The Middle East and the Impact of Imperialism

Visual Aids for Chapter 3. Imperialism

Map: Kurdish Territory
Key Figure: Mossadegh
Key Figure: Ayatollah Khomeini
Images: Modernizing Leaders (Atatürk, Reza Shah and Amanullah Khan)
Key Figure: Gamal 'Abdul Nasser
Maps: NATO and other Alliances/Treaty Orgs

The Middle East Map of Today

After the First World War, the contours of the major nation-states of today's Middle East were delineated. The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 solidified the political boundaries that later became the countries of the Middle East. At the same time a movement to recognize the sovereignty of colonized countries led to the creation of mandates based on the territories ruled by European countries, with the idea that they would develop toward independent status.

Many promises were left unfulfilled, however, as cultural communities such as the Kurds were left with no territory of their own. To this day, the Kurds are a “stateless nation”, with their territory spanning across 4 nation-states: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Many Kurds have sought refuge in neighboring countries and have formed diaspora communities. The Kurds have sought autonomy and have faced significant challenges in their pursuit of self-determination. The situation remains complicated by various political and geographic factors.

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Syria, Iraq and Iran (see map, below). We cover the concept of a stateless nation and provide other examples in this chapter as part of a discussion on the national identities of the Middle East of today.

It is important to recognize that nation-states of the Middle East do not accurately represent the cultural identities of all their inhabitants. An effort was made by European countries to draw boundaries, and in fact to move substantial populations, in ways which would create nation-states which aligned with the national identities of their inhabitants. Former colonies, and countries retaining sovereignty, regrouped, gathered national together with a new sense of national unity, and joined the new global system of nation-state diplomacy. A major part of this effort was modernization: of industry, government and society. After World War I, many of these countries were indeed “reincarnated” as they began to rebuild after sustaining the impacts of war, famine and cultural hegemony. Economic collapse, war, forced migration and famine carved new contours into the region we now know as the Middle East, and created new cultural identities.

Map of Kurdish Territory by the CIA

Map of Kurdish territory by English: “The following maps were produced by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, unless otherwise indicated.” Public Domain. via Wikimedia Commons.

Defining the Term “Middle East”

Culturally-speaking, it is difficult to limit the Middle East to a geographic area with hard borders. Civilizations outside of what is commonly referred to as the “Middle East” made intellectual, cultural and biological imprints in today’s Middle East that are indelible, especially in regard to the waves of migration from Central Asia. Further, North Africa has profound cultural connections through language, religious practices and philosophical discourses. There have been contiguous flows of thought and ideas, whether through the spiritual content of Sufism and Muslim folk practices, or through practices and technologies of law, medicine, education, and food production.

With the exception of Israel, the countries in our definition span from North Africa to Central Asia, and are Muslim-majority countries with large populations speaking one or more of the major Middle Eastern languages (Chapter One). Historically, there have been many definitions, however, which do not correspond to our definition closely, if at all (Center, F. G. E.a). Currently, West Asia, from about the Amu Darya (Oxus) River westward, North Africa, and often Turkey, are usually considered a part of the region. Our definition is one of the more inclusive ones because of the shared languages and may shared religious and cultural practices within the countries listed in the introduction.

In 1902 the term “Middle East” was coined in order to designate the area residing between Egypt and Singapore, comprising major access points to Asia, such as the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, etc. (Center, Keys to Understanding the Middle East Pyind & McClimans: Chapter Three: The Middle East and the Impact of Imperialism https://osu.pb.unizin.org/key2mideast/)
West Asia, where most of the countries of the Middle East reside, used to be called the “Near East”, but the newer term “Middle East” also came into usage in the early part of the 20th century.

The main purpose for covering these definitions in this chapter is to demonstrate that the bases for any of the most commonly used terms, also including “Orient” and simply “the East”, are rooted in European perspectives. These terms center Europe in the geography of the world map. Thus, geographic definitions tended to refer to strategic lands which provided Europeans with access to resources and military advantage, especially India.

National Borders as Foreign Intervention

As some of our students have observed in class, there is a predominance of straight borders on the Middle Eastern map. The national boundaries on the map of the Middle East and North Africa greatly oversimplify, or actually erase, many of the linguistic and cultural identities of the Middle East. This is because the borders were only based in part on local ideas, always formed in negotiation with European decision-makers. Some of them were almost entirely imposed from the outside. The examples of Jordan and Kuwait illustrate this:

“During a five day conference in 1922 at Uqair in Eastern Saudi Arabia Sir Percy persuaded Arabia’s future monarch, Ibn Saud, to recognize Iraq. and determined Iraq’s borders with Kuwait and the Nejd.” Kingmakers, p. 188

“Taking out a map and a pencil, Cox drew the boundary between Iraq and the Nejd. The borders with Syria and the Transjordan were penned similarly. The International Boundary Commission. .” p. 189

“Winston Churchill, then British Colonial Secretary, allegedly claimed that he created the borders for the British mandate Transjordan, roughly modern-day Jordan, ‘with the stroke of a pen’ one Sunday afternoon in Cairo.’” (Diener, 2010, p.189)

The term “Middle East” reflects a European worldview, originally imposed on the Middle East through colonization. This is why, if you decide to study the Middle East further or visit there, you may encounter conflicting geographical definitions. Often the term “Middle East” is employed, while at the same time some may choose to speak about their country as part of “West Asia,” “North Africa,” or even “Europe” (in the case of Turkey). It is important to be aware of the political connotations of the various terms.

It is misleading that “The West” came to refer to anything of European cultural origin, in contrast with any other community worldwide (not exclusively “the East”). This binary often, but not accurately, is associated with the axes of “First World” and “Third World,” “Developed” and “Developing,” etc. The line between European/European settler states that were much more modern, or “developed”, and all the other countries of the world, is no longer valid, however. Global health scholar, Hans Rosling, has culled USAID statistic since the 1950s which show that, while there once was a gap, in the past 60 odd years lifestyles have become increasingly similar (2009).

The Impact of Imperialism on the Region

Imperialism was nothing new in the world when European expansion began impacting the Middle East. As Ferguson said, “everybody did empire” (2011). It’s important to distinguish, however, between imperialism as it was “done” in antiquity and medieval times, and its modern form. Political developments in Europe, such as the Magna Carta, and the Treaty of Westphalia, followed by economic transformation from global trade and industrialization led to a completely different form of imperial power. Europeans brought their ideas, institutions and technical inventions with them, and many of them became standards for the whole world.

There are many terms for the uneven power relationships which developed between European states and the area we know as the Middle East today. This chapter discusses these power relationships and their importance for the Middle East. The term “imperialism” can be a “catch-all” to describe the relationship between a powerful country with a less powerful country. Rather than compete with other ways of using the term, and perhaps furthering the confusion.
surrounding its usage, we use “imperial dynamics” in this chapter. At the same time there is a classical meaning for empire, with reference to the empires of antiquity such as the Greeks and Romans.

When economic historian Niall Ferguson says “everybody did empire” he is de-emphasizing the power European empires had over the rest of the world. In fact, European settler colonialism made a major global impact, evidenced by the ubiquitous European linguistic, cultural and institutional practices found worldwide and in global systems. The English language we are using to write this book, for example. This imperialism has been experienced as global dominance by colonized countries, and especially by indigenous cultural communities. Ferguson admits that certain institutions (2011), developed and established globally via European colonialism, must be internalized by countries worldwide attempting to gain equal footing in global affairs and financial systems.

In the Middle East, there have been varying degrees of interference by outside powers. Not all countries of the Middle East were colonized: Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Afghanistan remained sovereign. Algeria illustrates another end of the spectrum. It was considered by France, not as a “colony” but as part of France proper. Similarly, the Belgian King Leopold II considered Congo his personal possession.

Countries were at times defined in more independent terms, although they remained under the control of foreign government. For example, “protectorates” were territories endowed with semi-autonomous government. The Sultanate of Egypt (1914-1919) was one of those, a short-lived protectorate of the British Empire. A local king was placed in power, but the purpose was mainly to sever it from the Ottoman Empire during World War I (L.O.C., Egypt). This was before the League of Nations and the Mandate System, which codified an international policy of gradual self-rule for colonized countries.

Due to these varying levels of sovereignty, and the fact that even countries which were not actually colonized had to contend with European power, “colonial dynamics” refers to the varying levels of influence and power European countries have had over Middle Eastern countries. The era of “imperial dynamics” starts roughly with “The Great Game”, between Britain and Russia during the 19th century. This refers to their competition over territory between Russia and the Indian subcontinent. Russia was seeking access to a warm water port, while Britain was seeking access to its most valuable colony, India. The Middle East was the arena for this struggle.

The era of colonialism is often placed in the past, but for many colonized groups, its effects are ongoing. Formal imperialism, with direct control of colonies around the world, and the ability to implement imperial policy from the “mother country”, has been curtailed since roughly mid 20th century when the Bandung conference of 1955 (p.57) was convened by colonized countries. Powerful countries continue to have the power to set the standards for participation in global economics and political affairs that less powerful countries must follow, however. Furthermore, indigenous groups in many Western countries continue to protest ongoing colonialism that affects their communities, as protests in the Middle East also often portray Western countries as imperialists.

Key Concept: Imperial Dynamics

Imperial dynamics refer to the relationship between a stronger country and a weaker country. The form it takes for the dominated country can range from “colony” to “protectorate” to “mandate”.

An example of Western dominance seen as imperialism in the Middle East is the case of Dr. Muhammad Mossadegh, who was prime minister of Iran. In 1953 he was duly elected but was forcibly removed by British intelligence, and the U.S. CIA. Subsequently, Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (son of Reza) was put on the throne, and the CIA trained his notoriously brutal secret service, Sazeman e Et-tela va Aminiyat e Keshvar (SAVAK). This background information helps explain much of the negative rhetoric about the U.S. in Iran, and especially the accusation of imperialism. The subsequent events, especially the Shah’s misguided reforms he called his “White Revolution”, eventually led to resentment among the people, across all classes and demographics.

Key Figure: Mohammad Mossadegh Prime Minister, Iran, 1953

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Clerics leveraged the popular dissatisfaction with the Shah, and organized a revolution to overthrow him in 1979. It was at that time several revolutionaries took 52 Americans hostage at the U.S. embassy in Tehran for 444 days (until 1981). A deep rift developed between the U.S. and Iran as a consequence, and hostilities quickly rose between Israel and Iran, as well. These events continue to frame the way Iran is viewed in the U.S. and explain the mistrust between the two countries.

One of the reasons clerics were able to lead the revolution is that they are connected to the people at a grassroots level in Iran. Neighborhood mullahs, who usually provide administrative assistant at the local mosque, are very connected to the families there. They preside over births, deaths, marriages, etc. At the same time a very prominent cleric, Ayatollah Khomeini, was issuing anti-government propaganda that these clerics could rally behind. Eventually, it was Khomeini who became the leader of Iran, usurping the Shah. This began the era of theocracy in Iran.

**Key Figure: Ayatollah Khomeini**

After the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, the mandate system was implemented in the Middle East. Palestine was one of the mandates, as were Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Mesopotamia (as Iraq was known). This followed Wilson’s ideals for the League of Nations and was intended to be a method of transition from a condition of colonization to independence. France, Britain, and Russia had negotiated a treaty, the Sykes-Picot Agreement. They agreed in secret on how to divide Ottoman territory amongst them once the war was over. On the political level, the impact of European imperialism can be seen in the form of new notions of national identity. Former imperial powers became nation-states, or their former provinces did. The trade networks and other activities that supported the empire’s power at one time, did not go away but were often subjugated by the new rules of trade agreements with European countries. These Keys to Understanding the Middle East Pyind & McClimans: Chapter Three: The Middle East and the Impact of Imperialism https://osu.pb.unizin.org/key2mideast/
agreements favored the interests of the European brokers. The present-day borders of the Middle East were steadily implemented as European powers gained control of provinces of the Ottoman Empire, such as Egypt, and north and West Africa.

These developments, more than the other factors of economics and culture, shaped the geographical definition of what we call the “Middle East.” These events impacted national boundaries and cultural identities in the region. By the time World War I began France and England had enough control over those communities they could conscript from them to bolster their armies, while Germany allied with the Ottomans who conscripted many for the German side.

Modernization Versus Westernization

The concept of modernity was an important rationale in projects of European imperialism, and is another element that sets this form of colonization apart from older forms of it. They often attributed their global power to it, and thus their entitlement to have authority over other societies. Looking at modernity as a unique European development, however, does not take into account the influence and competition coming from “The East.” Civilizations such as the Ottoman Empire (Casale, 2010) were competitors in the global struggle for dominance, alongside European countries.

Thus, modernity remains one of the important ways both insiders and outsiders of the Middle East conceptualize differences between European communities and the rest of the world. It is in terms of global competition toward technical advancement, in many ways. According to Middle East Historian Marshall Hodgson:

> “the gap in development between one part of the world and all the rest becomes decisive, and we must understand its character in order to understand anything else.” p. 176, Hodgson, 1974

Hodgson goes on to explain that the gap had more to do with technological leaps which he called “technicalization”. Yet, from a current postcolonial-theory-based perspective, Hodgson’s use of the term “development” remains a bit problematic. Postcolonial theorist discourse has critiqued the term for its implication that certain countries need Europeans to develop them. This is because it ultimately justifies colonial practices based on the need for “help.”

Modernity makes a strong conceptual connection to cultural imperialism for the above reasons. It was both a rationale of European imperialism, and an economic and social influence. Colonizers engaged in committed efforts to create a local workforce literate in not only in their technologies and methods, but in their cultural norms and worldview. Esposito describes the mentality this way:

> “Many Europeans believed that modernity was not only the result of conditions producing the Enlightenment and the industrial revolution, but also due to the inherent superiority of Christianity as a religion and a culture.” Esposito, Forward, Tolan et al, 2013, p. x

This also reflects the close link between religion and culture that was the norm at that time, although secularization was also becoming a major force in Europe and the Middle East.

Despite the pronounced influence Europe had on the Middle East, it is an oversimplification to say that the Middle East was modernized by Europeans. There is a long memory in regard to scientific and social advancements we mentioned on page 8, and their significance in the world. The push for modernization was felt most intensely from within, with a constant debate raging about whether that entailed Westernization.

The developed/developing binary is a false dichotomy in many ways. This is partly because modernity has often been defined in contrast with traditionalism. A binary tends to elude critical analysis because of the false choice it presents; that is, they present a superior/inferior construct, with little room for nuance or accuracy. In the case of the modern/traditional binary, it reinforces many stereotypes that justify the domination of “modernized” or “developed” countries. This is part of of the paradigm of linear “progress” that informs mainstream history textbooks.
While there were many modernizing reformers in Arab countries, three non-Arab modernizers stand out from the post-World War I era. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, of Turkey, Reza Shah of Iran, and Amanullah Khan of Afghanistan worked tirelessly to modernize their countries, and even go beyond Western nations in terms of progressive social institutions and women’s rights. Modernization has been in full force since the 1920s throughout the Middle East. Their social reforms often exceeded the progress in Europe, granting women the right to vote and giving them important roles in the modernizing efforts as educators. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s daughter was a pilot. He and other modernizing leaders (see below) implemented liberal secularism throughout government institutions.

**Modernizing Leaders:**


Amanullah Khan, King of Afghanistan, 1919-1929. C.C.O, via Wikimedia Commons.


**Gamal Abdul Nasser and Non-Alignment** One of the most prominent figures in resisting imperial control was Egypt’s president, Gamal ‘Abdul Nasser. He was at the forefront of the worldwide movement to resist the domination of the superpowers, called non-Alignment, which denied alliance with either the U.S.’s Containment Policy, or the Soviet Union’s systems of influence. He gained renown at the international conference on the subject in Bandung, in 1955, as a leader in non-Alignment and postcolonial sovereignty.

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Key Figure: Gamal ‘Abdul Nasser:

Gamal ‘Abdul Nasser – Egypt’s president, 1956-1970 – was at the forefront of the worldwide movement to resist the domination of the superpowers, called non-Alignment. He gained renown at the international conference on the subject in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955.

Nasser’s policies (Nasserism):

– Pan-Arabism

– Positive Neutrality: This was his non-alignment strategy, neutrality without indifference. This means the sovereign reserves the right to be involved in world affairs without taking sides, necessarily.

– He diverged from Marxist socialism in that he did not abolish private property, or attack systems which protected the rich. Also, considering that Egyptian society considered family as a bedrock, and its religious views were very steadfast, he did not implement anti-religious or family reforms.

Nasser was incredibly popular as he represented Egyptian national identity and independence in many ways. Firstly, because of his role in the revolution of 1952 that overthrew the European-backed monarchy but also because he the first Egyptian to rule Egypt since the time of the Pharoahs, and his humble village background gave him additional authenticity. His credibility was further strengthened when he nationalized the Suez Canal, standing up to both Israel and European powers. Even when Egypt lost the war to Israel in 1967, and lost the Sinai Peninsula, he continued to be considered a hero.

As a way to implement this ideology in his country, and bolster regional solidarity, he developed pan-Arabism to counter the pressures from the West and the Soviets. It was an aspect of Arab socialism which was also gaining traction among Arab intellectuals. Syria and Egypt were united briefly under this policy, and his direction. His main policies were pan-Arabism, and Positive Neutrality. The latter was his non-alignment strategy, neutrality without indifference. The government reserves the right to be involved in world affairs without taking sides, and to intervene on issues deemed appropriate.

Nation States and Stateless Nations

It is important to understand the dynamics of national identity for two main reasons:

1) to understand the immense cultural diversity of the Middle East,

2) to understand issues of inequity and power imbalances,

3) to acknowledge that many of the conflicts of the Middle East are better understood with an accounting of national identity issues.

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The map of the Middle East is diverse already with Arabic, Hebrew, Turkish and Persian linguistically defining the political borders — not the monolithic image most people have of the Middle East as a location exclusively Arabic-speaking place. However, within those political boundaries, there is even more diversity to be grappled with, and understood. This section gives an overview of national identities and how they formed in the Middle East, and how they differ with European and global views on national identity. It also touches upon the issues of inequity that national identity formation often creates.

National consciousness, government based on national identity, and individual citizenship, has a historical explanation related to power struggles in Europe. The Pope became equivalent to an emperor in Western Europe, because when the Western Roman Empire fell to the Germanic invaders, there was a power vacuum which the Bishop of Rome (now known as the Pope) came to fill. One result of this was a power struggle between “secular” forces, i.e., princes and local rulers, and the Church. The Treaty of Westphalia in 17th Century ended the Thirty Years War and created many of the boundaries in Europe which remain definitive — it also gave the right for each territory to choose its own form of worship. It was a defeat for the Church, but a victory for increased individualism in regard to spirituality and group belonging. Print media played a critical role in the formation of national consciousness as a form of group belonging: reading literature in one’s own vernacular had a powerful effect (Anderson, 2006).

In the Middle East the history of national consciousness differs a great deal from that of Europe. There were always concepts of cultural community, somewhat synonymous with nation, or people, but national identities were not defined by a particular state. To take an example from Arabic speaking communities of the Middle East. A nation, or a people, is usually referred to as qawm in Arabic. Thus, qawmia is usually how the word nationalism is translated. Likewise, the word umma, which means community and is used by Muslims to refer to their global community, is also sometimes translated as “nation”. Traditionally, cultural communities were also based on a particular religious tradition. National identity is therefore a complicated topic in the context of the Middle East. For the sake of this discussion, however, it is important to know that various cultural communities, whether they called themselves qawm or umum (plural for umma), came to consider themselves nations. At the same time, many of those, did not possess a state of their own, and some continue to be without a state. They are thus “stateless nations”.

Examples of stateless nations:

- The Kurds currently reside in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey, but they have not established an internationally-recognized state based on their national identity.
- The Jews were a stateless nation until 1948 when they declared Israel a state, and immediately gained recognition from the U.S., followed by the rest of the world.
- Palestinians are currently members of a stateless nation, although the sovereignty of Palestine has been recognized by 135 member countries of the U.N. The term “State of Palestine” is only used officially by Sweden.

Key Concept: Stateless Nation

Various cultural communities came to consider themselves nations and were also able to establish a modern nation-state based on that identity. Many, however, never established their own nation state. They are thus called “stateless nations”.

Many of the nation states of the Middle East formed their national consciousness after the establishment of their state, however. The national identity in that case is formed based on a recent institution, rather than one which organically developed over a long period of time. States that developed their national consciousness after the formation of the state do not have a national history that ties to a unique cultural community. For example, Arab-majority countries of the Middle East all share Arab identity, language and heritage, although they have very different national identities.

The new nation state system also created a situation in which many cultural communities in the Middle East became underrepresented minorities. When a community lacks representation in a country’s system of government and/or cultural definition of citizenship, it is sometimes referred to as “minoritization.” “Minoritize” is a verb used in the social
sciences to critically describe the process which creates inequity between groups in a given country (see “Key Concept” below).

Key Concept: Minoritization

“Minoritize” is a verb used in the social sciences to critically describe the processes which create inequity between groups in a given country. As a verb it emphasizes the historical nature of inequity, and as a phenomenon which is continually reinforced in a country. It is the culmination of laws, educational practices and popular culture which favor the perspectives and interests of the more powerful group. It refers to the relationship between the dominant group which identifies with national identity is more supported by the country’s political, social and economic systems, and less powerful communities whose interests are not as well-served by them. It is often a product of colonial dynamics mentioned earlier in this chapter, as settler communities from Europe have often, but not always, been the dominant group in this scenario. For a more detailed explanation, see: Sensoy & Diangelo (2012).

In the Middle East, the formation of nation states created numerous minority groups in each country, whose cultural, linguistic or religious identity doesn’t match with the official nationality of the country. The examples are too numerous to list. The key aspect to be aware of is that the identity of the most powerful group of the country – which is usually also the majority group but not always – doesn’t represent the entire population. For example in Iran the majority identity is Persian-speaking, Shi’i Muslim. There are numerous Kurdish, Arab, Azeri, Assyrian, Jewish, Iranians, among others, and each may be speakers of a different language, and/or adherents to a different religious tradition.

The U.S. and Post-Bandung Imperial Dominance

Key Event: Bandung Conference of 1955

By 1955 most colonies had gained independence. The Conference of Bandung in 1955 was a major turning point, which lead to the non-Aligned movement of newly independent countries who wished to resist Soviet and U.S. pressure to align. It was organized by newly independent countries to discuss how to move forward. Its purpose was to discuss two main issues: