(Re)Shaping Territories to Identities: Is the Middle East a Colonial Invention?

https://www.e-ir.info/2018/10/07/reshaping-territories-to-identities-is-the-middle-east-a-colonial-invention/

YATANA YAMAHATA, OCT 7 2018

The decline of the Ottoman Empire during the First World War prompted negotiations of treaties that divided the empire into a number of successor states controlled by one or the other of the victorious Western colonial powers (Owen 2004: 6). These provinces under Western rule would emerge to become the modern Middle Eastern nation-states. In this essay, the origins and development of the 'Middle East' as a region comprising of different nation-states will be discussed in order to assess whether it is a colonial invention or not. Firstly, the ways in which Orientalism served as a basis of Western colonial thought and activity will be examined to make the following claim: Orientalism enabled the colonial invention of the 'Middle East' without consideration of different identities in the region. This claim will be further explored by analysing to what extent colonial administration had influenced the formation of 'states,' 'nations' and hence 'nation-states' in the Middle East that continue to remain today.

The theoretical framework of Orientalism is the foundation of coloniality and colonialism; it resides upon an "ontological and epistemological distinction" made between 'the Occident' (the West) and 'the Orient' (the East) as an institution for dealing with the Orient by "making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it" (Said 1978: 10-11). For example, Islam is depicted as an "anti-rational and anti-scientific [religion that] oppresses vast portions of our globe, and in them maintains the idea most opposed to progress" (Lockman 2009: 79-80). This is especially seen in various literary and artistic portrayals of Muslim women as "victims of cruel patriarchal practice" who have no agency (Marandi and Tari 2012: 11). They are reduced to the stereotypes of sex slaves to serve "the erotic gratification of oversexed Muslim men" (Lockman 2009: 70). Such cultural representations were crucial to the practices of colonisation as they assumed the superiority of Western civilisations ('the Self') over 'the Others' and hence reinforced the idea that the Orient must emulate them to achieve progress (Shabanirad and Marandi 2015: 26). The dichotomy of the West and the rest created by Orientalism granted the Occident's authority over the Orient to dominate, and even restructure it.

The Middle East is a colonial invention "serving the West's Eurocentric purpose" to extend its sphere of influence through "civilising" the Orient (Bilgin 2004: 26). Orientalist knowledge production is complicit with the workings of Western power as can be observed in the naming of the 'Middle East' itself; it is "middle" and "eastern" only in proximity to Europe (Lockman 2009: 98). Additionally, the denomination of a portion of land as the "Middle East" is an arbitrary act as "it encompasses a vast area of great diversity [that is] inhabited by many different peoples with their own distinct languages, cultures and ways of life" (Lockman 2009: 97-98). Although the 'Middle East' was produced through the Orientalist power-knowledge nexus as an ahistorical space, there is also a need to consider the specific origins and developments of nation-states, as there were variations in how they emerged to constitute the region.

The Orientalist act of drawing borders that determined the territories of 'Middle Eastern' nation-states lie in the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement. It was made in secret during the First World War to distribute the Arab provinces of the former Ottoman Empire between Great Britain and France (Yapp 1987: 277-278). The agreement also included conditions on "custom tariffs, the construction, ownership and operation for railways and the status of Haifa and Alexandretta (today's Iskenderun) as 'free ports' for France and Britain respectively" that legitimised their Middle Eastern interests (Özsu 2016). This resulted in the mandate system, which shared features of an old-fashioned

(Re)Shaping Territories to Identities: Is the Middle East a Colonial Invention?

Written by Yatana Yamahata

colony, but additionally required the mandate holders, Great Britain and France, "to submit to certain internationally sanctioned guidelines, notably the need to establish constitutional governments in the new states" (Owen 2004: 6). Although the Middle East suffered a different fate from South Asian and African colonies, the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the mandate system that followed it were both colonialist policies at their essence. Both policies were the manifestation of Orientalism as they asserted Western superiority and hence their responsibility to 'civilise' the East as a way of preparing it for eventual independence.

The effects of such Orientalist policies on the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East can be seen by the challenges of the 'state,' 'nation' and 'nation-state' to this day. According to the Western state model, a sovereign state is a territorially-based apparatus of government administration that is recognised diplomatically by other states (Mingst and Arreguin-Toft 2016: 134). In contrast, the Ottoman Empire was a patrimonial one, headed by a "Sultan-Caliph whose rule was legitimated by the implementation of the Islamic law" (Owen 2004: 15). After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the colonial powers imposed their state system without regard to the ethnically and religiously diverse populations of the former empire; it was implemented on the new Middle Eastern states through establishing "a centralized administration, a legal system, a flag and internationally recognised boundaries" (Owen 2004: 9). The attempt of Western powers to 'modernise' the region through the implementation of their states system is Orientalist and colonialist in essence.

Moreover, the Western concept of state formation was also dependent on the participation of the state in the world market. Its ideas of modernisation thus required the transformation of the tributary system to a capitalist one (Bromley 1994: 104-105). The new Middle Eastern states became peripheral areas that were forcibly treated as objects of exploitation. Their economic roles were limited to exporting primary products and importing manufactured good, serving to complement the development of the colonial powers at the core (Halperin 1997: 35). For example, Egypt, formerly a primarily agrarian economy, became "a plantation producing cotton for Europe's textile industries" then later suffered under "the exploitation of local oil reserves by Western Multinational Corporations (MNCs)" to fuel industrialisation in the West (Hinnebusch 2003: 19). The state system was not only forcibly imposed by colonial powers to the new Middle Eastern states, but also created their dependency on the colonial powers, with little discussion or attention to the local agents.

The forceful implementation of the Western state system did not transform pre-existing tribes into a nation. At the most basic level, a nation is a group of people who share a common identity, such as ethnicity or religion, that unite them (Mingst and Arreguin-Toft 2016: 135). The arbitrariness of drawn borders, the absence of any local traditions of state formation and the degree of religious and ethnic heterogeneity are all substantial obstacles to geopolitical stability in the Middle East (Bromley 1994: 135). Although there are claims that these changes prompted modernisation in the region, they have been largely disruptive, with little to no national integration towards nation-building (Tibi 1990: 131). For example, the Balfour Declaration and the subsequent establishment of Israel had created decades of ongoing sectarian conflict between the Arabs and Jews in the state. The 1917 Balfour Declaration was a letter that suggested British endorsement for the establishment of a Jewish National Home in Palestine, without regard to the Arab populations indigenous to the region (Yapp 1987: 290). This colonial decision to administer the territories of "peoples not yet able to stand by themselves," in the words of the covenant of the League of Nations, reinforces Orientalist and colonialist notions (Ashrawi 2017). Under such states, the "quarrels and rivalries of the tribes had not been removed, but they had been subdued at best," without any significant progress to transform towards a national identity, despite living in the same state (Tibi 1990: 134). Although the establishment of nations is a modern phenomenon, "the establishment of new social relations is itself a historical process, in which prior forms of appropriation are revoked, destroyed or destroyed into new arrangements" (Bromley 1994: 103). Therefore, collective cultural, ethnic or religious groups cannot become nations overnight. The reshaping of territories comes with the reshaping of various identities that reside within them; colonialist policies have hindered nation-building in the Middle East.

The reshaping of borders after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire did not guarantee real nation-states in the Middle East. In International Relations, a 'nation-state' is a unit of analysis that refers to the homogeneity of polity and society. A 'nation-state' must therefore fulfil the requirements of external sovereignty, referring to the recognition of borders, as well as internal sovereignty, referring to a shared national identity (Tibi 1990: 127). This congruence

(Re)Shaping Territories to Identities: Is the Middle East a Colonial Invention?
Written by Yatana Yamahata

between territory (state) and identity (the nation) provides the foundation of "unity and legitimacy that allow orderly contestation and popular inclusion" (Hinnebusch 2010: 202). The role of the state is particularly important in the formation of a strong nation-state as it "serves as a principal agent in identity mobilisation and conflict in culturally plural societies" (Hashemi and Postel 2017: 6). Although the phenomenon of nation-states is man-made and Western in origin, its model was imposed on the Middle East by colonial powers without consideration of the various ground realities or local identities that make up the region of great diversity.

As a result, the Middle Eastern nation-states lack cohesion, giving the ruling class an incentive and means to constrain or manage participation to serve private interests. There have been "frequent mobilisations of people in the name of sub-state or supra-state (Arab and Islam) identities" (Hinnebusch 2010: 202). This can be seen in the case of Iraq, which had been plagued by numerous coups throughout the 20th century. In 1933, King Faisal defined the problem of state-building and nation-building as follows, "in Iraq there is still no Iraqi people, but unimaginable masses of human beings, devoid of any patriotic ideal, imbued with religious traditions and absurdities, connected by no common tie, giving ear to evil, prone to anarchy, and perpetually ready to rise against any government whatsoever" (Bromley 1994: 136). Iraq is a state as it is able to exercise power within a given territory. However, it is not a nation as there is no shared national identity. Conversely, Kurdistan is a nation, but not a state, living under the jurisdictions of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Their common identity is not attached to a particular territory either. Despite the decision of colonial powers to deny Kurds of statehood after the First World War, they have continued to share and develop national consciousness (Eliassi 2016: 1404). However, their positions remain complicated as they face marginalisation from not being equally recognised or represented in the states that they reside. The statelessness of the Kurdish people had consequently led to a Kurdish diaspora in Western Europe (Eliassi 2015). The colonial intervention of the 'nation-state' in the Middle East continues to affect the region geopolitically today.

However, it is inaccurate to assume that the Middle East is solely a colonial invention; the Western system of nation-states has been consistently challenged throughout history. The people of the Middle East did not remain passive agents of Orientalist policies, such as the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the mandate system. For example, Pan-Arabism is a nationalist ideology that calls upon the unification of all Arab states to join the struggle against Western imperialism (Dawn 1988: 79). In particular, Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal marked the height of pan-Arabism as it challenged the dominance of Western global capitalist order. This did not only encourage the people of Egypt but also those throughout other Arab states that "cooperation and solidarity among Arabs" can improve "living standards and economic opportunities" (Mellon 2002: 4). However, its credibility had significantly weakened in the outbreak of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, which had severely destabilised the Middle East. By the 1980s, pan-Arabism became eclipsed by Islamic fundamentalism as "the most attractive alternative to all those who feel that there has to be something better, truer and more hopeful than the inept tyrannies of their ruler" (Lewis 1992: 115). Similarly, pan-Islamism advocates the unity of Muslims under the umma. For example, the Iranian Revolution had replaced monarchy with Islamism, marking an Islamic revival that opposed Western dominance. Consequentially, the pan-Islamist movement in Iran had become appealing to other Muslim-majority states in the region (Mellon 2002: 10). Both political movements had transcended the Western invention of nation-states in an attempt to unite Arabic and Islamic identities beyond borders.

Nevertheless, the rise of new political movements, such as pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism, were unable to succeed in the Middle East. Although they did oppose Western imperialism, the concept of 'nation-states' was not directly challenged. Instead, there has been a rise in nationalist movements, with many individual states emerging as sources of national identity in the region. With a few exceptions, many Middle Eastern nation-states represent national identities that extend beyond simply an Islamic or Arab character. For example, Iranians are not Arab ethnically; they speak Persian (Farsi) instead of Arabic. In addition, most of the Iranian population is Muslim. However, Iran and its people have always seen themselves to be "a distinct nation characterised by a strong and ancient Persian tradition as well as an Islamic tradition" (Mellon 2002: 11-12). Similarly, Egyptians as well as many others who live in the region have become increasingly nationalistic, identifying themselves with their own respective nation-states. The growth of nationalist movements legitimises the colonial invention of borders, as the establishment of national identities corresponds with that of states; they only enhance the colonial invention. Therefore, the Middle East remains a colonial invention as both political and nationalist movements were unable to deconstruct the colonial institutions that had been historically embedded in the region. Colonial policies had significantly influenced the

(Re)Shaping Territories to Identities: Is the Middle East a Colonial Invention?
Written by Yatana Yamahata

formation and development of 'states,' 'nations' and hence 'nation-states' in the Middle East.

The 'Middle East' is a colonial invention in both its discursive production and state formation. Orientalism served as a basis of colonial thought and activity that enabled and justified its invention without the consideration of different identities in the region. The representations of the Orient were depicted to be inferior to the Occident. Its peoples were portrayed as oppressed in a backwards system that can only be developed and modernised with the help of the West. This image of the Occident as the 'self' and the Orient as the 'other' is also present in the naming of the region as it is only the 'Middle East' in relation to Europe. The world was reconfigured to the West's interests without regard of the 'other' as can be seen by the denomination of the 'Middle East' as an ahistorical space despite it encompassing many diverse identities. In this essay, it is argued that Orientalist knowledge production was the foundation of colonial policies and hence fueled Western power. This claim is explored by analysing how colonial powers had invented the 'Middle East' through the formation of 'states,' 'nations' and hence 'nation-states' in the region that continue to remain today. The Sykes-Picot Agreement showed how the West had imposed their model of 'nation-states' foreign to the people of the Middle East in order to integrate the region into their system, on their terms. Although there have been political movements against Western imperialism and dominance, nationalist movements have also become increasingly popular. However, such nationalist movements only justify the colonial invention of the region, as the establishment of a nation-state comes with the development of a national identity. Such political and nationalist movements were unable to deconstruct Western colonial institutions that largely contribute to the region's geopolitical instability. Empirical examples have revealed that the Western implementation of the state system without considering local realities led to the lack of congruence in 'state' and 'nation' that is normally expected in 'nation-states'. The region's ongoing disputes revolving sectarian divides and ethnic conflicts remain rooted in this problem. The colonial invention of the 'Middle East' does not only include its discursive production and state formation but also the ongoing geopolitical instability that plagues the region today.

Bibliography

Ashrawi, H. (2017). *A Century on from Balfour, I challenge Britain to finally do the right thing* . [online] The Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/nov/02/balfour-declaration-britain-uk-palestinian-state [Accessed 25 Mar. 2018].

Bilgin, P. (2004). Whose 'Middle East'? Geopolitical Inventions and Practices of Security. *International Relations*, 18(1), pp.25-41.

Bromley, S. (1994). *Rethinking Middle East Politics*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Dawn, C. (1988). The Formation of Pan-Arab Ideology in the Interwar Years. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 20(01), pp.67-91.

Eliassi, B. (2015). Making a Kurdistani Identity in Diaspora: Kurdish Migrants in Sweden. In: N. Sigona, A. Gamlen, G. Liberatore and H. Neveu Kringelbach, ed., *Diasporas Reimagined: Spaces, Practices and Belonging* . Oxford: Oxford Diasporas Programme.

Eliassi, B. (2016). Statelessness in a World of Nation-States: The Cases of Kurdish Diasporas in Sweden and the UK. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 42(9), pp.1403-1419.

Halperin, S. (1997). *In the Mirror of the Third World: Capitalist Development in Modern Europe* . Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Hashemi, N. and Postel, D. (2017). Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 15(3), pp.1-13.

Hinnebusch, R. (2003). *The International Politics of the Middle East*. Manchester University Press..

(Re)Shaping Territories to Identities: Is the Middle East a Colonial Invention?
Written by Yatana Yamahata

Hinnebusch, R. (2010). Toward a Historical Sociology of State Formation in the Middle East. *Middle East Critique*, 19(3), pp.201-216.

Lewis, B. (1992). Rethinking the Middle East. *Foreign Affairs*, 71(4), pp.99-119.

Lockman, Z. (2009). *Contending Visions of the Middle East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Marandi, S. and Tari, Z. (2012). Orientalist Feminism; Representation of Muslim Women in Two American Novels: Terrorist and Falling Man. *International Journal of Women's Research*, 1(2), pp.5-19.

Mellon, J. (2002). Pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism and inter-state relations in the Arab World. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 8(4), pp.1-15.

Mingst, K. and Arreguín-Toft, I. (2016). *Essentials of International Relations*, 7th ed. W.W. Norton & Company,.

Owen, R. (2004). *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*. London, New York: Routledge.

Özsu, U. (2016). *Sykes-Picot: The Treaty that carved up the Middle East*. [online] Oxford University Press (OUP) Blog. Available at: https://blog.oup.com/2016/05/sykes-picot-treaty-middle-east-international-law/ [Accessed 23 Mar. 2018].

Said, E. (1978) *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Shabanirad, E. and Marandi, S. (2015). Edward Said's Orientalism and the Representation of Oriental Women in George Orwell's Burmese Days. *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences*, 60, pp.22-33.

Tibi, B. (1990). The Simultaneity of the Unsimultaneous: Old Tribes and Imposed Nation-States in the Modern Middle East. In: P. Khoury and J. Kostiner, ed., *Tribes and State Nationalism in the Middle East*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp.127-149.

Yapp, M. (1987). *The Making of the Modern Near East 1792-1923*. New York: Routledge.

Written by: Yatana Yamahata
Written at: SOAS, University of London
Written for: Dr. Meera Sabaratnam
Date written: March 2018