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Post-war Treaties (Ottoman Empire/ Middle East)

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In peacemaking in the former Ottoman Empire, a discrepancy developed between the discursive power of the Paris Peace Conference to make treaties, and the material power to determine the situation on the ground. In the Arabic-speaking lands, the Great Powers papered over this situation with League of Nations Mandates. These raised as many questions as they answered. In Anatolia, Mustafa Kemal's emerging ethno-nationalist state sharply demarcated the power of the Allies to make peace. Yet the discursive power of the Conference did not entirely disappear, as post-Ottoman Turkey sought to join the new international system on terms it considered acceptable.

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1. Introduction

By the time the [Paris Peace Conference](#) turned its attention to the [Middle East](#) in late spring and summer of 1919, a disconnect had developed between the discursive and material power of the Conference itself. The Conference, or more accurately, the five Great Powers that made up the Supreme Council of the Conference ([Britain](#), [France](#), the [United States](#),^[1] [Italy](#), and [Japan](#)) still held

discursive power. They alone wrote treaties and expected the states of the defeated powers to sign them. This structure produced the last treaty of the Paris Peace Conference proper, the Treaty of Sèvres with the Ottoman Sultan signed on 10 August 1920.

However, material power proved something else altogether. In Arabic-speaking lands, discursive power proved sufficient to establish something that looked like imperial expansion, in the guise of League of Nations Mandates. From the outset, the Mandates in these lands raised as many questions as they sought to answer. In Anatolia, an emerging Turkish successor state under the direction of [Mustafa Kemal \(1881-1938\)](#) revealed dramatically the discrepancy between discursive and material power. The outcome in Anatolia required a second and quite different treaty, the Treaty of Lausanne signed on 24 July 1923. This treaty sharply demarcated the power of the European empires. Yet the new republic in Turkey proved interested not in rejecting the overall discursive structure of international relations, but joining it on terms agreeable to itself.

2. Wartime Agreements and the Wilsonian Imaginary

The European Allies made an array of wartime agreements among themselves concerning the Ottoman domains, both to ensure mutual implication in the war and to divide the projected spoils of victory. The Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916 divided much of the Arab Ottoman domains between the British and the French, with the Italians later included as part of the St. Jean de Maurienne Agreement of April 1917.^[2] On 30 October 1918, the Ottoman commanders concluded the Armistice of Mudros with the British. The armistice gave the Allies extensive powers, such as the right to occupy any strategic point of their choosing (Article VII), and the surrender of all garrisons throughout Anatolia, the Arabian peninsula, Syria, and Mesopotamia to the nearest Allied commanders (Article XVI).^[3]

Such terms foreshadowed a problem that would haunt peacemaking in the region down to the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 — the disparity between the apparent Allied victory and actual military capabilities on the ground. At the time of the Mudros armistice, British imperial forces in the theater numbered nearly 1.1 million men, many from the Army of India. By the following summer, these forces numbered only 320,000.^[4] How could the Allied forces in the field enforce peace throughout the vast former Ottoman realm, even before the huge popular clamor for demobilization that immediately followed the armistice? If the power to decide upon the peace did not rest on military force, what did it rest on?

As war began to morph into post-war, the unstable amalgam of ideas known collectively as *Wilsonianism*, further disrupted peacemaking in the former Ottoman lands, as elsewhere. President [Woodrow Wilson's \(1856-1924\)](#) famous Fourteen Points Speech of 8 January 1918 did not, in fact, explicitly call for the breakup of the Ottoman Empire. Rather, Point 12 called for a “secure sovereignty” for the “Turkish portion of the present Ottoman Empire” and for the other nationalities “an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous

development,” as well as free passage through the Straits of the Dardanelles.

Not to be outdone in the brief period of global Wilsonian fervor, the world's two largest empires issued the Anglo-French Declaration of 7 November 1918. Their true [war aims](#), it turned out, were “the complete and final liberation of the peoples who have for so long been oppressed by the Turks, and the setting up of national governments and administrations deriving their authority from the free exercise of the initiative and choice of the indigenous populations.” Woodrow Wilson himself could not have put the matter more forcefully.

The Conference simultaneously had to deal with the consequences of wartime imperial machinations. In the Arabian Peninsula, the efforts of the British to subvert Ottoman rule led them to subsidize rival families, that of the Hashemite Emir of Mecca and the House of Saud.^[5] By the spring of 1919, the Hashemites became the preferred instrument of imperial objectives. The emir's son [Faisal I, King of Iraq \(1885-1933\)](#) had fought in the Palestine campaign, giving him a certain amount of credibility as a champion of pan-Arab [nationalism](#). After the Palestinian campaign Faisal became the de facto the administrator of much of Syria. Actually enthroning him, however, conflicted with French claims, which became more politically charged by the month, as the price of the war and the perils of the peace became clearer.^[6] Faisal, for his part, had come to an arrangement with French Premier [Georges Clemenceau \(1841-1929\)](#) in April 1919, according to which Faisal would rule a nominally independent Syria including Lebanon under a loose French mandate.^[7] The British, unable to afford the acquisition of the entire Ottoman Middle East on their own, and in any event bound by the Sykes-Picot agreement, were willing to accept these arrangements, particularly if the French endorsed a British mandate in Palestine.

It soon became clear, however, that matters were not wholly under the control of the French, the British, or even of Faisal. A Syrian National Congress called by Faisal in June 1919 endeavored to sort out the complex relationship among religion, geography, ethnicity, and nationalism in the region.^[8] This Congress called for a wholly independent Syria comprising the whole Levant. This put Faisal, a native of Mecca not Syria, in an untenable position. He could antagonize either his European patrons or his supposed Syrian subjects. In March 1920, the Congress unilaterally declared Syrian independence with Faisal as king. Shortly thereafter, the Conference of San Remo of April 1920 (the itinerant structure that replaced the standing Conference in Paris) agreed on a [French mandate in Syria \(including Lebanon\)](#) and a [British mandate in Palestine and Trans-Jordan](#). In July 1920, the French Armée du Levant decided the matter, for the time being, by the occupation of Damascus and the forced exile of Faisal.^[9] The League of Nations approved the French Mandate for Syria in July 1922.

In Mesopotamia, the geopolitical goals of the British Empire remained the same — access to oil and a secured route of passage from Suez to [India](#).^[10] The issue was how to do so at an acceptable financial cost in an increasingly dire budgetary situation. The cost of maintaining some 100,000 troops in the region gave rise to ferocious debates, both within Westminster and between the [British](#)

government and the government of India.^[11] In the end, the political solution involved placing the then-unemployed Faisal on an Iraqi throne under a British mandate. Militarily, British policy revolved around brutal, if economically frugal, tactics of terror, through the latest military technology, notably airplanes, tanks, and armored vehicles.^[12] The British seriously considered using, though never deployed, poison gas.^[13]

The settlement in the Arabic-speaking lands preserved much of the Sykes-Picot Agreement. The French were excluded from most of Anatolia, and yielded the region around Mosul in Mesopotamia in exchange for a share of oil revenues. Palestine became a British mandate. But the imperial settlement raised at least as many issues as it would solve. These mandates were all Class A, with the presumption that they would shortly become independent states. The Balfour Declaration complicated an already difficult situation in Palestine, with its promise of a “national home” for Jews and its simultaneous civil and religious guarantees offered to existing non-Jewish communities. Arab-Jewish riots in Jerusalem and a major tribal revolt in Iraq in 1920^[14] followed by a revolt in Syria in 1925^[15] showed that the peoples of these lands would pursue their own, often contradictory, meanings of self-determination. If the British and the French soon forgot the lofty words of the Anglo-French Declaration back in November 1918, the peoples of the former Ottoman lands did not.^[16]

3. The Treaties of Sèvres and Lausanne: Nation State versus Empire

As the Paris Peace Conference proceeded, the Allies continued to deal with the regime of the Sultan in Constantinople as though it were the actual site of sovereignty in Anatolia. After the Mudros armistice, a modest force of some 3,500 Allied (mostly British) troops occupied Constantinople.^[17] Gradually, a distinct, ethnic Turkish successor state had begun to emerge. In May 1919, Mustafa Kemal (later known as Atatürk), the hero of the Dardanelles campaign, took up the innocuous-sounding position of inspector of the 9th Army. He placed his headquarters in Samsun along the Black Sea, well beyond Allied military power.

In February 1920, the last Ottoman parliament adopted the *Misak-i Milli* (National Pact), a declaration of national independence that directly challenged Allied sovereignty.^[18] Article 1 stipulated that Arab-majority Ottoman lands be accorded self-determination. Article 5 posited something of a “golden rule” concerning national minorities. Protections such as those envisaged in the other treaties “shall be confirmed and assured by us,” provided neighboring countries did the same with Muslim minorities. The declaration in Article 4 assented to freedom of navigation in the Straits, provided Constantinople and the Sea of Marmora remained “protected from every danger.”

Greece, meanwhile, had become determined to reconcile ethnic and historic claims on the Anatolian peninsula. Participation in the war and the fall of the Ottoman Empire fostered what Michael Llewellyn Smith called the “Ionian Vision,” of a Hellenic successor state.^[19] According to this vision, victorious successor Greece would expand to include much of what remained of Ottoman territory in Europe

(including Constantinople), the territories on both sides of the Straits, and the Anatolian peninsula itself up to the Central Plateau.

The gradual [migration](#) of Turkish sovereignty from the captive Sultan to Kemal in Angora (later Ankara), together with the continued withering of Allied military power, encouraged Britain, France, and Italy to make the Greeks the instruments of protecting their increasingly fragile “victory.” With Allied permission and logistical support, the Greeks attacked from their enclave in Smyrna in June 1920, and were shortly at full-fledged war with the emerging Turkish successor state.

The Allies continued to insist that the Sultan’s regime actually ruled over Anatolia. The Allied occupation of Constantinople became official in March 1920. They dissolved Parliament, and assumed control of the former Ottoman War Office, and mail and telegraph services.^[20] In response, the National Assembly meeting in Angora elected Kemal president of a new Turkish republic. The Assembly declared the Sultan a prisoner of the Allied powers, his acts invalidated as expressions of Turkish sovereignty.

Against this backdrop, the Treaty of Sèvres signed in August 1920 became a parody of the Conference it had originally proclaimed itself in early 1919.^[21] The treaty, in effect, sought to create an inter-Allied protectorate. It began with the Covenant of the League of Nations, like the other treaties emanating from the Conference. It espoused various Wilsonian principles, yet drove them in an explicit Great Power imperial direction.^[22] Like the other treaties, Sèvres created a criminalized former Great Power, unfit to play a legitimate role in the international system. Its international crime was not the atrocities perpetrated on [Armenians](#) or Assyrians, but the mere fact that the Ottomans joined the war on the side of [Germany](#) and [Austria-Hungary](#). In so doing, according to Article 231, Turkey had caused “losses and sacrifices of all kinds for which she ought to make complete reparation.”

Post-Ottoman Turkey fell into Allied receivership through losing control over its finances. The Allies recognized that meaningful reparations would be well beyond the capacity of the post-Ottoman Turkey to pay, particularly given the loss of the Arabic-speaking lands. Accordingly, in order “to afford some measure of relief and assistance to Turkey,” the treaty set up a Financial Commission comprising one representative each from France, the British Empire, and Italy, with a Turkish representative serving in a consultative capacity. This commission had vast powers, such as de facto control over the government budget (Article 232), and authority over future government loans (Article 234). No other defeated power had to subject itself to such a compromise of its sovereignty.

The treaty set machinery in motion that was likely to result in the partition of Anatolia. A French, British, and Italian commission would make recommendations for an autonomous Kurdistan within six months of the signing of the treaty (Article 62). Sovereignty around Smyrna (technically still Turkish as per Article 69) would ultimately be determined by plebiscite after five years of direct rule by Greece (Article 83). The treaty established immediately an independent, if amorphous, [Armenia](#) (Article 88). Its eventual boundaries would be determined through arbitration by, improbably enough,

the president of the United States.^[23] Minorities in what remained of Turkey proper would enjoy protections similar to those in the other treaties (Articles 140-151), guaranteed by the Principal Allied Powers.

In other words, the residual discursive power of the allies at the Paris Peace Conference had produced a certain kind of treaty. On the ground, however, the Allies relied on a proxy, the irredentist Greek state, to materialize their discursive power through the ill-conceived extension on the part of that state of the military campaign in Anatolia. The disastrous results of this campaign evoked the final disintegration of the Allied coalition. [Russia](#), of course, had effectively left the coalition following the [October Revolution](#). The Bolshevik regime recognized the evolving republic, and signed Treaty of Moscow and the Treaty of Kars in 1921. These regularized borders had been fought over for at least a century by the regimes of the sultans and the tsars. The treaties also paved the way for direct military aid from the Bolsheviks to Kemal. The French and Italians made their own, more modest bilateral deals with the Angora regime. The British Empire itself fragmented with the Chanak crisis of September-October 1922. In response to a direct appeal from Westminster for assistance, all of the independent Dominions except [New Zealand](#) refused to send troops in the event of war breaking out between Britain and Turkey.^[24]

The Treaty of Lausanne, signed in July 1923, reflected the “real” locus and attributes of sovereignty in Anatolia.^[25] Not strictly speaking part of the Paris Peace Conference, this separate treaty constituted a multilateral agreement among the Great Powers and Turkey. The “war guilt” provisions of the Treaty of Sèvres disappeared, and with it the Financial Commission. Gone too were restrictions on the size of Turkish military forces. Likewise provisions for an autonomous Kurdistan, let alone an independent Armenia were removed. Capitulations, mostly extraterritorial advantages for Western nationals and institutions, were abolished (Article 28). Greece recognized an obligation to make reparations (Article 59). Turkey formally renounced claims resulting from this obligation, given the dismal financial condition of the Hellenic state.

Yet non-trivial qualifications on Turkish sovereignty remained. A convention on the Straits distinct from the treaty but signed by the belligerent powers guaranteed a Wilsonian “freedom of the seas” in peace and in war (Articles 1-2, with the Annex).^[26] The agreement created a demilitarized zone on both sides of the Straits (Articles 4-6), overseen by an international commission operating under the auspices of the League of Nations (Articles 12, 15). Post-Ottoman Turkey would rejoin the system of international finance through involved provisions for partitioning and paying some version of the Ottoman public debt (Part II, Financial Clauses).^[27] A unilateral declaration issued the same day as the treaty declared the intention of the regime to study the inherited Ottoman legal system “with a view to the institution of such reforms as may be rendered advisable by the development of manners and civilization.”^[28] Toward that end, Turkey was to employ a number of Western jurists from non-belligerent countries to advise in the modernization of Turkish law. These foreign employees of the Turkish Ministry of Justice would be eligible to receive complaints and petitions on a wide range of civil and criminal matters (Article 2).

A convention appended to the Treaty of Lausanne indicated Allied acceptance of the frequently brutal “population exchange” between Greece and Turkey.^[29] In the end, the exchange uprooted some 1.5 million individuals, about 1.1 million Greeks, and over 350,000 Turks.^[30] The remaining minorities in Istanbul and Western Thrace given were protections similar to those in the treaties from the Paris Peace Conference. Article 38 of the Lausanne treaty guaranteed freedom of religion, and “full and complete protection of life and liberty to all inhabitants of Turkey without distinction of birth, nationality, language, race or religion.” Moreover, as per Article 44, provisions of minority protection “constitute obligations of international concern and shall be placed under the guarantee of the League of Nations.” Obviously, it was no simple matter to disentangle peoples who had lived together for centuries. The exchange convention itself specifically excluded populations of some 110,000 “Greeks” in Constantinople and over 100,000 “Turks” in Western Thrace.^[31]

Why did the new regime in Turkey agree to such qualifications on its sovereignty? The Great Powers remained in a position to grant some trade and loans. But more importantly, they could still grant international recognition to the new regime in Anatolia. The discursive authority of European Great Powers to set the rules of the international system after the Great War was challenged, but not overturned. The new regime in Turkey did not want to overthrow that system, but to join it as a fully sovereign member of family of nations; this, the Ottoman Empire had never been. In so doing, the new regime conferred its own measure of legitimacy, both on itself and on the system.

4. Conclusion

The peace settlement in the former Ottoman lands shows how empire and peacemaking shaped one another in the region after the Great War. The peace settlement began to take shape during the war itself, through a traditional partition among empires, shown clearly in the Sykes-Picot agreement. Yet 19th-century imperial arrangements found themselves disrupted immediately after the Mudros armistice. Allied military power proved limited over such a vast geographic area, and local collaborators uncertain. Moreover, Wilsonianism provided considerable ideological disruption, as notions of “self-determination” spread well beyond the European continent. In the end, empire in an adapted form reasserted itself in the Arabic-speaking lands through Mandates in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq. One “self-determined” state emerged beyond effective Allied control in Anatolia. This state not only defeated the Greek irredentist project, but effectively overthrew the settlement of the Treaty of Sèvres. In the end, however, the future Kemalist Turkey, as a gesture of its own “self-determination,” decided to join the international system largely created by the Western imperial powers. State and empire came to a mutual understanding in the former Ottoman lands.

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Notes

1. † The United States had never declared war on the Ottoman Empire, and thus did not sign either of the post-war treaties concerning the Middle East.
2. † The best overview of a period of highly complicated diplomacy is still Helmreich, Paul M: *From Paris to Sèvres: The Partition of the Ottoman Empire at the Peace Conference of 1919-1920*, Columbus 1974. On the Sykes-Picot Agreement, see Fromkin, David: *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*, New York 1989, pp. 188-99. The text of the St. Jean de Maurienne Agreement appears in Albrecht-Carrié, René: *Italy at the Paris Peace Conference*, New York 1938, pp. 345-46.
3. † See Dyer, Gwynne: "The Turkish Armistice of 1918: I-The Turkish Decision for a Separate Peace, Autumn 1918," in: *Middle Eastern Studies* 8 (1972), pp. 143-78; and "The Turkish Armistice of 1918: II-A Lost Opportunity: The Armistice Negotiations of Mudros," in *ibid.*, pp. 313-48.
4. † Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace* 1989, p. 404. See also Darwin, John: *Britain, Egypt, and the Middle East: Imperial Policy in the Aftermath of War, 1918-1922*, New York 1981, p. 172.
5. † Hussein at one point complained that he had to spend half of his £12,000 per month subsidy fending off attacks from Saudi forces. Fromkin, *Peace to End all Peace* 1989, p. 424.
6. † For a deeply felt contemporary justification of the French presence, see de Gontaut-Biron, Comte Roger: *Comment la France s'est installé en Syrie, 1918-1919*, Paris 1922, esp. pp. 1-10.
7. † Zamir, Meir: "Faisal and the Lebanese Question, 1918-1920," in: *Middle Eastern Studies* 27 (1991), pp. 409-410.
8. † Ma'oz, Moshe: "Attempts at Creating a Political Community in Modern Syria," in: *Middle East Journal* 26 (1972), pp. 389-404.
9. † Eldar, Dan: "France in Syria: The Abolition of the Sharifian Government, April-July 1920," in: *Middle Eastern Studies* 29 (1993), pp. 487-504.
10. † Indeed, Susan Pedersen has argued that the British advocated an end to the mandate and Iraqi "independence" for much the same [imperial](#) reasons. See "Getting Out of Iraq—in 1932," in: *American Historical Review* 115 (2010), pp. 975-1000.
11. † See Cooper Busch, Briton.: *Britain, India, and the Arabs, 1914-1921*, Berkeley 1971, pp. 8-9.
12. † On the role of the Royal Air Force, see Omissi, David E.: *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force, 1919-1939*, Manchester 1990.
13. † Douglas, Ray M.: "Did Britain Use Chemical Weapons in Mandatory Iraq?" in: *Journal of Modern History* 81 (2009), pp. 859-887.
14. † McTague, John J. Jr.: "The British Military Administration in Palestine," in: *Journal of Palestine Studies* 7 (1978), pp. 55-76.
15. † Miller, Joyce Laverty: "The Syrian Revolt of 1925," in: *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 8 (1977), pp. 545-63.
16. † See also the broad overview in Thompson, Elizabeth F: *Justice Interrupted: The Struggle for Constitutional Government in the Middle East*, Cambridge 2013.
17. † Mango, Andrew: *Atatürk: The Biography of the Founder of Modern Turkey*, Woodstock 1999, p. 196.

18. † English and French versions appear in Toynbee, Arnold J: *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey: A Study in the Contact of Civilizations*, London 1922, pp. 207-210. Quotes here come from the English version.
19. † Smith, Michael Llewellyn: *Ionian Vision: Greece in Asia Minor: 1919-1922*, London 1973.
20. † See Helmreich, *From Paris to Sèvres* 1974, p. 281.
21. † For the full text of the Treaty of Sèvres (10 August 1920), see: wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Peace_Treaty_of_Sèvres (retrieved 11 August 2013).
22. † See Montgomery, A.E: "The Making of the Treaty of 10 August 1920," in: *The Historical Journal* 15 (1972), pp. 775-87.
23. † See Ambrosius, Lloyd E: "Wilsonian Diplomacy and Armenia: The Limits of Power and Ideology," in Winter, Jay (ed.): *America and the Armenian Genocide of 1915*, New York 2004, pp. 113-45.
24. † See Macfie, Alec Lawrence: "The Chanak Affair: September-October 1922," in: *Balkan Studies* 20 (1979), pp. 309-341.
25. † For the full Text of the Treaty of Lausanne (24 July 1923), see: wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Treaty_of_Lausanne (retrieved 11 August 2013)
26. † "Convention Relating to the Regime of the Straits," in: *American Journal of International Law* 18 (Supplement, No 1.: Official Documents, 1924), pp. 53-62. Hereafter referred to as AJIL.
27. † Under this plan, the Bagdad Bonds, Series III of 1908 issued through Deutsche Bank, were to be redeemed in 2010, the last redemption date in the treaty.
28. † "Declaration Relating to the Administration of Justice," in: *AJIL* 18 (Supplement, No 2.: Official Documents, 1924), pp. 97-98.
29. † "Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations," in: *AJIL* 18/2, Supplement: Official Documents (1924), pp. 84-90.
30. † Blanchard, Raoul: "The Exchange of Populations between Greece and Turkey," in: *Geographical Review* 1 (1925), p. 455. These figures are generally accepted in the essays in Hirschon, Renée, (ed.): *Crossing the Aegean: An Appraisal of the 1923 Compulsory Population Exchange between Greece and Turkey*, New York 2003.
31. † Alexandris, Alexis: "Religion or Ethnicity: The Identity Issue of the Minorities in Greece and Turkey," in Hirschon (ed.), *Crossing the Aegean* 2003, pp. 118, 122.

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