

The impact of western imperialism history essay



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It will be argued that the effects of Western imperialism, specifically British, not only impacted on the immediate aftermath of their presence, but also contributed in shaping their future social, economic, and political landscape. This can also be illustrated by Gamal Abd-Al-Nasser's[2] extended hold of power primarily on the platform of anti-imperialism or be the resilience of Iraq's social cleavages and tensions that were either created or exploited by the British. It is arguable the state of quasi-independence, characteristic of a British post-imperialist stance, which has left the states in an uncertain location; constrained in certain areas, such as foreign and defence policy, yet lacking the domestic political base to affect real, and often unnecessary change. The importance of the Egyptian and Iraqi regimes can be linked to the socio-economic changes the British imposed and their reluctance to accept an alternative to the Western construct of power.

State Formation

An assessment of state formation ' must attend to the precise matrix from which it was launched' (Bromley, 1995: 45) yet it is evident that the British failed to comprehend this. The Western, Weberian, conception of a state, in which the territoriality and legitimacy of the system are paramount was fundamentally incompatible to the nature of Middle Eastern societies, which had previously comprised of a tributary[3] empire, nomads, and a tribal[4] state (Bromley, 1994: 34). Before modernity, there does not exist an institutionally separate realm of production and distribution as Polanyi argued in *The Great Transformation*, ' in pre-modern societies the economy, as a rule, is submerged in...social relationships' (1957: 46). Although both the administrative and coercive capabilities of the bureaucracy and the

military, respectively, were fulfilled, their interpretation within the states was not aligned to a conventional Western model. For example, the role of the military in overthrowing successive governments is a feature that appears repeatedly in both Egypt and Iraq. ' The compulsory model of the nation-state assumes that the societies of Egypt and Iraq are essentially the same as those in Western Europe, limiting possibilities of their own political development' (Zubaida, 1993: 121).

The aftermath of World War I was a pivotal moment for much of the Middle East due to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1923[5]. Iraq emerged as a result of the peace settlement and was formed of three former Ottoman vilayets[6]: Mosul, Basra, and Bagdad as a modern state under a British mandate in 1920. As such, it was the product of two ' colonial' administrations: first the moderizing Ottoman state of the Tanzimat and the Young Turks' Constitution of 1908, then of the British Mandate (Zubaida (2002: 205-215). Although Egypt had been occupied, supposedly temporarily, by the British since 1882, it became the ' cornerstone of British colonial supremacy' (Ayubi, 1995: 88). In order to ' secure its essential strategic needs without incurring the expenses of directly governing the territories' (Cleveland, 2004: 193), Britain installed monarchs in both states.

The behaviour of the British in these states did not adhere to the traditional imperialist standard however was, in effect, an 'empire by treaty' (Cleveland, 2004: 193). Unlike in African or Asian colonies, neither Egypt or Iraq experienced direct British colonial rule, however they were granted a limited of independence that allowed them the freedom to manage internal issues but had, as a caveat, the continued presence of the British military and the

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implementation of foreign and defence policy amenable to their imperial masters' (Cleveland, 2004: 193). The conflict that rendered this process problematic can be summarised by Cromer, who states that the colonisers were:

' Striving to attain two ideals, which are apt to be mutually destructive - the ideal of good government, which connotes the continuance of his [English] supremacy, and the ideal of self-government, which connotes the whole or partial abdication of his supreme position'. (Wilson, 1931: 72).

Whilst purporting to be installing a system politically superior to its predecessors, the British fail to cultivate any notion of political freedom, individual rights or mass representation that are traditionally linked with Western democracy (Haj, 1997: 81). Therefore, once true independence is obtained, peoples of Egypt and Iraq are left with an adequate understanding of a democratic political system, which could account for the primacy of the military within government and the erratic allegiance to democracy.

The lasting impact of the physical and artificial formation of Iraq is the key differentiating factor in relation to Egypt. The ' sheer arbitrariness' (Bromley, 1994: 135) of the geographical delineation has affected the governance and existence of Iraq as a state. Formed due to a desire to protect Britain's strategic interests within one sphere of influence, the population consisted of one-fifth Sunni Arabs, one half Shi'ite Arabs and one-seventh Kurdish tribes. Therefore:

' In Iraq there is still...no Iraqi people, but unimaginable masses of human beings, devoid of any patriotic ideal, imbued with religious traditions and

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absurdities, connected to no common tie, giving ear to evil, prone to anarchy, and perpetually ready to rise against any government whatsoever' (Yapp, 1996: 70)

In addition to the inevitable conflict between the social groups, Iraq was also subject to great friction between the urban and rural communities, described as 'two almost separate worlds' (Batutu, 1993: 503). Instead of seeking to resolve this great divide, the British solidified it by implementing a dual justice system that excluded tribal communities from national law, who were instead subject to the Tribal Criminal and Civil Disputes Regulation. This is a concrete example of the British governing principles of classification and differentiation (Haj, 1997: 81), perhaps a more sophisticated notion of 'divide and rule'. By reinforcing old divisions, the imperialists were able to manage smaller groups more effectively and, due to the lack of consensus, prevent the formation of an agreed national identity that would threaten their manipulation of the state. The social tensions have endured and much of the social instability attributed to them.

The nature and creation of class with Egypt and Iraq related to another decisive factor of British imperialism. The process of state building was accelerated via the creation of a new class of large landowners and the existing elites, previously loyal to the Ottoman Empire and there distrusted by the populations. The main focus of Egyptian politics was found in the capital city of Cairo where the main political actors were drawn from a mere 53, 000 individuals identified as 'professionals'. Similarly, the first Iraqi elections results conferred power to tribal shaykhs, aghast, and old notables (Haj, 1997: 82, almost exclusively Sunni Arabs, which set a precedent for all

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preceding elections, where members of the assembly were chosen bi-iltazkiya (unopposed). This contributes to the volatility of the regime due to the minority position, in sectarian terms, of those in power (Tripp, 2007: 31).

‘ In addition to the “ old” aristocracy of officials, the ex-Sharifian officers and the Muslim Merchants, this new landed class had come to form the socio-political backbone of monarchical Iraq. And, as in Egypt, the new bourgeoisie was openly collaborationist with colonial power, leaving the task of national struggle to the intelligentsia and the urban masses, and eventually to the army officers’ (Ayubi, 1995: 95).

The fact that the first governments of both Iraq and Egypt displayed a continuity of Ottoman personnel and an inclusion of the new landed class reinforced the lack of legitimacy given to the system as a whole and prepared the climate for repeated military takeovers.

The illegitimacy of the client governments of Iraq and Egypt was reinforced by the choice of a monarchical system preferred by the British. The kings appointed in both states were, previously, respected figures in the Arab world and possess natural authority, in addition to being predictably amenable to British demands. ‘ Within the restricted field imposed by British control, the constitution enabled the king to keep a governments out of, but not in, power’ (Bromley, 1994: 130) and there is significant evidence of arbitrary dissolution of governments. The Egyptian king Faud (1922-36) repeatedly disbanded popularity elected Wafd governments, despite huge majorities, due to their nationalist platform. ‘ The Wafd Party (“ Delegation Party”) was a nationalist liberal political party. It was said to be Egypt’s most

popular party for a period in the 1920s and 30s. The party was instrumental in the development of the 1923 Constitution and supported moving Egypt from the rule of the king to a constitutional monarchy, where power was wielded by a nationally-elected parliament' (Osman, 2010: 26). The fickleness of the British position is exemplified by their later coercion of King Farouk (1936-52) to appoint a Wafd government due to their need for a neutral Egypt during World War II. This intense irony does not detract from the fact that the monarchs in Egypt and Iraq were very powerful political actors but were 'so closely associated with the structure of colonization that they did not outlast them' (Owen, 1992: 19). The British imperialists exploited the constitutional power of the king to dismiss elected governments of nationalists 'that threatened to tear up or amend the arrangements...defying Britain's rights' (Owen, 1992: 19). Hence, once again, diminishing the authority of the regime they installed and creating a lack of respect for lawfully elected governments.

One lasting and significant effect of Western imperialism in Egypt and Iraq is the ideological legacy left behind and the 'determinant role' (Halliday, 2005: 83) played by nationalism. Substantiation of this can be seen in the proto-nationalist revolts of 1919 and 1920 in Egypt and Iraq respectively. Opposition parties were united in the demands for total independence and, as 'ideologies arise in conditions of crisis (Salem 1944: 4), nationalism provided an opportunity to 'adopt many of the patriotic, secular, and progressive outlooks of the West, recast them in nativist form, and then use them as weapons against the domination of the West' (Salem, 1994: 71). When faced with the social ordeal of colonial rule, the populations of these territories

search for new identities that can link the past to the future and demonstrate an awareness to create a strong state. However, therein lies the problem; the self-proclaimed Arab nationalist parties, such as Iraq's Ba'ath Party, took control of a state whose very legitimacy they challenged, hence undermining the legitimacy of their claim to govern. Despite this, nationalism was the prevailing ideological response to imperialism and remained so. For example, Nasser's longevity rests on the fact that he was everything the Arab world aspired to: 'assertive, independent, and engaged in the construction of a new society freed of the imperial past' (Cleveland, 2004: 301). Therefore, British presence in Iraq and Egypt 'gave birth to the familiar dialect by which imperial rule cannot help but generate the nationalist forces that will eventually drive it out' (Owen, 1992: 20).

The predominant role of the military in overthrowing government and the use of violent revolt to express discontent with a regime originated in the imperial era, however has persisted well into the 21st century. Initially, the 'weak consolidation of the state was shown by the spate of inconclusive military interventions in politics' (Bromley, 1994: 137) but gradually, regimes would only be seen as legitimate for as long as they could stave off a military coup d'état. The success of a take over was not relevant as its very existence had achieved its aim of creating instability, thus, the army became the 'arbiter' (Cleveland, 2004: 211) of politics in Iraq and Egypt and army officers 'significant political players' (Tripp, 2009: 78). The prevalence of army-based revolts can be attributed, in part, to the creation of the landowner class and the subsequent repressive character of the states - the response by a middle-class military is therefore a logical progression

(Bromley, 1994: 161). The use of public disorder was equally significant as it was related closely to the nationalist opposition and therefore a 'key element in the vernacular language of the argument against British domination' (Tripp 1998: 112). However, the series of military regimes in Iraq left the country in a position of such political uncertainty that any reforms promised were rarely implemented.

The impact of western imperialism on the process of state formation is multifold and rests on the specific understanding of a state and whether the Western construct can realistically be applied to the Middle East. For example, despite the formation of Iraq as a 'state' following World War I, the components of Western statehood did not emerge initially, if at all. The consequence of the British presence in Iraq's formative years 'has been the creation of the most controlled and repressive society in the Middle East (Bromley, 1994: 135). Similarly, the emergence of a landed class and promotion of old elites contributed to the exploitative nature of the states. The installation of a pliable monarch detracted from the benefits of democracy and reinforced the assumed interests, the British embarked on a process of artificial state formation, both in the geographical and institutional sense, which reinforced social cleavages and constrained the natural evolution of both Iraq and Egypt into modern states.