a response to the overarching capitalist global structures. The European powers can thus be considered important in the sphere of social processes as well because many of the supra-national movements and ideologies that characterize the dynamics of the Middle East state-system have arisen to counteract their influence (al Ahmad, 2007).

It does not matter whether we consider a state-system to be constructed solely by geographical boundaries, the transnational processes that shape international relations, or both. The role of the European powers was crucial in the making of the Middle East system not only because they were responsible for the incongruence of land partition after the Ottoman Empire and its consequent conflicts, but also because they established very important starting points for many trans-national phenomena by aiming to incorporate the area to the global capitalist system. Similarly, the creation of the Zionist state of Israel strengthened many of these supra-national movements, which were very important in shaping the nature of relations within the state-system.

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Written by: Ana Huertas Francisco Written at: University of Plymouth Written on: October 2009 Written for: Shabnam Holiday