

The never ending Anglo-American interference in the Middle East

الدخل الأنجلو-أمريكي اللامتناهي في الشرق الأوسط

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Abstract:

When dealing with the Middle East, one can neither avoid dealing with super powers like the United Kingdom and the United States of America, nor can one ignore the need to go back to the past in order to find clues about the making of the region. A key period to be explored in this paper is the one between the two World Wars and the 2003 invasion of Iraq for its historical and political significance. The latter lies in highlighting the role these powers played in re-shaping the area by disrupting the stability which reigned over most of the Middle Eastern entities. In trying to do so, the researcher will examine Great Britain's supremacy and interference in the region between the two World Wars; a period when Britain seemed to be the only powerful protagonist in the world scene and when the U.S. was busy building its empire elsewhere. It is not until WWII ended that the U.S. entered the stage as the new hegemon in the region, thus disrupting the existing World Order. This leads us to say that the focus of the present paper revolves around exploring the seemingly never ending Anglo-American interference in the Middle East. To achieve this, the research will rely on the qualitative approach for analyzing data from the various sources used.

Key words: Middle East, the United Kingdom and the United States, Invasion of Iraq, World Order, Anglo-American Interference.

ملخص:

كثيرا ما يجد الباحثون الذين يتعاملون مع مسائل تتعلق بالشرق الأوسط، صعوبة في تفادي الحديث عن القوى العظمى كالمملكة المتحدة والولايات المتحدة الأمريكية وصعوبة في تجاهل ضرورة اللجوء للماضي بهدف العثور على المفاتيح المساعدة على فهم الطريقة التي أسست بها هذه المنطقة. الفترة الممتدة ما بين الحربين العالميتين الأولى والثانية واحتلال العراق عام 2003 ستكون محل اهتمام في هذه الورقة البحثية نظرا لدلالاتها التاريخية والسياسية. هذا ما سيدفع الباحث الى تسليط الضوء على الدور الذي لعبته الدول العظمى في تغيير معالم المنطقة الجغرافية والسياسية للشرق الأوسط برسم حدود تخدم مصالح وأطماع بريطانيا التي هيمنت على العالم ومنطقة الشرق الأوسط لمدة طويلة اقترنت بنهايتها بنهاية الحرب العالمية الثانية. هكذا انتقلت موازين القوى الى الأيدي الأمريكية واختل النظام العالمي السائد. هذا ما يجعل محل اهتمام هذه الورقة البحثية دراسة تحليلية للدخل الأنجلو-أمريكي اللامتناهي في الشرق الأوسط.

كلمات مفتاحية: الشرق الأوسط، المملكة المتحدة والولايات المتحدة الأمريكية، احتلال العراق، النظام العالمي، الدخل الأنجلو-أمريكي.

Introduction:

The story of the modern Middle East, as a geographical area, is no recent one. It has some roots that go back to the end of World War I, and others that reach out to older times in history. As a concept, however, the modern Middle East started to be used after WWII. Given its geopolitical importance and its pivotal role for the world stability, countless texts have been written on it to recount the history of its making and to relate the long story of its struggle to achieve peace and stability. Among the authors, scholars, and Middle Eastern specialists who dealt with such an unstable region is David Fromkin who enriched the literature on the modern Middle East with a text that has no parallel. In his book, *A Peace to End all Peace*, he takes the readers into a fascinating intellectual journey throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century.

With such a voyage, he meant to help readers understand that with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the triumph of the British with the supervision of the Americans, and the contribution of the allies in WWI; the British and the Americans seem to have found the perfect pencils to write the diary of their seemingly never ending interference in the Middle East. With the same pencils they drew on the map the boundaries that reshaped and separated the Middle East. Astonishingly, one must note, boundaries that were drawn yesterday seem to be relevant today.

Therefore, it is possible to assume that present day Middle East with its present frontiers and political tumults was given birth by the zealous decisions of the Allies all through and after WWI. At the same time the long interference of two of the superpowers, namely the UK and the U.S., was given birth too. Thus, the present paper concern revolves, on the one hand, around locating the roots of the interference of Great Britain and the United States in almost all the countries belonging to this region. On the other hand, the author seeks to investigate the reasons behind the seemingly endless political meddling of the same superpowers in the region. To achieve this, the following questions are addressed:

- What might be the factors that triggered competition over the region in the past and opened space to such an interference?
- Why there seems to be a determination to keep such an interference in the present?

The examination of a number of western and non-western documents helped formulate the following hypotheses:

- With regard to the past, Great Britain's growth into a super power due to its industrialization and its past presence in some Middle Eastern areas, made it go into a fierce race with Russia and France to keep these regions as part of its empire before and after WWI. This is how, willingly or unwillingly, a certain British meddling in Egypt, Sudan, Syria, Iraq, and Palestine took place and continued until the US entered the scene after WWII was over.
- The alteration in the balance of power and World Order in the post WWII era with the decline of the British Empire and the threat that most Middle Eastern countries would turn into the pro-Russian world made it for the US more than a necessity to fill in the Middle East the space that was once British. Keeping the balance of power and World Order under the US grip seems a plausible explanation to the ongoing western interference in the region. Even after the seemingly end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the Russian ghost, the interference carried on taking place in a new form with the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The pretext presented before the assault took place was that Iraq turned into an evil threatening the U.S and the whole world security because of its terrorist ties.

1..Competition over the Middle East before WWI:

In order to offer his readers a thorough image about the making of the region that became known as the "Middle East", Fromkin devoted ten long years to finish writing his book *A Peace to End all Peace* (Louis, 1989) Within the intricacies of its 635, the author recounts with interesting details the way in which the Ottoman Empire dissolved by the end of World War I and traces back the political roots of present day "Middle East". He asserts that during the period that preceded WWI, Great Britain, which exercised an exclusive supremacy over the area, did not seem to have any intentions to make of it one of its own possessions. It just sought to push back any foreign power showing any will to get into the region or showing any form of interest in it. (Fromkin, 1989, p. 27) One of the instants when Great Britain felt threatened to lose the sea route to India was when Napoleon set foot in Egypt by the end of the eighteenth century. That was the time when Britain was already controlling East Africa and southern Arabia (Silverfarb, 1986, p. v).

Protecting the sea route at that point of the past can be seen as one of the factors that triggered a certain competition between Great Britain and France over East Africa and Southern Arabia. Another moment of threat for Britain in the region was before 1829. It was when Britain was ruling over India that there was fear that Russia could attack the area through Afghanistan (Fromkin, 1989, p. 27). The competition between Russia and Britain was depicted in Fromkin's words "as a cold war, sometimes as a hot one, the struggle between Russia and Britain raged from the Dardanelles to the Himalayas for almost a hundred years.

Its outcome was something of a draw" (Fromkin, 1989, p. 28). That is to say that from a relational point of view, both Britain and Russia never enjoyed good quality relations. The determination to have their empires grow larger by expansion always fueled animosity and competition.

In addition to France and Russia that made Britain's absolute supremacy in the world in general and in the Middle East almost impossible, Germany entered the race as a new foe disturbing the British economically and militarily (Fromkin, 1989, pp. 26-31). This very competition, in fact, paved the way to the British involvement in the Middle East which started as a reaction against the French and the Russian then the German Empires that could have access to a number of strategic areas such as Constantinople and India. Having rivals over these two strategic areas and others was for the British out of the question simply because this could distort the image of the powerful empire which sought it to keep and seemed not ready to give up.

It is important to note that the British involvement in the region is closely tied to the competition which involved Britain, as a main component, against France Russia, and later Germany. This growing competition was referred to as the nineteenth century "Great Game" that was said to be first coined by Arthur Conolly, a British officer (Fromkin, 1989, p. 27). The seeds of such a great game were related to significant events that were taking place during the mid-nineteenth century. At this particular time, Great Britain witnessed a major turning point when it started to move from the agrarian life style to the industrial one.

The introduction of machines enabled Great Britain to become a powerful producing country no other European country could compete with. Iron and wool production with the introduction of machines turned England into a first

producer of these goods; thus surpassing France that during the eighteenth century produced more than Britain. The arrival of Germany as a competing industrial force made it impossible for the British to carry on enjoying the same status of the powerful in the world of industry. Fromkin (1989) admits that the Germans, with their abilities in different and new industries, surpassed Britain. This was enough to push many investors in the world to lose faith in the British banks for investment (pp. 30-31).

Going back to competition through expansion, and before WWI broke, the British found in Egypt a market to textile production. Therefore, it was vital for them to protect it from any foreign producer. In addition to this and as stated earlier, Egypt constituted a sea connector between the Red Sea and India. That made of it a strategic area to Britain not to leave to any foreign power (McDowall, 1989, pp. 146-147).

The efforts in maintaining the status of the first producing and trading country in Europe and outside, and protecting the image of the most powerful one in the globe seems to have become Britain's obsession. There was need to expand and prevent others from expanding; as if the British were the only ones having rights and privileges to grow larger. For this Britain needed "... two main things in Europe: "a balance of power" which would prevent any single nation from becoming too strong, and a free market in which its own industrial and trade superiority would give Britain a clear advantage..." (McDowall, 1989, p. 131). With power concentrated in its hands, and a possibility to have its goods circulating everywhere, Great Britain could enjoy a flexible expansion in the world. This was enough a factor to keep competition to access strategic spheres in the world, among which the Middle East, always on.

In the late nineteenth century, competition amongst Europeans for expanding empires grew fierce. To avoid talking violence through the use of weapons that would have caused bloody battles, Europeans rather chose to talk peace through signing treaties. In 1890, for instance, they signed a treaty permitting themselves to make of the African Continent a possession they felt free of partitioning into "areas of interest". This is how Britain went to Egypt that turned into one of its possessions in 1882 under the pretext of protecting the Suez Canal and assuring a safe marine traffic. Britain's move to Egypt, then its conquest of Sudan in 1884, were due to the race for expansion. For Great

Britain joining the race was to protect its interests in these two areas (McDowall, 1989, pp. 146-147).

Britain's adventure in the Middle East did not stop at Egypt and Sudan, it moved further to reach Iraq, which came only at the beginning of the twentieth century "... after Turkey offered Britain's rival Germany a chance to build a rail road from Konya in Southern Turkey to Basra in 1902. British interest grew even keener in 1914 when Turkey entered World War I on the German side..." (Sorenson, 2008, p. 211). What pushed Great Britain towards Iraq was more or less related to its oil. The Industrial Revolution was behind Britain's shift from coal to petroleum and its availability in lands like Basra and Mosul was enough to push Britain to try and make of it a possession before the Germans could reach it (Sorenson, 2008, p. 211) which was likely to happen.

Before the First World War broke, Great Britain had shares in the Turkish Petroleum Company which was composed of a number of other members, the Turkish and the Dutch, with everyone having their own shares. Britain was also an active petroleum seeker in Basra and Mosul due the agreement that it was granted by the Ottoman authorities, and this increased its shares in the company. To cover Britain's needs in oil, and to ensure a continuous availability of this commodity, that became vital to its economy, Britain entered as a member into the Persian Oil Company. Because that sounded not enough, the UK bought 51% of the latter company during Churchill times (CARDRI , 1986, p. 2).

It is important to note that at the time Britain was seeking to have some power over oil production in the Middle East, it was still unknown that oil was laying under the Middle Eastern lands in important quantities. That is to say that it was believed that the rush to monopolise oil and its production was not the primary concern of the British. Having shares in the Persian Oil Company was vital for it was "... the most deeply felt concern of the British leaders..." (Fromkin, 1989, p. 29) who sought through this to secure access to the East against the Russians whose expansion in the area especially in the late nineteenth century seemed going beyond the limits the British could endure.

When WWI begun, the British found themselves fighting the Germans and the Turks alongside the French and the Russians as their allies, despite the fact that they were enemies at an earlier point in time. Their common interests and threats gathered them against common foes. What made the Turk-German paths

meet was the Ottoman's will to get back to Egypt that slipped away from its grip in 1882 and find its way back towards the Mountains of the Caucasus that was cut by the Russians (Goldschmidt Jr & Davidson, 2006, pp. 31-32). However, this was not enough a reason to make the war participants forget about the "Great Game" to which we referred to earlier.

In his New York Times review of Fromkin's *A Peace to End all Peace*, Professor of English History and Culture at the University of Texas, Louis refers to this by certifying that "the Great Game was never far from [the competitors] minds. From the time of the outbreak of hostilities in 1914, Lord Kitchener, Britain's Secretary of State for War, aimed to obstruct the possible expansion of Russia into the Middle East" (Louis, 1989). This confirms the previous idea of Britain's efforts to prevent any external meddling with the region for it was already considered a British possession not to be shared with any one.

Another sphere in the newly made Middle East, for as stated earlier; the Middle East was born from the decisions of the Allies after WWI came to an end, is Palestine. That place of the world that since its transformation into a Jewish shelter in 1948 ceased to be the hometown for the thousands of Arabs and Moslems living in its lands (Lesch, 2006, p. 47). Prior to that time, it became an English mandate soon after WWI was over. Just as Egypt, Palestine's strategic location made of it a prey both Russia and Britain wanted to capture. "As the bridge between Africa and Asia, it blocked the land road from Egypt to India and, by its proximity, it threatened the Suez Canal and hence the sea road as well" (Fromkin, 1989, p. 276). To insure the seizure of the areas close to the Suez Canal that were within the Russian sphere, it was more than vital to find a way to block that threatening non British expansion.

Two years after the war broke, it seemed that the Allies started to face financial troubles and it seemed that calling for the U.S. assistance was more than a necessity. Fromkin (1989) referred to this matter in his book mentioned earlier, by quoting John Maynard Keynes, a British economist representing the British Treasury at that time. Keynes words were not on the necessity to ask for American help but rather on the ensuing effects of seeking that help. He expressed his apprehensions related to losing supremacy over the Middle East region in addition to going broke because of the war cost (p. 253).

In this respect, Fromkin (1989) claimed that “President Woodrow Wilson underlined the point by interfering with a J.P Morgan financing for Britain in December 1916 demonstrating that he could destroy the market for Allied loans in the United States and thereby drive Britain and France into insolvency” (p. 253). The ghost of financial issues that the UK was facing was both an internal and external threat. Going bankrupt because of the war costs could, on the one hand, slow its economic growth and political stability. On the other hand, such an issue could affect the balance of power that Britain wanted to keep it on its side. To avoid such catastrophes, the UK found itself compelled to seek the US financial assistance despite the fact that it seemed uneasy with it.

1. World War I Ended not the Competition, not the interference:

The war ended with winners and losers. Britain was the most successful one despite the financial troubles it faced during the war. Fromkin (1989) describes the British triumph as the moment that “...brought the British Empire to its zenith...”; he went on explaining that “...with the addition of the territories it had occupied in the Middle East and elsewhere, it had become larger than it-or any other empire –had ever been before...” (p. 383). The end of the war with its Paris Peace Conference held in 1919 was the beginning of a world without Ottoman rule over what was called later the Middle East. It was a world where big decisions about masses of peoples were to be taken by the victors.

The map below is an illustration of the way some of the lands that were under the Ottoman governance fell under the French and British mercy. Baghdad, Mosul and Basra that were independent provinces under the Ottoman Empire became an entity called Iraq and was made into a British mandate (Hassaiene, 2010, p. 2). That was true for Palestine, as well, despite the fact that it was wished to remain under international rule. Egypt that turned into a British protectorate since 1882 remained under its grip once the war was over. Syria and Lebanon that Britain was not ready to leave to any foreign presence became after negotiations French mandates (Fromkin, 1989, p. 256). Russia, one must note, left the stage sometime in the middle of the war because of its domestic troubles caused by the Bolsheviks and their Revolution of 1917 (Fromkin, 1989, p. 465).

Map 1

League of Nations Mandates, 1920



Source: Pinterest.com

As noted above, most of the territories belonging to the Ottoman Empire turned either into British or French mandates or protectorates. Therefore, the end of the war marked the beginning of a long road of political interference. It also started the long struggle to gain independence for the people in the mandated or protected territories. Egypt and Iraq are examples of countries where uprisings began demanding freedom from imperialistic Britain and soon after it was sensed that getting rid of the Ottomans was to fall under the fist of the British and their long interference in almost all aspects of their lives (Fromkin, 1989, p. 415).

Twenty years later, the world engaged in a new World War simply because the competition for expansion never knew a time of halt. Germany was thought to be the trigger by its invasion of Poland in September 1939. Britain and France responded to this act by declaring war on Germany. The war was said to be caused mainly by Hitler's invasion of Poland. Behind such an act was the fact that he and the Germans never forgot the burden of having to pay WWI damages. Hitler, as his people, never accepted to pay the war costs alone. He was armed with the determination to take revenge by "...illegally rearming Germany..." (McDowall, 1989, p. 166) and expanding it. Though the Germans were eager to win the war, this was not enough for they were defeated once more.

Despite the fact that Britain and its allies won against Hitler, the war costs were heavy to the extent that the British could no more afford their imperial enterprise. This meant one thing; the UK lost its hegemony over many parts of

the world just as it stopped playing the hegemon in the Middle East. At the sight of Middle Easterners' cries for independence from British foreign interference into their lives, after WWII was over, in Egypt and Iraq, one could sense that the World Order maintained by the British and its allies was shaken. If Iraqi rebels succeeded to depose the pro-British Government in 1958 (Barrett, 2008, p. 1), this meant the British golden age of hegemony came to its end.

2. The Rise of the New Hegemon:

Soon after the end of World War Two, Great Britain was no longer able to rule the great empire it created nor could it keep its world supremacy. Weakened by the wars, the UK could no more keep its hegemony in the area which allowed the U.S to get interfered in the region "It was in Egypt that Britain's weakening international position was most obvious" (McDowall, 1989, p. 169). It could no more assist any country in need of its financial aid due to heavy physical and financial costs the two world wars caused. Greece and Turkey, for instance, were two countries which emerged after the Second World War. They counted on the British government to provide help for their economic growth but that was impossible for the British. Informed by the British Embassy in February 2, 1947 of that situation, the new hegemon, the United States of America accepted the mission especially because it seemed that both countries could fall under the influence of Communism which constituted a threat for Great Britain and the U.S.A (Davis, 1990, p. 3).

To convince the American Congress and people of the necessity to assist those countries, President Harry S. Truman delivered a speech where he put a stress on the fact that if Greece and Turkey fell under the Communist sphere of influence, the neighboring countries would follow (Hudson, 1996, p. 330). Later, this came to be known as the Truman Doctrine or the Domino Theory (Brigham, 2006, p. 3). In an attempt of providing the American people of a plausible explanation of the theory the President claimed that preventing Greece and Turkey from following the Communist Block could preserve both American foreign policy and national security. That seemed to be enough to make the Congress agree on sending financial and military aid to both countries.

The endorsement of the Domino Theory in the late 1940s by the American Congress and foreign policy makers marked the beginning of the Cold War and containment of Communism in Europe. Communism, it is important to know,

did not stay at Europe, it spread to Asia to reach the Middle East in the 1950s. It found its way to Iraq which was still a pro- British protectorate under Nuri al Said. For fear that Iraq turns Communist; Great Britain joined the U.S.A to stop the threat with the Baghdad Pact which Iraq signed in 1955 (Bickerton & Klausner, 2007, p. 120). Later, in the 1960s, under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the same theory seems to have influenced the American foreign policy and led to the Vietnam War in an effort to contain Communism in Asia. The War was again a necessity to avoid neighboring countries to Vietnam to fall under Communism.

As stated above, the late 1940s made the super powers existing at that time, namely the U.S. and Russia, which was accused of spreading Communism, engage into a war of a different genre; the Cold War, which can be in fact, the "Great Game" in a new version that was no more Anglo-Russian but rather Americano- Russian. In the past times of British hegemony in the world, Britain could settle peace with their Russian foes in times of common interests. When the U.S. became the hegemon, such a scenario was difficult to be written. The Americans sought a World Order with their supremacy over the whole world with no one competing for this.

This is why when the "Great Game" became an American affair, the American foreign policy makers used the Domino Theory in Europe and Asia in the late 1940s and 1960s to have better chances to win the game and suppress the Russian foe to have a unipolar World Order with no Russian disturbing it. In his book entitled *Is Iraq Another Vietnam?*, Robert K. Brigham (2006) with a certain convincing tone asserts that this theory was utilized by the U.S foreign policy makers to prepare for the war in Iraq in 2003 (p. 3) in the post-Cold War era . This time, however, the enemy to be suppressed was not Communism for it was thought to be over with the end of the Cold War. The enemy this time was given a new label; a nine letters word long: terrorism (Nassar, 2010, p. 16).

By eliminating the ghost labeled 'terrorism' and spreading democracy, Iraq was supposed to become the democratic model for the neighboring Arab Moslem countries to follow. Great Britain was not the leader in that war; however, it supported the Bush administration heavily and played a significant role in planning the war against Iraq and calling for it. The U.S that was building its empire far from the Middle East in the late nineteenth century found its way into the region by accessing a gate of paramount and strategic importance. This

was enough to get interfered in the region and make sure the Old Russian foe would stay away in order not to bother a World Order where the U.S. would enjoy its supremacy all alone.

Conclusion:

Between the period that followed the end of the First World War and preceded the Second World War, Great Britain, whose empire was the largest on the globe, played a hegemonic role in the Middle East and elsewhere. With the Allies, Great Britain partitioned the area so as to maintain its influence over the region and carry on its supremacy over it by excluding the other powers from the scene; just as it did in the late nineteenth century. Whether protectorates or mandates, Britain gave itself the right to interfere in various aspects of the lands where it established itself as the successor of the Ottoman Empire. The competition to exercise more influence on the Middle East and the race for more power never ceased, because always fueled with the British will to maintain the prestigious image of the most powerful, and keep the balance of power on its side forever. Yet a new war was coming and with its outbreak a lot has changed.

After World War II, the U.S.A entered the stage and became the new hegemon in the Middle East in particular and in the whole world at large. This way, it seemed entering a new phase of the "Great Game" where the strategy based on the Domino Theory to counter Russia and the Communist spread in Europe and the Middle East seemed the working tool to win the game. This scenario, however; was said to have reached its end with the end of the Cold War and the establishment of a new World Order. The opening years of the Twenty First Century carried a different tale; that of a new enemy called terrorism emerging from a land called once upon a time Mesopotamia.

Fueled by the same eagerness to be seen as the most powerful and the will to protect a World Order that satisfied its interests, the U.S. accepted the role of the savior always ready to face dangers, save the world and protect its own order of the world; and made it one of its missions to fight and relieve the globe from a threatening enemy to its security and the whole world altogether. Though not backed by all the past allies, Great Britain was there to play the role of the savior as well. Iraq that was once a British property, became a target for the new hegemon, the U.S. and the UK planned for its invasion in 2003. Together, they went on a new adventure for saving the world and its lands from a "common

threat", and the story of the never ending meddling in the Middle East never found its end.

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