

FRANCE'S IMPERIAL AMBITIONS AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE FRENCH MANDATE IN SYRIA

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ABSTRACT

When the Allied powers advanced into Syria, the political divisions of the country followed the lines of the provincial administrative divisions of the Ottoman Empire, and in the late Ottoman period territorial borders of Syria were virtually nonexistent. British troops under Marshal Edmund Henry Allenby entered Damascus in 1918 accompanied by troops of the Arab Revolt led by Faisal, son of Sharif Hussein of Mecca. General Allenby, and in accordance with the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement between Britain and France, assigned to the Arab administration only the interior regions of Syria (the eastern zone). Palestine (the southern zone) was reserved for the British, and on October 8, French troops disembarked in Beirut and occupied all the Lebanese coastal region until Naqoura (the western zone) replacing British troops there. The French immediately dissolved the local Arab governments in the region. The French demanded full implementation of the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the placement of Syria under their influence. On November 26, 1919, the British withdrew from Damascus to avoid confrontation with the French, leaving the Arab government face to face with the French.

Soon after the Allied Power's occupation the southern part, Palestine, was assigned to the British Mandate, and the other, Syria and the Lebanon, was assigned to the France Mandate. The process of political radicalization was initiated during the era of the French Mandate; the French legacy to Syria was almost a guarantee of political instability. The creation of Greater Lebanon destined the Lebanese to an unstable political system which is based on sectarian rivalries. The purpose of this study is to examine France's imperial objectives and the fragmentation of Greater Syria; at the same time examining France's implementation of colonial tradition of ruling by division policy in 1920s which has planted the seeds of today's problems in Syria.

Keywords: French Imperialism, Colonial Tradition, World War I, Syria, Mandate

FRANSA'NIN EMPERYAL HAYALLERİ VE SURİYE'DE FRANSIZ MANDASININ KURULMASI

ÖZET

Müttefik kuvvetler Suriye'ye girdiğinde bölgenin siyasi bölünüşü Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun idari vilayet birimlerinin çizgilerini taşımaktaydı. Başka bir anlatımla Suriye'nin kesin ve tanımlanmış sınırları yoktu. Yirminci yüzyılın başlarına kadar Suriye coğrafi bir kimlikti. Bugün içinde Lübnan, Suriye, Filistin, İsrail ve Ürdün'ü içeren tüm bölgeyi kapsamaktaydı. İtilaf Devletleri'nin bölgeyi işgalinden sonra güney kısım, yani Filistin Büyük Britanya'ya, geri kalan bölgeler, yani Suriye ile Lübnan ise Fransa'ya verilmişti. Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Arap eyaletlerinin sınırları aslında Nisan-Mayıs 1916'da imzalanan gizli Sykes-Picot Anlaşması'yla belirlenmişti.

Bu anlaşma Mezopotamya'yı (Irak), Körfez'i ve Filistin'i çevreleyen bölgeleri Büyük Britanya'ya, Suriye ve en doğu kesimleri ise Fransa'ya bırakıyordu. 1920 San Remo Konferansında Ortadoğu'nun kalbine saplanan bir hançer olarak manda yönetimleri karara bağlandı ardından da Milletler Cemiyeti tarafından onaylandı. Milletler Cemiyeti kararı onaylamadan önce bölgesel paylaşım ve işgal zaten fiilen tamamlanmıştı.

Birinci Dünya Savaşı, Fransız hâkimiyetinin genişlemesinin son aşamasını da beraberinde getirdi. İtilaf Devletleri'nin galibiyetinden sonraki barış görüşmelerinde Fransa ilk kez Ortadoğu'da hâkimiyet kazanmış oldu. Fransa'nın Ortadoğu'daki toprak edinme ve hâkimiyet kurma hevesi, Osmanlı

İmparatorluğu'nun savaştan hemen önceki yıllarda parçalanmaya başlamasıyla iyice güçlendi. 1911'in sonunda Ortadoğu ilk kez Fransız sömürgecilik hareketinin ilgi odağı olarak Afrika'nın yerini almıştı.

Bu çalışmada Fransa'nın emperyal hayallerini ve bu hayaller üzerinden Suriye'de Fransız Mandasının nasıl elde edildiğini ve Manda yönetiminin kuruluş sürecini ele alacağız.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Fransız Emperyalizmi, Sömürgecilik Geleneği, I. Dünya Savaşı, Suriye, Manda Yönetimi

THE BEGINNING OF SYRIA'S MODERN HISTORY

The First World War witnessed the defeat and dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire. After the First World War, the victorious Allies, Britain and France, divided the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire to suit their particular interests. For some four hundred years until 1918, the countries we now call Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Israel were known as 'Greater Syria' or rather as the Syrian provinces of the Ottoman Empire. During their rule the Ottomans divided the Syrian provinces into a variety of administrative districts. After 1864, these consisted of three vilayets (administrative divisions or provinces), those of Aleppo, Damascus and Beirut, the province of Jerusalem and the mutasarrifiya of Mount Lebanon. These vilayets had little more than administrative significance. They bore no great political meaning, nor did they interfere with communications or the movement of people and the goods across administrative lines (Chaitani, 2007: 5)

The beginning of Syria's modern history could be placed at the onset of First World War, when Syria abruptly emerged from "the shabby obscurity of an Ottoman province" to become the focus of Great Power concern (Longrigg, 1958: 144). At the centre of this transformation were the Britain's efforts to build alliances for its war efforts against Germany. Britain made vaguely worded promises regarding the Syrian territory to three different parties (Huneidi, 2001; Tibawi, 1978; Khalidi, 1980; Knox, 1981). In the Hussein-McMahon correspondence, ten letters exchanged between July 1915 and March 1916, Britain promised parts of Syria to be brought under the control of the Ottoman governor of Mecca, Sharif al-Hussein to enter into an alliance with Britain and to launch a revolt against the Ottoman government. By November 1915 it was clear that Britain must bring France more fully into the picture, the two powers hammered out their agreement regarding the future of Ottoman territory in the Middle East. In the Sykes-Picot agreement of May 1916, Britain and France took over Syria. In the Balfour Declaration of November 1917, Great Britain endorsed "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people" (Cleveland, 2004: 244). After the war, the Arabs helplessly witnessed the partition of their lands and the imposition of artificial borders by two European Powers, and watched as France surrendered Palestine to Britain and eventually to the Zionists, and then France carved up Greater Syria, exploiting its religious, ethnic, sectarian and geographic diversity, into what the Arab nationalist regarded as artificial entities.

THE SYKES-PICOT AGREEMENT

The First World War brought with it the final phase of the French imperial expansion. At the peace negotiations after the Allies' victory, France gained a Middle Eastern empire for the first time. France obtained her Middle Eastern mandates on the Western Front by diplomatic negotiations rather than military action in the Middle East. Previous to that France's military

presence in the Middle East was negligible. At the end of the war the French contingent in Palestine and Syria numbered only 3,000 Armenians, 3,000 Africans, and 800 Frenchmen who had been promised that they would not have to fight” (Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, 1981: 11). In the Middle East, France’s bargaining position rested chiefly on the sacrifices the country had made in Europe.

The First World War was to revive the colonialist movement in France. The prospect the partition of the Middle East gave the colonialists new aspirations. Additionally, the war allowed them to present the question of colonial expansion as an issue of national prestige.

In the Middle East, French imperial ambitions had just been sharpened by the beginning of the Ottoman Empire’s disintegration in the years immediately before the war. By the end of 1911 the Middle East was for the first time replacing Africa as the central concern of the French colonialist movement. This transition was assisted by the events in North Africa itself. In October Italy invaded Tripolitania, the last remains of the Turkish Maghreb, thus striking a further blow against the cohesion of the Ottoman Empire as a whole (Ibid: 46). Colonialists had earlier decided that the security of French rule in Algeria and Tunisia made it essential to take Morocco. After taking Morocco they argued now that control of the Muslim Maghreb made it essential to secure French control in Syria: “The axis of French policy is in the Mediterranean. One of its poles is to the west through Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. The other pole must be to the east: Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine” (Flandin, 1915: 6). In France a vigorous parliamentary campaign started by colonialists led by E. Flandin. His report on Syria and Palestine in May 1915 became the manifesto of the “Syrian party” and he became its unofficial leader. Flandin based France’s claim to Syria on both “geographic necessity” and “historic right”. What he termed “geographic necessity” was merely the old imperial reasoning by which every extension of the colonial frontier was held to require a further extension for its security. Flandin’s Rapport reminds the French public of the Syrian positive view with the words “the Syrians are accustomed to see in us their guardian and their teachers. Our flag has always appeared to them as an emblem of hope and salvation” (Ibid). This was mostly a mythical construct which blinded them to the reality on the ground.

In 1915 French ambitions in the Middle East were reasonably clear, even if the boundaries of Syria were not. But it was beyond their capacity to achieve these. Their military commitments in Europe made it impossible for them to take a leading role in the Middle Eastern war. Their concern was not to alienate the British thus their recourse was to use their strongest card, diplomacy. On the 21 October 1915 the British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey proposed the Anglo-French negotiations concerning Syria. Francois Georges-Picot, one of the most enthusiastic “Syrian” in the French public service, was the French negotiator. The British negotiator was Sir Mark Sykes who was deeply committed to an extension of British power in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf (Fieldhouse, 2006: 50). Picot was instructed from Paris to negotiate for the whole of Syria extending to the borders to Egypt and Palestine in the south, and to Mosul and the Persian borders in the east. Sykes was determined to detach Palestine from Syria; after much haggling Sykes accepted that Lebanon and the rest of coastal Syria would be detached from inland Syria and would come under some form of direct French rule

(Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, 1981: 89). Sykes and Picot signed the draft agreement on 31 January 1916 and the Agreement was finally ratified ten days after the Arab Revolt began on 5 June 1916 (Chaitani, 2007: 1). Early in 1916 Sharif Hussein began laying the groundwork for the Arab Revolt and “he knew little if anything of Sir Mark Sykes and Francois George-Picot, and absolutely nothing of the agreement the two men had reached regarding Arabia” (Schneer, 2011: 87). From 1916 to the end of war with the Ottoman Empire in October 1918 the main focus on the Middle East, apart from the military campaigns, was the continued power struggle between Britain and France over the interpretation and implementation of the Sykes-Picot Agreement (Fieldhouse, 2006: 57-58).

The Agreement was now the official Allied policy, even though it was not a treaty and it was secret. In many respects the post-war and long term shape of the Middle East was determined by the Sykes-Picot Agreement and its consequences were being felt in the twenty first century.

The San Remo Conference of the Supreme Council of the Allies tied up many loose ends of Sykes-Picot Agreement. It agreed to recommend to the newly established League of Nations that Lebanon and Syria should be under French and Mesopotamia (Iraq) and Palestine under British mandates. In April 1920 the Conference granted the mandates to France and Great Britain, a turning point in the history of the Middle East. In San Remo, the natures of the mandates were decided jointly by Britain and France. The boundaries of the mandates took endless amount of time, finally France agreed to abandon Palestine and Mosul to the British and acquire the 25 per cent share of Mosul oil (Andrew and Kanya-Forstner, 1981: 117).

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE FRENCH MANDATE

France officially received the mandate for Lebanon and Syria from the League of Nations two years after the occupation of Damascus. By the time it came into force 29 September 1923, the French had already made de facto arrangement for the establishment of boundaries and form an administration which the League of Nations was in no position to reverse (Shambrook, 1998: 2).

The partisans of the Syrian party, having already been forced to surrender part of Greater Syria to the British, now imposed further divisions on Syria in the belief that only the policy of ‘divide and rule’ could preserve France’s authority over her ungrateful Syrian subjects. On the 26 July 1920 the French occupied Damascus and the French authorities went ahead to divide Greater Syria. Syria was sub-divided into five parts; one was the Greater Lebanon, including its principal towns Tripoli, Beirut, Sidon and Tyre; the second was called the State of Syria, with the main towns of Aleppo, Hama, Homs and Damascus; the third was the mountainous region of the Jabal al-Druze, with its principal town Suaida; the fourth was the Sanjak of Latakia, with Latakia as its principal town; and the fifth the Sanjak of Alexandretta, a cross between part of Syria in theory, but in practice, separate and subjected to a special autonomous form of government (Antonius, 1934: 525).

The establishment of the French Mandate in Syria was contingent upon a weakening Arab nationalism. The strategy was to divide Syria into segments to block nationalist sentiment and

action first and then put an indigenous administrative façade facilitating the French rule. The remaining issue was how many states should be created and on what basis they should be divided.

The process was started focussing on the Great Lebanon. Today's Lebanon, in its modern form had never been a state or even a defined geographical region. It always constituted part of an empire, and since the sixteenth century that of the Ottomans (Akarli, 1993). The region included in the new state of the Greater Lebanon by the French in 1920, corresponding to the contemporary Lebanon, consisted of largely tribal societies. In terms of religion, there were Christian Maronites, Druzes, Shia, Sunnies, and several smaller minorities including Greek Orthodox and other Catholic minorities. The Maronites saw the salvation in France. By 1919 the Patriarch Hawayik was ready to lead his Maronite community demanding for a Greater Lebanon under France's protection. The Maronite dream was finally realised. The Greater Lebanon comprised, in addition to the largely Christian inhabited mountain, the predominantly Muslim coastal cities of Tripoli, Sidon, and Tyre and their administrative hinterlands, the capital Beirut, with a population nearly evenly mixed between Christians and Muslims. France also removed the largely Muslim inhabited fertile Bīqā' Valley from Syrian jurisdiction and placed it within the frontiers of the expanded Lebanese state. Most of Lebanon's newly acquired 'citizens' did not want to be part of a Maronite dominated Lebanon and fought for a union with the rest of Syria (Khoury, 1987: 57). The Muslims, especially the Sunnies were far from ready to accept their inclusion in the Greater Lebanon; and in the following years they campaigned hard for a return of the newly attached territories to Lebanon back to Syria. The Durze, led by the two most powerful Durze families in Lebanon, the Jamblatts and the Arslans, were also strongly against a French dominated Lebanon. The Shi'is of Jabal Amil in the south were afraid both of the Sunni and the Christians, and wanted just a loose connection to Syria (Howard, 1963: 38-41).

The main beneficiaries of this territorial partition were France's clients, the Maronites Christians. The Greater Lebanon was brought into its existence to provide the Maronites with a distinct political entity in which they were the single largest community. However, they did not form the majority of the population. By adding several Muslim areas to the new state, the French reduced the Maronites' percentage to about 30 percent of the population (Cleveland, 2004: 225). This French policy increased the possibility of a sectarian conflict. It was to lead to the bloodshed in the 1970s and 1980s, as various groups attacked the leading position of the Maronite minority in what had become a predominantly Muslim country. Whether this expansion of Lebanon; was the result of Maronite Christian or of French political pressure cannot be determined (Kedourie, 1981: 85).

The French conception of Syria had been based on Mount Lebanon, with its dominant Maronite population, Catholic missions, western universities, and other institutions already predominantly in favour of French control. But inland Syria was an altogether a different proposition. Despite its significant Christian population it had few ties with France. It had no historic unity and contained large and potentially hostile minorities, such as the Alawites in the north and the Druzes in the south. In 1919-20 the French had no clear idea of the nature of this

mixed society, even though the colonial enthusiasts had propagated the idea that its inhabitants would welcome a unified French rule. What they knew of it came mostly from the Catholic missions and from contacts with Greeks and Catholics in the Hawran and Jabal Druze. French consuls in Damascus were also very active, travelled a lot, and send enthusiastic reports of Syrian positive responses (Fiedhouse, 2006: 252). Most of the problems of the French rule over the next quarter of the century were to stem from this limited knowledge and misconceptions. Arab nationalism born as a result of the First World War became the dominant force among the Arab Muslim majority in Inland Syria and they viewed French ambition in the area as a mortal danger. The French administration largely ignored the force of pre-1918 Arab nationalism, but they recognised its power when in Syria Arabs briefly formed an autonomous state under Amir Faysal Ibn Husseini from 1918 to 1920. General Gouraud, the first High commissioner and his influential aid, Robert de Caix, realised that the traditional French concept of non-Arab Syrian entity was illusory. The territory of a Geographic (Greater) Syria was predominantly Arab and among the Arabs pan-Arab nationalism held sway. As a result, they sought to take advantage of local and communal particularism in order to break Syria up and reshape it gradually to their liking (Burke III, 1973: 175-186).

After the separation of Lebanon from the Greater Syria the second step was to divide the Inland Syria into segments. The French administration followed the colonial policy of 'divide and rule' and segmented the territory along regional and ethnic lines. They created the two separate states of Aleppo and Damascus which included the districts of Homs and Hama, the next two largest urban centres in the mandate which in 1920 both of the states were ruled by a local governor supported by French adviser. The Sanjak of Alexandretta, with its significant Turkish population, enjoyed a largely autonomous administration in the Aleppo state. In a further effort at political fragmentation, France stressed the distinctiveness of Syria's two regionally compact minority groups, the Alawites and the Druzes. Arab nationalism, as expounded mainly by the Sunni Muslim community and was a threat to the Christians and France's position, and to heterodox Muslim communities. Therefore France needed to promote a friendly relationship with the Druze and Alawite communities. In 1922, the Jabal al-Druze, which was located in the south of Damascus, was an area of Druze concentration. It was proclaimed a separate unit with its own governor and elected congress, under the French protection. The mountain district behind Latakia, with their large Alawite population, became a special administrative regime under a heavy French protection and was proclaimed a state. Later, in 1922 all but the Jabal al-Druze were united in a Syrian Federation. This was dissolved at the end of 1924 and replaced by a Syrian state comprising the states of Aleppo and Damascus and a separate Sanjak of Alexandretta (Later Autonomous Republic of Hatay). However, the Alawite state was excluded from the new arrangement. In 1939, after two long years of haggling, France conceded the Sanjak of Alexandretta to Turkey in a bid for Turkish neutrality in the event of war. Except for a brief period from 1936 to 1939; Alawite and Druze states were administratively separate from Syria until 1942. Despite the variety of administrations in Syria's outlying areas, ever since 1925 Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo were consistently under one administration. Nationalist pressure and expenses forced France to unite Damascus and Aleppo. The territories of the Alawites, and the Jabal al-Druze were kept in altering degrees

of administrative isolation and political insulation from these centres for the better part of France's tenure in Syria. "French policy was clear: if the Mandate authority could not break the back of the nationalist movement, the next best alternative was to contain it in its heartland" (Khoury, 1987: 58-59). By the end of the mandate Alawite and Druze areas were incorporated into the larger Syrian state by the French. But minority consciousness which was reinforced by a combination of factors such as geography, religious differences, communal segregation, and regional separatism, had a damaging impact on the Syrian political life even long after the mandate (Ibid.: 15)

The Ottoman Middle East was carved up into "A" mandates, where the mandatory powers (Britain in Iraq and Palestine, France in Syria and Lebanon) were merely to provide "administrative advice and assistance" to peoples in theory soon to be granted self-government. All mandates were to be administered on the principle that (as Article 22 of the League Covenant put it) "the well-being and development of such peoples" - that is, of "peoples not yet able to stand by them-selves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world"- "form a sacred trust of civilization" (Pedersen, 2006: 561-562). The mandates in the Middle East, being established in spite of the local populations' clear preference for independence and, in the case of Syria, rooted objection to the assignment of the mandate to France.

The mandate, was committing France to "facilitate their progressive development as independent states". France was to have served as a trustee for the League of Nations. However, as Millerand made it clear, the reality was different from the theory. There was nothing altruistic about France's desire to have a mandate in the Middle East:

In assuming the mandate in Syria, France has not attempted to create a new colony but to maintain a century-old situation necessary for her place in the Mediterranean; she [France] wishes to ensure her influence there... (Tanenbaum, 1978: 42).

During the Mandate period through French administrators and advisers France ruled Syria as effectively as any colony; no significant decision could be taken at any level without the French approval. After nearly twenty years of the French mandate, Syria remained without independence, without institutions of self-government, and without territorial unity.

CONCLUSION

The fundamental error of judgement which underlay the Anglo-French negotiations and agreement over the Middle East was the inability of either side to take Arab nationalism seriously as a peace time political force. For that failure of judgement the British and the French, as well as the Arabs, were to pay dearly. Syria became what it is today both because the European powers undertook to re-shape it and because Britain and France failed to ensure that the dynasties, the states, and the political system that they established would permanently endure. During and after the First World War, they destroyed the old order in the region irrevocably; they smashed the Turkish rule of the Middle East beyond repair. They created the question of not merely the dimensions and boundaries, but the right to exist; of countries that immediately or eventually emerged from the British and French decisions of the early 1920s, dividing Geographical Syria to Lebanon, (Inland) Syria, Palestine/Israel, and Jordan. The

settlement of 1920s, therefore, does not belong entirely or even mostly to the past; it is at the very heart of the current wars, conflicts, and politics in Syria and at large in the Middle East. France's colonial 'divide and rule' policy sowed the dragon's teeth which were to grow into the complex tensions and despotism that constitute today's Syria.

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