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Between imperialism and revolution: geopolitics of the Great War in the Middle East

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**‘For
Civilisation’**

**The First
World War
in the
Middle East
1914 ▶ 1923**

TIJDSBEELD

'For Civilisation'

The First World War
in the Middle East
1914 ▶ 1923



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The infamous Sykes-Picot Agreement: the division of the Ottoman Empire into French and British spheres of influence. The map was signed at the beginning of May 1916

(lower right corner) by the architects of the agreement, Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot.



Alp YENEN

Between Imperialism and Revolution: Geopolitics of the Great War in the Middle East



There are two classic ways of studying the history of wars. On the one hand, historians can look at wars as international events, as conflicts between states. Such a perspective tries to explain why and how states engage in collisions and coalitions with other states on the battlefield and at diplomatic conferences

in order to win the war. On the other hand, historians can study a single nation, because internal affairs could be determining state behaviour in wars. Such histories try to explain how wars affect state-society relations and how the outcome of wars is dictated by national policies, economic resources, and social forces at a national level. Beyond these classic approaches, most contemporary historians have come to appreciate that both international and national dimensions of war need to be combined, because states also interact with the societies of other states. This was ever more the case with the emergence of the idea of 'total war' in the First World War. In total wars, the line between the military and civil society as well as between combatants and non-combatants disappears. States not only mobilise their own societies for the war effort and antagonise foreign societies as enemies that must be destroyed, but also look for potential collaborators among foreign populations within enemy states and fear subversion and treason in their own societies. This crisscrossing of states and societies across borders is a crucial aspect of studying the geopolitics of the First World War at a global scale.

Imperialism and revolution were two strategies of geopolitics through which states and societies interacted with one another in the Middle Eastern theatre of the

First World War. Ideas of imperialism and revolution were meant to control and co-opt foreign populations against their states to bring an end to the war. Especially in the Balkans, where the First World War started, there was a century-old history of entanglement between imperialism and revolution since the Greek War of Independence (1821–1829). While European monarchies were wary of revolutionary movements against themselves, they had supported the Greek revolutionaries in their struggle for liberation from the Ottoman Empire. Make no mistake, European great powers were not conspiring for the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The so-called 'Eastern Question', a contemporary euphemism in diplomacy for the geopolitical game of controlling the decline of the Ottoman Empire without disturbing the balance of power in the Concert of Europe, would actually help the Ottoman sultans to survive threats of military and economic collapse throughout the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the Ottoman Empire as well as the Khedivate of Egypt and Qajar Empire of Persia became entangled in semi-colonial contractions under the so-called capitulations that allowed privileges for European policies and businesses. Meanwhile, the frontier regions of the wider Middle East in North Africa, the Caucasus, and Central and South Asia could not escape the fate of colonisation by French, Russian, and British empires throughout the nineteenth century. The rise of Germany under Prussian rule as a new European great power further aggravated geopolitical struggles. The two Berlin Congresses (1878 and 1884–5) not only created the conditions for future conflict at the frontiers of empires in the Balkans and Caucasus, where imperial ambitions and nationalist-revolutionary activism collided with one other after the end of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–8, but also shaped a new imperialism and colonialism in the so-called 'Scramble for Africa'. It was at the Berlin Congress of 1878,



In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire lost several territories (coloured yellow on the map): Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro, Romania, Bulgaria, Eastern Rumelia, and Thessaly.



In 1913, the Young Turks staged a violent coup that brought them to power in the Ottoman Empire.

where the Ottoman province of Bosnia-Herzegovina was put under the administration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, that the stage would be set for the triggering of the First World War in the summer of 1914.

At the turn of the century, imperialism and revolution continued to shape the contours of conflicts. Due to imperial misgovernance, the Ottoman Empire was challenged by rebellions in various frontiers, including Western Armenia, Macedonia, Yemen, and Albania. The emergence of new revolutionary committees that operated both as political parties and insurgent bands, as well as new forms of revolutionary action nourished by the influx of military surplus weapons and easy access to explosives, worsened state-society relations and intensified intercommunal violence. Imperial competition in the Middle East increased when Germany's advances into the Middle East to carve 'a place in the sun' for Kaiser Wilhelm II's grand schemes pushed the British and Russian empires towards rapprochement to settle their differences in the so-called 'Great Game'. Against the backdrop of this imperial settlement between Britain and Russia, constitutional revolutions took place in the Qajar and Ottoman empires that founded parliaments and introduced elections. The revolution in the Ottoman Empire was organised by the so-called 'Young Turks', a revolutionary committee of Muslim military officers, petty bureaucrats, and exiled intellectuals. They were concerned about the fate of the Ottoman Empire's Balkan provinces and inspired by the methods of Macedonian and Armenian revolutionaries. Reactions of the European great powers to the constitutional revolutions in Turkey and Iran were rather negative. British officials were concerned that it would inspire anticolonialism in Egypt and India. The Russian Empire intervened militarily in the civil war after the Persian constitutional revolution on behalf of monarchist and counterrevolutionary forces. Seizing the opportunity of the constitutional revolution,

the Austro-Hungarian Empire unilaterally annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908, and Italy occupied Ottoman provinces in Libya in 1911. While Austrian goods were boycotted as a means of non-violent protest, Young Turk officers volunteered for the defence of Libya, where they conducted an unconventional war along with Arab nationalists, Bedouin tribes, and religious orders. The Turkish-Italian War was interrupted by the First Balkan War in 1912, when a coalition of ex-Ottoman states declared war on the Ottoman Empire and took away most of its European territories. The Young Turks, who had been ousted by the opposition, took over the government through a coup d'état in 1913 and tried to reconquer some of the lost territories in the Second Balkan War. The Balkan Wars were the prelude to the First World War as a total war, in that revolutionary and military forces fought side by side on behalf of state interests, and enemy civil populations were purged and persecuted in accordance with national demographic imperatives. After the loss of the European provinces, the Ottoman Empire became more Muslim than ever before. Young Turk leadership became irreversibly resentful, as most of them had lost their homelands in Ottoman Macedonia. At the nexus of international and national politics, Young Turk leaders became convinced that international law was working against the interests of Muslim peoples. Consequently, the loyalty of Christian populations in the Ottoman Empire became questionable in their eyes. After establishing what amounted to a single-party dictatorship, Young Turk leaders believed that a Third Balkan War, possibly against Greece, would escalate in 1914, and hoped to use it to recover past losses and save the integrity of the Ottoman Empire. However, the next Balkan War did not start between Turkey and Greece, but rather between Austria-Hungary and Serbia after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by 'Young Bosnian' revolutionaries on 28 June 1914. The chain reaction

of imperial alliances turned the diplomatic crisis of July 1914 into a European war, and after the entrance of the Ottomans into a global war that was fought on three continents.

Despite the will to reverse the ill-fated situation of the Ottoman Empire, the Young Turk government knew that their military was in a desolate state after the defeats against the Balkan states. Moreover, after Turkey's former allies France and England formed an entente together with the Turkey's archenemy Russia, their diplomacy was isolated. Ottoman proposals to join the Entente were rejected, pushing the Young Turks towards an alliance with the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary (later joined by Bulgaria). The Ottoman alliance was kept secret from the public to allow the Ottoman military to mobilise under the pretext of defensive neutrality. After the British navy seized two vessels, which had been purchased by the Ottoman navy through a public funding campaign, the Young Turk government and the public were enraged. Germany offered the Ottoman navy two of its own warships, the *Goeben* and the *Breslau*, which were being pursued by British vessels in the Mediterranean and seeking a safe haven in Ottoman waters. The formal entry of the Ottoman Empire into the war, which Young Turk leadership wanted to postpone in the face of German pressure, took place on 28 October 1914, when the two ships mentioned above opened fire on the Russian fleet in the Black Sea. The Ottoman contribution to the war effort of the Central Powers was meant to divert the attention of the Entente Powers from the war theatres of Central and Eastern Europe towards North Africa, Middle East, Caucasus, and Central Asia. All Entente states possessed ex-Ottoman territories and other Muslim countries as colonial possessions: Algeria and Tunisia had been under French rule since 1830 and 1881, respectively; in addition, France controlled Morocco since 1912; Britain, the greatest Muslim empire of its time thanks to India, had occupied Egypt, which was nominally under

Autochrome of Turkish refugees from Edirne. During the Balkan Wars (1912–1913) the Ottoman Empire lost almost all its territories on the European mainland. Muslims living in those areas were massacred or forced to flee in great numbers because of the war.



Ottoman suzerainty, in 1882 and unilaterally declared it a protectorate in 1914; Russia had annexed three Ottoman provinces at the Anatolian-Caucasian frontier back in 1878, in addition to its Muslim populations in Crimea, Caucasus, and Central Asia; Italy entered war in 1916 and possessed ex-Ottoman provinces in Libya and the Dodecanese Islands since 1912. Besides diverting resources from the European theatre of war, the direct strategy of the Ottoman military—based on ideas of imperial irredentism—also aimed at reconquering some of its lost territories, for example, during the military campaigns against Egypt and Caucasus in the winter of 1915.

This Ottoman imperial strategy had also a revolutionary dimension. On 11 November 1914, the Ottoman government's chief of religious affairs declared an Islamic holy war on behalf of the Sultan-Caliph, who was considered the spiritual sovereign of all Muslims in the world. The Ottoman jihad campaign was organised by Ottoman military intelligence officers and German propagandists to revolutionise the Muslim subjects of the Entente empires in a global anticolonial rebellion. Ottoman agents and special forces were sent to North Africa, Caucasus, Central Asia, and South Asia to incite local rebellions. Muslim political and religious leaders from colonial lands were invited to the Ottoman capital to campaign for the holy war. Attempts were made to convince Muslim rulers in Persia and Afghanistan to join the war on the side of the Central Powers. Propaganda publications were translated into multiple local languages and dispatched to far corners of the Muslim world. Muslim prisoners of war were recruited to serve in the Ottoman army. Most of these ambitious efforts were, however, to no avail. No such Muslim uprising took place, except for the mostly unrelated anti-conscription revolt of Turkic tribes against Russian authorities in Central Asia in 1916. Moreover, Muslim soldiers from Africa, Central Asia, and India fought in Entente armies on all fronts.



The 'Intikam' or 'Revenge' map, published by the Society of Muslim Refugees from Rumelia, shows the part of the Ottoman Empire (coloured in black) that was lost during the Balkan Wars and from which these refugees fled.

Nevertheless, the Ottoman jihad was more effective on the home front, as it helped mass military mobilisation by giving it a global social justice cause. The Ottoman calls for jihad against European 'Crusaders' and local 'infidels' maintained solidarity among Sunnis and Shi'ites as well as among Turks, Arabs, and Kurds of the Ottoman Empire.

The most tragic outcome of the imperial and revolutionary strategies of the Ottoman war effort was the Armenian Genocide of 1915. Armenians resided across the Turkish, Russian, and Persian imperial frontiers. Although the Young Turks had tried to build an alliance with Armenian revolutionaries against the Russian Empire, this was not realised. After the Ottoman defeat in the Caucasus campaign of 1915, the Armenian population was blamed for collaboration with the enemy and suspected of preparing for a great insurgency. The foundation of Armenian volunteer battalions in the Russian army further enhanced such public paranoias. After a political purge of the Armenian political elite in Istanbul, most of the Armenian population of Anatolia was displaced from their homes to settle in Syria. The deportation of Armenians, which soon included the Assyrians as well, was accompanied by death marches, paramilitary massacres, abduction of women and children, and confiscation of property that reached a genocidal extent. While the Young Turks' regime had a clear nationalist agenda in cleansing Anatolia of non-Muslim elements as a new homeland for Ottoman Muslims, there were also international and imperial security concerns based on the contingencies of the war that opened the path for catastrophe.

Meanwhile, the Entente Powers had in fact their own imperial schemes and revolutionary plots for the destruction of the Ottoman Empire and division of its spoils. The Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916 between Britain and France, as well as the addendum treaties with Russia and Italy, foresaw territorial expansions and the extension

of colonial spheres of influence. The Ottoman Middle East reaching into the Turkish-Arab and Arab-Kurdish borderlands of Anatolia was divided between Britain and France. Istanbul, the Straits, and Western Armenia were promised to Russia. Italy laid claim to the Mediterranean coast of Anatolia. In the Middle East, imperial plans were complicated by British intelligence activities to stir up Arab nationalism against the Ottoman Empire. Although the Young Turks had been investing in the Arab provinces to preserve the empire as a Muslim state, relations between Arab and Turkish nationalists were tense and characterised by mutual distrust. Chauvinistic and despotic measures taken by Turkish wartime governors in the Arab provinces, especially against Arab nationalists suspected of espionage, further aggravated the situation. The Ottoman guardian of Mecca, Sharif Hussein, made a secret deal with the British to start an Arab revolt in return for the promise of an independent Arabia reaching from the Hejaz to the Levant. Promises made to the Arabs conflicted with French plans for Syria, and soon also contradicted the Balfour declaration to Zionists to create a 'Jewish homeland' in Palestine. The Arab Revolt of 1916 did not receive much popular support among Arabs, who largely remained loyal to the Ottomans, but thanks to the British military intelligence, including men like T. E. Lawrence (of Arabia), it changed the course of the war in its Middle Eastern theatre by occupying Ottoman military resources.

While the offensive campaigns of the Ottomans had failed terribly in Caucasus and Egypt, the Ottoman army proved to be more effective defending the Dardanelles and Mesopotamia. These two fronts were part of the British strategy to encircle the Ottoman heartlands and connect with the Russian military in the Black Sea and Eastern Anatolia. This strategy failed, as Ottoman defence was effective. Meanwhile, a revolutionary plot was conceived in Istanbul when Alexander Helphand (Parvus), a famous

revolutionary of his time, proposed a plan to the German Ambassador to support the Bolsheviks in their efforts to stir up a revolution in the Russia Empire. The Russian Revolution of 1917 had immediate consequences for the Ottoman war effort, as it relieved pressure on the Eastern front. Moreover, Bolshevik leadership publicised the secret treaties for the partition of the Ottoman Empire by the Entente Powers. These treaties very much confirmed the embittered worldview of the Young Turks and disappointed the leaders of the Arab Revolt, who had relied on British promises. The retreat of the Russian military from Eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus created an opportunity for the Ottoman-German alliance to launch a new Caucasus campaign. Instead of imperial expansion—apart from the three previously lost provinces—the Young Turks wanted to create a *cordon sanitaire* of friendly regimes in Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and beyond in Dagestan and Crimea.

Despite the Ottoman conquest of Baku with the help of Azerbaijani troops in September 1918, the war was lost on the Syrian and Mesopotamian fronts. The surrender of Bulgaria rendered the Ottoman capital defenceless on the Balkan front. The Ottoman Empire signed an armistice on 30 October 1918. However, contrary to expectations, achieving peace in the Middle East would prove to be difficult. Despite international pressure, the Young Turks could not be properly prosecuted for the war crimes against Armenians and would even remain influential after the

war. Although the Ottoman military was demobilised, a war of independence soon succeeded in uprooting plans for the partition of Turkey. Regardless of all the international support, Greece was unable to extend its territories into Anatolia, nor could an independent Armenia survive. Even though the Arabs were considered liberated from the 'Turkish yoke', revolts and revolutions challenged colonial settlements in Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Iraq. Instead of the expected rise of ethnic-nationalism, collaboration between Turks, Arabs, and Kurds continued against the peace settlement. While the Ottoman jihad of 1914 had failed to animate pan-Islamic solidarity in the Muslim world, a global movement of Muslim internationalism from Morocco to India emerged after 1919 in opposition to the partition of the Ottoman Empire. Muslim countries that had not joined the Ottoman war effort, such as Persia and Afghanistan, built up new alliances against European great powers. Although Russia was ousted from the European Concert after the take-over of the Bolsheviks, Soviet Russia became a force to be reckoned with in the peace settlement in the Middle East. The Arab leaders who had led the Arab Revolt of 1916 would become kings under colonial administrations. Among all the defeated countries, ironically, Turkey would emerge with regained sovereignty and a new revolutionary ethos. In many ways, the armistice period would turn into a prolongation of the war but reverse the geopolitics of imperialism and revolution.

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