

Imperialism and Empire:
How the British Created the Modern-Day Middle East

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Abstract

The Middle East is largely perceived to be a region dominated by corruption and discontent. This narrative is perpetuated by western society when they lament the unfulfilled potential of the region. This paper seeks to examine how the instability of the Middle East has been engineered by western powers through imperial intervention at the turn of the 20th century. Through primary source analysis of the correspondence of British officials, the imperial attitudes of the British and their manifestation through policy and intervention become apparent. This exploration clarifies how the instability of the Middle East served western interests and how western powers used the consequences of their intervention to further the narrative of the uncivilized unstable Middle East.

The conclusion of World War I ensured that the Middle East would forever have a place in world politics. Today, it is one of the most important regions in the world, with almost every nation having a stake in the events at play in the area. To much of the Western world, the Middle East still requires their presence and influence – to rid itself of instability and be able to join the world order. The origin of this instability – where it has come from and why it has persisted – remains unknown, which appears to be a serious issue. How can instability be quelled if one does not know what is its cause? Peacekeeping efforts in the Middle East have largely failed during the last century. Some could argue that this is because people are treating the symptom of the problem instead of the cause.

In this paper, I will attempt to ascertain why the world seems to be perpetually involved in the Middle East and why all peace-keeping efforts in the region seem to fail. I will argue that the British's imperial aspirations characterized their involvement in the Middle East during the 20th century. To justify their imperial aspirations, the British utilized orientalist perceptions which further rationalized their involvement within the supposedly sovereign states. The consequences of their involvement then further reified orientalist perceptions. To support my point, I will analyze primary sources from the McMahon-Hussein correspondence, the Sykes-Picot Agreement, and other texts that indicate British intentions and attitudes regarding the Ottoman Empire and others from the "Orient."

From this discussion, it becomes clear how the plight of the Middle East has been almost entirely engineered by western imperial powers. The imperial interests of the British were so prominent during their involvement in the Middle East that the British were willing to use all forms of deceit and deception necessary to acquire the resources and wealth of the Middle East.

Therefore, when creating the states that make up the Modern Middle East today, these states lack coherent cultural norms, stable institutions, and viable economic structures.

In Section I, I will provide some context about British involvement in the Middle East – how it started, for what reasons, and how those reasons evolved as the geopolitical circumstances in the region evolved. In Section II, I will explain the theory that underlies my hypothesis and how I believe this theory necessitates a shift in our discourse surrounding the Middle East. In Section III, I will detail the methodology that I will use. In Section IV I will conduct my primary source analysis and separate it into two subsections that will discuss the different stages of British involvement in the Middle East. I will conclude my discussion in Section V and explain how my research contributes to the overall research in international relations and political science.

SECTION I –THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF BRITISH INVOLVEMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

British involvement in the Middle East started long before World War 1, but World War 1 was the inciting incident for much of the nation's activity in the region. Much of the British's interests in the Middle East stemmed from their wish to protect their investments in India and the rest of their colonial empire. The easiest way to reach India was through the Suez Canal, so the British needed to secure their access to it. The British believed the Middle East would be incredibly useful for procuring trade routes to their colonies out east. This required that stability be maintained in the Persian Gulf and Iranian provinces. As the British developed this interest in the Ottoman Empire, the Ottoman Empire saw itself at a precipice. Tensions within the empire were rising. Many locals wished to be independent and have the right to self-determine their future. The actions taken by the British and other European powers would greatly determine the fate of the Ottoman Empire.

During the beginning of the 20th century, the British were incredibly invested in the preservation of the Ottoman empire. Russia and France along with Britain were incredibly interested in controlling the Middle East, and the Ottoman Empire, one of the most powerful nations in the region, would be an incredibly lucrative ally in that project. The British knew the Ottoman Empire was struggling to remain united. By allying with the Ottoman Empire and helping preserve it, the British and the French would be able to block Russian access to the Middle East. Russia was an incredibly strong nation. If Russia took control of the Middle East, it would threaten British and French Hegemony, so the two nations were proactive in curbing Russian influence through the preservation of the Ottoman Empire.

SECTION II – THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Imperialism creates a dynamic between two states, where one nation is at the mercy of another. When the British colonized the Middle East, they created a power dynamic where the Middle East was dependent on British investment and markets to sustain itself. This dynamic was supplemented by the racialized dynamic of their occupation in the Middle East. Through the racialized otherization of the people of the Middle East, the British were able to further infantilize the Middle Eastern people. This process of racialized othering made it easier for the British to disregard the wishes, personhood, and humanity of the people of the Middle East in the name of helping civilize and protect the Middle Eastern people.

In Race Among Nations: A Conceptual Approach, George W. Shepherd, Jr. and Tilden J. LeMelle wrote about how white states approach foreign policy shaped by their whiteness and their internal perception of race and racial stratification. In terms of implications for British foreign policy, this meant that the anti-Black racist rhetoric that many British people personally used would come through in the actions the British government took with non-white states.

In “Settler Colonialism, Race, and the Law” Natsu Taylor Saito wrote about how the material consequences of racialized othering manifested in policy:

Otherness must take concrete form in the popular imagination if it is to serve social functions. Racialization justifies the elimination and exploitation of colonized peoples by associating particular phenotypical characteristics, real or imagined, with the state of being “less-than”—less civilized, less intelligent, less capable, less trustworthy, less attractive. By the time settler society considered incorporating migrant Others, the racialization of identity was well entrenched and it comes as no surprise that tropes used to denigrate and dehumanize American Indians and persons of African descent would also be utilized against other peoples of color.

While Saito primarily referred to the settler colonization of the indigenous people of America and Africa, the ideas applied to British policy in the Middle East. Racialization helped justify the way the British deliberately overlooked and underplayed the interests of the Middle Eastern people. The British used racialization to justify their actions but simultaneously bought into their own propaganda, which created a self-fulfilling cycle that resulted in the perpetual exploitation of the Middle East.

Due to the dynamics of imperialism, the Middle Eastern States were incredibly reliant on the British, which allowed the British to largely determine the terms of interaction and set the dominant and only paradigm in their relationship. This paradigm was the British’ desire to expand its resources and grow its empire. This desire to grow and to take characterized British imperial aspirations.

SECTION III – METHODOLOGY

To support my thesis, I will be engaging in primary source analysis. I will be examining treaties, official correspondences between officials, as well as informal letters, and secondary work such as Edward Said’s Orientalism. In my research, I will be focusing on British imperial efforts in Iran, Iraq, and Kuwait.

To contextualize my research, I will read works from authors such as Sankaran Krishna and Marian Kent. I will also read Money, Oil, and Empire in the Middle East: Sterling and Postwar Imperialism, 1944-1971 by Steven G. Galpern to develop my background understanding of the topic.

I will use sources from the Harvard Reference Library as well as the Honnold Mudd library of the Claremont Colleges. I will examine the correspondence between Henry McMahon and Sharif Hussein. I will study the Sykes-Picot agreement as well as letters exchanged between Mark Sykes and David Picot when debating the contents of the Sykes-Picot Agreement. I will utilize secondary sources from scholars such as Edward Said to supplement my analysis and frame the scholarly discussion.

SECTION IV – ANALYSIS OF BRITISH INVOLVEMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

In this section, I will provide evidence from primary and secondary sources in support of my thesis. I am arguing that imperial aspirations fueled orientalist perceptions in the Middle East which then in turn were used to justify the continuous involvement of the British. Through the analysis of the correspondence between Arab and British leaders, I will demonstrate that British involvement in the Middle East was guided by imperial aspirations and that the partition of the Middle East and the creation of Arab states served the interests of the British. I will then examine British media and literature to demonstrate how the British used orientalist perceptions to justify their imperial efforts and how the Middle Eastern people were treated.

Securing British Interests

In this section, I will be examining letters between Henry McMahon and Sharif Hussein to identify the tactics the British used to secure their interests. Then I will analyze the Sykes-Picot agreement to explain what the British interests were and the extent they were willing to go

to secure them. I will then review newspaper articles and letters from British officials to explain how the imperial interests of the British evolved as oil was discovered in the Middle East.

There is a misconception that the making of nation-states in the Middle East started with the Sykes-Picot Agreement. While the Sykes-Picot agreement most certainly had a notable role in nationalizing the Middle East, one must start with the McMahon-Hussein correspondence to understand the justifications for the partition of the Middle East.

The McMahon-Hussein correspondence was a series of ten letters exchanged between Sir Henry McMahon, the British High Commissioner in Egypt, and Sharif Hussein, an Arab leader from the Banu Hashim clan who was the Sharif and Emir of Mecca during 1908. When Hussein was appointed as Emir, the Ottoman Empire was governed by the Young Turks, a group that favored the replacement of the Ottoman Empire's absolute monarchy with a constitutional government. Hussein distrusted the Young Turks because they believed that holy places should be governed directly. This directly threatened his power as Emir. To protect his interests as well as advocate for the independence of the Arab people, Hussein reached out to the British.

In July 1914, Hussein penned his first letter to McMahon. Hussein opened his letter immediately attempting to connect Arab and British interests. He wrote:

Whereas the whole of the Arab nation without any exception have decided in these last years to accomplish their freedom, and grasp the reins of their administration both in theory and practice; and whereas they have found and felt that it is in the interest of the Government of Great Britain to support them and aid them in the attainment of their firm and lawful intentions (which are based upon the maintenance of the honour and dignity of their life) without any ulterior motives whatsoever unconnected with this object;

And whereas it is to their (the Arabs') interest also to prefer the assistance of the Government of Great Britain in consideration of their geographic position and economic interests, and also of the attitude of the above-mentioned Government, which is known to both nations and therefore need not be emphasized;

Hussein emphasized the desire for Arab nations to have their independence and be able to “grasp the reins of their administration both in theory and practice.” The phrasing of what independence is to Hussein indicated an understanding of the proclivity of the British to set up proxy governments under the guise of granting nations their sovereignty. Hussein also highlighted the ability of Arab nations to support the British, but he qualified this support when he only agreed to “aid [the British] in the attainment of their firm and lawful intentions (which are based upon the maintenance of the honour and dignity of their life).” This qualification seemed to absolve the Arab nations from aiding in any imperial or colonial projects, because they would not be from a “firm or lawful intention” or be “based on the honour and dignity of their life.”

For the British, Hussein reaching out was an incredible opportunity. Having a Muslim ally was going to be incredibly beneficial for a few reasons. The first being that the Ottoman Empire had just declared “jihad” or holy war against the British and the French during World War 1. Hussein reaching out provided an opportunity for the British to internally undermine the Ottoman war effort. The British knew that the Ottoman Empire was key to maintaining its position in the Middle East. In a letter to Edward Grey, the secretary of state, Mark Sykes, the future facilitator of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, wrote about how “If we do not participate in the development of S. Mesopotamia I am sure that our position in the Persian Gulf is as good as lost, no matter what treaties our diplomatists may make. Our position in the Persian Gulf with regard to the Dardanelles and in Egypt is wholly bound up in the future of the Ottoman Empire itself.” In short, Hussein provided a very intriguing opportunity for the British that McMahon was eager to capitalize on, and other officials, such as Grey and Sykes fully supported the endeavor.

On August 30, 1915, McMahon wrote his response. McMahon opened his response by celebrating Hussein’s acknowledgment that “Arab interests are English interests and English

Arab.” While Hussein attempted to connect British and Arab interests, McMahon conflated the two by declaring them the same. He even asserted the British’s “desire for the independence of Arabia and its inhabitants.” However, McMahon specified that the British should only “welcome the resumption of the Khalifate by an Arab of true race.” In his previous letter, Hussein had outlined the boundaries of which the British would have influence as well as the limits of that influence. In his reply, McMahon was dismissive of these efforts, stating that “it would appear to be premature to consume our time in discussing such details in the heat of war” and that “some of the Arabs in those very parts, far from assisting us, are neglecting this their supreme opportunity and are lending their arms to the German and the Turk, to the new despoiler and the old oppressor.” McMahon understood that the British needed to center their interests and ensure they would be able to control the Ottoman Empire to secure their access to resources and trade routes, which was why he was incredibly intentional when cementing the British interests as the dominant and relevant concern in his letters with Hussein.

Hussein eventually wrote back on September 9, noting how the British’s hesitancy in discussing borders and limits “might be taken to infer an estrangement or something of the sort.” McMahon responded on October 15, assuring Hussein he meant no offense. In this letter he accepted the limits outlined by McMahon with one exception – “The two districts of Mersina and Alexandretta and portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo cannot be said to be purely Arab, and should be excluded from the limits demanded.”

From his letters, one would believe that McMahon was particularly passionate about portioning the Middle East along ethno-religious lines, considering he had mentioned “pure Arabness” twice. While we do not know whether or not this concern for ethnic solidarity was

authentic, future correspondence has now definitively proven that the reason why McMahon wanted to set aside those specific territories was because the French had already claimed them as theirs, so the British could not allow them to be involved in any agreements with Hussein. As a result, when Hussein responded and disagreed with the exemption of the French claimed areas, McMahon did not engage with this objection in his future responses. McMahon also specified that “the established position and interests of Great Britain necessitate special administrative arrangements” in Baghdad and Basra. Hussein also disagreed with this and argued that “a friendly and stable administration” ought to limit British activity in those regions. McMahon also failed to address this in his future responses.

The first two letters of the correspondence illuminate how fraught interactions between the Ottoman Empire and the Middle East were. Power dynamics were already apparent with the British using their status as a global power to drive the conversation in a way that benefitted themselves – dictating Arab interests and avoiding discussions about limits that could hinder them. The correspondence was a lifeline for Hussein because it would be the key to securing his family’s future and the autonomy of the Arab people. However, for the British, this was simply an added weapon in their arsenal for the war effort. This imbalance in power ensured that Hussein had many reasons to abide by his agreement with the British, but the British had little. Even when Hussein brought up objections about the terms the British set, McMahon refused to substantively engage with these complaints, postponing them to after “the defeat of the enemy.” Any discussions of the limits of British power or what British protection ought to imply were shut down in the name of urgency and postponed indefinitely. This led to an incredibly vague conclusion to the discussion regarding borders, a vagueness for which Hussein would pay the

price later. When it was time for the British to fulfill their end of the bargain, they had no reason to, nor were they obligated to by the text of the correspondence.

When the discussion about borders appeared unproductive due to the urgency of the discussion, the correspondence moved to more 'practical' matters. In the end, it was agreed that Hussein would lead an anti-Ottoman revolt and in return, the British would recognize an Arab state led by Hussein and his family after the war. Supported by British funds and weapons, Hussein's son Faisal I bin Al-Hussein bin Ali Al-Hashemi attacked the Ottomans on 1916, which culminated with the occupation of Damascus in 1918.

The British, ultimately, failed to fulfill their end of the correspondence, and it appeared that the letters were designed to be vague enough so the British could always renege on any agreement reached with Hussein. Edward Grey, the secretary of State at the time, had written instructions for McMahon to be as "vague as possible" in his dealings with Hussein, so the British would be able to dispute any claims Hussein would make in the future. This vagueness would allow the British to defend themselves once they reneged on their deal with Hussein to pursue their own projects. By refusing to make definitive statements and promises, the British ensured they were not committed to anything but their imperial interests.

This vagueness allowed the British to disregard any promises made to Hussein as the British were formulating the Sykes-Picot Agreement. The Sykes-Picot Agreement was a secret wartime agreement signed between Sir Mark Sykes of Britain and George Picot of France in 1916. In the agreement, each nation agreed to define its sphere of influence and control, and it was during this process that the Middle East was officially broken up into what largely remains its current modern-day state formations.

In this agreement, the British and the French divided the Middle East for themselves, and any promises made to Hussein were disregarded in favor of the wishes of the imperial powers. The British received “administrative control and priority of enterprise” in the regions of Bagdad and Basra, and the French gained the “provinces of Aleppo, Beirout, Damascus and Mosul.”

The Sykes-Picot agreement is now used as a guideline for what the current borders in the Middle East are, but that was never intended to be its chief purpose. From the text of the memorandum signed by Sykes and Picot, it is clear that the Sykes-Picot Agreement was only meant to be a guide for the division of resources at the time.

The memorandum begins by outlining the main issues that needed to be reconciled by the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

(a) France requires a settlement which (1) while compensating her for the inconvenience and loss attendant upon the disruption of the Ottoman Empire, will (2) safeguard her historic and traditional position in Syria, (3) assure her of full opportunity of realizing her economic aspirations in the Near East.

(b) The Arabs require (1) recognition of their nationality, (2) protection of their race from alien oppression, and (3) an opportunity of re-establishing their position as a contributing factor in the world's progress.

(c) Great Britain requires (1) to assure her position in the Persian Gulf, (2) opportunity to develop Lower Mesopotamia, (3) (a) commercial and military communication between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean by land, (b) influence in an area sufficient to provide the personnel engaged in Mesopotamia irrigation work with suitable sanatoria, and hill stations, and containing an adequate native recruiting ground for administrative purposes, (4) to obtain commercial facilities in the area under discussion.

(d) Lastly, such a settlement has to be worked in with an arrangement satisfactory to the conscientious desires of Christianity, Judaeism, and Mohammedanism in regard to the status of Jerusalem and the neighboring shrines.

The issues the imperial powers presented all revolved around protecting their resources, and these issues would be the main issues addressed in “the proposed settlement.” All of the main issues discussed directly related to securing the imperial interests of the British and the French.

The concerns of the Arabs and the general note about religious harmony were essentially disregarded (besides a small section that recognized a confederation of Arab states). Britain and France were given “priority of right of enterprise and local loans” in the new Arab states. Great Britain was also “allowed to establish such direct or indirect administration or control as they desire. Both Britain and France secured the right to build railways across their respective territories as well as transport troops. Everything the British secured in the Sykes-Picot agreement would aid them when they built their trade routes to India and would later go on to establish their oil empire. The British secured the land, control, and the necessary alliances. The tools needed to develop their imperial empire were all in place.

The Sykes-Picot agreement violated the McMahon-Hussein correspondence, but the agreement was deemed far more important than honoring the correspondence. The British officials responsible for the McMahon-Hussein correspondence even knew about the potential contents of the Sykes-Picot agreement but continued to negotiate with Hussein as if they did not.

The interactions between these two agreements demonstrate the priorities of British foreign policy in the Middle East – resource extraction and securing their imperial possessions was their foremost objective. Any conversations were conducted to achieve that end. Any promises made that jeopardized British resources were disregarded and set aside. This trend is seen in the ways the McMahon-Hussein correspondence was used and then abruptly forgotten when the far more lucrative Sykes-Picot agreement was put into motion. The British understood their power as a dominant imperial power and used their elevated status to coax Hussein into doing their bidding by providing empty promises in return. The predatory policies of the British allowed them to disregard any Arab interests and cement their grip over the region as the new imperial power to obey.

As the British cemented their control over the Middle East, they began to realize the true potential of the region. During the beginning of the 20th century, the British viewed the Middle East as a means for securing their resources in the east, but as more and more oil was discovered in the region, the British began to see the Middle East itself as a resource to secure. Instead of serving as a means of securing the British's imperial interests, the Middle East became the imperial interest to secure.

Many of the locals in the Middle Eastern states realized that the British's promises of managing their "civil affairs in collaboration with the political representatives of Great Britain" were empty words. The terms of the Sykes-Picot agreement stated that the British intended to set up a direct administration in Baghdad, so it was apparent that the locals would have no say in the governance of Baghdad. The locals in the Middle Eastern states were not swayed by Sykes' words. Especially in Baghdad, many of the locals already had suspicions about the real reason the British desired to control the Middle East. This reason, of course, was the extraction of oil.

Oil was first discovered in the Middle East on March 26, 1908, by geologist George Bernard Reynolds. It was a momentous occasion for the British, as this had been a year's long effort. In a letter written to his father, Arnold Wilson (a young political officer at the time and later a member of the British Parliament) wrote about how significant the discovery of oil was for the British Empire:

"It is a great event: it remains to be seen whether the output will justify a pipe line to the coast, without which the field cannot be developed. It will provide all our ships east of Suez with fuel: it will strengthen British influence in these parts. It will make us less dependent on foreign-owned fields: it will be some reward to those who have ventured such great sums as have been spent. I hope it will mean some financial reward to the Engineers who have persevered so long, in spite of their wretched top-hatted directors in Glasgow, in this inhospitable climate.

Wilson understood that oil was going to be one of the most important valued resources for the British empire for the foreseeable future. As a result, it was no surprise when one year after oil was discovered, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) was formed on April 14, 1909.

On May 23, 1920, the Observer wrote about how oil was still an important interest for the British empire:

In this matter, we do not care one brass farthing for the mere interests of any financial combination as against another. But to increase oil-fuel is now almost as urgent a necessity for the prosperity of our democracy as to increase wheat food. And on oil depends more and more the new mechanism of Empire - transport and traffic by land, sea and air. The Empire within itself produces little more than two percent of its oil. How to get the biggest, cheapest, and safest oil supply—this last condition being critically important—is the question, and it is all the question.

World War 1 caused the British obsession with oil to intensify greatly. In World War 1, oil was one of the most vital resources a nation could possess. During the War, the British were forced to be dependent on US oil when waging their war effort. When World War 1 ended, the British made it a priority to secure their own oil reserves.

The discovery of oil in Baghdad was a boon for the British, and when the British gained direct control over Baghdad (as well as Basra, another region that was suspected to be oil-rich) the British were able to start scaling up their oil efforts. Through the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the British gained control of the resources in three oil-rich countries – Iran, Iraq, and Kuwait. This would be the start of a fruitful relationship between oil and empire in all three states.

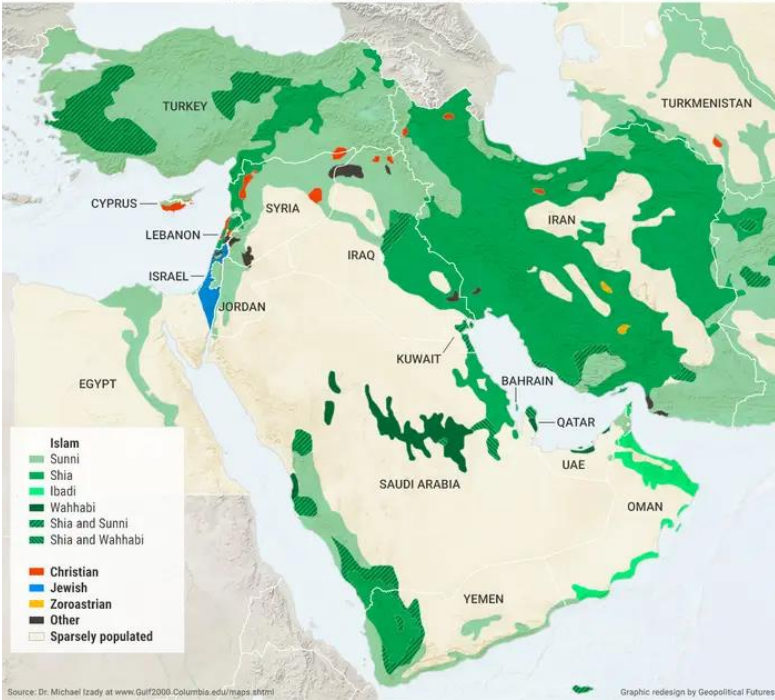
In Iran, APOC had already built a refinery in the port of Abadan, but after Winston Churchill adopted oil as the fuel for the British navy instead of coal, APOC became far more aggressive with its oil drilling efforts. The British government also invested over two million euros into the company. This investment allowed the government to acquire a controlling interest and become the de facto hidden power behind the oil company.

From the 1920s through the 1940s, the British Empire fueled itself with Middle Eastern oil. The considerable stake that the British government and British Companies, such as APOC, had in Middle Eastern oil helped Britain retain its status as a world power. British transportation ran on Middle Eastern Oil. The factories of British industries were all fueled by oil from Iran, Iraq, and Kuwait. Churchill also got his wish when all navy ships were fueled by cheap Middle Eastern oil as well. The empire struck and it found something better than gold – it found oil. It ensured its longevity and secured access to a valuable resource for the foreseeable future. The trickery and the lies paid off. The British gambled with the interests of the Middle Eastern people and won.

At face value, it appears that the public and private interests of the Middle East were relatively separate. However, on a closer examination, it becomes clear that the two interests were quite intertwined and, in many ways, reinforced each other. The efforts of the British to secure their private interests destabilized the local institutions and communities. This instability fueled orientalist perceptions and prompted humanitarian interest, which was what fueled the public justification for British involvement in the Middle East.

The Sykes-Picot agreement was one of the tools that guaranteed the British' access to oil depositories. The specific territories that the British acquired allowed them easier access to the oil depositories in Iran, Iraq, and Kuwait. The British were also very intentional and ensured that the local people would never be able to band together to overthrow the British control of their resources. The British accomplished this through the drawing of artificial borders that created and defined the new Middle Eastern States. These borders were designed to sow division and discontent by making it impossible for groups to work together. A clear indication of this point is found in the information displayed in the figures below.

RELIGIOUS COMPOSITION OF THE MIDDLE EAST



MIDDLE EAST ETHNIC GROUPS

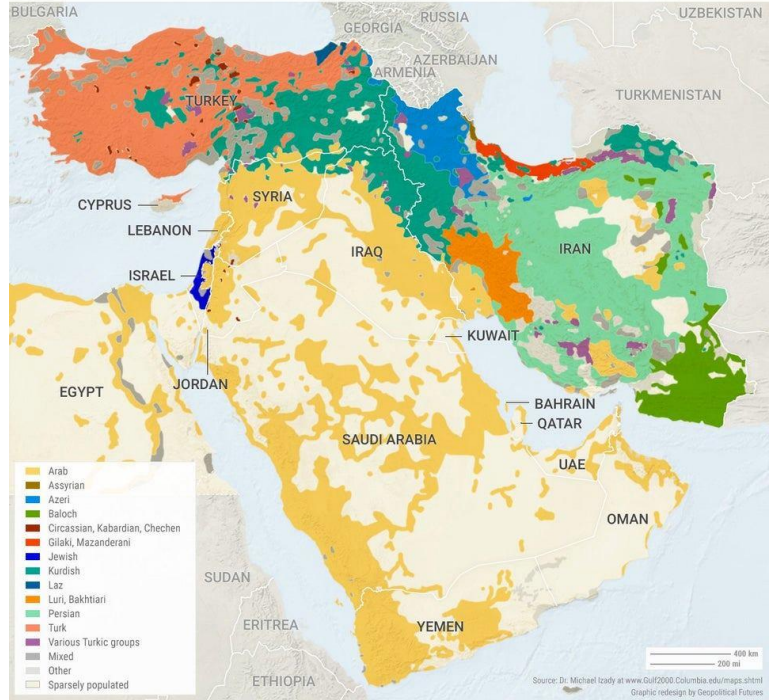


Figure 1. A representation of the religious demographics of the Middle East overlaid with the borders of the Middle Eastern countries. This figure was taken from George Friedman’s column about Mauldin Economics for Business Insider

Figure 2. A representation of the ethnic demographics of the Middle East overlaid with the borders of the Middle Eastern countries. This figure was taken from John A. Shoup’s book on “Ethnic Groups of Africa and the Middle East”

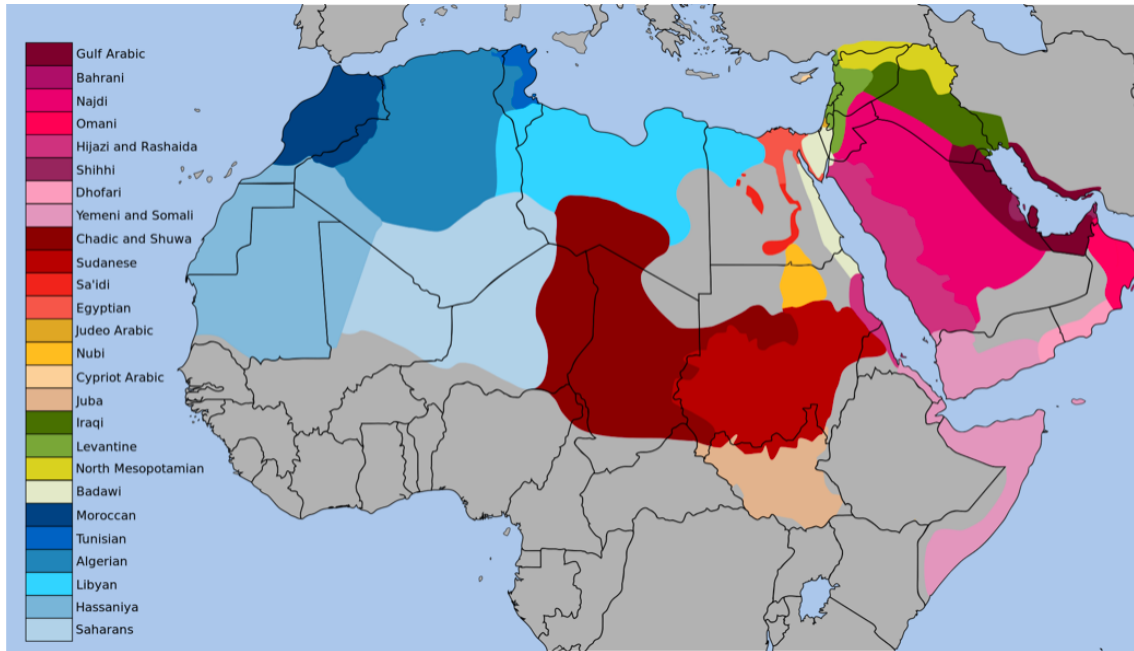


Figure 3. A representation of the linguistic demographics of the Middle East overlaid with the borders of the Middle Eastern countries. This figure was taken from Aaron Brook’s article on “Why are Gulf nations battling it out for the Horn of Africa”

Figure 1 overlays the borders of the Middle East with a religious map. When examining the image, we can see that in many regions, the borders do not match up with the distribution of the various religious communities. Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen are sharply divided between Sunni-Muslim and Shia-Muslim groups. Many religious minority communities are split between borders. Figure 2 overlays the borders of the Middle East with an ethnic map. Many states do not match up with the distribution of ethnic communities. Syria and Iraq are divided between Arab and Kurdish people. There are also similar divisions in Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan. Figure 3 overlays the borders of the Middle East with a linguistic map. A linguistic distribution overlaid in the Middle East also explains why many regions in the Middle East have poor institutions and communal norms. In relatively stable countries, like Egypt, Morocco, and Algeria, the people within the state largely speak the same dialect. However, in relatively unstable countries, like Iraq, Syria, and Jordan, locals speak many different dialects.

When drawing the borders of the Middle East, the British could have been intentional about protecting ethnic and religious minorities as well as keeping different linguistic communities together. Instead, the borders they drew only serve to facilitate chaos, disorder, and instability. This chaos, while incredibly damaging for the Middle Eastern people, aided the British in protecting their imperial interests by weakening the Middle Eastern people. By drawing borders to divide the local people, the British were able to more easily control the regions and their resources. If the locals were too busy fighting amongst each other, they would not be able to unite and fight against their oppressors. Religious and ethnic conflicts are rife in territories where differing groups are placed together. A language barrier also makes it difficult for warring groups to peacefully communicate and develop communal norms. These divisions threaten the sustainability and longevity of governments and institutions and make regions more

susceptible to foreign influence. Raffaella A. Del Sarto powerfully articulates this phenomenon, when he writes:

Colonial policies towards different ethnic and religious groups contributed considerably to the friction between the legitimacy of state authority and its territorial control. While Middle Eastern borders did not usually delineate ethnic or religious communities, the colonial powers often manipulated ethnic and religious divisions for their own interests, following the old Roman strategy of ‘divide and rule.’

These borders were a means to securing the British’s private interests, but a side effect was that the Middle East appeared incredibly unstable and prone to conflict. This then allowed the British to postulate that the Middle East needed their presence to become more civilized and advanced. The instability proved that their humanitarian efforts in the Middle East were integral to the welfare of the region. Their private oil interests necessitated their public justification of humanitarian concern.

A cycle began that justified the seemingly perpetual involvement of the British in the Middle East. The British took whatever actions needed to protect their oil investments – instituting a puppet king, crushing rebellion, etc. Their ruthlessness in protecting their oil investments ensured that instability always follow. Instability meant that the British needed to send more troops, more aid, and built more institutions, which then made it easier for the British to scale up their oil efforts and defeat any resistance.

Orientalism as Political Tool

In the previous section, I established how the imperial aspirations of the Middle East were identified and secured. In this section, I will explain how the British used orientalism to justify their initial involvement in the Middle East and how the instability caused by their initial involvement reified their orientalist sentiments and rationalized their seemingly perpetual involvement in the Middle East. I will utilize the work of Edward Said, various examples from British literature, and several excerpts from Newspaper articles to prove my point.

The Sykes-Picot agreement ensured that the Middle East would become a significant part of British foreign policy for the foreseeable future. The newly formed Middle Eastern states were key to securing control over the colony of British India, but they were also full of resources such as oil. These objectives, however, would take time and be an undertaking that would last years. As a result, British officials knew it was paramount that they secure the support of the British people.

Orientalism was one of the most valuable political tools the British possessed when appealing to the citizenry. Edward Said described Orientalism as “the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny and so on.”

Orientalism was a product of the increased proximity between the west and those it considered the Orient. Early orientalism can be seen in British art and literature. The translation of Arabian Nights unlocked an intense desire within the British people to know more about the mysterious inhabitants of the Middle East, so British writers and painters did their best to oblige. Authors such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, George Gordon, and Lord Byron wrote about the exoticism and danger present in the Middle East. British painters depicted aspects of Oriental life like the harem, the Turkish bathhouse, and the slave market.

More than a response, Orientalism was a justification for the infantilization and exploitation that the people of the Orient experienced at the hands of the west. The earliest forms of Orientalism as a political response can be studied in the British’s response to India. The Indian Mutiny, a widespread but unsuccessful rebellion against British colonization, occurred in 1857. Depictions of India as violent and backward increased exponentially after this in the works of Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and many other British authors. British politicians used a

similar strategy when attempting to justify their continued presence in Egypt during the late 1800s. They spoke about how backward and simple-minded the Egyptian people were and how much they relied on the British to civilize them.

The British needed to employ similar strategies to justify their actions with the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Once the agreement was published, the British people quickly began to see the treaty as the imperialist land grab it really was. In an article published on May 26, 1919, the Manchester Gazette wrote about how the territorial arrangements of the Sykes-Picot agreement showed “equal disregard for the national rights of the Jewish, Arab, and Armenian peoples, for geography, for economics, and for strategy.” They understood that the agreement stripped the indigenous people of their agency and autonomy as well as how the borders articulated by the agreement did not make sense in terms of the geographic and economic layout of the region. The Sykes-Picot agreement was exploitative and meant to control the Middle Eastern people by disrupting their communities through forcibly imposed borders and institutions.

Orientalist perceptions of the Middle East already ran rampant in England. Authors such as John Milton wrote incredibly racist interpretations of people in the Middle East. In the Tenure of Kings and Magistrates, Milton wrote that “If an Englishman, forgetting all laws, human, civil and religious, offend against life and liberty...he is no better than a Turk, a Saracen, a heathen.” As a result, these orientalist attitudes caused the British people to view the Sykes-Picot Agreement differently. A reader of the London Times wrote a letter to the editor and spoke about the disarray that Mesopotamia would experience without guidance:

In the opinion of many who know Mesopotamia, if the country and its great resources are left in the hands of liberated Arabs, the cattle and crops will go to the nomads on the west and to the Kurds and Lurs on the east, the population will decrease, and the business in ‘the towns will come to lie in the hands of the Jews, or, worse still, of the Armenians, And if “two divisions of local volunteer troops, all Arabs, from the senior divisional general to the junior private,” are raised, we can only prophesy one thing with

confidence—that the cultivation will suffer for lack of men, as it did in 1917-18, when the best of the young cultivators were earning high pay in the Labour Corps.

The British public began to approve of the lack of autonomy the Sykes-Picot provided to the Arab people. Orientalism taught them that the Arab people were heathens who could not be trusted to govern themselves and properly manage their resources. The British needed to be a leader and guide for the backward and simpleminded people of the Middle East. Another newspaper article described how the Peace Treaty with Turkey would “regulate the future health and behavior of the “sick man of Europe.” The narrative changed from the British violating the autonomy of the Arab people to the British attempting to reform the backward Arab people.

The British government pushed the idea of the backward people of the east onto the British people, and British authors began incorporating these orientalist sentiments into their works, supporting the government’s imperial effort. A prominent example of this was Rudyard Kipling. Peter Morey in his essay on “Kipling and “Orientalism””: Cracks in the Wall of Imperial Narrative” writes about how Rudyard Kipling often used entirely fabricated information to create narratives that benefitted the British imperial projects in India. An example of this was when Kipling wrote about how the Afghan is “a thief by instinct, a murderer by heredity and training, and frankly and bestially immoral by all three” in *The Amir’s Homily*. Morey wrote about how Kipling’s portrayals were “less the product of Western ignorance and prejudice than part of that strategy of control, the features of which Said has described. They render the perceived qualities and deficiencies of subject peoples, that they may be the better governed, interpellated, made docile and rendered useful, by addressing and appealing to certain of these typological characteristics.”

The British used orientalist stereotypes of the Middle Eastern people as backward and uncivilized to justify their initial involvement in the Middle East. Eventually, their approach began to morph into a far subtler form of orientalism which better accommodated the changing social climate as well as better appealed to the wishes of the Middle Eastern people. The British were keen on obtaining the favor of the Middle Eastern people because they knew that the people of the newly formed Middle Eastern states passionately disproved the Sykes-Picot agreement. An article published on April 28, 1920, in the London Times indicated the British's knowledge of the locals' discontent:

San Remo, April 26. —The Arab Delegation has issued a note stating that the decision regarding the mandate for the Arab liberated countries will cause great disappointment to their people, who had accepted the solemn and repeated promises of liberty and independence.

The delegates add that it is feared that the situation will be exploited by the Turkish Nationalists, who are trying to rally the Arabs to their cause in the struggle against the Allies. They vehemently protest against the decision as being against the principles of self-determination. The Arabs are not hostile to friendly and disinterested collaboration based on an understanding but protest against the partition of the country and the mandate against their desires. — Reuter.

The locals realized that the British were reneging their agreement with the Sharif and going back on their promises of autonomy and self-governance. They gambled and ultimately were cheated out of their winnings.

Sykes was aware of how his agreement was perceived by the locals in the new Middle Eastern states but firmly believed that it was the best solution considering the circumstances. To appeal to the people of the Middle East, Sykes sought to paint the British's interests as humanitarian and benevolent. After Baghdad was officially captured by the British, Sykes wrote a proclamation to the people of Baghdad:

O people of Baghdad, remember that for twenty-six generations you have suffered under strange tyrants, who have ever endeavored to set one Arab house against another in order

that they might profit by your dissensions. This policy is abhorrent to Great Britain and her Allies, for there can be neither peace nor prosperity where there is enmity and misgovernment. Therefore, I am commanded to invite you, through your nobles and elders and representatives, to participate in the management of your civil affairs in collaboration with the political representatives of Great Britain who accompany the British Army, so that you may be united with your kinsmen in north, east, south and west in realizing the aspirations of your race.”

It is quite ironic because many of the actions Sykes disavowed in his proclamation were actions that the British would later go on to take, but of course, the people of Baghdad could not know that. Sykes’ proclamation was an explicit articulation of the public justification for British intervention in the Middle East. Even decades later, the rhetoric of freedom and humanitarian efforts would continue to be espoused by the British.

CHAPTER V - OUTCOMES AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

When the Middle East is discussed today, it is viewed as a hotbed of instability and corruption. People often speak about the “Middle East Problem” and often lament over the future of the region. As the discussion in this paper indicates, that problem is almost entirely the result of years of western intervention and imperial mismanagement. The problems of the Middle East were not created by the Middle Eastern people but rather engineered by the imperial powers. The institutions, the borders, and the economies created by the imperial powers were not meant to be stable or self-sufficient. Therefore, any instability or chaos in the region has quite literally been engineered into it. This must contextualize our discussions and the foreign policy that is recommended.

Western presence in the Middle East has always been a lever for violence and discontent, so Middle Eastern policy moving forward must focus on minimizing western presence in the region. The global economy as well as the general state of geopolitics necessitates that western powers will always have some sway in the region, but they can no longer be the ones unilaterally determining the policy and politics. The agency of the Middle Eastern states, (that they were

deprived of since the Sykes-Picot agreement) must be rightfully recognized. The Middle Eastern states must direct their own policy. All institution building and norm facilitating must be done under the leadership and guidance of locals. The injustices in the Middle East were perpetuated by the imperial powers, so it is the people of the Middle East who deserve the chance to exercise their agency and correct the wrongs of the imperial powers. The imperial powers, however, do have a role to play by providing the necessary resources (money, aid, etc.) in these efforts, because, after all, had the Middle East not been imperialized, they probably would have already possessed these resources anyway.

CHAPTER VI – CONCLUSION

In this paper, I analyzed how the British' imperial aspirations overtook their involvement in the Middle East. I utilized the Hussain-McMahon correspondence as well as the Sykes-Picot agreement to identify the imperial aspirations of the British as well as the lies and trickery they used to secure them. Then, I chronicled how the interests of the British changed due to the relevance of oil after World War I and how the British established their oil empire. I then studied how the British used orientalist stereotypes to justify their initial involvement in the Middle East and how the consequences of their initial involvement reified the orientalist attitudes of both the British government and people and helped justify the British' perpetual involvement in the region.

When I started this discussion, I intended to shed light on the complicated history of the Middle East and how that history has affected its current geopolitical circumstances today. While I certainly feel like I have achieved that objective, I also think my research is significant in that it raises questions about the dynamics that circle intervention and how so easily intervention is done for the wrong reasons and to serve the wrong people. My research contributes to that

scholarship by providing a new historical perspective to demonstrate how there is precedent to show biases often cloud intervention and render it a difficult form of policy to morally advocate.

My research is limited by the scope of my primary source analysis. With access to better and more expansive archives, it would be possible to examine correspondences between higher-up British officials to glean more knowledge of how aware they were about their intentions in the Middle East and how they formulated their foreign policy strategy. My research was also limited because it confined itself to a primary source analysis and did not use more proper case studies of Iraq, Iran, and Kuwait.

In the future, it would be worth studying more about the ethics of intervention, especially in a world order that is racially stratified and has many historical and structural power dynamics. Can intervention be done ethically with all of these inequalities in place? Is it possible to respect the agency of indigenous and local cultures as a foreign entity coming in with the intention of circumventing local norms and institutions? These questions must be studied in order to better incorporate issues of race, colonialism, and imperialism into the field of international relations.

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