

The Middle East in the 20th century: from Entente until the Cold War¹

Buring the decades prior to World War I, leading European powers consolidated their positions by expanding the spheres of influence – i.e., their colonial/imperial possessions. Great Britain was interested mainly in securing the route to India, meaning with respect to the Middle East annexing Aden (1839), controlling Bahrain (1880), Muscat (1891) and Kuwait (1899). The French began the foundation of their Empire by the conquest of Algeria (1830), followed later by the occupation of Tunisia (1881) and the incorporation of Morocco (1912). Russia was building a vast Asian Empire, also at the cost of the Ottoman Empire. All of the Middle East – including Egypt, Persia (Iran) and the Sudan – was drawn into great powers' politics.

With the beginning of the XX century, both the Ottoman Empire and Persia had every cause to feel insecure (hence, reform movements and revolts of 1908 and 1911 in Turkey, and the constitutional movement in Iran of 1906–1911. Turkey established close relations with Germany².

Entente Cordiale was formed – as it is known – in two stages: in 1904 (8 April), when a British-French agreement was concluded, widened in 1907 by the access of Russia. It was called Entente Cordiale, triple Entente,

¹ The Middle East is understood in this paper as the Arab North African and South West Asian countries in addition to Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and (after its establishment) Israel. See: R. Owen, *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*, London–New York 1994, pp. 8 ff. (map on page 12, including North African and Asian countries of the region, but excluding Afghanistan). Also: Chapter 1 of Part I of: G. Corne, *Le Proche-Orient éclaté. 1956–2000*, Paris 2003.

² W.L. Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, Boulder–San Francisco–Oxford 1994, pp. 99 ff.

or in short the Entente. According to the major clauses of the 1904 agreement, France resigned from all objections to British occupation of Egypt (the French resigned from insisting on fixing a time for its termination), while Britain acknowledged the right of France to interfere in Moroccan affairs, together with the introduction of so-called reforms on condition of respecting the hitherto-acquired rights of British citizens. French recognition of British rights in Egypt (and understandably, also in the Sudan) did not have any practical significance, since the French could not do much about that, particularly as they were forced to leave Fashoda (in Southern Sudan) in 1898. The French however gained a great boost to their empire by being granted a free hand in Morocco. It follows that the British monarch Edward VII (1901–1910), in recognition of British isolation on the international arena, was ready to go as far as possible to satisfy the French (and later Russians) and attract them into a British sponsored political-military alliance.

The British-Russian Convention (signed on 31 August 1907) covered three matters, which were of interest to both sides: Tibet, Afghanistan and Persia. Russia and Britain resigned from interference in the affairs of Tibet. Russia guaranteed the security of Afghanistan. Both sides agreed to the partition of Persia into their own spheres of influence. Britain granted Russia the northern and more rich part of Persia as sphere of influence, while the southern part of the country became its own sphere of influence. The two sides were separated by a “neutral” central part that included the capital Tehran³.

So, Entente Cordiale had obviously a Middle Eastern moment at its core: firstly – in 1904, when it was convened between Great Britain and France. The two world powers solved (at least some) problems of their hitherto existing rivalry in Egypt (unilateral occupation of the country in 1882, earlier attainment of controlling shares over the Suez Canal Company in 1875) and the Sudan (the Mahdist uprising and the Mahdist state of mid-1880's and 1890's conquered by the British in 1898 by Kitchener), also North Africa (accepting the primacy of French interests explicitly in Morocco and implicitly in Tunisia and Algeria). Hence, each side accepted

³ *Histoire de la Méditerranée*, eds J. Carpetier, F. Lebrun, Paris 1998, pp. 322–323; also: *L'orient arabe, Arabisme et islamisme de 1798 a 1945*, Paris 1993.

the other's sphere of influence, attainments in the Middle East, granting themselves freedom of action on the particular terrain.

The expansion of Entente Cordiale by the access of Russia in 1907 to the club, through British initiative, again took place at the cost of Middle Eastern nations. This time, Persia (since 1935, Iran) was at stake (not to mention Afghanistan). The division of Persia into a northern – Russian – sphere of influence, and southern – British – spheres of influence proved a strategically vital moment (i.e., the occupation of northern Iran by the USSR and southern Iran by Britain) during World War II in the context of the Axis states battle for the Middle East.

Keeping the chronological sequence of events, the Ottoman Empire's penetration by Germany led to its involvement on the side of Central Powers and access to World War I (theatres: Iraq, Arabia, Egypt-Suez Canal).

The downfall of the Ottoman Empire as a consequence of World War I was tantamount to British and French supremacy in the Middle East, in general – European supremacy. Mandates' system meant the establishment of new nation states in the region modelled on French and British patterns. Besides – there were during the inter-war period independent Turkey, Iran, Arabia (Hijaz was during the war in alliance with Britain, however the Saudis later, conquering the former in addition to the larger part of the Arabian Peninsula, established Saudi Arabia), as well as Italian, French and British occupied Eritrea and Somalia.

British-French supremacy in the area during the post-World War I period was legalised within the framework of the League of Nations. Hence, article 22 of the League of Nations Covenant referred to colonies and dependent territories, whose inhabitants were not yet capable of ruling themselves in difficult international circumstances. The prosperity and development of those people is a sacred civilisational mission (The White Man's Burden). That mission could be carried out by developed nations whose resources, experience and geographical location could best facilitate undertaking similar responsibility as League mandatory powers. Particular reference was made to some communities of the former Ottoman Empire, which attained such a degree of development that their existence as independent nations could be temporarily acknowledged, on condition of having the advice and assistance of a mandatory until they become ca-

pable of independent government. The will of particular nations should be taken into consideration in the choice of the mandatory. This was the case of A-type mandates (there were also B and C). Hence, Iraq, Palestine and Transjordanian were assigned to Great Britain, while Syria and Lebanon – to France⁴.

The inter-wars' period⁵ in the Middle East was marked by struggle for independence. Main efforts of Arabs during the period were directed towards ending foreign rule and gaining independence. Social, economic and political reforms were pushed into the background (e.g.: Iraq, whom formal independence was granted in 1932, and Egypt – in 1936; both as kingdoms; the question of Palestine; the Balfour Declaration of 2 November 1917; Jewish mass immigration into mandatory Palestine; Fascist/III Reich menace; inconsistent British policies in Palestine). In that period and during World War II, the situation in the Middle East was highly complicated both strategically (in the context of great powers politics) and regionally (with respect to inter-state and local politics).

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With the liquidation of the Ottoman Empire, after World War I, the stage was set for Great Britain and France as the new dominant powers of the Middle Eastern region to achieve their goals. Their status was – on the one hand – defined by the League of Nations, which (as mentioned) formally granted them in accordance with article 22 of League Covenant mandatory powers. On the other hand, due to popular opposition to the mandatory system, relations had to be regulated by bilateral treaties, such as the 1930 British-Iraqi treaty, becoming the basis for Iraqi formal independence as a constitutional monarchy and access to the League of Nations in 1932. Egypt also achieved formal independence from the British in 1936, also becoming transformed into constitutional monarchy. None the less, the British continued to maintain military bases in the area, while the French – direct presence in the mentioned mandatory areas as well as in North Africa (Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia).

⁴ L. Gelberg, *Prawo międzynarodowe i historia dyplomacji. Wybór dokumentów* [International Law and History of Diplomacy. Selected Documents], Vol. II, Warszawa 1958, p. 39.

⁵ For a detailed view of the Middle East during these times, see: R. Owen, op.cit.

The strategic importance of the Middle East (particularly for British and, to a lesser extent, French imperial interests, later for the Allies' war efforts, and naturally for the rival Axis powers)⁶ was crucial in connection with substantial oil riches of the region as well as its importance for sea and land communications lines between Europe and the United States – on the one hand – and Central Asia and the Far East – on the other.

With the outbreak of the World War II, the area became directly threatened by Italy and Germany, to the effect of weakening British positions in Iraq, Egypt, Iran and elsewhere in the area. Hence, after the defeat of France by Germany in May–June 1940, Syria and the Lebanon – through the Vichy authorities – became an Axis sphere of domination. These Levantine territories were used by Germans to render assistance to the anti-British coup of May 1941 in Iraq headed by Rashid Ali al-Kailani. So, in June–July 1941 British forces together with Free French defeated Vichy forces. The latter were given the choice of leaving to France or joining gen. De Gaulle's forces. The majority of them joined De Gaulle's Free French.

As to Iraq, the mentioned serious development came, when in April/May 1941 a pro-Axis politician Al-Kailani, drawing behind himself the army headed by nationalist elements, seized power in Iraq, forcing the pro-British regent Abdel-Ilah to leave the country. German propaganda and Arab nationalists accused the British of conspiring to get rid of king Ghazi I (1933–1939: killed in car accident), who polarized national anti-British sentiments, and appoint his uncle as regent, for the time when the heir to the throne-king Faisal II would be under age. By deciding upon prompt military intervention against the Kailani government (May 1941), the British launched a period called by historians the second British occupation of the country.

Combat operations in the Balkans (operation "Marita"), particularly the seizure of the island Crete (May–June 1941), coupled by the mentioned Vichy menace in Syria and the Lebanon, also the Iraqi coup, created at that moment a quite serious opportunity for the Germans to take over the entire Middle East.

⁶ See: L. Hirsowicz, *The Third Reich and the Arab East*, London 1966 (Polish original edition: *Ł. Hirsowicz, III Rzesza a Arabski Wschód*, Warszawa 1963); L. Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, London 1963; *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, K.G.*, London 1958; W.L. Cleveland, *op.cit.*; P. Mansfield, *A Modern History of the Middle East*, London 1992; *The Middle East and North Africa 2000: A Survey and Reference Book*, London 2000.

Somewhat earlier, in spite of many unfavorable circumstances, the Middle East seemed secure until Italy joined the war in June 1940 on the side of Germany. On 10 June 1941 Italy declared war on Great Britain and France, which meant the extension of military operations to the Mediterranean and Africa. At that time too British forces had to wage battles against Italian forces in Libya and Eritrea. Egypt came within the range of strike of the Italian air force, operating from Libya. On 18 September 1940 the Italians started their offensive against Egypt, advancing by 18 September to Sidi Barrani. The loss of Egypt would have given the enemy control over the Suez Canal, in addition to access to the routes towards oil-rich Persian Gulf and strategically important Indian Ocean. Instead of that, Italian forces had to withdraw back into Libya as the consequence of losing the battle against the British at the end of the same year (Operation "Compass" under the command of gen. O'Connor). Within only few days, the Italian forces of Marshall Graziani were destroyed. The British continued their march on Libyan soil controlling Bardia (5 January 1941), fortified Tobruk (23 January), and Benghazi (6 February).

Heavy losses induced Mussolini to accept (10 February) the German offer of participation in the defense of Tripolitania, and within few days first formations of what was later called Deutsche Afrika Korps (DAK), under the command of gen. Erwin Rommel, landed in Libyan Tripolis.

In the meantime, the British became involved in the defense of Greece (attacked by Italy on 28 October 1940), while certain British forces were engaged in battles waged in Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea. Gen. Rommel took advantage of the occasion by attacking weakened British positions, conquering successively: Benghazi (4 April 1941), Derna (7 April), Bardia (9 April), and the important port Tobruk (20 June). The fall of Tobruk was for the Allies a heavy loss, which made the way open for the enemy towards Alexandria. On 30 June Axis forces reached Alamein. The main battle of Alamein was decided by the British counter-offensive initiated on 23 October 1942 under the command of Field Marshall Montgomery, which proved to be a surprise for Axis forces and successful in breaking the German-Italian front (4–5 November). Consequently, the battle of Alamein ended with a long retreat of Rommel forces, chased by the VIII Army of Montgomery. That marked the end of the Axis presence in North Africa.

Simultaneously, the American-British Operation “Torch”, Allied landing on the North African shore (November 1942) did the rest by liquidating both the Vichy presence in the area (admiral J. Darlan’s order of surrender and his joining the Allies), and remnants of Axis presence in Libya. In brief, the battle of Alamein was a major point in fight for the Middle East. Seven months later the entire North Africa was cleared of Axis forces. Then British-American Middle East Supply Center became the coordinating body of Allied war efforts in that region.

As to the impact of events on the Egyptian scene, it should be mentioned that when German-Italian forces at the end of 1940 accelerated their march in the direction of Alexandria, many Egyptians – in their hatred to the occupants – attached the hopes for liberation with the defeat of Great Britain in the Middle East, including North Africa, while Aziz Ali al-Misri, Egyptian army chief of staff (later dismissed), was active in this respect, while colonel Anwar al-Sadat (later jailed) was organizing secret anti-British military actions. Also pro-Fascist para-military organization of *Jam’iat Misr al-Fatat (Green Shirts’ Society)* were cherishing such hopes. Fearing for his own eventual position, king Farouk started to hesitate and distance himself from the British, by nominating Ali Maher – then unsympathetic to the British – as prime minister. The balance of power on the Egyptian internal scene started to shift away from the British, who in this critical moment undertook a decisive action. On 4 February 1942, the British ambassador Sir Miles Lampson forced king Farouk, by means of British tanks surrounding the royal palace, to dismiss Maher and nominate instead of him as prime minister the leader of the Wafd party Mustafa al-Nahhas. That action shocked the country deeply and discredited the Wafd among the Egyptian population and army. This insult to the monarch was viewed at the time as tantamount to an insult of the Egyptian nation. General Muhammad Nagib submitted his resignation from the army (rejected by the monarch), while lieutenant Gamal Abdel Naser with a group of young officers thought about ways to rid the country of the British.

Equally important as Egypt for the Allies was Iran. Its strategic significance (also naturally in connection with Iranian rich oil fields) became enhanced after Germany’s attack on the USSR in June 1941, followed by serious German successes on the Soviet fronts. Besides, German indus-

trial and trade interests were well established in that country at an earlier stage. Nazi propaganda was active stirring up anti-Ally (particularly, anti-British) national sentiments. Reza Shah and Iranian elites (including the army) on the bulk were showing a pro-German attitude.

With the access of USSR to the war on the side of Allies, there arose (in August) the question of Allied arms deliveries to that country through Iran. Reza Shah's rejection of this idea, which had supported by the US within the Lend-Lease Act of 1941, caused the Soviet Union and Great Britain to undertake action. On the 25 August 1941 Iran was invaded by the Soviet Union from the north and Britain from the south, meeting insignificant resistance on the part of Iranian troops. King Reza abdicated, being replaced by his son Muhammad Reza. A treaty was signed between Iran, Britain and the Soviet Union to the effect of respecting the territorial integrity of Iran, its independence, defense against aggression, and the pledge of leaving the country by foreign forces within six months after the end of the war.

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After the Second World War, during the Cold War period, the fight of Middle Eastern nations for independence from European domination became more forceful, especially in the aftermath of the Palestinian *An-Nakba* (The Catastrophe, connected with the establishment of the state of Israel in mid-May 1948 and the defeat in the war afterwards). The resultant unrest took the shape of mass movements as well as military coups d'état (Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Yemen), removing successively British and French positions from the region⁷.

During the Cold War and the prevalence of the bi-polar world order, the Middle Eastern countries joined on different sides of the international (and to that, regional) fence, becoming client states of one of the super-powers. We had then the policy of military-political pacts. In the Middle East, the British-sponsored Baghdad Pact covered Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Pakistan (The organisation was renamed as the Central Pact in 1959 after the withdrawal of Iraq). This tendency was opposed in the Arab world by

⁷ See: P. Calvocoressi, *World Politics since 1945*, VII edition, London–New York 1996, Part III (on the Middle East, particularly).

Egypt of the Free Officers, who seized power in July 1952 and were headed by Gamal Abdel Naser⁸. Naser was at the early stage the advocate of a nationalist pan-Arab policy, with the Palestine question being one of the major issues on the Egyptian agenda. With the passage of time a radical-populist (branded officially as socialist) socio-political programme evolved in Egypt, republican Iraq (after 1958), Libya (since Qadhafi's seizure of power in 1969) and Algeria (after independence in 1962). The other trait of these governments was close ties with the USSR. This consideration, coupled by the requirements of the fight against Israel drew them into an anti-Western position. On the regional Middle Eastern level, it meant the aggravation of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Lack of victory in the wars with Israel and the Palestinian front, in addition to the costs of armaments and the militarisation of the particular countries' life, as well as the inadequacy of the theoretical and practical proposals of so-called Arab socialism – created circumstances for the rise in activities and the domination of the political scene by existing rival ideological-political options – above all, by Islamic radicalism, often called: fundamentalism.

Streszczenie

Już podczas nawiązania entente cordial między Wielką Brytanią a Francją w 1904 r. oraz przyłączeniu do niej Rosji w 1907 r. sprawy bliskowschodnie (m.in. Maroko, Egipt, Iran, Afganistan) legły u podstaw tego sojuszu. Toteż kiedy wybuchła I wojna światowa, trzy wymienione mocarstwa uznały się za powołane do ukształtowania przyszłości Bliskiego Wschodu zgodnie z własnymi interesami (porozumienie Sykes–Picot, korespondencja Hussein–MacMahon, deklaracja Balfoura i inne).

W wyniku wojny (przegrana państw centralnych, wycofanie Rosji bolszewickiej z wojny) Wielka Brytania i Francja stały się jedynymi dominującymi siłami w tym regionie świata. Pierwsza otrzymała mandat Ligi Narodów nad Palestyną (wraz z wydzieloną jej częścią – Transjordanią) i Irakiem. Francja zaś otrzyma-

⁸ On Naser's ideas and life, see: G.A. Nasser, *Falsafat al-Thawra (The Philosophy of the Revolution)*, Cairo 1954; G.A. Nasser, *Egypt's Liberation: The Philosophy of the Revolution*, Cairo 1954; A. al-Sadat, *Revolt on the Nile*, London 1957; A. Nutting, *Nasser*, London 1973; M.H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals 1958–1970*, London 1971; *Egypt and Nasser*, ed. D. Hofstadter, Vol. I–III, New York 1973.

ła mandat nad Syrią i Libanem. Wielka Brytania zachowała ponadto swoją dominację nad Egiptem i Somalią Brytyjską. Francja z kolei – nad Algierią, Marokiem, Tunezją, Somalią Francuską. W tych nowo powstałych krajach arabskich państwo i administrację odwzorowywano na podobieństwo metropolii, co było w pewnych aspektach korzystne, w innych – dysfunkcyjne i konfliktogenne. Ujawnia się to dobitnie w czasach niepodległości i zimnej wojny, tj. po II wojnie światowej.

Słowa kluczowe: Bliski Wschód, ententa, I wojna światowa, II wojna światowa, zimna wojna

Абстракт

Даже при создании Entente Cordial между Англией и Францией в 1904 году и включении России в 1907 году дела Ближнего Востока (Марокко, Египет, Иран, Афганистан) легли в основу этого союза. Так что, когда Первая мировая война разразится, эти три силы считают себя призванными формировать будущее Ближнего Востока в соответствии с их интересами (соглашение Сайкса-Пико, переписка Хуссейн-Макмагон, Декларация Бальфура и другие). В результате войны (поражение центральных держав, вывод большевистской России из войны) Англия и Франция стали единственными доминирующими силами в этом регионе мира. Первая получила мандат Лиги Наций на Палестину (наряду с отдельной её частью - Трансиорданием) и Ирак. Франция получила мандат в Сирии и Ливане. Великобритания сохранила кроме того господство над Египтом и „британском” Сомали. Франция в свою очередь - над Алжиром, Марокко, Тунисом и «французском» Сомали. В этих новосозданных арабских государствах администрация и управление были созданы по подобию метрополии, что было в некоторых аспектах положительно, в других дисфункционально и вызывало конфликты. Это обнаруживается в эпоху независимости и холодной войны, то есть после Второй мировой войны.

Ключевые слова: Ближний Восток, Антанта, Первая мировая война, Вторая мировая война, холодная война