The Emergence of the Middle East into the Modern State System

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Introduction
The political arena of the Middle East region today is largely shaped around ethno-religious lines. For example, we have the issue of the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey, and the Sunni-Shia divide between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Many attribute the drawing of these lines to ethno-religious reasons, however, I believe that it is overly naïve of us to name to do so. Under Ottoman rule, the region was as heterogeneous as it is today both ethnically and religiously, but the region was shaped quite differently. This is largely due to the use of religion as a glue to bind the different societies and nationalities together. Religious freedom, minority rights, and economic prosperity had the citizens of the Ottoman Empire satisfied with their government, and their satisfaction lead to stability. On the other hand, the emerging Middle East system is suffering economically in many of its states, and many complain of undemocratic practices and restricted civil liberties. Both systems existed in the same geographical area, have the same culture, religion, and ethnicities. So how did the modern Middle East come to be, and what were the factors that shaped it. In this paper, I list Ottoman influences, foreign actors, and clashing identities as the main shaping factors of today’s Middle East.

Historical Background
The new chapter in the Middle East begins with the end of the one before it. In the final years of the Ottoman Empire, increased economic wealth available to the public became something that started acting against the central government. With increased wealth, the public sphere became stronger and more influential. Political thinkers, civil servants, journalists, authors, and businessman began to create groups that care more about their own personal priorities than the priorities of the empire as a whole. These groups usually used regional identities as a tool to marshal people around their cause and get their support. This was especially seen in regions that were far from the Ottoman capital, as the rule of law was thinner over there, and local leaders had stronger control and influence on both economic resources and culture, as their claim for sovereignty was supported by their cultural identity. These soon evolved into separatist movements, often supported by outside powers. A clear example of this is the separation of Greece from the Ottoman Empire in 1821.¹ The national Greek movement was endorsed by most of Europe, partly because the notion of Ancient Greece was very romanticized by most Europeans. However, it seems that the main reason for the European’s endorsement for the Greek separation was to stop the Ottoman expansion into Europe. This inspired many other separatist movements to rise in Bulgaria, Armenia, Serbia, Romania, and even among Arabs.

The Ottomans recognised this threat and tries to counter it by providing a strong institutional framework via the Ottoman Tanzimat, and the use of moral mean by using Islam as a unifying force to bind the entire Empire together. These top down reforms created legitimacy for the Ottoman government and achieved some sort of cohesion in the region by having a solid institutional framework that is applied in all regions of the empire. By having a unified

constitution, a unified rule of law applied by courts and judges, and elected regional officials representing the citizens of the Ottoman Empire, people of different ethnicities did not feel marginalised by the central government. If their voice was heard and they were treated fairly, why would they rise against the central government? The use of education was also an important binding factor, as students from a very young age learned about the Ottoman Empire, and the shared cultural identity they have, which also helped instil a sense of belonging and citizenship.²

In the period extending from July 1915 to March 1916, Britain collaborated with the Sharif of Mecca to organise an Arab revolt against the Ottomans. There is no clear religious reason for the revolt, as both the Ottomans and the Sharif followed the Sunni sect of Islam. Therefore, the notion of a separate Arab identity was used to rally the troops around the Sharif. It is clear that the Sharif of Mecca was chosen due to the strong religious and cultural influence he had on the region, by having Mecca and the Madinah on his side. The use of Islam, in addition to Arab nationalism greatly facilitated his gaining of supporters against the Ottomans. The Sharif could have never succeeded in his revolt without British financial aid, British weapons and intelligence.

While it seemed that these nationalist movements worked hand in hand with colonialist powers against the Ottomans to achieve a joint goal, the truth was actually quite different. Both France and Britain used the abovementioned subnational movements for select purposes. These subnational movements usually formed closed off societies that were cohesive internally and had very limited contact with the larger community surrounding them. This made them easier to control and manipulate by using promises of an independent state after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, economic incentives, and very good diplomatic relations with Europe in the future. However, what happened is that European countries used these nationalist movements to weaken the Ottoman Empire, divide the Middle East region to small nation states, and create an environment of political instability and insecurity. Smaller nation states are easier to control and manipulate, and political instability stops these small states from coming together to form a unified power. Political instability and insecurity provides both Britain and France with an excuse to remain in the region and control it.

Britain and France both shared an interest in the Middle East during the final years of the First World War. Britain’s interest was piqued due to the geostrategic location of the Middle East, and its role in securing Britain’s trade lines across the Indian Ocean, which was largely controlled by the British. Most of the foreign trade of the Arabian Gulf was dominated by the British.³ France’s interest was not economic, as France’s economic interests laid in French Indochina. France was interested due to cultural reasons. Syria’s history and heritage was very influential in North Africa, a region France had control over. Therefore, controlling

Syria would give France sense of prestige that they could use to further exert their influence in Northern Africa.4

Both Britain and France did not wait for the collapse of the Ottoman Empire to divide the region amongst themselves. Even before that, they saw themselves as the winners of the war, and that justified the act of dividing the region amongst themselves. During the First World War, the region was divided through four main documents: firstly, The Constantinople Agreement in 1915. It was initiated by Russia, which was later joined by France and England. The Russian Tsarist government staked claim to Istanbul and the waterways connecting the Mediterranean to the Black Sea. This was because Russia is nearly landlocked, and one of the main causes of insecurity in Russia is the small access to the ocean. That is why Russia wanted to expand to Istanbul and gain from its strategic location. France claimed Syria and Cilician coastline. Britain reserved the right to choose a specific area in the region but reserved the right to choose one once the war was over. However, the British did not wait for the end of the war to interfere in the region, which leads us to the second document that would shape the region after the Ottoman Empire: the letters between the British High Commissioner in Egypt and the Sharif of Mecca, which I have already mentioned. What must be mentioned here is that there were some overlaps between the lands that the Sharif Hussein was promised, and the lands that the French claimed in the Constantinople Agreement, especially in some parts of Syria and Palestine. This brings us to the third document: The Sykes Picot Agreement of 1916. The main aim of this agreement, other than to divide the region between the British and French, was to fix the clash between what the British promised the Sharif of Mecca and the French. Therefore, the foreign ministers of Britain and France decided that France would get administration over all territories excluded from the Arabs, Britain would establish administration in Mesopotamia, and Palestine would be internationalised. The Russians agreed to the terms of this agreement because they were promised some territories in Eastern Anatolia. The fourth document shaping the region was the Balfour Declaration of 1917, between British government and the World Zionist Organisation. This declaration promised the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine. This further complicated the division of the region as this declaration contradicted the British promises to both the French and the Arabs. The creation of Israel remains one of the focal points of conflict in the Middle East.5

All of these plans made by Britain, France, and Russia had to be altered yet again due to two main points. Firstly, the collapse of the Tsarist government in Russia and the rise of the Bolsheviks, who exposed all of the secret agreements of 1914 in the Pravda and Izvestia. This caused the USA to intervene through Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points.6 The two points that really concern us in this topic are the 12th and the 14th. The 12th point promised the Turkish part of the Ottoman Empire their sovereignty, and also promised other nationalities

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under Turkey security and the opportunity for autonomy. The 14th point called for the formation of an association of nations, which aims to provide political independence for all of the new state emerging from the post war political map. Many described Woodrow Wilson’s point as being too idealistic, and not very clear on providing a solid implementable structure. This idealism provided Britain and France the opportunity to exert their influence on the region, which was done through the mandates system.

Article 22 of the Charter of the League of Nations, which was adopted in 1919, described the mandates system. It stated that some communities that were previously under the Ottoman Empire deserve to be independent nations, but cannot be trusted to be se just yet. That is why they should by subject to administrative advice and assistance by another, more established, state. That will continue until the new state is deemed ready to operate independent of a Mandatory. This article is extremely subjective as it doesn’t give specific criteria for: what are the states to be assigned mandates, how will the mandates be chosen, when a state is seen as ready to operate on its own. With no specific deadlines or rules, the new geopolitical map greatly resembled the land divisions of the Sykes-Picot agreement. Both France and Britain had an extensive colonial reputation, which they continued under the loose terms of the mandates system. The imperial framework which was in place before the First World War continued under a new title. The only differences between the mandates system and the previous system of colonialization are that mandates did not survive as long as colonies, and that the mandate system offered the small shred of hope to the states that they would eventually leave once the goal of independent statehood was achieved.7

This framework was allowed to prosper, especially due to the absence of the US from the region. That was largely due to Woodrow Wilson becoming increasingly sick and suffering from a number of strokes, until 1921 which marked the end of his term as president. The US after that had no problem with Britain controlling the region as long as American interests were not harmed, and were allowed to grow. The US preferred that the region remain stable under the mandates system, as that would help them in gaining from their regional interests without having to start from scratch in forming alliances and connections with regional leaders. The mandates system did not negatively affect the US, so the US let it continue.

The mandates system eventually deteriorated, with national movements becoming stronger and acting against their colonizers. Nationalist movements appealed to the international arena by highlighting the colonial nature of the mandates system and using examples of the mandates using force to enforce their ruling. Eventually, international pressures proved to be too heavy for the mandates to ignore. Both Iraq and Transjordan negotiated the end of the mandates system, while Syria and Lebanon achieved independence through revolts and civil unrest which lead to constitutional reform. The issue of Palestine became increasingly problematic to the British, with neither the Israelis nor the Arabs willing to compromise, which eventually lead to Britain referring the case to the UN in 1947, signifying a diplomatic failure on their part.

Other regions of the Middle East faced varying forms of colonization, the strongest in North Africa, where the French tried their hardest to erase any semblance of culture and replace it with French culture. Egypt and Sudan got their independence through a very gradual process of concessions which were given to them following periods of riots and civil unrest. Turkey, Iran, and Hijaz were not colonised due to their extensive experience in statehood, while the small Gulf kingdoms were largely ignored as oil was not discovered there yet.

**Current Situation**

The post-colonial framework did not help states achieve a more “civilised form of statehood”. In fact, it actually seemed to have an opposite effect. Both France and Britain tried to introduce modern forms of governing in the civil service, some of which still exist today. However, this introduction was not a new thing to the region, as Ottoman Tanzimat already had a history in the region and were implemented successfully.

Just because the mandates system is officially over, it does not mean the British and French influence is erased from the region. For example, even though Britain officially left Iraq in the year 132, their influence remained till the 14th of July revolution in 1958. Their presence was actually one of the main reasons provided by the military for why it overthrew the previous system. Peaceful transfers of power are quite rare in the region, which was also seen in Egypt. The British created institutions of state, but conveniently forgot to create them in a way that facilitated the peaceful transition of power. It allowed the leader to remain in power and forcefully silence opposition leaders and infringe on minority rights. That is why coups d’état remain a recurring theme in Egyptian politics till this day.

Iraq had a relatively freer political arena, but even that was restrictive, especially when you examine the heterogeneous Iraqi society. Communist, Arab nationalist, and Islamist movements were not permitted, and could only operate underground. This meant that followers of these increasingly popular movements were not represented in the political arena. All of this facilitates the use of coups d’états to change the system of government, rather than the use of a democratic peaceful process. Military coups were a feature as well in Syria in the period extending from the 1940s to the 1950s.

The mandates system created a political environment where domestic actors would clash: the government being supported by the mandates versus the nationalist movements against them. The nationalist movements overthrew the old systems, but instead of reshaping the political arena to a more democratic one, they ruled through a process of military rule. That was done to silence any future calls of independence from minorities or opposition leaders. These new military ruling systems did not provide strongly rooted institutions of state, and are usually very repressive of others’ rights. This means that while the new system had popular support while overthrowing the mandates, that support quickly diminished after the dictatorial nature of the new system became evident. Citizens of Iraq, Egypt, and Syria adapted to this new development by distancing themselves from the government that does not represent them, and turned to other structures such as tribes, ethnicities, and religion. This further weakened the unity of these states, and provided ample opportunity for future independence movements. Military dictatorships provide an excellent environment for corruption, which
lead to the majority of the middle class suffering economically, unless they had a strong connection to someone in the inner circle of the government. In these systems, official institutions of civil society exist only symbolically and are strongly shaped by the state.

All of the abovementioned factors show the weakness and instability of the current regimes. These regimes came into power because they were against the mandates system, thus providing them with popular support. The lack of state institutions and diplomatic skills lead to these new regimes mutating into military dictatorships which were inherently unstable. This instability lead to the current deteriorating status of Syria, Iraq, and to a lesser extent, Egypt. Northern Africa suffered from a similar fate, with the most extreme example being Libya.

Gulf States attracted the attention of the colonial powers and the United States once oil was discovered. Britain and the US competed over influence over the region. Seeing that the Gulf regimes were new and not as established as their counterparts, it was relatively easy for Britain and the US to strike deals with them. The US and Britain would handle all of the oil production and exporting processes, and the Gulf States will get protection, recognition, and a sum of the profits. This dependence lessened with the nationalisation of oil companies and the formation of regional organisations such as the GCC, but our dependence on the US and Britain for security and oil production remains.

Palestine remains a controversial topic that is often used as a dividing actor between Arab states. The PLO remains weak in comparison with the Israeli government and most Palestinians have left their home country to other neighbouring countries. Furthermore, with civil wars raging across the Middle East, it is clear that most Arab States are too preoccupied with their internal affairs to try and seek justice for the Palestinians.

Futuristic Expectations and Solution Alternatives

The main problems that will continue to plague the region in the future are: the use of sects to justify regional competition (e.g.: Iran and Saudi Arabia), the existence of shallow unstable undemocratic regimes (e.g.: Egypt), the Kurdish problem and the issue of Palestine. These issues are deeply rooted in the region’s modern history after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which caused a vacuum of power. That vacuum of power was filled by nationalist movements, but as these nationalist movements turned into military dictatorships which were in turn toppled by the people in 2011, they made way for new tides. I predict a strong return of Islamist political parties and movements. This can be seen in how religion plays such a strong role in the regional competition between the KSA and Iran today. Religion is, and will continue to be, used to rally people for a unified cause. The Egyptians showed that they favoured the Muslim Brotherhood in the democratic elections following the Arab Spring, and Tunisia showed a similar model. Religion is a very strong tool in the region, a fact that the previous mandates seem to have overlooked, as they thought that religion will be forgotten and replaced with other sentiments. Religion is currently used to divide the region using the Sunni Shia divide. It is also used to recruit youth to terrorist organisations such as ISIS and Al Qaeda.
A solution alternative would be to use religion, which proved to be a powerful tool, as a tool for the unification of the region. The establishment of a unified religious organisation that provides unified religious teachings is the first step to end the misuse of religion. By setting religious differences aside, political leaders will be forced to solve their differences through the use of diplomacy and politics. War will not be used as it will not be permitted by the unified religious organisation. That means that states will not be able to justify attacking another country. This will pave the way for more cohesion and cooperation. With that, economic cooperation will prosper. Trade is already occurring in the region, but the next step should be the formation of an economic union that encourages regional trading and economic cooperation. The Middle East should then follow the European model and expand this economic cooperation to other aspects such as culture, education, and finally, security.

If the Middle East acts cohesively then it will not be as dependent as it currently is on foreign actors. The strings that have attached us to colonial powers will be weakened and replaced with strong ties with our neighbours. The world is moving from a unipolar system to a multipolar system based on regional clusters. The Middle East must turn with the tides and form a strong cohesive regional cluster. Religion, our shared history, shared language, and shared culture should act as a glue binding us together.
Conclusion

The Middle East region went through so many changes in a relatively short time: moving from the Ottoman Empire, to the Mandates system, to military dictatorships and/or monarchies, to the collapse of many regimes in the 2011 Arab Spring. This did not allow for the natural progression and cementing of a specific system of government. Every new system presented new flaws and was not given the time to evolve. Changes were done through civil unrest, revolts and coups. All of this instability allowed foreign actors to have a strong influence over the region, directly or indirectly. The most evident being Israel, which has benefitted greatly from the regional instability. With its hostile neighbours too busy resolving their own problems, Israel could flourish. The flourishing of Israel is the clearest indicator of our weakness, and our inability to come together. That is why the current Middle East is made of a collective of unstable regimes that are in constant competition. The status quo is bound to continue, and the region will be stuck in a loop of weak totalitarian regimes, foreign interferences, coups, and sectarian conflicts. The only way out is through unification, as strength is in numbers. Unification will bring us political stability, economic strength, security, independence from foreign actors, and control over our region.
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