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The Middle East Harvests Bitter Imperialist Fruit

by Sheldon Richman

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The wall-to-wall coverage of the disintegration of Iraq ought to carry this credit: “This bloodshed was made possible by the generosity of British and French imperialists.”

The stomach-wrenching violence in Iraq — not to mention the horrendous civil war in Syria, the chronic unrest in Palestine/Israel, and problems elsewhere in the Middle East — are direct consequences of the imperialist acts of the British and French governments at the end of World War I, the history-altering catastrophe that began 100 years ago.

The story has been told many times. The government of Great Britain wanted to disrupt the Ottoman Empire’s ability to help Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the Great War. So the British dispatched personnel, most famously T.E. Lawrence (“Lawrence of Arabia”), to persuade the Arab leaders to revolt against the Turks, in return for which they would gain their independence in (roughly) the Levant (what today is Israel/Palestine, Jordan, and Syria), Mesopotamia (Iraq), and the Arabian Peninsula. The Arab leadership agreed and proceeded to obstruct the Turks’ war efforts.

In the 1915-16 correspondence between the British High Commissioner in Cairo, Sir Henry McMahon, and Arab leader Hussein bin Ali, McMahon acknowledged Hussein’s demand for independence in most of the Levant (Palestine included) and the Arabian peninsula:

Subject to the above modifications, Great Britain is prepared to recognize and support the independence of the Arabs in all the regions within the limits demanded by the Sherif of Mecca [Hussein].

McMahon did not give a blanket guarantee; he excluded western parts of the Levant (Lebanon) in favor of French interests and declared,

With regard to ... Bagdad [sic] and Basra [in Iraq], the Arabs will recognise that the established position and interests of Great Britain necessitate special administrative arrangements in order to secure these territories from foreign aggression, to promote the welfare of the local populations and to safeguard our mutual economic interests.

Nevertheless, the British led the Arabs to believe — and the Arabs indeed did believe, perhaps naively, given Britain's control of Egypt since 1882 — that they would gain independence in most of their lands not only from the Turks but also from Britain and France as well if the Allied powers prevailed.

Betrayal

The British officials, however, never intended to honor their promise to let the Arabs go their own way at the war's end. The British (and French) cynically used the Arabs for their own advantage while secretly planning for a postwar Middle East dominated by their countries.

In 1916, after McMahon's correspondence with Hussein, Sir Mark Sykes, a Middle East adviser to the British cabinet, and French diplomat François Georges Picot negotiated the famous secret agreement that bears their names. (It was also signed by tsarist Russia's representative.) The Sykes-Picot Agreement presumed to divide up the Middle East among the imperial Allied Powers, even before it had been wrested from the Turks.

Generally, the better-developed parts of the Arab lands — Iraq and Greater Syria (including Lebanon) — would be controlled by Britain and France (western oil companies were already interested in this area), while the undeveloped peninsula — today's Saudi Arabia and Yemen — would be independent, though divided into British and French spheres of influence. (Its oil potential was yet unknown.) Part of what is today's Turkey would be in Russian hands.

More specifically Britain would control southern Mesopotamia (Iraq), two Mediterranean port cities, and what would become Jordan. France would get Greater Syria, including today's Lebanon, and northern Mesopotamia. Palestine (minus Jordan) would be under international supervision. That is not exactly how things ended up, but it set the stage for the final division of Arab territory between Britain and France after the war.

Obviously the agreement had to be kept secret, or else the Arabs would not have cooperated with the British. Moreover, the Allied powers hoped that Woodrow Wilson would bring the United States into the war — and Wilson said he opposed territorial gains by the belligerents and spoke of self-determination.

The agreement might have remained secret through the war except that after the Bolshevik Revolution in the fall of 1917, the Bolsheviks discovered it in the tsar's files and made it public in order to embarrass the French and British governments.

That did not deter them from going ahead with their plan, in apparent disregard for Wilson's Fourteen Points, issued in January 1918, ten months before the end of the war. While Wilson is known for insisting on the principle of self-determination, in opposition to colonialism, the closest his Fourteen Points came to endorsing that principle was a call for

[a] free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims, based upon a strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined.

Note that the interests of subjugated people were to receive only "equal" consideration with the colonial claims of governments. That hardly sounds like self-determination. At any rate, Wilson, who took sick when the Paris Peace Conference convened, was unable to stop the British and French from carrying out their imperial plans. In the end, his administration acquiesced in return for oil concessions for American companies.

As noted, the actual division of the Middle East did not follow Sykes-Picot precisely, because modifications were made in light of subsequent agreements, conferences (such as the 1920 San Remo conference), and events (such as the Bolshevik Revolution). The language of 19th-century colonialism was dropped in favor of the "mandate" system, which (in theory) authorized Britain and France to oversee newly created Arab states until the Arabs were ready for self-government. In other words, the two great powers of Europe would treat the Arabs like children, directly in violation of Britain's promise. As the infamous Article 22 of the League of Nations Covenant (formulated during the Paris conference) put it,

To those colonies and territories which as a consequence of the late war have ceased to be under the sovereignty of the States which formerly governed them and which are inhabited by peoples *not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world*, there should be applied the principle that the well-being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilisation and that securities for the performance of this trust should be embodied in this Covenant. [Emphasis added.]

The best method of giving practical effect to this principle is that the tutelage of such peoples should be entrusted to advanced nations who by reason of their resources, their experience or their geographical position can best undertake this responsibility, and who are willing to accept it, and that this tutelage should be exercised by them as Mandatories on behalf of the League.

New states

The British created the states of Iraq and Transjordan (later Jordan). What was left of Palestine (it had different boundaries at different times) would not be designated a state but would be administered by Britain. France took Syria, out of which it created a separate Lebanon.

The arbitrarily drawn “national” boundaries cut through sectarian, ethnic, and tribal lines, planting the seeds of future conflicts that continue to this day. (The imperialists had done the same thing in Africa.)

Regarding Palestine, in the November 2, 1917, Balfour Declaration the British government expressed its approval of “the establishment ... of a national home for the Jewish people,” and pledged to “use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object.” The declaration also stated that “nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.” These provisos were little more than boilerplate.

Note that the declaration was issued before the British army conquered Palestine. The government was making promises about land it did not yet control — and this promise to the Zionist movement conflicted with the promises made earlier to the Arabs, again setting the stage for later conflict.

The Balfour Declaration, which created anxiety among Arabs and most Jews (Zionism was embraced by only a small minority of Jews), of course paved the way for the creation of the state of Israel some 30 years later and the continuing frustration of the Palestinian Arabs’ aspirations for independence.

It is important to understand that throughout this process, the Arabs, Kurds, and other indigenous people were never consulted about the imperialists’ disposition of their lands. No wonder: what they wanted — independence from foreign powers — conflicted with the objectives of British and French politicians. But by what authority did they decide the future of the people in the Middle East?

During the Paris conference, the American delegation suggested that a tripartite (Britain, France, and the United States) commission go to Arabia to ask the inhabitants what they wanted. Since Britain and France had no interest in doing so, it became a purely American project, the King-Crane Commission, named after co-chairmen Oberlin College president Henry Churchill King and Chicago businessman Charles Richard Crane. After a month of interviewing inhabitants of the Levant, King and Crane reported that most Muslim Arabs (a majority of the region) wanted complete independence and that if they could not have that, they preferred American supervision over British and French. The report also noted that the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine would have to be accomplished by violence.

The secret report made no impact on the final resolution of the matter by the Paris conference, and it wasn’t even published until three years later.

The beacon of liberty

The King-Crane findings should have been no surprise. When the Paris conference convened, Arab leaders looked to the United States to frustrate the imperialists’ designs, because they associated Wilson with the principle of self-determination. Their hopes, however, were dashed. (For details see Ussama Makdisi’s *Faith Misplaced: The Broken Promise of U.S.-Arab*

Relations, 1820–2001.) Anyone who protested the callous treatment of the Arabs and others was dismissed or ignored as naive.

Let that sink in: the Arabs — Muslim, Christian, and secular — looked to the United States as a beacon of liberty and independence. (Whether American history justified that attitude is another matter.) They were let down and have suffered as a result ever since.

America may be despised by many people in the Middle East today — but it did not have to be that way.

The French and British proceeded to create states and governments in their new possessions. In the early 1920s, whenever Arabs tried to resist foreign rule, they were brutally suppressed — by the British in Iraq and the French in Syria. (This was reminiscent of the American suppression of the Filipinos, 1899–1902.) The Arab resistance was no match for the Europeans’ bombers, artillery, and mechanized vehicles.

Let’s now take a step back from the trees and view the forest.

This is a story about arrogant Western imperialists who thought enlightened, civilized Europeans should govern the childlike Arabs (and Kurds) rather than let them determine their own destiny. While describing their rule in paternalistic terms, the imperialists barely disguised their updated colonial system.

The paternalistic view, let’s remember, was voiced by men representing countries that had just engaged in more than four years of savage trench warfare in a “war to end war,” not to mention the previous centuries bloodied by Europe’s religious and political wars. The condescension, of course, concealed the imperialists’ narrow economic and political interests. (When Britain and France were unable to continue managing the Middle East after World War II, the United States took over and is still trying to maintain the region as its sphere of influence.)

What’s happening in the Middle East today may be seen as a violent attempt to undo the Sykes-Picot, San Remo, et cetera, impositions of the last century. The newly declared Islamic State in parts of Syria and Iraq, for example, is attempting to erase the artificial boundary between those countries. One wonders how the Arab world would have evolved without violent foreign intervention. It’s hard to imagine that the process would have been more violent than it was and continues to be.

In this light, further Western intervention looks like a recipe for an even greater disaster.

As we view the violence today in Iraq, Syria, Palestine/Israel, Egypt, and elsewhere in the region, we should remember that it all might have been avoided had the European powers not launched World War I, or if, in the event of war, the British and French had let the Arabs chart their own course. U.S. intervention of course did not help, but the European imperialists might have wrested the Middle East from the declining Ottoman Empire without the world war anyway.

War and empire do not produce good results but only further misery. As Edward Woodward's character, Harry Morant, says in the movie *Breaker Morant* just before being executed by the British army in order to make an example of him during the Second Boer War, "Well ... this is what comes of 'empire building.'"