

## **Conference Report:**

The Great War in the Middle East 1911-1923  
Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and the University of Oxford  
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The First World War began over one hundred years ago. Yet it continues to shape the world we live in. Empires fell, empires expanded, new countries were created, and Europe's borders were re-drawn. Moreover, international organizations were formed and new political ideologies took root. In short, the post-war world looked little like the world that had come before it.

However, it was not only in Europe that the shockwaves of the world's first truly global conflict were felt. Across the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, much like in Europe, the war led to momentous and irreversible changes. Changes that had, in fact, started before the war. The Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 saw the Ottoman Empire's European territory shrink considerably. Population exchanges in the aftermath of the two conflicts fundamentally altered the ethnic makeup of the Balkans and Ottoman Europe. The formal end of the Ottoman Empire in 1923 gave way to a number of new states, some independent and some part of the League of Nations mandate project, with new borders, new peoples, and new politics. Even in places where the Ottomans had not ruled, such as Qajar Persia, the war had a devastating effect on domestic life.

The consequences of the First World War in the Middle East are still subject to research. The post-war amalgamation of the ethnically and religiously varied regions of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra into a unified Iraq stands out as arguably one of the worst post-war political blunders. Radical Islamist groups such as the so-called Islamic State (IS) are keen to point to wartime diplomatic arrangements and secret pacts by Europe's great powers as evidence that the Middle East today has no basis in Arab-Islamic history. To that end, the now widely known and increasingly infamous agreement between Sir Mark Sykes and François-George Picot has been a cornerstone of IS propaganda, another in a countless line of examples of the Christian, European West subjugating the Arab, Islamic East.

The First World War still matters to the modern Middle East, and to a West that has struggled to come to grips with the region's volatility. However, how much do we know about the war's impact on the region? Why were the Allies and Central Powers there? What were they trying to achieve? How did the war affect working- and middle-class Muslims, Christians, and Jews throughout the region? How was culture, literature, religion, and politics affected by the war? Is what we know still state of the art? Can we go beyond Sykes and Picot? Can we make real, legitimate links between the events of 1914-18 and the present?

These are complex but important questions to answer. Recently, more and more historians and scholars of many fields have tackled the subject of the First World War and the Middle East. From sweeping histories of the downfall of the Ottomans (Eugene Rogan, 2015) and the war's

impact on the peoples of the Middle East (Leila Fawaz, 2014), to studies of how the war intensified colonial networks of economic control (Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, 2014) and how the armies that fought in the region performed (James E. Kitchen, 2014), each passing year sees the scholarship on the First World War and the Middle East growing.

Over three days at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst (RMAS) and the University of Oxford, ‘The Great War in the Middle East 1911-1923’, sponsored by the RMAS and the University of Oxford’s ‘Changing Character of War Programme’, offered a glimpse at the remarkable and diverse work scholars are engaging in to answer these questions and to shift our attention, in a complementary way, towards the Middle East. The conference opened with ROBERT JOHNSON (Pembroke College, Oxford), one of the conference’s co-organizers, making a well-reasoned and eloquent argument for seeing the First World War as part of a wider “spectrum of conflict” in the Middle East; a period that began in 1911, not 1914, and ended in 1923, not 1918. Indeed, Johnson’s suggestion for a revised timeline fit the overarching theme of his opening remarks: in order to understand the First World War and the Middle East, scholars have to understand the conflict from the perspective of those living in the Middle East. To do so, he argued, means not only looking at the great power politics of Europe but also the war’s social and cultural consequences for a multi-ethnic, multi-faith region.

Fittingly, the conference’s first panel, ‘Global Strategy and the Middle East’, sought to understand how the Middle East figured into the grand strategy of the Allies and Central Powers. JAMES RENTON (Edge Hill University) started by discussing what exactly the Middle East meant to Britain and how the British understanding of the region, with a particular focus on Palestine, shaped its policy towards Arab nationalists and Zionist Jews. The concept of a nation-based Middle East as a successor to Ottoman Asia was, as Renton put it, “a revolution of European conceptions of the region.” Most interestingly, Renton argued for a more nuanced approach to the relationship between the European colonial state – in this case, Britain – and occupied peoples than has been previously suggested by Erez Manela and his work on Wilsonian self-determination. It was an interactive process, Renton said, and one where Arabs and Jews had a voice. CHRISTOPHER READ (University of Warwick) followed Renton by responding to Johnson’s call to place the First World War in a larger historical context. Read discussed how Russia’s war with Constantinople was very much a continuation of its policy and relationship with the pre-war Ottoman Empire. The Turks and Russians had, after all, fought a number of wars prior to 1914, and the First World War was but the latest chance for Russia to exercise its religious-cultural authority in the region as the upholder of Russian Orthodoxy, with the accompanying goal of capturing Constantinople, and the protector of Christian holy places and Slavic peoples. In this way, Read sees Russian involvement in the war not only directed at the emerging German threat, as Sean McMeekin has argued, but also at a terminal Ottoman Empire. PETER LIEB (Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr, Potsdam) closed the panel with a reassessment of Germany’s almost unknown mission to wartime Georgia. Contrary to the arguments of previous historians, Lieb showed that Germany did not see Georgia as a part of a scheme for world domination. Instead it was a way to re-open the Eastern Front (halted by the Bolshevik Revolution), to extend German influence to the Middle East, and the regions around the Black Sea, Caucasus, and Caspian Sea, and to create a buffer state between Bolshevik Russia and their Ottoman ally. Taken together, all three papers

effectively globalized and localized the war in the Middle East. They showed how Palestine, the Russian-Ottoman borderlands, and even Georgia were all touched by the war, not because Britain, Germany or Russia had an insatiable appetite for conquering (although Russia might have been the exception), but because all three were trying to win the war and bringing the fight to every front imaginable was one way of achieving this goal.

Not only did the war in the Middle East involve different geo-strategic considerations than the war on the Western Front, it also had to be fought differently. Panels two and five considered 'Military Operations and Adaptation' and 'Tactics and Combat in the Middle East'. On the second panel, KAUSHIK ROY (Jadavpur University) focused on the Indian army's performance in Mesopotamia, arguing that something like the 'learning curve' of the Western Front also applied to the Indian army. Throughout the course of the war, the Indian army kept improving its battlefield performance and became better at taking care of the sensibilities of its Hindu and Muslim Indian soldiers. AIMÉE FOX-GODDEN (University of Birmingham) followed Roy by explaining how military tactics from the Western Front were brought eastwards to Gallipoli, Palestine, and Mesopotamia. Fox-Godden's argument was particularly insightful, as she emphasized the importance of "people to people transfers", of men, usually officers, coming from the Western Front and imparting their knowledge of the battlefield on other officers in the peripheral theatres. However, the flow of information was not one directional. Ideas from the peripheral theatres also went westwards as part of a reciprocal exchange between soldiers. ALEV KARADUMAN (Hacettepe University) launched panel five by looking at how ANZAC and Turkish soldiers remembered their time at Gallipoli, while NIKOLAS GARDNER (Royal Military College of Canada) closed the panel with a carefully argued reassessment of the tactics and morale of Indian Expeditionary Force 'D' at Kut el-Amara and elsewhere.

Unsurprisingly, the war in the Middle East evoked a strong reaction amongst religious communities both in the region and abroad. ADRIAN GREGORY (Pembroke College, Oxford) offered a thoughtful overview on the idea of the war as a crusade. Gregory echoed the recent revisionist approaches of James E. Kitchen and Justin Fantauzzo by arguing that the idea of the Palestine campaign as a religious crusade did not resonate with many men in the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, at least during the war years. Instead, Gregory demonstrated convincingly that crusading rhetoric was far more popular in the United States of America and France. The key difference was that for the French the Western Front, not the Holy Land, was imagined as a modern-day 'Via Dolorosa'. ROBERTO MAZZA (University of Limerick) showed that the Christian churches in Palestine were primarily concerned with their communities (and none, it seems, thought of the war as a conflict between faiths). For Christian communities in Palestine, the war led to closer relations with Palestinian Muslims in the face of growing Zionist and Sephardic Jewish immigration, the Arabization of Catholic and Anglican institutions, and an increased involvement of Christian churches in communal issues. JOHN SLIGHT (St. John's College, Cambridge) closed the panel by looking at the reception of the Ottoman's declaration of *jihad* outside the Ottoman heartlands. From Burma to India, and from Nigeria to Singapore, Slight revealed that the overwhelming majority of Muslims rejected the idea of the war as a holy struggle. Crucially, all three papers dealt with a provocative and occasionally sensitive topic with great care. To effectively unlock whether or not the war was thought of in eschatological or religious terms, all three stressed the local and/or regional interpretations of crusade and *jihad*,

offering the audience a close-up of how the war was being understood by religious communities on the ground.

Panel four looked at how the people of the Middle East experienced the war in day-to-day life. LEILA FAWAZ (Tufts University) positioned the war in the Middle East as a break from the pre-war Ottoman past, similar to how some cultural historians of the war in Europe, such as Modris Eksteins, have seen 1914 as a rupture point for European society. Although many Arabs throughout the region saw the war simply as a continuation of the Balkan Wars, the war fractured Ottoman society and identity in ways that were never fully repaired. Indeed, the Middle Eastern world of 1914-1918 was markedly different from the years before it. As MARIO RUIZ (Hofstra University) showed, the declaration of martial law in Egypt gave the British authorities in Cairo a critical tool to exercise their power. Martial law allowed the colonial state to monitor foreigners in Egypt, to police prostitution, and to regulate the sale of alcohol. In short, martial law created the conditions under which Egypt became a wartime state, and played a small but not insignificant part in Egypt transitioning to a nation-state in the 1920s. Just as the war had a tremendous impact on Arabs living in Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon, and everyday life in Egypt, so too did the war affect life in Persia. OLIVER BAST (University of Manchester) laid bare the shocking humanitarian disaster caused by a devastating combination of economic inflation, government maladministration, and invading Russian and British armies.

Governing the post-war Middle East presented unique challenges and formed the theme of the sixth panel. JAMES E. KITCHEN (RMAS), another of the conference's co-organizers, discussed British colonial policing and counter-revolutionary operations in Egypt during its year of national unrest in 1919. Rather than the disastrous attempts to govern Ireland or the embarrassment of the Amritsar massacre in India, the British army in Egypt essentially functioned as imperial policemen, meting out collective punishment and harsh prison sentences to Egyptian nationalists. Maintaining governance on the borderlands of the post-Ottoman world was much harder to do, as ROBERT FLETCHER (University of Warwick) explained in his paper about the untidy and fluid borders of Arabia. Not only the British had to contend with governing an unhappy, oppressed population. In places such as Ottoman Syria, the state had to stage-manage the rising tide of Arab nationalism. Moreover, as MICHAEL PROVENCE (University of California, San Diego) pointed out, it did so in rather unconventional ways and with surprising success. Ottoman military schools were filled with young boys from a variety of ethnic backgrounds (Turks, Arabs, Bulgarians, Greeks) who learned Turkish and Arabic, producing young Arabs, especially, who would eventually play an important role in the Ottoman war effort. Crucially, as Provence pointed out, the Sharifian Revolt was not an operation led by defected Ottoman Arab officers. Most stayed loyal to Constantinople.

The conference's final panel examined a fascinating range of cultural representations of the war. JUSTIN FANTAUZZO (Memorial University of Newfoundland) began by discussing British-imperial fiction. He argued that novels focusing on the Middle East, and the war in Egypt and Palestine in particular, weaved sophisticated stories that simultaneously portrayed the Middle Eastern campaigns as romantic sideshows and grueling wars with brutal conditions unlike anything on the Western Front. NADIA ATIA (Queen Mary, University of London) also dealt with fictional representations but focused on Mesopotamia and the writings of Agatha Christie.

Christie's work on Mesopotamia reached an astonishingly wide audience and helped to shape interwar popular culture views of Mesopotamia in Britain and abroad. However, the war in the Middle East was embodied in other ways than fictional writing. JENNY MACLEOD (University of Hull) reflected upon the ways in which Kemal Atatürk's speech about a shared fraternity between ANZACs, Turks, and Armenians evolved in the post-war period. Macelod showed that a shared language of brotherhood-in-arms developed in earnest after the Second World War, becoming increasingly popular in the latter years of the Cold War as Turkey and the West looked to solidify their partnership in NATO. Finally, GIZEM TONGO (St. John's, Oxford) turned the audience's attention to visual and material culture. Ottoman artists and producers of culture were incredibly active during and shortly after the war. In Ottoman art, the ordinary soldier quickly replaced the Sultan as the central figure of wartime visual culture, with works sometimes bordering on anti-war or at least representing the destruction and psychological torment of the conflict on the average Ottoman soldier.

The final day of the conference saw both a format and venue change. EUGENE ROGAN (St. Antony's College, Oxford) delivered the conference's keynote lecture at Pembroke College, Oxford, concentrating on how the Allies prepared for the post-war, post-Ottoman Middle East, and how the Middle East responded. In a coolly delivered and level-headed lecture, Rogan raised many of the same points in his superb monograph, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East* (2015). Wartime diplomacy, he argued, cannot and should not be treated independently of the First World War. That context becomes all the more important with regard to the allied attempts to carve up the Middle East. As Rogan stated, it would be a mistake to assess British policy, in particular, as part of an elaborate plot to rule over parts of the Middle East. As of the Constantinople Agreement in 1915, and even past it, the British had no territorial ambitions in the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, their only objective was to win the war, even if that meant promising parts of a post-Ottoman future to Arab nationalists or Zionist Jews. If anything, wartime diplomacy was an attempt to end the Eastern Question that had plagued Western-Ottoman relations for decades. It would be a further mistake, Rogan pointed out, to speak of a "broad-based Arab nationalist movement" throughout the Middle East. In short, Arabs did not jump at the chance to cooperate with the Allies, and many actually favoured a dual-sultanate, an Arab-Turkish system of governance similar to Austria-Hungary. In the end, Rogan's lecture reminded the audience that during the First World War, Allied diplomacy and Arab political action advanced the national interests of those involved (although not always territorial interests). There were no conspiracies, no grandiose plans to subjugate the Middle East under Western rule, and no widespread Arab nationalist movement at near boiling point. Nonetheless, the war in the Middle East did not contribute to the political and national environment that exists in the Middle East today. On the contrary, Rogan was careful to point out that the events of the war and, in some cases, the longstanding grievances that came out of it still resonate in the twenty-first century. A lively roundtable discussion followed between Rogan, MARGARET MACMILLAN (St. Antony's College, Oxford), MATTHEW HUGHES (Brunel University London), JOHN DARWIN (Nuffield College, Oxford), HIMMET UMUNÇ (Başkent University) and Robert Johnson.