

## **Critically assess the impact of European colonialism on the development of Middle Eastern society and politics**

The Middle East, a region encompassing Turkey, the Levant, Egypt, Arabia, the Gulf, Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan, has been at the forefront of European colonial interest since the late eighteenth century. Its strategic and commercial significance, as well as abundance of natural resources, made the region an attractive pursuit for European colonial powers, whose presence from the late eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century vastly transformed Middle Eastern societies. There are competing perspectives as to whether this transformation was positive or negative. The modernisation theory emphasises the modernising effects of European colonialism for the development of institutions, culture, and technologies. However, the detrimental consequences of colonial rule are abundant, and they include high levels of political instability and social fragmentation, proneness to authoritarianism, insurgencies, and ultimately, violent conflict. This essay will employ modernisation theory to analyse the impact of colonialism on two Middle Eastern states, Egypt and Syria. In the case of Egypt, it will argue that British rule has left both positive and negative legacy on the country's development, whereas Syria's experience under the French mandate can be seen as overwhelmingly damaging for the state's internal stability.

Before looking at the two specific cases, this section will present a general overview of the impact of colonialism on the fabrics of the Middle Eastern societies. Until the early eighteenth century, the influence of European powers in Middle Eastern affairs was limited. It wasn't until 1798 when Napoleon's forces landed in Alexandria that the Middle East came in direct contact with great powers (Kirk, 1948, p. 72), which marks the entry of the region into the modern international system. Since then, the region has become the centre stage for European

geopolitical rivalries, whose imperialist appetite introduced “the structures of governance and economics associated with the modern period...into the Middle East” (Gelvin, 2005, p. 88). James Gelvin writes how, as a consequence of the intrusion of imperialist powers, “new economic and political structures and new forms of social organisation compatible with the modern world economy emerged in [Middle Eastern] societies” (2005, p. 88). Robert L. Tignor argues that colonial rule had a modernising effect on countries that were exposed to it: “During the era of colonial rule there was a vast exportation of European civilization, particularly European science, into the colonies. Whether for good or bad, for humanitarian or for selfish motives, the non-Western world was uprooted and made over during this time” (1966, p. 3). Modernisation theory supports his argument and claims that all societies are undergoing a transformation from agrarian to urban; traditional structures are replaced by modern ones, such as secularism, economic progress, democratisation, social differentiation, rationalism” (Kumar, 2020). However, in focusing on the positive impacts of colonialism, modernisation theory neglects many adverse consequences of external interference into already existing dynamics of Middle Eastern societies. The findings of Michael Bernhard, Christopher Reenock, and Timothy Nordstrom shed light on the negative aspects of the legacy of colonialism on Western overseas colonies, which they define as “a territory outside of Europe ruled by a European power” (2004, p. 227). Certain elements of modernity, such as Christianity or European languages, and the economic system of capitalism, are significantly more foreign to European overseas colonies, than European internal colonies. They found that the hope that European overseas colonies would be able to absorb the positive aspects of modernity, like democracy, was misplaced, as colonialism proved itself to be harmful for the democratic development, for which they cite issues such as high levels of social fragmentation, underdevelopment, and the bad effect on the relationship between the state and civil society (2004, pp. 227, 228). Beverley Milton Edwards makes a similar argument by stating that

western values, norms, and standards played a part in “creating the sense of crisis and instability which characterises the region” (2011, p. 37). A consequence of the forceful imposition of modernity has been the emergence of nationalism in many Middle Eastern states. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the idea of nationality was unknown to Muslim civilisations. The Europeanisation of the education system in the late nineteenth century created a class of educated young men, “who through their education had imbibed some of the liberal and nationalist ideas of contemporary Western Europe” (Kirk, 1948, p. 111). Coupled with the grievances of the local population over the inability to voice their concerns due to the legislatures being dominated by the voice of the colonisers, the roots for nationalism were laid during the colonial period (Mansfield, 2013, p. 198). Thus, colonialism has had an enduring influence on the Middle East through the imposition of elements of modernity that permeated deep into the Muslim societies and caused social fragmentation, nationalism, and ultimately, conflict. The following two sections will analyse the specific effects of colonial rule on the development of Egypt and Syria.

In the 1880s, following a debt crisis and a domestic uprising, Egypt entered Britain’s imperial system as a “Veiled Protectorate”, in the words of a British imperial proconsul, Lord Milner (Mansfield, 2013, p. 113). Although Egypt was still officially part of the Ottoman Empire, the de facto ruler was the British consul general (Gelvin, 2005, p. 93). The country was rapidly modernising since the 1798 invasion, and the British presence accelerated and intensified this trend. Prior to the 1800s, “Egypt possessed fairly undifferentiated, self-sufficient, and non-rationalised structures” that were replaced during the nineteenth century by the more specialised institutions (Tignor, 1966, p. 5). Egyptian society was affected by the exportation of European ideas and technologies, but Robert Tignor emphasises that the British administrators were not in favour of a complete transformation and modernisation of Egypt. “Indeed, in many crucial areas, such as the realisation of political power in accordance with

changing social and economic conditions, the British tended to obstruct the forces and pressures for change” and he claims that the colonial administrators resisted the indigenous population’s requests for more widespread social change (1966, p. 396). The programs of social change in colonies depended on the reason for the colonisation and often favoured the colonisers, rather than the colony itself. The entry of European capital into Egypt disrupted Egyptian institutions, and caused a paralysis of the government, which resulted in the Arabi revolt (Tignor, 1966, pp. 10-11). Peter Mansfield writes how the big and middle-sized landowners, who possessed 75 percent of the cultivated land, accumulated more wealth, but the rest of the population was faced with a sharp rise of the living cost. The government failed to introduce any social or economic policy that would prevent the big-sized landowners from abandoning the cultivation of food in favour of cotton-growing, which created a near-famine and a steep rise in the death rate...” (2013, p. 197). Egypt’s specialisation in the production of cotton has made it highly dependent on its coloniser, a pattern that is often repeated; “Colonialism creates patterns of development that often leave countries highly dependent on exports from monocrop agriculture or resource-extractive industry”, which makes “post-colonial economies vulnerable to volatile prices for primary goods on the world market” (Bernhard, 2004, p. 229). As a result of dissatisfaction with colonial governors, nationalist movements and riots started emerging in Egypt and in other Middle Eastern societies. A strong public reaction was provoked in 1918 after British administrators denied Egyptians the self-determination that had previously been endorsed by the Allies. Egypt’s nationalist leadership who demanded independence was deported, sparking a public revolt. Peter Mansfield writes how, “The public reaction was immediate and severe. Rioting students in Cairo were supported by strikes among government officials, doctors and lawyers and the capital came to a standstill”. The protests reached the countryside and took “the form of a national uprising which Egyptian nationalists later called their 1919 Revolution” (Mansfield, 2013, pp. 198-

199). Henry C. Atyeo describes a similar nationalist riot of students in the 1950s who, while marching the streets of Cairo shouted, “Down with Britain! Up with Egypt!” (1952, p. 312). Hence, in the case of Egypt, the period spent under British colonialism has had certain positive effects on the development and introduction of new technologies. It is worth noting, however, that the modernisation which occurred wasn’t complete and was obstructed by the British administrators, whose harmful policies sparked a rise in nationalism. The next section will look at Syria’s experience under the French mandate to analyse how the specific policies pursued by the French deteriorated political stability in the country.

Syria, a country in Western Asia that is home to a diversity of ethnic groups and faiths, has long been a centre of pilgrimage and commerce, as well as political turmoil. After the end of the First World War, it came under the system of mandates that was set up by the League of Nations, but as George E. Kirk writes, “The Mandates System was little more than a polite fiction”, which the French and the British regarded as continuation of colonialism (1948, p. 130). The rising nationalisms in the societies that fell under the protection of the mandates were not given concessions to, as the policy of the French in Syria and Lebanon was based on the promotion of the minority Francophile Maronite Christian groups, rather than the Muslim Arab population (Mansfield, 2013, p. 226). The policies that were issued “inflamed traditional sectarian conflict by distinctly favouring religious minorities and by promoting a series of administratively isolated minority enclaves”, and the French went as far as to “threaten the Muslim majority by seizing control of their institutions and debasing the symbols of their culture” (Khoury, 1987, p. 5). The suppression of nationalist movements did not sit well with the educated elite who demanded independence. D. K. Fieldhouse argues that the majority of the problems of the French rule derive from their limited knowledge and misconceptions of Syria, evidence of which is the partition of Syria into two distinct units which weakened the

state and contributed to instability (Fieldhouse, 2006, p. 253). David Sorenson writes that the consequences of this partition can still be felt, as “this partitioning was a prime factor in Syria’s weak national integration today” (2016, p. 13). There are more ways in which the French rule was highly disruptive for Syria’s development, whose small economy was not vitally important to France (M.B. and H.G.L., 1940, p. 841). France pursued monetary policies that had disastrous effects for the Syrian economy and created a situation of widespread unemployment and high inflation, which served to further deteriorate political instability (Khoury, 1987, p. 5). Data collected by Michael Bernhard, Christopher Reenock, and Timothy Nordstrom in a study about democratic survival suggests that French colonial legacy is one of the least conducive for sustaining a democracy due to it having a negative effect on social fragmentation (2004, p. 246). Their findings support David Sorenson’s claim that foreign rule aggravated Syria’s population divisions, because “France pursued a “divide and rule” strategy, pitting rural versus urban elites” (2016, p. 14). Even at the time of the mandate, the French politicians understood that the deep divisions characterising the Syrian society would hinder any future establishment and survival of an independent state (Miller, 1977, p. 561). After declaring Syria independent in 1943, the French left the country without a viable political structure and a power vacuum with no one to fill it (Sorenson, 2016, p. 15). Therefore, modernisation theory’s assumption that all societies undergo economic development and democratisation might not apply to the case of Syria. Unlike in Egypt, Syria’s colonial experience was overwhelmingly negative and disrupted the country’s economic and political development by favouring religious minorities over the Muslim population and by worsening the economic situation.

To conclude, the general effects of colonialism analysed in the first section are evident in the specific cases of Egypt and Syria. Although direct colonial rule in Middle Eastern countries was generally short-lasting, its consequences for the local population were enormous. In Egypt,

the British administrators encouraged the modernisation of the economy, but at the same time resisted calls for political modernisation and denied the Egyptian population self-determination. Unlike the British policies in Egypt, the French policies in Syria were not favourable for economic development. French colonial legacy is seen as having had an overwhelmingly divisive impact on Syrian society which can be felt until today.

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