What determined the political boundaries established, and remaining today, in the contemporary Middle East, following the demise of the Ottoman Empire?

Revision Guide

Introduction

Principal argument: The main factor that determined the formation of states in the Middle East was the pursuit of colonial interests on the part of the French and the British, eager to capitalise on the power vacuum in the wake of Ottoman collapse. However, this was not the sole determinant: the policies of the imperial powers often interacted with local factors and political actors to result in unintended consequences.

British and French Rivalry and the Sykes Picot Agreement

- Sykes and Picot divided the regions into spheres of influence in a secret agreement of 1916 – this roughly determined the character of, and precise boundaries between, the modern states in the region.

- According to the agreement, the French kept control of Lebanon, Syria, and Western Iraq, and the British kept Egypt, the majority of Iraq, and Trans-Jordan. Palestine was to remain an international zone.

- This directly contradicted the McMahon-Hussein agreement between the British and the Sharif of Mecca (1915). The Arab Revolt was effected on the basis of this agreement, but then served to create widespread hostility against the British following the publication of Sykes-Picot in 1917.

- Arab Revolt, and the perceived treachery of the British, accelerated the Arab nationalist movement.

The Preservation of Strategic Assets

- The ultimate boundaries of Sykes-Picot were determined by French/British assets and interests in the region.

- Discovery of oil in Iraq – led the British to violate Sykes-Picot and take Mosul. They also decided to solve the problem caused by the broken promise to Sharif Hussein by installing his son Faisal in Iraq as King. This provided the basis for the modern state of Iraq, in which the regions ethnic and religious minorities were somewhat arbitrarily united (Shi'a, Sunni and Kurd).

- British interests in Egypt, particularly the Suez Canal, led them to maintain a tight control over the country, before and after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. However, they also served to foster Egyptian nationalism. Egypt's independence movement was also premised upon the fact that the British would retain strategic control of the country's economy and the Suez Canal.

<u>Zionism and the Balfour Declaration</u>

- Another key factor in determining the political boundaries in the modern Middle East is the rise in Jewish nationalism and migration to Palestine following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. This was supported and facilitated by the British, following the publication of the Balfour Declaration in 1917.

- This also served to further accelerate the development of Arab nationalism in the region.

<u>Mustapha Kemal and the Creation of Modern Turkey</u>

- The modern state of Turkey managed to assert its independence immediately after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, unlike the situation in the Arab provinces. This was largely achieved under the military leadership of Mustapha Kemal. He rejected the humiliating terms at Versailles and Sevres, and instead forced a new treaty (Lausanne, 1923) which would establish the boundaries of the modern Turkish state.

- This resulted in the establishment of a secular state in the region, based upon Turkish nationalism. It was also a further blow to Kurdish aspirations for statehood, thereby providing the basis for a future protracted conflict.

<u>Conclusion</u>

- British and French imperial designs were very important in deciding the political boundaries, but they were also affected by a number of other factors, including

  o The strategic importance of oil and trade routes,

  o The rise of competing nationalisms in the region

  o Jewish migration to Palestine (together with British support)

  o Strong military figures such as Mustapha Kemal.