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What World War I Did to the Middle East Century of Violence

By Bernhard Zand

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World War I may have ended in 1918, but the violence it triggered in the Middle East still hasn't come to an end. Arbitrary borders drawn by self-interested imperial powers have left a legacy that the region has not been able to overcome.

Damascus, year three of the civil war: The 4th Division of the Syrian army has entrenched itself on Kassioun Mountain, the place where Cain is said to have slain his brother Abel. United Nations ballistics experts say the poison gas projectiles that landed in the Damascus suburbs of Muadamiya and Ain Tarma in the morning hours of Aug. 21, 2013 were fired from somewhere up on the mountain. Some 1,400 people died in the attack -- 1,400 of the more than 100,000 people who have lost their lives since the beginning of the conflict.

Baghdad, in the former palace quarter behind the Assassin's Gate: Two years after the American withdrawal, Iraqis are once again in full control of the so-called Green Zone, located on a sharp bend in the Tigris River. It is the quarter of Baghdad where the Americans found refuge when the country they occupied devolved into murderous chaos. Currently, the situation is hardly any better. On the other side of the wall, in the red zone, death has once again become commonplace. There were over 8,200 fatalities last year.

Beirut, the capital of Lebanon that is so loved by all Arabs: The city has long been a focal point both of Arab life and of Arab strife. The devout versus the secular, the Muslims versus the Christians, the Shiites versus the Sunnis. With fighting underway in Libya and Syria, with unrest ongoing in Egypt and Iraq, the old question must once again be posed: Has Beirut managed to leave the last eruption of violence behind or is the next one just around the corner?

Two years after the revolts of 2011, the situation in the Middle East is as bleak as it has ever been. There is hardly a country in the region that has not experienced war or civil strife in recent decades. And none of them look immune to a possible outbreak of violence in the near future. The movement that came to be known as the Arab Spring threatens to sink into a morass of overthrows and counter-revolts.

That, though, is likely only to surprise those who saw the rebellions in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Syria as part of an historical turn of events for the Middle East. To be sure, the unrest was a bloody new beginning, but it was also the most recent chapter in an almost uninterrupted regional conflict that began 100 years ago and has never really come to an end.

'The Children of England and France'

In no other theater of World War I are the results of that epochal conflict still as current as they are in the Middle East. Nowhere else does the early 20th century orgy of violence still determine political conditions to the same degree. The so-called European Civil War, a term used to describe the period of bloody violence that racked Europe from 1914 onwards, came to an end in 1945. The Cold War ceased in 1990. But the tensions unleashed on the Arab world by World War I remain as acute as ever. Essentially, the Middle East finds itself in the same situation now as Europe did following the 1919 Treaty of Versailles: standing before a map that disregards the region's ethnic and confessional realities.

In Africa, Latin America and -- following the bloodletting of World War II -- Europe, most peoples have largely come to accept the borders that history has forced upon them. But not in the Middle East. The states that were founded in the region after 1914, and the borders that were drawn then, are still seen as illegitimate by many of their own citizens and by their neighbors. The legitimacy of states in the region, writes US historian David Fromkin in "A Peace to End All Peace" -- the definitive work on the emergence of the modern Middle East -- comes either from tradition, from the power and roots of its founder or it doesn't come at all.

Only two countries in the broader region -- Egypt and Iran -- possess such a long and uninterrupted history that their state integrity can hardly be shaken, even by a difficult crisis. Two others continue to stand on the foundation erected by their founders: The Turkish Republic of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, finally united by Abd al-Asis Ibn Saud in 1932.

These four countries surround the core of the Middle East, which is made up of five countries and one seemingly eternal non-state. Fromkin calls them the "children of England and France:" Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Israel and Palestine.

No group of countries, particularly given their small sizes, has seen so many wars, civil wars, overthrows and terrorist attacks in recent decades. To understand how this historical anomaly came to pass, several factors must be considered: the region's depressing history prior to World War I, the failure of the Arab elite and the continual intervention by the superpowers thereafter, the role of political Islam, the discovery of oil, the founding of Israel and the Cold War.

A Peace to End All Peace

Perhaps most important, however, was the wanton resolution made by two European colonial powers, Britain and France, that ordered this part of the world in accordance with their own needs and literally drew "A Line in the Sand," as the British historian James Barr titled his 2011 book about this episode.

It is still unclear where the Arab Spring will take us and what will ultimately become of the Middle East. Apocalyptic scenarios are just as speculative as the hope that that the region will find its way to new and more stable borders and improved political structures. But where does this lack of legitimacy and absence of trust which poisons the Middle East come from? How did we arrive at this "Peace to End All Peace," as Fromkin's book is called?

Istanbul, the summer of 1914: The capital of the Ottoman Empire seems half a world away from the sunny parlor in the Imperial Villa in Ischl where Emperor Franz Joseph I signed his manifesto "To My People" on July 28 and unleashed the world war by declaring war on Serbia. For centuries, the Ottoman Empire had controlled the southern and eastern Mediterranean, from Alexandretta to Arish, from the Maghreb to Suez. But Algeria and Tunisia fell to the French while the British nabbed Egypt; in 1911, the Italians established a bridgehead in Libya. By the eve of the Great War, the empire had shrunk to include, aside from today's Turkey, only the Middle East, present-day Iraq and a strip of land on the Arabian Peninsula stretching down to Yemen.

It is these regions, south of present-day Turkey, that became the focus of the Middle Eastern battles in World War I. For 400 years, the area had wallowed deep in history's shadow. But in the early 20th century, it rapidly transformed into the arc of crisis we know today -- a place whose cities have become shorthand for generations of suffering: Basra, Baghdad, Aleppo, Damascus, Beirut, Gaza and Suez.

The protagonists of World War I were not fully aware yet that the Ottoman Empire's backyard was sitting atop the largest oil reserves in the world. Had they known, the fighting in the Middle East would likely have been even more violent and brutal than it was. At the time, however, the war aims of the two sides were determined by a world order that would dissolve within the next four years: Great Britain wanted to open a shipping route to its ally Russia and to secure its connection to India via the Suez Canal and the Persian Gulf. The German Empire wanted to prevent exactly that.

Shifting to the Periphery

It remained unclear for a few days following Franz Joseph's declaration of war whether the Ottoman Empire would enter the war and, if it did, on which side. But shortly after the conflict began, Istanbul joined Berlin and Vienna. On August 2, the Germans and the Ottomans signed a secret pact; a short time later, two German warships -- the *SMS Goeben* and the *SMS Breslau* -- began steaming from the western Mediterranean toward Constantinople. Once they arrived, they were handed over to the -- officially still neutral -- Ottoman navy and renamed *Yavuz* and *Midilli*; the German crews remained, but donned the fez.

With the arrival of the two battleships in the Golden Horn and the subsequent mining of the Dardanelles, the *casus belli* had been established: The Ottomans and the Germans had blocked the connection between Russia and its allies, the French and the British. Shortly thereafter, the *Goeben*, flying the Ottoman flag, bombarded Russian ports on the Black Sea. At the beginning of November, Russia, Great Britain and France declared war on the Ottoman Empire.

In London, strategists began considering an attempt to break the Dardanelles blockade and take Constantinople. The result was the arrival of a British-French fleet at the southern tip of the Gallipoli Peninsula three months later. The attack, which began with a naval bombardment but soon included an all-out ground-troop invasion, failed dramatically. The Ottoman victory led to the resignation of Britain's First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill and provided the foundation for the rise of the man who would later found modern Turkey: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The bloody battle also became a national trauma for Australia and New Zealand, thousands of whose soldiers lost their lives at Gallipoli.

The Allies' defeat at Gallipoli marked a strategic turning point in the war in the Middle East. Because their plan to strike at the heart of the Ottoman Empire failed, the Allies began focusing on its periphery -- targeting the comparatively weakly defended Arab provinces. It was a plan which corresponded with the Arab desire to throw off the yoke of Ottoman rule. In July 1915, Sir Henry McMahon, the High Commissioner of Egypt, began secret correspondence with Hussein Bin Ali, the Sharif of Hejaz and of the holy city of Mecca. He and his sons, Ali, Faisal and Abdullah -- together with the Damascus elite -- dreamed of founding an Arab nation state

stretching from the Taurus Mountains in southeastern Turkey to the Red Sea and from the Mediterranean to the Iranian border.

In October 1915, McMahon wrote Hussein a letter in which he declared Great Britain's willingness -- bar a few vague reservations -- "to recognize and support the independence of the Arabs within the territories in the limits and boundaries proposed by the Sherif of Mecca."

Imperialistic Dealings

The Arabs fulfilled their part of the agreement. In June 1916, they began their insurgency against the Ottomans -- a decisive aid to the British advance from Sinai to Damascus via Jerusalem. Their revolt was energized by the British archeologist and secret agent Thomas Edward Lawrence, who would go down in history as "Lawrence of Arabia."

Britain, though, did not fully live up to its part of the deal. In a dispatch sent in early 1916, Lawrence wrote that the Arab revolt would be useful to the British Empire because, "it marches with our immediate aims, the break-up of the Islamic 'bloc' and the defeat and disruption of the Ottoman Empire." But in no way were the British thinking of the kind of united Arab state that Hussein and his sons dreamed of. "The states the Sharifs would set up to succeed the Turks would be ... harmless to ourselves.... The Arabs are even less stable than the Turks. If properly handled they would remain in a state of political mosaic, a tissue of small jealous principalities incapable of cohesion."

Far more important to the British than their Arab comrades in arms were the French, with whom their troops were fighting and dying in untold numbers on the Western Front. "The friendship with France," British Prime Minister David Lloyd George later told his French counterpart Georges Clemenceau, "is worth ten Syrias." France was a colonial power that had long laid claim to the Christian provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Great Britain would have preferred to control the region alone, but with their common enemy Germany bearing down, London was prepared to divide the expected spoils.

Even as McMahon was corresponding with Sharif Hussein, British parliamentarian Sir Mark Sykes was negotiating a contradictory deal with the French diplomat François Georges-Picot. It foresaw the division of the Arab provinces which still belonged to the Ottomans in such a way that France would get the areas to the north and the British those to the south. "I should like to draw a line from the 'e' in Acre to the last 'k' in Kirkuk," Sykes said as he briefed Downing Street on the deal at the end of 1916.

The so-called Sykes-Picot Agreement was an unabashedly imperialistic document. It took no account of the wishes of the peoples affected, ignored the ethnic and confessional boundaries existing in the Arab and Kurdish world and thus provoked the conflicts which continue to plague the region 100 years later. "Even by the standards of the time," writes James Barr, "it was a shamelessly self-interested pact."

The Balfour Redesign

The document initially remained secret. And by the time the Bolsheviks completed their revolution in Moscow in 1917 and made the Sykes-Picot Agreement public, the British had already signed another secret deal -- one which neither the Arabs nor the French knew about.

On Nov. 2, 1917, Foreign Minister Arthur James Balfour promised the Zionist Federation of Great Britain "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." There were several factors motivating the British to grant the oppressed Jews the right to self-determination and to give them a piece of the Ottoman Empire for that purpose. One of the most important was the accusations of imperialism against London that had grown louder as the war progressed. Not that the imperialists in the British cabinet shared such concerns. But it bothered them, particularly because one of the critics, Woodrow Wilson, had just been reelected as US president.

"Every people should be left free to determine its own polity, its own way of development, unhindered, unthreatened, unafraid," Wilson intoned in January of 1917 on the eve of America's entry into the war. At the time, Wilson was unaware of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, but the British suspected that they would ultimately have to come clean with their new ally. As such, the Balfour Declaration can be seen as an effort to guard against the expected US reaction to Britain's arbitrary redesign of the Middle East.

In the meantime, the British -- with the help of the Arabs -- were establishing military facts on the ground. Against stiff Ottoman and German resistance, they advanced across the Sinai and Palestine to Damascus. At the same time, they progressed up the Euphrates to Baghdad and occupied Iraq. Between 1915 and 1918, there were more than 1.5 million soldiers fighting in the Middle East, with several hundred thousand casualties -- not including the around one million Armenians who were killed or starved to death in the Ottoman Empire.

In October of 1918, World War I came to an end in the region with the Armistice of Mudros. The Ottoman Empire had been defeated and, with the exception of Anatolia, was divided among the victors and their allies. The "peace to end all peace" was forced upon the Middle East -- for an entire century.

When US President Wilson arrived in Paris in early 1919 for peace negotiations with British premier Lloyd George and French leader Clemenceau, he became witness to what for him was an unexpected show. The heads of the two victorious powers were deeply divided and engaged in a biting oratorical duel. The French insisted that they be given the mandate for present-day Lebanon and for the region stretching to the Tigris, including what is now Syria. The Sykes-Picot Agreement, after all, guaranteed them control over the area.

Asking the People

The British, who were mindful of their own mandate in Palestine and who had just received more exact information regarding the immense oil riches to be had in Mesopotamia, were opposed. Granting France the mandate over Syria, after all, was in contradiction to the promises they had made to the Arabs at the beginning of the war. Furthermore, the British had fought the war in the Middle East essentially on their own, with almost one million soldiers and 125,000

killed and injured. "There would have been no question of Syria but for England," Lloyd George said.

Wilson proposed a solution. The only way to find out if the residents of Syria would accept a French mandate and those of Palestine and Mesopotamia would accept British rule, the US president said, was to find out what people in those regions wanted. It was a simple and self-evident idea. For two months, the Chicago businessman Charles Crane and the American theologian Henry King travelled through the Middle East and interviewed hundreds of Arab notables. Although the British and the French did all they could to influence the outcome of the mission, their findings were clear. Locals in Syria did not want to be part of a French mandate and those in Palestine were uninterested in being included in a British mandate. London had been successful in preventing the Americans from conducting a survey in Mesopotamia.

In August, King and Crane presented their report. They recommended a single mandate covering a unified Syria and Palestine that was to be granted to neutral America instead of to the European colonial powers. Hussein's son Faisal, who they describe as being "tolerant and wise," should become the head of this Arab state.

Today, only Middle East specialists know of the King-Crane Report, but in hindsight it represents one of the biggest lost opportunities in the recent history of the Middle East. Under pressure from the British and the French, but also because of the serious illness which befell Wilson in September of 1919, the report was hidden away in the archives and only publicly released three years later. By then, Paris and London had agreed on a new map for the Middle East, which diametrically opposed the recommendations made by King and Crane. France divided its mandate area into the states of Lebanon and Syria while Great Britain took on the mandate for Mesopotamia, which it later named Iraq -- but not before swallowing up the oil-rich province of Mosul. Between Syria, Iraq and their mandate area of Palestine, they established a buffer state called Transjordan.

Instead of the Arab nation-state that the British had promised Sharif Hussein, the victorious powers divided the Middle East into four countries which, because of their geographical divisions and their ethnic and confessional structures are still among the most difficult countries in the world to govern today.

Fatal and Long-Term Consequences

And they knew what they were doing. Just before the treaties were signed, the question arose as to where exactly the northern border of Palestine -- and thus, later, that of Israel -- was to run. An advisor in London wrote to the British Prime Minister Lloyd George: "The truth is that any division of the Arab country between Aleppo and Mecca is unnatural. Therefore, whatever division is made should be decided by practical requirements. Strategy forms the best guide." In the end, the final decision was made by a British general assisted by a director from the Anglo-Persian Oil Company.

The Arab world, of course, wasn't the only place where borders were drawn that local populations refused to accept. It happened in Europe too. But three factors in the Middle East led to fatal and long-term consequences.

First: Whereas many Europeans had begun to develop national identities and political classes by the beginning of the 19th century at least, World War I yanked Arabs out of their historical reverie. The Ottomans took a relatively hands-off approach to governing their Middle Eastern provinces, but they also did little to introduce any kind of political structure to the region or to promote the development of an intellectual or economic elite. On the contrary, at the first sign of a progressing national identity, the Ottoman rulers would banish or execute the movement's leaders. This heritage weighed on the Middle East at the dawn of the 20th century, and the region's pre-modern conflation of state and religion further hampered its political growth.

Second: The capriciousness with which France and Great Britain redrew the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire's former Arab provinces left behind the feeling that a conspiracy was afoot -- a feeling which grew into an obsession in the ensuing decades. Even today, the legend lives on that the mysterious buckle in the desert border between Jordan and Saudi Arabia is the result of someone bumping the elbow of Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill as he was drawing the line. That, of course, is absurd -- but it isn't too far removed from the manner in which Sykes, Picot, Lloyd George and Clemenceau in fact carved up the region.

Thirdly: In contrast to Europe, the tension left behind by the untenable peace in the Arab world was not released in a single, violent eruption. During World War II, the region was not a primary theater of war.

But the unresolved conflicts left behind by World War I, combined with the spill-over effects from the catastrophic World War II in Europe -- the founding of Israel, the Cold War and the race for Persian Gulf resources -- added up to a historical burden for the Middle East. And they have resulted in an unending conflict -- a conflict that has yet to come to an end even today, almost 100 years after that fateful summer in 1914.