

## The Middle East: An Orientalist Creation

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ARWA SYED, FEB 25 2021

In order to examine whether the Middle East is an invention, it is important to examine the significance of British and French influence over the region. The fall of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century marked the beginning of Western influence in the region and consequently created the 'Middle East' that we know today. By examining the role the British and French had in shaping state boundaries and state formations, along with the social and geopolitical aspects, it can be argued that the imperial rule of the British and French essentially invented the Middle East. Even the name coined for the region can be an indication of how the Middle East can be understood as an invention. The term Middle East is a Eurocentric term and was coined by the British in accordance with the proximity of the region to Europe. As a result, the region can be interpreted in various ways and what countries form the Middle East is often a topic of debate, with many scholars opting to referring to the region as 'West Asia'. This essay will argue that the Middle East can be understood as an imperial invention, created by the European imperial powers by exploring policies such as the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the mandate system, as well as the region's response to such policies and how overtime nationalist groups have contributed to the identity of the region. Edward Said's 'Orientalism' can support many of the claims made in this essay and the policies which are explored, demonstrating how Orientalist attitudes have played a significant role in the 'invention' of the Middle East as well as 21<sup>st</sup> century Western influence and intervention in the region.

Orientalism is essential in understanding British and French actions regarding the Middle East region and in understanding how the region came to be 'invented' by foreign influences. Lockman argues that Orientalism discourse was linked to 'contemporary European colonialism' and was used as a form of justification by the European states to exert their power over the region (Lockman, 2004: p.88). Edward Said offers a range of overlapping definitions of Orientalism, which can provide insight into how Orientalism supported European power's imperial rule over the region. As well as defining Orientalism as a 'mode of discourse', it is also defined as being 'a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident' (Said, 1978: p.2). The distinctions made between the 'Orient' and the 'Occident', supported by a range of literature, allowed for the West to present themselves as being superior to those in the Middle East, providing them with a rationale to control and have a strong voice in the region and its affairs. Said also defines Orientalism as a 'corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching, settling it, and ruling over it' (1978: p3). Essentially making Orientalism 'a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient (Ibid.). Once again, many of the 'statements' or the preconceptions made regarding the Orient allowed the West to assert their superiority over the region. Common Orientalist attitudes included the belief that the Middle East was backwards and in desperate need of civilising. It was this prejudice which justified the British and French colonial powers to implement Orientalist policies, 'reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness' (Owen, 2004: p.7).

However, the notion that the Middle East requires civilising is not a thing of the past, and we can still see it in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, ranging from US intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, in which the United States claimed it would save Afghan women from the Taliban to Macron's recent visits to Lebanon following the Beirut explosion, which many viewed as a 'new colonial push' (Ghitis, 2020). It was these Orientalist preconceptions of the Middle East and its people that supported many of the policies put forth by the British and French during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ultimately, this would allow the imperial powers to restructure, as suggested by Said, a region that can be considered to be a 'European invention' (Burney, 2012: p. 23).

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The 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, drawn up by the British and French, is a clear indication of how the Middle East can be viewed as an 'invention'. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Britain and France carved up the region between the two imperial powers, creating their own spheres of influence within the region. The British sphere of influence included Iraq, Transjordan, and Palestine. The French sphere of influence included Lebanon and Syria. It can be argued that through the example of the Sykes-Picot Agreement that the boundaries of these states are an 'invention [...] decided by European powers under conditions of colonial rule' (Bilgin, 2016: p.357). One should also remember that the arbitrary borders were imposed upon the people of the region and that they were not consulted in the creation of the Sykes-Picot Agreement. The drawing up of arbitrary borders can be understood as an Orientalist act as the colonial powers failed to acknowledge that the Middle East region was comprised of various ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. Instead, they blurred the various identities of the region into one homogenous entity, which was better suited to their interests. The impacts of the Sykes-Picot Agreement can still be felt in the region today. For example, the Kurdish people can be considered to be victims of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, with Saeed arguing that the formation of a Kurdish state in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century may have 'saved millions of lives and helped mitigate the risk of violence visible today in the nation states that formed as by-products of Sykes-Picot agreement' (Saeed, 2016). Today, the Kurdistan region is divided between Turkey, Iraq and Syria, where the ethnic group has become oppressed minorities, struggling for cultural and political rights within the states they live in. This suggests that state borders are not the only example of how the Middle East can be deemed an 'invention' but also that the Sykes-Picot Agreement is responsible for the divisions created amongst the people of the region and the conflicts that occur today. The Sykes-Picot Agreement can be understood as a European attempt to establish a new region, disregarding the existing identity of the region, linking to Said's notion of Orientalism as the West 'restructuring' the 'Orient' to complement their own interests. Therefore, the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which epitomised Orientalist attitudes, illustrates how the British and French imperial powers not only invented the modern day boundaries of the Middle East but also many of its social and political issues.

Similarly, the Balfour Declaration of 1917 was another example of a policy that was imposed on the people of the region. It also can be understood as the cause of the Palestine-Israel conflict which has come to characterise the region; emphasising the notion that the many issues of the regions, along with state formation, can be directly tied to the colonial powers of Britain and France. The Declaration called for a 'national home for Jewish people' in Palestine and claimed that 'nothing shall be done which will prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine' (The Palestinian Return Centre, 2017). The British and the Zionists, both involved in the formation and implementation of the Declaration, used 'Orientalist ideologies to justify their claims to the land'. Furthermore, they used the Orientalist narrative that the 'Orient' is in need of civilising, claiming that the Palestinians were 'primitive and backwards, requiring modernisation' (Pappé, cited in The Palestinian Return Centre, 2017). The Balfour Declaration validates Said's theories of Orientalism as using discourse and establishing distinctions to legitimise control over the 'Orient'. Over time, the Israeli state created a narrative claiming that the land prior to the Balfour Declaration lacked in trade and infrastructure, and its people were undemocratic and uncivilised. Through this narrative, Israel was able to build its credibility as a state, claiming that the Zionists and Jews who came from Europe made the land 'prosperous, democratic and most importantly civilised' (The Palestinian Return Centre, 2017). The sudden creation of the contemporary state of Israel, backed by Orientalist attitudes, led to social and political turmoil in the region which is still prevalent to this day. Thus, through the example of the Balfour Declaration and its implications, we can also understand Israel to be a British 'invention'.

The mandate system, which followed the Sykes-Picot Agreement, further emphasises how the Middle East was 'invented' by European powers and can be understood as an 'instrument of political control' (Owen, 2004: p.9). Whilst the Sykes-Picot Agreement created new internationally recognised state boundaries, the mandate system ensured the creation of the nation-states, helping to shape the region politically and economically. The mandate system aimed to prepare the newly formed states for eventual freedom and independence by ensuring that they 'submit to certain internationally sanctioned guidelines' and 'establish constitutional governments' (Owen, 2004: p.9). Therefore, even the path to independence of contemporary Middle Eastern states from the British and French played a significant role in shaping these nation-states, with Owen arguing that the mandate system had features of an 'old-fashioned colony' (Owen, 2004: p.9). It should be noted that the Middle East's experience with the colonial powers differed to the experiences of British and French colonies across Asia and Africa. Nevertheless, like in the colonies, the British and French pushed to implement political and economic systems that would complement their own vested

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interests in the region. For example, the British implemented constitutional monarchies within their sphere of influence.

The British believed by establishing the Hashemite Kingdom in Iraq and Transjordan, it would ensure support for the British and for British influence in the new nation-states. According to the British, a monarch created an element of stability and continuity as well as being an important political actor, with some veto power and the ability to suppress any nationalist uprisings or challenges to the political system under British mandate power (Owen, 20014: p.16). The idea of stability and continuity is true to some extent, as Jordan today is still a constitutional government. Similarly, governance in Lebanon can be considered to be a legacy of French 'colonial' rule. Unlike the British, the French opted to implement a republic style of government. In contrast to how the Sykes-Picot overlooked the very diverse region, the French designed the Lebanese government to provide political representation for all Lebanese religious groups, with the president always being Christian Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni and the speaker of parliament a Shia. Thus, through the nation-states that exist within the Middle East today and their existing institutions that were implemented by the imperial powers, it is indicated that the region can be understood as an 'invention'.

By using Said's definition of Orientalism 'as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient' and by 'teaching it', we can come to understand the mandate system as being a policy or a system very much backed by Orientalist attitudes. European powers saw the region as being unable to develop independently, as well as being a geopolitical entity that they were entitled to, allowing them to exert their influence over and 'restructure' the region. Again, this was largely justified by the common Orientalist belief that the people of the 'Orient' were backwards and in need of civilising and modernising, which was only possible with support from the 'Occident'. Under French and British control, the region saw a shift from being ruled under Islamic rules and pledging allegiance to Istanbul to the establishment of the modern nation-state, with a centralised administration, legal system, internationally recognised borders and a flag (Owen, 2004). Thus, one could argue that the Middle Eastern nation-states that we see today are an 'invention', created by the mandate powers.

However, the argument that the Middle East is solely an 'invention' of European powers can be deemed as problematic, as it reinforces Orientalist attitudes of the 'Orient' being unable to produce its own identity and having to rely on the 'Occident' for its knowledge and power. Orientalism suggests that the 'Orient' is mute, which is supported by Burney who claims that the Middle East was created 'by a hegemonic process that robbed it of its true identity, voice, and indigenous culture' (2012: p.26). However, this notion can be challenged as people of the region did not accept and welcome imperial rule. Instead, following the creation of the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the implementation of the mandate system, we begin to see the emergence of nationalist movements. For example, following the creation of the 'national home for Jewish people', Palestinians and Arabs violently opposed the Declaration and the same struggle for Palestinian sovereignty is still prevalent today. The emergence of pan-Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood aimed to unite the Muslim world for the Palestinian cause and the destruction of Israel. By claiming that the Middle East is solely an imperial 'invention', we discredit the role nationalist movements played in shaping the region's identity. It can be argued that pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism played a significant role in shaping the identity of the Middle East. These movements called for a sense of unity, whether it was religious or cultural, in order to challenge Western influence in the region by acting 'in concert in world politics' to defend their interests (Hinnebusch, 2015: p.72). For example, Nasserism and the Suez Crisis of 1956 marked the height of pan-Arabism before its quick demise following the Six Day War in 1967. Nasser's decision to nationalise the Suez Canal Company directly challenged British interests in the Middle East and to some extent the Western capitalist order that they had established in the region. The success of the nationalisation demonstrated to the Arab world that 'enhanced influence in international politics' and 'improvement in living standards and economic opportunities' can be achieved through 'cooperation and solidarity among Arabs' (Mellon, 2007: p.4). Therefore, it can be argued that transnational nationalist movements did play a role in the 'invention' of the Middle East and how it is understood today, as the movements created a shared Muslim and Arabic regional identity that transcends the borders invented by the British and French.

Nevertheless, whilst nationalist groups were able to challenge Western imperialism to some extent, they were not able to dismantle the state boundaries or the concept of nation-states that were implemented by the British and French (Yamahata, 2018). Instead, it can be argued that the national identities encouraged by such movements

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accepted and legitimised the nation-state that had been invented by the mandate powers. Similarly, the call to establish a shared Arabic or Muslim identity beyond borders also acknowledged and to some extent accepted the imposed state boundaries. Therefore, the Middle East largely remains an imperial 'invention' as nationalist movements were unable to successfully deconstruct the institutions and boundaries that were imposed upon them and have now become embedded in the region.

As previously mentioned, Orientalism is not a thing of the past and is still relevant to the modern-day Middle East. Orientalist views still serve as a foundation for reasoning and justification of Western intervention in the region today. For example, Orientalist perceptions often depict Islam as 'anti-rational and anti-scientific', incapable of progressing with social changes (Lockman, 2009: p.79) and that its leaders are tyrants. It also views women of the region as being oppressed by the patriarchal society and the culture of the Middle East. It is these preconceptions that prompt and justify Western intervention in the region. For example, the US 'War on Terror' was justified by the claim that 'the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women' (Flanders, 2001). The Middle East is constantly being reinvented by Western interference in the region, whether it is through direct military intervention or Western neocolonialism. An example of neocolonialism in the region is the US and its recent policies under the Trump Administration. For example, the recent US-brokered deals that have seen four Arab states normalising ties with Israel reinforces the Orientalist notion that the region relies on Western knowledge and power in its affairs. Furthermore, the role the US has played in the normalisation of relations underscores the Orientalist notion of the West 'authorizing' policies and 'teaching' the states in the region how they should interact, thus 'settling' any disputes and tension (Said, 1978: p.3). It is for this reason that it can be argued that Western hegemony in the region still exists and consequently, the Middle East continues to be (re)invented or 'restructured'.

In conclusion, by examining how Orientalism served as a basis of thought and justification for the construction of the region, it can be argued that 'the Orient was manufactured by the West through the tropes of knowledge and power as the ultimate Other of the Occident' (Burney, 2012: p. 24), thus making the Middle East an 'invention'. Orientalism can be defined as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the 'Orient' and provides an 'ontological and epistemological distinction' between those of the 'Orient' and those of the 'Occident' (Said, 1973: pp.2-3). This essay has argued that Orientalism knowledge was the foundation of many of the policies implemented in the region. Furthermore, it has shown how the Middle East came to be an 'invention' created by Orientalist-backed attitudes of the European imperial powers Britain and France. Through the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the mandate system, Britain and France helped to establish the foundations of the nation-states in the region that continue to remain today. The imperial powers also created the term 'Middle East' due to its geographical location and close proximity to Europe. Furthermore, this essay explored how the Orientalist-backed policies of the European powers contributed largely to much of the social and political turmoil that characterises the region today. The presence of the West in the region from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century helped to establish a power hierarchy in the region, supported by Orientalist attitudes, presenting the West to be superior. This idea of West superiority and the power hierarchy it has created in international politics is what allows Western states to intervene in the region today, which has been demonstrated through events such as the 'War on Terror' and the recent US-brokered deals which saw some Arab states normalising relations with Israel. Like the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western intervention in the region remains to be backed by the same Orientalist attitudes that the region requires civilising and modernising, which can only be achieved by guidance from Western states. Although nationalist movements have played a significant role in creating the identity of the Middle East region and its respective nation-states, they have yet to eradicate embedded imperial inventions in the Middle East. Thus, the Middle East can be recognised as an invention of European colonial powers and their Orientalist attitudes.

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# **The Middle East: An Orientalist Creation**

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