

# The Concept of the Middle East and the Historical Breaking Points of the Middle East (1878-1979)

## Orta Doğu Kavramı ve Orta Doğu'nun Tarihsel Kırılma Noktaları (1878-1979)

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**Başvuru/Submitted:** 01.02.2024

**Revizyon Talebi/Revision Requested:**  
02.02.2024

**Son Revizyon/Last Revision Received:**  
27.03.2024

**Kabul/Accepted:** 28.05.2024

**Atıf/Citation:** Köse, Hulusi. "The Concept of the Middle East and the Historical Breaking Points of the Middle East (1878-1979)." *Yakın Dönem Türkiye Araştırmaları-Recent Period Turkish Studies* 45 (2024): 1-26.  
<https://doi.org/10.26650/YTA2024-1430261>

### ABSTRACT

The concept of the modern Middle East originated in the 19th century due to the colonial ambitions of Western nations. Since then, the Middle East has been a battleground for Western powers seeking to assert control over its political, strategic, and economic interests.

This study examines the historical construction of the "Middle East" concept, focusing on the period between 1878 and 1979 as a critical juncture. It analyzes how this construction shaped the perception of the region in Western public opinion.

The article is divided into two main parts. The first part examines how the Middle East was perceived as a geographical, sociological, and political asset for specific political goals in the modern era. It then analyzes the events that shaped the concept of the Middle East from the late 19th century to the late 20th century within this ideological framework. The focus is not on providing a chronological account of Middle Eastern developments in the modern era but on assessing how the events between 1878 and 1979 have influenced the Western public's perception of the "Middle East" today.

**Keywords:** Middle East, Eastern Question, International Relations, World War I, World War II, the Israel Problematic, Palestine, Jerusalem

### ÖZ

Modern Orta Doğu kavramı, 19. yüzyılda Batı devletlerinin kolonyal gündemlerinin bir sonucu olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. O tarihten günümüze kadar Orta Doğu toprakları, Batılı güçlerin siyasi, stratejik ve iktisadi amaçları ekseninde hâkimiyet kurma çabalarına sahne olmuştur.

Bu çalışmada, Orta Doğu kavramının nasıl ortaya çıktığı ve 1878-1979 yılları arasında Orta Doğu'nun tarihsel kırılma noktaları ile bunun Batı kamuoyu algısına etkisi incelenecektir.

Makale, temelde iki ana bölümden oluşmaktadır. İlk bölümde; belirli siyasal amaçlar

doğrultusunda Orta Doğu'nun coğrafi, sosyolojik ve politik bir imkân olarak modern dönemde nasıl kavramsallaştırıldığı ele alınmaktadır. Ardından 19. yüzyılın son çeyreğinden 20. yüzyılın ilk üç çeyreğine dek, zihinlerdeki Orta Doğu kurgusunun şekillenmesine yol açan gelişmeler, bu düşünsel bağlam içinde değerlendirilmektir. Burada amaçlanan Orta Doğu olarak nitelenen bölgedeki gelişmelerin modern dönemde kronolojik bir dökümünü yapmak değildir. Bunun yerine 1878-1979 yılları arasında yaşanan gelişmelerin, günümüzde özellikle Batı kamuoyunun zihninde oluşturduğu "Orta Doğu" algısına etkisi incelenecektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Orta Doğu Kavramı, Doğu Meselesi, Uluslararası İlişkiler, Birinci Dünya Savaşı, İkinci Dünya Savaşı, İsrail Sorunsalı, Filistin, Kudüs

## Introduction: Conceptualization of the Middle East

The modern conceptualization of the “Middle East” is, from the very beginning and by itself, the result of an attitude towards the “East” as being different, more distant and separate from the West. This was not just a political interest. The French used the term “Near East” for the lands owned by the Ottoman Empire. The British, on the other hand, started to use the term “Middle East” from the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the 19th century, Western scholars, artists and travelers attached meanings to what was happening in the East more different than ever before. Navid Mohseni defined the Western approach to the East during this period as follows: “*The East was not just a place to be discovered somewhere out there. It was gradually transformed from an independent entity into an extension of the European powers.*”<sup>2</sup> This analysis developed by Mohseni for photographers and travelers provides clues for understanding the Middle East agendas of the great European powers at the end of the century.

The “Eastern Question”, one of the most important diplomatic agendas of 19th century Europe, especially with the Treaty of Berlin in 1878, has gradually transformed into an unnamed Middle East problem. The Ottoman Empire, which until then had managed to maintain the extent of its territories in Europe, Asia and Africa in a certain balance, lost most of its European territories at the Berlin Conference and in just over thirty years, it was almost completely transformed into an Asian state.<sup>3</sup> With the deterioration of the Ottoman territorial balance in favor of the Asian continent, the “Eastern Question” had now transformed into a partition strife for the Ottoman Middle East, which had previously been referred to as the Near East together with Iran. The emergence of the ‘Middle East’ as a concept also took place in this period, which cannot be considered as a coincidence.<sup>4</sup>

As discussed in this study, the outlines of the Middle East have been shaped by the political and geostrategic interests of the people who are not native to the region and as the definition of these interests changed, the description and boundaries of the Middle

1 Muzaffer Erendil, *Çağdaş Orta Doğu Olayları*, Genelkurmay Basımevi, Ankara, 1992, p. 5.

2 Navid Mohseni, “Images of the Middle East: Exploring a Fascination”, *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 7, No. 13, (September 1998), p. 86.

3 “The Congress of Berlin and Its Consequences”, *The North American Review*, Vol. 127, No. 265, (November-December 1878), p. 392-405.

4 Mustafa Keskin, *Emperyalizm ve Ön Asya, Beşinci Askerî Tarih Semineri Bildirileri II*, Genelkurmay Askerî Tarih ve Stratejik Etüt Başkanlığı Yayınları, Ankara, 1997, p. 301.

East has transformed too.<sup>5</sup> The interest in the Middle East has been shaped and refined in the modern era. For this reason, in the last quarter of the 19th century, not only strategists and politicians but also theologians became more interested in a more familiar East within the East. It is important in this respect that one of the most concrete geographical descriptions of the Middle East in this period came from Francis Upham, a Biblical academician. Upham's conceptualization of the "Near" or "Middle" East, which considers Mesopotamia as the center, had even made its way into the Sunday school curriculum of churches.<sup>6</sup>

According to some people, the Campaign in Egypt marked the beginning of the history of the modern Middle East. According to Christopher Catherwood, Napoleon's Battle of Egypt revived the Islamic world's bad memories from the Middle Ages.<sup>7</sup> However, it would not be a very accurate assessment to start the modern history of the region from this point. This is because the aims of this campaign were not basically much more different from Napoleon's campaigns in, for example, Germany or Russia. On the other hand, this expedition was not carried out in line with the idea of the balance of European power, but on the contrary, it was organized especially in opposition to the conceptualization of the "East Problem" by the European great powers.

In the eyes of Europeans, the phenomenon of the "Near East", which German scholars in the mid-19th century tried to define without political or strategic clarity, also played a major role in the construction of what would later be called the Middle East, in other words, an East that was "closer" to Europe than India, China or Japan.<sup>8</sup>

It has been claimed that the term "Middle East" was first used in the 1850s in the British Indian Office of the British Empire.<sup>9</sup> Although it is not proven, this information is important for understanding how colonial objectives were instrumental in the emergence of the Middle East as a political concept. Besides, the fact that the concept of the Middle East has become well known and used precisely is closely related to this purpose.

5 Luke McKernan, "The supreme moment of the war: General Allenby's entry into Jerusalem", *Historical Journal of Film Radio and Television*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1993), p. 169-180.

6 Hüseyin Yılmaz, "The Eastern Question and the Ottoman Empire: The Genesis of the Near and the Middle East in the Nineteenth Century", *Is There a Middle East: The Evolution of a Geographical Concept*, ed. by Michael E. Bonnie, Abbas Amanat, Michael Ezekiel Gasper, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2012, p. 21.

7 Christopher Catherwood, *A Brief History of the Middle East: From Abraham to Arafat*, Carol and Graf Publishers, New York, 2006, p. 108.

8 Hüseyin Yılmaz, "The Eastern Question and ...", p. 19.

9 Peter Beaumont, Gerald H. Blake, Malcolm Wagstaff, *The Middle East: A Geographical Study*, London, Wiley, 1976, p.43.

When Alfred Thayer Mahan, an American naval historian and strategist, characterized the region between the Gulf of Aden and India as the “Middle East” in his article “*The Persian Gulf and International Relations*” in 1902, he was not only naming a geography that had been subjected to strategic, political and civil tensions for more than a century, he was also initiating a debate on which regions were or should be included in this geography.<sup>10</sup> Mahan’s ‘Middle East’ was the name of the region between the Suez Canal and Singapore, in other words, for its inventor, the Middle East was an element of the British colonial agenda.<sup>11</sup> Yet, according to Mahan, the British navy should have the capability to use force in Aden, India and the Persian Gulf when an opportunity arose.<sup>12</sup>

The person who popularized Mahan’s concept of the Middle East was Valentine Chirol, the head of the external relations department of *The Times* newspaper. In 1902 and 1903, when he published a series of twenty articles titled “The Middle East Problem”, Chirol made the concept of the Middle East known, at least to the Anglo-Saxon community, and made its use permanent.<sup>13</sup> Both Mahan and Chirol were interested in the region for political rather than cartographic<sup>14\*</sup> concerns. For example, according to Mahan, the Baghdad railway line, which the German Empire helped in building within the borders of the Ottoman Empire, was a development that would prevent the Russians from expanding their influence towards the south and was a positive one. However, Chirol could not be so optimistic about this and other growing German interest in the region.<sup>15</sup>

Two and a half years before Mahan’s article, Scottish-born British general and diplomat Thomas Edward Gordon had published an article titled *The Middle East Problem*.<sup>16</sup> Gordon did not claim that he had invented a new concept to define a region, nor even generally draw boundaries for what he called the Middle East.<sup>17</sup> Like his other contemporaries and colleagues who intended to define the region, he was pursuing political and strategic determinations that were distinctive and useful for his country.

10 Alfred Thayer Mahan, “The Persian Gulf and International Relations” *National Review*, (September 1902), p. 39.

11 Mahan, “The Persian Gulf and International Relations”, p. 39.

12 Mahan, “The Persian Gulf and...”, p. 39; Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik*, Küre Yayınları, 19. Baskı, İstanbul, 2004, p. 130.

13 Roderic H. Davison, “Where is the Middle East?” *Foreign Affairs*”, Vol: 38, New York, 1959-1960, p. 667-668.

14 \* Cartographic: Related to cartography (study and practice of making maps).

15 Valentina Chirol, *The Middle East Question: Or Some Problems of Indian Defence*, John Murray, Albemarle Street, London, 1903, p. 224-229.

16 Clayton R. Coppes, “Captain Mahan, General Gordon, and the Origins of the Term ‘Middle East’”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Jan. 1976), p. 96.

17 Coppes, “Captain Mahan, General...”, p. 96.

Mahan was probably unaware of Gordon's definition, and that is not very important anyway.<sup>18</sup> At very similar dates, various individuals, driven by expansionist political and strategic motives, attempted to define and establish boundaries for a sizable piece of land that was not under their control. Equally interesting is the fact that, like the "Eastern Question" the Middle East has been defined as a "problem" from the very moment it drew political attention.

The Middle East is also important in terms of religions. Christianity, Islam and Judaism were born in this region. The region is also rich in diversity in terms of sects.<sup>19</sup> Over time, while defining the Middle East, the territories included in this region have differed. In general, the term Middle East is used to describe the region extending to Egypt in the west, Iran in the east, Türkiye in the north and the Arabian Peninsula in the south.<sup>20</sup> At this point, there is an issue that should be kept in mind. The definitions regarding the region, like those of Mahan, have always been part of political agendas. While Theodor Herzl, in the same year as Mahan, described the Palestinian territories as *Altneuland* (The Old-New Land), he was undoubtedly in search of a political legitimacy in his own way.<sup>21</sup> In this context, Zionism, which is also referred to as Jewish nationalism, can be defined as "a universal movement for the settlement of Jews in Palestine as an independent state and the revival of Judaism there with all its institutions" in the modern sense.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, throughout the 20th century, political struggles concerning the Middle East region would shape how the region was defined. Particularly in the second half of the century, areas that were not previously considered part of the Middle or Near East would be included if they became involved in a cycle of violence. In fact, even as late as 1957 and 1958, the descriptions of American President and Secretary of State of the time about the Middle East varied widely.<sup>23</sup>

## 1. The Beginning of Modern Middle East History (1878-1939)

In the years when the concept of the Middle East emerged, there were two independent states in the region at one level or another: the Ottoman Empire and Iran.

18 Coppes, "Captain Mahan, General..." p. 96.

19 Bernard Lewis, *Ortadoğu'nun Çoklu Kimliği*, translated by Mehmet Harmancı, Sabah Kitapları, İstanbul, 2000, p. 27-28.

20 W. Cleavend, *Modern Orta Doğu Tarihi*, translated by Mehmet Harmacı, Agora Yayınları, İstanbul, 2008, p.1.

21 Martin Kramer, "The Middle East: Old and New", *Daedalus*, Vol. 126, No. 2 (Spring 1997), p. 89.

22 M. Kemal Öke, *Siyonizm ve Filistin Sorunu 1880-1923*, Kırmızı Kedi Yayınevi, İstanbul, 2011, p. 29.

23 Roderic H. Davison, "Where is the Middle East", p. 666.

The Ottoman Empire was suffering from continuous and large-scale territorial losses. Moreover, with the free trade agreement it signed with the British in 1838, it had become a semi-colony, and as of 1881, it left the management of its debts in the hands of its creditors, that is, it was deprived of the right to have a control over its revenues.<sup>24</sup> Iran, on the other hand, was already under heavy pressure for a long time because of the power struggle between Britain and Russia in the region, known as *The Great Game*.<sup>25</sup> This situation reveals that non-regional states did not approach the Middle East with the responsibility of a kind of “white man’s mission” to fill the gap for centralized power, as is often claimed.<sup>26</sup> Yet both states held considerable territories in what came to be known as the Middle East now sometimes through centralization efforts and sometimes through forced and often short-term alliances with local powers.

Both the Ottoman Empire and Iran were trying to resist the Western powers’ (including Russia) imperial pressures, with inspiration they received again from the Western powers. Indeed, this situation would later become an indispensable component of the history of the Middle East in the 20th century. On December 23, 1876, during an international conference held in Istanbul, the transition of the Ottoman Empire into a constitutional order was declared,<sup>27</sup> however, due to another international crisis within a year and a half, officially the parliamentary system and actually the entire constitution, were laid aside.<sup>28</sup> However, the aim of the Ottoman Empire’s foreign policy during this period was to prepare a ground for the improvement of the situation of the Ottoman Empire by minimizing foreign intervention. In this context, it is seen that Sultan Abdulhamid II aimed to extricate the country from the situation it was in by achieving unity in domestic and foreign policy.<sup>29</sup> For this purpose, he attached importance to Pan-Islamism and Islamic unity. It is clearly evident that in the background of this idea there

24 Özge Varol, *II. Abdülhamit Dönemi’nde Düyün-u Umumiye İdaresi, Kuruluşu ve İşleyişi*, Ankara Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Yayınlanmamış Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Ankara 2007, p. 90.

25 David Fromkin, “The Great Game in Asia”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (Spring 1980), p. 936.

26 In his poem “White Man’s Burden”, written in 1899, the English poet Rudyard Kipling talks about the civilizing responsibility of Western colonial powers in the lands they dominated. Rudyard Kipling, *White Man’s Burden*, Internet Modern History Sourcebook, (Online) <http://www1.udel.edu/History-old/fıgal/Hist104/assets/pdf/readings/11whitemanburden.pdf>, 3 December 2023.

27 Yavuz Abadan, “Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nda Anayasa Sistemine Geçiş Hareketleri”, *Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi’nin 100. Yılına Armağan: Meclis ve Milli Egemenlik Yazıları Seçkisi*, edit. by Hamit Emrah Beriş, TBMM Yayınları, Ankara, 2022, p. 85.

28 Erik Jan Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye’nin Tarihi*, translated by Yasemin Saner, İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul, 2013, p. 113-117.

29 Selim Deringil, “II. Abdülhamid’in Dış Politikası”, *Tanzimat’tan Cumhuriyet’e Türkiye Ansiklopedisi*, C. II, İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul, 1985, p. 304.

were features such as religion, nationality and continental unity.<sup>30</sup> By the summer of 1908, the constitutionalism had been restored.<sup>31</sup> A similar constitutional revolution had taken place in Iran in 1906.<sup>32</sup> It should be noted here that it is not possible to talk about a comprehensive revolutionary movement with the participation of large masses of people in either the Ottoman Empire or Iran.

## 2. The Impact of the First World War on the Middle East

World War I has long been known as a war that resulted from the long-standing animosity of the European powers and in which the parties settled their scores with each other. In this context, it would not be correct to limit World War I to the period between the summer of 1914 and November 1918. World War I was essentially a ‘Long Decade War’ and its first front was the Ottoman-Italian Battle for the rule of Tripolitania in 1911. This war also had a significant impact on the formation of the known polarization of World War I.<sup>33</sup> The last treaty of World War I was the Lausanne Peace Treaty in July 1923. With the Treaty of Lausanne, Türkiye’s borders with its two new neighbors, Syria and Iraq (excluding the province of Mosul for the time being), were drawn.<sup>34</sup> Both the beginning and the end of the war were located in the vast geography of the Middle East.

On the other hand, above all, World War I was a war of colonization. During the war, the great powers aimed to acquire new colonies by utilizing their “colonial capabilities”, that is, the human and economic potential of the colonial territories. From this point of view, it would not be inaccurate to refer to World War I as the “The First Partition War”. World War I is closely related to the fate of the Middle East lands in this very aspect. In this regard, it has always been debated in Türkiye whether the Ottoman Empire should or should not participate in World War I or on which side it should be. However, neither participating in the war nor choosing a side in the war was a matter of preference for the Ottoman Empire. It is difficult to say that the similar treaties that envisaged the division of the state’s territories in the Middle East among the Entente Powers would not have been concluded even if the Ottoman Empire had remained neutral. Moreover, the

30 Cezmi Eraslan, *II. Abdülhamid ve İslam Birliği*, Ötüken Yayınları, İstanbul, 1992, p. 23-24.

31 N. Nazif Tepedenlioğlu, *İlan-ı Hürriyet ve Sultan II. Abdülhamit Han*, Yeni Çığır Kitapevi, İstanbul, 1960, p. 6.

32 Kaan Dilek, “İran’da Meşrutiyet Hareketi ve Dönemin Siyasi Gelişmeleri”, *Akademik ORTA DOĞU*, C. 2, Vol. 1, 2007, p. 66.

33 Rachel Simon, “Italo-Turkish War (1911-1912)”, *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, (Online) [http://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/pdf/1914-1918-Online-italo-turkish\\_war\\_1911-1912-2016-08-23.pdf](http://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/pdf/1914-1918-Online-italo-turkish_war_1911-1912-2016-08-23.pdf), 2 November 2023.

34 Yusuf Hikmet Bayur, *Türkiye Devleti’nin Dış Siyaseti*, Atatürk Kültür, Dil ve Tarih Yüksek Kurumu, Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, Ankara, 1995, p. 162-172.



agreement between the British and Russian Empires, as early as 1907, recognizing British consent to Russian activities in the Ottoman Empire, serves as a proof of this.<sup>35</sup> In fact, the desire of the Ottoman Empire to join the war on the side of the Entente States was not accepted by these states themselves.

World War I laid the foundation of today's Middle East in many ways as well as a political phenomenon. Firstly, it fundamentally and irreversibly changed the map of the region. More importantly, it has created a geography where more than one state is sovereign, and more are seeking sovereignty. This does not only apply to the mainland nations that are the "primary components" of empires. The opinion leaders of the colonized nations also supported participation in the war in the hope of being treated more equally with the mainland nations that had colonized them. Mohandas Gandhi, for example, is known to have supported the recruitment of Indian soldiers into the British army with this kind of motivation.<sup>36</sup> Britain and France, which dominated the Middle East after World War I, played a major role in shaping the current borders. The influence of the British on the determination of the borders of Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and later Iran is known.<sup>37</sup> In that process, the influence of colonialism on the region was also decisive in shaping the borders.<sup>38</sup> One of the developments that caused the change in the map of the region during this period was the growing Arab nationalism in the region. The revolt of Sharif Hussein against the Ottoman Empire is one of them. In addition to the rising Arab nationalism, the British imperial agenda also played a role in the emergence of this revolt.<sup>39</sup>

At the end of the war, the region had more than one owner. The Turkish Republic, as the main inheritor of the Ottoman Empire, has retreated to the north of Asia Minor and the ancient Mesopotamian geography. The British Empire made enormous gains. After the armistice with the Ottoman Empire, they captured Mosul, which for many reasons would become a strategic piece of territory.<sup>40</sup> France, too, now extended its colonial presence throughout the Middle East, albeit not as large as the British. The French Empire that established mandates in Syria and Lebanon was once again putting into

35 Beryl J. Williams, "The Strategic Background to the Anglo-Russian Entente of August 1907", *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (1966), p. 360-373.

36 Robert Gerwarth, Erez Manela, *Empires At War*, Oxford University Press, England, 2014, p.10.

37 Mesut Özcan, "Ortadoğu'da Sınırlar ve Sorunlar", *Anlayış Dergisi*, Vol. 74, 2009, p. 45.

38 Mesut Özcan, *Sorunlu Miras Irak*, Küre Yayınları, İstanbul, 2003, p. 4-5.

39 For detailed information, see; Bülent Özdemir, Eftal Irkçıatal, *İngiliz Arap Büro Raporlarında Arap Ayaklanması Bir İsyanın Kodları*, Yitik Hazine Yayınları, İzmir, 2011, p. 34-87.

40 Nevin Coşar, Sevtap Demirci, "The Mosul Question and the Turkish Republic: Before and after the Frontier Treaty, 1926", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 1, (Jan., 2006), p. 123.

practice what Robinson and Gallagher analyzed as the “official mind of imperialism”.<sup>41</sup> However, “as a significant consequence of the administrative structure based on the divide and rule principle, the French administration in Syria and Lebanon was increasingly emerging as an arbitrary, sectarian, exploitative, and corrupt government in practice.”<sup>42</sup> Britain intervened in the Basra region from the very beginning of the war. Its aim - whether it was the Russians who were its allies, or the Germans who were its enemies - was to control the region, especially the oil fields that are of particular concern to British interests in Iran.<sup>43</sup>

There was also a military operation that constituted one of the agendas of the British throughout the World War I. Despite the defeat at Kut-al-Amara in 1916, British troops marched into Baghdad in 1917.<sup>44</sup> Iraqi Sunni Arabs were the last “element” to leave the Ottoman Empire. Until World War I, local leaders had no agenda towards independence and were instead concerned about land ownership or water issues.<sup>45</sup> In this respect, it is not possible to include the British attack on Iraq - as was common throughout the 19th century - in the scenario of a European great power helping Ottoman vassals who revolted due to poor governance. During this period, Iraq was incorporated into the British Empire’s territory largely within the framework of an imperial strategy and a set of imperial objectives. The borders of the Middle Eastern countries between 1914 and 1922 are considered to be the product of a colonial period in which a Western perspective was applied. British officials were the key factor in the formation of the states of Iraq and Jordan. The borders of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq were drawn by a British officer with the 1922 Uqair Convention. And the borders of Syria and Lebanon were drawn by France. The allocations between Muslims and Christians in this country were also made by the French.<sup>46</sup>

41 J.P Spagnolo, “French Influence in Syria Prior to World War I: The Functional Weakness of Imperialism”, *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 1, (Winter 1969), p. 45.

42 James Barr, *Kırmızı Çizgi, Paylaşılamayan Toprakların Yakın Tarihi*, translated by Ekin Can Göksoy, Pegasus Yayınları, İstanbul, 2016, p. 137.

43 Judith S. Yaphe. “War and Occupation in Iraq: What Went Right? What Could Go Wrong?”, *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 3, (Summer 2003), p. 383.

44 Judith S. Yaphe. “War and Occupation in Iraq: What Went Right? What Could Go Wrong?”, p. 383.

45 Judith S. Yaphe. “War and Occupation...”, p. 383-384.

46 David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2001, p. 8.

### 3. The Middle East in the Interwar Period (1919-1939)

The main factor in the political climate in the Middle East after World War I was the mandate regimes established under British and French dominance. The new authorities were, in themselves, an element of change after centuries of Ottoman rule. More than that, they foreshadowed the changes in the future. The British colonial authorities consolidated their power through the tribes they deemed close to cooperation under intense insurgency pressure.<sup>47</sup> In the meantime, of course, the elimination of the administrative and political legacy of the Ottoman Empire was one of the main power practices of the British mandate. As Dodge diagnosed, the British mandate administration “*emphasized the rural area to such an extent that it considered Islam, which it identified with the city, as ‘an obstacle to development’ and responsible for all Iraq’s maladies*”.<sup>48</sup> Here, the city or Islam refers to Sunni Islam, while the rural area refers to the Shia sect. More precisely, while the British mandate administration consolidated its power through a very archaic practice of divide-and-rule, it was also defining the basic axes of the spiral of violence that the country would be thrown into for the next hundred years. The violent environment, characterized by insurgencies and internal conflicts among Iraqis, has made the military an indispensable actor of the political order in Iraq and civil politicians only realized that they could “stay in power with the consent” of the military.<sup>49</sup> Otherwise, those who were amongst the military class actually took power.

In Iraq, the 1920 revolt led to the formation of a kingdom in 1921 and the formal termination of the British mandate in 1932.<sup>50</sup> The French mandate in Syria also demonstrated that power in the modern era is a zero-sum game. While the French tried to consolidate their power in Syria, they had to contend with a kind of “pluralist” revolt involving formations from different parts of the country and all these revolts led to the emergence of a new Syrian identity, especially after 1925.<sup>51</sup> The French administration had an oppressive character. It was also evident in the economic structure.

47 Brian P. Sharp, *British Colonization of Iraq, 1918-1932*, Marine Corps University, Unpublished Master’s Thesis, Virginia, 2008, p. 5.

48 Tobdy Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2003, p. 135.

49 Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2002, p. 94.

50 Salah Eddine Mehideb, *British Presence in the Middle East: Emancipation or Colonization, Case Study: Iraq 1918-1958*, University of Mentouri, Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Constantine, Algérie, 2010, p. 32-41.

51 Hamit Bozarslan, *Orta Doğu: Bir Şiddet Tarihi*, İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul, 2011, p. 62.

For example, French Franc was placed at the center of the Syrian economy, and the management of the monetary mechanism was entrusted to French bankers, not Syrians.<sup>52</sup>

The revolts defined the character of the new mandate administrations in a very decisive way. Even in Egypt (this country had been under British colonial rule since 1882), a country with a more “deep-rooted” colonial tradition than Iraq and Syria, there was a revolt whose level of participation surprised even its organizers. The fact that this revolt, coupled with large-scale strikes, produced a “workers’ movement” helps to understand why a kind of socialism specific to the Arab world was proposed by this country in the 1950s.<sup>53</sup> In Palestine, the native Arab population was in a state of reaction against two phenomena. Especially the reactions led by large families living in the Palestinian territories created unrest against both the British mandate and the growing Jewish population there. This situation was bringing the Palestinian character of the reaction’s ethnic nationalism to the fore compared to other Arabs living under the mandate. After the 1920 and 1929 anti-Zionist reactions, the last and largest Arab reaction, which began in Palestine in 1936, was directed against both British military forces and Jewish settlers.<sup>54</sup> The reactions were suppressed in the bloodiest way imaginable, through mass punishment methods. To emphasize the continuity in the British colonial mind, the following example would be illustrative: “*The Essex regiment, which had bloodily suppressed the Irish independence movement in the 1920s, carried out similar violence in Palestine in 1937.*”<sup>55</sup>

In the period after World War I, there were both rebellions in the territories under the mandates, and the elite families of the mentioned countries were involved in the governance of the states that emerged as a result of these rebellions. Public participation in governance is not much in question at this early stage. There were not such as democratic political parties just as nowadays, at that time. The middle and lower middle classes have been able to have a say in state governance mainly with social mobilization through educational institutions and, of course, the military, and often through their rise to the top of the state through undemocratic processes. This process was also the case for the Turks and Iranians who had a state before the war. The modernization practices

52 Mehmet Akif Okur, “Emperyalizmin Ortadoğu Tecrübesinden Bir Kesit: Suriye’de Fransız Mandası”, *Bilig*, Vol. 48, (Winter 2009), p. 142.

53 William J. Handley, “The Labor Movement in Egypt”, *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 3, (July 1949), p. 277-292.

54 Süleyman Özmen, *Ortadoğu’da Etnik Dini Çatışmalar ve İsrail*, IQ Kültür Sanat Yayıncılık, İstanbul, 2001, p. 153-154.

55 Matthew Hughes, “From Law and Order to Pacification: Britain’s Suppression of the Arab Revolt in Palestine, 1936–39”, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 2, (Winter 2010), p. 15-16.

of the interwar period in both Türkiye and Iran were similar. Starting from the late 1920s, efforts such as The Sun Language Theory or the Turkish History Thesis, which emphasized the pre-Islamic existence of the Turkish nation, came to the fore in Türkiye.<sup>56</sup> With almost the same motivation, Reza Shah changed the name of his country to Iran in 1935. Perhaps the most symbolic of all was the fact that both countries have chosen to eliminate Arabic words from their languages to prove that they demanded to be in a participation of Western civilization.<sup>57</sup>

In Türkiye, Mustafa Kemal established a nation state as a result to be the partition of the Ottoman Empire and sharpened the nationalist character of the regime. In Iran, which had been subject to nearly a century of British and Russian colonial rivalry, Reza Shah aimed to cultivate a sense of high national self-confidence. On the other hand, neither country was in conflict with the new world order established after World War I, which was based on the interests of colonial powers that had imposed their presence in the Middle East by force of arms. The Turkish War of Independence between 1919 and 1922 can be considered as an early example of post-World War I revisionism. Türkiye followed a rational and balanced foreign policy during in the early Republican period. It did not make territorial claims except the Sanjak of Alexandretta (İskenderun)<sup>58\*</sup>, which was under French mandate in Syria and displayed a reconciliatory attitude on the critical Mosul issue. Especially after the cession of this province to Iraq in 1926, Türkiye improved its relations with the victors of the post-war order and even signed a tripartite alliance treaty with Britain and France on the eve of World War II.<sup>59</sup>

#### 4. Establishment of the Continuous Front (1939-1956)

During the Second World War (1939-1945), the Middle East was not as directly affected as it was during the First World War. Of course, when viewed from another perspective, the region was already under occupation and heavy foreign power influence. Türkiye, as described by one of its wartime foreign ministers Numan Menemenciöđlü, managed to keep itself out of the conflict with an “*active neutrality*” policy.<sup>60</sup>

56 Soner Çađaptay, “Race, Assimilation and Kemalism: Turkish Nationalism and the Minorities in the 1930s,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 3, (May 2004), p. 86-101.

57 John R. Perry, “Language Reform in Turkey and Iran”, *Men of Order: Authoritarian Modernization under Atatürk and Reza Shah*, Ed. Touraj Atabaki, Erik Jan Zürcher, I.B. Tauris, London, New York, 2004, p. 246-250.

58 \* Today’s Hatay

59 İsmail Soysal, *Türkiye’nin Siyasal Andlaşmaları I. Cilt (1920-1945)*, Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, Ankara, 2000, p. 608-617.

60 Selim Deringil, *Turkish Foreign Policy during the Second World War: An Active Neutrality*, New York, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 1.

In the post-war world, the nationalism of the people of the region was also radicalized. Now, there were more opportunities for a mass mobilization with nationalist motives. For example, the number of university students in Egypt, which was 3,000 in 1920, rose to 32,000 in 1950. In Iraq and Syria, similar trends were observed during the same period.<sup>61</sup> The increasing level of education among the urban population meant the emergence of a rising middle class. This class's unique demands led to the emergence of new political views in the region. In various countries of the Middle East, the Ba'ath (Resurrection) parties, which would rule for a long time in the coming years and become a political concept, emerged as a result of such a sociological climate.<sup>62</sup> After merging with Akram al-Hourani's Arab Socialist Party in 1953, the Ba'ath Party, which was founded by Michel Aflaq, a Syrian Christian Arab, advocated for the transformation of the Arab people into a mold consisting of scientific socialism and nationalism through revolution and self-sacrifice as a spiritual duty.<sup>63</sup> However, in terms of its consequences, World War II had its most traumatic effects on Palestine. The "formulation" of the state of Israel by the UN at such a time in history, influenced by the Holocaust, and the immediate acceptance of this formulation by the West -for example, the recognition of Israel by the United States just eleven minutes after its declaration of independence-, further strengthened the momentum of the nationalist transformation of the Arabs in the region.<sup>64</sup> In other words, another Western intervention in the region was going to increase the Middle East's propensity for violence, and the strengthening of this trend was going to be likely to pave the way for new Western interventions.

On the other hand, the view that associates the establishment of Israel with the Holocaust is also common. For example, according to Walter Laqueur, European Zionism was unable to prevent this tragedy, and the Israeli state, which was founded as a result, owes its existence to it.<sup>65</sup> Although there are significant and legitimate objections to this view, the argument was not groundless, given the strong anti-Semitic influence on the European continent that began in the early modern period. With the establishment of the State of Israel, the Jewish people were happy to have reached the inevitable point of history. For the Palestinians and the Arab community in the region, it was a *disaster* and for the people of the region, who felt that they had been subjected to conspiracies

61 Hamit Bozarslan, *Orta Doğu...*, p. 77.

62 John F. Devlin, "The Baath Party: Rise and Metamorphosis", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 96, No. 5, (Dec. 1991), p. 1396-1407.

63 John F. Devlin, "The Baath Party: Rise and Metamorphosis", p. 1397.

64 Michael Ottolenghi, "Harry Truman's Recognition of Israel", *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (Dec. 2004), p. 964.

65 Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1972, p. 564.

since World War I, it was a trap of Zionist invasion and British plot.<sup>66</sup> The establishment of a Jewish theocratic state right in the heart of their ancient lands pushed the Arabs towards a nationalist and socialist reaction in line with the spirit of the era.

In the 1950s Middle East, the country where nationalism and socialism interactively generated a strong power dynamic was Egypt. Indeed, certain members of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, whose roots trace back to the 19th century, individuals like Sheikh Karbala al-Ghazali, were able to advocate for Muslim socialism in 1951.<sup>67</sup> Of course, it would be appropriate to limit the Muslim Brotherhood's relationship with Arab socialism with this exceptional example. The briefly mentioned socialist-oriented Arab nationalism, ignited by Michel Aflaq, found its counterpart in Egypt with the *Free Officers* organization.<sup>68</sup> Founded in 1949 by Gamal Abdel Nasser, the organization seized power from King Farouk in a coup d'état only three years later, on 23 July 1952.<sup>69</sup> The priority of the free officers in Egypt was, of course, Egypt. As Nasser said, they were fighting in Palestine, but their dreams were tied to Egypt.<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, Nasser's ambitious vision was inevitably addressing the burning agenda of the people of the region. Egypt was supporting Algeria's struggle for independence and even had a brief United Arab Republic experience with Syria.<sup>71</sup> Although his army was destroyed in the War of 1956 by the British-French-Israeli coalition, he gained a great victory in political terms. The essence of Nasser's victory lay in his ability to convert more than half a century of protest and rebellion of the people of the region into a political discourse that was most compatible with the conditions of the time. He became one of the leaders of the Arab world and even of the Non-Aligned Movement, which was the most prominent organization of that period and symbolized by the phrase "*From the rebellious gulf to the roaring ocean, we are with you, O Nasser!*".<sup>72</sup>

66 Mamdouh Nofal, Fawaz Turki, Haidar Abdel Shafi, Inea Bushnaq, Yezid Sayigh, Shafiq al-Hout, Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Musa Budeiri, "Reflections on Al-Nakba", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1, (Autumn 1998), p. 20.

67 Hamit Bozarslan, *Orta Doğu...*, p. 87.

68 Hamit Bozarslan, *Orta Doğu...*, p. 88.

69 Baha Abu-Laban, "The National Character in the Egyptian Revolution", *The Journal of Developing Areas*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (Jan., 1967), p. 179.

70 Hamit Bozarslan, *Orta Doğu...*, p. 90.

71 Monte Palmer, "The United Arab Republic: An Assessment of Its Failure", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 1, (Winter 1966), p. 50.

72 O.M. Smolansky, "Moscow and the Suez Crisis, 1956: A Reappraisal", *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 80, No.4 (Dec., 1965), p. 604.

## 5. Inevitable Reactions (1956-1979)

The most obvious result of the 1956 Suez Crisis from the perspective of the Middle East was the irreversible establishment of Cold War realities in the region. The already declining hegemony of the UK and France after World War II paved the way for the US to completely take over their role with this war. The fact that the US almost indexed its regional policy to Israel's security turned the Soviet Union into an actor of the Middle East policy in favor of the Arabs. The construction of the Aswan Dam, one of the main elements of the 1956 crisis, was undertaken by the Soviet Union.<sup>73</sup> The Ba'ath-type regimes established as a result of military coups in Syria, Iraq and Libya also developed close relations with the Soviet Union. Following the crisis environment in Syria in 1957 and the Ba'athist coup in Iraq in 1958, Soviet influence in the region gained even more ground.<sup>74</sup> Türkiye and Reza Pahlavi's Iran acted in co-operation with the United States in this period.<sup>75</sup> In fact, such involvement of the Soviet Union in the politics of the region was not something that the Middle Eastern countries, especially Egypt, were very glad about. Moreover, except for Iran, the Soviet Union did not leave any trace in the memory of the people of the region and, of course, the statesmen.

Throughout the more than forty-year history of the Cold War, the position of few countries has changed as much as that of Iran. After the dual occupation, although the monarchy was re-established in 1946, it did not last long. The unrest, especially in the cities, brought nationalist leader Mohammad Mossadegh to power. Mossadegh, who completed his education in the West and held a doctorate in law, had the same thoughts for Iranian oil as Nasser had for the Suez Canal.<sup>76</sup> When he attempted to nationalize the Anglo-Iranian oil company, he faced a severe British embargo.<sup>77</sup> And then he was overthrown.<sup>78</sup> When considered together with the events in Egypt, the picture is actually quite clear. The great Western powers have been determined to restrict the policy-making arena of the countries in the region as much as they can. Another reality that complements this situation is, in such moments, the presence of local leaders in the

73 Mehmet Gönlübol. *Olaylarla Türk Dış Politikası (1919-1995)*, Siyasal Kitabevi, Ankara, 1996, p. 279.

74 Kamel S. Abu Jaber, *Arap Baas Sosyalist Partisi*, translated by Ahmet Ersoy, Altınok Matbaası, Ankara, 1970, p. 167-174.

75 Türkiye became a member of NATO in 1952; (Online), [https://www.nato.int/nato-welcome/index\\_tr.html](https://www.nato.int/nato-welcome/index_tr.html) 18 December 2023.

76 Hamid Dabashi, *İran: Ketlenmiş Halk*, translated by Emine Ayhan, Metis Yayınları, İstanbul, 2008, p. 141.

77 Reza Ghasimi, "Iran's Oil Nationalization and Mossadegh's Involvement with the World Bank", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 65, No. 3, (Summer 2011), p. 443.

78 Ebu'l Fazl Dilaveri, *Modern İran'da Şehir, Kimlik ve Siyaset, İran: Ulusal Kimlik İnşası*, edit. by Hamid Ahmedi, translated by Hakkı Uygur, Küre Yayınları, İstanbul, 2009, p. 150-151.



region who understand very well the messages of Western states reminding Middle Eastern countries of their limits. Reza Pahlavi, son of Reza Shah, was such a person. Shah Pahlavi, who embarked on a radical reform movement similar to what his father had done and called the *White Revolution* (İnkılab-ı Sefid), which began in 1963 and lasted until 1978, tried to keep close co-operation with Western countries while trying to make his country's outlook similar to the West.<sup>79</sup> Reza Pahlavi, like his father, attached great importance to having a large army. For example, the increased revenues generated by the 1973 oil crisis were largely spent on equipping the army. At the same period, in 1973-74, the poorest 10 percent of the population in Iran could spend only 1.3 percent of total expenditures.<sup>80</sup> Considering the geography of his country, Shah Pahlavi thought that he had made the right choice. This is a situation that should be dwelled upon. When a statesman in the region established close relations with the West, his view of his region and his country would become almost identical to that of the Western great powers. The psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, who was born in a French colony, was probably referring to something exactly like this when he reported his observations on Algeria and spoke of the colonization of minds.<sup>81</sup>

Nevertheless, when it was the time, the powerful army that Reza Pahlavi had built up was not enough to maintain his power. He lost his power due to reform movements that were illiberal, lacked mass support, and even attracted the reaction of large groups of people, especially conservatives and socialists. The Shah's repressive, inequitable and uncompromisingly pro-USA foreign policy had created a large socialist base around the TUDEH Party. This base played an active role in the process that led to the overthrow of the Shah and provided significant support to the Islamic Revolution in its early days.<sup>82</sup> At the end of the whole process of the rebellion, the Islamic Republic was established, which was of great interest even to Michel Foucault in terms of the power-knowledge debate.<sup>83</sup> In less than thirty years, Iran has witnessed three regimes, each of which emerged as the antithesis of its predecessor. The recent regime change had implications even beyond Iran. On the other hand, the Islamic Revolution in Iran was a development that fundamentally shook the mental algorithm of the Cold War. Until then, there was

79 Ali M. Ansari, "The Myth of the White Revolution: Mohammad Reza Shah, 'Modernization' and the Consolidation of Power", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2001, p. 1.

80 Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2008, p. 420-421.

81 Peter D'Errico, "What's a Colonized Mind?", *Indian Country*, (Online) <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2011/12/12/what-colonized-mind>. 15 November 2023.

82 Farhang Jahanpour, "Iran: The Rise and Fall of the Tudeh Party", *The World Today*, Vol. 40, No. 4, (Apr. 1984), p.154.

83 Mahmoud Khatami, "Foucault on the Islamic Revolution of Iran", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 23, No. 1, (April 2003), p. 121-125.

one main opponent and ideology for the United States and its potential or existing allies. The Islamic Revolution in Iran had led to the opening of a new front for the United States on the territory of its most reliable ally in the region. In this respect, the Islamic Revolution, together with the military intervention of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, which could be considered as an indirect consequence of the Islamic Revolution itself, was redefining the content of the ideological polarization in the Middle East and where exactly the Middle East was located.<sup>84</sup>

While the Cold War was in progress, the Egyptian army had suffered a heavy defeat in the Suez Crisis of 1956, but the effects of the 1967 Six-Day War were much more traumatic for the Arab countries of the region. The definitive defeat in 1967 had come at a time when the Arab world was feeling very good about itself. Although it was a clear military defeat, the Suez Crisis of 1956 created a feeling of political triumph as a result, moreover, in 1962, Algeria had also carried out its independence revolution, which had a very symbolic meaning for the people of the region. Now, what happened in 1967 was a definitive defeat that would strengthen the belief in the West's historic conspiracy against the Middle East. The wheels of modern history were once again turning in the region. Another deep disappointment affected the people of the Middle East, especially the Palestinians during the 1970s.<sup>85</sup>

In 1957, al Fatah was established, and in 1964, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) undertook the cause of Palestine.<sup>86</sup> Not just the PLO or al Fatah, several structures served to the activation of Palestinian-centered political movements during this period. Any type of mobilization by Palestinian organizations, which were deprived of the opportunity to fight on an equal basis with the enemy during this period, was identified by the West with terrorism as *a priori*.

While all these developments were taking place, the relations between Arab leaders were directly affecting regional events. For example, the relations of King Faisal of Saudi Arabia of the time with his Egyptian counterpart Gamal Abdel Nasser were very bad, only when he made an agreement with his successor, Anwar Sadat, the countries of the region were able to realize embargoes against the United States as a policy

84 Nayef R.H Al-Rodhan, Greame P. Herd, Lisa Watanabe, *Critical Turning Points in the Middle East: 1915-2015*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2011, p. 117.

85 Hillel Frisch, "The PLO and the Arabs in Israel 1967-93: Politicization or Radicalization?" *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, Vol. 2. No. 3, 1996, p. 446-464.

86 Veysel Ayhan, "HAMAS: Filistin Direnişinde Politik İslam", *Ortaoğu Etütleri*, C. 1, Vol. 1, Temmuz 2009, p. 103-104.

alternative.<sup>87</sup> Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's Libya was also able to emerge in this period as a kind of "centrifugal" force relying on the opportunities offered by their natural resources.<sup>88</sup> Given that a president who wanted to nationalize Iran's underground resources was overthrown in order to preserve Anglo-American hegemony in Iran, the political and economic-political power of the Middle Eastern governments in the 1970s was considerable.

By 1970, the balance was being re-established in the Middle East. Monarchies were overthrown in Egypt, Iraq, Tunisia, Yemen and Libya. In Syria and Algeria, as well as in Sudan and South Yemen, foreign administrators had already been replaced by local ones.<sup>89</sup> Combined with the opportunities offered by the possession of the most valuable natural resources, this new map of the region was creating important consequences. The Middle East was no longer a geography of peoples and governments whose borders were drawn by Western diplomats in secret meetings, and whose fate was decided for them.

## Conclusion

The history of the modern Middle East is in fact the story of the vision of non-native people towards the region. Cemil Meriç also says that the concept of "Middle East" is a concept created by the Western states on the axis of their own interests, but it is also adopted and accepted by the people of the region.<sup>90</sup> Even the names of many Middle Eastern countries are the result of the Western colonial powers' conception of these countries and their inhabitants. When Italy, after occupying the Tripolitania province of the Ottoman Empire, named it Libya, it was referring to the Roman-ness of these lands. When Britain invented the Trans-Jordan, it was implementing a management technique that was committed to alienating the region from its inhabitants.

Here, one should not fall into the error of the mainstream Orientalist point of view. According to this perspective, the Muslim Middle East geography is an exceptional place that is inert, closed to change in terms of its internal changes and different from other regions of the world in these respects.<sup>91</sup> On the contrary, the people of the Middle

87 Charles Issawi, "The 1973 Oil Crisis and After," *Journal of Post Keynesian Economics*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Winter 1978-1979), p. 12.

88 Charles Issawi, "The 1973 Oil Crisis and After", p. 9-11.

89 Charles Issawi, "The 1973 Oil Crisis and After", p. 4.

90 Cemil Meriç, *Kırk Ambar*, Ötüken Yayınları, 1. Baskı, İstanbul, 1980, p. 287-288.

91 Erhan Keleşoğlu, "Filistin'den Bir Toplumsal Hareket: Hamas", *Toplumsal Hareketler: Tarih, Teori Deneyim*, der.: Y. Doğan Çetinkaya, İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul, 2008, p. 513.

East have also undergone significant mental and sociological transformations with their own dynamics and have been able to demonstrate their will to “dominate their history” in many moments of recent history. All examples aside, even taking into account the transformation of the groups leading the struggle of the Palestinian people, it would be inconsistent with reality to attribute inertia or passivity to the people of the Middle East. Besides, the aim of this study is not to analyze the internal political dynamics of the region in detail. Rather, it is aimed to discuss the role of non-regional Western powers in the process of violence in the recent historical experience of a geography characterized by a tendency towards conflict and violence from a totalistic point of view.

The most important thing is to avoid all totalizing approaches when thinking about the region that has started to be described as the Middle East in the last century, likely irreversibly so. This situation is, first of all, demographically impossible. The Middle East does not only consist of Arabs. Apart from Egypt, the most populated countries in the region are Türkiye and Iran, and these countries are not Arab. On the other hand, it is a misconception to see the region as solely comprised of a Muslim population particularly due to the influence of the current situation. An even more grave misconception is to see the people of different religious beliefs in the region as rigidly separated from each other.

On the other hand, the history of the modern Middle East is basically a history of transformation. First of all, there is a transformation in terms of political geography. In the early 20th century, there was no independent country in the region except Türkiye and Iran. Between World Wars I and II, new political entities emerged with the establishment of monarchies in Egypt, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Probably the most important new political phenomenon of the post-war period was the establishment of Israel in 1948 and its considerable territorial expansion through invasion in a short period of time. In the early 1970s, many new states, from Kuwait to Qatar, Bahrain to the United Arab Emirates, became actors in regional politics, empowered by their natural resource opportunities. In addition, the vision of the Middle East has also expanded over time. Previously, the south-west of the region was being kept limited to Egypt. However, both the presence of natural resources of high geopolitical value and the governmental structures that are now defined as “identical” with the Middle East have led to Libya, Algeria and even the two other Maghreb countries, Tunisia and Morocco, being conceived within the borders of the Middle East.

The main element of transformation was the change in the roles of actors. As mentioned above, the Middle East was more open to the influence of the political visions of the Western colonial powers in the early 20th century. This situation reinforced the idea of “inert, passive and ready to accept” Middle Easterner. But since the last quarter of the 20th century, in Iran, Libya and Palestine, the people or leaders of these countries continue to develop the ability to realize Wilson’s famous principle of “*right of self-determination*” in a much more authentic way.

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**Peer-review:** Externally peer-reviewed.

**Conflict of Interest:** The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

**Grant Support:** The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

**Hakem Değerlendirmesi:** Dış bağımsız.

**Çıkar Çatışması:** Yazar çıkar çatışması bildirmemiştir.

**Finansal Destek:** Yazar bu çalışma için finansal destek almadığını beyan etmiştir.

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