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Occupation during and after the War (Middle East)

By [Roberto Mazza](#)

The occupation of the Arab lands of the Ottoman Empire was essentially the by-product of the war, but it had been in the making for a long time. Despite their attempt to appear as liberators rather than occupiers, the British and, later, the French established a new form of occupation, sanctioned by the newly created League of Nations. This article aims at showing how the Arab lands fell into the hands of the British and French rulers, reflecting on the long-term consequences of occupation and control.

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Introduction

The occupation of the Arab Ottoman provinces by European powers started well before the outbreak of the First World War, as they were included in the larger issue of the “Eastern Question”. By the mid-19th century, Algeria and Tunisia had been occupied by [France](#) and [Egypt](#) had been under British occupation since 1882. Pre-war occupation styles varied, ranging from full occupation to economic control over specific sectors. Egypt experienced a rather unique status, as it was British

controlled but under Ottoman sovereignty. Inconsistent plans, paired with loose ideas about the future of the region, had been circulating between European powers. However, the urgency of re-designing the Middle East emerged during the first year of the war.

This article addresses the creation of a British Protectorate in Egypt and its long-lasting repercussions. Secondly, a brief overview of Ottoman losses in the Arab lands is followed by a discussion of the occupation of Jerusalem and Baghdad. Lastly, this article engages with the creation of the Mandates as a new form of colonial occupation, following the dismantling of the [Ottoman Empire](#) and the signing of several peace treaties. From a local perspective, the war proved to be a dramatic event that produced destruction and an enormous amount of victims, but eventually, it was shown to have only been the beginning, as some of its consequences have to this day not yet been absorbed and dealt with.

Egypt

It has been argued that the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 produced one of the most significant colonial encounters of the modern era.^[1] [Great Britain](#) occupied Egypt after a round of nationalist demonstrations in order to protect the Suez Canal, choosing a rather unique form of occupation, as the country was not made into a colony or a protectorate. Although Egypt remained under formal Ottoman sovereignty, neither Ottomans nor Egyptians had much say in its governance, and Evelyn Baring, Earl of Cromer (1841-1917), who “ruled” Egypt from 1883 to 1907, influenced all aspects of life, from economy to education, promoting British financial interests and, at the same time, contributing to the emergence of a strong political opposition.^[2] Cromer’s successors relaxed some of his policies and, by 1914, political parties and press flourished. Upon Ottoman entry into the war, the British declared Egypt to be an official protectorate (18 December 1914), ending four centuries of Ottoman sovereignty: ’Abbas II, Khedive of Egypt (1874-1944) was deposed and his uncle Husayn Kamil, Sultan of Egypt (1853-1917) was appointed sultan. Britain declared that it would protect Egypt, and Egyptians were not required to be actively involved in the conflict. Nevertheless, the demands of the British army impacted the civilian population as prices rose and more peasants were recruited into labour battalions. Profiteers and foreign landlords benefited from the rising prices, while the middle and lower classes began to resent British rule and enlisted in nationalist organizations, ready to demonstrate their alienation.^[3] The end of the war and the popularity of the Wilsonian idea of self-determination contributed to the rapid politicization of Egypt, which led to the creation of a delegation – *wafd* – whose purpose was to petition the British to represent Egypt at the [Paris Peace Conference](#) in 1919. When the *Wafd* and its leader Saad Zaghloul (1859-1927) were denied the possibility of being heard in Paris, a wave of popular riots and demonstrations broke out in various parts of the country, resulting in the death of more than 800 Egyptians. By then, the newly appointed High Commissioner, General Edmund Allenby (1861-1936), allowed the *Wafd* to travel to Paris. In 1922, Britain unilaterally declared the independence of Egypt; however, it was not until 1956, with the outbreak of the military and political Suez Crisis, that the British occupation of Egypt finally ended.^[4]

Ottoman Losses

Following the [Balkan Wars of 1912-1913](#), Europeans believed that the Ottoman Empire would collapse rapidly after joining the war effort. Despite this, the Ottoman armies performed fairly well, even though the empire's extensive borders required troops at several fronts simultaneously.^[5] At the beginning of the war, Ottoman losses were confined to the [Eastern Front](#) with [Russia](#), and to the Persian Gulf and southern [Mesopotamia](#) as a result of limited British penetration. In November 1914, the Sixth Indian Division crossed from Persia and occupied Basra, a position that was consolidated only later in 1915.^[6] Nevertheless, the military reality was that, in the same year, the Ottomans were not only defending their [empire](#), but were planning to attack on multiple fronts. [Ahmed Cemal Pasha \(1872-1922\)](#), for instance, assembled a task force in southern Palestine in order to take the Suez Canal, hoping that the Egyptians might have turned against the British. The advanced failed; however, the Ottomans did not lose ground.^[7] Though the British, led by General [Charles Vere Ferrers Townshend \(1861-1924\)](#), attempted to push their way up from Basra to Baghdad later in 1915, they had to retreat on the Tigris, stopping in the muddy village of [Kut](#), which was then sieged by Ottoman forces. On 26 April 1916, Townshend negotiated a surrender: nearly 13,000 men were taken prisoner. Kut was the second victory in a row for the Ottomans ([Gallipoli](#) being the first); territorial losses were minimal and the "Sick Man of Europe" was very much alive; as were the British, who, by mid-1916, were planning to reverse their performance in the Middle East.^[8]

Occupation of Jerusalem and Baghdad

Early in 1915, the British established an interdepartmental committee led by [Maurice De Bunsen \(1852-1932\)](#), former British ambassador to [Austria](#), in order to discuss their interests in the Ottoman Empire. However, it was not until the defeats at Gallipoli and Kut that they began to consistently plan the future of the region.^[9] The [Husayn-McMahon correspondence](#) and the [Sykes-Picot Agreement](#) went hand in hand with military preparations on the British side, showing the willingness of the newly appointed British Prime Minister [David Lloyd George \(1863-1945\)](#) to seal the fate of the Ottoman Empire once and for all.^[10] Whereas an agreement with [Husayn ibn Ali, King of Hejaz \(c.1853-1931\)](#) and Sharif of Mecca, was the outcome of a necessity dictated by the unfolding war events, the Sykes-Picot agreement was an act of official and secret imperial planning, one that would have re-designed the map of the Middle East. A comparison of these agreements shows the inconsistencies of the promises made, first to the Arabs and later to the Jews, with the [Balfour Declaration](#). After all, these agreements were by-products of the war effort and its unpredictability. Lloyd George believed that a strong military effort in Palestine and Mesopotamia would have changed the course of the war.^[11] The conquest and occupation of Jerusalem was planned in order to enhance the nation's morale; the practicalities were left in the hands of the head of the [Egyptian Expeditionary Force](#) General Allenby.^[12] The occupation of Jerusalem became the centre of a heated debate in the cabinet ahead of the city's conquest in November 1917. The War Office formalized the main policies

for its administration through a note that also suggested how holy places should be administered.^[13] Belligerents on both sides were concerned about the potential negative impact that a battle for Jerusalem could have on holy sites. On 8 December, Ottoman, German, and Austrian troops evacuated the city, leaving a declaration of surrender in the hands of the mayor of Jerusalem, Husayn al-Husayini (?-1918), who, after a rather bizarre sequence of events, was able to hand it to General Allenby, who made his official entry on 11 December.^[14] Allenby read a proclamation to the people of Jerusalem, promising religious freedom while maintaining martial law. The occupation of Jerusalem had local, regional, and international repercussions. Jerusalemites were happy the war was over, but were also suspicious of their new rulers. Streets were crowded with joyful people who later saw the occupation as a curse rather than a blessing.^[15] At the same time, Zionists, the beneficiaries of the 1917 Balfour Declaration, which promised a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine, had a different take on the long-term effects of British occupation, believing it to be a necessity for the establishment of a Jewish entity in Palestine. Whereas in Britain the conquest of Jerusalem was used as a **propaganda** tool, internationally the occupation of the city, and later of Palestine, came to represent the willingness of the British to re-draw the borders of the Middle East.

Moving to the Mesopotamian Front, the occupation of Baghdad started with the appointment of a new commander of the Mesopotamia Expeditionary Force, Major General Stanley Maude (1864-1917). While increasing the number of troops and laying down railway tracks, Maude forced the Ottomans to retreat from Kut on 24 February 1917, vindicating his predecessor, but more importantly, securing a way up through the Tigris to Baghdad. The Ottoman army was effectively disbanding, and no major defences were left to protect Baghdad. The British encountered some resistance on the Diyala River, but on 10 March, the city had fallen to British hands.^[16] While leaving the city, Ottoman and German troops destroyed all military installations. Total chaos spread in the city as people started looting whatever they could. General Maude made his entry on the afternoon of 11 March, and read a proclamation, crafted in London, which highlighted the history of the city and its symbolic value. By making reference to the great Islamic caliphates, the British hoped to appease the local population and to appear as liberators rather than occupiers. Like Jerusalemites, Baghdadis welcomed the restoration of order, but soon realized that the British had different plans for the emerging new state of Iraq.^[17]

Conclusion: From Armistice to Mandates

In the fall of 1918, the British staged a large offensive that resulted in the occupation of Damascus on 1 October, which fostered the dreams of Faysal I, King of Iraq (1885-1933), the son of Sharif Husayn of Mecca, as a contender in the occupation of Syria.^[18] The next few weeks marked the collapse of the Ottoman army, and an armistice was signed at Mudros on 31 October 1918 on board the HMS *Agamemnon*, a veteran of Gallipoli. The Ottomans were forced to surrender unconditionally and to accept the **occupation** of strategic points detailed in the text of the armistices. However, with the establishment of the Mandates Ottoman lands were partitioned and occupied as Lebanon and Syria

came under French control, while the newly created states of [Iraq](#) and [Palestine](#) were assigned to Great Britain. The [partitioning of the Ottoman Empire](#) was briefly discussed in Paris, but as the British and the French were concerned that the Americans would support the idea of Arab independence following [Woodrow Wilson's \(1856-1924\) Fourteen Points](#) speech, decisions were postponed. The Americans, through the King-Crane Commission, investigated what the local populations wished for themselves, but the findings were ultimately ignored in favour of international *realpolitik*.^[19] The future of the defunct Ottoman Empire was decided with the Treaty of Sevres (1920) – superseded by the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) – and with the Treaty of San Remo (1920), which eventually sanctioned the occupation of the Middle East in the form of British and French Mandates.^[20] Expectations of a new era of independence were rapidly replaced by European [imperialism](#) and new borders. Though physical occupation of the Middle East ended after the Second World War, its effects are still palpable, and the First World War, albeit in a different form, is still being fought, with no clear end in sight.

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Notes

1. ↑ Cleveland, William: A History of the Modern Middle East, Boulder 2013, pp. 95-96.
2. ↑ See Vatikiotis, P.J.: The Modern History of Egypt, London 1969, pp. 165-176.
3. ↑ Ibid., pp. 244-245.
4. ↑ Rogan, Eugene: The Arabs. A History, New York 2009, pp. 165-169.
5. ↑ Cleveland, Modern Middle East, p. 138.
6. ↑ Fawaz, Leila T.: A Land of Aching Hearts, Cambridge, MA 2014, p. 63.
7. ↑ McMeekin, Sean: The Ottoman Endgame, New York 2015, pp. 157-161.
8. ↑ McMeekin, Endgame 2015, pp. 291-293; Rogan, Eugene: The Fall of the Ottomans. The Great War in the Middle East, New York 2015, pp. 243-274; Fromkin, David: A Peace to End All Peace, New York 1989, p. 202-203.
9. ↑ TNA: PRO CAB 42/3/12, Committee of Imperial Defence. Asiatic Turkey, London, June 1915. See also Klieman, Aaron S.: Britain's War Aims in the Middle East in 1915, in: Journal of Contemporary History 3 (1968), pp. 237-251.

10. † The McMahon-Husayn correspondence took place between the British governor of Egypt (McMahon) and the Sharif of Mecca from July 1915 to January 1916. Husayn promised the British that he would stage an [Arab revolt](#) against the Ottomans in exchange for the establishment of an Arab state. The Sykes-Picot agreement, signed by French and British officials in May 1916, divided the Middle East into territories under direct French-British control and areas in their spheres of influence. Obviously, the McMahon-Husayn agreement and the Sykes-Picot agreement contradicted each other, suggesting a high degree of inconsistency and of opportunism on the part of the British.
11. † Fromkin, Peace 1989, p. 234.
12. † Mazza, Roberto: *From the Ottomans to the British*, London 2009, p. 122-124. An interesting work is Dolev, Eran / Sheffy, Av Yigal / Goren, Haim (eds): *Palestine and World War I*, London 2014.
13. † TNA: PRO FO 371/361, War Office to Headquarters Cairo, London, 19 November 1917.
14. † For details about the conquest and occupation of Jerusalem, see Mazza, *Ottomans* 2009, pp. 132-136. See also Jacobson, Abigail: *From Empire to Empire*, Syracuse 2011, pp. 117-147.
15. † See Tamari, Salim / Nassar, Issam: *The Storyteller of Jerusalem. The Life and Times of Wasif Jawhariyyeh*, Northampton 2014.
16. † McMeekin, *Endgame* 2015, p. 356; Rogan: *Fall* 2015, p. 324.
17. † Gholi Majid, Mohammad: *Iraq in World War I*, Oxford 2006, pp. 304-311.
18. † On the occupation of Damascus, see Rogan, *Fall* 2015, pp. 377-380; McMeekin, *Endgame* 2015, pp. 399-400; Fromkin, *Peace* 1989, pp. 336-341.
19. † On the King Crane Commission, see Patrick, Andrew: *America's Forgotten Middle East Initiative. The King-Crane Commission of 1919*, London 2015.
20. † Fraser, T.G. / Mango, Andrew / McNamara, Robert (eds): *The Makers of the Modern Middle East*, London 2011, pp. 170-176; Montgomery, A.E.: *The Making of the Treaty of Sèvres of 10 August 1920*, in: *The Historical Journal* 15/4 (1972), pp. 775-787; McMeekin, *Endgame* 2015, pp. 393-437; Rogan, *Fall* 2015, pp. 395-406; Ulrichsen, Kristian Coates: *The First World War in the Middle East*, London 2014, pp. 173-201.

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