

Dissecting the Mountains

*The Place of Kurdistan in the Policies of
the British Empire in the Aftermath of The
First World War*

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Abstract

This thesis deals with the questions of how the British Empire envisioned the place of Kurdistan and the Kurdish population within the Middle East after the First World War. During the war the British colonial interests expanded into the areas populated by the Kurds. But when Kurdistan became important it was only because the region became the frontier where the interests of the colonial superpowers met; it held no significance to any of them on its own. In the Peace Conference in Paris after the war some Kurds approached with pleas for a state of their own and for British assistance in establishing their independence. The British were not forthcoming with such aid and felt that the Kurdish interference with the Conference was annoying. The British were only interested in establishing their own desires for the new order in the Middle East. There were provisions for the establishment of an independent Kurdistan in the final peace treaty with the Ottoman Empire, but due to the long delays in laying down the details of that treaty those provisions were never carried out.

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Notes on names and language

Wherever possible I have tried to use the modern-day Kurdish spellings of names. In cases where this is not possible I have used the spellings the way they appear in the sources.

When writing place-names I use the modern-day English names, for clarity. I have consistently used Istanbul, for the Ottoman Capital, except when referencing the Constantinople Agreement, which I consider to be a proper noun in its own right. When mentioning regions, I, as far as possible, use the names that are used in the sources. This is done to avoid confusion with modern-day usage which, can differ from the terms that were used at the time. For instance, El-Irak is not the same as the modern country of Iraq, the entity that became Iraq is referred to in this text as Mesopotamia.

In most cases the usage of subdivisions of Kurdistan, I use the terms as they are used in the sources, otherwise I follow what turned out to become the political division in the area: Northern Kurdistan is the Turkish part, Eastern Kurdistan the Iranian, Western Kurdistan the Syrian and Southern Kurdistan the Iraqi.

The Kurdish letters to the Peace Conference were mostly written in French. In the cases where I quote from these sources the translations are my own, and I have added the original language text in the footnotes.

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Introduction

[W]e demand, that independence which is our birthright, and which alone will permit us to fight our way along the road of progress and civilization, to turn to account the resources of our country and to live in peace with our neighbours. [...] Full of hope in the justice of the Congress, we entrust it with the life and future of a very ancient race, which is determined to renew its youth, if only it be accorded the necessary latitude.

- Şerîf Pasha, March 1919.¹

With this impassioned plea the Kurdish delegation presented their case for independence to the Peace Conference in Paris in 1919. Emboldened by the principles laid down in the American President Woodrow Wilson's 14 points, the Kurds fully expected their wish to be granted. Still, an independent Kurdistan never materialized, instead the region was divided up between four countries: Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran. Situated at the edges of the Fertile Crescent, the region of Kurdistan has a long history of straddling the frontiers between empires, showing shifting and often loose allegiances to their various overlords.² The collapse of the Ottoman Empire had led the West to consider the Middle East to have fallen into a political vacuum, where the populations were not yet ready to establish states and governing institutions for themselves. The Western Powers, the British in particular, took upon themselves the responsibility to fill this vacuum and build a new political order.³

The Paris Peace Conference was a place of euphoria and hope for the future. It attracted representatives of peoples from all around the globe, who all came to petition for their own voices and interests to be heard by the rest of the world. The Allies had during the last year of the Great War openly professed ideals of self-determination, equality of nations and anticolonialism. The oppressed peoples of the world held great belief in President Wilson and his power to forge a new world, where they would be able to rule themselves. But the Wilsonian moment did not last; by the time the Conference concluded the Americans had left

¹ Şerîf Pasha, "Memorandum on the Claims of the Kurd People," (Paris: A. G. L. Hoir, 1919), 14-15.

² Zeynep Arıkanlı, "British Legacy and Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism in Iraq (1918-1926): What Significance the 'Mosul Question'?", *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations* 9, no. 4 (2010): 98.

³ Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 25.

the international society, and the remaining European Powers had established a new colonial regime in the Middle East. A new regime that, though differing in name and stated intentions, in practice was not so different from their old colonial empires.⁴

Context and Purpose

This thesis examines why Kurdish independence never happened. We look at how the British Empire treated the question of Kurdish independence, through how the Kurdish regions fitted into British war aims during the First World War and at the subsequent Peace Conference in Paris. How did the British delegates treat the Kurdish delegation and their demands? How was the question of the independence of Kurdistan brought up in the negotiations in Paris? In answering these questions, we look at how the Kurds were perceived by the British; if they were perceived as a unified entity, if they were perceived as significantly different from the remaining population in the area, if their fate was considered when national frontiers were decided.

Trying to define geographical regions based on ethnical belonging will always be problematic in and of itself. I do not intend my usage of the term Kurdistan to be, in any way, politically charged. I use the term as an idea, rather than a strictly defined geographical region. There was no ethnical homogeneity among the populations of the Middle East, and it is difficult to find any unity among the peoples described as Kurds either.

By 1919, there still existed few nation-states, but still, most European peoples had established themselves as ethnic communities.⁵ This was not necessarily the case in the Middle East; though some recognition of ethnic groups did exist. Sarah Shields, in her examinations on the Mosul Question, has shown how it was found extremely difficult for the commissioners from the League of Nations to determine the ethnic belonging among the population of that province.⁶ Though, this is not to say that this would necessarily have been true for the entire Middle East, but it was true for most of the area considered to have had a significant Kurdish population.

⁴ William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2013), 159-161.

⁵ Miroslav Hroch, *European Nations : Explaining Their Formation*, trans. Karolina Graham, *Das Europa Der Nationen* (London: Verso Books, 2015), 45.

⁶ Sarah Shields, "Mosul, the Ottoman Legacy and the League of Nations," *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 3, no. 2 (2009).

It is apparent that ideas of ethnic awareness and proto-nationalism had made their way to the Kurdish upper classes as a reaction to the national-romantic uprisings in Europe during the nineteenth century. Though, a fully blossomed movement of nationalism does not occur until after the Great War and then as a response to the imposing of nation-states that seemingly completely disregarded the existence of Kurdistan. Of course, the Western powers were very particular about including clauses protecting minorities within these new states, but the idea of being a minority was utterly foreign to these populations, who regarded these lands as their own. It was their home and their ancestors had lived there for millennia.⁷

If ethnic identity was not an important element in the daily life of most Kurds, there were other societal groups from which they could base their identity. In Kurdistan this was mostly religious; to most Kurds religion would have been significantly more important than nationalism. The majority of the Kurds followed Sunni Islam, the same religion as their Turkish and Arab neighbours, and the same religion as the regime in Istanbul. The issue of religion would therefore be an important element in the post-war settlements, though not necessarily viewed as such by all.

Even though we cannot find a well-defined Kurdish ethnic group or a clearly delimited Kurdistan, those concepts were being used at the time. We find the words used among the British, the Ottomans and among the Kurds themselves. At least some Kurds had developed the idea of Kurdistan far enough to approach the Peace Conference with demands for independence. The Kurds did not provide a united front to the Peace Conference, however, and those who were there to present their case could be easily dismissed as not being representative. The British experience with the Kurds under their occupation also painted a picture of a society with little in the way of cohesion outside of tribal and religious ties.

The Kurds as a group, and Kurdistan as a region, were concepts that were discussed during the British deliberations around their war aims and during the negotiations at the Peace Conference. Provisions for an independent Kurdistan were also included in the final text of the Treaty of Sèvres. Still, the desires and wishes of the Kurdish population were not in any way important to these British deliberations. The British were first and foremost concerned with the strategic positions regarding the security of their own empire. The interests of the British Empire changed over the course of the war, most notably with the decision to abandon

⁷ Laura Robson, *States of Separation: Transfer, Partition, and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 30-34.

the long-standing policy of defending the Ottoman Empire's territorial integrity in the Middle East. The vast British Empire had to a large degree been held together by what John Darwin refers to as "the soft power of commerce and culture."⁸ The empire's interests were largely economical by nature, and political and military control would only be enacted in those cases where those commercial interests were threatened. This was the case in Egypt, where British military occupation came as a response to a perceived threat against the Suez Canal.⁹ The British had economic interests in the waterways of Mesopotamia, protected by agreements with the Sublime Porte, and they were very keen to not allow any of their European rivals to encroach on those rights. There were also the important oil extractions from Khuzestan in Persia. But, the most important issue was to keep any European Powers from gaining access to the Persian Gulf, from where they could threaten the vital trade routes between India and Britain.¹⁰ How these interests were best guarded was a contentious subject and the different semi-autonomous parts of the British Empire developed diverging ideas about how to enact British power in the Middle East.

Kurdistan was not at all a part of the British Empire's scope of interests at the onset of the war. That would change, however, as the empire's occupation expanded and through the decision to divide the Ottoman Empire between the members of the Entente Alliance. Kurdistan would emerge as a region where the empire's interests intersected, becoming then important to the imperial powers.

Political problems will always arise when studying nationalism, national identity and nationalistic ambitions. The situation where the Western Powers decided to impose their own, European, ideas of nationalism upon a foreign population, does however, provide us with a different situation than the nation-building efforts in Europe. Miroslav Hroch has written an authoritative study on the concept of the nation and shows how that concept in itself is not easily defined.¹¹ Hroch shows that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, most scholars writing about the subject were convinced of the nation's "objective existence," which implied that it was a natural and eternal entity.¹² Through this understanding nations were not created, they were only revived. British statesman Arthur Balfour professed that the English "race"

⁸ John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 305.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 71-74.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 112-143. P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion 1688-1914* (London: Longman, 1993).

¹¹ Hroch, *European Nations*.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

was lost in prehistoric times when the Egyptian civilization was at its zenith, which implies a belief in the eternal existence of that English race.¹³ An objective history would not be able to trace the English back three thousand years, so the idea of the English race existing at the height of the Egyptian civilization is based on sentiment and myth alone. This objective understanding of the nation would have been prevalent among the nation builders both in Europe and the Middle East at the time. It was only later, largely in the years following the second world war, that historians and sociologists started emphasizing the subjectivity of the concept, and that nations were creations and “imaginary.”¹⁴ Imaginary in the sense that the community exists in the mind of the individual, hence, a nation-group would be a group where the individual members would feel a sense of belonging to that group. This is not to say that it is not real, or that it is not important. Nations and national identity, even though imaginary, do exist and have created strong bonds of affinity and strong currents in the historical narratives.

The Kurds did not get their desired independent state after the Peace Conference, and as such, histories of Kurdistan as a country are few and far between. Histories detailing the story of the Kurds as a people are rife, though such a concept as an ethnic group is surprisingly difficult to define and different writers might focus and delimitate along different lines. Such delimitations are much easier to set when writing about a nation-state, because their borders are well defined by nature; we can easily find histories of Iraq, but few, if any, would attempt to write a history of the Iraqi people. Because of this, historiographical tendencies tend to focus through the lens of the nation-states and thus cross-boundary communal experiences tend to be lost.¹⁵

A homogenous nation-group or a strong national identity are not required, however, to create functioning states. There exist other ways of organizing society that are not constructed on the idea of ethnic belonging. Michael Provence discovered a viewpoint among some citizens of the Middle East that “Ottoman rule had been better, more just, and perhaps more modern, than what we take to be the modern nation-state system.”¹⁶ The primacy of the nation-state in the West has led to a focus on the ideas surrounding the nation in western historiography.

¹³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 32.

¹⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

¹⁵ Michael Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

Therefore, the claims that we find no homogeneity or strong nationalism among the Kurds is not an argument that it would be impossible to construct a viable state in the area. The argument lies in that the western powers of the time were looking for such national affinity that they could use to construct nation-states on.

Existing Historiography

By the end of 1918 there were four British armies, totalling more than a million men, occupying separate parts of the Ottoman Empire: Mesopotamia, Syria, the Caucasus and Istanbul. All four encountered Kurds in their respective regions and had to individually relate to the Kurdish situation on the ground. In only one of the cases did the occupation have a lasting effect, however; that of the Indian Expeditionary Force in Mesopotamia. The historiography of British policies towards the Kurds has therefore tended to focus on this area only, the area that would become Iraq.¹⁷ This thesis has a broader geographical field of study, covering the whole region with a significant Kurdish population. We examine how the questions of the Kurdish claims were raised and discussed in the broader political settings of negotiations on the allied war aims during the war and the international conferences of 1919-1920 (Paris, London and Sanremo, leading up to the Treaty of Sèvres of 1920). The attempts by the Kurds to influence the Peace Conference have generally been dismissed as insignificant details in most histories touching on the subject. The place of Kurdistan in the earlier plans for divisions of the Middle East has also generally been overlooked. By seeing Kurdistan as an idea, rather than a strictly defined geographical unit, we can look at the Kurds as a whole, and through this approach highlight how the meanings in the concept of Kurdistan changed with shifting imperial interests, as well as through the efforts of some Kurds.

The First World War and the Paris Peace Conference are seminal events in European history, and as such have been subject to a lot of study. D. K. Fieldhouse, Kristian Ulrichsen and Eugene Rogan have provided us with studies of the Great War in the Middle East, though, of course, the Kurds tend to take a back-seat in these narratives.¹⁸ Harold Temperley's work "A History of the Peace Conference of Paris" provides a thorough account of the proceedings of

¹⁷ For example: Sarah Shields, *Mosul before Iraq: Like Bees Making Five-Sided Cells* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); D. K. Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East 1914-1958* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Eleanor H. Tejirian and Reeva S. Simon, *The Creation of Iraq, 1914-1921* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

¹⁸ Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East*; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The First World War in the Middle East* (London: Hurst, 2014); Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East* (London: Allen Lane, 2015).

the conference.¹⁹ Though utterly biased and without much understanding of the positions of the peoples left outside of the considerations of the Great Powers, Temperley's work, the first volume of which was released as early as June 1920, shows how the West was thinking and how the conference was carried out. Temperley does not include much deliberation around the Middle East, and none about the Kurds, until his sixth volume, which contains one chapter about the peace with the Ottoman Empire, illustrating how much of a periphery the Middle Eastern theatre was to the members of the conference. Paul Helmreich and David Fromkin have studied in depth the impact the peace conferences had on the Middle East, though none have a particular focus on the Kurds.²⁰

Saad Eskander's work on the British policies on the question of the Kurds in the period between 1915 and 1923, focusses almost exclusively on the Mesopotamian mandate. Eskander concludes that certain individuals on the ground, mainly Arnold Wilson, the civil commissioner in Baghdad, had a great deal of freedom of action, and thus was instrumental in creating policies towards the Kurdish question, and that it was never in the British overall strategic interest to establish an independent Kurdistan.²¹ Eskander has studied in depth the British policies on the Kurdish areas the British came to control, but his focus is on how British policies were enacted on the ground. We will look at how those policies were created.

In order to better place British interests, policies and reactions to Kurdish demands, this thesis relies on secondary literature on the Kurds and Kurdish identity and nationalism. David McDowall's *Modern History of the Kurds* is learned and thorough history of the Kurds through the twentieth century.²² Mehrdad Izady has written an encyclopaedic handbook of the Kurds, limited in its historical scope it still provides us with some valuable information.²³ Works by Hakan Özoğlu, Sarah Shields, Zeynep Arıkanlı, Hirmis Aboona and Kendal Nezan can be used to establish a backdrop to the thesis regarding the situation of the Kurdish people at the time.²⁴

¹⁹ Harold William Vazeille Temperley, *A History of the Peace Conference of Paris*, vol. 1 (London: H. Frowde, 1920).

²⁰ Paul C. Helmreich, *From Paris to Sevres: The Partition of the Ottoman Empire at the Peace Conference of 1919-1920* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986); David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: Creating the Modern Middle East, 1914-1922* (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

²¹ Saad Eskander, "Britain's Policy Towards the Kurdish Question, 1915-1923" (The London School Of Economics And Political Science, 1999).

²² David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co., 2004).

²³ Mehrdad R. Izady, *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook* (Washington: Crane Russak, 1992).

²⁴ Hakan Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties and Shifting Boundaries* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004). Shields, *Mosul before Iraq*. Arıkanlı,

The impact of the actions of the Kurds on the Peace Conference has by most historians studying these issues been treated as a minor detail. Özoğlu's reading of the Kurds at the Peace Conference does not take into account the reactions of the British or the impact of the Kurds on the peace treaty, he is only concerned with the differences among the Kurds and the reactions in Kurdistan.²⁵ McDowall's conclusion is that the delays in coming to any agreement, and that the Kurds had failed "to produce a credible leadership," had narrowed down the options available.²⁶ Fromkin agrees with the reading that "the decisive fact was that it took so much time."²⁷ Mehrdad Izady, in his essay about the Kurds and the creation of Iraq, describes the claims of the Kurdish delegation to the Peace Conference as "quite modest" in relation to the claims of their neighbours and claims that they did "to some degree impact the subsequent awards of land to the Kurds."²⁸ This conclusion seemingly contradicts Eskander's, who claims that the award of land was part of a British plan to secure the northern boundary of their mandate in Mesopotamia; that it was only a ploy and the Kurdish independence promised was never intended to materialise. This thesis examines more closely these elements and provides a contribution to the discussion of how much of an impact the Kurdish delegation actually had, by showing how the British reaction to the Kurdish letters and circulars was generally one of annoyance at the attempted meddling. The British responded that their voices had been heard, now they needed to sit back and wait for the Conference to finalize the issues. If any Kurds had any impact on the agreement signed at Sèvres, it would have been the local notables in Kurdistan, in their direct dealings with Arnold Wilson and the Baghdad administration, rather than those from the milieu of Istanbul.

Sources

The study is heavily dependent on primary sources. The sources I have used are primarily documents from the British Delegations to the Peace Conferences, found in the National Archives in London. The primary focus of the thesis is on the British and British interests, so a dependency on the National Archives is unavoidable. I have looked through the Kurdish

"British Legacy." Kendal Nezan, "The Kurds under the Ottoman Empire," in *People without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*, ed. Gerard Chaliand (London: Interlink Pub Group Inc, 1980); Arikani, "British Legacy." Hirmis Aboona, *Assyrians, Kurds, and Ottomans: Intercommunal Relations on the Periphery of the Ottoman Empire* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2008).

²⁵ Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*, 38-40.

²⁶ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 134.

²⁷ Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 403.

²⁸ Mehrdad R. Izady, "Kurds and the Formation of the State of Iraq," in *The Creation of Iraq, 1914-1921*, ed. Reeva Spector Simon and Eleanor H. Tejirian (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 99.

letters to the Peace Conference. I cannot claim to have perused an exhaustive list of Kurdish appeals for attention during the Conference, but I have seen enough to lay down the general trends in the relationships between the Kurds and the Conference, and between the British and the Kurds.

The one-sidedness of the archival sources is problematic for several reasons. For one, it only provides us with the viewpoint of the western actors, our understanding of the actions and thoughts of the Kurds and other non-western actors will remain limited. Another problem is that we are forced to focus on what the British bureaucracy chose to focus on, with the potential limiting scope that the particular British interests would bring with them. As McDowall puts it:

[T]hey must be treated with caution. This is not because the motives of an imperial power are suspect; that may be true, but diplomats still sought to understand and report faithfully what was taking place. The reason is that British diplomats saw events in Kurdistan through a prism of British interests. There must have been any number of things happening in Kurdistan which did not attract their attention.²⁹

It also holds true that the motives of an imperial power will be suspect, though often subconsciously so. Edward Said, in his seminal work about the Western conceptions of the Orient, has Balfour profess that “I take up no attitude of superiority” when speaking of the Egyptians.³⁰ Still, as with most British politicians at the time, Balfour held the view that the Egyptians needed British rule, as they were not able to themselves create any functional modern state. Balfour goes on to claim that, in the East as a whole:

Conqueror has succeeded conqueror; one domination has followed another; but never in all the revolutions of fate and fortune have you seen any of those nations of its own establish what we, from a Western point of view, call self-government. That is the fact. It is not a question of superiority and inferiority.³¹

²⁹ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, xii.

³⁰ Balfour quoted in: Said, *Orientalism*, 32.

³¹ Balfour quoted in: *ibid.*, 33.

Balfour claimed that the British work in Egypt was actually the inferior work, the manual labour of making the state and the economy function. This is compared to the superior history of the Egyptian civilization: “It goes far beyond the petty span of the history of our race, which is lost in the prehistoric period at a time when the Egyptian civilization had already passed its prime.”³² There did, however, exist some exceptions to this line of thinking among the British, notably the radical wing of the Liberal party, among which we can find J. M. Robertson, who Said uses as the opposing voice to Balfour. Another exception was one who would later, as we see in this thesis, become an ardent imperialist: David Lloyd George.

We find the same patronizing attitude among the remaining Western Powers. With all their talk of bringing self-determination to the world, they openly considered the peoples of the Middle East as too uncivilised to be able to govern themselves. The Western Powers took up the “manual” and “dirty work” of providing stable government for these peoples:

To those colonies and territories which as a consequence of the late war have ceased to be under the sovereignty of the States which formerly governed them and which are inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world, there should be applied the principle that the well-being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilisation and that securities for the performance of this trust should be embodied in this Covenant.³³

By studying this correspondence between the Kurds and the British through the National Archives we not only get our sources with a British point of view, but we also only get half of the correspondence. We can examine the Kurdish letters, at least that communication deemed important enough to be archived, and the initial British internal responses to those letters. But, we do not get to see the external responses; how, if at all, the British answered the Kurds. We can, through this, notice the British perceptions of the Kurds and of Kurdistan, and how those perceptions might change through the course of the deliberations and negotiations surrounding the peace settlements. There is also a fluidity in the Kurdish ideas of what exactly constitutes Kurdistan.

³² Balfour quoted in: *ibid.*, 32.

³³ TNA FO 93/36/76, Covenant of the League of Nations, Article 22, 28 June 1919.

In the study of the British understanding of the region we have been provided with a series of maps drawn up by those who were attempting to ascertain exactly what the British interests in the region should be. These deliberations are almost exclusively drawn over a map made by cartographer Edward Stanford called “A Map of Turkey in Asia,” which therefore became a rather influential document. Stanford’s map does not include any political borders, it is solely a geographical work, but it does give names to the larger regions. The name *Kurdistan* is for some reason given twice, in two separate regions next to each other. One could think the reason for this was to separate Persian and Ottoman Kurdistan, but his placings of the words do not correspond with those boundaries. Anyway, the British usage of this map meant that those examining it, and drawing lines across it, were often faced with the word Kurdistan, written in rather large letters. This thesis uses these maps as a way to examine the understanding the British held around the geography of Kurdistan and the surrounding areas, and how that understanding influenced the creation of British policies towards the area.

Disposition

The thesis follows a thematic disposition, rather than a strict chronological order of events. The first chapter outlines the usage of the terms Kurdistan and the Kurds and provides a brief study on Kurdish history and the situation among the population of Kurdistan up to the end of the Great War. The chapter aims to establish the backdrop on which the Kurds who called for the independence of Kurdistan stood.

The second chapter details the myriad of, often conflicting, interests the British started developing towards the Middle East during the war. Great Britain had traditionally desired to keep the Ottoman Empire intact, but the Ottomans siding with the Germans meant that Britain needed to define her interests in the Middle East anew, in the case of the Ottoman Empire collapsing. Though powerful, the British Empire was not able to win the world war on its own, but the Entente Alliance was not a very sturdy building. The Russians and the French had historically been the main rivals of the British, until they had suddenly all found themselves on common ground against the aspirations of the newly fledged German Empire. It was therefore important to establish internally in the entente binding agreements on war aims and spoils. It was found that these agreements could also be used to bring others into the fold too, like with Italy. The many semi-independent offices ruling the different aspects of the British Empire followed their own individual courses, which in many cases led to conflicting

promises. The commitments included areas of Kurdistan, which was the region through which the boundaries between the claims of the great powers were drawn. The events of the final years of the war, however, turned all of this up-side-down and presented the British with the opportunity to take advantage of the changed situation.

The third chapter follows the British attempts to extricate themselves from all the commitments they had placed themselves in during the war. The situation at the end of 1918 was rather different than what the future had looked like in the midst of the war in 1916-1917, and the British had no longer any use for those agreements. Considering themselves the sole victors of the war in the Middle East they set out to establish their own vision of what the Middle East should look like. However, other issues were more important for the Peace Conference to decide upon, i.e. the fate of Germany, the creation of new nations of Europe and the establishment of the League of Nations. The questions of the Middle East would have to wait. The Americans being slow to answer how much they would be able to commit to the Middle East settlement, primarily the mandate for Armenia, led to further delays. And it was not until December that serious negotiations started concerning the peace with the Ottoman Empire. Again, Kurdistan featured as a region where boundaries between powers were drawn. Among the different plans drawn up on how to divide the Middle East the boundaries were drawn in different places, but it was always considerations for the interests of the colonial powers that dictated where the borders were placed.

The fourth chapter shows how three separate groups, all claiming to represent the Kurds, presented their case for Kurdish independence to the Paris Peace Conference. We follow how the Kurdish approaches were received by the British and how the British responded. The Kurds were only represented by men from the class of Ottoman notables, men from Istanbul who had little direct connection to the population of Kurdistan. They shared a desire for a political future for the Kurdish nation but did not agree on the definition of their Kurdistan. Many started out supporting an idea of Kurdish autonomy while still remaining loyal to the Sultan. Others sought independence from the Ottomans and petitioned the British for protection and aid in establishing their state. The British had a view of the Kurds as divided into many tribes, and that uniting them under one state would be difficult. The appearance of several groups of Kurds claiming several different Kurdistans did not help this perception. There appears to have been within the scope of British interests to establish a united and independent Kurdistan at one point, but the inability to find any one person who could achieve a degree of authority over a wide area and the unwillingness to commit policing

troops, led to long hesitations and the British would eventually wash their hands of the commitment all together.

Chapter 1: Defining the Kurdish

The mythical view of Kurdistan is equally important. Occupancy by the Kurds stretches back into the mists of time, ‘from time immemorial’ to use a resonant phrase, conferring on the Kurdish people a unique association with the land. Moreover, the idea of Kurdistan for many Kurds is also characterized by an almost mystical view of ‘the mountain’, an imaginary as well as a real place [...], for nations are built in the imagination before they are built on the ground.

David McDowall, 1996³⁴

Since the times of the early civilizations the history of the region inhabited by the Kurds has been a history of tribes on the borderlands of a long list of alternating empires. Situated along the natural frontiers of the Fertile Crescent, the inaccessibility of the region would always make it difficult for the neighbouring empires to enact any lasting control.³⁵ Which, in turn, led the rulers of those empires to frequently allow the local leaders a degree of autonomy. The Kurds themselves were often showing loose and shifting allegiances to their nominal overlords, turning their favour to the ones who could provide the most advantageous position, at any given time.³⁶

This chapter details the main historical developments in the regions inhabited by the Kurdish people, under the last years of the Ottoman Empire and up to the end of the Great War. This provides a background to the situation in that region as it was at the time when the European colonial powers convened in Paris to decide the fates of the peoples of the Ottoman Empire. The focus is on the development of Kurdish nationalism and ethnic identity.

³⁴ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 3.

³⁵ Arikani, "British Legacy," 98.

³⁶ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 21.

Kurdistan as a Cultural Region

The Kurdish People at the time of the Great War was not a homogenous ethnic group. Though largely Sunni Muslim, the group also included followers of other religions, such as Shi'ite Islam, Yezidism, Yarsanism and Alevism. There were also groups of Kurdish-speaking Christians and Jews.³⁷ The Kurdish language was separated into several distinct dialects so diverse that some linguists define them as separate languages, though it has also been claimed that Kurdish itself is only a dialect of Persian.³⁸ In addition, exactly which of the subdivisions should be included in the term and concept of the Kurdish has been debated.³⁹ For instance, the Zazas and Yezidis are often excluded from the definition.⁴⁰ Kendal Nezan, in his article on the Kurds under the Ottoman Empire, describes the Kurds in the beginning of the twentieth century as a politically very divided group, and presents several historical reasons for these divisions. Firstly, the historical relationship between Kurdish Emirs and the Ottoman Sultan, where the Sultan wanted to maintain a system with several smaller Emirates to avoid the possibility of a strong and united Kurdistan. Secondly, that the tribal society provided small space for the building of a sense of national identity.⁴¹ Historian Hakan Özoğlu suggests that the characteristics defining the national identity of the Kurds is the geography; “[...] the common denominator is simply a shared territory in which they believe their people originated.”⁴² McDowall emphasizes the importance of myths in national sentiment: “they are valuable tools in nation building, however dubious historically, because they offer a common mystical identity, exclusive to the Kurdish people.”⁴³

The region of Kurdistan is not easily definable either. Millennia of migrations with intermingling and integration had led to a situation where few areas were inhabited exclusively by any one ethnic or linguistic group. Historian James Gidney illustrates this point when he claims that “[m]uch of the territory here called *Armenia* may also be called *Kurdistan*,”⁴⁴ and that “Kurds and Turks were both minorities but in Armenia every people,

³⁷ Izady, *The Kurds*, 131-166.

³⁸ Silje Grønner Stang, "Fjellene Er Våre Eneste Venner: Fremveksten Av Kurdisk Nasjonal Identitet I Tyrkisk Kurdistan 1880-2000" (Universitetet i Oslo, 2002), 29. McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 3.

³⁹ Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*, 40-42. McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 3-5. Aboona, *Assyrians, Kurds, and Ottomans*, 157.

⁴⁰ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 144.

⁴¹ Nezan, "The Kurds under the Ottoman Empire," 23-24.

⁴² Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*, 42.

⁴³ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 4.

⁴⁴ James B. Gidney, *A Mandate for Armenia* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1967), 14.

including the Armenians, was a minority.”⁴⁵ Both Mehrdad Izady and David McDowall contest this point by claiming that in most of the proposed Greater Armenia the Kurds were in majority. It is interesting to compare the maps the two writers provide, as they differ in defining where the boundaries of a majority Kurdish land go. And where Izady operates with only the one category of “Areas with Kurdish Majority,” McDowall uses three: “under 30%, 30-75% and 75-100%.”⁴⁶ Izady shows that there also exist pockets of Kurdish majority throughout Anatolia, in Armenia, Azerbaijan, along northern Iran and in Turkmenistan, in addition to there being areas without Kurdish majority within Kurdistan.⁴⁷

The commission sent to Mosul by the League of Nations in 1925 found that the Mosul vilayet had a Kurdish plurality, though not a majority. The commission, who had come with the Western conviction that ethnic identity was the main formula to decide the political future of the region, found that ethnic identity to be very difficult to define. Writing about the town of Mosul they found that “it would have been impossible to determine the percentage of the various nationalities in the town, and it would have been still more difficult to estimate the percentage of the origins of the population.” They also found that “[g]enerally they speak both languages and live intermingled in their villages. They intermarry without distinction of race, so that the difference is tending to disappear.”⁴⁸ So, where a lot of Western writers would use a Western language of ethnic identity when examining the history of the Middle East, like the above-mentioned Izady and McDowall, and when historian Charles Tripp, in his book about the history of Iraq, writes about “Kurdish-speaking areas” and “Arabic-speaking districts,” the Mosul boundary commission proved that such language is at best simplistic.⁴⁹

Ottoman Assimilation and Reforms

During the sixteenth century the empires vying for control of the region were the Ottomans and the Persians. These empires’ rivalry led to a situation where some Kurdish rulers straddling the frontiers were able to build positions of power and establish for themselves a large degree of autonomy. The Kurds would then use those conflicts for their own gain and to demand concessions in order for the empires to retain, or win, their support.⁵⁰ The many wars

⁴⁵ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁶ Izady, *The Kurds*, 4. McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, xiv.

⁴⁷ Izady, *The Kurds*, 9.

⁴⁸ Shields, “Mosul,” 223.

⁴⁹ Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 3rd ed. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 10.

⁵⁰ Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*, 49-50.

in the area had a devastating effect on the Kurdish economy, and it decimated the population, dropping more than 10% in the century leading up to the Ottoman conquest of Baghdad in 1639.⁵¹ Capturing Baghdad would prove to be decisive, and with the following peace treaty between the two empires they established, for the first time, a stable border.⁵² A border that cut straight through the Kurdish region, with the majority of the Kurdish population under Ottoman control but leaving the smaller Eastern Kurdistan under Persian dominance. There was, however, no unified Kurdish polity at this time. Nor any unified Kurdish policy towards the two empires; individual tribal leaders were building their own power bases and were using the situation to advance their own, individual interests. So, even though we can see a development of autonomy in the Kurdish regions at this time, there is no corresponding development towards any coherent concept of a politically unified Kurdistan.⁵³

The stabilising of the Ottoman-Persian frontier left the Ottomans free to approach the Kurds with a different tactic, and over the next couple of centuries the autonomy of the Kurdish rulers was eroded away.⁵⁴ The Tanzimat reforms, the project to modernise the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century, centralised and normalised the provinces of the empire.⁵⁵ As a consequence of this restructuring the Kurdish autonomous regions were eventually placed firmly under the control of the central government in Istanbul.

The last of the semi-independent Kurdish Emirs was Bedirxan Beg of Bohtan, a warrior chief who extended his rule over large swathes of Kurdish lands. Bedirxan's expansions were at first unopposed by the Ottoman government, but his intolerance for religious minorities would soon become problematic. American missionary activities had begun to spread in the Christian Armenian and Nestorian, or Assyrian, communities, often supported by the Ottoman government who saw Western involvement as a means of helping secure the stability of the empire.⁵⁶ Among many of the Muslim neighbours of those communities the American involvement was viewed with distrust and there grew an unease about a possible Christian ascendancy backed by the Western Powers of Britain and the United States. Bedirxan responded to these Christian missions, that he viewed as provocations, by invading the Nestorian lands and massacring their inhabitants. The massacres of 1843 and 1846 caused

⁵¹ Izady, *The Kurds*, 115.

⁵² Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*, 51.

⁵³ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 1-17.

⁵⁴ Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*, 57-59.

⁵⁵ Aboona, *Assyrians, Kurds, and Ottomans*, 113-131.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

international outrage and led to political pressure on the Ottoman government to deal with the situation. In 1847 Bedirxan declared independence but was quickly defeated by the Ottoman army, and the last Kurdish Emirate was dissolved.⁵⁷

Following Bedirxan's rebellion, and in order to centralise and pacify the area, the Ottomans created a new province named *Kurdistan*. This was the first time that name was used for an administrative unit, rather than just as a geographical or cultural region.⁵⁸ The province did not, however, include the entirety of the Kurdish lands under Ottoman control, only what is today considered Northern or Turkish Kurdistan. Southern Kurdistan remained part of the province of Mosul. After only twenty years the name Kurdistan was removed from the province, and it was renamed Diyarbakir in 1867. Possibly, the Ottomans were concerned the Kurds might use the province as a rallying point around which to build a nationalist movement. There are, however, no indications in official records that the government actually considered Kurdish nationalism to be a threat at this time.⁵⁹ Unlike in the Christian provinces of the Balkans, where nationalist uprisings continued to erode Ottoman power throughout the century, the Sunni majority among the Kurds linked their identity to their religion. Sunni Islam was also the religion of the Ottoman regime and most of the Kurds were thus linked closely to the Ottomans through their common ties to the Ummah, the Muslim community, and through their subservience to the Caliph.⁶⁰

Kurdish Societies before the Great War

A growing feeling of ethnic affinity seems to have taken root through the course of the nineteenth century, though Özoğlu makes a point of saying that it was only after the Great War that Kurdish nationalism emerged, and McDowall points out that “there is virtually no evidence that any Kurds thought in terms of a whole Kurdish people until the later years of the nineteenth century.”⁶¹ In the period of liberal policies after the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 several societies were founded by the Kurdish elites in Istanbul, in order to form a cultural synthesis and unity among the Kurds. Özoğlu shows how the variety, the rivalry and the conflicting narratives and interests of these societies evidenced a divided elite that aided

⁵⁷ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 46-47. Aboona, *Assyrians, Kurds, and Ottomans*, 257-276.

⁵⁸ Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*, 60-61.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁶⁰ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 91.

⁶¹ Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*, 69. McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 1.

little the creation of any coherent national identity.⁶² Echoing this sentiment, Zeynep Arikanh writes:

The particularity of Kurdish nationalism or Kurdish nationalist movement, which was a direct consequence of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, was that it was not the product of an independence war against the occupation, nor the issue of resistance to colonialism, but an immediate and direct challenge to the newly founded or constructed nation-states.⁶³

To wit, Kurdish nationalism emerged as a response to the creation of nation-states in the Middle East, rather than as a result of the cultural movements of early twentieth century Istanbul.

Kurds featured heavily in the organised resistance against the Ottoman regime in the late nineteenth century, Kurds were part of the inner core of the society that would become known as the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP).⁶⁴ This opposition to the government, however, was against the policies of Sultan Abdul Hamid, and not sentiments stirred up by any Kurdish nationalism. Abdul Hamid had suspended the constitution and shifted power back to the imperial seat. He increased his own authority and led reactionary policies towards European influence and “Western-inspired reforms.”⁶⁵

The CUP would eventually develop towards becoming more of a Turkish nationalistic organisation, rather than an Ottoman brotherhood. The nationalist core started calling themselves the Young Turks, and after what would become known as the Young Turk Liberal Congress in Paris in 1902 assertion of their Turkish ethnic identity became a core principle of the party. Still, when the CUP came to power through the revolution of 1908 their Turkish nationalism was set aside in favour of a project to build an empire-wide pan-Ottoman identity. Taking the reins of power in the multi-ethnic empire the Young Turks realised that they needed to unify the Ummah,⁶⁶ rather than to play on the divisive ideas of nationalism.⁶⁷ It was in this liberal environment, after the reintroduction of the constitution, that the cultural societies started blossoming in Istanbul. Kurdish notables used this opportunity to form

⁶² Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*, 77.

⁶³ Arikanli, "British Legacy," 92.

⁶⁴ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 88.

⁶⁵ Cleveland and Bunton, *History of the Modern Middle East*, 109-112.

⁶⁶ The *Ummah* is the collective community of the followers of Islam.

⁶⁷ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 92.

societies of their own, in order to form a cultural synthesis and unity among the Kurds. The societies were strictly cultural and not political, it was never a part of this movement to call for any Kurdish independence. These Kurdish elites were part of the Ottoman high bureaucracy and their interests thus aligned with the Ottoman state.⁶⁸

Still, as McDowall succinctly puts it: “The liberalism of the Young Turks proved shortlived.”⁶⁹ Turkish nationalism kept its momentum also after the Young Turks proclaimed their identity as Ottomans and it was expected that the other Muslim groups of the Empire also would develop their own ethnic identities. The CUP government quickly started cracking down on their own liberal policies and the environment of liberal societies. The Ottoman Kurds in Istanbul were presented with two options: To embrace their Kurdish identities or to follow the pan-Ottoman ideals. Some Kurds chose to go a third way and instead embraced Turkish identity.⁷⁰

The Eastern Question and European Balance of Power

As we have seen, coming into the nineteenth century the region had been divided between the Ottoman Empire in the west and the Persian Empire in the east. But as the century progressed the waning power of these two empires became clearer and two new rivals began growing their influence: the British and the Russian Empires. The two new empires had different tactics in their dealings with the Ottoman Empire: whereas the Russians, through a series of wars, were steadily conquering parts of Ottoman territory, the British felt their interests were best defended by keeping the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire intact.⁷¹

Towards the end of the century Germany arose as a rival to the established European Superpowers. During the Great Eastern Crisis of 1875-1878 the British had moved in to stop the Russians from conquering Istanbul. The British were threatening with starting a major war if the Russians did not step down. In the subsequent attempts to secure peace among the Great Powers, the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck introduced Germany as a mediator

⁶⁸ Hakan Özoğlu, "Nationalism and Kurdish Notables in the Late Ottoman-Early Republican Era," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33, no. 3 (2001): 383.

⁶⁹ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 94.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁷¹ David Fromkin, "Britain, France, and the Diplomatic Agreements," in *The Creation of Iraq, 1914-1921*, ed. Reeva Spector Simon and Eleanor H. Tejirian (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 134-135.

between the rivalry of the British and Russian interests in the Ottoman Empire, through the Congress of Berlin in 1878.⁷² The Treaty of Berlin was devastating to the Ottomans, as they were forced to stand by and watch as the European Empires divided amongst themselves large chunks of Ottoman lands. The Ottomans lost lands both in the Balkans and in Eastern Anatolia, and even their supposed ally, Great Britain, joined in and seized control of Cyprus. For the Germans the treaty not only managed to halt the movements towards a new war between Russia and Britain, but also to position Germany firmly as contenders among the European Colonial Empires.⁷³

The growing German power, and attempts at colonial expansion, forced the British to abandon their own isolationist policy and seek reconciliation with the Russians, creating the Entente Alliance uniting Britain with Russia and France in opposition to the Central European Triple-Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy. Russia and Britain set aside their differences and resolved their dispute over the control of Persia, by dividing the country into “zones of influence,” a development that was obviously viewed with unease in Istanbul. The rivalry of “The Great Game” between Russia and Britain had meant that the two powers had largely restrained each other, however, the new realities of international politics threatened the removal of those restraints. The Ottoman answer was to ally themselves closer to Germany.⁷⁴

Mission Creep up the Two Rivers

In 1914, the balance of power between the European alliances collapsed when the political situation on the Balkans deteriorated. The weakness of the Ottoman state and the competition between the European Powers to take advantage of this weakness had brought the European balance of power to a cliff’s edge. The Austrian declaration of war on Serbia led to a series of events that spiralled into what became known as the “Great War.” Through their economic and political ties to Germany the Ottoman regime became pushed into joining the war. The Germans needed the Ottoman contribution and spent large amounts of gold and military supplies to prop up the failing Ottoman economy. Thus, the two great rivals, the British and Russian empires, found themselves as allies in a World War against the Ottoman Empire.⁷⁵

⁷² Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia and the Russians : A History* (London: Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 2001), 316.

⁷³ Cleveland and Bunton, *History of the Modern Middle East*, 82.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 122-123; Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, 456-465.

⁷⁵ Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East*, 36-39.

The Anglo-Persian Oil Company had set up an oil refinery on Abadan, an island in the Shatt al-Arab, the lower reaches of the Euphrates and Tigris, which constituted the border between Persia and the Ottoman Empire. It was ostensibly to defend the British oil refinery that the Indian government ordered the Indian Expeditionary Force (IEF) to move to the Persian Gulf, but they also desired to extend their control upriver, into Mesopotamia, to take control of the potentially vast oil fields they expected to find there.⁷⁶ When the IEF captured Basra in November 1914 it was not intended as the beginning of one of the major theatres of the war, but solely as a means of securing the border to Persia. The further advance into Mesopotamia came not as part of a grand battle plan, but largely as the result of one man's quest for glory. General Charles Townshend, the commander of Force D of the IEF, was dreaming of capturing Baghdad and of his subsequent triumphant return to London. Townshend, along with his entire army, would get captured at the siege of Kut, after a failed attempt at reaching Baghdad, and spend the rest of the war in captivity in Istanbul. The rest of the IEF slowly continued the advance and when they eventually captured Baghdad it was without Townshend.⁷⁷

The Ottomans had invaded Russia in December 1914, an invasion that quickly stalled, and would remain relatively stable for the remaining duration of the war. It was at this front that the relations between the Ottomans and the Christian Armenians reached its low-point. Though the front-lines were largely stable, the two sides did move back and forth across a region inhabited mostly by Armenians and Kurds. The Russian revolutions of 1917 brought Russia out of the war, and the Ottomans were thus able to recapture all territory they had lost, not only in the course of this war but also those regions of the Caucasus lost after the Treaty of Berlin of 1878. In the ensuing spring the British were advancing into Kurdistan from the south, but they did not manage to establish any permanent hold on any Kurdish towns. Now that the Ottomans could move some of their forces from the Caucasus front, the British were faced with a stronger opposition. Ottoman advances towards the oil fields of Azerbaijan was also a threat to British vital interests, and an expeditionary force was dispatched to attempt to stall the Ottomans. Events elsewhere would soon remove any chances the Ottomans might have had at striking any kind of decisive blow on the British, however.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 80.

⁷⁷ Ulrichsen, *First World War in the Middle East*, 122-142; Ulrich Trumpener, "The Turkish War, 1914-18," in *A Companion to World War I*, ed. John Horne (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 105-106.

⁷⁸ Ulrichsen, *First World War in the Middle East*, 53-73.

In Persia the British were at this time controlling the Qajar regime. After the revolution the Russians had lost control over their zone of influence and the British had moved in to take advantage of the situation and did not wish any further destabilising there. Since the summer of 1918 the Kurdish rebels under Simkoyê Şikak, known as Simko, had established control over much of Eastern Kurdistan, and the continuing state of revolt in the east was considered to be threatening to the stability of any new order in the other Kurdish regions. Because of this the British government was anxious to avoid any policy towards Kurds in other parts of Kurdistan that would worsen the situation in Persia.

The Armenian Genocide

In early 1915 the Ottoman government began a wide-spread operation of deporting and executing the Armenians of Eastern Anatolia.⁷⁹ The scope and reasoning behind these operations have been, and continue to be, hotly debated. On the one hand the Ottomans feared that the Armenians could rise up in revolt supporting the Russians, and so removing them from their homeland and spreading them out across a larger area would alleviate this problem and allow the Ottoman army to unhindered prosecute the war against the Russians.⁸⁰ Another view is that the Ottoman effort was a planned attempt at extending the area of Turkish majority population within the Empire.⁸¹ There were also Kurdish tribes that were complicit in the persecution of the Armenians, linked by their religion the Kurds and Turks were logical allies against the Christian enemy.⁸²

What came to be known as the Armenian Genocide elicited international outrage. The Armenians were Christians, and as such, garnered a lot of support in the Christian West, particularly in America. The US sent aid efforts to refugees within the Ottoman Empire, and concern for the well-being of the American aid workers might have been a major factor in the decision not to declare war on the Ottoman Empire when the US would later join the war against the Central Powers.⁸³

⁷⁹ Cleveland and Bunton, *History of the Modern Middle East.*, 139

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Nezan, "The Kurds under the Ottoman Empire." 37

⁸² McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 105.

⁸³ Eleanor H. Tejirian, "The United States, the Ottoman Empire, and the Postwar Settlement," in *The Creation of Iraq, 1914-1921*, ed. Reeva Spector Simon and Eleanor H. Tejirian (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 151.

Within the Ottoman Empire the Armenian Question was used to stoke support among the Muslims living in the areas with large Armenian populations. Most of the Armenian populated regions were also populated by Kurds, the Sunni Kurds therefore became natural allies for the Ottomans in this project. It was easy to paint the picture of the Evil Christian Powers that were attacking the Muslim Empire from all sides. The Ottomans were the only Muslim Power left independent from the European colonial Powers, and even the Caliphate itself was under threat of Christian meddling. But the case has also been made that the causes of the animosity were not only religious or ethnical differences, but economical. Many Armenians had made themselves wealthy, due in large to moneylending, and many Turks and Kurds envied this perceived privileged position.⁸⁴ Gidney also presents another reason behind the feuding between Armenians and Kurds: From before the nineteenth century, when control over the area by Istanbul was practically non-existent, the Kurds had set themselves up to provide protection for the Armenians, in exchange for tributes. But when the Ottoman government began its centralising reforms, the Armenians became squeezed in between the Kurds and the Ottomans who both demanded their taxes.⁸⁵

Even though they had been aiding the Ottomans in their genocide against the Armenians, the Kurds too became victims of a similar policy by the Young Turk government. Under the cover of a scorched-earth policy as the Russians were advancing, the Ottomans were forcibly removing hundreds of thousands of Kurds from their homelands and resettling them spread out across Anatolia. The Young Turks hoped that spreading the Kurds out this way would stop them from developing any distinct ideas of nationalism.⁸⁶ In addition to the harshness enacted upon them by their government the region was also hit by famine and disease as consequences of the war.⁸⁷ In the provinces of Van and Bitlis as much as 62% and 42%, respectively, of the non-Christian population was lost during the war, many due to being forcibly displaced but most due to war-related deaths. Mehrdad Izady estimates that the total death toll among the Kurds during the war was around 500,000.⁸⁸ McDowall's estimate is significantly higher; he places the Armenian death toll on around a million and the Kurdish at "very approximately 800,000."⁸⁹ Eskander cites historian Robert Olson's Kurdish death-toll

⁸⁴ Jon-Arild Johannessen and Siri Hopland, *Det Armenske Folkemordet : 1915-1917* (Oslo: Dreyers forl., 2015), 86-87.

⁸⁵ Gidney, *A Mandate for Armenia*, 15.

⁸⁶ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 106.

⁸⁷ Ulrichsen, *First World War in the Middle East*, 176; McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 108-109.

⁸⁸ Izady, *The Kurds*, 115-116.

⁸⁹ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 109.

estimation as around one million.⁹⁰ In any case, whatever that number may have been, out of a total Kurdish population of around three million the losses were staggering.⁹¹

Kurdistan under the Indian Office

By October 1918 the Ottoman government had realised that the war was unwinnable, as their European allies were collapsing. And so, they approached the British with a proposal for a cease-fire. The Armistice of Mudros was signed on 30 October 1918 and brought the Ottomans out of the war.⁹² Among other stipulations, the Mudros armistice sanctioned British occupation of an area it named Mesopotamia, though it did not attempt to establish exactly what was meant by that name. There were no indications in the text as to where the borders of Mesopotamia would be considered to lay, a definition that would be crucial to the future of the Kurdish region, as much of Kurdistan could be claimed to be part of Mesopotamia.⁹³ The armistice included two mentions of the Armenians; one where the British demands that the Ottomans should deliver all “Armenian interned persons and prisoners” to Allied custody, the other was a clause where the British reserved the right to occupy the six Armenian vilayets “in case of disorder.”⁹⁴ There were no mentions of the Kurds or Kurdistan in this regard. Shortly after the armistice was signed, on 10 November, British forces seized control of Mosul, under Ottoman protests. The Ottomans claimed that Mosul was not part of Mesopotamia and that the British forces should withdraw to the position they held at time of the armistice coming into effect.⁹⁵ Little more of Kurdistan was under British military occupation at that point, they had taken Kirkuk five days before Mudros but had not been able to advance further into Kurdish lands. But many among the Kurds welcomed the British and they did not need to extend their military occupation in order to extend their political control.⁹⁶

The civil servants from the India Office that were put in charge of the occupation of Mesopotamia were left largely to their own devices when it came to delimitate their commission, both politically and geographically. London was far more concerned with the more pressing European issues in the wake of the war. The Civil Commissioner to Baghdad,

⁹⁰ Eskander, "Britain's Policy Towards the Kurdish Question," 116.

⁹¹ The total population number is based on a British wartime estimate.

⁹² Cleveland and Bunton, *History of the Modern Middle East*, 141.

⁹³ Helmreich, *From Paris to Sevres*, 342.

⁹⁴ Temperley, *History of the Peace Conference*, 1, 495-497.

⁹⁵ Eskander, "Britain's Policy Towards the Kurdish Question," 52.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

Colonel Arnold Wilson, advocated for a definition of Mesopotamia that reached the full length of the two rivers all the way to the watershed, a definition which would include the entirety of the previously Ottoman Kurdistan.⁹⁷ Wilson did not have any spare military units to advance the occupied area by force, and was met with a blanket refusal from London to be supplied with such, and was thus left only with diplomatic tools for his attempts to expand British power. In the end they came, largely, to nothing.

Conclusion

The populations of the region we call Kurdistan, as well as the neighbouring areas, were not easily pigeon-holed into clearly defined ethnic groups. The project to establish which ethnic group had the majority in which region, in the vein of European nations, would be difficult, if not impossible. Among the Kurds there had not developed any strong feelings relating to a collective Kurdish consciousness, except for the national-romantic currents that were picked up by the Kurdish-Ottoman elites in Istanbul. The Kurdish milieu in Istanbul was only concerned with the cultural and linguistic aspects of nation building and made no attempts to move its cause into the political arena. They were still outlawed by the government, and forced to continue their work under ground, which led many onto paths of opposition to the CUP and its revolution.

The war had had a tremendous impact on the lives of the Kurds. The front-lines of the battle between the Ottomans and the Russians had mostly gone across Kurdish populated areas. But the direct actions of the war were not all the population had to suffer; the war also brought with it famine and disease. In addition, the government enacted a policy of forced population transfers, spreading Kurdish speaking people out across Anatolia. Among the surviving population in Kurdistan there were none who had not felt the direct impact of these events.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 88.

Chapter 2: The Many Secrets of the Great War

As a result of negotiations which took place in London and Petrograd in the Spring of 1916, the Allied British, French, and Russian Governments came to an agreement as regards the future delimitation of their respective zones of influence and territorial acquisitions in Asiatic Turkey, as well as the formation in Arabia of an independent Arab State [...]

– The Manchester Guardian, January 1918.⁹⁸

This sentence opened one of a series of articles published in the British Liberal newspaper *The Manchester Guardian* in the winter of 1917-1918, unravelling for the public the secret negotiations that had been going on between the Allied Powers on how to divide the spoils of the Great War. Conducted between the spring of 1915 and that of 1916, the negotiations included agreements on the post-war political future of what was referred to as “Asiatic Turkey,” i.e. The Ottoman Empire. At the nadir of fortunes of the Allied war efforts, the agreements had been a desperate attempt at holding the alliance together at a point where the Russian Empire was starting to fall over.

The articles were translations of official documents printed in the Russian paper *Izvestiya*. After the Russian Revolutions, the new Bolshevik regime had discovered the secret documents and decided to make them public. The communists wanted to show the world the hypocrisy of the Allies, who wanted to be viewed as the protectors of freedom and self-determination, and also to attempt to sow dissent among those of the Alliance who were not privy to the contents of these negotiations.⁹⁹

The negotiations forced the British Empire to define its policy towards the future of a Middle East after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. This would become the first time that British interests actively encountered the Kurdish region. At the time Kurdistan was not considered a

⁹⁸ Text from *The Manchester Guardian*, quoted in: Charles Roden Buxton, *The Secret Agreements* (Manchester: The National Labour Press, 1918), 17.

⁹⁹ Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment*, 38.

prize worth pursuing to any of the Allied Powers but ended up becoming the region where the zones of interests of the three allies met. Thus, the Kurds would become important in the deliberations around establishing the boundaries of the three empires.

This chapter examines these negotiations and detail how they influenced an emerging British policy towards the Kurdish Areas. The agreements can be divided into two sets: First we have several bilateral agreements between British representatives and Arab princes, the most significant one being the McMahon-Hussein Correspondence. Secondly, we have agreements made between the Entente Allies, Great Britain, France Russia, and Italy; The Constantinople Agreement of March/April 1915, The London Agreement of April 1915, The Sykes-Picot Agreement of February 1916, with its Russian amendments added in May, and finally, the Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne Agreement of September 1917.

A Clash of Interests Between Cairo and Simla

Due to the way the British Empire was governed there emerged within it several rival centres for policy-making towards the Middle East. Differences of interests developed between Egypt and India, and between those of the colonies and the interests of the government in London. The traditional policy had been to support the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire, only in special cases had the British encroached upon this integrity, as in Egypt and Cyprus. But, the British occupational authority in Egypt had always insisted on the country formally belonging to the Ottomans, and that Britain had no intention of wresting it from them.¹⁰⁰ And even though India had occasionally challenged Ottoman supremacy along the Arabian coast, as with their intervention in Kuwait in 1899, the existence of the Ottoman Empire as such, had kept Egypt and India from encroaching on each other's interests. But removing the Ottomans from the Middle East would result in the zones of interest of Cairo and Simla to meet and overlap. With both these two offices allowed to independently define and carry out their foreign affairs, this would eventually lead to conflict between them.¹⁰¹

The Government in London, in turn, was also divided between the interests of the Foreign Office, the War Office and the Admiralty, with headstrong personalities at the helm of each office, respectively Edward Grey, Herbert Kitchener and Winston Churchill, who would often conduct their own policies independent of each other. Mark Sykes, a protégé of Kitchener's,

¹⁰⁰ Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, 404. Darwin, *Empire Project*, 130-132.

¹⁰¹ Ulrichsen, *First World War in the Middle East*, 153.

on his intelligence gathering mission to the Middle East and India noted that: “our traditional way of letting various offices run their own shows, which was allright [sic] in the past when such sectors dealt with varying problems which were not related, but it is bad now that each sector is dealing in reality with a common enemy.”¹⁰²

The Call for a Holy War

Shortly after the opening of hostilities between Russia and the Ottomans, on 29 October 1914, the Ottoman sultan Mehmed V called for a jihad, a Sunni Muslim holy war, against the Entente Powers. The Ottoman sultans had since the sixteenth century claimed the title of caliph.¹⁰³ In name, the caliph was the spiritual leader of all Muslims, and the five fatwas that were pronounced as part of the call for jihad were seen by the Sublime Porte as strongly authoritative, not only to the Muslims of their own Empire, but also to those beyond its borders.¹⁰⁴ The Muslim world feared the rising Christian influence in what appeared to be a crumbling Ottoman Empire, and since the disastrous war against the Russians that preceded the Treaty of Berlin of 1878 support for the concept of the caliphate had been increasing.¹⁰⁵

The call for jihad had been a part of a German scheme to undermine the colonial empires of the Entente. The Germans were anxious to stir unrest in their enemies’ colonial empires and wanted their enemies to be forced to divert troops away from the European fronts in order to secure the Muslim population of their empires.¹⁰⁶ Thus, the Ottoman Caliph’s position as nominal sovereign over all Muslims was used to further this aim.

All the Entente Powers, the British, the Russians and the French ruled over empires with large Muslim populations, and as such, they were understandably wary of major Muslim uprisings. By the late nineteenth century the caliph’s spiritual authority had found resonance among the Muslims of India who “saw the Ottoman Empire [...] as the one major Muslim power which had maintained its independence, and many embraced the idea of the caliphate as a challenge to the discourse of imperial rule and western supremacy.”¹⁰⁷ Not only did the British Raj rule

¹⁰² Mark Sykes quoted in: Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 170.

¹⁰³ Cleveland and Bunton, *History of the Modern Middle East*, 38.

¹⁰⁴ Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 52. Hugh Kennedy, *Caliphate: The History of an Idea* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 251-254.

¹⁰⁵ Kennedy, *Caliphate*, 257.

¹⁰⁶ Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*, Penguin Books (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 300-303.

¹⁰⁷ Kennedy, *Caliphate*, 261.

over a very large Muslim population, but they also relied heavily on Muslim conscripts for the Indian Army. The Indian Army recruited most of its soldiers from the north and north-west of British India, where the majority of the population were Sikhs and Muslims, the population of the remainder was not considered warlike enough to be of any use to the military.¹⁰⁸

The British Secretary of State for War, the highly decorated war hero Earl Kitchener, believed that the best way of countering the jihad was to weaken the authority of the Ottoman Sultan by gaining the support of other religious leaders. Kitchener proposed the thought that since Mohammed himself had been an Arab it should be reasonable that the Caliph too should be an Arab: “[...] I think it would be our policy to recognize a new Khalif of Mecca or Medina of the proper race and guarantee the Holy Places from foreign aggression as well as from all foreign interference.”¹⁰⁹ If successful, such a plan would achieve both the goal of bringing the religious authority out of the hands of the Ottoman enemies, but also securing it from potentially falling under the influence of the Russians after the war.¹¹⁰

In the end, no Muslim uprising on the scale the Germans had envisioned happened as a response to the call for jihad. There were a few instances of Muslim soldiers refusing to fight against fellow Muslims, but these cases were not frequent and had no impact on the war.¹¹¹ But, as a whole, the call for jihad would not be much of a success, the Muslim community in India, for instance, chose to respond by withdrawing their recognition of the Ottoman Caliphate.¹¹²

As we have seen, the Kurdish population, at that time, held stronger ties to their religious identities than to those based on ethnicity or linguistics. Only tribal connections held more sway over the daily existence of the people than religion. As seen clearly in the Bedirxan Beg rebellion, the presence of Western missions among the Christian communities had led to a fear of the Western Powers extending their influence, and subverting Muslim traditions.¹¹³ In the West, the Kurds were likely seen as not significantly divergent from the Turks for there to be anything to build a nationalist rebellion from. The Turks and Kurds were often seen as the uncivilized oppressors against the innocent Armenians. It is interesting to note that as late as

¹⁰⁸ Robert Aldrich and Christopher Hilliard, "The French and British Empires," in *A Companion to World War I*, ed. John Horne (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 525.

¹⁰⁹ Earl Kitchener quoted in: Ulrichsen, *First World War in the Middle East*, 153.

¹¹⁰ Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 98.

¹¹¹ Ferguson, *Empire*, 306.

¹¹² Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 71.

¹¹³ Aboona, *Assyrians, Kurds, and Ottomans*, 113-131.

the 1960's James Gidney compared the "fierce, hard-fighting Kurds" to the "peaceable Armenians." Gidney also stated of the Armenians that: "being unarmed, they had no defence."¹¹⁴ The conflicts that Gidney described in these examples were not events from the genocide of the Great War, but rather the general situation of the area throughout the nineteenth century.

The Arab Question: Muslim Leadership

Kitchener had already before the war been in contact with the Sharif of Mecca, Hussein bin Ali. The Sharif's son, Abdullah, had travelled to Cairo to meet with British officials about a potential alliance. Kitchener was at the time Consul-General to Egypt. Quoting the example of the intervention in Kuwait, the Sharif, who was himself embroiled in conflict with the Sublime Porte's attempts at centralizing control over the outlying regions of the empire, proposed to allow for British influence in exchange for military aid in a rebellion against the Ottoman Government. Kitchener declined, on the grounds that, at the time, Britain had no quarrel with the Ottomans.¹¹⁵

The Sharif of Mecca was a position appointed by the Caliph to steward and protect the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and to ensure the safety of those on the pilgrimage. Traditionally the title was given to a member of the Hashemite family of the Prophet Muhammed, and Hussein bin Ali had won the accolade shortly after the Young Turk revolution of 1908. The position was not a territorial one, the territorial administration of the province was handled by a governor, but the Sharif held sway over many of the tribes in the province and was frequently in conflict with the governor over their authority and jurisdiction.¹¹⁶ Shortly before the outbreak of war in 1914 Istanbul appointed a strong military governor to the Hijaz, a move that Sharif Hussein saw as an attempt at limiting his autonomy. Hussein, therefore, started looking for allies elsewhere, to retain his position of power.¹¹⁷

At the onset of war, Kitchener sent a message to the Sharif saying that if he was to support the British against the Ottomans the British would "guarantee that no internal intervention take place in Arabia, and will give Arabs every assistance against foreign aggression."¹¹⁸ In

¹¹⁴ Gidney, *A Mandate for Armenia*, 15.

¹¹⁵ Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 276-277.

¹¹⁶ Hasan Kayali, *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 144-173.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 181-192.

¹¹⁸ Kitchener's letter to Abdullah, quote in: Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 103.

addition Kitchener promised British support in restoring the Caliphate to Arabia.¹¹⁹ The Indian Government, however, felt that such a move would be perceived as problematic among the Muslim Indians. For an imperial, Christian, Western Power to meddle in Muslim religious affairs would worsen the relations between the British and their Indian Muslim subjects, and the authority of such a Caliph would never be accepted anyway.¹²⁰

At this point in the war, however, the only thing the British desired the Arabs to do was to remain neutral, and to disassociate themselves from the proclaimed jihad. The war effort was to be focused on the Western Front, against Germany, and the Middle Eastern Theatre, in opposition to Kitchener's wishes, and those of the Admiralty, was to remain a defensive one. The war effort in the Middle East was to be limited to defending the British positions in Egypt and the Persian Gulf. It was the Indian Government that blocked the idea of opening an Arab front. They were concerned that such a policy would lead to a situation descending out of control, and threatening the relatively stable system India had created along the shipping lines outside the Arabian coasts.¹²¹ Sharif Hussein, on his end, was happy to stay out of the war and consented to the British wishes.¹²²

Russia Claims Istanbul

In March of 1915 the Russian government set in motion a series of events that would lead to the Entente Alliance dividing up the entire Middle East between them, with Kurdistan as the region where their interests intertwined. It shared with its Allies its intentions of claiming the city of Istanbul and the Dardanelles in the event of a victory against the Ottoman Empire.¹²³ The Allies appear to have been surprised by the timing and the scope of the Russian territorial claims:

The claim made by the Imperial Government [...] considerably exceeds the desiderata foreshadowed [...]. Before His Majesty's Government have had time to take into consideration what their own desiderata elsewhere would be in the final terms of peace, Russia is asking for a definite promise that

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 104.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 106-110.

¹²¹ Ibid., 108.

¹²² Ibid., 115.

¹²³ Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (London: I. B: Tauris, 2004), 143.

her wishes shall be satisfied with regard to what is in fact the richest prize of the entire war.¹²⁴

The French responded to the Russian overture by claiming Syria and Cilicia. The French had a history of “sentimental, financial, and religious involvements” in Syria and they were eager to stop any of their allies from encroaching on their position there.¹²⁵ The French claimed they had a strong historical connection with Syria, that they traced back to the Crusades. And they considered the Syrian coast to be strategically vital to their empire.¹²⁶ Based on the reply from the British Government to the Russian claims, it seems clear that the British, at this point, had not yet begun to seriously consider their own position towards the aftermath of the war on the Ottomans.

At the beginning of hostilities with the Ottoman Empire, the line of the British Government had been that “occupation of territories by allies is provisional pending final settlement at close of war.”¹²⁷ Traditionally, the British policy had been that the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire needed to be preserved, particularly against the ambitions of the Russians.¹²⁸ In July 1913 the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, had instructed the Ambassador to Russia that the only policy the British could assent to was “one directed to avoid collapse and partition of Asiatic Turkey.”¹²⁹ The Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, wrote that:

[Grey and himself] both think that in the real interest of our own future, the best thing would be if at the end of the war we could say that we have taken and gained nothing. And that not merely from a moral and sentimental point of view, but from purely material considerations. Taking on Mesopotamia for instance, means spending millions in irrigation and development with no immediate or early return, keeping up quite a large army – white and colored – in an unfamiliar country, and a hornet’s nest of Arab tribes.¹³⁰

¹²⁴ British memorandum to the Russian government, 12 March 1915, quote in J. C. Hurewitz, *Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East: A Documentary Record, Vol 2: 1914-1956* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1956), 8.

¹²⁵ Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East*, 46.

¹²⁶ Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 190.

¹²⁷ Secretary of State for India to the Viceroy of India, 16 December 1914, quoted in: Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East*, 150.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹²⁹ Edward Grey quoted in: Isaiah Friedman, *British Pan-Arab Policy, 1915-1922 : A Critical Appraisal*, British Pan-Arab Policy, 1915-1922, Volume 1 (New Brunswick N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2010), 14.

¹³⁰ HH Asquith quoted in: Fromkin, "Britain, France, and the Diplomatic Agreements," 136.

Now being allies with their traditional rivals the British found themselves in a position where they needed to adapt these policies to placate the Russians. Hence, the Allies quickly consented to all the Russian claims, being faced with the possibility of the Russians pulling out of the war.¹³¹

It was paramount for the British that this agreement was to remain secret, due to the potential negative effect an agreement on the destruction of the last independent Muslim empire would have on the Muslim population in India and Egypt.¹³² In the event that it would be made public it was important to Grey that the British would be able to maintain “that they had throughout all the negotiations stipulated that in all circumstances Arabia and the Moslem holy places should remain under independent Moslem rule.”¹³³

Shortly after having agreed on the future of Istanbul the Entente Powers met in London to sign an agreement that would bring Italy into the alliance and into the war.¹³⁴ In this agreement the Entente promised that in the event of a partition of the Ottoman Empire Italy would be granted “a share, equal to theirs.”¹³⁵

The De Bunsen Committee

In response to the Constantinople Agreement it became important for the British to define their own desires for spoils after the Ottoman Empire were to be dismantled. Lord Kitchener claimed that The Great Game of the nineteenth century was likely to be revived after the war, and thus that it would be necessary for the British to manoeuvre themselves into a position of strength in relation to the Russians. Kitchener’s own solution was to create a unified Arab Kingdom, under British influence.¹³⁶

The government set up a committee, led by Sir Maurice de Bunsen, the Assistant Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs, to define British claims in the Middle East. The committee published its report on 30 June 1915, largely written by Mark Sykes, who was the one member of the committee who had the most experience with the Middle East. Sykes

¹³¹ Cleveland and Bunton, *History of the Modern Middle East*, 149. Fromkin, "Britain, France, and the Diplomatic Agreements," 137.

¹³² Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 139.

¹³³ TNA CAB 42/3/12 1, "Report of the Committee on Asiatic Turkey," 30 June 1915.

¹³⁴ Paul C. Helmreich, "Italy and the Anglo-French Repudiation of the 1917 St. Jean De Maurienne Agreement," *The Journal of Modern History* 48, no. 2 (1976): 99.

¹³⁵ The Agreement with Italy reproduced in: Buxton, *Secret Agreements*, 6-11.

¹³⁶ Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 140.

shared the world view of his mentor, Lord Kitchener, that those Powers who gained land from the Ottomans could never be content with the position they were put in but would always seek to extend their territories at the expense of weaker neighbours. Thus, if Britain did not move to secure their own interests France or Russia might soon after the war with the Ottomans be found threatening the British in the Persian Gulf.¹³⁷

The interests of the British the committee found easy to define, what the committee found difficult to establish was the best way to attain them.¹³⁸ The British interests laid in protecting the established position of dominance in the Persian Gulf, as a means to securing the trade routes to India. The report agreed with the Prime Minister, H.H. Asquith's, point of view that the British Empire was large enough as it was and to extend it further would place them in an untenable situation.¹³⁹ The committee found that what was needed was to "consolidate the position we already have, to make firm and lasting the position we already hold."¹⁴⁰ But faced with the emergence of rival European Powers in the area, this would not be as easy as it sounded.

In order to safeguard the control of the city of Basra and the British shipping interests in Mesopotamia, the area under British control would have to be extended to include Baghdad and Mosul. This would include a significant part of the Kurdish homeland under British rule. The report notes that rule over the Kurds would be beneficial to the military, as the Kurds would make "excellent material for recruits."¹⁴¹

Further, the report states that for a British frontier going along the hills north of Mosul to be viable it would need to be supported by direct communications with the Mediterranean. It proposes a railway from Haifa as the best way to secure this. But, at the same time, it acknowledges that such a railway would actually be detrimental to British, and particularly Indian, economic enterprises in the area. Therefore, it would be preferable if a foreign power were to construct the railway, in a way that the British Empire would be able to use it for their own need. The only Power considered for this task was France, and they were quickly

¹³⁷ TNA CAB 42/3/12, "Report of the Committee on Asiatic Turkey," 30 June 1915.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 141.

¹⁴⁰ TNA CAB 42/3/12, "Report of the Committee on Asiatic Turkey," 30 June 1915.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

dismissed due to what the report calls: “[...] the dead weight of intrigue and incompetent pettiness which is characteristic of their method [...]”¹⁴²

In the French world-view their claim on Syria included Palestine. The Russians had earlier protested this, on the grounds that the independence of Jerusalem needed to be protected.¹⁴³ The inclusion of Palestine in the French claim was also problematic for British plans of a Haifa-Basra railway. The report proposed a trade-off between Palestine and the territory between the French claims in Syria and Cilicia and Lake Urmia in the east, referring to a French “missionary interest” with the Nestorian population there (fig.2.1). This would also have the added benefit of providing a buffer between the British and the Russian territories. The proposed borders for this French extension included the majority of Kurdistan. It is interesting to note the report spoke of the region as if it were mainly Nestorian.¹⁴⁴

In the end, the report concluded that the partition of Ottoman territory between the Entente Allies would be too expensive and problematic for the British Empire. The costs of acquiring and controlling new territories would be too high in relation to the potential yields of the new acquisitions. In addition, such a course of events would strengthen the position of Britain’s rivals in the area. A scheme where the Ottoman Empire was to remain standing, but as a decentralized state was put forward as the solution that fit the British interests best. In this scheme the Ottoman Empire would be divided into “Anatolia, Armenia, Syria, Palestine and Irak-Jazirah” (fig.2.2).¹⁴⁵ As most of these partition plans did, the borders were drawn straight through Kurdistan, while most Kurds fell under Armenia, Mosul and the southern towns would be included in Irak-Jazirah and the south-west would be part of Syria. The report noted that Armenia could potentially be split into Armenia and Kurdistan but acknowledged that the committee was not qualified to set down the details on this question.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Russian Foreign Minister to Russian Ambassador in Paris, 16 March 1915, Hurewitz, *Diplomacy in the near and Middle East*, 9.

¹⁴⁴ TNA CAB 42/3/12, “Report of the Committee on Asiatic Turkey,” 30. June 1915.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.



Figure 2.1 Map indicating possible Zones of Influence in the post-war Ottoman Empire.¹⁴⁷

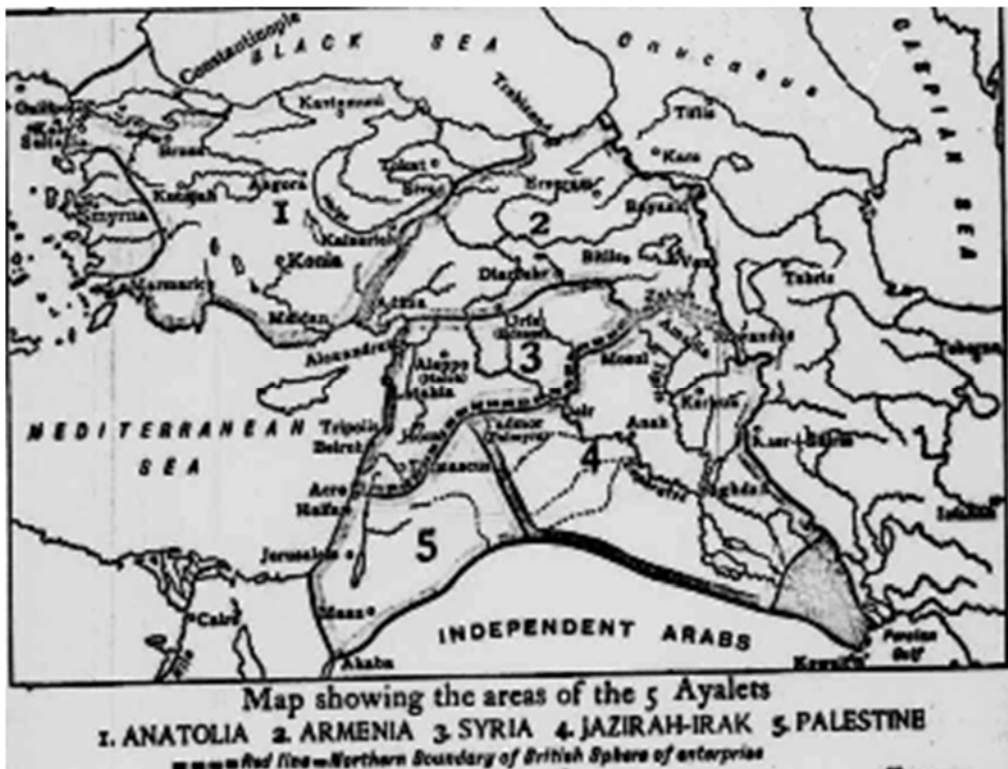


Figure 2.2 Map showing the proposed decentralized Ottoman Empire¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ TNA CAB 42/3/12, Report of the Committee on Asiatic Turkey, 30 June 1915, The British and French zones in this map are the same as what was proposed in the case of annexations.

¹⁴⁸ TNA CAB 42/3/12, Report of the Committee on Asiatic Turkey, 30 June 1915.

The Arab Question: Territorial Ambitions

Lord Kitchener used his extensive network from his days in Cairo to influence his policies which led him to desire the creation of an Arab Caliphate. The Indian Government, on the other hand, had built up an interest in propping up small Arab states along the Arabian coastline to secure control over their economic and strategical interests in the area.¹⁴⁹ In a memorandum sent from Delhi to the India Office in London it was proclaimed that: “What we want is not a United Arabia: but a weak and disunited Arabia, split up into little principalities so far as possible under our suzerainty – but incapable of coordinated action against us, forming a buffer against the Powers in the West.”¹⁵⁰ At the same time, India wished that Mesopotamia could be established as an Indian colony, to be “made rich by colonists from India.”¹⁵¹ India was not positively inclined towards the idea of creating any large Arab entity. The Viceroy, Charles Hardinge, wrote that “Sykes does not seem to be able to grasp that there are parts of Turkey unfit for representative institutions.”¹⁵²

Lord Kitchener believed that any military assistance that Sharif Hussein could muster would be insignificant to the British war effort. He did not think that any Arab Revolt would help in toppling the Ottoman Empire. His designs for the Caliphate and Hussein’s kingdom were long-term plans and could wait till after the war.¹⁵³ Kitchener and Cairo thought that the issue had been successfully concluded with Hussein agreeing to remain neutral. It came therefore as a surprise when the British High Commissioner for Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, received a letter from Hussein setting out his territorial claims. Recently appointed to Cairo, McMahon had come to Egypt from a position as Foreign Secretary in the Indian Government and had little experience with Arab affairs.¹⁵⁴

Hussein had interpreted the British promises as promises to secure him the kingdom over all Arabs in Asia, and in his letter he detailed his wishes for the geographical extent of this kingdom.¹⁵⁵ Kitchener’s idea of the Caliphate had been of a spiritual rather than territorial one.¹⁵⁶ Actually, the plan concocted in Cairo was of a confederation of a loosely defined

¹⁴⁹ Ulrichsen, *First World War in the Middle East*, 153.

¹⁵⁰ Memorandum from Foreign Office of Government of India to the India Office, quoted in: Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 106.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁵² Charles Hardinge quoted in: *ibid.*, 170.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁵⁴ Ulrichsen, *First World War in the Middle East*, 102.

¹⁵⁵ Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 174.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 105.

“Arabic-speaking world” that would be run from Cairo as a British protectorate.¹⁵⁷ Kitchener thought his assignment to the Government in London would be temporary, and he fully expected to return to Cairo and take up the helm of this new entity.¹⁵⁸ The Arab claims were therefore rather puzzling to the British, and McMahon’s initial reply was that such negotiations should be undertaken after the conclusion of the war.¹⁵⁹

The reaction in Cairo had been to not take the letter seriously. This changed, however, when the British were led to believe that Hussein could potentially command all Arab units in the Ottoman Empire to join his cause. Adding to this was the threat of the Sharif joining the Ottoman cause bringing with him what Cairo labelled as the “united Islam” against them.¹⁶⁰ Faced with these two new issues Cairo jumped enthusiastically on the idea of promising Hussein his kingdom. Those of the Government representing the Indian viewpoint, like Lord Curzon of Kedleston, a former Indian Viceroy, strongly opposed the plan of negotiating with the Arabs, but Cairo still held sway over Kitchener, and Grey and Asquith allowed themselves to be convinced. McMahon was instructed to conduct the negotiations with Hussein in order to bring about a large scale Arab Revolt.¹⁶¹ The rationale in Grey’s instructions was to “give our assurances that will prevent Arabs from being alienated” and McMahon was given authorization to use his own discretion on the details of the negotiations.¹⁶²

The Allies had enacted a naval blockade of the Syrian coast, hoping the famine would help lead the Arabs to revolt. The French and British dissented on how best to win the local Arabs to their cause; the French thought that providing relief to the starving Syrians would be a better course of action to win the hearts of the Arabs. But when the French consul in Cairo put forward a plan for the relief effort, the British blocked it, claiming that their “Allies are simply being blackmailed to remedy the shortage of supplies which it is the very intention of the blockade to produce.”¹⁶³ According to Eugene Rogan the famine took the lives of between 300,000 and 500,000 in the years between 1916 and the end of the war, still it failed to induce any large-scale uprisings.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 143.

¹⁵⁸ Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East*, 53.

¹⁵⁹ Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 174.

¹⁶⁰ Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East*, 54.

¹⁶¹ Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 182.

¹⁶² Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East*, 55.

¹⁶³ British memo, quoted in: Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 22.

¹⁶⁴ Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans*, 291.

Hussein had demanded an Arab Kingdom stretching from Mersin and Adana and in a straight line east to the Persian frontier, including all the land south of that line down to the Indian Ocean, excluding only the British colony of Aden. This line would go slightly to the north of the modern borders between Turkey in the north and Syria and Iraq to the south, and would thus include the Mosul vilayet and a significant number of Kurds. In McMahon's reply to Hussein's territorial demands he claims: "The two districts of Mersin and Alexandretta and portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo cannot be said to be purely Arab, and should be excluded from the limits demanded."¹⁶⁵ What is interesting for us to note however, is that these areas in the west are the only areas within the proposed Arab Kingdom that were thought of to be not "purely Arab." The fate of the Assyrians and Kurds in the east were not considered.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement

Back in June 1915, when the De Bunsen Committee had published their report, Asquith had felt that he was almost alone in agreeing with the recommendation to leave the Ottoman Empire intact. As the year progressed it became increasingly obvious that such an outcome would not be likely, and the voices that called for a break-up of the empire and of British territorial acquisitions eventually won the Prime Minister over.

By October 1915, the French had defined their own territorial claims to "the whole of Syria to the borders of Egypt and east to Mosul and the Persian frontier."¹⁶⁶ There was at this time interest among the French for formal negotiations to take place to iron out the differences between the French and British desiderata. Grey invited the French to come to London. The French sent Francois Georges Picot, an outspoken member of the Syrian Party in French politics.¹⁶⁷ His British counterpart was to be Mark Sykes, who had returned from his Asian trip and was building support in London for the alliance with Hussein and the Arabs.

The Sykes-Picot compromise is well-known, and we need not delve into all the details of that agreement here. We can note that Sykes felt he managed to create a compromise between the Arab desire for their own Kingdom and the French desire for control over Syria by

¹⁶⁵ McMahon to Hussein, 24 October 1915, reproduced in: Hurewitz, *Diplomacy in the near and Middle East*, 15.

¹⁶⁶ Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East*, 50.

¹⁶⁷ Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 190.

introducing the concept of zones of influence. The compromise, in turn, angered his colleagues in Cairo who had envisioned an Arabia under Egyptian control.¹⁶⁸

Sykes had earlier spent several years travelling through the Ottoman Empire, and he had published books about his travels and about the culture and history of the different regions of the empire: “Dar-Ul-Islam” from 1904 and “The Caliph’s Last Heritage” from 1915. In his books he recounts his meetings with the Kurds: “A Kurd is the simplest and most gullible of mortals.”¹⁶⁹ The population of the Middle East was widely derided by the observers from the West, so this type of description was not exclusive to the Kurds.¹⁷⁰

In the agreement the territory of the Kurds was divided by the three Entente Powers (fig. 2.3). The region the text actually referred to as Kurdistan was defined as: “to the south of Van and of Bitlis between Mush, Sert, the course of the Tigris, Jezireh-ben-Omar, the crest-line of the mountains which dominate Amadia”, and was awarded to the Russians, being outside of the strategical interests of either the French or British.¹⁷¹ Mosul had been considered strategically important to protect the British positions in Mesopotamia but establishing an Arab Kingdom would be sufficient to fulfil this task. Mosul and its environs were not important in their own right and thus granting them to the French zone was not necessarily problematic for the defence of Baghdad. The national aspirations of the Kurds themselves do not appear to have been considered at this point.

The Continuing Arab Question

After the signing of the Sykes-Picot Agreement this became the official British policy, strongly contradicting the undertakings of both Egypt and India. Cairo had desired to build up their own control over Syria, and when they had talked about independent Arab countries it was implicit to mean as British protectorates. Nobody at the Arab Bureau expected that the Arabs would be capable of ruling themselves without British guidance. Delhi, on the other hand, felt that creating the Arab kingdoms stipulated in the Sykes-Picot text would be

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 194.

¹⁶⁹ Mark Sykes quoted in: P. E. A, review of *The Caliph's Last Heritage: A Short History of the Turkish Empire*, Mark Sykes, *The Geographical Journal* 47, no. 6 (1916): 471.

¹⁷⁰ Leila Fawaz, "Globalization, Imperialism, and the Perspective of Foreign Soldiers in the Middle East," in *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates*, ed. Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan (London: Routledge, 2015), 31-38.

¹⁷¹ Letter from Earl Grey to Count Benckendorff, reproduced in: Hurewitz, *Diplomacy in the near and Middle East*, 21.,

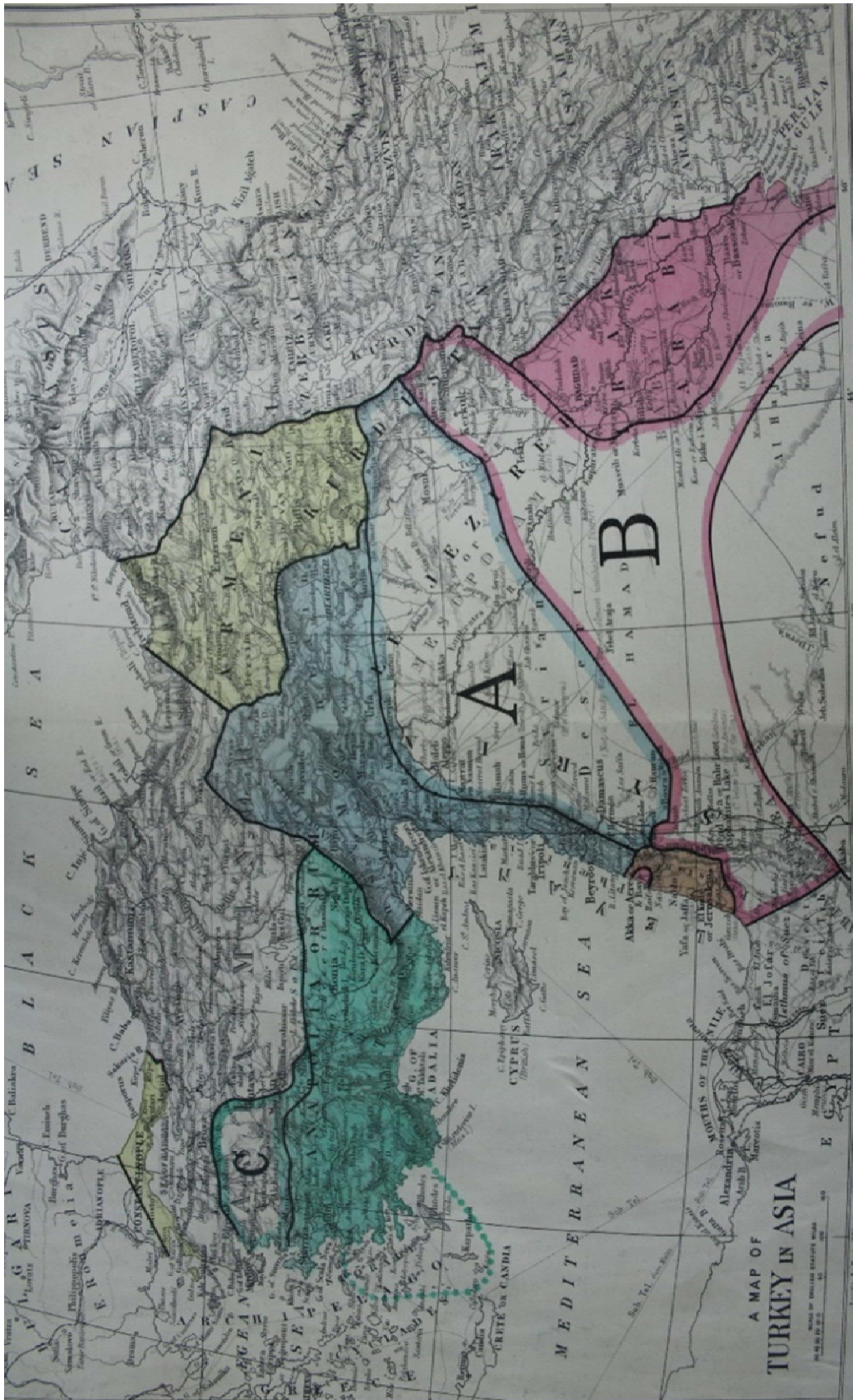


Figure 2.3 The Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne Agreement (including Sykes-Picot).
TNA, FO 925/41157 (The map is labelled 1916 even though the Italian area was agreed to only the following year.)

detrimental to their own efforts in the region. And in the event of a British backed Arab revolt, Delhi felt that the leadership of the Arabs should fall to Abdulaziz, the Emir of Nejd, instead.

At the same time as the negotiations between Sykes and Picot, the correspondence between McMahon and Sharif Hussein was still ongoing. McMahon eventually led Hussein to believe that the British had promised to support the creation of a large and independent Arabian kingdom. But Hussein had still found it difficult to accept the concessions the British were demanding on the territorial delimitations of the proposed kingdom.¹⁷² Apart from the above-mentioned towns of Mersina and Alexandretta, McMahon demanded the provinces of Basra and Baghdad to be excluded, due to their strategical importance to the British. Moreover, McMahon could only make promises for the areas within what he called “those frontiers wherein Great Britain is free to act without detriment to the interests of her ally, France.”¹⁷³ McMahon later claimed that he had intended his correspondence with Hussein to be so vague that it would not be binding for the British.¹⁷⁴

Concurrently with the McMahon–Hussein Correspondence, Percy Cox, the Consul-General at Bushehr who was in charge of Indian policy in the Persian Gulf, was negotiating with Abdulaziz, Sharif Hussein’s main rival for supremacy in Arabia. Abdulaziz agreed to allow British influence over his kingdom, while India agreed to recognize the independence and territorial integrity of the kingdom for Abdulaziz and “his sons and descendants.”¹⁷⁵ Cox was insistent on strengthening the network of Arab clients and set out to reaffirm Indian support for their independence. In their agreement with the Emir of Sabia, a small kingdom on the western coast of the Arabian Peninsula who, at this time, was a vassal of the Ottoman Empire, it was stated that: “The British Government [...] wishes solely to see the various Arab Rulers living peacefully and amicably together each in his own sphere, and all in friendship with the British Government.”¹⁷⁶ Cox and the Viceroy styled themselves as “The British Government” even though their acts contradicted the policies worked out by other sections of “The British Government.” Grey’s letter of authorization to McMahon had, at least in principle, consented to the establishment of Hussein’s kingdom, and the creation of an Arab kingdom was also

¹⁷² The McMahon – Hussein Correspondence, reproduced in: *ibid.*, 13-17.

¹⁷³ McMahon to Hussein, 24 October 1915, reproduced in: *ibid.*, 15.

¹⁷⁴ Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 186.

¹⁷⁵ “British Treaty with Ibn Sa’ud,” 26 December 1915, reproduced in: Hurewitz, *Diplomacy in the near and Middle East*, 18.

¹⁷⁶ “British Treaty with the Idrisi Sayyid of Sabya,” 30 April 1915, reproduced in: *ibid.*, 13.

underlying the Sykes-Picot compromise. A kingdom that would have included Mosul and the southern Kurdish towns.

A Change of the Guards

In the spring of 1916 the situation for the British in the Middle East didn't look good. The disastrous attempt at forcing their way through the Dardanelles had caused high casualties, the rush to capture Baghdad had led to the entire 6th division of the Indian Expeditionary Force to be annihilated and the Ottomans were constantly attempting to breach the British lines at the Suez Canal. What had been styled as "the Sick Man of Europe" had held up remarkably well under the pressure of a three-front war.

The war against Germany had also ground into a stalemate, and within British politics the strains of the poor management of the war effort was beginning to produce cracks. Pressure was building up from the Conservatives against the Liberal Asquith, but a fissure was also growing within the Premier's own party. Asquith invited the Conservatives into a coalition government, and tried to play the political game, but within the end of 1916 the intrigues had gotten the better of him and he was ousted in a palace coup staged by a group within the Liberal party led by David Lloyd George. As Andrew Bonar Law, an influential Conservative who had been leader of the opposition before the first coalition government, pointed out: "In war it is necessary not only to be active but to seem active."¹⁷⁷ This was Asquith's main issue, he had the air of being relaxed and unhurried. Supported mostly by the Conservatives Lloyd George took over the Premiership while Asquith and Grey went into opposition.¹⁷⁸

Lloyd George had in his youth been a radical anti-imperialist, and a fervent opponent of Britain joining the war, but by the time he ascended to the Premiership he had become more pragmatic. After taking the reins of the government Lloyd George moved towards more Conservative views on imperialism, and to the thought that the Middle Eastern fronts would be instrumental to winning the war.¹⁷⁹ He insisted that if it was not for the General Staff insisting on the primacy of the Western Front, the Ottoman Empire would have fallen before the end of 1916. He claimed that the "façade the Turks presented [...] had nothing behind it",

¹⁷⁷ Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 231.

¹⁷⁸ Adrian Gregory, "Britain and Ireland," in *A Companion to World War I*, ed. John Horne (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 410.

¹⁷⁹ Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 234-236.

and that it was a “War Office game” to pretend that the Ottoman forces were strong.¹⁸⁰ To head the Foreign Office Lloyd George brought in Arthur Balfour, who had been a leading Conservative policymaker and one-time Prime Minister. But Balfour was not invited in to the War Cabinet, and was frequently left out of the decision-making regarding the conduct of the war. Lloyd George took interest in and control over much of the foreign policy-making, to the point that Balfour deridingly called him a dictator.¹⁸¹

As an illustration of Lloyd George’s new direction, we can look at the negotiations he attempted to instigate with Enver Pasha, the Ottoman War Minister. Lloyd George offered Enver Pasha a deal to leave the war on British terms, terms that included making Mesopotamia and Palestine British protectorates, giving independence to Arabia, but leaving the rest of the Ottoman Empire intact. Lloyd George completely disregarded his allies’ claims and any agreements made prior to his assumption of the office. The proposal also included a stipulation on autonomy for Armenia and Syria, but one can assume that the future of the Kurds was not considered in this plan.¹⁸²

Lloyd George’s French counterpart, Georges Clemenceau, who became Prime Minister in November 1917, was the British Prime Minister’s direct opposite. Clemenceau had no desire for acquiring overseas territories, he was only championing French influence in Syria because of political pressure.¹⁸³ It would become apparent that Clemenceau’s leniency would be something Lloyd-George would attempt to take advantage of in the future negotiations on the Middle East.¹⁸⁴

Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne: Tying Loose Ends

By this time the Italians had learned that their allies had come to an agreement among themselves about the division of war spoils in the Middle East, and they wanted a clarification on how this would fit in with their own claims in Anatolia, and the agreement made in London in 1915. In April of 1917 the Prime Ministers from three of the four powers met in the French village of Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne to iron out the differences and tie together loose ends to finalize the quadrilateral agreement on the Entente Alliance’s war goals. The

¹⁸⁰ Lloyd George quoted in: *ibid.*, 264-265.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 234.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 266-267.

¹⁸³ Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East*, 59.

¹⁸⁴ Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 267.

Russian government had by this time fallen to the February Revolution and the future of Russia within the Entente Alliance was uncertain.

The Agreement made at Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne added an Italian area and zone of influence to the Sykes-Picot map (fig. 2.3), and the three Powers formally recognized each other's claims.¹⁸⁵ The text included a clause that said that the agreement was "[s]ubject to Russia's assent."¹⁸⁶ However, the Russian situation was not forthcoming and such assent was never procured.¹⁸⁷ In addition, Lloyd George had added another stipulation that said that:

It is understood that if, at the conclusion of peace, the advantages embodied in the agreements contracted among the allied Powers regarding the allocation to each of a part of the Ottoman Empire cannot be entirely assured to one or more of the said Powers, then in whatever alteration or arrangement of provinces of the Ottoman Empire resulting from the war the maintenance of equilibrium in the Mediterranean shall be given equitable consideration.¹⁸⁸

This clause would become important later, in Lloyd George's attempts at getting these agreements annulled. But, considering his insistence on disregarding the Sykes-Picot Agreement at the Peace Congress, it is interesting to note that in 1917 he had no qualms about signing this document.

Conclusion

The Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne Agreement had been an attempt to unify all the war aims of the Entente Alliance, but in the end, Russia would never sign the document. The authority of the document could therefore easily be challenged. But at the time the important thing was to hold the alliance together as much as possible. The faltering Russian Empire was not helping the Entente's war fortunes, and the future was looking rather grim.

It is not an understatement to say that in all of the above negotiations Kurdistan or the Kurds were never particularly important to any of the Great Powers involved. The region was, as so

¹⁸⁵ Helmreich, "Anglo-French Repudiation," 99-100.

¹⁸⁶ "Agreement Approved in London, 18 August 1915 [sic]," quoted in: Hurewitz, *Diplomacy in the near and Middle East*, 24.

¹⁸⁷ Helmreich, *From Paris to Sevres*, 7.

¹⁸⁸ "Agreement Approved in London, 18 August 1915 [sic]," quoted in: Hurewitz, *Diplomacy in the near and Middle East*, 25.

many times before in history, considered a natural place to establish the frontiers between the empires, as they expanded into the Middle East. The Russians were interested in Armenia, The British Mesopotamia and the French Syria, Kurdistan ended up squeezed in between them. Much of Kurdistan was also handed to the proposed Arab Kingdom, whose northern boundary is just a straight line, drawn rather arbitrarily. There does not appear to have been any significant consideration for ethnic minorities within this new Arab Kingdom.

The British were aware of the Kurdish population as significantly different from the Turks or Arabs. They were seen as warrior-like and uncultivated, the de Bunsen report noted that they would make good soldiers for the Imperial Army. But, throughout the negotiations the primacy of the British Empire was what was paramount, the agreements and concessions were made only as a means to an end. That end being to build and strengthen the military alliances at a time where the outcome of the war looked grim.

Chapter 3: How to Win the Peace?

The falling out of Russia, the intervention of America, and the general development of the international situation have made the principles of nationality and democracy and the right of self-determination, in which these principles are translated into action, not merely one element among others in the aims of the Allies, but the essential aim and expression of their cause.

-The Foreign Office, November 1918.¹⁸⁹

The War to End All Wars had finally been won. There still remained the question of how to win the peace. The events of the last couple of years of the war had led to some momentous changes in British attitudes towards the coming negotiations. As the above quote suggests, the idea of “self-determination” had become an important part of British views on a Middle East settlement. The text, from a Foreign Office memorandum, continued on to state that Great Britain, alone among the Great Powers, was responsible for the victory over the Ottoman Empire. At the end of the war the British had thus, at least according to themselves, placed themselves in a position of power vis-à-vis the French and Italians.

Prior to the Great War the British policy towards the Ottoman Empire had been to support the empire’s territorial integrity. After finding themselves at war with the Ottomans and allies with the Russians, who openly desired territorial expansion at the expense of the Ottomans, the British position had suddenly become one where they needed to adopt new policies towards the aftermath of the war. At the conclusion of the war in the Middle East the British were standing as the military occupier of large parts of what had been Ottoman lands.

The plethora of agreements and public statements concerning the aftermath of the war had led to a rather confusing situation. Now the beginnings of negotiations were threatening to descend into an imperial rivalry between Great Britain and France, akin to the Great Game between Britain and Russia in the nineteenth century, almost exactly like Lord Kitchener had

¹⁸⁹ TNA CAB 29/2: P84, 23, “Foreign Office Memorandum respecting the Settlement of Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula,” 21 November 1918.

predicted.¹⁹⁰ This chapter examines how the British built their post-war policies towards the Middle East with a particular eye towards Kurdistan.

The Wilsonian Moment

In 1917 the United States joined the war against the Central Powers and brought with it a completely different ideology towards the post-war settlement than what was evident from the secret deals conducted between the older Entente Allies. Even though the United States never declared war against the Ottoman Empire, they nevertheless would be party to establishing the peace in the Middle East. The American President, Woodrow Wilson, had championed a philosophy of what he styled “the consent of the governed.”¹⁹¹ The idea being that no Power should have the right to subdue and control a population, without the consent of said population. Wilson also added in ideas of international law where all nations, no matter how small, were entitled to the same treatment. To ensure the survival of this system Wilson envisioned an international institution where all states were equal members, this was the seed of what would become the League of Nations.

Already in May 1916 Wilson had professed these ideas in a public address, and even though the US was not in the war at this time, Wilson set out on a campaign to broker peace and become the champion of a new and international society.¹⁹² The United States was eventually forced to join the war and with them they brought the Wilsonian Ideals to the Entente Alliance. Wilson was aware that the British and the French did not hold the same desires towards the peace settlement as he did. But the President was intent on changing their minds and to “force them to our way of thinking.”¹⁹³

The efforts the President had made about spreading ideas of the equality of nations and consent of the populace had been noticed among vast populations who were at the time subjects to one or another of the European Powers. So when Wilson laid down his vision of what ideas the peace should be based upon, in a Congress address in January 1918, the World was listening. Concerning the future of the Ottoman Empire Wilson declared:

¹⁹⁰ See Chapter 2.

¹⁹¹ Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment*, 22.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 19-26.

¹⁹³ Woodrow Wilson quoted in: Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 253.

The Turkish portions of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development, and the Dardanelles should be permanently opened as a free passage to the ships and commerce of all nations under international guarantees.¹⁹⁴

The only population of the Ottoman Empire considered fit for “a secure sovereignty” was the Turkish. Other groups were only accorded “security of life” and “opportunity of autonomous development.” Obviously, these phrases are very vague and non-committal.

In January 1918 Lloyd George had also held a major speech revealing his new war aims for the British Empire, where the British Prime Minister stole the term “self-determination” from the language of the Bolsheviks. The Communists had by this time taken control over the Russian Revolution and were conducting a campaign to undermine and expose the Western Powers’ imperialist and hypocritical conduct. Lloyd George took the Bolshevik language and fused it with Wilson’s ideals in an effort to “regain the diplomatic initiative for the Allies.”¹⁹⁵ However, just as the Russians were claiming, Lloyd George had no intention of extending the concept of self-determination to the subjects of his own Empire.

Wilson’s view on establishing independence for non-European peoples was that they were not considered civilized enough to be able to stand on their own feet. A civilizing influence needed to be brought to them from Europe and they would be helped to stand on their own through gradual reform.¹⁹⁶ Lloyd George saw in this a way the two state leaders could combine their wishes for the Middle East: for the British to be granted an international concession to retain their economic and political influence over the areas they had conquered, and would conquer, from the Ottomans during the war. This would become the basis for the League of Nations Mandate System. However, as the Conservative ideologue Leo Amery, who was an under-secretary of the government at the time, put it: there was no reason to think that the Mandates would make British control of the Middle East temporary. Even with

¹⁹⁴ President Wilson's Message to Congress, January 8 1918; Records of the United States Senate; Record Group 46; Records of the United States Senate; National Archives.

¹⁹⁵ Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment*, 39.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

allowing a certain degree of independence to the countries of the region, they still could remain within the framework of the British Imperial System.¹⁹⁷

There was also a question to be answered about who the peoples were who should get their own new states. The Foreign Office Memorandum quoted at the beginning of this chapter discussed the effect of the war on the local populations. The local populations are tallied as: “Arabs, Armenians, Jewish colonists, Nestorians, and latterly also the Greeks.”¹⁹⁸ The Kurds were not included. The text included some deliberation on the delimitation of Armenia, where they concluded that “[it] would be expedient to extend the area of Armenia as widely as possible, so as to include all territories north of the Arab boundary in which there is a mixed population of Turks, Armenian, and Kurds.”¹⁹⁹ Thus, the writers of the document clearly considered the Kurds a distinctly separate group, but they still chose to leave them out in the list of groups whose interests they were proposing for the British to consider. The reasons why the Foreign Office left out the Kurds from their deliberations can only be speculated upon, but it does illustrate the point that the Kurds were not seen as having national aspirations worthy of western attention.

The French and the British had issued a joint declaration about their intents of the future of the Ottoman Empire shortly after the armistice of Mudros.²⁰⁰ The declaration was filled with the diplomatic wordings of the Wilsonian ideals, but it is quite clear that neither the British nor the French considered the liberated peoples of the Ottoman Empire as developed enough to be left to establish their own independent states. The Wilsonian ideals of self-determination were made prominent in the armistice agreed to with the Germans, but the liberated peoples of Europe were considered vastly different to those of Asia. As the final wording of the Treaty of Versailles later put it, these areas were “inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world.”²⁰¹

¹⁹⁷ Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 283.

¹⁹⁸ TNA CAB 29/2: P84, 23, “Foreign Office Memorandum respecting the Settlement of Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula,” 21 November 1918.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁰⁰ “Anglo-French Declaration”, 7 November 1917, reproduced in: Hurewitz, *Diplomacy in the near and Middle East*, 30.

²⁰¹ TNA FO 93/36/76, Covenant of the League of Nations, Article 22, 28 June 1919.

Welcoming the World to Paris

At the end of 1918, with the Entente victorious on all fronts, the work started to invite all parties to the war to an elaborate Peace Conference in Paris. The intention had been to host a preliminary series of formal plenary sessions to draw up the documents for the peace with the Central Powers. The Central Powers would then be invited to the Peace Conference proper where the suggested peace agreements would be put before them. These plenaries consisted of those countries who had declared war on Germany, or severed ties with them, but would be dominated by the three Major Powers: Great Britain, USA and France. Japan had originally been considered a Major Power, but their disinterest in the questions concerning Europe led to them playing only a minor role at the conference.²⁰² The historian Harold Temperley, who himself had been a member of the British delegation, described how the important policy-makers would gather at either the Hotel Crillon, where the French delegation was housed, or the Hotel Majestic, the home of the British.²⁰³ From the beginning, the Conference recognized the supremacy of the Great Powers, in a clear breach of the Wilsonian ideal of equality of nations. The dominance of the Great Powers was inevitable, as Temperley put it: “It was a recognition at the outset of the fact that legal power must correspond to actual power.”²⁰⁴

Temperley’s narrative shows how positive and optimistic the view of the Conference was from the members of the Great Powers delegations:

So great a diversity of minds has seldom been associated on a single task under one roof. Men who never imagined they had anything in common began to discover how much in common they really had. In friendly informal intercourse they came to see how they differed, and also to appreciate the sincerity of view which were not their own. A respect for each other’s opinions grew up which could scarcely have developed under other conditions. [...] More effective agencies for creating an opinion on international affairs at once charitable, sane, and well-informed have never been devised than these delegations so long as they existed.²⁰⁵

²⁰² Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment*, 57.

²⁰³ Temperley, *History of the Peace Conference*, 1, vi.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 249.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, v-vi.

Echoing the sentiments that had prevailed in the first days of the Great War, the leaders of the Allies had envisioned that the negotiations would be swift. For instance, Lloyd George had predicted the whole proceedings to take just a week.²⁰⁶ It was generally thought that the Major Powers agreed on the main questions concerning the peace; that only minor details were left to be wrought out. This was going to turn out to be far more difficult than any of them had imagined.²⁰⁷

Arriving at the conference in Paris the British considered those agreements and assurances made during the war to be invalid. The events of 1917 and 1918 had rendered most of them, if not all, outdated. The Armistice of Mudros had been agreed to behind the backs of the French and had provided for a position of strength for the British Empire, not only towards the French but also towards the Ottomans. The British had a standing army of more than a million men occupying the Ottoman Empire and fully intended to use this superior military position on the ground to advance their agenda.²⁰⁸ In order to fulfil this, they felt necessitated to scheme to reduce the position of France “to the lowest possible level.”²⁰⁹ The British desired to take advantage of the changed situations to win back the compromises and concessions assented to during the wartime negotiations.²¹⁰ In May 1919 Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister, described his point of view to his French counterpart Clemenceau; that Sykes and Picot had had some conversations back in 1916, but they were only conversations and had led to nothing that his government considered binding.²¹¹

The French also expressed a desire to re-negotiate the inter-allied agreements, but wished to use the agreements made as basis for further negotiations, whereas the British position was to use the facts established on the ground as this basis.²¹² The way the British saw it, the facts on the ground were that it had been the British that had captured, and were occupying, the territories seized from the Ottoman Empire, “without any allied aid.”²¹³ The French had been given control over Beirut and the Lebanese coast, but this was after the British had captured it. Interestingly, the Indian government used the same argument against the British; claiming that it had been they who had defeated the Ottomans and they who should reap most of the

²⁰⁶ Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 403.

²⁰⁷ Helmreich, *From Paris to Sevres*, 23-24.

²⁰⁸ Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 385.

²⁰⁹ Helmreich, *From Paris to Sevres*, 13.

²¹⁰ See Chapter 2.

²¹¹ TNA FO 371/4215: 53/78496, Letter from Lord Derby to Lord Curzon, 23 May 1919.

²¹² TNA CAB 29/2: P.48, “Mesopotamia: Memorandum” by Sir Erle Richards, not dated, but filed late 1918, (Richards quotes a “note verbale” from Clemenceau to the Italian Government dated 28 November 1918.)

²¹³ *Ibid.*

benefits.²¹⁴ The Indian Government still had their eyes on Mesopotamia as a colony they could develop and reap benefits from.

India's Position

The British Empire was also allowed separate delegations for the Dominions: Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and India.²¹⁵ The Dominion Delegations were not strictly speaking independent, they were admitted under the name of the British Empire, but they were allowed to independently put in memoranda to the conference on issues of particular interest to themselves. The India Delegation was headed by the Secretary of State for India, Edwin Samuel Montagu. It otherwise consisted of the native Indians Satyendra Prasanna Sinha and Ganga Singh, the Maharaja of Bikaner. Montagu's position became one where he was forced to balance between the interests of the Indian nationalist movement, the Muslim population and those of the British Empire. A position that would often bring him in direct opposition to Lloyd-George.²¹⁶

There was a strong nationalist movement in India which had now been stoked up by the rhetoric of President Wilson.²¹⁷ In 1885 the nationalists had formed the Indian National Congress to advocate increasing devolution of power from Great Britain to the local institutions. By the end of 1918 the Congress had split into a power struggle between those who wanted home-rule within the Empire and those fighting for complete independence.²¹⁸ Not convinced that the Indian Delegation approved by London would be representative of the interest of the Indian People, the Indian National Congress appointed their own delegation to Paris, consisting of the radical nationalists Bar Gangadhar Tilak and Mohandas Gandhi. The Congress Delegation arrived at Paris proclaiming the "hope of India" in the Wilsonian doctrine of self-determination, fully expecting President Wilson to listen. The Great Powers, however, brushed off the issue with vague promises of it being "taken up in due time" with no plans whatsoever to do so.²¹⁹

²¹⁴ Interestingly Erle Richards' memorandum agrees with the Indian point of view, even before the Indian delegation formulated it.

²¹⁵ India did not have Dominion status at this time, but this distinction is not relevant to this thesis. The Indian Delegation was treated in the same manner as the Dominion Delegations.

²¹⁶ Helmreich, *From Paris to Sevres*, 116, 216.

²¹⁷ Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment*, 77.

²¹⁸ Maya Tudor, *The Promise of Power: The Origins of Democracy in India and Autocracy in Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 45-55.

²¹⁹ Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment*, 159-168.

Montagu warned that the Indian Muslims would feel betrayed by their government if the peace accord would allow non-Muslim countries to take over Muslim people who had previously been ruled by Muslims.²²⁰ “There was no religious issue in the war – none at all. But there are religious issues in the peace,” he proclaimed.²²¹ It is interesting how he so offhandedly dismissed the jihad and all the elements relating to it, which had been taken seriously during the war, particularly within the Indian Government.²²² But also the administration in Cairo had been concerned about a Muslim uprising in support of the Caliph, which had been a reasoning for not deploying any regiments drawn from the locals in the defence of Egypt.²²³ He particularly objected to the planned severing of Istanbul from the Ottoman State: “I must repeat that the Indian delegation cannot under any circumstances be parties to a Peace which removes the Turkish Government from Istanbul.”²²⁴ Balfour’s dry retort was: “I am quite unable to see why Heaven or any other Power should object to our telling the Moslem what he ought to think.”²²⁵ Interestingly the French proposal to evict the Sultan from Istanbul had had almost the exact opposite reasoning; that if the Sultan was allowed to keep his empire with Istanbul as his capital, the Muslims of the world would look up to him as one who stood undefeated in the face of the power of the Europeans.²²⁶

India also objected to the point that only the Great European Powers had interests concerning the class A mandates. India felt they had been instrumental in defeating the Ottoman Empire; “I could point out that these countries which formed part of the old Turkish Empire, have been mainly conquered or liberated by Indian armies.”²²⁷ Stressing that Mesopotamia had since been administered by Indian officials and that Mesopotamia was represented at the Peace Conference through the Indian Delegation, Montagu proclaimed that India was very much interested in the mandates of the Middle East.

²²⁰ TNA CAB 29/28, BED 16th minutes, Minutes of a Meeting of the BED, 3 April 1919.

²²¹ TNA CAB 29/17: WCP 1057, Montagu’s comments on Balfour’s reply to the Turks. 23 June 1919.

²²² See Chapter 2.

²²³ Ulrichsen, *First World War in the Middle East*, 101-102.

²²⁴ TNA CAB 29/17: WCP 1057, Montagu’s comments on Balfour’s reply to the Turks. 23 June 1919.

²²⁵ TNA CAB 29/17: WCP 1057, Balfour’s remarks on Montagu’s comments. 23 June 1919.

²²⁶ TNA FO 371/4179: 2117/40360, Letter from Earl Curzon to Earl Derby, 12 March 1919.

²²⁷ TNA CAB 29/9: WCP224, Memorandum by the Secretary of State for India to the Peace Conference, 10 March 1919.

Ottoman Delegation

The Ottoman delegation would arrive at Paris with a list of demands and points to be negotiated. They claimed their trust in the belief that “in the sentiments of justice of the Peace Conference the Ottoman people does not despair of reaching a solution in conformity with its legitimate aspirations and one fitted to ensure in the East that durable peace which it so greatly needed.”²²⁸ The Ottomans fully expected the parties to arrive at a peace deal that both sides could agree on.

The new Ottoman government presented a line to the Peace Conference that was similar to the German; that they had themselves gotten rid of the regime that was to fault for the war and the atrocities carried out during the war. Since the current government was not the same as the one that had carried out the war, they urged the Conference for leniency. However, the Allied Powers had no interest in using the table of the Peace Conference as peace negotiations between the two sides of the war. The intention behind the Peace Conference had always been for the Allies to lay down the conditions for peace that they would then impose on their vanquished enemies. The Ottomans, as with the Germans, were allowed to put forward their views but were not invited to take part in any actual negotiations.²²⁹

The Inconvenient Claims of the French

In November 1918 the Foreign Office authored a paper suggesting a British policy towards the newly formed states that were appearing in the previously Russian territories of Southern Caucasus, penned by under-secretary Eyre Crowe. After the Armistice of Mudros and the subsequent withdrawal of Ottoman forces, the British had moved an army in from Persia to ensure the region did not collapse into anarchy. Even though it was important to control and pacify the borders surrounding the British interests in Persia and Mesopotamia, it was already clear at this point that the British had no desire or intention to shoulder the burden of any mandate in the area:

It is undoubtedly a British interest that regions so near to those countries in the Middle East in which we have a direct stake should not be allowed to

²²⁸ TNA CAB 29/17: WCP1066, “Memorandum concerning the New Organisation of the Ottoman Empire” from the Ottoman Delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, signed Hamad Ferid. 23 June 1919.

²²⁹ TNA CAB 29/17: WCP1044, British Empire Delegation answer to the Turkish delegates, prepared by Balfour. 23 June 1919.

lapse into anarchy. On the other hand it would be undesirable, because dangerous from the point of view of our future relations with Russia, that England should be the Power whose mandate it was to offer advice and support to the Caucasian states.²³⁰

Crowe's proposed solution was to offer the mandates to the French, thinking that this would make it easier to force the French to "relinquish some of her inconvenient claims" from the Sykes-Picot Agreement.²³¹ He did, however, state that an American mandate would be even more suitable to the British position, but that the Americans would likely not accept this burden, "unless we are to assume that their ostensible reluctance is only a pretence and that they would gracefully yield under the friendly and flattering pressure of the rest of the world."²³²

The "inconvenient claims" of the French were for the British to hand over control of Syria and of the Mosul vilayet, areas assigned to the French sphere of influence as per Sykes-Picot (fig 2.3), but which the British had conquered without French help. The British now considered it obstinate of the French to continue their claims to these territories. In Syria the British were supporting Prince Faisal in setting up an Arab kingdom under British protection. The Arabs had built what was described as "an effective administration" in Damascus and it was thought that "the idea of French assistance is obnoxious to them."²³³ Meanwhile, the prospect of significant oil deposits around Mosul had made that region more attractive and the British were not inclined to give it up easily.²³⁴

General Gilbert Clayton, who had helped organize the Arab Revolt, noted the impracticality of dividing an independent Arab kingdom into zones of influence, as had been proposed by the Sykes-Picot Agreement:

For many years to come advice and assistance to the newly-formed Arab State must entail a considerable measure of actual administration. French and British methods of administration are widely different, and confusion and inefficiency must result. Worst of all, such an arrangement contains the

²³⁰ TNA CAB 29/1: P31, Memorandum by Eyre Crowe, 7 November 1918.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ TNA CAB 29/2: P84, "Foreign Office Memorandum respecting the Settlement of Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula," 21 November 1918.

²³⁴ Helmreich, *From Paris to Sevres*, 205-213. Ulrichsen, *First World War in the Middle East*, 144-146.

seeds of future friction between France and Great Britain in a region where the policies of the two countries have been in opposition for many years.²³⁵

The British had had experience with this type of zones of influence with their sharing of Persia with the Russians, and it should be expected that they would have built up knowledge and expertise on how to administrate such a situation effectively. The arguments in this paper hint at a British attempt to pinpoint reasons for maintaining British influence over Syria, rather than attempts at understanding the situation on the ground.

The Foreign Office also pointed out that the Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne Agreement included what was referred to as a “contingent clause”, i.e. a clause that would render the agreement invalid if its conditions were not met.²³⁶ And the case could be made that this clause “refers not merely to the Italian claims but to the whole series of Agreements regarding Turkey.”²³⁷ France, having assented to this agreement, “would appear to have admitted thereby that the clause applies retrospectively to the earlier agreement between her and Great Britain.”²³⁸ The contingency in question referred to the issue of the balance of power among the Great Powers in the Middle East. The Foreign Office’s stance on this matter was that the new order envisaged for the Middle East was one of establishing new, independent nation-states, and not of imperial expansion: “There will arise no French, Italian, or British dominions or protectorates [...], but entirely new and independent national States.”²³⁹ Thus the question of the balance of power had become moot, and with it, all the agreements Great Britain had made with their allies during the war: “The choice will be theirs, not ours, and we cannot be responsible for maintaining the balance of power where it is affected by actions other than our own.”²⁴⁰

The Foreign Office stated that the Anglo-French Declaration bound the Great Powers to assent to the wishes of the population in question as to which Power they chose to ask for assistance from. At the same time, it described a great animosity among the people of Anatolia and Syria towards the Italians and French respectively, expecting that those

²³⁵ TNA CAB 29/2: P83, “Memorandum on French and Arab Claims in the Middle East in Relation to British Interests,” 19 December 1918.

²³⁶ TNA CAB 29/2: P84, “Foreign Office Memorandum respecting the Settlement of Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula,” 21 November 1918.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid. “Theirs” in this case refers to the people of the Middle East.

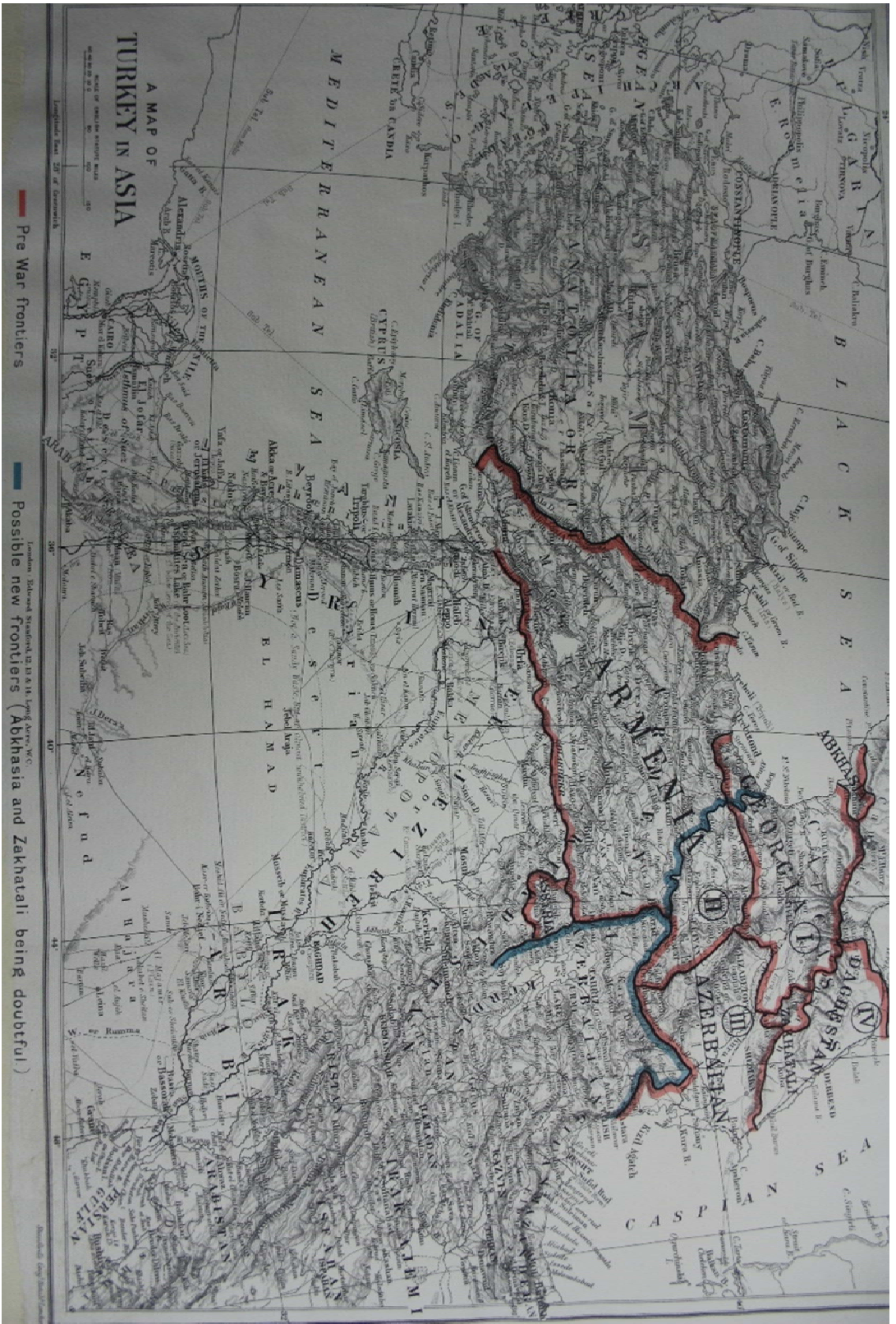


Figure 3.1 Map showing possible new borders in the Caucasus, dap, drawn up to accompany E. Crowe's Memorandum, 7 November 1918
TNA MPI 1/377

populations would under no circumstance volunteer to be placed under the control of those Powers.²⁴¹ Thus the British laid the framework for justifying their own expansion of influence into areas of interest to the British Empire, by using the Wilsonian ideals of self-determination as the basis for their expansion.

Could there be a Future for Kurdistan?

The Kurds were not mentioned by a word in Crowe's memorandum. The map that was used to draw up the proposed borders mentioned in the paper has the name Kurdistan written twice, as two different geographical regions, separated by the old Ottoman-Persian frontier. Crowe's lines are drawn straight across the name, seemingly without any consideration for it at all (fig. 3.1).

Mark Sykes proposed the idea that it might be in British interest to give all of Kurdistan to Persia:

[T]ransfer Turkish Kurdistan to Persian sovereignty on the condition that the Urmia district should be united with it administratively, and that the whole should form an autonomous province with foreign assistance in its administration. This would (a) secure an effective reconstruction of the Urmia (b) unite the Nestorians on both sides of the frontier (c) satisfy long-standing Persian claims on the former Turko-Persian frontier, and (d) safeguard our position strategically in Mesopotamia.²⁴²

This proposed autonomous province was not intended for the benefit of the Kurds, but rather to secure the safety of the Christian communities in the region. The British could not commit to this proposal as neither the political nor the military will existed to engage in such a monumental project.

In the autumn of 1918 Erle Richards, the Legal Member of the Executive Council of India, drew up a memorandum on British interests in Mesopotamia. In this memorandum Richards proposed to set up Kurdistan as a separate entity from Mesopotamia. In the new suggestion Kurdistan was joined together into a confederation, "autonomous, but protected by some one Power." It could not be just any Power, though. The British interests in Mesopotamia were

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Mark Sykes quoted in: Eskander, "Britain's Policy Towards the Kurdish Question," 159.

too important to allow any potential rival to get a foothold in the area. The Kurds would become “a constant source of inconvenience if left to themselves” but “a standing menace if under the influence of an intriguing Power.”²⁴³ The only solution would be for the British to take the mandate upon themselves.

To illustrate and propose a potential British policy towards the division of the Ottoman Empire the Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office (PID) drew up a series of maps. Here the Foreign Office have helpfully drawn up the borders of the proposed future states based on “the Principles of Self-Determination”, however without actually conferring with the populations in question (fig. 3.2). What is called Kurdistan on the map, but in the text referred to as “South-Kurdistan”, is in this instance considered a possible independent state.²⁴⁴

It is interesting to note the little Assyrian state on this map, between Armenia, Kurdistan and Persia.²⁴⁵ The Assyrians were the Nestorian Christian community, who had a history of a volatile relationship with the Kurds and it was therefore thought that they needed to be separated from the Kurdish state. Like the Armenians, the Assyrians had also been “badly treated” during the war and their fellow Christians in the west were clearly sympathetic to their calls for compensation, particularly among the Americans who had missions in the area.²⁴⁶ The Assyrian Delegation to the Conference in Paris would put forth some rather extensive territorial claims, stretching from the Euphrates west of Diyarbakir to Lake Urmia, including Diyarbakir and Mosul. It is quite obvious that the British could never have consented to such an Assyrian state, but a smaller autonomous region in the area surrounding Hakkari appears to have been considered.²⁴⁷

It was debated whether the “Arab Countries” should become one single state or if it should be divided into several. The proposal put forward by the PID was to split the area into three kingdoms and hand them out to the sons of King Hussein (fig. 3.3). Faisal was granted Syria, with the interior, including Transjordan, but excluding Lebanon. Abdullah was granted Iraq. In this proposal Kurdistan would be united with the Jezireh and Kuwait to form the kingdom

²⁴³ TNA CAB 29/2: P.48, “Mesopotamia: Memorandum” by Sir Erle Richards, not dated, but filed late 1918.

²⁴⁴ TNA FO 925/41231, “Memorandum Respecting the Settlement of Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula,” 21 November 1918.

²⁴⁵ Labelled “E” on the map.

²⁴⁶ TNA FO 925/41231, Map Accompanying “Memorandum Respecting the Settlement of Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula,” 21 November 1918.

²⁴⁷ Maria T. O’Shea, *Trapped between the Map and Reality: Geography and Perceptions of Kurdistan* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 114.



Figure 3.2 Map showing suggested new borders, accompanying Memorandum Respecting the Settlement of Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula, 21 November 1918, TNA FO 925/41231

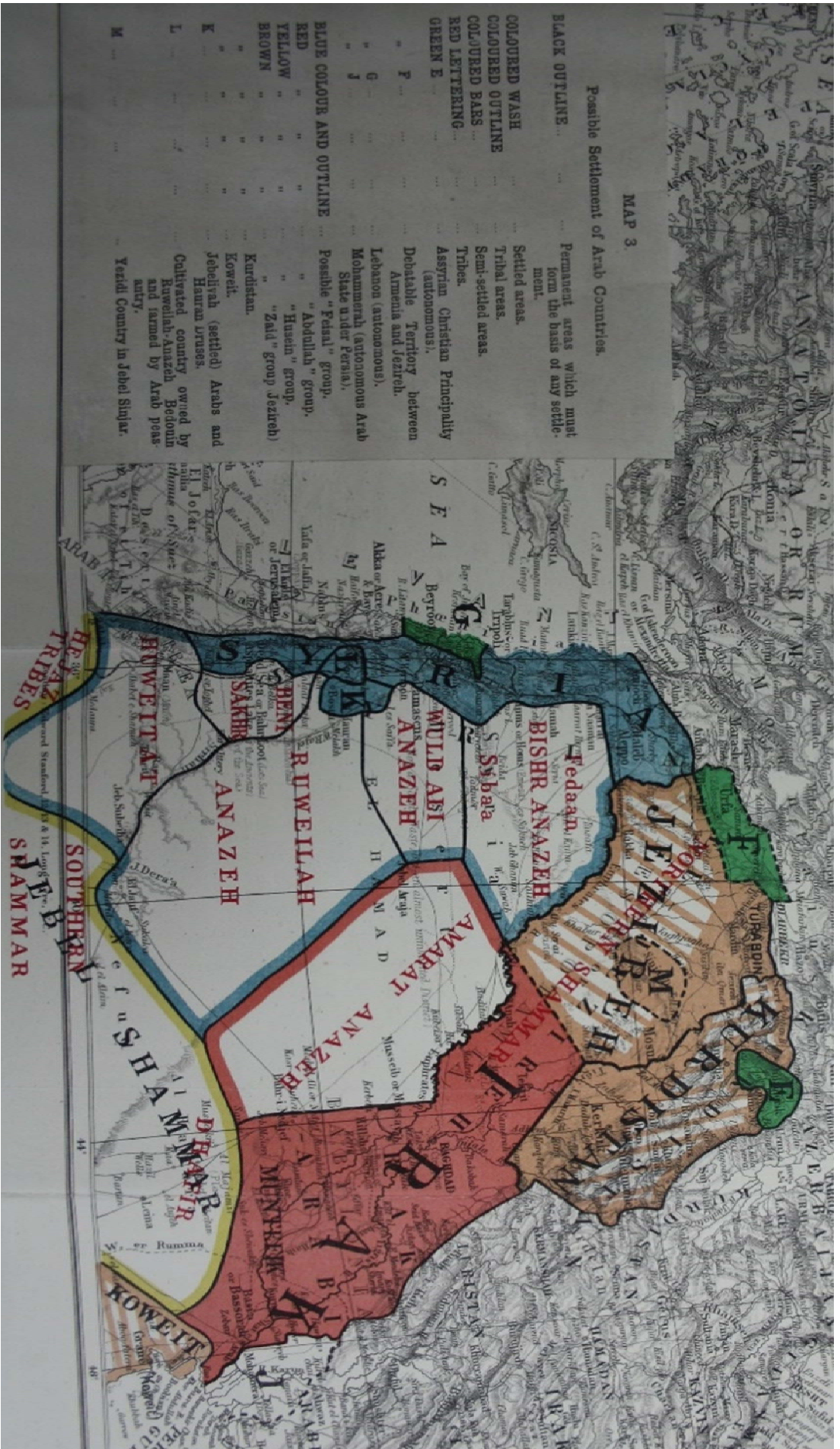


Figure 3.3 Map showing possible settlement of Arab Countries, accompanying Memorandum Respecting the Settlement of Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula, 21 November 1918, TNA FO 925/41231

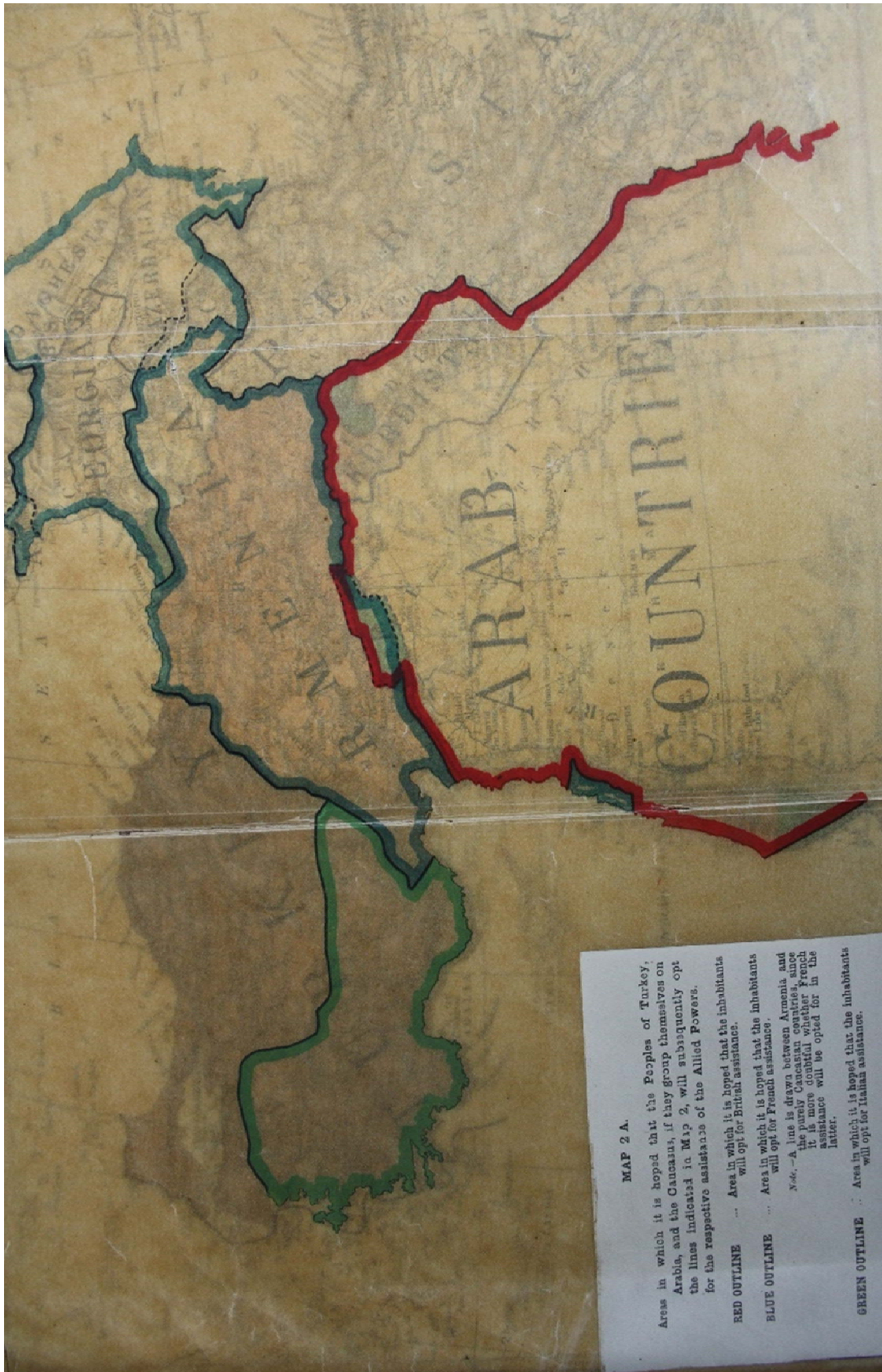


Figure 3.4 Map showing proposed mandatory influence, accompanying Memorandum Respecting the Settlement of Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula, 21 November 1918, TNA FO 925/41231

proposed for prince Zaid. This proposal also included a separate entity for the Yezidis, though still part of Zaid's kingdom.²⁴⁸

In any case, no matter how many states would be formed, it was considered a matter of course that the new states would need assistance from the Great Powers to establish their independence. Continuing with the Wilsonian language the British “hoped that the People of Turkey, Arabia, and the Caucasus, if they group themselves on the lines indicated [...] will subsequently opt for the respective assistance of the Allied Powers” (fig. 3.4).²⁴⁹ It being implicit in this that the populations in question did not have any other option but to adhere to the “hopes” of the European Powers. It's interesting to note that only half of the remaining Turkish republic would want to ask for “assistance” from Italy, the northern half is left to their own devices. Which is an indication that the proposed mandate borders were catering more to the imperial interests of the Great Powers than the need or desire for such mandatory guidance from the population in question. The Foreign Office even noted that any Italian attempts to take control of these areas would be “bitterly and justifiably opposed by the inhabitants.”²⁵⁰ The Italians were seen as “oppressive and incompetent” with regards to their own colonial history.²⁵¹

If we compare the maps, the British proposal would entail that the French would have to relinquish a large part of the territories allotted to them back in 1916 while the rest would be turned into an Armenian mandate. The French were left with Lebanon, but apart from that the British took for themselves the entirety of the Arab lands. It is difficult to conceive that such a proposal could ever have been seriously considered by the French Government.

In January 1919, in the weeks preceding the gathering in Paris, the Eastern Committee drew up a concise series of resolutions on British policies towards what is referred to as the “disposal” of the Middle East territories.²⁵² The resolutions have no mention of Kurdistan or the Kurds. They do, however, state clearly that it was the British desire to cancel the Sykes-Picot Agreement and that it was “essential that no foreign influence, other than that of great

²⁴⁸ TNA FO 925/41231, “Memorandum Respecting the Settlement of Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula,” 21 November 1918.

²⁴⁹ TNA FO 925/41231, Map accompanying “Memorandum Respecting the Settlement of Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula,” 21 November 1918.

²⁵⁰ TNA CAB 29/2: P84, “Foreign Office Memorandum respecting the Settlement of Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula,” 21 November 1918.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² TNA CAB 29/2: P97, “Eastern Committee Resolutions Regarding the Disposal of Middle East Territories,” 16 January 1919.

[sic] Britain, should be predominant in Areas A and B.”²⁵³ They also stated that the British historically held a “special position” in the Persian Gulf and Arabia, and that Great Britain had no desire for that position to be a point of discussion at the Peace Conference.²⁵⁴

When Kurdistan became important to the British it was not because the British had any interests in the area itself but because of the areas it bordered; “The question is obviously one of great importance, because the mountains of Kurdistan command the plains of Mesopotamia, while on the other hand they could be used to threaten the security of Armenia.”²⁵⁵ In the Tripartite Agreement of 1916 the Kurdish territories had been divided between the three parties involved (fig. 2.3), without Kurdistan itself being of any importance to any of them. The only consideration the British had had at that time was to avoid creating a land border between the British and Russian areas.²⁵⁶

When Viscount Milner, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, was asked to draw up a draft of British policy towards the mandates, he listed Kurdistan as one of nine possible mandates to be detached from the Ottoman Empire but noted that it could also be part of either Mesopotamia or Armenia.²⁵⁷ The Americans insisted that discussion of the mandates and mandatory powers was premature; President Wilson wanted to leave the naming of mandatories till after the League of Nations was established. Only if done through the League of Nations would the proposed system of mandates have the appearance of an anti-imperial, self-deterministic world order. Wilson professed “that he could not return to America with the world parcelled out by the Great Powers.”²⁵⁸ Due to the primacy of the issues concerning Europe and the desire to conclude a peace treaty with Germany before the American President left Paris, the issues of mandatories and the Middle East were set aside.²⁵⁹

²⁵³ TNA CAB 29/2: P97, “Eastern Committee Resolutions Regarding the Disposal of Middle East Territories,” 16 January 1919. Areas A and B refer to the Sykes-Picot Agreement, being the zones of influence in the Arab kingdom awarded to the French and the British respectively (fig. 2.3).

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ TNA CAB 29/2: P.48. Mesopotamia: Memorandum by Sir Erle Richards, not dated, but filed late 1918.

²⁵⁶ Helmreich, *From Paris to Sevres*, 51.

²⁵⁷ TNA CAB 29/28: WCP211, “Mandates under Clause 19 of the Draft “Covenant” of the League of Nations,” Memorandum by Lord Milner, 8 March 1919.

²⁵⁸ TNA CAB 29/28: BED5, British Empire Delegation Minutes, 28 January 1919.

²⁵⁹ TNA CAB 29/28: BED6, British Empire Delegation Minutes, 29 January 1919.

A Greater Armenia?

As the leaders of the Western Powers sat down to negotiate in Paris, the situations in the areas of the Caucasus, Armenia, Kurdistan and Eastern Anatolia were still volatile. The small British force that had advanced into the Caucasus from Persia was not large enough to pacify the entire area on its own. The self-proclaimed Armenian Republic that had almost been destroyed by the Ottoman advance in 1918 was still being besieged by an alliance of Georgian, Tartar, Azeri and Kurdish forces.²⁶⁰

The Armenian massacres had been reported extensively by the British press and there had been built up a popular sentiment among the British population that the British should remain in Armenia, largely on humanitarian grounds. The British Empire Delegation to Paris shared this view; Lord Curzon, at one point, assured his colleagues that the proposed withdrawal of British forces from the Caucasus would surely leave “a legacy of certain chaos and bloodshed behind us.”²⁶¹ The region’s strategic importance, located between Russia and British occupied Persia, was also stressed:

It would be expedient to extend the area of Armenia as widely as possible, so as to include all territories north of the Arab boundary in which there is a mixed population of Turks, Armenians, and Kurds. This would at the same time conduce to a stable settlement, and would indirectly be of advantage to His Majesty’s Government.²⁶²

President Wilson had been in favour of America taking up a mandate wishing to support the “interests of the Armenian people and see to it that the unspeakable Turk and the almost equally difficult Kurd had their necks sat on long enough to teach them manners.”²⁶³ This sentiment doesn’t exactly echo the lofty ideals of self-determination and rule by popular consent. Wilson’s idea of a Greater Armenia was one designed to punish the Kurdish and Turkish population. He was, however, not able to convince the US Congress to support the project.

²⁶⁰ Helmreich, *From Paris to Sevres*, 131-132. .

²⁶¹ TNA FO 371/4179: 2117/46889, Memorandum by Earl Curzon, 26 March 1919.

²⁶² TNA CAB 29/2: P84, Foreign Office Memorandum respecting the Settlement of Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula, 21 November 1918. See also Helmreich, *From Paris to Sevres*, 135.

²⁶³ Woodrow Wilson in a speech to the National Democratic Committee, February 1919. quoted in: McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 130.

The British proposed that Cilicia should be joined with the new Armenian state. The Armistice of Mudros had left the administration of Cilicia in the hands of the Turks, but the British generals on the ground found that in order to pacify the Turkish gendarmes of the area and facilitate for the return of Armenian refugees, the Turkish administration needed to be replaced.²⁶⁴ The Turkish officials were claimed to be hindering the work of the Allied forces: “The disarming of the demobilized soldiers and unnecessary gendarmes, will do away with chief source of danger but as long as Turkish officials remain under orders of Istanbul obstruction is surely to be met with.”²⁶⁵

The costs of the operations in the Caucasus were becoming too much for the British Government to bear. It was decided to pull out all troops from the area, and this had to be done quickly. The Government was eager for their involvement in Armenia to not turn into something of a “de facto mandate” and wished to pull out before the League of Nations would start to hold them responsible for upholding the peace in the area. After unsuccessfully trying to convince first the Americans, then the Italians and finally the French to take over the occupation, the British forces were in the end pulled out unilaterally.²⁶⁶

Supporting the idea of the Greater Armenia became problematic when taking into account that it would include large swathes of land where the Armenians were in the minority; if the Armenians became a minority in the state as a whole the population would soon elect “a majority of representatives hostile to the Armenians.”²⁶⁷ In his draft document trying to establish a joint policy of the Allies towards the peace deal with the Ottomans, the French diplomat Philippe Berthelot noted that: “reality and logic are equally opposed to the dream of a Great Armenia stretching from Trebizond to Alexandretta.”²⁶⁸ Berthelot further claimed that the region was in fact Armenia and that the local Armenian population needed to be defended against “an energetic Kurdi-Turkish population which has seized the land.”²⁶⁹ However, the Armenians did not need to be in a de facto majority on the ground because there existed an estimated half a million in exile that the Allies hoped to be able to resettle into the new

²⁶⁴ TNA FO 371/3657: 512/4501, Telegram from GHQ Egypt to War Office, 1 January 1919.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Helmreich, *From Paris to Sevres*, 135-136.

²⁶⁷ TNA CAB 29/29: AJ4, “Peace with Turkey,” Memorandum by Berthelot, Undated (archived as January 1920).

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

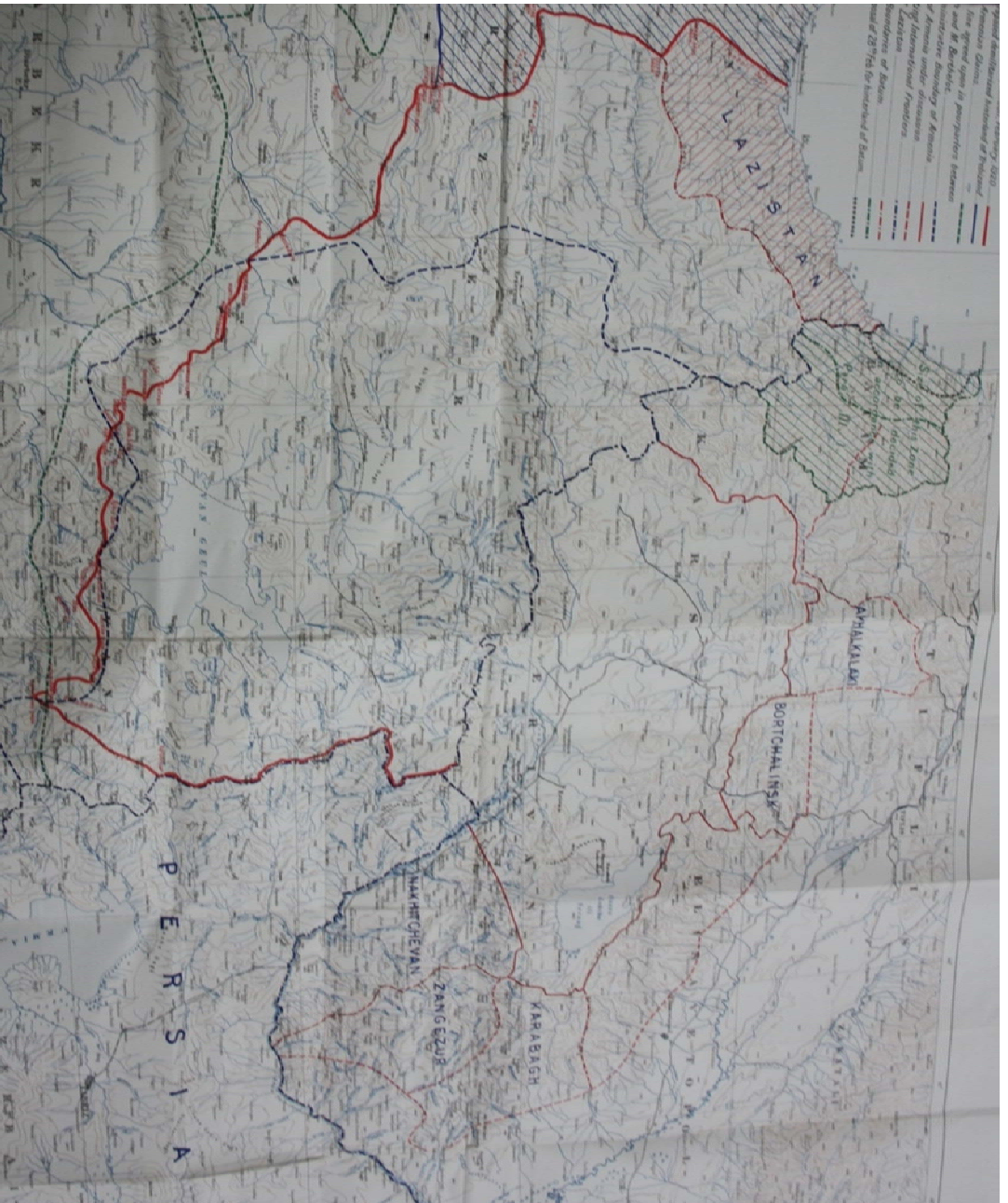


Figure 3.5: Map showing the proposed boundaries of Armenia.
 Report and Proposal of the Commission for the Delimitation of the Boundaries of Armenia, 24 February 1920.
 TNA CAB 29/29: A146

state.²⁷⁰ The potential number of immigrants was not enough to warrant the extensive territorial stretch of the earlier proposals of Greater Armenia but would be enough to extend the proposed country almost all the way down to the Black Sea coast. To solve the issue of access to the sea it was proposed to set up Batumi as an independent free city and ensure Armenian right of access to the port (fig. 3.5).

After the American exit from being considered a mandatory power the British brought in the idea to leave the mandatory responsibilities to the international community through the League of Nations. This was a responsibility the newly formed League did not possess the military power to accomplish; the League was not itself a state and had no army or finances of its own.²⁷¹ Balfour explained the reasoning behind the League of Nations' answer by writing:

The League is of course perfectly ready to act as the supervising authority under the mandatory system. [...] It is more doubtful however whether it should itself directly undertake large responsibilities of a mandatory character; especially in remote and half civilised regions where civilised opinion, the chief weapon of the League, carries but little weight. There is no useful analogy to be drawn between the case of Armenia and the case (say) of Dantzig.²⁷²

He went on to claim that: "Civilised public opinion has no influence whatever in that country; - indeed since civilised public opinion is for the most part Christian opinion, it is a danger rather than a strength to Christian minorities."²⁷³ What he referred to as "that country," i.e. Asia Minor, presumably included Armenia and Kurdistan, as it was the mandate of Armenia that was the main issue of the memorandum. Basically, what was being said was that the population of the Middle East would not be able to follow the "civilised" laws and rules given by the League without being forced to at gun-point.

Realizing the impossibility of a League of Nations governed Free State of Batumi, the Boundary Commission revised their report and proposed that Batumi should be given to

²⁷⁰ TNA CAB 29/29: AJ46, "Report and Proposal of the Commission for the Delimitation of the Boundaries of Armenia," 24 February 1920.

²⁷¹ TNA CAB 29/32: AJ156, "Future Status of Armenia: Memorandum by the Council of the League of Nations," 11 April 1920.

²⁷² TNA CAB 29/30: AJ96, Memorandum by Mr. Balfour on "Suggestions made to the Council of the League of Nations in reference to the Peace with Turkey," 15 March 1920.

²⁷³ Ibid.

Georgia, while Lazistan should fall to Armenia.²⁷⁴ At the same time, the Allied Powers convening in Sanremo decided to attempt to persuade the Americans to reconsider taking up the Armenian mandate.²⁷⁵ This would again fall on deaf ears and the Allied Powers were left facing the only option that remained to them: to allow for the Armenians to fend for themselves.

The Road to Sèvres

By autumn 1919 the formal Peace Conference was over. After the peace with Germany and the creation of the League of Nations, the Paris Peace Conference had mostly dispersed. There were still negotiations taking place, but these were now conducted largely in secret and without the trappings of the plenary sessions. With the American exit confirmed it was time to finally tackle the Middle East Question seriously. The British and French decided they needed to conduct bilateral discussions before they could allow the Peace Conference proper to address the question. Stephen Pichon, the French Foreign Secretary, claimed that “there remained only two parties whose interests had seriously to be considered and reconciled, namely, Great Britain and France.”²⁷⁶

Fromkin notes of the delays that:

The specific terms of the Middle East agreement upon which the Prime Minister and his Allied colleagues finally settled proved to be less important than the process by which they were reached. one aspect of that process was that it took a long time, during which circumstances [...] were to change for the worse. Friendly foreign leaders were replaced by others less cooperative; quarrels developed between former allies; defeated enemies regrouped and revived; and the British army [...] was dwindling away and losing its ability to hold on to its conquests.²⁷⁷

The military power of the British in the Middle East had been drastically reduced during 1919. The government needed to demobilize their massive army due to political pressure from

²⁷⁴ TNA CAB 29/30: AJ120, “Report and Proposal of the Commission for the Delimitation of the Boundaries of Armenia,” 24 March 1920.

²⁷⁵ TNA CAB 29/31, AJ185, Reply to the League of Nations by the Supreme Council of Allied Powers, 26 April 1920.

²⁷⁶ Pichon quoted in: Helmreich, *From Paris to Sevres*, 179.

²⁷⁷ Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 389.

home and the costs of maintaining it. The troops were also rebelling against the continual stationing abroad even after the war was ended.²⁷⁸ By 1920, when the Allies would finally sit down to negotiate the Middle East settlement, British military strength was reduced to the point that they no longer held the power to impose their will inconsiderately, as more than two-thirds of the army had been sent home.²⁷⁹

The deteriorating authority of the Government in Istanbul and the rising threat of Mustafa Kemal's Nationalist movement caused a great deal of urgency among the policy-makers in London. Curzon's view was that if they delayed much longer there might not be any Turkish Government left they would be able to impose their peace deal on. Curzon was concerned that if the Nationalists were to take power in Turkey they would rather start a new war than to accept the terms agreed to by the allies, and the British military commitment would not be strong enough to seriously challenge Kemal's forces.²⁸⁰

Still, with these pressing concerns and sense of urgency, the negotiations would continue with very slow progress; through the Anglo-French back-room discussions of December 1919 and the more formal convention in London in February 1920. But, it was not until April and the conference held at Sanremo in Italy that the Allies managed to come to an agreement over the Middle East Question. And it was not until August that the peace treaty with the Ottoman Empire was finally signed. By this time the situation in Turkey was developing along the lines Curzon had prophesized and the treaty would ultimately be rejected by the nationalist Turks.

The Allies continued their support for creating a new Armenian state out of former Ottoman territory and attaching it to the self-proclaimed Republic of Armenia that had been erected after the collapse of the Russian Empire. The Greater Armenia with coastlines on both the Black Sea and the Mediterranean was deemed as impractical, however, and was revised to a smaller, landlocked area, stretching from the Republic in the east to Erzurum in the west. They realised that the Armenian population of this state would constitute a minority and that this was a significant problem. Helmreich succinctly described the situation: "What it all ultimately came down to was the fact that Britain and France were fully committed to support

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 384-387.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 403-405.

²⁸⁰ Helmreich, *From Paris to Sevres*, 179-180.

the creation of an Armenian state, yet neither had the will, men, or money actively to promulgate the solution.”²⁸¹

During the Conference of London an international commission had been appointed to determine the borders of the proposed Armenian state. The commission delivered its report on 24 March, but it turned out to have not quite been as international as first imagined. The introduction to the report stated that due to “the pressure of other work and the necessity for an early meeting, it has not been possible to consult the French and Japanese representatives,”²⁸² Thus the British shoved the French aside, the only other Power who had an interest in the result of the report.

Come April, and the meetings at Sanremo, all the major issues had already been resolved and a joint Allied position towards the peace with the Ottoman Empire had been agreed to. What was known at the time as the “Treaty of Peace with Turkey”, and later would become the Sèvres Treaty, was practically finished. Helmreich notes that:

As far as the Turkish peace is concerned, the Conference of San Remo, apart from the decision regarding Allied non-involvement in Armenia, dealt almost, if not entirely, with routine matters involving final approval and minor revisions of clauses already drafted during the Conference of London.²⁸³

What is interesting to a study of Kurdistan, however, is that the Kurdish question was one of these minor details that were not resolved before Sanremo.

Conclusion

The peace treaty with the Ottoman Empire was presented to the government in Istanbul in May and signed at Sèvres, in Paris, on 10 August. But it would never be carried into effect, as the situation on the ground in Anatolia had progressed out of the hands of the Western Powers. The long delays in coming to discussing the terms among the Allies had led to the

²⁸¹ Ibid., 202.

²⁸² TNA CAB 29/31: AJ120, Report by the Commission for the Delimitation of the Boundaries of Armenia, 24 March 1920

²⁸³ Helmreich, *From Paris to Sevres*, 309.

moment passing in which they had the power to dictate as they pleased the future of the Middle East.

The many, often conflicting, secret wartime agreements, coupled with the anti-imperialist notions of the Americans, the conflicting interests and world-views of London, Cairo and Simla, as well as the sudden imperialistic drive of Lloyd George, had made the issues far more complicated than they had initially been thought of. Lloyd George had expected the entire Peace Conference to last for one week, while in reality it would last well into its second year.

The resolution of the issues of the Middle East had not been among the most important topics discussed when the Great Powers convened the Conference in Paris. The issues that were considered important was the treatment of Germany, the establishment of new nation-states in Europe and the creation of the League of Nations. The question of the Middle East would have to wait till after those issues had been resolved. Under American insistence, the questions pertaining to the mandates and mandatory powers would have to wait till after the League of Nations was properly set up so that the resolution of those questions would go through it. This American insistence is ironic, though, considering that the United States would leave the new international system even before it had been established.

As a less important detail of the proceedings, the question of Kurdistan had been put aside until the very end of the negotiations. And the stipulations about Kurdistan placed into the Treaty of Sèvres were only promises of further negotiations in the future. And, so, even though the Allies presented the treaty as a finalized document to settle the peace with the Ottoman Empire, the future of the Kurds was still unresolved.

Chapter 4: The Future of a “Very Ancient Race”

In virtue of the Wilsonian principale [sic] everything pleads in favour of the Kurds for the creation of a Kurd state, entirely free and independent. Since the Ottoman Government has accepted Mr Wilson’s fourteen points without reservation, the Kurds believe that they have every right to demand their independence, and that without in any way failing in loyalty towards the Empire under whose sovereignty [sic] they have lived for many centuries, keeping intact their customs and traditions.

– Şerîf Pasha, March 1919.²⁸⁴

With the eyes of the entire world directed towards Paris in the early months of 1919 a stream of interested parties arrived in the French capital wanting to have their voices heard by the conference. The Conference had been announced amid the euphoria and hope created across the world by Woodrow Wilson’s language of self-determination and equality of nations, and of the anti-imperialist intentions of the Anglo-French declaration. The groups of uninvited participants included NGO’s, Labour Unions and individuals lobbying for their own particular causes, like the Norwegian Fridtjof Nansen and his calls for relief and aid to the Russian refugees. In addition to these groups there also arrived representatives of nations who had not yet won their own independence but were spurred on by the anti-colonial Wilsonian language.²⁸⁵

Among these groups attempting to take their turn in the spot-light were a representation from the Kurds, pleading to be heard and laying their case down before the Conference. The “Memorandum on the Claims of the Kurd People” was published in March 1919 and circulated among the delegates, in both French and English. The Kurds had, as so many other groups had, been enthralled by the language of Wilson, and the Anglo-French declaration, and

²⁸⁴ Şerîf Pasha, "Memorandum on the Claims of the Kurd People," 14-15.

²⁸⁵ Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment*, 59.

fully believed that the international community would accept their claim to independence.²⁸⁶ Historian James Gidney observes, of the Kurdish attempts at influencing the Conference:

Probably this appeal made little serious impression on anyone. While conclusive evidence on the point is lacking, the scarcity of references to the Kurds in the literature of the conference is evidence of a kind. It seems much more likely that they were welcomed as a picturesque element but given even less attention than the Montenegrins and the Albanians who furnished the same kind of romance.²⁸⁷

In the minutes of the official meetings of the British Empire Delegation, the highest-level organ of policy-making on the issues surrounding the Peace Conference, there are no mentions of Kurdistan or the Kurds: Kurdistan was simply not important enough to be discussed at this top level.²⁸⁸ The policies towards the Kurds were left to be decided by other actors, or in most cases, put aside to be decided upon at a later date. This chapter examines how the British received the Kurdish attempts at influencing the Conference and influencing British official policies towards the region.

Revival of the Kurdish Societies

We have seen how the system of special interest cultural societies grew in Istanbul as a response to the liberal policies after the Young Turk revolution.²⁸⁹ These associations were initially not politically charged but were rather focussing their attention on the language and culture. They had had little impact on nation-building among the Kurds in Kurdistan, though, they were only interest groups for the Ottoman-Kurdish elites in Istanbul. The CUP, however, started to crack down on the societies due to a fear that they were growing into political and nationalist organizations that could destabilise the state and jeopardise their pan-Ottoman policies. The societies were, thus, forced to go underground. The crackdown had initially been aimed at groups representing Christians of the European parts of the Empire, but also the Kurdish associations were hit by it.²⁹⁰ As a response to the political chaos following the Ottoman surrender, these societies started to reappear and evolve into becoming more

²⁸⁶ Izady, "Kurds and the Formation of the State of Iraq."

²⁸⁷ Gidney, *A Mandate for Armenia*, 133-134.

²⁸⁸ TNA FO 374/22, BED: Minutes of Meetings 1-35, Jan – June 1919

²⁸⁹ Kayali, *Arabs and Young Turks*, 75.

²⁹⁰ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 94.

politically charged. The Kurds developed a desire to take command of Kurdistan's future.²⁹¹ Among these movements there arose two major directions for the newfound Kurdish idealisms to follow: One was to stress the importance of the religious identity, which meant continuing subservience and support to the Sultan and Caliph in collaboration with the Turks, only with increased Kurdish autonomy. The other was the route of political independence.²⁹²

Two of these societies would be present in Paris and attempt to influence the peace accords. The Society for the Rise of Kurdistan (Cemiyeta Tealiya Kurd: CTK), often referred to as "The Kurdish Club," was a club of notables established in Istanbul, headed by Seyîd Evdilqadir. The leadership of the CTK was mainly divided among two rivalling families, Evdilqadir's Semdinan family and the Bedirxans, and the rivalry and distrust among those within the CTK meant that the club had difficulties in establishing any united policy.²⁹³ The Committee for Kurdish Independence (CKI) was a group of emigres settled in Cairo. Both of these societies shared a desire for British support and protection and focussed their attention on attempts at influencing British policy towards Kurdistan. Whereas the CKI early on took a clear stance for complete Kurdish independence, the CTK were not so quick to decide on which path to follow in regards to Kurdistan's relation to the Sultan. Both groups consisted exclusively of aristocrats from the cultural elites of Istanbul, and commanded little influence over the tribes of Kurdistan proper, where rivalry among the tribes and among aristocratic families made it difficult for any one group or individual to command much in the way of influence outside their immediate surroundings.²⁹⁴

Admiral Somerset Gough-Calthorpe, the High Commissioner in Istanbul, noted his exasperation with the situation: "I am increasingly impressed with difficulty of reconciling Armenian claims with satisfactory treatment of Kurds."²⁹⁵ Balfour's response to Calthorpe's inquiry into the British policy towards the CTK was to ask them to "remain quiet" until the Peace Conference was finished. The British Government probably felt like the stream of letters and despatches from the Kurds was being more disruptive than constructive and did not desire to have them be part of any negotiations. The Kurdish views had been made known, and now they ought to sit back and wait for the decisions of the Allied Powers.²⁹⁶

²⁹¹ Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*, 77-84.

²⁹² McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 125. Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*, 87-88.

²⁹³ Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*, 88-103.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 77-84. McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 121-125.

²⁹⁵ TNA FO 608/95: 8307, Telegram from Admiral Calthorpe to Foreign Office. 22 April 1919.

²⁹⁶ TNA FO 608/95: 8803, Telegram from Balfour to Lord Curzon of Kedleston. 3 May 1919.

It appears there was a mistrust among the British diplomats towards the Kurds of Istanbul. There was an idea circulating that the Kurds were working with the Turks to sabotage the creation of the Armenian state. Calthorpe did not agree with this reading of the situation. He put forward to the Government that depending on the line the British took towards the areas in question, the CTK could prove useful. He described Seyîd Evdilqadir as “shrewd within narrow limits” but saw no reason to distrust neither him nor the Bedirxans.²⁹⁷

Sureya Bedirxan

The CKI, as opposed to the CTK which was based in Istanbul, was a group of exiled Kurdish notables who had banded together in Cairo to form their own attempt at a nationalist movement. The group was led by Sureya Bedirxan, a grandson of Bedirxan Beg.²⁹⁸ The Bedirxans were still a wealthy and powerful family, but Sureya’s exile in Egypt had placed him on the periphery of his family’s influence. Two of his brothers, Celadet and Kamuran, would become aids and guides to a British mission to Kurdistan.²⁹⁹

In December 1918, in advance of the Peace Conference, Sureya had sent a couple of letters to the British Government laying out the CKI’s desire for the independence of Kurdistan. Bedirxan protested against the plans of a Greater Armenia, which would likely engulf large areas inhabited mainly by Kurds. He begged for British assistance in this undertaking: “As our neighbour in Mesopotamia it is to her we appeal not only to save us from the terrible fate overshadowing us, but also to help us to take a place in the midst of the civilised world.”³⁰⁰ Sureya professed his own allegiance, and that of the Kurds, to Great Britain, asking: “[...] are we wrong in believing that our cause is just, and that England, will not permit us to be sacrificed to the interests of other nations[?]”³⁰¹ Further, he claimed that it must be in Great Britain’s interest to have a peaceful and stable state on the borders of Mesopotamia, and that for such a stable state to exist it needed as much ethnic homogeneity as possible. An

²⁹⁷ TNA FO 608/95: 8307, Telegram from Admiral Calthorpe to Foreign Office. 22 April 1919.

²⁹⁸ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*. 122

²⁹⁹ The mission of Major Noel to Kurdistan was an attempt both to garner support among the Kurds and to counter the influence of Mustapha Kemal, but in the end they only visited Gaziantep and Malatya, and the report Noel issued was largely ignored. See *ibid.*, 128-129.

³⁰⁰ TNA FO 608/95: 435, Letter from Comitè de l’Independence Kurde to Reginald Wingate. 16 December 1918.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Armenian state ruling over an Arab or Kurdish population would only lead to “strife and unaccording warfare.”³⁰²

The letters drew up a rather rudimentary border for the proposed state, a line that would stretch from Mount Ararat, north of Erzurum and Erzincan, to Besni and Harran in the west. Then along the Sinjar Mountains and south of Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah to the Persian frontier. The northern and western frontiers, including the cities of Erzurum and Erzincan, were immediately discarded, by the British, as completely outside of any consideration.³⁰³

The British were not at all welcoming to the CKI’s attempts at influencing their opinion. The letters were received with disdain and mockery by the British bureaucracy; it was noted that the Kurds were asking Great Britain to be their mother and with all the other children who were also asking to be adopted it would prove to become a “hopelessly turbulent as well as quite impossibly expensive” family.³⁰⁴ Another noted that the letters seemed “to presuppose an extraordinary naiveté on the part of those it addresses.”³⁰⁵ Another note stated that the letters were “hardly worth reading through.”³⁰⁶ The High Commissioner in Egypt, Reginald Wingate, was subsequently sent an order to ignore the group.

Şerîf Pasha

On 24 March General Mihemed Şerîf Pasha made himself known to the Peace Conference through a circular where he introduced himself as the “President of the Delegation of the Kurds to the Peace Conference” (president de la Délégation des Kurdes à la Conférence de la Paix).³⁰⁷ In his letter he claimed to have been elected to the position of president, though he did not state whom by. Ostensibly Şerîf represented the CTK, still, he appears to have acted rather independently and frequently went against the desires and interests of the CTK leadership in Istanbul.³⁰⁸ Like the CKI, Şerîf Pasha unequivocally pledged himself to the service of Great Britain and aligned the national interests of the Kurds with those of the

³⁰² TNA FO 608/95: 435, Letter from Comitè de l’Independence Kurde to Reginald Wingate. 16 December 1918.

³⁰³ TNA FO 608/95: 434, Circular from Comitè de l’Independence Kurde to Reginald Wingate. 7 December 1918.

³⁰⁴ TNA FO 608/95: 435, Letter from Comitè de l’Independence Kurde to Reginald Wingate. 16 December 1918.

³⁰⁵ TNA FO 608/95: 434, Circular from Comitè de l’Independence Kurde to Reginald Wingate. 7 December 1918.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ TNA FO 371/4215: 48531, Letter from Şerîf Pasha to Lord Derby. 24 March 1919.

³⁰⁸ Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*, 38-40.

British. But he was also a supporter of the Caliph and of Sunni Muslim unity and appeared to be on friendly terms with the Ottoman delegation. He was frequently present at meetings between the Ottomans and the Western Powers.³⁰⁹

Şerîf Pasha was a francophone Ottoman diplomat, born in Istanbul in 1865, the son of a former Foreign Secretary of the Ottoman Government. His family had been from Sulaymaniyah, but he himself had no real connection with that city. His family's disassociation with the Kurdish culture is evident in the fact that Şerîf never learned to speak the Kurdish language. He had worked for the Ottoman Foreign Office, holding offices in Berlin, Paris and Stockholm, which had made him a well-known individual in the international arena.³¹⁰ He had been an influential member in the CUP before the Young Turk revolution, but he had opposed the overthrow of the Sultan Abdul Hamid and took part in an attempted counter-revolution.³¹¹ Due to the botched coup, he was eventually forced to flee the country and spent the war in exile in France. From Paris he had attempted to gather support among the Entente Alliance for a scheme to overthrow the CUP government and take the Ottoman Empire out of the war. It seems that the main obstacle to the plan being carried out was that the Russians refused to cede their claim on Istanbul.³¹² According to historian David McDowall, Şerîf was known among the Ottoman exiles as being "a 'phenomenally stupid' dandy."³¹³ Apparently the only thing that gave him influence was that he was wealthy. After the war Şerîf had returned to Istanbul and become one of the leaders of the Kurdish nationalist movement.

Şerîf had previously spoken to the Peace Conference for a group of exiled Ottomans calling themselves the "Congress of the Liberal Turks of Switzerland, Egypt and Cyprus,"³¹⁴ but had decided to focus his attention on the question of Kurdish independence instead.³¹⁵ In his circular, addressed to the various ambassadors in Paris, he explained that his change of responsibility was due to that the proposed new state of Armenia would sever Kurdistan

³⁰⁹ TNA FO 371/4156: 36640, Letter from Louis Mallet to Lord Curzon, 6 March 1919

³¹⁰ Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*, 110-113.

³¹¹ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 94-95.

³¹² TPA LG/D/19/7/12, Letter from Bertie to Crewe, 22 April 1916.

³¹³ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 121.

³¹⁴ "Congres des Libéraux Turcs habitant la Suisse, l'Égypte et l'Île de Chypre."

³¹⁵ TNA FO 371/4215: 48531, Letter from Şerîf Pasha to Lord Derby. 24 March 1919.

away from Turkey. And if such an Armenian state was established it would no longer be feasible to hope for a federation of Kurds and Turks.³¹⁶

In his new role as President of the Kurdish Delegation Şerîf published a pamphlet, called “Memorandum on the Claims of the Kurd People”, where he detailed his claims for the Kurdish nation.³¹⁷ His description of what he called “Turkish Kurdistan, from an ethnographical point of view” is almost identical to the borders drawn up in the CKI’s letters. However, Şerîf stopped short of demanding the Kurdish state to follow these borders, and instead called for an international commission to decide the exact line of the frontier. In this paper it was only the frontier with Armenia that Şerîf discussed, the borders with their other neighbours were either considered self-evident or not taken into serious deliberation at this point.

Şerîf based his claims on definitions of Armenia and Kurdistan from Western encyclopaedias and cartographers, i.e. the *Nuttall Encyclopaedia* and *Élisée Reclus’ L’Homme et la terre*. In addition, he referred to an enigmatic handbook by the Russian army, which had been “distributed confidentially to a few personalities only, whose discretion was above suspicion.”³¹⁸ It is not clear how Şerîf obtained a copy of this book, or even how authentic the document was, but Şerîf argued that, since the handbook was written by, and for, the Russian army, it could be considered to have “a neutral character as far as the Kurds and Armenians are concerned, its object being to furnish strictly secret information.”³¹⁹ The Russians had apparently counted the Armenians and Kurds in the Ottoman Vilayets of Van and Bitlis and concluded that the Armenians were not in majority in either region. According to Şerîf this proved “eloquently enough that the [Armenians] have never possessed the slightest majority in any part of the Ottoman Empire.”³²⁰ Similarly, the CKI had presented the idea that the only country that could be called Armenia would be beyond what had been the pre-war Russian frontier.³²¹

³¹⁶ TNA FO 371/4215: 49825, Letter from George Dixon Grahame to Lord Curzon of Kedleston. 29 March 1919.

³¹⁷ Şerîf Pasha, "Memorandum on the Claims of the Kurd People."

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

³²¹ TNA FO 608/95: 435, Letter from Comitè de l’Independence Kurde to Reginald Wingate. 16 December 1918.

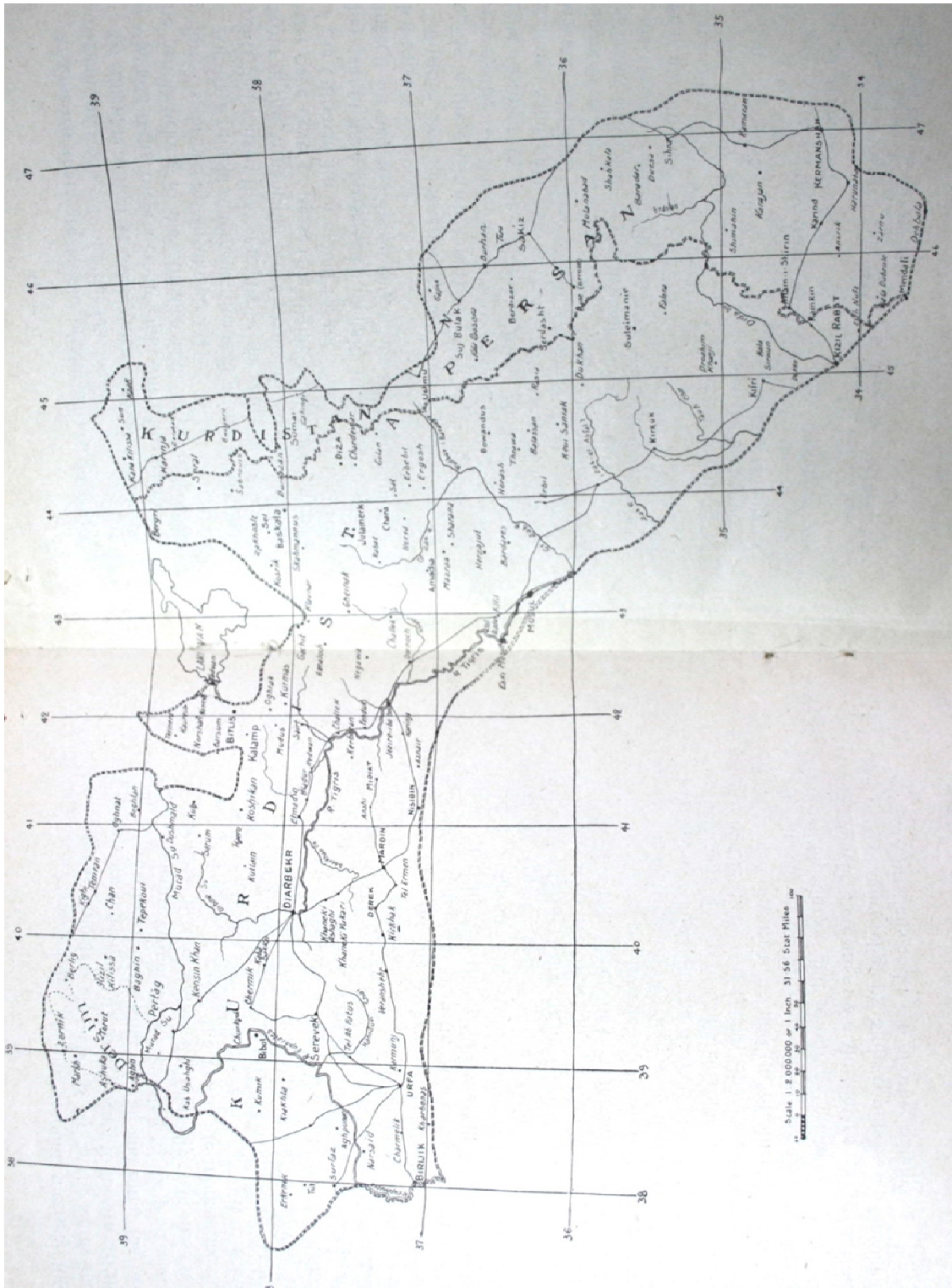


Figure 4.1 Map included in Şerif Pasha's "Memorandum on the Claims of the Kurd People."

Şerîf circulated his memorandum to the Peace Conference, together with a map (fig. 4.1).³²² The accompanying map is significantly different to the delimitations laid down in the text, especially concerning the northern border. The border on the map is drawn far to the south of Erzurum and Erzincan, in addition it excludes a large part of land around Lake Van. The historian Hakan Özoğlu has attempted to explain this discrepancy by pointing to the agreement made between Şerîf and the Armenian Delegation. There appears to be a flaw in Özoğlu's research here, though, because the agreement between the Kurds and Armenians he mentioned was only concluded in November.³²³ By then, the delays of the Peace Conference and the increasing insecurity of the situation on the ground would have led the Armenians to wish to make a compromise with the Kurdish Delegation.³²⁴ However, when this map was published, in March, the situation for the Armenians was very different. In the early months of the Peace Conference the establishment of a larger Armenia had seemed very likely and there was therefore no impetus for the Armenians to wish to compromise with the Kurds.

There might have been an impetus for Şerîf to want to make such a compromise, though. His text is very clear on the idea that no Armenian state would ever be able to peacefully control a majority Muslim population. He stated that if districts with Kurdish majority would be included, then "there cannot be the slightest doubt that a chronic state of disorder will reign in Armenia, unless the Allies are prepared to occupy the country indefinitely with a strong army, and even then they would be subject to all the attacks of guerrilla warfare."³²⁵ Still, Şerîf's actions at the Peace Conference show him as a pragmatic figure, and it is conceivable that he might have attempted to show a bit of leniency in order to seem more reasonable to the British. Historian Mehrdad Izady seems to agree with this reading, he calls what Şerîf was doing a "political apprehension vis-à-vis the neighboring states and ethnic groups."³²⁶ There is no evidence that the British perceived this map as such a show of leniency, though.

Another interesting discrepancy between the map and the text is that the map included what is referred to as "Persian Kurdistan"³²⁷. The text made no mention of there being Kurds in Persia but, like the letters from the CKI, drew the eastern frontier of Kurdistan along the Persian border. The map, as well, included a clear border between "Kurdistan" and "Persian

³²² Şerîf Pasha, "Memorandum on the Claims of the Kurd People," 8-9.

³²³ TNA FO 371/4193: 156272, Letter from Şerîf to Clemenceau, 25 November 1919.

³²⁴ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 131.

³²⁵ Şerîf Pasha, "Memorandum on the Claims of the Kurd People," 5.

³²⁶ Izady, "Kurds and the Formation of the State of Iraq," 99.

³²⁷ "Kurdistan Persan", Şerîf Pasha, "Memorandum on the Claims of the Kurd People," 9.

Kurdistan.” Şerîf never made any claims on any lands in Persia, he must have been aware of the British policy of keeping the Persian borders intact and the unfeasibility of including those regions in an independent Kurdistan.

A Threat of Genocide

By the end of April 1919, it appears that the lack of any coherent progress on the question of the future of Kurdistan led the CKI to change their tactics in their approach to the British. A letter was sent from Cairo, this time addressed to Şerîf rather than handed to the British High Commissioner. Assumedly this was due to Wingate having been ordered to ignore the group, and the CKI realised that they were not being heard in Paris. Şerîf forwarded the letter with a short note saying that it may not be in a “diplomatic language” but was still worthwhile for the Peace Conference to pay heed to.³²⁸ The letter stated that the Kurds would refuse to accept any peace accord that did not include an independent Kurdistan, and threatened to massacre the remaining Armenians if an Armenian state was created on Kurdish soil.³²⁹ The letter was this time not signed by Sureya, but by two individuals called Mardi Zade and Mehmet Arif Pasha. The text did not explain who these two were, or why they replaced Sureya as signatories, but one can assume that they were members of the Kurdish exile community in Cairo.

In their letters of 1918 the CKI had denied that the Armenian Genocide had taken place, saying they were the imaginations of missionaries. This had been noticed and pointed out by the British and was one of the reasons the CKI’s approaches had been rejected so clearly. In the minutes accompanying the letters it was written that:

This memorandum seems to presuppose an extraordinary naiveté on the part of the to whom it is addressed, [...] in not being content with a denial of Kurdish responsibility for the Armenian massacres but going so far as to suggest that these were themselves the product of the imagination of consuls and missionaries.³³⁰

³²⁸ “termes qui ne sont pas dans les usages diplomatique”: TNA FO 608/95: 8853, Letter from Le Comité pour l’Indépendance du Kurdistan to Şerif Pasha (Forwarded to Louis Mallet). 30 April 1919.

³²⁹ TNA FO 608/95: 8853, Letter from Le Comité pour l’Indépendance du Kurdistan to Şerif Pasha (Forwarded to Louis Mallet). 30 April 1919.

³³⁰ TNA FO 608/95: 434, Note signed MDC, 8 January 1919.

The tone in the new letter had changed from denying the genocide to one of threatening to continue and complete it. The annotations from the Foreign Office called the letter “an extremely insolent document” and instructions were given to Şerîf that “the Kurds do not improve their case by such communication.”³³¹ Şerîf Pasha would later repeat the stance that if a large Kurdish population was left under Armenian or Nestorian sovereignty, this would lead to violence. In his case, it was not intended as a threat of massacres but as a matter of fact that such massacres would occur if Armenians were to attempt to establish control over Kurds.³³²

It is not clear from the short note Şerîf used to introduce the letter whether he agreed with the sentiments of the text, or if he was just passing the letter on. It is not clear, either, what relationship Şerîf had to the CKI or the Kurdish exile community in Cairo. The CKI’s and Şerîf’s stances and approaches had been fairly similar up to this point; the same details and the same sources to support their cause show up in both groups’ correspondence with the British. But the exasperation from the long wait and the lack of progress in Paris led the two to react very differently: Where the CKI’s reaction was to toughen their stance and angrily threaten with violence, Şerîf’s more pragmatic manner led him to try to find more creative ways to make things happen.

Louis du Pan Mallet, a British diplomat attached to the British delegation to Paris, described Şerîf as a man who “is not believed to carry much weight or to represent the Kurds but he is capable of creating a certain amount of trouble.”³³³ Şerîf was himself convinced that just this independent position, separated from the tribal rivalries of Kurdistan, was a beneficial position to be in for a potential leader of an independent Kurdistan. Thus, he humbly put his name forward as a possible Kurdish Emir, in order to “preserve his race from the threat of anarchy.”³³⁴ This was presumably done without the explicit consent of the CTK leadership. Şerîf wrote that the Kurds lived in “a feudal state and under ignorant chiefs,” and none of those local leaders would have the qualities needed to lead a modern state. But himself, with

³³¹ TNA FO 608/95: 8853, Letter from Le Comité pour l’Indépendance du Kurdistan to Şerîf Pasha (Forwarded to Louis Mallet). 30 April 1919.

³³² TNA FO 608/95: 10837, Letter from Louis Mallet to Lord Curzon of Kedleston. 27 May 1919.

³³³ TNA FO 608/95: 7996, Letter from Louis Mallet to Lord Curzon of Kedleston. 26 April 1919.

³³⁴ TNA FO 608/95: 10564, Letter from Şerîf Pasha to Louis Mallet. 20 May 1919: “Dans l’ardent désir de préserver sa race du danger de l’anarchie qui l’entraînerait à sa ruine complète, le Général Şerîf Pacha se sacrifierait volontiers pour assumer la lourde responsabilité d’une pareille tâche pendant le temps nécessaire à l’organisation de l’Etat kurde”,

his “civilized European culture” was superior to the “ignorant chiefs,” and more suitable to hold such a position.³³⁵

Şerîf Elected Head of State

In August 1919 Şerîf Pasha again begged the Conference for a resolution to the problems of the Middle East, decrying that the Conference was taking so long and complaining that the longer it took the more the CUP would gain ground in Kurdistan and Anatolia. The CUP had by this time been officially disbanded, but the rebellion led by Mustafa Kemal was seen as a continuation and reinvigoration of the Young Turk party.³³⁶ Şerîf again pointed out that the British policy in the Middle East surely must benefit from “a well organised Kurdistan.”³³⁷

Exasperated by the inability of the Conference to even come close to any solutions, Şerîf must have decided that the best option was to try to show the British that he and the Kurdish people were ready to establish their independence on their own. He informed the British that he had formally been elected head of state of Kurdistan and suggested that the British should send some representatives with him to tour the Kurdish areas to establish his rule. As part of this tour the British were to give him subsidies, which he in turn would be responsible for doling out to the local chiefs, thus buying their loyalty. As with his previous claims of having been elected to office, it is not clear who Şerîf claimed to have been elected by, or how this supposed election had taken place. And again, the response from the Foreign Office was dismissive: “His Majesty’s Government consider that Chérif’s age and long residence in Paris make him entirely unfitted for this role.”³³⁸ The focus on Şerîf’s age is puzzling; if the birthdate that Özoğlu gives us is correct, Şerîf would have been 54 at the time. Which is hardly a remarkable age to take up a position as head of state.

In an answer to the Foreign Office’s query on the situation the Assistant High Commissioner to Istanbul, Admiral Richard Webb, claimed that: “I have no reason to suppose Sherif has been elected by anyone except himself.”³³⁹ The Civil Commissioner to Baghdad, Arnold Wilson, agreed: “Sherif Pasha is wholly unsuited for the role, which I believe no man to be capable of sinking.”³⁴⁰ Wilson did not believe that any one man would be able to unite and

³³⁵ Ibid.: “la population kurde vivant encore à l’état féodal et sous des chefs ignorants.”

³³⁶ Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 407.

³³⁷ TNA FO 608/95: 18506, Letter from Şerîf Pasha to FO, 27 August 1919.

³³⁸ TNA FO 608/95: 18506, Telegram from FO to Admiral Webb, 3 September 1919.

³³⁹ TNA FO 608/95: 18506, Telegram from Admiral Webb to FO, 8 September 1919.

³⁴⁰ TNA FO 608/95: 18506, Telegram from Wilson to FO, 1 September 1919.

control the Kurds. Neither had he ever been in favour of establishing any united Kurdish Kingdom. His views on the subject had been that their disjointed history had led the population to a situation where they would never be able to unite themselves.³⁴¹ Wilson, through his office of Commissioner in Baghdad, was the man who was forced to actually handling the situation on the ground, in relation to the occupation of Kurdistan. And as time went on, and no clear policy was coming out of London (or out of Simla, for that matter) it was increasingly his actions of the day-to-day administration that were to define the British Empire's relation to the Kurds.

Towards the end of the Great War, Sheikh Mehmûdê Berzencî had established a Kurdish Government in Sulaymaniyah, hoping that the advancing British forces would support him.³⁴² Mehmûdê had desired to extend his control to the wider Kurdistan and saw the British as his opportunity to achieve his goals. The British had initially been favourable to this project and gave Mehmûdê the title of Governor of Sulaymaniyah. Though, Mehmûdê apparently had subscribed to the ideals of self-determination that the Allies ostensibly had promised, the language used to establish his authority was one of religion; "he appealed for a *jihad*, not a national liberation struggle."³⁴³ After moving troops into the area, while openly supporting and treating him as part of the Indian administration, Wilson had instead worked towards eroding the autonomy of the Kurdish Government and towards incorporating the occupied areas more directly into Mesopotamia, policies that eventually led Mehmûdê to rebel.³⁴⁴ The uprisings were quashed but they constituted an example of how costly a full occupation of Kurdistan would be, and both the governments of India and Britain agreed that they could not justify that cost.³⁴⁵ Wilson had proposed to the British Government a plan to establish a confederation of Kurdish statelets, under local rulers with nominal autonomy, along the northern border of Mesopotamia.³⁴⁶ But the Kurdish areas of the Mosul Vilayet would remain within the British mandate of Mesopotamia. By later summer 1919, largely due to the British Government's refusal to commit militarily and financially to securing control over Kurdistan, Wilson had changed his mind to supporting a plan leaving northern Kurdistan to the Turks.³⁴⁷

³⁴¹ Eskander, "Britain's Policy Towards the Kurdish Question," 61-62.

³⁴² Ibid., 49-50.

³⁴³ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 158.

³⁴⁴ Tripp, *History of Iraq*, 33-34.

³⁴⁵ Helmreich, *From Paris to Sevres*, 203-205.

³⁴⁶ Eskander, "Britain's Policy Towards the Kurdish Question," 85-86.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 89-90.

In Wilson's mind it was inconceivable to imagine Kurdish autonomy or independence without British control of the area.

The Armenian “Entente Cordiale”

In October Şerîf again approached the British, this time with a new proposal for a statement to be put forward to the Peace Conference. He was proposing Kurdistan as a British mandate and wanted the British to officially approve and support his statement. The British refused to endorse the statement. At this time the question whether the Americans were ready to take on the mandate for Armenia needed to be resolved before the question of Kurdistan could be tackled. Eric Forbes Adam, one of the British delegates in Paris, was the one who received the proposal from Şerîf. In sending it along to the Foreign Office he referred to it as “this long rambling statement which is not worth reading.” Adam noted that the American Commission on the question of Armenia “have always intended that the bulk of Kurdistan (i.e. everything to the south of the line drawn roughly from Diyarbakir to the Persian frontier) should fall outside the Armenian state.” Since “the bulk of Kurdistan” thus would fall outside the proposed Armenian mandate, Forbes noted that it would be prudent for the British Government to define their policies towards the region sooner rather than later, so that when the word came from the United States if they would accept the mandate or not, the British would “be ready to say whether or not we are prepared to control Kurdistan.” The reply to Şerîf was that, in lieu of the American decision it would be “impossible for us usefully to discuss this matter further.”³⁴⁸

As autumn progressed and it became increasingly clear that the United States would not take up any mandate in the Middle East, the future of the Armenian state was starting to look more unstable. Confronted by this changed situation the Armenian delegation in Paris opened up for a more conciliatory approach towards the Kurds. On 20 November Boghos Nubar, the head of the Armenian delegation, and Şerîf issued to the peace conference a joint statement of peaceful cooperation, where they asked the conference to establish a joint mandate over both Armenia and Kurdistan.³⁴⁹ Admiral de Robeck, who had replaced Calthorpe as High Commissioner in Istanbul, confirmed from both Evdilqadir and from the Armenian Patriarch that such an agreement had been approved by and was supported by the leading notables of

³⁴⁸ TNA FO 608/95: 19466, Letter from Şerîf Pasha to Eric Forbes Adam. 9 October 1919.

³⁴⁹ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 131. Helmreich, *From Paris to Sevres*, 205.

both camps in Istanbul.³⁵⁰ De Robeck whole-heartedly supported the idea as well, and he recommended that “[e]very possible encouragement should be given to the movement.”³⁵¹

A few days later Şerîf presented a new plea to the Peace Conference, where he reiterated the Kurdi-Armenian “entente cordiale,” and asked the League of Nations to appoint a commission to establish a just and accurate delimitation between the countries. Şerîf claimed that the Kurdish question was what would form the basis for any “peace and tranquillity in Asia Minor.” He also reiterated that Kurdistan was indivisible and that there could only be one, united Kurdistan.³⁵² Rumours had started to emerge, at this time, about some secret negotiations taking place between the British and the French. Not completely unfounded, the rumours suggested that the Western Powers had agreed to divide Kurdistan between them, in a division akin to that of the Sykes-Picot line. It seems to have been this rumour Şerîf was alluding to when he professed the indivisibility of his nation. However, the British had rejected the French proposal. They had also, as we have seen, rejected the idea of themselves going heavily into Kurdistan. Lord Curzon, who had by this time taken over as Foreign Secretary, appears to have wished for the Kurds to decide their own future.³⁵³ The Kurdistan spoken of in these negotiations was only the area between Diyarbakir and the northern border of the Mesopotamian mandate. Southern Kurdistan, it had already been decided, was to be included in Mesopotamia. Eastern Kurdistan was to remain within Persia, and Western Kurdistan would be handed to the French. In addition, the Kurdish population of the areas further north of Diyarbakir would fall under the new Armenian state. Thus, there was truth in the Kurdish fears that the Great Powers would divide their country, which after all, was what would eventually happen.

Support for the Kurdi-Armenian Agreement did not last long, the revelation of the actual text of the accord caused outrage among the Kurdish leadership in Istanbul.³⁵⁴ Emîn Alî Bedirxan had by this time taken his supporters and withdrawn from the CTK, ostensibly due to political differences between him and Evdilqadir over the question of independence or federation.³⁵⁵

³⁵⁰ TNA FO 371/4193: 162297, Telegram from de Robeck to FO, 11 December 1919.

³⁵¹ TNA FO 371/4193: 162297, Telegram from de Robeck to FO, 20 December 1919.

³⁵² TNA FO 371/4193: 156272, Letter from Şerîf to Clemenceau, 25 November 1919.: “la question kurde laquelle est la base des conditions essentielles pour assurer la paix et la tranquillité en Asie-Mineure.”

³⁵³ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 132-133.

³⁵⁴ Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*, 38-40.

³⁵⁵ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 133-134.

However, both factions united in their distaste and rejection of the exploits of Şerîf Pasha in Paris.

The Kurdish chiefs in Kurdistan, some of whom were still embroiled in bitter feuds with the Armenians, were not pleased with the Armenian agreement either. The news that the delegation to Paris had apparently compromised their own cause in favour of the Armenians led many of the local tribal leaders to look to the Turks instead. Mustafa Kemal and the Turkish nationalists managed to take advantage of the situation and garnered increasing Kurdish support for their Turkish Republic.³⁵⁶ Among the tribal chiefs in Kurdistan Turkish rule, which after all was what they were accustomed to, was preferable to being ruled by Armenians or Arabs.³⁵⁷

Sanremo and the Kurdish Question

The bilateral discussions among the French and British had brought French acceptance to Curzon's scheme to leave the area of Kurdistan between Armenia and Mesopotamia to rule themselves. After acquiring the French concurrence that neither Power would seek influence in Kurdistan, the issue was then set aside. In examining the negotiations Helmreich observed that "One must infer from this that the British [...] sought to wash their hands of the problem by ignoring it."³⁵⁸ In the early drafts, from before the London Conference, of the "Treaty of Peace with Turkey" we find no mentions of Kurdistan or the Kurdish question at all.³⁵⁹

In the version of the peace treaty dated the 21 February 1920, from the conference in London, we find a small notice on the Kurdish question: "The Future of Kurdistan remains to be discussed and Lord Curzon has undertaken to make proposals to the Supreme Council on the subject."³⁶⁰ But, by the end of the London Conference, when all of the major points of the Peace Treaty had been resolved, Kurdistan was still being ignored. An international commission to determine the exact borders of the proposed Armenian state had been approved, but nothing similar had been discussed in relation to Kurdistan.³⁶¹

³⁵⁶ Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*, 112.

³⁵⁷ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 133.

³⁵⁸ Helmreich, *From Paris to Sevres*, 205.

³⁵⁹ TNA CAB 29/29: AJ4, AJ10 & AJ17, Drafts of "Peace Treaty with Turkey", January 1920.

³⁶⁰ TNA CAB 29/29: AJ21, Synopsis of Peace with Turkey, 21 February 1920.

³⁶¹ TNA CAB 29/31: AJ120, Report by the Commission for the Delimitation of the Boundaries of Armenia, 24 March 1920.

So, when the Great Powers would then converge in Sanremo, in April, the future of Kurdistan was still up in the air. The future of the proposed Armenian state had also been thrown into turmoil by the flat refusal of the League of Nations to accept the British idea that the League of Nations itself could take responsibility for the mandate. Thus, the situation arose where none of the Great Powers were ready to commit to the costs of securing the Armenian state, and the League of Nations professed the impossibility of the international community doing so.³⁶²

Curzon's project to leave Northern Kurdistan outside of the influence of any Great Power had largely been concocted out of a desire to keep the French out of establishing any influence in the area. The dominating idea among the British was that if Britain was unable to take it, nobody else should be allowed to either. Curzon did not believe that the Kurds would ever be able to unify themselves and thought that the best option was to leave the area to Turkey. The Armenians had, at this point, become considered as belligerents of the war, and would become signatories to the final peace treaty signed at Sèvres.³⁶³ No such recognition was awarded to the Kurds. As historian Saad Eskander noted: "It was not accidental that Britain opposed any League of Nations' role in Kurdish affairs and made sure that no Kurdish representative could speak on behalf of the Kurds at the San Remo conference, unlike other nationalities such as the Armenians."³⁶⁴

By April, the French had become suspicious that Curzon's plan, in reality, had been a cover for extending British influence and control over Kurdistan. The French, therefore, brought the issue up for discussion at Sanremo, where they managed to secure a British renouncement of any economic priority outside the Mosul vilayet.³⁶⁵ The terms agreed to concerning Kurdistan were that a joint commission of British, French and Italian representatives would draw up a "scheme of local autonomy" for the areas considered "predominately Kurdish." The tripartite commission was to publish its report within six months, then after another six months the option for independence would be opened for the Kurds, if the international community "considers that these peoples are capable of such independence and recommends that it should be granted to them." The boundaries of this Kurdistan were given as: "lying east of the Euphrates, south of southern boundary of Armenia as it may be hereafter determined, and

³⁶² TNA CAB 29/32: AJ156, Memorandum by the Council of the League of Nations, 14 April 1920.

³⁶³ TNA CAB 29/5 P155, *Traité de paix entre les puissance alliées et associées et la Turquie*, 10 August 1920.

³⁶⁴ Eskander, "Britain's Policy Towards the Kurdish Question," 149.

³⁶⁵ Helmreich, *From Paris to Sevres*, 301.

north of the frontier of Turkey with Syria and Mesopotamia.”³⁶⁶ According to Eskander this made up “no more than 20% of the actual size of Ottoman Kurdistan, and less than 15% if Eastern Kurdistan was taken into consideration.”³⁶⁷

Eastern Kurdistan was actually taken into consideration, as the article also made provisions for a second commission to be appointed to “examine and decide what rectifications, if any, should be made in the Turkish frontier where [...] that frontier coincides with that of Persia.”³⁶⁸ The commission would have been made up of representatives from Britain, France, Italy, Persia and Kurdistan. It is not clear exactly what these frontier “rectifications” mentioned in the peace treaty would have amounted to. Persia was not a party to the peace treaty, as they had never officially joined the war. They had, however, sent a delegation to the Peace Conference to attempt to lobby with territorial claims. Some fighting had happened on Persian soil during the war, and the suffering this had caused on the Persian people had led Persia to demand reparations, preferably in the form of territory. They presented claims against both the Ottoman and the Russian Empires, demanding the return of lands that “had used to belong to Persia.”³⁶⁹ Apparently, Kurdistan was included among these lands, so within this quinquartite commission the Treaty of Sèvres made provisions for, the Persians would certainly have pushed for expanding the border as far west as they could.³⁷⁰

The Treaty of Peace with Turkey also included an article that opened up for the possibility of Southern Kurdistan separating from Mesopotamia and joining the independent Kurdistan, and that the British would raise “no objections” if it became known that this was the will of the Kurds within the Mosul vilayet.³⁷¹ Eskander points out that this went against all British desires and interests in the region, and that the British could not have accepted seeing this clause carried out. He claims that “what can be safely deduced is that it was not in the British plan to allow Southern Kurdistan to join a Kurdish state.”³⁷² He presents his explanation to the insertion of the paragraph, that the British were trying to make it seem like their occupation of Southern Kurdistan would be temporary. This was done both to convince the

³⁶⁶ TNA CAB 29/5 P155, “Traité de paix entre les puissance alliées et associées et la Turquie,” 10 August 1920.

³⁶⁷ Eskander, "Britain's Policy Towards the Kurdish Question," 150.

³⁶⁸ TNA CAB 29/5 P155, “Traité de paix entre les puissance alliées et associées et la Turquie,” 10 August 1920.

³⁶⁹ TNA CAB 29/30 AJ52, Memorandum from Prince Firouz to the Peace Conference, 9 January 1920: “des territoires qui appartenait à la Perse.”

³⁷⁰ TNA CAB 29/30 AJ52, Telegram from Prince Firouz to the Peace Conference, 20 February 1920.

³⁷¹ TNA CAB 29/5 P155, “Traité de paix entre les puissance alliées et associées et la Turquie,” 10 August 1920.

³⁷² Eskander, "Britain's Policy Towards the Kurdish Question," 150.

French and also to attempt to “avoid the alienation of Kurdish nationalists in Northern Kurdistan.”³⁷³

Lloyd George had come to the same conclusion as Curzon and Arnold Wilson, that the Kurds would never be able to unify unless under the guidance of a Great Power.³⁷⁴ And therefore, the provisions laid down in the peace treaty concerning the independence of Kurdistan would never be implemented, because they necessitated the Kurds speaking with one voice to the international community. Lloyd George, thus, had decided that the best solution was to leave the region as part of Turkey because the “country had grown accustomed to Turkish rule, and it was difficult to separate it from Turkey unless some alternative protector could be discovered.”³⁷⁵

The Kurds on the Road to Sèvres

As stated above, the Armenian Compromise Şerîf Pasha had agreed to had left him isolated and without any support from either wing of the Kurdish leadership in Istanbul. This led to the situation where, in the eyes of the Istanbul notables, there was no Kurdish representative left to talk for them at the Peace Conference. In addition, among the leadership of the CTK fractures were beginning to open up between the camps of Evdilqadir and Emîn Alî Bedirxan, the vice-president.³⁷⁶ In February, Evdilqadir went public with his support for the Ottoman Caliph and for Kurdish autonomy under the Ottoman government. Emîn Alî, on the other hand, wanted nothing but complete independence from the Turks. The infighting led the CTK to split up, and eventually collapse completely. This was seen by the British as more proof that “no single authority existed in Istanbul or elsewhere that could speak for the Kurds as a whole.”³⁷⁷

In March, Emîn Alî sent in his own recommendations to the deliberations of the Peace Conference. Emîn Alî’s Kurdistan consisted of the “vilayets of Diyarbakir, Harput, Bitlis, Van, Mosul and the sancak of Urfa.”³⁷⁸ A couple of days later Emîn Alî presented to the British High Commissioner a map of his proposal for Kurdistan’s future. The map is similar to the one Şerîf Pasha presented to the Peace Conference in 1919, except in two regards;

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Helmreich, *From Paris to Sevres*, 301-302.

³⁷⁵ Lloyd George quoted in: *ibid.*, 302.

³⁷⁶ McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 134.

³⁷⁷ Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*, 93.

³⁷⁸ TNA FO 371/5068: 4396, Letter from Emin Ali Bedirxan to the Peace Conference, 18 March 1920.

Firstly, Emîn Alî included all of the Van and Bitlis vilayets, the regions Şerîf might have left out as an attempted compromise with the Armenians. Secondly the new map included a stretch of land to connect with the Mediterranean, at Alexandretta. All of these claims were widely outside of what the Allies had in mind for the Kurds at this point and were never taken seriously.³⁷⁹

On 24 April Şerîf Pasha again re-stated for the Peace Conference that the Armenians and Kurds had made an agreement among themselves about the prospective boundaries between their two states, and that the Allied deliberations on the issue should take this document into consideration.³⁸⁰ But only a few days later, on 27 April, Şerîf had realised that he no longer held any support in the Kurdish communities in Istanbul and he announced to Lord Stanley, the British Ambassador in Paris, that he was stepping down as President of the Kurdish delegation.³⁸¹ Unbeknownst to Şerîf, however, at this time, the Allies had largely finished their deliberations on the issues of interest to the Kurdish representatives, and the text had already been agreed upon which would eventually become the Sèvres treaty.

The details of the peace treaty were not made publicly known until the Treaty was signed in August, but when they were, they caused a great deal of outrage among the Kurds. The Kurds who had put their faith in the British, to help them establish their own independence, felt abandoned and disappointed. For all the grandiose language of the Allies in the last year of the war and during the Peace Conference, of self-determination and freedom for oppressed nations, the Kurds were left with nothing. They had only been granted a vague promise of the possibility of a commission examining the prospects of the feasibility of establishing a Kurdish state, and then only for 15% of Kurdistan.³⁸² Even with the provisions of protection of minority rights that the British insisted on, the Kurds made it clear that they never wished to be governed by the Arabs.³⁸³

³⁷⁹ Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*, 38-40.

³⁸⁰ TNA CAB 29/29 AJ41, Telegram from Şerîf Pasha to the President of the Peace Conference, London, 24 April 1920.

³⁸¹ TNA FO 371/5068, Letter from Şerîf Pasha to Lord Stanley, 27 April 1920.

³⁸² Eskander, "Britain's Policy Towards the Kurdish Question," 150-151.

³⁸³ Peter Sluglett and Centre Oxford University. Middle East, *Britain in Iraq, 1914-1932*, vol. no. 4, St Antony's Middle East Monographs (London: Ithaca Press for the Middle East Centre, St Antony's College, Oxford, 1976), 118.

Conclusion

Thus, the moment had passed. By the signing of the Treaty of Sèvres it became clear to the Kurdish leaders that Great Britain would not be what they had wanted and needed her to be. Britain had had no interests in Kurdish self-determination or their national aspirations. The only use the British had for the Kurds had been in order to safe-guard their own interests around Mosul and the northern boundaries of their mandate in Mesopotamia. Therefore, British policy towards Kurdistan would reflect this consideration exclusively. There were among the British many conflicting ideas on how best to create the conditions for a safe and peaceful border, and some of these plans could potentially include independence, or autonomy, for some Kurds, most likely under a British mandate. But a fully united and independent Kurdistan was never in the cards, and the Kurdish demands for such an entity were repeatedly rebuffed and ridiculed.

Even though Lloyd George had taken up the Wilsonian language of self-determination and equality among nations, and even after the Anglo-French Declaration of November 1918, he would always hold the imperial interests of Great Britain before any other considerations. The Prime Minister's insistence that the United States should take a significant part in the post-war settlement of the Middle East and his government's anti-French policies led to long delays in settling the questions surrounding the Treaty of Peace with Turkey, delays which would eventually give the upper hand to the Turkish nationalists.

At the end of the war, Britain had found itself in a dominating position in the whole of the Middle East, a position from which it considered itself privileged to, pretty much, dictate the terms of the peace. But by the time the Allies had actually agreed on the text of the peace treaty, Allied power in the region was no longer committed enough to be able to implement the terms of the treaty. The British retained control over Southern Kurdistan, but renounced their interests in the remaining Kurdish lands, and thus allowed the Turkish nationalists to establish Turkish dominance.

Conclusion

In examining the Kurdish participation at the Paris Peace Conference this thesis has attempted to answer three main questions; how did the Kurds attempt to influence the Conference? How were those Kurdish attempts received among the British delegates? And did the attempts have any influence on British policies towards them?

During the war, the Ottoman government had enacted a policy of forcible deportation of Kurds from their homeland, akin to that of the Armenians, though not as extensive or ruthless. In addition to the deaths caused by the war, as well as famine and disease, the Kurdish population had been decimated. It is striking that the Kurds never brought this issue up in their discussions with the Western Powers, there were no attempts to garner any sympathy for the plight of the Kurdish people caused by the deportations or the actions of the war. The Kurdish letters to the Conference had used history and geography to back their claims, and more space was used to try to refute the Armenian claims rather than to prove the validity of their own.

The efforts of tribal leaders to create for themselves the independence or autonomy they wanted, proved to be inefficient when it came to expand their authority outside of their home regions. Attempts made by Simko and Mehmûdê Berzencî had both been viewed, among the British as potential solutions to the issues of Kurdistan, but both had ultimately shown that their interests did not align with those of the British. Simko would be allowed his rebellion until the British needed to re-establish peace and order in Persia, and Mehmûdê was defeated and exiled when he attempted to claim a de facto independence from Baghdad.

The situation among the peoples of Kurdistan was far removed from that of the capital. Whereas ideas of ethnic romanticism emerged in Istanbul through the nineteenth century, bringing with it cultural and literary blossoming, these sentiments did not spread out across the population as a whole. We can see differences in identity among the populations of Kurdistan, mainly separated by religion, but nothing that can be described as the beginnings of national awareness.

Şerîf Pasha, who after all was an Ottoman politician at heart, would probably prefer the solution to Kurdistan that was put down in the Treaty of Sèvres to his own agreement with the Armenians. Şerîf's pragmatic compromises at the Peace Conference were attempts to

ingratiate himself with the leaders of the Western Powers by trying to tap in to the political currents of the Conference. It is implausible to think that such a federation between Kurdistan and Armenia would have been able to exist peacefully without the strong-arm rule of an imperial power, and Şerîf and Nubar had envisioned that the British should take up this position in their proposed federation. As it turned out, none of the Great Powers had any interest in shouldering the burdens or the costs of such an undertaking. But for Şerîf, leaving Kurdistan as an autonomous region within the Ottoman Empire had always been his number one wish. It was only after he realised that the proposed Armenian state might split Kurdistan from Turkey that he adjusted his stance to advocate Kurdish independence.

By the time he learned of the provisions concerning Kurdistan in the Treaty of Sèvres Şerîf had been side-lined, if it at all could be said that he held any support or influence to begin with. The main critique of Şerîf's stance had been concerning his lack of support among the Kurdish population and that he could not be said to represent a united voice of the Kurds. Though a valid point to make, this was also equally true for any other candidate for the position of unifier of the Kurds. And if the goal was to establish a democracy, which was after all an intrinsic part of the tenets of self-determination, nationalism and equality of nations, then the argument that he was unrepresentative gets rendered moot. As we have seen, in his insistence on British aid to help him establish his rule over Kurdistan, Şerîf held no credence to that he would have been able to impose it on his own, even if he claimed to have been elected emir. But the British had no faith in him and Şerîf found no way to persuade them to provide the aid that he needed to establish himself as ruler. Şerîf acting as independently and pragmatically as he did only underlined the British view that the Kurds were not united enough to be able to establish and sustain its own state.

Studying the politics of the British Empire it is difficult to view the British as one single actor; we find a myriad of players each with their own peculiar interests and ideas. David Lloyd George's coup in 1917, for instance, would have significant effects on the proceedings of the peace negotiations. Herbert Asquith and Edward Grey had been reluctant to agree to the expansionist policies being pushed upon them by the conservative opposition, as well as pressure from within their own government. Lloyd George's coalition government, on the other hand, was much more in favour of territorial acquisitions. One could therefore assume that Asquith would have been more in favour of propping up the Ottoman Empire after the war, than Lloyd George was. But when considering their alliance with the Arabs, Arnold Wilson's rather independent moves to secure the British position in Mesopotamia and popular

sentiment towards the plight of the Armenians, it is difficult to conclude that a Liberal conclusion to the peace under Asquith would have left the Ottoman Empire with much more land than did that of Lloyd George. The road to get there would likely have been different, it might probably have adhered closer to the war-time agreements, though it would probably not have been so different for the Ottomans. A more liberal Treaty of Sèvres might have eased up on the economic clauses, but the territorial divisions would have likely been very similar.

The opening up for political expansion into the Middle East had led to a clash of interests between Egypt and India, with completely different visions of what they wanted the post-war region to look like. Neither had much consideration for the desires of the native population; Cairo professed a wish to establish a single Arab state, but Kitchener's vision of a pan-Arab unity was one where he placed himself as its ruler. Simla's plan was one where the individual local leaders would be allowed to conduct their internal affairs with little British meddling, but where Great Britain would be in charge of external affairs and defence. That both offices started to go about with setting up their own Middle East order led to a situation where they had made promises and agreements that Great Britain as a whole would not be able to keep without breaking others. This birthed a legacy that continued past the Peace Conference into the conflict between Sharif Hussein and Abdulaziz for supremacy in Arabia, where the British Empire had proclaimed its support for both.

The British Empire Delegation to the Paris Peace Conference had a difficult time in trying to fashion a coherent British policy out of all these agreements. The revolutions in Russia and the United States joining the war had both complicated and simplified the picture. Russia's collapse meant that the Entente Agreements were left with holes in them, that could potentially be used to claim that the entire set of Entente Agreements needed to be re-negotiated. Russia never signed the Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne Agreement, which could be used as a reason to claim that that agreement never came into effect in the first place. The United States brought with them ideas of anti-imperialism and international collaboration, ideas that fit poorly into the Entente Agreements which had the balance of power between Great Powers as a central motif. Lloyd George managed to incorporate the Wilsonian anti-imperial language into his own imperialistic policies, and he could use this new language to say that since they were no longer talking about the balance of power then all the Entente Agreements built on that idea would become invalid.

The Kurdish claims were mocked and ridiculed and were never taken seriously by anyone in the British Delegation. The feelings and desires of the Kurdish population was never a crucial component of British policy-making, and at the same time the Kurds at the Peace Conference were accused of not representing just this Kurdish population. The British were concerned with the interests of their own empire and dealt with the Kurds only as a means to further those interests.

If, however, the Kurds would have been able to present something resembling a united front to the Peace Conference, then their reception might have been different. But rivalry between the tribes, and between the notable families in Istanbul would have made attempts at doing just that extremely difficult, if not impossible. The Society for the Advancement of Kurdistan was arguably an attempt at such a unified front, but political and personal bickering among the leadership meant the society never managed to unite even the Kurds of Istanbul, and by the end of 1920 the personal rivalry led to the society itself collapsing.

Lloyd George's stubborn insistences had been the main reasons for the long delays in establishing policy towards the Middle East. It is possible to conceive that without Lloyd George at the helm things might have been resolved quicker and that a peace treaty might have been concluded while the British still had the power to enforce it. All in all, the delays were exploited by actors like Mustafa Kemal and Arnold Wilson who used them to further their own agendas, and it was largely down to the actions, and inaction, of these three that the borders cutting through Kurdistan ended up where they are today.

The question of Kurdish independence came down to a question of a game between the Great Powers. The interplay between the rivalry of the French and the British empires, and between imperial ambitions and the anti-imperial Wilsonian ideals, complicated the issues. We have seen how these complications led to adamantly held fronts that caused major delays in the resolutions of the issues of the Middle East. These delays meant the power to establish the new order was taken out of the hands of the Western Powers, and into the hands of those who would seize the opportunity to forge their own vision of the future. Thus, when the lofty politicians finally agreed on what their ideas of the new Middle East looked like the ability to implement it had been taken out of their hands. For most of the Kurds this meant falling under the rule of the new nationalistic Turkish regime, led by Mustafa Kemal. For many Kurds this had been welcomed, it was seen as a continuation of the previous regime; the Turks were their historical overlords and they had mostly prospered under the Ottoman Empire. With the

uncertainty surrounding the stances of the Western Powers, this was the conservative and safe option, where the other possibilities appeared unsafe and unpredictable; peaceful existence under Armenian overlords seemed unthinkable and becoming part of an Arab state was not considerably attractive either.

Thus, when examining the interplay between the Kurds and the British we can draw a clear dividing line between on the one hand the British officials on the ground and their relations with the native population, and on the other the politicians of London and Paris and their dealings with the urban Kurds from the Ottoman bureaucracy. The history of the relationships between the British and the Kurds in what became the mandate of Mesopotamia has been written before, and the conflict between the Kurds and the Turks certainly has an extensive bibliography connected to it. This thesis has sought to fill a gap in the bibliography around the attempts of those urban Kurds in influencing the Paris Peace Conference, concerning itself more with things that would never actually happen rather than following the course of history the way it did play out. It is still useful for an historian to examine how and why things did not happen, as most histories tend to follow the teleological path down towards the present day of the historian writing the narrative.

An independent Kurdistan did not emerge from the deliberations of the Peace Conference. But on the other hand, what did develop was a Kurdish narrative of nationalism in response to the creation of nation-states around them; nation-states built on their land but belonging to other nations. The experience of becoming a minority in their own homeland was what began to unite the Kurds to a common sentiment of nationality. Though, in the Middle East, where the nation-states were established before the creation of their corresponding nations, those borders do appear to have been constructed rather arbitrarily. In the region this thesis is studying, what turned out to be the southern border of the Turkish Republic, that is to say with Iraq and Syria, ended up where it did due to this being the extent to which the European Powers were willing to commit themselves to control. This was a result of the interplay between a conservative imperialism and the growing expenses of the burgeoning welfare states, as well as war-wariness and the need to deflate the large armies that had been commissioned during the war. The British could not afford to, and they also did not have the political backing to, maintain the one-million-man strong army that was occupying the Middle East at the end of the war.

None of the new nation-states followed any ethnic or linguistic divisions, because those divisions did not exist geographically in the Middle East. This holds true also for the Turkish Republic, which was created through a nationalistic and organic rebellion, and did not come about as the result of Western politicians drawing lines on a map. As we have seen, Western nationalism was a completely new sentiment that was being brought in to the Middle East in the beginning of the twentieth century. There did exist divisions of identity along the lines of ethnicity, religion and language, but those lines did not translate to geographical boundaries. The groups had intermingled, intermarried and were living together in the same towns and villages. There also existed such divisions within what is referred to as the Kurds, separated by language, religion and geography, with no obvious unifying characteristics. But, one does not need any unifying characteristics to build a nation on, it is enough to establish an abstract narrative for the people to place their sentiments in. In the case of the Kurds this was, according to Hakan Özoğlu, an idea of a common ancestral homeland.

Among the Kurdish Sunni majority religion played a big part of their existence and traditionalist views were linked to subservience to the sultan-caliph. The era under the rule of the Ottoman Empire had been prosperous and most tribal leaders in Kurdistan did not wish for any change in this situation. Among the Kurdish leaders in Istanbul, adherence to the sultan also stood strong, there were few who advocated for full Kurdish independence at the beginning of the Peace Conference. When they did start to call for independence it was largely due to external factors; the proposed Armenian state, the proposed Arab states, the actions of the Turkish nationalists.

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Abbreviations:

ADM – Admiralty
BED – British Empire Delegation
CAB – Cabinet Office
CO – Commonwealth Office
FO – Foreign Office
TNA – The National Archives
TPA – The Parliamentary Archives
WCP – War Cabinet Paris

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