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The WWI Middle East: Western Intervention and Modern-Day Political Conflict

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After the Allied victory in the First World War, the British enacted three separate agreements between 1915 and 1917 for the postwar partition of the Ottoman Arab lands: an agreement with the Sharif of Mecca, which allowed the creation of an independent Arab kingdom, a pact between the Great Powers of Britain and France concerning the division of the Ottoman Arab lands, and a pledge to the Zionists authorizing the creation of a Jewish national home in Palestine. The overlapping nature of the land thus promised to three separate authorities would result in decades of conflict characterized by ongoing Arab-Israeli wars, millions of refugees, and continued intervention by the West in Middle Eastern politics. The conflicting agreements made by the Great Powers during WWI convey insight into politics in the modern Middle East by defining and propagating core issues at the heart of Arab-Israeli conflict; these include Arab resentment of the West, Arab nationalism, and consequent conflicting Arab-Israeli claims to Palestine. Through comparing the situation in the Middle East that resulted from these agreements, to the European colonization of Rwanda starting in the 1880s, I will demonstrate how, in both cases, imperially and politically-motivated intervention by Western powers, using the divide and rule colonization strategy, created long-lasting internal conflicts amongst indigenous peoples that continue to define politics in both regions today.

The first of the conflicting agreements made by the Western powers during the First World War began in the summer of 1915, upon the authorization of British officials in Cairo to negotiate an agreement with the Sharif of Mecca on the fate of the Ottoman Arab lands. In July of that year, Sharif Husayn ibn' Ali of Mecca began correspondence with the British High Commissioner of Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, through which Husayn obtained British guarantee that he could retain his title of Grand Sharif, and receive aid in defense of external aggression—in effect, British recognition of an independent Arab kingdom with Husayn as its ruler.¹ This would all take place in exchange for an Arab revolt against Ottoman rule. British imperial concerns, prioritizing the security of its empire, included the reaction that the millions of Muslims inhabiting its colonies, such as those in British India, would have in response to the Ottoman call to jihad; their willingness to fight the sultan or caliph on the side of their Christian rulers was dubious. This concern for British colonial stability propelled hopes that a counter-call for jihad, made by the highest religious figure in the Arab world, and an official for Islam's most holy city, would turn the course of events.² The British thus took advantage of Arab resentment towards Ottoman domination, harnessing

¹ Rogan, Eugene. *The Arabs: A History*, 2nd Ed., Penguin Books, 2012.

² Rogan, 187.

a growing Arab nationalist sentiment as a tool to defeat the Ottomans in war.³ McMahon's crucial letter on October 24th, 1915 confirmed the boundaries of the independent Arab kingdom proposed by Sharif Husayn, excepting "portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo."⁴ The letter stated, "Subject to the modifications stated above, Great Britain is prepared to recognize and uphold the independence of the Arabs in all the regions lying within the frontiers proposed by the Sharif of Mecca."⁵ Husayn ultimately accepted these modifications, albeit reluctantly, and called for an Arab uprising against the Ottomans on June 5, 1916. By October of 1918, Mecca, the Red Sea port of Jidda, and Damascus had fallen, securing the success of the Arab Revolt and expectations for British fulfillment of the agreement. Yet the Arabs faced disappointment at the end of the war, when McMahon and Husayn disagreed on the regions granted independence in the agreement, specifically Palestine. British officials later claimed that Palestine, which had not been specifically mentioned in the letter, was part of the coastal Syrian territory reserved for France and thus excluded from the independent Arab state.⁶ The correspondence became the subsequent basis of Arab nationalist charges of betrayal against Britain. The perception that Britain had made a pledge which it did not honor persisted and deepened among Arabs, leading to the idea that the Arabs had been misled and then betrayed.⁷ This fostered the Arab distrust of Western powers that continues today, due to Western abuse of Arab nationalism as a strategy against the Ottomans and subsequent betrayal of the movement. The growth of Arab nationalism in opposition to the West furthermore fueled the intensity of Arab claims to Palestine, demonstrating early stages of modern political attitudes and catalysts to the conflict of the modern day Middle East.

The second pact made by Britain concerning the Arab Ottoman lands was with the French. The former was represented by Britain's Middle East advisor Sir Mark Sykes, while the latter was represented by the former consul general in Beirut, Charles Georges-Picot; the Russians subscribed to the agreement under condition that Britain and France accept its territorial claims. Its provisions, finalized in October of 1916, were as follows: Russia would acquire the Armenian provinces in eastern Anatolia; France would acquire Lebanon, Cilicia and the Syrian coastal region; and Britain would acquire southern Mesopotamia,

³ Rogan, 182.

⁴ Cleveland, William L. *A History of the Modern Middle East*. 3rd ed., Westview Press, 2004, pp. 160.

⁵ Gerner, Deborah J. *One Land, Two Peoples: The Conflict over Palestine*. Westview Press, 1994.

⁶ Cleveland, 160.

⁷ Cleveland, 160.

including Baghdad and Basra. Between the British and French acquisitions, there would be an Arab state or states divided into British and French spheres of influence. Palestine was to be an 'international administration' because of its holy places.⁸ The Sykes-Picot agreement was understandably kept a secret between Britain and France: It completely disregarded previous British pledges to the Sharif of Mecca for the creation of an independent Arab kingdom in the region. What had been promised to the Arabs was now confined to the sliver of 'spheres of influence' between the directly controlled French and British zones. Upon discovery of such a betrayal, basis of Arab trust for the Great Powers was destroyed.⁹ Like the Husayn-McMahon correspondence, the revelation fostered the fundamental Arab distrust of and antagonism towards the West that pervades Middle Eastern attitudes today. By contravening Arab desires for a united Arab state, the Sykes-Picot concord fueled the aggressive nature of the Arab Nationalist movement and also intensified conflicting claims to Palestine.

The third conflicting agreement made by Britain and France during the war was comprised of a letter sent by the British government called the Balfour Declaration. Starting in 1882, waves of Jewish immigrants had fled Russian persecution, and twenty to thirty thousand settled in Palestine.¹⁰ The World Zionist Organization, established in 1897 with the aim of creating 'for the Jewish people a home in Palestine secured by public law,'¹¹ began the Jewish nationalist movement that came to be known as Zionism. The November 2nd 1917 Balfour Declaration authorized the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine. It stated, "His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object."¹² The letter was clearly motivated by British imperial interests in the Middle East, such as the desire to exclude France from Palestine,¹³ gather political support for the war from Jews in Russia and the U.S.,¹⁴ and gain Zionist support for placing Palestine under British rule.¹⁵ Undoubtedly, this declaration is one of the key foundation stones of the

⁸ Blanche, Ed. "Borders Of Blood." *Middle East*, vol. 44, no. 6, 2013, pp. 14-18. *Academic Search Complete*, 8 Nov 2015.

⁹ Cleveland, 160.

¹⁰ Rogan, 190.

¹¹ Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*. Oxford UP, 1980, pp. 429.

¹² Rogan, 191.

¹³ Verete, Mayir. "The Balfour Declaration and its Makers," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1970, *JSTOR*. Accessed 11 Nov 2015.

¹⁴ Rogan, 191.

¹⁵ Rogan, 191.

Arab-Israeli dispute; at the time, 90% of Palestine was inhabited by Arabs, and a mere 10% was inhabited by Jews and Zionist settlers. The Arabs thus understandably resented the letter's dismissive reference to them as simply "the existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine."¹⁶ The right to promise a national home to such a tiny Jewish minority in a predominantly Arab country was questionable at best. In a recent article, "The Balfour Declaration and its consequences," Oxford revisionist historian Avi Shlaim maintains that the declaration was Britain's "original sin," giving rise to "one of the most intense, bitter and protracted conflicts of modern times."¹⁷ Moreover, Historian Ed Blanche stated in his article "Borders of Blood" that "the consequences of that commitment has been perpetual war in the Middle East for the last six decades."¹⁸

Admittedly, politics in the Middle East today involves much more than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and thus the WWI agreements only partially explain it; however, in reviewing the three agreements made by Britain and France, respectively the Husayn-McMahon agreement, the Sykes-Picot concord, and the Balfour Declaration, an overarching truth can be seen that, to a notable extent, explains politics in the modern Middle East: Western intervention in its conflicting agreements during WWI propagated Arab resentment of the West, and intensified Arab nationalism and conflicting Arab-Israeli claims to Palestine. In making this statement, it must also be acknowledged that these factors do not encompass the entirety of the modern impact of each agreement; however, they highlight the commonalities between the agreements and their overall effect on which this paper is focused. Ultimately British support for such a small minority group of Jews, which entailed rejecting previous promises to its majority indigenous peoples, cultivated a deep Arab resentment and a sense of injustice towards the Jews and the Western Great Powers supporting them. Now the region of Palestine was a thrice-promised land, and conflicting claims to it had official grounding in the form of the Western pacts. This distrust has contributed to Middle Eastern perceptions of the West and vice versa, instigating an attitude of suspicion that has grown to define politics between the two regions as conflicts have progressed.

The authorization of power into the hands of a small minority through the Balfour Declaration compares in many ways to the European colonization of Rwanda from the 1880s to the 1950s; in both Rwanda and the Middle East, it is clear that the nature of Western powers is to intervene in remote places for

¹⁶ Rogan, 191.

¹⁷ Shlaim, Avi. *The Balfour Declaration and its Consequences, in Israel and Palestine, Reappraisals, Revisions, Refutations*. Verso Books, 2009.

¹⁸ Blanche, Ed. "Borders Of Blood." *Middle East*, vol. 44, no. 6, 2013, pp. 14-18. *Academic Search Complete*, 8 Nov 2015.

imperialist political reasons and to support minority rule using divide and rule policy, ultimately causing long-lasting internal conflict and division amongst indigenous peoples. European colonization of Rwanda from the late 1880s onward began the construct of diverging ethnic “Tutsi” and “Hutu” identities. German colonialism affirmed Tutsi justification for minority rule through dependence on native Tutsi domination over the lower Hutu classes; yet much more intrusive Belgian forces entered Rwanda after WWI which obstructed the social system’s ability to endow an inherent superiority on the Tutsi aristocracy, since they were genetically closer to the European bloodline.¹⁹ Belgians portrayed the Tutsis as more highly evolved in appearance, intelligence, and height, and thus more civilized, while the Hutus were defined as ignorant and uncivilized. The propagation of ideas of fundamental racial differences was used to justify colonial placement of political power in the hands of the Tutsi minority, and furthermore provided the foundation for the Tutsis and Hutus to begin identifying themselves as separate ethnic groups. This classic use of the “divide and rule” strategy of colonization divided groups along social castes to secure control over indigenous peoples,²⁰ creating racial group differences from social group differences; it proved a natural and effective form of mobilizing the masses and subduing resistance. Dominance of the Tutsi aristocracy over the subjugated Hutu led to the stripping of Hutu political and land power, and the robbing of Hutu chieftains’ centuries-old rulership over their own people.²¹ Moreover, Hutus were used for forced labor on Tutsi lands, educational systems were separated, and identification cards differentiating the groups were issued, creating deeper stratification between wealthy Tutsis and the poor Hutus, and solidifying separation of ethnic identity. This served as the catalyst to ethnic resentment and antagonism between the people groups, evolving into the formation on the one hand of a separate Hutu ethnic identity as native and thus legitimate in claims to rulership, and on the other hand the idea of the ‘foreignness’ of the Tutsi and their consequent illegitimacy to rule.²² Upon the departure of the Belgians from Rwanda in the 1960s, the rise of political Hutu nationalism and anti-Tutsi sentiment prompted the overthrow of the Tutsi. The victory of the Hutu nationalist party led by Grégoire Kayibanda in the early 1960s began the Hutu mandate for discrimination against the Tutsi, leading to local killings of Tutsi, executions of Tutsi political figures by Kayibanda, and the resultant extermination

¹⁹ Jean, Moïse. “The Rwandan Genocide: The True Motivations for Mass Killings.” *Emory Endeavors in World History*, vol. 1, no. 5, 2007, pp. 1-10.

²⁰ Jean, 5.

²¹ Jean, 5.

²² Mann, Michael. *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*. Cambridge UP, 2004.

of Tutsi political opposition;²³ as the social and political supremacy of the Tutsi began to decline, they were rebranded as second-class citizens, non-indigenous, and alien.²⁴ Despite the overthrow of the Hutu nationalist regime in 1973 by Habyarimana, his mysterious death in 1994 was accompanied by the immediate declaration of the Hutu administration of a policy to kill all Tutsi, an act which was made easy through the identification cards issued by the Belgian administration during colonization.²⁵ The Rwandan genocide in 1994 resulted in the deaths of half to a million Tutsi within the span of four months.²⁶ The genocide had a profound impact on Rwanda in many spheres, causing economic collapse due to depopulation, Hutu refugees, and further wars. Despite governmental attempts to unify ethnic identity as simply “Rwandan,” both the identification of victims and perpetrators in order to administer justice and the unrealistic concept of eliminating ethnicity continue to separate the Hutu and Tutsi and risk perpetuating links to the very racial divergences the Rwandan government wishes to eradicate.

As in Sykes-Picot, Western imperial incentives in Rwanda motivated involvement with and domination over remote lands without regard to native culture; as aforementioned, Rwandan political turmoil is comparable to the Balfour Declaration in its exhibiting Western-imposed minority control that disrupted the stability between its indigenous peoples. It must be acknowledged that the declaration did not lead to genocide, as in Rwanda; however, the Balfour Declaration too became a catalyst for communal conflict in engendering clashes between rival nationalisms – the Zionist movement and the emerging Palestinian nationalism. According to Rogan, Palestine would be Britain’s gravest imperial failure in the Middle East and would condemn the whole of the modern Middle East to the conflict and violence which persist today.²⁷ The Western delegation of control of a largely Arab-populated Palestine to a small Jewish minority would lead to the 1936-39 Arab revolt, the 1944-47 Jewish insurgency in Palestine, and ultimately to the 1948 Palestine War, which involved both civil war and the Arab-Israeli war, marking the end of the British mandate and the birth of Israel.²⁸ Though it did not lead to genocide, the Palestine War led to the Palestinian exodus, in which around 700,000 Palestinian Arabs fled or were expelled from

²³ Mamdani, Mahmood. *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda*. Princeton UP, 2001, pp. 43-44.

²⁴ Mamdani, 43-44.

²⁵ Mamdani, 43-44.

²⁶ “Rwanda: How the Genocide Happened.” *BBC News*, 17 May 2011, bbc.co.uk. Accessed 16 Nov 2015.

²⁷ Rogan, 245.

²⁸ “Israel profile – Overview.” *BBC News*, 18 Mar 2015, bbc.co.uk. Accessed 17 Nov 2015.

their homes in the area that is now Israel. Other major Arab-Israeli wars of the 20th century demonstrate the profound impact of these contradicting WWI agreements on the Middle East, such as the Suez Crisis in 1956, the Six-Day War in 1967, the War of Attrition in 1969-70, Yom Kippur War in 1973, and the Gulf War in 1991.²⁹ Even today, violent Arab-Israeli relations over the West Bank and the Gaza strip, and the consequent total displacement of over 4.6 million Palestinian refugees demonstrate continued conflict over Palestine. The over half a million Israeli settlers living in illegal settlements throughout the West Bank and East Jerusalem constitute another facet of tension and violence between the Arabs and Israelis inhabiting the Middle East.³⁰

Furthermore, politically motivated Western support of a minority group and subsequent civil war can also be seen in the precursors of the Syrian Civil War. U.S. cooperation with the Syrian Assad dictatorship against the Iraqi dictatorship was opportunistic, in order to gain support from the Syrian Ba'athist party during the Gulf War in 1991. This support made the U.S. tolerate Syrian military occupation of Lebanon and the suppression of the human rights of the Sunni majority;³¹ the EU acted similarly in order to secure a Middle Eastern peace deal with Israel. What began as anti-government protests against this Assad dictatorship ultimately sprang into the full-fledged Syrian Civil War in 2011, pitting the Sunni majority against the minority Shia dictatorship; it is a war in which over 11 million have been forced from their homes due to violence between the forces of President Assad, oppositional groups, and Islamic jihadist militants, and over 250,000 have been killed as of August 2015.³² Moreover, the humanitarian crisis of refugees as a result of the ongoing Syrian Civil War is a hugely prominent issue in the Middle East today. The Syrian conflict thus demonstrates, as with Rwanda and the WWI agreements, Western delegation of power to the minority, consequent uprising of the suppressed majority, and resultant internal conflict and division.

Because of Western intervention and imperialism, remote regions are colonized, dividing local ethnicities and languages with arbitrary lines and borders drawn with thick pencils on small maps. The three conflicting WWI agreements made by Britain and France propagated core issues at the heart of Arab-Israeli conflict, such as Arab resentment of the West, Arab nationalism, and conflicting Arab-Israeli claims to Palestine, thus significantly explaining the

²⁹ "Israel profile – Overview." *BBC News*, 18 Mar 2015, bbc.co.uk. Accessed 17 Nov 2015.

³⁰ Bell, William. "Without Hope Peace is a Meaningless Process." *The Huffington Post*, 16 Oct 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/william-bell/without-hope-peace-is-a-m_b_8300606.html. Accessed 15 Nov 2015.

³¹ Tibi, Bassam. *The Sharia State: Arab Spring and Democratization*. Routledge, 2013, pp. 119.

³² "Syria: The Story of the Conflict." *BBC News*, 9 Oct 2015, bbc.co.uk. Accessed 16 Nov 2015.

politics of the modern Middle East. Just as Rwandan divide and rule colonization by Europe led to violent civil war, Western support of minority groups in the Middle East in WWI and post-WWI has caused decades of deep internal conflict that continues today in the ongoing Arab-Israeli land conflict, the displacement of millions of Syrians from their homes, and continued intervention by the West in Middle Eastern politics.

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