

Lecture 2, Colonialism and The Imperial Moment

Fundamental themes:

a) What were the ways that the Western powers occupied the Middle East before and after World War I?

b) What did that mean for the reorganization of the Middle East?

As usual, we will begin with a definition. How do we define Imperialism?

Ronald Robinson offers perhaps the best definition I've yet encountered: 'a process whereby agents of an expanding society gain inordinate influence or control over the vitals of weaker societies by ... diplomacy, ideological suasion, conquest and rule, or by planting colonies of its own people abroad.'

A. Pre-World War I

1. Modern European imperialism in the Middle East adopted all the methods

dictated above:

a) Diplomacy and economic penetration. These were through investments, loans and special treaties such as the concessions in Persia and capitulations in the Ottoman regions;

b) Outright colonial settlement, such as carried out by the French in Algeria, or the Italians in Libya, where large numbers of European colonialist nationals moved in and took over all aspects of the political and economic spheres;

c) Occupation without large scale population transfer, such as the British experience in Egypt, where the country remained nominally part of the Ottoman empire, but in reality was run by the British Consul General, the military was commanded by British officers, the control of government (including all ministries, save that of

religious endowments) was transferred into British hands, and the economy was managed as a satellite of the British economy;

d) Diplomacy and ideological suasion in the area we now call Lebanon. This complex area had, because of the multi-religious character of its population, experienced severe upheavals in the wake of the first *tanzimat* promise of equal citizenship in the mid-19th century. The various local Christian communities allied themselves with the inhabitants of European communities which were there under the capitulations treaties, and presented their claims against the Ottoman government in religious terms, as a mechanism for political and economic leverage. This contributed to the religious politicization of every indignity and community grievance, with the European governments supporting the Christian communities to which they were allied (the French with the Maronite Christians, for example, and the Greeks with the Orthodox Catholics). Conflict escalated between Muslims, angered by the status of the Christian communities, and the Christians, who interpreted Muslim dominance as a form of exploitation and assault on their practices of belief and community. In the wake of serious massacres of Christians in Damascus, Aleppo, and Nablus, a conference of Europeans met in 1861 and imposed a solution: Framing the situation as the age-old problem of Muslim fanaticism preying on non-Muslim communities, they created (and forced the Ottomans to accept) Lebanon as an autonomous administrative district, called a *mutasarrifiya*, to be governed by a strict formula of apportionment between Christian and Muslim council officials, under European protection.

----The point must be made here, however, that sectarianism did not characterize relationships throughout the Ottoman empire. For example, in pre-WWI Jerusalem, peoples' identities, and their social, traditional and religious boundaries were very fluid. Children would engage in ceremonies and rituals celebrated by all the various religious groups in the city, with Muslim children dressing up in Jewish costumes to celebrate the festival of Purim as readily as an Orthodox Christian musician would play for a Jewish wedding, and Jewish children would join in city-wide celebrations marking the prophet Mohammad).

On the eve of World War I, the scene was already set for the imperialist era.

European powers were already acting in concert to take responsibility for solving the issues of the Eastern Question. The French were in North Africa, the Italians in what today is Libya, the British ensconced in Egypt. The Balkan states were shearing off through processes of nationalism, and eventually conquered by the Europeans. Nonetheless, the European concert kept the Ottoman empire largely intact – until the unification of Germany upset the balance of power, dividing the European powers into separate alliances.

2. Responses in the region varied, but can be seen to be characterized by two important trends:

- a) realizing that the Middle East, and the Islamic world, in contrast to the rising power of Europe, was in decline, a movement grew apace in which Islam was interpreted to have deflected from its original teachings, and that a purification of Islam would be the best way to restore the power of the Islamic world. This

was an acutely modern phenomenon, relying on interpretations by both lay, as well as clerical thinkers, of the original texts of Islam.

b) In fact, this constituted a **huge departure from the 1800- year-old tradition** of Islamic interpretation, which used to be the sole purview of the ulema, who had transmitted Islamic scholarship orally from one generation to another. This ensured that the texts, and their interpretation, were not available to the masses except through the authority of the ulema. As noted by Francis Robinson in his excellent article, 'Crisis of Authority, Crisis of Islam?' , 'person-to-person transmission was at the heart of authoritative transmission of knowledge. The best way of getting to the truth was to listen to the author himself.' (p. 343). This had **two consequences**.

A) Since education was primarily religiously based and managed, the ulema dominated the dissemination and interpretation of knowledge – ensuring that school-children (and these were primarily of the elite), as well as aspirants to clerical orders, would gain their primary education by reciting the Qoran by heart. If they went further, they would learn the scholarship that had developed over the ages by listening to it being recited by well-regarded members of the ulema who had been specifically authorized to transmit these ideas by their predecessor. They did this by earning what was called an *ijaza* - a document giving them that right.

B) **the second** consequence of the oral tradition was that the ulema travelled all over the Islamic world to listen to other authorities in person so as to gain the

exact meaning being transmitted - the best way for making up for the absence of the original author of the text. This meant that the ulema were part of a thick personalized network that spanned the Islamic world, giving them special status in both the ordering and interpretation of knowledge – and hence, power – a status contributory to the status of Islamic civilization, which had risen to a position of domination through the quality of its learning and its Islamic law. Interestingly, this focus on oral transmission explains why there was so little use of the printed word in the Islamic world, since as the 14th century historian, Ibn-Khaldun explains, ‘when a student has to rely on the study of books and written material, and must understand scientific problems from the forms of written letters in books, he is confronted by a veil that separates hand-writing and the form of letters found in the writing, from the spoken words found in the imagination.’ The printing press that so changed Europe was all but ignored in the Islamic world – the printed word, where it existed at all, was primarily rendered by hand.

c) This changed with the Western conquest of the Muslim world – first with Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt, and then with the annexation or assertion of influence over the majority of the rest of the Muslim territories between 1800 and 1920. In the process, the West expressed contempt for Muslim learning and replaced it with Westernized educational systems, while abolishing the funding for Muslim scholarship and teaching. As Thomas Macaulay noted in a minute to

the Indian General Department, 'A single shelf of a good European library is worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.'

The Muslim response across the Islamic world was anger, protest and sorrow, and included a sensitivity to failures of respect to their sources of authority – the Qoran and the Prophet – the predated by a century the Salman Rushdie Affair and the Cartoon Crisis.

Even more important, perhaps, the loss of power led to a crisis of authority within Islam. The target most blamed, by ulema and other groups, was classical scholarship and what was called the accretion of interpretation that had diverted Islam from its true sources. Additionally, the person-to-person transmission was abruptly abandoned, and the Qoran began to be commercially printed, not just in Arabic, but in a variety of languages more accessible to the nineteenth century masses. What is more, the ulema, in an attempt to retain their authority, used the printing press to turn out religious pamphlets. This coincided with rising literacy rates as educational systems were expanded as a result of the *tanzimat*. It was, in fact, these processes that Sultan Abdulhamid II supported in his *tanzimat* programme to promote the dissemination of religious texts, and print the Qoran under government monopoly. Until then, the Qoran had been laboriously copied by hand. Now, it was not only being commercially printed, but control over that printing had shifted out of the hands of the ulema and into that of the government.

The result was not entirely unexpected: the mass dissemination of religious texts, instead of contributing to the authority of the ulema, irreparably damaged them, for now, anyone who could read could engage directly with Islamic texts, and interpret them as they wished - and ulema became only one voice among many in that process. An important consequence was the emergence for the first time of lay interpreters, whose perspective on Islamic modernism, combined with inspiration from Western thinkers, strongly influenced the way people and institutions would develop within the changing states of the Middle East. These included Mawlana Mawdudi of Pakistan, whose totalitarian understanding of Islam figured strongly in the development of Pakistan's Islamic structuring under General Zia. Others included the Egyptian, Sayyed Qutb, who offered justifications for the jihadist turn of a wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, and in Iran, Ali Shariati, who envisioned a socialist-style Islam that drew from original Islamic texts combined with philosophies expounded by Frantz Fanon, and Jean Paul Sartre.

b) This crisis in Islamic authority, and the adaptation of Islamic precepts to modern processes fed into competing and contradictory streams of politicized Islam, many of them with roots dating back a long way, others dating to the colonial period when they were used to counter colonialism. : i) salafism, which hearkened back to the original society of Mohammad, and drew exclusively on the two primary Islamic sources, the Qu'ran and the hadith (reports of the sayings and activities of the prophet). Two different strains, Legalism and Scriptualism come under this rubric,

and contributed to the revivalism of Islamic political precept. The theoretical premise behind this movement was the use of a legal procedure called *ijtihad* or judgment, to determine the appropriate Islamic precepts in the face of modern change. ii) Islamic modernism, whose adherents argued that true Islam was compatible with European notions of progress and modernization and that Islam contained all the necessary practices and doctrines. This movement drew on two important historical traditions, one called the Motazafa, a neo-Platonic tradition spearheaded by Ibn-Sina, which, along with Ibn Rushd's Falasafa were rationalist rather than revelatory, and tried to argue a case for the existence of God. This movement was countered by the Al-Ghaza tradition which refuted the philosophers by arguing it was *bida* – *apostasy*. This gained the upper hand, stopping the rationalist movement. However, these traditions were never lost in Islam. Instead, they were modified and re-emerged – again and again.

Salafists and Islamic modernists alike exchanged ideas with like-minded thinkers across the Ottoman empire, and across the Islamic world, through networks, called *turuq*, that were often developed through trade, travel and scholarly exchange with other Muslims, whether in Persia, India or even as far as Indonesia. Preachers of various versions of puritanical Islam flourished in this period, including al-Sanusi in North Africa, al-Afghani in Persia, and al-Wahab in central Arabia.

Islamic civilization came to represent a cultural and territorial doctrine, such that during Sultan Abdulhamid II's *tanzimat* period, *osmanlik* gave pride of place to Muslims, and a newspaper at the time described Islam as 'not only a religion but a nationality'. Yet, the very act of promoting official patronage of religious scholars, or

the dissemination of official Islamic texts by the government, or the support of religious endowments and infrastructure as an aspect of Abdulhamid's *tanzimat* rule, reflected the changes the institutions and structures of Islam were undergoing, the involvement by the government being a manifestation of both a backlash and an adaptation to the pressures of European intervention.

ii) a third important strand in this process was the Shia – a form of Mahdi'ism (or Imamism), in which the occultation of the 12 Imam offered a way for Islam to assert and reassert itself as an ideal order.

3. One of the profound effects of European imperialism was its fostering a rise in nationalist, populist movements. Imperialism nourished the idea that religious and ethnic differences mattered, and that hardship was being imposed from outside. Money that had previously gone into public works, military salaries and the expansion of services were now going to repay European debt, and sowed popular discontent. This coincided with a growing sense of social empowerment, and the expression of popular movements that inculcated concepts of trade-unionism, communism, anarchism, and constitutionalism. Autocratic governments were blamed for selling out to European imperialism and mortgaging the states' sovereignty. Demands for constitutions reflected not only local grievances, but a desire to show the Europeans that the Middle East was populated by civilized, industrious people, rather than states that were little better than carcasses to be picked over by imperial powers. As noted previously, constitutionalism succeeded in Persia in 1906, and in the Ottoman empire in 1908, and had two important effects: 1) it brought about a change in the political culture of the Middle East,

making the state a site of contestation. 2) it made ideology, not dynasty, the foundation for political legitimacy.

B. World War I – possibly the most important political event in the history of the modern middle east.

Key Themes:

- 1) it brought about a new political order, established a new set of states and international boundaries that remain with us to this day, and severed the single political framework that had united the Turks and Arabs, the two largest ethno-linguistic groups inside its boundaries.
- 2) It failed to create a commonly accepted political framework to unite the Arabs with one another.
- 3) It led to the success of a critical nationalist movement, Zionism, which encouraged significant Jewish emigration into Palestine and the first intercommunal violence there. Thus, WWI marked a milestone in the establishment of Israel, and the beginnings of the Arab-Israel conflict.
- 4) Contributing to the 'world' aspect of WWI fighting, the colonies were an important site of conflict and critical to the European effort. Losses in the Ottoman and Persian empires were among the highest of all nations. Compared to the death of 9% of the German population, for example, 25% of the population of the Ottoman empire was decimated – 5 million out of 25 million, with $\frac{3}{4}$ of those being non-combatants. Neutral Persia suffered similar losses.

I'll go over these and discuss them in greater detail.

1. A new political order, with international boundaries where none had previously existed.
 - a) The Ottoman empire allied with the Triple Alliance – the Central Powers – because of its arch-rival Russia's alliance with the Entente powers. This meant that when the Central powers lost the War, the spoils of Ottoman territory were considered not only the prize but the due compensation of those powers which had fought and won. Secret treaties that reflected different ways of breaking up the Middle East proliferated, the two most important – and contradictory - being the Sykes Pekot Agreement, and the McMann-Hussein Letters, although British pledges to shelter ibn-Saud with a 'veiled protectorate', and the Balfour Declaration endorsing a Jewish home in Palestine likewise were critical.
 - b) The McMann-Hussein letters were an agreement between Whitehall and the Sharif Hussein of Mecca, the head of the Hashemite clan that had traditionally controlled the two holy sites of Islam, Mecca and Medina, and who allied himself with Britain against the Ottomans in exchange for a promise of British support for an Arab state in the Arab territories of the empire – which included larger Syria, Arabia and much of the Levant. This led to the ill-starred Arab Revolt, which was abandoned by the British because of the Sykes-Pekot Agreement, though not before Hussein's son, Faysal, had occupied Damascus.

- c) The Sykes-Picot Agreement, in contrast to McMahon's letters, perceived the design of the Middle East as divided between France and Britain, with the French in Syria, and the British in Palestine and Iraq. When the French militarily deposed Faysal, and Faysal's brother Abdullah marched up from Mecca and occupied Amman, a combination of both agreements was settled upon - with Abdullah becoming King of the newly created Jordan (a country set up to solve a political problem but being without economic viability, became an economic nightmare), and Faysal established as King of the newly created Iraq under British mandate.
- d) Even as these newly drawn lines on the map were carving out brand new states, US president Woodrow Wilson advanced his intention to make the 14 points the basis of post-war peace, a position he maintained at the Versailles Peace Conference. Included in the points were the right of self-determination, a point included in the subsequent Charter of the League of Nations, which, in Article 22, established the mandate system, as 'the best method of giving practical effect to this principle' by entrusting to advanced nations the responsibility of bringing these new states to self-rule. Though the inhabitants of the Middle East were to be consulted as to the selection of the mandatory, and the principles of post-war nation-building, this never occurred, and the mandate system was little more than thinly veiled imperialism. Because, under the terms of the League of Nations, mandatory states were contractually bound to eventually surrender control to the local governments, and because the terms

forbade them to apply tariffs or other measures to protect trade, European investors were reluctant to support indigenous industry and services, which languished during this period. Instead, a colonial-style system of buying raw materials from the mandates, and dumping finished goods onto their unprotected markets, characterized the relationship throughout the region. What is more, in Syria and Iraq, the French and British respectively granted vast tracks of land to rural and tribal leaders to buy their loyalty, and counter the power of the urban elites. As a result, by mid-century, 1% of the population in Syria owned 50% of the land; in Egypt the percentage was even more extreme: 1 % of the population owned 72% of the land. This contributed to huge migrations into the cities, turning from a steady stream into a virtual river with the advent of the Great Depression. This put further strain on governments that were weak and unstable, and governed at the sufferance of the imperial powers.

- e) Meanwhile, when the Treaty of Sevres was signed after the close of the Versailles Conference, bringing an end to the Ottoman Empire, the Arabs realized they had been cheated out of the benefit of a single state – the purpose behind the Arab Revolt. What is more, the Hashemites, although ensconced as the new kings in Baghdad and Amman, neither area having had any tradition of kingship until that moment, were eased out of the Arabian Peninsula. Instead, the British supported ibn-Saud's conquests, and his proclamation in 1932 of Arabia as a Saudi Kingdom. Yet

interestingly, the nationalistic movement that inspired the Hashemites to conceive of a single Arab nation itself spawned a the significance of the word 'arab', which until then end of the 19th century, was a derogatory term used by urban dwellers to delineate the 'savage' Bedouin. Yet, as Bedouin leaders came to lead the conquest side of nation-building, and as intellectuals trained in Western ideas came to associate traditional ways of life with cultural legitimacy and religious rootedness, the term assumed a larger remit, encompassing the Arabs in revolt, both rural and urban and tribal, linking them to a shared identity.

- f) The thinly disguised colonialism that underlay the mandate system, and which led to the creation of the new states of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Jordan, affected the legitimacy of those states. State building was initiated by the victorious European powers in the Levant and Mesopotamia, rather than by the inhabitants themselves. Many in the Arab world felt the arbitrary divisions into separate nations debilitating and unnatural – a feeling that persisted for years in the efforts expended in Pan-Arabism, and the attempt at Arab unity and Islamic ummah. (Gelvin).
- g) In Egypt, which the British proclaimed a protectorate on the eve of WWI, controls were set on the marketing of cotton, alienating an already unhappy population. Wartime inflation devastated living standards, bringing famine to the countryside. Yet, strange though it may seem, historians still look back on this time as the 'liberal age' or 'international

age, the trappings of democracy, in the form of a parliament, trade union, and political associations, veiling the social divisions and the inadequacy of representational practices, the censorship of the media, and the restrictions on speech and assembly. The uprising in 1919, often called a Revolution, contributed to the British decision to offer Egypt a nominal form of independence in 1922, although the constitution it granted was little more than a blueprint for continued British intrusion into Egyptian affairs. Nonetheless, two significant parties developed during this period – the Wafd, a reflection of mainstream nationalism, and more importantly, by the mid 1920s, the Muslim Brotherhood, whose founder, Hassan al-Banna, claimed to be the true voice of Egypt, and articulated the message of nationalism in a language that appealed to strata of the population alienated from and un-moved by the mainstream political movements.

- h) In Turkey, meanwhile, the Allied plan to break up the Anatolian peninsula sparked the emergence of Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk), a national military hero of the Battle of Gallipoli, who forced out foreign troops in a costly two-year war, and guided the establishment of a Turkish Republic. Here at least was state creation with the involvement of the local populace, led by a native equivalent of a Washington or Napoleon. His ideology of Kemalism was unabashedly based on European models and ideas. He abolished the caliphate and made Turkey a secular state in which private religious freedoms were tolerated, but religious intrusion into the state

apparatus was not. Like his developmentalist predecessors, he expanded the centralizing role of the state, introducing standard legal institutions, and educational curricula, a single ideology binding the population to each other and the state, and centralized economic planning. Harnessing early 20th-century technologies to promote free market doctrines and ideas of liberal participatory politics, he succeeded where his predecessors had failed, not least because of the contemporary blueprints of mass social governance upon which he could draw – such as those of the Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union, the Fascists in Italy, and the New Deal in the US. The cult of personality which developed around Ataturk and which he used to great effect, played a significant role in the development of the Turkish state, a factor that drew in no small measure on his ability to command the army to intervene at times of instability and deviation from his vision – and equally, to withdraw, when the crisis had been overcome, and order restored. This pattern of military involvement has continued, and contributed to some of the grislier aspects of historical Turkish repression, and its difficulties in incorporating ethnic minorities into its otherwise vibrant, and by Middle East standards, surprisingly flexible democratic system.

- i) As with Turkey, Iran had its native son, the Cossack Reza Khan, who, rose through the ashes of World War I to overthrow the old monarchical system of the Qajars, and with British and Russian support, establish new state structures through military means. Like Ataturk, Reza Khan, who

was crowned Shah by a pliant parliament in 1925, expanded the reach of the state, bringing first the territories previously managed by the British and the Russian empires, under centralized control in Tehran, and second, commanding the instruments of state, so that the treasury, the posts, the customs, the army and the economy were wrested from Imperial hands and brought under Iranian control. Education and law were standardized, and although religion was never banned from the public sphere, strong measures were adopted that shrank its influence outside the strict purview of the mosque, defanging it of political clout. Unlike Ataturk, however, Reza Khan instituted modernization practices and institutions without an overarching ideology, and once crowned Shah, reduced the participatory politics of the state, imposing a new monarchical system that for all intents and purposes, retained the elite cadres of the previous dynasty.

Yet, Reza Shah had to contend with the British in a way unique to Iran – in that they controlled the Anglo-Persian (later Anglo-Iranian) Oil Company which was the greatest source of Iranian revenues, as well as the greatest source of its frustrations. Though the affiliation persisted in having the trappings of a colonial-imperial relationship, the dependency of the British on Iranian oil, the asymmetry of the oil income made by the British in contrast to the Iranian, and thus, the tensions that continuously marked the relationship, spilled over into the political, contributing to the philosophy adopted by Reza Shah of developing state structures that

would free Iran of the constraints of the world system. This distinguished Iran from all other Middle Eastern states save Turkey, in that rather than initiating ways to integrate their states further into the modern world economy, they developed mechanisms, such as import-substitution, to become more self-sufficient.

In sum, the experience economically and politically during this period was varied over the region. Although in most states, constitutions were in place, few had much meaning. Populations in rural areas had begun to move toward the cities in a pattern that ballooned during the Great Depression and World War II, and persists into our current age. Yet, the process of modern-state building had begun, with full expansions of state power - particularly through standardized legal and educational systems and the building of infrastructures - into the territories defined by their borders; expectations of good government infused local populations, seeding concepts of citizenship and state legitimacy, and the stirrings of nationalism began to respond to the need to create nations where none had existed before, defining national imaginaries and identities tied to certain territories so they could distinguish one arbitrarily constructed country from another, provide them purpose, and inspire each population with a sense of modern legitimacy. This last was no easy process - and, in the Arab world, pulled by both larger tensions - such as Arab unity - and smaller ones, such as that of the tribe, the town (the family power of Tikrit, for example) and the region (the province or Vellayat of Basra, for example, versus Kurdistan). These are issues that both flourished and withered

after World War II, and deeply affected the state systems that emerged during the Cold War and after.