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Pierre Blanc and Jean-Paul Chagnollaud, *L'invention tragique du Moyen-Orient*. Paris: Éditions Autrement, 2017. 155 pp. Maps, figures, notes, and bibliography. €18,90 (pb). ISBN 978-2-7467-4477-6.

Review by James Whidden, Acadia University.

The historiography of the Ottoman Empire speaks of the obligations of the state to its subjects, as well as the moral order of small communities, including the existence of local forms of political deliberation and governance. The First World War replaced this political order by extending European imperial states into the Ottoman region. But this new political order was conceived in a very narrow sense. Conquest empowered the European diplomats, whose 'state-building' project began by 'instrumentalizing' certain elite groups and their constituencies, often ethnic or religious minorities within new political geographies designed to serve European imperial interests. The states thus 'invented' were designed to meet the strategic and economic interests of France and Britain, with very little consideration for the peoples living in the region.

Using the insights of Raymond Aron, the authors of *L'invention tragique du Moyen-Orient* show that European states were represented solely by the agency of their diplomats and soldiers, largely concerned with creating imperial spheres of power or influence that left little room for considerations of the obligations of the state to its subjects. The book is not unique in this sense, many studies have appeared on this theme, in English and French, and similarly designed for undergraduate instruction and public consumption; however, Blanc and Chagnollaud offer a very concise post mortem of the French and British destruction and dismembering of the Ottoman Empire and, subsequently, the formation of a Greater Iraq and an 'amputated' Syria (p. 199). The study focuses on these two states, as well as two stateless peoples emerging contemporaneously, the Kurds and the Palestinians. The authors also offer a focused account of France's role in the invention of the modern Middle East and its continuing involvement there, even as the republic's internal divisions and weaknesses meant that its imperial power in the region was replaced by Britain, then the United States and the Soviet Union/Russia. Although the rapid and dramatic changes in the region make it difficult for any study to be up to date, this work concludes with a precis on the United States' assumption of an 'imperial' role in the region and the reemergence of Russian 'imperial nationalism' (p. 134). Russia's military support for the Syrian dictator restored its diplomatic weight in the region. All illusions of a new world order thus dispelled, the Middle East was securely back in the hands of the imperial diplomat and soldier, Aron's primary analytical tool.

The starting point for French and British intervention was the Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916, the key development was the British military defeat of the Ottomans in Iraq in 1916 and Syria in 1917, with the result that the British were in a commanding position at the end of the war, with hundreds of thousands of soldiers occupying the region. To a large extent the political geography of the region was shaped by the British, largely concerned with protecting the Suez Canal and the Persian Gulf (strategic and economic assets) by building a land bridge that connected the Mediterranean littoral with the Persian Gulf (Palestine, Transjordan, and Iraq). But this sphere could not be built without considering the interests of their French allies, extremely sensitive to the fact that the British army of occupation threatened their diplomatic gains in Sykes-Picot. The relatively weak position of the French resulted in the creation of a French sphere that conceded the *vilayets* (Ottoman administrative districts) of Jerusalem and Mosul to the British: French Syria was thus made smaller and British Iraq enlarged.

The drawing of these territorial borders and its consequences is a central theme of the book, focusing on Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine, and the various peoples living within these new states. As the authors show, the European powers instrumentalized various peoples and elites in the construction of these new political entities. In the case of Lebanon, there was a pre-mandate political entity known to the Ottomans as Mount Lebanon, a refuge quasi state of the Maronite Christians.^[1] The Maronites lobbied at Versailles in 1919 for a 'Greater Lebanon' with some success, aligning with a French ambition to create a secure client state in the region as a counter to the ambitions of the Arab nationalists in Damascus to create a 'Greater Syria'. As a result, the borders of Lebanon were extended to include a Shia dominated south and a Sunni dominated east and north. The Sunnis in Greater Lebanon supported the Arab nationalists in Damascus, resulting in an enduring political divide in Lebanon, deepened by the French colonial policy of enhancing the constitutional powers of the Christians against the Muslim majority. This is referred to by the authors as instrumentalizing a specific ethnic group in pursuance of European imperial objectives. 'Greater Syria' was divided to weaken the Arab nationalists, led by the Hashemites, allies of the British during the Arab Revolt (1916-1918), who were therefore regarded by the French as instruments of British imperial designs. And indeed, the Hashemites were British pawns, as the authors demonstrate by the way the British used the leading Hashemite prince, Feisal, as an agent of British influence in Iraq, with the creation of the Iraqi monarchy, a Sunni institution implanted in Iraq to quell a revolt wherein the Shia majority played a predominant role.

The logic of this map-making in the Middle East was that France and Britain were global geopolitical rivals and that the mandates were primarily designed to ensure a balance of power and repress indigenous opponents to imperial interests. Lebanese Maronites and Zionist nationalists were instruments, as were Sunni Arab nationalists for the British in Transjordan and Iraq. But these same Arab nationalists were regarded as threats to French imperial interests and therefore had to be crushed during the French invasion of Syria, including the aerial bombardment of Damascus, in 1920. Likewise, the demands of Arab nationalists in Palestine were ignored, or, those of the Kurds in northern Iraq, marginalized with the formation of a Hashemite Iraq. And while the allies at the international conferences at Versailles and Sèvres symbolically supported the Kurdish claim to a national state, imperial claims in French Syria and British Iraq meant that Kurds became a marginal minority in those states. Meanwhile, the military successes of the Turkish nationalists meant that the Kurds of Turkey suffered a similar treatment.

The first half of Blanc and Chagnalloud's study involves these stratagems of European diplomats, backed up by their soldiers, and the local responses including the creation of Zionist quasi state institutions in Palestine and the revolts in Iraq, Syria and Palestine in 1920, 1925, and 1936. In the summation of this part of the book, the authors consider the challenges confronted by indigenous elites, including the structure of societies not only divided along ethnic and sectarian lines, but between elites and peasantry. The ambitions of elites informed by nationalist ideologies were deprived the benefits of a populace similarly engaged, except for the Zionists and Turkish nationalists. Another disadvantage for the indigenous inhabitants of Greater Syria and Iraq was the obvious power imbalance between the modern and militarized societies of Europe and Turkey (as well as the Zionists) against those of a 'traditional society' (p. 56). These differences leaned themselves to 'colonial arrogance' (p. 61), with the assumption of European superiority and advancement in relation to the peoples corralled into the recently invented mandates.

Part two of the work investigates the politics of the new states. The cultural mosaic of the region meant that nation-state building was problematic. The most important configuration in these states was the domination of one ethnicity, one sect, or one tribal group. The ruling group confiscated the resources of the state to ensure its domination against the others. National projects, whether Sunni or Alawi Arab nationalists or Zionists, privileged one group in the mosaic with the result that marginal groups were often defined as citizens of lesser rights, like the Kurds and Shia of Iraq. The process of Sunni domination reached its apex under the Baathists, who privileged an Arab nationalist narrative as a signal of Sunni domination, and eventually of a tribal regime, led by the clans of Tikrit in Iraq and the Assad family in Syria. The authors offer several analytical devices to understand this process, including Ibn Khaldun's thesis of the tribal predation of urbanized elites, leading eventually to the formation of a plutocracy or the 'kleptocracy' referred to in other studies. Also, the insights of Bertrand Badie on the 'revenge on history' (pp. 79, 85), a concept used to illustrate the rise of historically repressed groups like the Alawi in Syria and the Shia in Iraq. Yet, neither of these phenomena, nor the civil wars they have provoked, can be explained without an understanding of the designs of the imperial powers, Britain and France, at the diplomatic table after 1918. French colonial policy reversed the historical marginalization of the Alawi, with their employment in the military leading to their eventual domination of the military state constructed by the Baathists. In Iraq, the British continued the Ottoman policy of privileging the Sunni; a trend pursued with greater efficiency and ferocity under the Baathists, resulting in a state structure resembling Hannah Arendt's definition of the totalitarian state: an emphasis on subordinating the individual to the collective, the 'nation', through indoctrination, incorporation, and omniscient surveillance. Political opposition was criminalized, its proponents imprisoned and tortured. Ethnic 'others' were deemed a threat to the 'nation' and targeted, as in the Baathist campaign against the Kurds in Iraq, causing 180,000 deaths in the late 1980s. Also, the Shia in Iraq were systematically repressed after the Iranian revolution. Similar campaigns involved the counter-insurgency against the Kurds in Turkey in the 1990s and the subsequent hydro projects that have involved the relocation of the Kurds from their historical homelands to urban centers in Turkey. The Baathists in Syria used similar tactics through agricultural development schemes that were designed to Arabize the Kurdish regions of Syria from the 1980s. The result was that regional politics took on existential stakes, wars of all against all, fueling civil conflict and state fragmentation.

One of the strengths of the book is to illustrate the underlying processes that have shaped state

and inter-state politics in the region. The format is original, beginning with great power reconfiguration of the region, the reorientation of the elites to Europe, the revolt of diverse social groups, before turning to the construction of predatory and polyarchic states, and the seemingly inevitable fracturing of these states, not without losing sight of the comparatively different political formations in each state. Lebanon is typical in that its civil war involved the revenge of the marginalized upon the dominant, yet, is unique in that Lebanon has maintained a political balance between the various confessional groups. Rather than one ethnic group dominating the entire region, the notables of each communal group dominate and exploit their regional fiefdoms. In the final section of the book, the involvement of outside powers in these complex processes are investigated, including Russia and the USA, as well as Iran and Saudi Arabia. One could not wish for a more comprehensive and lucid examination of the factors contributing to the tragic circumstances of the modern Middle East.

Lecturers will find its organization and analytical concepts applicable to teaching and suitable for undergraduate level instruction, although some of its language would be controversial, including racism, segregation, and apartheid-like references to Israeli policy (pp. 102, 110, 115). Yet because this analysis appears alongside the similar policies of Turkey, Syria, and Iraq in relation to the Kurds, the phenomenon is presented as less uniquely Israeli, and more a regional syndrome—a lasting legacy of the original invention of the ‘Middle East’ out of the shorn body of the Ottoman Empire. Others will be alienated by descriptions of American ‘nation-building’ as ‘State-destroying’ (p. 130), alongside reference to the ‘duplicitous’ (p. 134) policies of the neo-conservatives, beginning with the false claims of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, followed by Congressional and United Nations demands for Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, while at the same time using the Security Council veto to avoid any censure of Israel’s ‘enterprise of destruction’ (p. 134) in the same country during the 2006 war. Israel was an American funded ally, ideologically aligned with the neo-conservatives, whereas Syria was a state that remained hostile to Israel and the USA. Also, the authors do not hesitate to suggest that persecution of the Kurds in Turkey was enabled by that country’s strategic importance to the USA during the Cold War, and that a similar policy of containment of Iran meant that Iraq’s persecution of the Kurds in the 1980s was not impeded. All of this echoes the equally cold calculations of the imperial powers at Sèvres in 1920 and gives this volume a chilling symmetry. Yet, such conclusions will certainly provoke protests from many readers who might ask: What was the alternative, given the need to check enemies, real or imagined, and the limits of great power resources? Nevertheless, all might agree that the people living between the Levant and the Gulf have been the foremost victims of the stratagems of diplomats and soldiers, British, French, American, Russian, and their regional successors, now that the myth of an American ‘Greater Middle East’ (p. 129) has been shattered in war-torn Iraq and Syria. From these ruins Iran and Saudi Arabia imagine a new orientation, and the authors show for instance that the collapse of Iraq’s state-building project was assisted by the Iranians, who, with their local militias, fomented *fitna* (religious inspired civil war) to ensure Iran’s regional hegemony. The Shia revanche in Iraq was in fact the victory of some ‘predators’ (p. 139) from the Iraqi Shia community with their Iranian affiliates. Likewise, the collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process was not only the work of the American and the Israeli right because Iran stoked opposition to it in Hamas and Islamic Jihad, crippling the secular Palestinian nationalists. In short, this is a fearless work that illustrates most clearly a regional dynamic that otherwise seems opaque.

NOTES

[1] Mandate refers to the League of Nations designation of those territories coming under the provisional governance of one of the League members.

James Whidden
Acadia University
jamie.whidden@acadiau.ca

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