

Arab Revolt of 1916

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Abstract:

During World War One the Arab Revolt of 1916 is an important part of the Middle Eastern history that led to the breakup of the Ottoman Empire. The Colonial Powers of Britain and France decided to Carve up the Ottoman Territory between themselves and the dream of Greater Arab State didn't materialize. The British entered into several conflicting treaties with different nations and people during World War One. The Arabs felt betrayed at the end of World War One and the war led to further interference of Colonial powers in the Middle East. Secondary sources have been used for the research of the article.

Keywords: Colonialism, Ottoman Empire, Revolt, World War One

Introduction:

During World War I the Arab Revolt of 1916 against the Ottoman Empire is an important episode of Middle Eastern history that changed the landscape of the region in many ways. After nearly four hundred years under the Ottoman rule, the Arab nationalism emerged as a defining phenomenon that led to the eventual breakdown of the Ottoman Empire. The revolt may have started from Hijaz in modern Saudi Arabia but it shook the foundations of the Ottoman Empire from within. More than a military campaign, the revolt came as a blow to the moral foundations of the Ottoman Empire. For centuries the Arabs had accepted the Sultan's rule in Istanbul as the head of Islamic community. The tumultuous events of the World War I and the secret maneuverings of the Colonial powers created an uprising to the far corners of the Middle East. Some scholars had tried to project the revolt as a minor event in the wider scope of battles during World War I and especially the fierce fighting on the Western front. However, there is no doubt that the modern Middle East is the creation of the Arab revolt during World War and the secret agreements and policies of the European powers.

Causes of the Revolt:

The Arabs in the Ottoman Empire had their misgivings and apprehensions about the Ottomans rule during the World War but Arab nationalism emerged only at the end of the nineteenth century. The rule of Young Turks in many ways led to the downfall of the Ottoman Empire. The Young Turks carried out a coup d'état in 1908 and took over the reins of the power and the Sultan in Istanbul was reduced to a titular role. The Arabs and other communities hoped that they would be given autonomy within the Ottoman Empire. However, the Young Turks embarked on centralization and Turkification of the Ottoman Empire. The conscription

in the army was advocated and Turkish language was promoted at the expense of Arabic. The alienation and sense of Arab nationalism were deep rooted, genuine and increased among the educated Arabs in Syria and the Chiefs of Arabia.

The Young Turks inappropriately joined the World War I and allied themselves with Germany. The Sultan called for a global Jihad against the British and French forces. For British the main concern was protecting India from any foreign influence through the important waterway of Suez Canal from any foreign influence. Therefore to protect their interests in the Middle East, the British embarked on a series of secret treaties with several contesting sides.

Sharif-McMahon Correspondence

In Nov. 1914 Sharif Hussein of Mecca entered into correspondence with Sir Henry McMahon (British High Commissioner in Egypt). Prior to the revolt, Sharif Hussein was appointed as Governor of Hijaz by the Ottoman Sultan and he belonged to the respectable Hashemite family of Arabia. The Hashemite leader Sharif Hussein wished to establish his independence from Ottoman Turkish authority and saw the British as the best guarantor of his aspirations (Goldstone, P-20). The Sharif family were also in competition with Al-Saud family who had aligned themselves with the Wahabi Sect.

Britain feared that a call to Jihad (holy War) by the Sultan might trigger an anti-British rebellion within Britain's empire just when Britain needed all its strength to face external enemies (Wilson, p-27). The British got more interested in correspondence with Sharif to counter the Jihad of the Ottoman Sultan and initiated an internal uprising within the Ottoman Empire. The correspondence between Sharif Hussein and Sir Henry McMahon continued for eight months. The British promised that there would be an independent Arab State comprising of Syria, Arabia, Iraq and

TransJordan in return for the Arab revolt. Sharif Hussein went ahead with the plan as he had visions of a Greater Arab state whose boundaries extended from Iran to the Mediterranean.

In March 1924 the Turks abolished Caliphate and on 11 March Sharif Hussein was recognized as Caliph for the areas comprising Shuneh, Jeddah, Aleppo, Demascus and Beirut but in Egypt his Caliphate was disapproved because of British intrigues (Qureshi, p-66). The Political scenario changed at the end of 1924 when Ibn Saud ousted Hussain from Jijaz (Qureshi, p-69).

Sykes-Picot Agreement:

During World War I the British were conducting agreements with several nations and parties at the same time. The British were making promises that were incompatible in the post War scenario. Even during the World War I, the British and French had already decided to carve up Middle East among themselves. A secret agreement known as Sykes-Picot Treaty was signed in May 1916 between Britain and France. The makers of the treaty were Mark Sykes (British Diplomat) and Francois George Picot (former French Consul in Beirut).

The European for many years referred to Turkey as the ‘Sickman of Europe’ and they knew the Ottoman Empire was like a dying man. The possessions of a dying man were ready to be divided among many parties. The British sought ports of Haifa and Acre, as well as Ottoman province of Basra and Baghdad (Paige, p-567). The French had long been interested in Syria and Lebanon and claimed sovereignty over them. Russia was promised the prized possession of Istanbul and the Bosphorus straits. Greece and Italy were also assured of control of parts of Anatolia.

It was an incredible piece of duplicity and ‘double dealing’ on the part of the British and the French. Mark Sykes and George Picot pondering over the map of Middle East, with a ruler and pencil in hand, decided upon the fate of millions of people. At a meeting in 1915, Mark Sykes had said, —I would like to draw a line from the e in Acre to the last K in Kirkuk. Lenin asked the Pravda newspaper to publish the secret treaty and called it —an agreement of the Colonial thieves. The Arabs came to know about his treaty almost after a year, however it didn’t have much of an impact on the revolt.

Many consider the borders drawn up by the Colonial powers as illegitimate designed to keep Arabs weak and divided (Holland, p-XX). Even after one hundred years of the infamous agreement the current turmoil in the Middle East is blamed on the Sykes-Picot agreement. It divided nations and people without taking into consideration the ethnic, linguistic and religious matters. The Shia-Sunni divide, division of Kurds in many countries and the Palestinian conflict are its defining legacy.

Balfour Declaration:

Another contradictory promise made by the British during World War I was the establishment of Jewish homeland in Palestine. The Zionist dream of Jewish homeland had steadily gained ground due to Chaim Weizmann (President of Zionist Organization) and the Rothschild family and other influential people in Europe and the U.S. After years of lobbying the Zionists succeeded in convincing the British to accept their demands. On Nov. 2, 1917, British Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour issued a letter stating, — His Majesty’s government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people..... (Kramer, p-149) The declaration consisted of conflicting statements as it desired a Jewish

homeland along with the promise of no prejudice against the non jews in Palestine.

The Balfour declaration proved to be the most enduring of the British war time promises. To gain the favour of worldwide Jewry during World War I, the British promised a Jewish state at the expense of the Palestinians. It was a shocking piece of dishonesty as the British had promised the Arabs a state which included Palestine. Although, the British later asserted that there was no mention of Palestine in Sharif-McMahon correspondence. The British were trying to appease the Jews — to right some of the wrongs that history had committed against the Jews. (Kamrava, P-43). The Balfour declaration would lead to increased migration of Jews to Palestine and the increased emigration of Arabs out of Palestine in the proceeding years.

The Arab Uprising:

On June 5, 1916 the Arab uprising (aided by the British) began against the Ottoman Empire. The revolt led to the capture of Jeddah and the holy city of Mecca. However, the Arabs failed to capture Medina till the end of the war as it was connected by railway line and ottomans supplied most of the equipment through this line. The Arabs lacking modern weapons and technology relied on the British for arms and equipment.

A protracted war ensued for the next two years, one of the effects of which was the rise of an adventurous British military adviser named T.E Lawrence (Kamrava, P-40). T.E Lawrence had been sent by the British to help Sharif Hussein in the revolt against the Ottomans. Lawrence met with Sharif's son, Faysal and began sabotaging and disrupting the Ottoman supply lines. Lawrence's role was eulogized by

1962 film, Lawrence of Arabia played by Peter O'Toole. At the end of World War T.E Lawrence felt guilty that the Arabs were going to be betrayed due to the Sykes-Picot agreement.

The important port of Al-Aqaba (in Jordan) fell to Faysal's army in 1917. The Ottoman forces severely depleted and were fighting on many fronts during World War I. In 1918, Arab army of 8,000 with General Edmund Allenby took Damascus (Rogan, P-170). The fall of Palestine, Iraq and Syria proved to be the end of the Ottoman rule in the Middle East. When the defeated Ottomans withdrew from their Arab provinces, there were few who mourned their passing (Rogan, P-167). Four centuries of Ottoman rule had come to an end and Sharif Husein hoped that the British would comply with there War time promises.

The reverbations of abolition of Caliphate could be heard in India too where a Khilafat movement started to restore Ottoman Caliuphate. The new leader in Turkey should have no connections with Pan-Islamism and religious entanglements with the Arab countries and India. He was a pure nationalist and preferred Pan-Turcanism i.e the the race of the Turks.

Betrayal and State Formation:

In the post World War I years the Arabs would feel greatly betrayed by the British and had to reconcile themselves without a Greater Arab state. Sharif Huseein refused to accept the Treaty of Versailles (1919) but the victorious Allies were adamant to impose their terms on the vanquished nations. Sharif's son, Faysal proclaimed himself as the ruler of Syria and received the wide support of Arab masses. The French were determined to get their piece of Ottoman share and ousted Faysal from Syria on July 25, 1920. However, in 1921 Faysal was made the King of Iraq by the British. Sharif's other son, Abdulla, would become the King of

Jordan and it proved to be the permanent dynasty surviving today. Sharif himself lost to the Al-Saud in Arabia in 1924. World War I led to further dismemberment of Arab states across ethnic and sectarian lines that continues to divide the Middle East. The Arab revolt is important because, — it marked the beginning of the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire in the 20th century. Second , it ushered in an era of extremely close relationship between Britain and those who came to eventually Transjordan and parts of Arabia including Iraq (Kamrava, P-39).

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