Contemporary Boundaries in the Middle East

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ILIASSE SDIQUI, APR 16 2014

What Determined the Contemporary Political Boundaries in the Middle East Established After the Demise of the Ottoman Empire?

This essay seeks to highlight the dynamic processes by which the spatial configuration of a whole region was determined during the 19th century, and culminating into the contemporary Middle East. Existing literature offers numerous explanatory factors behind the contemporary political boundaries of the area in question. Nevertheless, academic contributions pursue two major trends. First, it is argued that the political boundaries of the Middle East were "colonial constructs" and merely the product of colonial influence; given the presence of British and French imperial powers and their interests in the region, this explication would be rationally deduced. Other theories contend that existing boundaries were established under the consent of key autochthonous actors, adding that it would be too conspiratorial to attribute the formation of these nation-states to imperial motives. Our aim is then to analyse the "overlapping consensus" of the above trends, in order to critically examine these claims.

The boundaries of the Middle East represent a conflation of external and internal forces. Argued is the fact that state formation in the Middle East – an organic process – began with local aspirations, which were later transposed to both the regional and global scale. The Arab state's "mind" originated from within the region, but its "body" was institutionalised elsewhere. Today, coordinating both mind and body has proven to be the most challenging political task for the region's modern state system.

Geography is politics, and politics is geography. Indeed, this idea has never been as explicit as it is in the Middle East. Today, with 17 states, 46 boundaries, and an average of 4,7 land boundaries per state, the region's territorial stability relies on a geopolitical framework (Blake, 1992:366). Historically speaking, the region underwent major shifts after World War I, which led to a complexification of the state system in the newly formed Arab Middle East. Giving an account of such a transition is in other words rewriting history, or at least, having the potential to do so. Henceforth, it is common to affiliate the current political boundaries with British and French imperial legacy. This illustrates an inviolable canon of imperialism: it is the idea that colonial powers have directly (using a ruler) shaped the political boundaries of the Middle East, and notably via Sykes-Picot agreement. Boundaries were drawn regardless of existing human, social or cultural geography of the region. Without doubt, international and individual interests of the major powers heavily influenced the current political boundaries of the Middle East. In fact, the etymology of the term "Middle East" can be traced back to colonial influence. However, "it is often forgotten that the vast majority of Arab countries are not only old societies but also old political entities in one form or another", and result from regional legitimate dynamics (Weitzman-M, 1993:5). It is exactly these internal social forces that will serve as the locus of this analysis.

An example of the importance of indigenous forces, is given by G.H. Blake (1992:367), and where maritime boundaries were set by "imperial powers alone, local powers alone, and imperial powers acting with local powers" (Blake, 1992:367). Although this example represents a post World War II context, it is nevertheless synonymous with the coexistence of both national and international interests. This paper will seek to undermine the theory of external influence on state-formation in order to highlight and explore the pre-existing foundations of those newly formed states. It is indeed more insightful and challenging to view state-formation by way of the latter; to assume that the political boundaries were simply the object of colonial influence tends to limit the scope of analysis, whereas trying to

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identify an indigenous source for state formation can allow for greater analysis. The rationale for the study is brilliantly discussed by Kazancigil [1986:119-25]. Indeed, the state concept may be a European "imported commodity"; however, its "voluntary mimicry" by non-Western elites proves that there are internal forces influencing political boundaries and state formation (Ayubi, 1995:11). The study will first seek to socially contextualise the elaboration of these political boundaries, and identify the embryonic stage of the idea that led to their establishment. Furthermore, the war period in which formalization of political boundaries occurred will be analysed, and the claim that imperial interests created these boundaries will be critically examined. Last but not least, the paper will explore the conceptual aspect of these boundaries and the implications of their establishment.

Endogenesis of Ideological Boundaries: Idea at an Embryonic Stage

The context of the establishment of political boundaries *per se* is one of Ottoman agony, and reflects ideas of uncertainty about the future of its empire. By the late eighteenth century, the empire faced dissolution; however, its lifespan was increased thanks to a process of draconian reforms under Selim III (Yapp, 1987:97). Nevertheless, these reforms confirmed the fears and self-perception of the empire as gradually disintegrating. The fact that the empire had lost territorial integrity, namely Crimea, and that the Ottoman ruler couldn't protect the "Muslim Land", posed a great threat to Selim's legitimacy and signified that reform was a must (Yapp, 1987, 99); these reforms will be explored further in this paper.

What is interesting to note when analysing the reformist Ottoman Empire between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is the importance of the context in which these reforms took place. Indeed, when socially contextualised, the series of shifts undergone by the empire reveal the importance of these ideas in shaping much of Ottoman policy (Fortna, 2005:23); they were the seeds by which specific social structures were later established. Context is therefore of tremendous importance, as it defined what the empire thought of itself, its subjects, and the powers surrounding it. The importance of ideas is underlined by the fact that the initial reforms were majoritarily educational. For instance, the reform under Mahmud II, which was from top to bottom and sought to develop the bureaucratic nature of the Ottoman Empire, by creating a bureaucratic and multicultural class. This unique system meant that "for the first time Ottoman Muslims were encouraged to learn European languages" in order to conduct foreign affairs (Yapp, 1987:107).

Furthermore, the main discontinuity occurred with the transition from the *Tanzimat* to the centralisation prospect envisaged by Sultan Hamid. This was the defining domestic rupture that would lead to the first narratives of dissent within the empire. The *Tanzimat* and Hamidian rule were to say the least, antagonistic policies. On the one hand, the Tanzimat operated with a decentralized structure and gave a great deal of autonomy to local provincial groups with the *millets.* However, under Hamidian rule, Istanbul was now aiming to centralize power in order to consolidate economic structures. Here the role of religious minorities was crucial, in the sense that they acted as a conduit towards the external realm, due to their diasporic nature and prosperous character[1]. This was perceived as a threat by the Hamidian state, and thus he "began to lay greater stress on the Islamic character of the Empire" (Khoury, 1983:54). A great example of the shift in perceived ideas of the Ottoman state is portrayed by the change of its educational agenda. The Ottoman state's growing alertness to Christian minorities, affected the internal dynamics of the educational system, and precisely cartography: Istanbul's paranoiac fear of being undermined, led it to depict the Ottoman Empire "in its entirety" on school maps, as opposed to previous sympathy towards French maps (Fortna, 2005:24-5). Clearly, Istanbul's image of the self and overall identity were affected.

Moreover, a first wave of dissidence and opposition started to express itself, and mainly in the furthest points from Istanbul's nucleus. In Damascus and Beirut, two different social structures and religious entities opposed Istanbul: respectively, a Muslim Intelligentsia accompanied by a Christian bourgeoisie, and a lower Muslim clergy and liberal secular voices (Khoury, 1983:54-55). The idea of centralisation had now transcended the embryonic stage. By now, a certain political identity expressed throughout various entities, started to form much of the socio-political structure of the empire. This structure had at its core two important variables: religion, with the role played by minorities, and the presence of social class, namely the urban notability. How could these concerns be voiced to form political boundaries?

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While the political boundaries were not yet determined, the consequences of these shifts created a certain political culture both within Istanbul and in peripheral provinces, which was likely to catalyse state formation in the future. These small political entities would later become too wieldy to govern from central locations. In 1906, the Committee of Union and Progress, led by Young Turks and Arabs, put an end to the previous discontinuity only to replace it with a new one (Yapp,1987:117). Clearly, growing internal opposition within the CUP led to the establishment and institutionalisation of "ideological" divergences. Indeed, "political differences between the CUP and the Syrian-Arab notables became more apparent, reflected in divergent interpretations of the ideology of Ottomanism" (Khoury, 1983-58). In this context, Istanbul proceeded with a radical policy of "overcentralization", thus undermining provincial autonomy. The ideological gap increased with the CUP's covert operations: in private letters between prominent figures of the CUP such as Nazim Bey, Arabs were referred to as "dogs of the Turkish nation" (Hanioglu, 1991:31). The political ideas which were to set the political boundaries now consisted of an opposition between three dynamics: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Turkification. "The most glaring distinction between Arabists and Ottomanists concerned the holding of administrative office" (Khoury, 1983:68). Turks from Istanbul, replacing Arab civil servants, made it harder for Istanbul to hold an appealing policy in the provinces. Slowly but steadily, the politicization of Arabism and Turkism was forged in both public and private spheres. For instance, "Turkish cultural societies gradually rediscovered the elements of an overarching Turkish identity in the same way that the Arabists had begun to rediscover those of a broad Arab identity under the influence of the *salafis"* (Kayali, 1997:22). Arabism is then the offspring of failed Ottomanism. However, there is evidence of aspirations to create independent states, appropriate power and domesticate it from both sides before the actual Young Turks' revolution. However, proving the anterior existence of Arabist patriotism is often ignored. Indeed, as Khalidi (1991:53) points out: "A significant problem with the work of many historians [such as Dawn, George Antonius or Cleveland] who have downplayed the extent of Arabist feeling before 1914 is that they seem to be arguing in the face of several important categories of primary evidence" (Khalidi, 1991:53).

Although political boundaries as such were not yet formalised, the study has shown that a certain pre-existing politicized narrative and tradition expressed itself in the region. It did so throughout important notions such as culture, religion and language and within distinct political entities and bureaucratic classes[2]. These ideas will later be the basis for justifying geographic and cultural continuity[3]. In the next part, we will see how these important transnational components will become regional in scope, and how they will formalise political boundaries of the region.

War as Transition: Institutionalisation of Political Boundaries

"A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization. A civilization that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a stricken civilization. A civilization that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilization"

Aime Cesaire, Discours sur le Colonialisme[4]

The decision of Istanbul (under CUP authority) to enter the First World War with the Alliance is the "single most important event in the history of the modern Near East" because of the tremendous consequences it had on the political structure of the region (Yapp, 1987:266). As a result, the potential for transition from regional empire to a systemic configuration of states was subject to strategic exploitation by colonial actors. Indeed, the legal system, and "internationally recognized boundaries" of the Middle East are believed to be the product of colonial interference. New states emerged, and whereas some reflected old administrative traits, others such as Trans-Jordan, Syria and Iraq, "involved either detaching some part of a former Ottoman province [or], adding several provinces together" (Owen, 1992:13). This transition led to a "plethora" of new states making the Near East an Arab Middle East (Lapidus, 2002:489).

As a consequence, a new challenging query arises: are these new states "colonial constructs" or do they represent nation-states? No doubt, the region's states breed artificiality in their appearances, which is mainly due to colonial intercession. However, one may argue that the process of state building had already begun in the late Ottoman period with decaying tribal social structures (Owen, 1992:13-14). The Levant had expressed a will to establish territorial state before the war, and a certain sense of political identity was already being expressed (Weitzman,

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1993:7-10). As expressed in the earlier chapter, the Ottoman Empire's *tanzimat* granted a great deal of autonomy to minorities and new political entities; ignoring this fact is in itself a colonial idea which affiliates the empire to an "Oriental despotism", seen as the "Sick man of Europe"[5].

To highlight this discrepancy, the validity of the claim that states illustrate foreign interests, and mainly British and French ones, will be critically assessed. Although external forces were crucial in setting up the current boundaries of the regions, I argue that these forces had to be met by local interests during and after the war. It is this conflation of interests which will set in place arrangements that illustrate the contemporary boundaries of the Middle East.

States in the Levant were carved by British and French bargains and overall interests in the region. This statement denotes a larger infamous argument held by historians and other academics alike: "European powers redrew the lines of the Levant according to their own needs. They are gone, but the map remains, along with a shameful irony" (Scheinmann, 2013). The colonial strategic apprehension of space is often determined by recurring variables in almost all colonial framework. The formulation of colonial policy directed at state-formation in the region was legitimised by a reference to minority communities of the Middle East and emphasis on its ethnic differences[6]: divide and rule. A clear example of this is visible in the French attitude towards a Syrian and Lebanese state. Indeed, policy making legitimised colonial control in the region under the basis of protecting Christian Maronite communities in the region of Mount Lebanon for instance (Longrigg, 1958:116). Colonial powers also tend to adopt a certain "multi-statal" vision for these states by emphasising ethnic differences: in Syria, "the fragmentation of the territory was a convenient, superficially attractive, and not indefensible policy" greeted by French policy-makers (Longrigg, 1958:117).

Of course, these strategic visions, which heavily influenced the political boundaries of the region, also emanated from important economic interests in the region. It was more the case that the British colonial force felt the need to protect its routes to the East; according to Robinson (1999:401), this was the way in which the British managed the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire that led to the formation of three new states in the Middle East (Robinson, 1999:401). It is true, Britain had a great bargaining power for instance, when negotiating the Baghdad Railway projects with Ottomans: "for strategic reasons related to the defence of Egypt […] British military planners had always sought to prevent a link-up between the Ottoman and Egyptian railway systems (Khalidi, 1998:260). The example of Syria is the most relevant one when assessing that boundaries are a colonial construct; it is a country that "never wanted to exist at all, at least within its present boundaries" and most Syrians believe that the state was an artificial colonial creation (Humphreys, 1999:71).

Despite this evidence, the early seeds of Arabism planted under the late Ottoman Empire may be another explanatory factor that legitimises the Arab state as an act of will. According to Eliezer Tauber (1993:88), the Arabs were willing to cooperate with Britain because the "Arab nation wanted its freedom as a result of the nationalist idea that had begun to pulsate within it"(Tauber, 1993:88). This statement is crucial and reinforces the argument advanced by this paper: the Levantine boundaries that still exist today were not merely the result of external influence. Haddad (1991:126-27) successfully proves this when giving the example of *Sayid Tayib Al-Naqib,* a rich merchant of Iraq who expresses his willingness to have his interests protected by the British (Haddad, 1991:127). Clearly, local interests were also a defining feature of the would-be Arab states; the domestic realm of the Middle East also had considerable leverage in deciding the future of the region. Kayali (1997: 7) states that "the notion of the Arab caliphate offered the framework for an umbrella ideology that would accommodate particular interests and regional, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity in the Arab-populated lands". It would be completely absurd to think that the remaining social and political structures from the Ottoman Empire, which attributed a great deal of autonomy to provinces, were non-existent after the war. In fact, the Ottoman legacy is directly linked to the development of these political entities, thus emphasising the local and domestic importance of Middle Eastern regions.

In addition, although the economic colonial interests were important, these interests do not prove that there is a direct causality between policy-making and economic expansionism. Khalidi (1998:261-62) clearly asserts that the economic influence on the region only modified the economic infrastructures from which political claims could be made; however, those political claims emanated from within. He courageously asserts that there were shortcomings and failures within British foreign policy, and that economic decisions were often the product of local context and

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"unwilling pioneers [such as] financiers, bankers…" (Khalidi, 1988:262). It is exactly this nuance that this study tries to emphasise: it is too simplistic to attribute the past, present and future structure of a whole region to one single dynamic, let alone the colonial imperialist one. These colonial powers institutionalised the boundaries of the region by making them formal with Sykes-Picot; however, these boundaries were sustained by internal forces. The fact that Hussein's Arab revolt of 1916 was preceded by unsuccessful ones shows that the idea of a state was there and that it just needed the process (Tauber, 1993:244). Another example is the fact that the Hashemites had always wanted to create a state prior to any colonial establishment of boundaries (Khalidi, 1991:214).

A pragmatic reading of the formalisation of Levantine political boundaries suggests that if the colonial forces had not been involved in emulating the mechanism by which modern states would emerge, then would the Arab Nationalists succeed in actually forging their own state? The evidence from the Hussein-McMahon correspondence suggests that it isn't the case, and that such a formalization was indeed unstoppable. Mansfield's detailed account of the correspondence shows that Hussein placed considerable trust in Britain to defend his interests and that he was aware of the interests of other parties such as France (Mansfield, 1973:40-41). Alongside Ibn Saud and Al Idrisi, Hussein was ready to compromise territorial integrity for the idea of an Arab Hijazi state (Mansfield, 36-47). Hussein then had the freedom to choose – however, he couldn't back down or change his decision. My point is that colonial powers, and more precisely Britain, never made any formal commitment to Hussein, and the ambiguity of the deals culminate in today's Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is in effect known as the *Nakba*, or greatest catastrophe known to the Arab populace.

So What Really Influenced and Determined Political Boundaries of the Region?

To sum up, the study has tried to adopt a pragmatic reading of the question by not jumping to conclusions, and not affiliating the political boundaries of the Middle East directly to European powers. Stating that the Middle East's present and future are and will be the result of foreign intervention actually patronises the region by confining it to eternal control. Recent evidence of the Arab uprisings shows that the region has many things to say. The political boundaries as such were determined by forces which emanated from within the region. These forces chose to adopt foreign practices and domesticate them. Had there not been great powers, or divergent interests from different powers, the ideas would be the same; only the processes would be different.

The political boundaries were not mere colonial constructs, in so far that their presence was justified and made sense amongst many in the region with the exception of Palestine. However, one may argue that with time, alienation may have been another form of determining political boundaries. But evidence for this claim relies mainly on speculation rather than factual substance. Ignoring the internal dynamics that determined the political boundaries of the region and simply attributing them to foreign involvement is ignoring the region's power to shape policy. When saying that the region was merely at the mercy of external forces, one completely overlooks the rationality of the actors in the region and its sovereignty. However, this logic may have changed with a postcolonial reading. Indeed, to say that the political boundaries were mere colonial constructs prevents us from identifying the real colonial influence on the region, which wasn't formal or institutional but rather attributed to the power of ideas, and other forces such as globalization or capitalism. For instance, ideas of the state as ruling over the people and the state per se being a colonial construct. Ayubi (1995:11-15), is perhaps one of the only academics that adopted such a postcolonial reading to explore what the region had to offer. He explores how Islamic scholars such as Afghani or Rabii actually defined the state, and concludes that the superimposition of Western ideas on the region is mainly due to the fact that Ottoman or Arab Muslim scholars did not have a concise and viable definition of the state as such (Ayubi, 1995:11-26). This can only reinforce the complexity of the question and the region itself.

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[1]Kayali, Hasan (1997) *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Evidence of Christian minorities being favourable for decentralized government in chapter 3.

[2]

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It wasn't a class conflict but rather a particular class of urban notables that would form these entities.

[3] Both CUP and Arabists will use the religious "card" to legitimise their political credo: for instance, the *ulamas* of Damascus using women's dress code as a basis for opposing CUP liberal ideology.This is related in Khoury's analysis of early Arab nationalism (1983:57).

[4] Translated by Joan Pinkham. This version published by Monthly Review Press: New York and London, 1972. Originally published as *Discours sur le colonialism*e by Editions Presence Africaine, 1955.

[5] Appellation mainly attributed to Tsar Nicholas I

[6] The notion that policies had a fragmenting goal is visible with French attempts to create "a mini state for the Alawis along the Mediterranean coast and another for the Druze" (Owen, 1992:17).

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Written by: Iliasse Sdiqui
Written at: Royal Holloway University of London
Written for: Professor Sandra Halperin
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