

The First World War and its Legacy in the Middle East (7-8,000 words)

Eugene Rogan (University of Oxford)

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Abstract: The First World War proved a crucial turning point in the modern history of the Middle East and North Africa. Under conditions of total warfare, conscripts and civilians suffered greater losses and depredations than in any other conflict in the region before or since. The Great War also led to the breakup of the Ottoman Empire after four centuries of rule over the Arab lands, to be replaced by a modern state system actively negotiated between the Entente Powers in the course of the war. While the borders of Middle Eastern states have proven remarkably enduring over the past century, so too have the problems engendered by the wartime partition diplomacy.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire, Middle East, First World War, Arab lands, partition diplomacy.

As the states of Europe prepared their armies for war, the Ottoman government issued orders for general mobilization on 1 August 1914. Colourful posters were hung in towns and squares across the Empire emblazoned with the legend: “*Seferberlik var!* Mobilization has been declared! All men to arms!” Men of military age – 21-45 years old – and their families responded to the news with justifiable dread. Many had only recently been demobilized following catastrophic wars in the Balkans. Few had confidence that the Ottomans, who had been soundly defeated by a coalition of fractious Balkan states in 1912-1913, could withstand attack by some of the greatest European military powers of the day. They believed the Ottoman government rash to drag the empire into a European conflict in which they had no stake.¹

The Ottoman government in 1914 was headed by three influential members of the Committee of Union and Progress who had come to power in the aftermath of the 1908 Young Turk Revolution:

Enver Pasha, Minister of War; Talat Pasha, Interior Minister, and later Prime Minister; and Cemal Pasha, Minister of Marine. They were distinctly *young* Turks. In the summer of 1914, Enver was only 33, Talat 40 and Cemal 42. Arguably they were rash too, having risen to power through revolutionary times in which fortune favoured the bold. Yet they knew of threats to the Empire from dangerous neighbours that convinced the Unionist triumvirate that neutrality in the rapidly expanding European war was not an option.

Russia followed the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 with great interest. Ottoman territorial losses in Albania, Macedonia and Thrace convinced Tsar Nicholas II and his government that the Ottoman Empire, long dismissed as the “sick man of Europe,” had entered a terminal stage. St Petersburg’s greatest concern was that one of the ambitious Balkan states – Greece or Bulgaria – might succeed in taking the Ottoman capital city of Constantinople (as Istanbul was commonly called by Turks and Westerners alike in 1914) and establish their control over the strategic straits linking the Russian Black Sea with the Mediterranean. Fifty percent of Russian exports transited the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. These were strategic lands that Russia coveted for its own empire. In April 1914, the Tsar approved his Council of Ministers’ recommendation to occupy Constantinople and the Straits and ordered his army to mobilize the forces to secure these territories at the earliest opportunity. The Russians believed a general European conflict would provide the best opportunity to realize these “historic claims”. The Unionist leadership, fully aware of Russian ambitions, believed the general mobilization of European armies in July and August 1914 heralded the start of just such a conflict. The Ottomans mobilized both to protect their own lands and to help secure a defensive alliance against Russian expansionism.²

The Unionist leaders approached different European powers in search of a treaty of mutual defence that might provide protection of Ottoman territory from Russian ambitions. Though Britain and France might once have been natural allies, the Ottomans were wary of British and French territorial ambitions. In the course of the nineteenth century, France had stripped the Ottoman Empire of

Tunisia and Algeria, and was known to covet Syria. Britain for its part had forced the Porte to cede Cyprus in 1878 and occupied Egypt in 1882. The British and French were thus hardly disinterested parties. Moreover, both were bound to Russia as part of the Triple Entente. Neither France nor Britain was likely to intervene against their ally Russia in defence of Turkish territory.

Germany was the Ottoman Empire's natural ally. Kaiser Wilhelm II had twice visited the Ottoman Empire and had taken the opportunity to declare Germany's perpetual friendship with the Muslim world. Germany had invested heavily in Turkey's infrastructural development, epitomized by the Berlin to Baghdad railway project. A Prussian general named Liman von Sanders headed a German military mission to modernize the Ottoman army in the aftermath of the Balkan Wars. Yet for all its military and industrial might, Germany had no imperial ambitions in Ottoman territory. Its only real demand, in return for concluding an alliance with the Ottoman Empire, was that Sultan Mehmed V Reşat, in his role as caliph of the global Muslim community, declare a jihad on Britain, France and Russia. The Kaiser and his advisers were convinced that the religious authority of the sultan-caliph would stir colonial Muslims to rise in revolts in British India and Egypt, French North Africa, and the Russian Caucasus, undermining the Entente war effort through their imperial possessions.³

Agreement struck, German and the Ottoman Empire concluded a secret treaty of alliance on 2 August 1914 – one day after Enver issued orders for a general mobilization.

The Ottoman Empire thus mobilized at the same time as all of the other wartime belligerents. In the course of the war, just under three million men would be called into service in the Ottoman army. At war's end, only half returned home unharmed: 804,000 were killed, 400,000 wounded and 250,000 taken prisoner. Ottoman casualty rates (48%) were thus much higher than the British (36%), on a par with German losses (56%), but well lower than Russian (59%), Austrian (77%) or French (78%).⁴

The Ottoman contribution to the Great War has been eclipsed in both the historiography and in public memory by European fascination with the horrors of the Western Front. Dismissed at the

time as the weakest link in the Central Powers' chain, the British and French were confident of their ability to inflict a swift and decisive defeat on the Ottomans. Instead, they found themselves drawn ever deeper into the sideshow of the Ottoman Front, committing hundreds of thousands of troops and tons of materiel to fight pitched battles for the full four years of the war. The Ottoman entry transformed the Great War from a European conflict into the First *World War*. The Great War in turn transformed the Ottoman world, giving rise to the modern states of the Middle East and laying the seeds for many of the conflicts that would divide them over the ensuing century.

The course of the war in the Middle East

After months of preparations, the Ottomans entered the Great War on 29 October 1914, when their Black Sea fleet, under German command, fired on Russian shipping and naval facilities. Two weeks later, on 14 November, Sultan Mehmet V Reşat fulfilled his empire's commitment to their German ally and declared the war a jihad against Britain, France and Russia.⁵ The declaration asserted it was the religious duty of all Muslims to fight against the Triple Entente as enemies of Islam, and prohibited colonial Muslims from giving any assistance to the Allied war effort as a crime against their religion. This posed a double threat to the Allies: the risk of Islamic uprisings in their imperial possessions, and the threat of mutiny by Muslim soldiers serving in the Indian Army and the French Army of Africa.

In February 1915, Indian Muslim soldiers rebelled against their British commanders in Singapore in direct response to the sultan-caliph's call for jihad. The uprising raged on for five days before the British and their allies were able to dispatch loyal troops to Singapore to restore order. Some 47 British officers, soldiers and civilians were killed in course of the mutiny. Compared to the loss of life on the Western Front, events in Singapore seemed trivial. Yet the fact that colonial Muslims rebelled in a land as far from Ottoman domains as Singapore convinced British commanders that the declaration of jihad posed a very serious threat to their war effort.⁶

Allied war planners believed they could eliminate the jihad threat by the early defeat of the Ottoman Empire. In the opening days of the war, the Entente pressed the Ottomans at different points in the empire's extensive frontiers. Russian forces swept across the Caucasus frontier to occupy a salient fifteen miles deep into Ottoman territory on 2 November. British and French warships bombarded the entry to the Dardanelles, detonating an ammunition depot in the Seddülbahr Fort. On 10 November, a British force overran Ottoman gun emplacements off the coast of Yemen in the Bab al-Mandab straits, near the British colony of Aden. A detachment of the Indian Expeditionary Force entered the Shatt al-Arab on 6 November and occupied the southern Iraqi city of Basra on 23 November. These quick and easy victories over thinly-defended Ottoman outposts encouraged the Allies in their belief that the Ottomans were incapable of withstanding a concerted assault by Allied forces.

Early Ottoman offensives in the Caucasus and Sinai only reinforced the Entente's view of Turkey's military weakness. Enver Pasha, the Minister of War, led the well-trained Ottoman Third Army to disaster in the Sarikamiş Campaign in December 1914 – January 1915. Caught in the heavy snows of the high Caucasian mountains, a large part of Enver's force died of exposure before even engaging Russian troops. Of the original force of 100,000 men, the Third Army lost between 50,000 and 80,000 soldiers killed, captured or wounded.⁷ The Minister of Marine Cemal Pasha, who had been appointed military governor of Syria, led another unsuccessful assault against the British in Egypt in February 1915. It was a remarkable achievement, to lead a campaign force across the hostile terrain of the Sinai Peninsula with pontoon craft in tow. However, the handful of Ottoman troops who managed to cross the Suez Canal were either killed or captured. Cemal was lucky to withdraw the bulk of his forces back to the safety of Ottoman lines in Palestine.

Encouraged by the Young Turk commanders' failures, Britain and France began to plan a major offensive to force the straits of the Dardanelles and seize the Ottoman capital Istanbul. Not only would that give the British and French direct access to their Russian ally by secure sea lanes, but the

Ottoman capitulation would put an end to the threat of jihad once and for all. The result was the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign (March 1915 – January 1916).⁸

The Gallipoli campaign always suffered from the contradictory goals of British war planners.

Determined to keep up strength on the Western Front, the generals never sent sufficient men or materiel to the Dardanelles to overpower the determined Ottoman defenders. By the end of 1915, the British war cabinet recognized their position in Gallipoli was untenable and called for a total evacuation of Allied positions between 20 December 1915 and 9 January 1916. The British congratulated themselves on evacuating all combatants without suffering a single casualty in retreat. Yet the British and French had committed nearly 500,000 men to the battle and had lost 252,000 dead and wounded in the course of the campaign. In accepting defeat and evacuating Gallipoli, the Allies dealt the Ottomans their first major victory of the Great War.⁹

Defeat in Gallipoli heightened British concerns about the jihad threat among colonial Muslims.

Rather than withdrawing from the Middle East altogether, some in the War Cabinet called for one more campaign in Ottoman lands to deal the Turks a decisive defeat, to lay to rest the risk of jihad once and for all. They looked to the east, to Mesopotamia. Between November 1914 and September 1915, British and Indian forces had won a string of impressive victories in southern Iraq that left them in control of the whole of the Ottoman province of Basra. Believing Ottoman morale in Mesopotamia to have been broken by successive defeats, an influential troika in the British war cabinet, including the foreign secretary Lord Grey, Winston Churchill, and Arthur Balfour, called for the immediate occupation of Baghdad to compensate for the Ottoman victory at Gallipoli.

British and Indian troops set off from their front line positions in Kut al-Amara, a market town in a bend in the Tigris some 175 kilometres from Baghdad. In December 1915 they engaged well-entrenched Ottoman defenders near the ancient Sassanian site of Ctesiphon at a site revered by Muslims as the burial place of the Prophet Muhammad's barber, Salman the Pure, or Salman Pak. The Ottomans had reinforced their positions with experienced troops, while the British were over-

extended after a year of campaigning. After three days of heavy losses on both sides, the British were forced into retreat under fire. They limped back to Kut al-Amara where they were besieged by the pursuing Ottoman Army.

Though the Ottomans were vulnerable in the Caucasus, where Russian forces captured the fortress-city of Erzerum on 16 February 1916, they held their ground tenaciously in Mesopotamia. Despite the best efforts of the British relief column to break through Turkish lines, the Ottomans starved General Charles Townshend's troops into unconditional surrender after a siege of 145 days. On 29 April 1916, some 13,309 British and Indian officers and men were taken prisoner by the Ottomans, the officers to be billeted in comfort, the soldiers to be marched and worked, many of them to their deaths. The worst surrender in British history since the Battle of Yorktown, Kut was as great a boost to Ottoman morale as it was a blow to the Allied war effort in the Middle East.¹⁰

The British decision to enter into a wartime alliance with the Hashemite Sharifs of Mecca can be traced directly to Allied setbacks in both Gallipoli and Kut. Ottoman battlefield successes kept British fears of jihad alive. In striking an agreement with Hussein ibn Ali (who as Sharif of Mecca was the highest ranking Muslim official in Arab lands) to lead an Arab revolt against Ottoman rule, the British hoped to "rob the call to Holy War of its principal thunderbolt."¹¹ With no more troops to commit to the sideshow of the Ottoman Front, the British hoped to undermine the Ottoman war effort from within its Arab provinces and give the lie to the declaration of jihad through their support of the Arab Revolt – the "sideshow of a sideshow" celebrated in the writings of T.E. Lawrence.

The terms of the Anglo-Hashemite wartime alliance took shape through an exchange of correspondence between the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, and Sharif Hussein in 1915-1916. However, by the time the Hashemites launched their revolt, on 10 June 1916, the Ottomans had broken the support base among politically active Arabs by dispatching Arab officers to remote fronts and by arresting and placing on trial civilian Arab activists. The Hashemites were left to recruit Bedouin irregulars to their cause, and found their revolt confined to the Red Sea

province of the Hijaz, rather than sparking rebellion across Syria and Iraq. The Ottoman garrison at Medina very nearly defeated Hashemite forces in December 1916, when only a show of force by the Royal Navy prevented Fahri Pasha and his troops from overrunning Arab coastal positions. Britain's Arab allies were proving more of a drain on Allied resources than a threat to the Ottoman position in the Arab provinces.

In 1916 the British turned their attention to the security of Egypt. The Suez Canal was of great strategic importance to the British war effort. Shipping from New Zealand, Australia and India all transited the Canal carrying men, horses and material vital to the Allied war effort. The Ottomans and their German allies were keen to shut the Canal, and hoped to play on Egyptian hostility to the British occupation to foment a popular uprising in the Nile Valley. Britain had concentrated on defending the Canal from its western banks, which enjoyed a fresh water supply and rail links for the rapid movement of men and materiel. This left the largely waterless Sinai Peninsula in Ottoman hands. By early 1916 the Ottomans had transformed the Sinai into a launching pad for sustained hostilities against British forces along the Suez Canal. The British realized they would need to drive the Ottomans out of the Sinai altogether if they were to assure the security of the Canal.

The Egyptian Expeditionary Force advanced across northern Sinai at the pace it took to lay a railway line and water pipeline – both essential for maintaining a campaign force in the road-less, waterless deserts of Sinai. Work on the railway began in March 1916, and progressed slowly through the intense heat of the summer months. Ottoman forces took every opportunity to harass the British as they advanced their vital supply lines from the Suez Canal zone towards the Mediterranean port of El Arish. In April 1916, an Ottoman raid captured nearly an entire British cavalry regiment at the brackish Qatiya oasis, and in August they managed to shell British positions in Romani with heavy artillery. Yet by 21 December, the British had driven the Ottomans out of El Arish, and on 9 January 1917 captured the town of Rafah on the Egypt-Palestine border.

Twice the British stormed Ottoman positions in the southern Palestinian port of Gaza. And twice the Ottomans drove them back. In the First Battle of Gaza, on 26 March 1917, British commanders ordered a retreat when their forces were on the verge of a breakthrough, fearing they did not have sufficient water supplies to campaign through the night. With encouragement from Whitehall, and armed with gas-tipped artillery shells and six tanks from the western front, the Egyptian Expeditionary force made a second attempt on Gaza on 17 April, which after three days of fighting also ended in an Ottoman victory over the invaders. The British, once secure of dealing the Ottomans a swift and decisive defeat, had suffered major losses to the Turks in the Dardanelles, in Iraq and in Palestine.

The fortunes of war began to shift in the Allies' favour in the course of 1917. The British rebuilt their Mesopotamian expeditionary force to resume hostilities in Iraq, and succeeded in occupying Baghdad on 11 March 1917. The Arab Revolt scored its first major breakthrough with the capture of the northern Red Sea port of al-`Aqaba on 6 July 1917. The presence of Arab forces on the eastern Sinai inspired the new commander of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF), Sir Edmund Allenby, to revise his strategy in Syria and Palestine. Allenby plotted a northward advance, with his own EEF driving the Turks back in Palestine, and the Arab Army advancing through Ottoman lines in Transjordan. The two armies would then converge in a pincer movement on Damascus, dealing Ottoman forces a death blow in the Arab lands. The EEF carried its end of the deal when Allenby's forces broke through Ottoman lines with a surprise attack on Beersheba on 31 October 1917. The collapse of Ottoman defences in southern Palestine led to rapid British advances to the gates of Jerusalem, which Turkish forces abandoned to British occupation on 9 December.

The loss of Baghdad and Jerusalem in the course of 1917 proved great setbacks to the Ottomans and eased Britain's jihad fears. Yet even as the Turks were being driven back in Iraq and Palestine, their war efforts were thrown an unexpected lifeline with the Russian Revolution in March 1917, and the Bolshevik seizure of power in November that same year. The Ottoman government concluded an

armistice with the new Russian authorities on 18 December and, in line with their anti-imperial policies, the Bolsheviks initiated a full withdrawal from all Ottoman territories occupied in the course of the war, from the Black Sea port of Trabzon through Erzincan, Erzurum and the Caucasus frontier zone. These gains were confirmed in the Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk concluded between Russia and the Central Powers on 3 March 1918.

Yet the new year's hopes of the Ottoman Empire surviving the war were not to survive 1918.

Allenby precipitated the final collapse of Ottoman defences in Greater Syria in the September 1918 Battle of Megiddo. Encouraging Ottoman expectations of an assault across the Jordan Valley (after two failed attempts earlier in 1918), Allenby unleashed a devastating surprise attack on Turkish positions in northern Palestine. Flooding through thinly defended Turkish lines, British forces outflanked Ottoman positions in Nazareth and Nablus, forcing the Turks and their German allies into a desperate retreat across the Jordan River. The Hashemite Arab Army mobilized in the oasis village of al-Azraq to converge on Damascus with Allenby's forces. Arab hopes of major victories against the Ottomans had been stymied, but they did succeed through their commando raids on the Hijaz Railway to pin down 11,000 men in Medina and another 4,000 in Ma'an who otherwise might have been redeployed to the defence of Palestine. It was thus deemed politically expedient to leave the honour of accepting the surrender of Damascus to the Hashemites and their Arab Army on 1 October 1918. British forces continued to pursue the retreating Ottoman army northwards to Aleppo. With the signing of the armistice on 31 October 1918, hostilities finally drew to an end.

As even this brief survey demonstrates, the battles of the Great War were fought right across the Middle East – in the modern states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Egypt, and Libya. Those countries that did not witness fighting were nonetheless affected by the conscription of young men to fight in the armies of the Ottoman Empire, or of their British and French enemies. Civilians were caught up in the wartime suffering through disease, economic hardship, the wartime blockade of ports, and extraordinary

government measures. Indeed, for much of the Arab world, the Turkish term *Seferberlik*, which originally referred to conscription, has come to represent the panoply of civilian suffering in the Great War.¹²

Seferberlik: Civilian Suffering in the Ottoman Great War

Households across the Middle East and North Africa suffered the consequences immediately after the Ottoman entry into the Great War.¹³ The conscription of all men of military age dealt a blow to agriculture and trade just as the economy began to recover from the ravages of the Balkan Wars. The burden of tending fields and shops fell to women, children and the elderly. Wartime requisition measures to feed the hundreds of thousands of soldiers under arms depleted agricultural stocks yet further. These hardships were compounded by nature's wrath, when an unprecedented locust plague swept across the Fertile Crescent and Anatolia in 1915-1916, devastating up to 80 percent of crops in some areas.¹⁴ The Ottoman economy was undermined by the introduction of paper money, and inflation swept the marketplace. Those on fixed incomes faced shortage and ever higher prices. Ottoman supply and logistics were further undermined when the Allied fleet imposed a strict blockade on the Eastern Mediterranean. Starting in November 1914, the Allies deployed over 100 vessels to close the Aegean coastline from the frontier with Greece to the Ottoman port of Izmir (or Smyrna). The blockade was extended the length of the Cilician and Syrian coastlines in early 1915. Cut off from natural maritime trade routes, the Syrian lands were unable to procure food from abroad to mitigate shortage at home. The immediate result was hunger that by 1916 gave way to full scale famine. Contemporary documents suggest as many as 500,000 civilians died in Syria and Lebanon as a result of wartime famine.¹⁵

The hardships of war strained civilian loyalties towards the Ottoman government. These tensions were more pronounced in the Arab provinces, where Young Turk rule had provoked a distinct Arab political movement that, if not demanding outright secession, certainly sought major reforms in the way the Arab provinces were governed under Ottoman rule.¹⁶ Intolerant of any political opposition,

the Unionist government sought to clamp down on Arabist movements. Tens of thousands of Arab Muslims and Christians were summarily arrested and exiled into central Anatolia for the duration of the war. A smaller number of political activists, compromised by their correspondence with French consular authorities in search of great power support, were put on trial in Mount Lebanon. Those found guilty of treason were sentenced to death. Twenty-one were hanged in public squares of Beirut and Damascus on 6 May 1916.

The combination of famine, exile and execution led many in the Arab provinces to believe the Ottoman state was deliberately targeting the Arab peoples for punishment. Such views encouraged a minority to throw their support behind the Arab Revolt declared by Sharif Hussein of Mecca in June 1916. For most, however, Ottoman repressive measures intimidated the Arab peoples into open shows of loyalty. Arab fears of government action against communities of questionable loyalty were only exacerbated by the tragic flood of Armenians who, deported from Anatolia to Aleppo and Dayr al-Zor, began to reach Syria in growing numbers in the summer of 1915.¹⁷

The Armenian genocide remains the most controversial legacy of the Ottoman Great War. Until recently, Turkish law forbade reference to the Armenian genocide as a crime against national honour. The Turkish Nobel laureate in literature, Orhan Pamuk, famously was charged in 2005 for the “public denigration of Turkish identity” after making reference to the killing of “one million Armenians” in an interview with a Swiss magazine. Charges against Pamuk were dropped in 2006, and a conference on the Armenian question held at Istanbul’s Bilgi University later that year served to break a long-standing taboo. Many prominent Turkish and Western scholars continue to dispute the claims that wartime measures against Armenian civilians constituted state-sanctioned genocide.¹⁸ Yet their arguments are increasingly overtaken by a new wave of scholarship, based on Ottoman, Armenian and Western sources, that undermines the case for denial.

It is generally agreed that the Ottoman government initiated deportation operations against the Armenian community on the eve of the Gallipoli landings, on 24 April 1915 (the date

commemorated by Armenians as Genocide Remembrance Day). Starting in Istanbul among the Armenian communal leaders, but rapidly applied across Anatolia and particularly in the eastern provinces in the Caucasus, whole Armenian communities were ordered by the government to leave their homes under armed escort. Eyewitness accounts, both by survivors and by neutral consular officials, confirm that male adolescents and working-aged men were separated from their female family members and massacred. Women, children and the elderly were marched from Anatolia to Syria, some to the relative safety of Aleppo, others on death marches across the Syrian Desert to Dayr al-Zor. While the worst of the deportations and massacres were conducted in 1915-1916, the killing of Armenians continued to the end of the war.

Recent Turkish scholarship argues the deportations and killings were deliberate state policy to remove the Armenian population from the vulnerable Caucasus region, where they were feared to make common cause with the Ottomans' Russian enemies. The government sought to reduce the overall population of Armenians in the Empire, to ensure their numbers did not exceed five to ten percent in any given province.¹⁹ Thus, while the Unionist leadership might not have sought the total annihilation of the Armenian population, their policies called for acts of mass murder that ultimately led to an estimated 800,000 – 1,200,000 Armenian deaths and, for many recent scholars, qualify their actions as genocide.²⁰

The Armenians were not the only Christian community to suffer from deportation and mass murder. Ottoman Greeks were forcibly expelled from their ancestral villages in Anatolia and Thrace before, during and after the Great War as part of an internationally sanctioned population exchange.²¹ The Assyrian community was also a target of Unionist mass killing. Accused of collaboration with the Entente Powers, an estimated 250,000 Assyrian Christians, out of a pre-war population of some 620,000, were killed in the course of the First World War.²² Kurds and Turkish Muslim civilians also suffered from retaliatory killings by Armenian and Assyrian forces with the Russian Army in the Ottoman Caucasus region.²³

While the Ottoman government's responsibility for crimes against civilians remains a subject of intense academic controversy, the magnitude of civilian suffering is beyond dispute. Unlike the Western Front, where military casualties far exceeded the number of civilian dead, the number of Ottoman civilians killed in the course of the Great War by the most conservative estimates is counted in the millions, where the number of military casualties were in the hundreds of thousands. Here again, the impact of the Great War on the Middle East and North Africa was more catastrophic than any conflict before or since.

Wartime Partition Diplomacy and the Postwar State System

The end of the war brought the partition of the defeated Ottoman Empire and the creation of the modern states of the Middle East. The boundaries of the new states were the result of extensive negotiations between the Entente Powers that spanned the years 1915 to 1920. Each of the partition agreements, beginning with the 1915 Constantinople Agreement and including the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence (1915-1916), the Sykes-Picot Accord (1916), the Tripartite Saint-Jean de Maurienne Agreement (1917), and the Balfour Declaration (1917), was shaped by wartime exigencies.²⁴ The Allies were left to iron out the contradictions between agreements as part of the postwar settlement, when they met at San Remo in April 1920. The resulting boundaries have for the most part proven very enduring. So too have the conflicts which were engendered by the flawed process of colonial state building.

Britain, France and Russia began to plan for the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire within months of the Ottoman entry into the war. Russia started the process on the eve of the Gallipoli campaign when it approached Britain and France for their formal agreement to Russian claims to Constantinople and the Straits. In return, France sought its allies' support for their claims to Cilicia and Syria. Britain, for its part, entered the war with no territorial ambitions in the Ottoman Empire. The Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, declared the British government needed "time to take into consideration what their own desiderata" in Ottoman lands would be, but reserved the right to

claim territory of equal strategic significance in due course. These terms were formalized in a series of secret exchanges concluded between 4 March and 10 April 1915 that came to be known as the Constantinople Agreement, the first of the wartime partition accords.

It was Britain that unilaterally re-opened the partition diplomacy when it entered into secret negotiations with the Sharifs of Mecca to declare an Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire. Britain initiated serious discussions with the Hashemites in July 1915 when still confident of victory in Gallipoli. The British government hoped to conclude a wartime alliance with Sharif Hussein in return for recognizing him as caliph and his family's hereditary rule over the Red Sea province of the Hijaz. British officials hoped to satisfy Sharif Hussein's territorial and dynastic ambitions while using his religious authority to undermine the Ottoman sultan's claim to caliphate in a bid to weaken his authority to declare jihad. They found the Sharif's ambitions growing in the course of their correspondence, claiming kingship over all Arab lands between Egypt and Turkey. "His pretensions are in every way exaggerated," Sir Henry McMahon, the British high commissioner in Egypt charged with negotiations with the Hashemites, wrote to London.²⁵

As their campaign in Gallipoli faltered, the British were forced to reconsider terms with the Hashemites. Sir Henry McMahon's famous letter of 24 October 1915, written as the British government began planning to evacuate from the Dardanelles, conceded most of the Sharif's demands. Excluding those territories in the Persian Gulf, in which Britain had established treaty relations with local rulers (like Muscat and Oman, the Trucial States, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Ibn Saud's territories in the Najd and the Eastern Province), and the provinces of Basra and Baghdad in which Britain declared its "established position and interests", Sir Henry McMahon was willing to give Britain's recognition of Arab independence within the boundaries demanded by the Hashemites. Yet mindful of his government's prior agreement to French demands for Cilicia and Syria, Sir Henry also sought the exclusion of "the two districts of Mersina and Alexandretta and the

portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo” on the spurious grounds that the inhabitants of those territories “cannot be said to be purely Arab”.

Having struck the basic terms of an agreement with the Hashemites, the British realized they needed to put more specific boundaries to the French demands for “Cilicia and Syria,” classical toponyms with no modern administrative meaning. This is the background to the notorious Sykes-Picot Agreement, negotiated between 26 April and 23 October 1916 by Lord Kitchener’s Middle East expert Sir Mark Sykes, a man with little more than a traveller’s experience of the Arab world, and Charles François Georges-Picot, the former French consul-general to Beirut. While the Sykes-Picot Agreement bears no resemblance to the modern map of the Middle East, it set the precedent for future map-drawing exercises to create nation-states from Ottoman Arab lands under British and French domination. It was, in essence, an exercise in balance of power politics between rival empires. As such, the British and French architects of the Sykes-Picot Agreement only considered the interests of Britain and France, with no thought to the aspirations of the peoples of the region who would live within the boundaries drafted in Paris and London.

Following Italy’s entry into the Great War on the side of the Entente Powers in May 1915, the partition diplomacy resumed with Italy making its own demands in Ottoman territory. Between 19 April and 26 September 1917, Britain, France, and Italy concluded an agreement in Saint-Jean de Maurienne as an extension of the Sykes-Picot Accord. Because Italian demands were confined to the Turkish coastline and played no role in the ultimate shape of the Middle East, the Saint-Jean de Maurienne Agreement is often overlooked as part of the wartime partition diplomacy. Yet this agreement is essential to understand the balance of power politics pursued by the Entente Powers, and the way in which Ottoman territory increasingly came to be viewed as war prizes by the Allies.

The Balfour Declaration of 2 November 1917 was the last and most controversial wartime agreement. Seen in light of the Arab-Israeli conflict it engendered, the Balfour Declaration is often read to the exclusion of its wartime context, either as a betrayal of Britain’s pledges to the Arabs or

as a triumph of the Zionist movement to win the support of the British government for their cause.²⁶

The British government was neither pro-Arab nor pro-Zionist. Its only loyalty was to the British Empire, which by 1917 was caught up in a murderous war with no end in sight. Government officials, believing Jewish support might reinforce both Russian and American commitment to the war effort, thought it politic to lend support to the Zionist movement, believing Zionism represented a Jewish international whose political and financial influence stretched from Washington to St Petersburg (a misconception Chaim Weizmann, as leader of the Zionist movement, was only too happy to encourage).²⁷

Moreover, the timing of the Balfour Declaration was clearly influenced by wartime considerations. The War Cabinet approved the declaration of support for the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine only after Allenby's army had broken through Turkish lines in Beersheba. The British in Egypt had come to appreciate the importance of Palestine in assuring the security of the Suez Canal. So long as Palestine was in hostile hands, the Canal could be attacked through the Sinai Peninsula with relative impunity, for the inhospitable and waterless terrain ruled out billeting soldiers in Sinai. The Sykes-Picot Agreement called for an international administration in Palestine. After the Sinai campaign, and the hard-won victory in Beersheba and the Third Battle of Gaza, British commanders and administrators in Egypt agreed on the imperative of securing Palestine for British rule. This meant re-negotiating with their French allies. The British found it easier to do so in the name of a great humanitarian cause, such as the restoration of the Jewish people to their historic homeland, rather than as a self-interested land grab. On the face of it, Lord Balfour was offering Palestine to the Zionist movement. In fact, Lloyd George's government was using the Zionist movement to secure Palestine for British rule.

By war's end, the different agreements of the partition diplomacy left a number of contradictions for the peacemakers in Paris to resolve. In April 1920, the British, French, Italian, and Japanese delegations retreated to the Italian resort town of San Remo to agree the final partition of Ottoman

lands. The Arab provinces were to be divided between the victorious powers, with Iraq, Palestine and Transjordan awarded to Britain and Syria and Lebanon awarded to France as League of Nations mandates. In Anatolia, Italy was awarded the coastline around Antalya and a Greek autonomous zone was established that extended from Izmir into central Anatolia. The allies also created autonomous zones for the Armenians and Kurds in Eastern Anatolia. All that was left to the Ottomans were their capital city, Istanbul, and those parts of north-western Anatolia (roughly from Ankara north to the Black Sea and west to the Straits) that no one else wanted. These terms were drafted into the Treaty of Sèvres, the draconian peace imposed on the defeated Ottoman Empire in August 1920.

While the Kemalist movement mounted a successful war of national liberation that between 1919 and 1922 succeeded in reunifying all of Anatolia and Turkish Thrace under Ankara's rule, the state system imposed on the Arab world was to survive and endure down to the present day. The manner in which the modern boundaries were imposed by imperial fiat has destabilized the region ever since. Guided by the imperative of balancing the ambitions of rival empires, rather than in consultation with the Arab peoples concerned, the frontiers of Arab states have lacked legitimacy. A century after the Great War, Middle Eastern frontiers continue to bedevil regional stability – less on grounds of legitimacy than as a consequence of the many peoples who remain stateless (notably the Kurds and Palestinians) as a result of the wartime partition diplomacy and its consequences.

Conclusion

The Middle East played a decisive role in the history of the First World War. The Ottoman Front, where Britain and France hoped to secure a swift and decisive victory that might hasten the end of the war, served rather to lengthen the global conflict. Millions of soldiers that might have been deployed to the primary battlefield in the Western Front fought instead for four long years in Ottoman lands. Moreover, it was the Ottoman Empire more than any other belligerent that turned Europe's conflict into a *world* war. Soldiers from around the world fought in the battlefields of

Turkey and the Arab lands. New Zealanders and Australians, volunteers from Newfoundland, every ethnicity of South Asia, the English, Scots, Welsh and Irish, the French and their North and West African colonial soldiers from Senegal, Mali, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia made war against Ottoman Turks, Arabs, Kurds, and their German and Austrian allies. The Ottoman front was a veritable tower of Babel, a killing field for global soldiers whose valour and sacrifice has too often been neglected in the history of the Great War.

The First World War was also a decisive turning point in the modern history of the Middle East. The war touched more lives and incurred more destruction than any conflict in the region's history. It also brought to an end four centuries of Ottoman rule over the Arab lands, and over six centuries in Anatolia. The modern state system that followed Ottoman rule was shaped by imperial ambitions rather than a process of self-determination. The emergence of the modern Middle East and many of its conflicts are thus a direct consequence of the Great War.

¹ This work draws on a number of recent surveys of the First World War in the Middle East, particularly Ryan Gingeras, *Fall of the Sultanate: The Great War and the End of the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1922* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Sean McMeekin, *The Ottoman Endgame: War, Revolution and the Making of the Modern Middle East, 1908-1923* (London: Allen Lane, 2015); Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East, 1914-1920* (London: Allen Lane, 2015); and Christian Coates Ulrichsen, *The First World War in the Middle East* (London: Hurst, 2014).

² Mustafa Aksakal, *The Ottoman Road to War in 1914: The Ottoman Empire and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 42, 82-3; Michael A. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 36-41; Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

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- ³ On German-Ottoman relations in the lead-up to WWI see Sean McMeekin, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany's Bid for World Power, 1898-1918* (London: Allen Lane, 2010); on Germany's jihad politics, see Tilman Ludke, *Jihad Made in Germany: Ottoman and German Propaganda and Intelligence Operations in the First World War* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005).
- ⁴ Jay Winter, "Demography," in J. Horne, ed, *A Companion to World War I* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 249. On Ottoman casualty figures, see also Edward J. Erickson, *Ordered to Die: A History of the Ottoman Army in the First World War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 237-39.
- ⁵ Mustafa Aksakal, "The Ottoman Proclamation of Jihad," in Erik-Jan Zürcher, ed., *Jihad and Islam in World War I* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2016), 53-69.
- ⁶ Eugene Rogan, "Rival Jihads: Islam and the Great War in the Middle East, 1914-1918," *Journal of the British Academy* 4 (2016) 1-20.
- ⁷ Erickson, *Ordered to Die*, 59-60.
- ⁸ Edward J. Erickson, *Gallipoli: The Ottoman Campaign* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2010).
- ⁹ Official British casualty figures from Aspinall-Oglander, *Military Operations: Gallipoli*, 2:484.
- ¹⁰ Charles Townshend, *When God Made Hell: The British Invasion of Mesopotamia and the Creation of Iraq, 1914-1921* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010).
- ¹¹ George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1938), 140.
- ¹² Najwa al-Qattan, "Safarbarlik: Ottoman Syria and the Great War," in Thomas Philipp and Christoph Schumann, eds, *From the Syrian Land to the States of Syria and Lebanon* (Beirut: Orient-Institut, 2004), 163-74.
- ¹³ Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *A Land of Aching Hearts: The Middle East in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University press, 2014).
- ¹⁴ The locust plague is followed in the diary of the Jerusalemite Ottoman soldier Ihsan Turjman, translated by Salim Tamari in *Year of the Locust: A Soldier's Diary and the Erasure of Palestine's Ottoman Past* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

¹⁵ Linda S. Schilcher, "The Famine of 1915-1918 in Greater Syria," in John Spagnolo, ed, *Problems of the Modern Middle East in Historical Perspective* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1992), 229-258; M. Talha Çiçek, *War and State Formation in Syria: Cemal Pasha's governorate during World War I, 1914-1917* (London: Routledge, 2014), 232-257.

¹⁶ Eliezer Tauber, *The Emergence of the Arab Movements* (London: Frank Cass, 1993).

¹⁷ Fayiz al-Ghusayn, an early Arab nationalist who served in the Ottoman army during WWI, left a detailed account of the mass killing of Armenians that was translated and published in English: Fâ'iz El-Ghusein, *Martyred Armenia* (New York: George H. Doran, 1918).

¹⁸ Justin McCarthy argues against genocide claims in *Muslims and Minorities: The Population of Ottoman Anatolia and the End of the Empire* (New York: New York University Press, 1983), 47-88; and in his *Turks and Armenians: Nationalism and Conflict in the Ottoman Empire* (Madison, WI: Turko-Tatar Press, 2015). Stanford Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw reject claims the Armenians were victims of genocide in *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey, Vol. II: Reform, Revolution and Republic – the Rise of Modern Turkey, 1808-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 315-17. Others who have rejected genocide claims include Bernard Lewis, who in 1995 was found guilty by French courts of genocide denial and fined a symbolic 1 Franc.

¹⁹ On the "five to ten percent regulation" see Taner Akçam, *The Young Turks' Crime Against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 242-263; and Fuat Dündar, "Pouring a People into the Desert: The 'Definitive Solution' of the Unionists to the Armenian Question," in Ronald Grigor Suny, Fatma Müge Göçek and Morman M. Naimark, eds, *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 282.

²⁰ Among the most prominent works by Armenian, Turkish and Western historians treating the wartime deportation and massacre of Armenians as a genocide would include: Taner Akçam, *Young Turks' Crime Against Humanity*; Vahakn N. Dadrian and Tanker Akçam, *Judgment at Istanbul: The Armenian Genocide Trials* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011); Donald Bloxham, *The Great Game of*

Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Ugur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Ronald Grigor Suny, *They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else: A History of the Armenian Genocide* (Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press, 2015).

²¹ Ryan Gingeras, *Sorrowful Shores: Violence, Ethnicity, and the End of the Ottoman Empire, 1912-1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²² Bloxham, *Great Game of Genocide*, 97-98; Paul Gaunt, "The Ottoman Treatment of the Assyrians," in Suny, Göçek, and Naimark, *Question of Genocide*, 244-259.

²³ See for example the retaliatory killing of Kurdish civilians by Armenians and Nestorians in Russian service in Rawanduz in May 1916, discussed in Kamal Madhar Ahmad, *Kurdistan During the First World War* (London: Saqi Books, 1994), 170.

²⁴ The texts of each of these agreements is reproduced in J.C. Hurewitz, *The Middle East and North Africa in World Politics, vol. 2* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980).

²⁵ McMahon quoted in Jonathan Schneer, *The Balfour Declaration: The Origins of the Arab Israeli Conflict* (New York: Random House, 2010), 59.

²⁶ The Arab view is epitomized by George Antonius in *The Arab Awakening* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1938), the Zionist view by Chaim Weizmann, *Trial and Error* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949).

²⁷ Tom Segev, *One Palestine, Complete: Jews and Arabs Under the British Mandate* (London: Abacus, 2001), 42-43.