

CONFERENCE REPORT

A World In or Out of Order: A Hundred Years since WWI



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A World In or Out of Order: A Hundred Years since WWI

This is a report on a public session titled “**A World In or Our of Order: A Hundred Years since WW1**”, held as part of the TRT World Forum 2018. The views, themes and discussion points expressed in this conference report are those of participants and speakers present at the TRT World Forum 2018, and do not reflect the official view of TRT World Research Centre.

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- 1** *How did the post-WWI settlements shape the history of the Middle East? Are they still relevant today?*
- 2** *What impact will the Trump administration have on the US Middle East policy?*
- 3** *Is the Middle East going into a new and decisive phase right now?*
- 4** *What role can regional actors like Turkey play in stabilising the Middle East?*

Summary

The Middle East continues to struggle with militancy, civil unrest, and extreme economic and political instability. The inability of governments to prevent the rise and spread of Daesh in Iraq and Syria without foreign intervention highlighted the volatile state of the region. Similarly, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict shows no sign of resolution, with overt US support for Israel merely fanning the flames of the Palestinian resistance to occupation. Furthermore the collapse of state power in Syria was followed by Russian, Turkish and Iranian intervention. We assembled a panel of historians, analysts, and former policy advisors to diagnose the cause of the current bloodshed and instability in the region. To break down the historical background, we were joined by Ottoman historian Şükrü Hanioglu from Princeton University and Turkey expert Professor William Hale, former professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies. While contemporary geopolitics is of relevance, the major issues in the region are ultimately based around pre-existing fault-lines and historical grievances. In commemoration of the centenary of the end of World War I (1914-1918), the panel discussed how or whether circumstances had changed in the past century. They looked at broader, structural problems such as the creation of new nation-states and borders in line with colonial interests. Robert Dixon Crane, former advisor to President Richard Nixon, together with Thomas P.M. Barnett, American military strategist and chief analyst at Wikistrat, analysed the current crises in light of the international order. The roles of regional actors were re-assessed, and the need for strong local leadership was emphasised. In order to build a stable future for the Middle East, regional actors such as Turkey need to play a greater role in safeguarding the lives of civilians. Indirect intervention and support for militant groups will only further increase the instability, violence and bloodshed in the region. Given that the US increasingly disinterested in limiting humanitarian crises, whether in Yemen or Palestine, and the ineffectiveness of post-WWII international organizations such as the UN, it has become clear that the region's ills need to be addressed by regional actors themselves. While the support of the international community is indeed necessary, the leading role in alleviating the problems of the region will lie with the governments of the Middle East themselves.



Moderator Ghida Fakhry, presenter for TRT World, enquiring the panelists regarding the impact of the post-WWI settlements on the current crises of the Middle East.

Introduction

The current world order, composed of nation-states, emerged in its currently recognisable form early in the 20th century. While the “Great War” of 1914-18 led to the consolidation of the British and French Empires, it also resulted in the collapse of three other centuries-old entities: the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian Empires (following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917). The rise of ethnic nationalism and settlements by the victorious powers resulted in the creation of new nation-states throughout Eurasia. The Treaty of Versailles (1919) led to the creation of nine new nation-states in Europe, while the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) sealed the fate of the Ottoman Empire. One of the most well-known arrangements of this period, the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 between the British and French, laid down the new borders in the Levant, creating the new states of Syria, Iraq, British Palestine, Transjordan, and Kuwait, albeit under colonial mandates. As highlighted by Ottoman historian Professor Şükrü Hanioglu, this arrangement was created with the strategic interests of the British and the French Empires in mind, and did not take the existing political structures and alliances between local notables into account. Unlike the Ottomans, who had ruled through a combination of various power-sharing arrangements, the new states emerged in spite of the political will of the local populace. Thus, while Sykes-Picot provided the blueprint for the borders which would be drawn, the Treaties of Sevres and Lausanne overturned the existing political arrangements in the region. The new political elite of what would now be called the “Middle East” (or Near East) were products of the geopolitical interests of the victorious Triple Entente.

Much of the sectarian tensions, territorial disputes, and turmoil in the Middle East stems from this historical injustice, which irreversibly altered the future of its ancient, multicultural, and diverse peoples. The post-WWII order was effectively more of the same, with the Cold War’s US-Soviet rivalry replacing that of the British-French rivalry. The creation of Israel and the occupation of Palestine remains the most visible legacy of imperial designs in the region – and became the rallying cry for Arab nationalism, whose emergence provided a sense of legitimacy to the new Arab regimes. Sectarian rivalries have led to increased polarisation of the states in the region, and genuine cooperation or attempts to address historical injustices remains elusive. A hundred years on, still rife with unrest, is the Middle East closer to a sense of order than at the eve of the Great War? We asked our erudite panel of historians and contemporary analysts of the Middle East regarding the legacy of the war, and whether the past one hundred years could be instructive in determining the future trajectory of the region.

The Lasting Impact of the Post-WWI Settlements

The current nation-state order in the Middle East remains largely unchanged from that which emerged following the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, and is virtually indistinguishable from its post-World War II configuration. In spite of the longevity of the current configuration of states, internally, the region is faced with a number of seemingly intractable issues. These include the ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestine, the wars in Yemen and Syria, regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as aberrations such as the emergence of Daesh in Iraq, among others. The possibility of greater violence continues to loom large on the horizon, and it is worth asking whether these conflicts can be attributed solely to contemporary geopolitical concerns, or if old wounds and neglect of historical injustices also plays an important role. Şükrü Hanioglu, Professor of Ottoman history at the Near Eastern Studies department in Princeton University, highlighted the differences between the Ottoman era and the current political order. Unlike colonial empires, the multi-religious and poly-ethnic Ottoman Empire allowed a great deal of autonomy to the provinces and ruled primarily through a set of power-sharing arrangements between state representatives and provincial notables. He identified three different types of political arrangements that were active under the Empire: provinces directly administered from Istanbul such as Greater Syria, legally autonomous regions such as Mount Lebanon and the Yemeni highlands, regions under nominal Ottoman and de-facto local rule such as parts of Niger and the Hijaz in Arabia. As a result, the status quo of the pre-WWI Middle East was representative of the local populations and accustomed to the needs of the regions. According to him, while it was by no means a golden age devoid of conflict, the overarching Ottoman peace provided the region with a stable status quo. The British and French creation of mandates, such as in Iraq, which put together formerly separate Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul, led to the erosion of the existing status quo and the emergence of brand new states which struggled to gain legitimacy. The currently balkanised Middle East no longer has a legitimate status quo, which is why the states in the region are continuously plunged into instability and rampant conflict.



Professor Şükrü Haniöđlu from Princeton University, highlighting the differences between the Ottoman era status quo and the current scenario.

According to William Hale, Emeritus Professor of Politics at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), there are three primary theaters of conflict in the Middle East. Namely, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (in which the United States plays a key role), the Syrian conflict, and the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In all of these conflicts, there is a level of foreign intervention involved. Former advisor to US President Richard Nixon, Robert Dickson Crane, highlighted the need for a return to the wisdom of the Ottoman Empire. While the political context and concerns are considerably different, the Ottoman Empire functioned as a negotiating power which kept peace through a multilateral approach, and respected the wishes of the populations by offering them autonomy. In contrast, the current Middle East policy of the US upholds structures of oppression, which prevents the emergence of stable and just governance in the Middle East. Rather than support unjust and oppressive governments or to try to play the role of a nation-builder, the US needs to adopt a more constructive and humane policy towards the Middle East. Furthermore, as one of the successor states of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey can play an important role in stabilising the Middle East – by adopting policies which address the injustices faced by the millions of people caught up in the turmoil. As per Professor Hanioglu, unlike the post-WWI arrangement, the new landscape of the Middle East will be defined by regional powers – who must act in spite of foreign influences and geostrategic interests.

Moving forward requires strong leadership by Turkey, but also a greater commitment by the US and the international community to put vested interests aside and to act in the interests of the populations suffering from these conflicts. Especially in-light of the ongoing catastrophes in Palestine and Yemen, an increasingly humanitarian and justice-centered approach is necessary.

The Trump Administration's Middle East Policy

Although regional powers have a greater say in the configuration of the Middle East today, the balance of power remains entangled with the geostrategic and economic interests of global powers. Globalisation has enabled the creation of a far more integrated world order, which can be regulated and governed with the help of international organisations such as the UN. However, the increasingly isolationist foreign policy of the US, centered on the notion of 'America First', has been followed by a series of unilateral measures concerning the Middle East. The US' declaration of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel was highly provocative, and openly contradicted the consensus against such a move by the majority of the UN member-states. Thomas P.M. Barnett, American military strategist and former chief analyst at Wikistrat, believes that this is the natural outcome of previous US attempts to actively lead the global order and intervene excessively in the affairs of other countries as part of the so-called 'War on Terror'. In an attempt to unburden itself of the responsibilities and costs of global leadership, the US has begun to renegotiate its relationship with other nations throughout the world. As a result, American intervention in Syria has been mostly indirect. Instead of intervening directly, it provided arms and support for the YPG (the Syrian wing of the PKK designated as a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the US and EU). Nevertheless, he believes that the Trump administration has not brought a permanent alteration in US foreign policy, but rather a recurrence of a trend in American politics whereby the middle class supports isolationism and protectionism when it feels threatened. The fracking revolution in the US has facilitated the extraction of oil from its domestic reserves, which has left the Middle East as only the fifth-largest supplier of oil to the US. The efforts to pursue a nuclear deal with Iran during Barack Obama's presidency, according to him, was also a product of the increased confidence that the US no longer depends on Gulf oil. However, this has also contributed to rising unilateralism.

SOAS

**American Military-Geostrategist and
Chief Analyst at Wikistrat**



Thomas P.M. Barnett, American military strategist and chief analyst at Wikistrat, discussing the reasons behind the Trump administration's unilateralism.



A New and Decisive Phase in the History of the Middle East

Unlike the immediate post-WWI scenario, the governments in the Middle East now play an important role in determining the future of the region. While direct British and French intervention led to the creation of new states and the drawing up of artificial borders, the picture is not as simple today. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and other states all play an important role in determining the outcome of local conflicts. As per Thomas P.M. Barnett, there has been a hardening of the dynamic between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which has resulted in greater Saudi-Israeli cooperation in the past few years. Both are also strong allies of the Trump administration. On the other hand, the Syrian theatre has brought Russia, Iran, and Turkey to the table to discuss the future political settlement in the region. The implication of the Saudi-Israeli rapprochement for the Palestinian cause is clear, especially with the US declaration of Jerusalem as the Israeli capital in violation of the UN General Assembly's consensus. Similarly, the war in Yemen is another theatre where the US continues to support Saudi Arabia in spite of the humanitarian crisis and massive toll on civilians. William Hale points out that the US and Russia are both involved in the Saudi-Iran struggle as secondary powers. While US sanctions target Iran in an attempt to isolate it, Russia has included Iran in the Syrian peace process. Given the effective collapse of the Syrian-Iraqi border following the spread of Daesh, the future of the two countries is still not clear. The final settlement in Syria will have a substantial impact on the region, but the exact nature of the changes remains uncertain. What is clear is that regional powers with direct interests are far more effective in ensuring actual political change, and that indirect intervention is unlikely to bring any major, constructive changes to the political landscape.



Robert Dickson Crane, former advisor to President Richard Nixon, pointing out the importance of Turkey's role in facilitating stability in the Middle East.

The Role of Turkey in Stabilising the Middle East

The lack of peace and prosperity in the Middle East stems from the lack of just governance, and the compromising of local demands for the sake of foreign interests. World historians such as Ibn Khaldun and Arnold Toynbee have argued that civilisations rise when they successfully meet the challenges their circumstances present, and fall once they fail to do so. There is a crisis of leadership now that the United States has chosen to take a more unilateral approach to international relations. According to William Hale, the likelihood of the Syrian status quo being restored exactly as it was is unlikely. Despite Russian support for the Syrian regime, multiple actors have become involved in the Syrian sphere, including Turkey. Any final settlement will revolve around balancing the strategic and territorial interests of Turkey and Iran, both of whom have opposing positions regarding the Syrian regime. Regional actors have a clear stake in maintaining peace in the broader region, but they do not necessarily have the same opinion regarding how best to achieve it. Robert Dixon Crane argues that Turkey has a responsibility to maintain peace and stability in the region, and to serve as a model for humane governance much as the Ottoman era provided an overall framework of stability for centuries. Just as the historical grievances and present-day conflicts can be traced back to the immediate post-WWI scenario, understanding the past status quo and the way it functioned can offer clues to what sort of factors need to be kept in mind when considering present-day settlements. Turkey has welcomed Syrian refugees with open arms, and continues to play an important role in stemming the bloodshed in Syria. The Turkish government reached a MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) with the Russian government regarding Idlib, which allows for the continuation of a peace process in Syria, in which the US plays a minimal role. By taking on the responsibility for addressing the wrongs of the region, regional governments can follow Turkey's example and contribute to more multilateral cooperation in peace-building and restoration in the Middle East.



Emeritus Professor William Hale, formerly at the School of Oriental and African Studies, discussing the future of Syria and the current arrangements in place.

Conclusion

The Syrian crisis shows that the Middle East is still far from stable, and the need for policies pursuing compassionate justice is higher than ever. Although regional actors have a greater level of autonomy in determining the political future of the region today, there has to be a change in the policy of global powers. As a country which has already played an important diplomatic role in the Syrian crisis, Turkey has a responsibility to act as a model for leadership. While it seems unlikely that the conflicts will be resolved in the short-run, regional powers such as Turkey and Iran can now negotiate the future of the Middle East with global powers such as the US and Russia. Moving forward requires strong leadership by Turkey, but also a greater commitment by the US and the international community to put vested interests aside and to act in the interests of the populations suffering from these conflicts. Especially in-light of the ongoing catastrophes in Palestine and Yemen, an increasingly humanitarian and justice-centred approach is necessary. The refugee crisis and the exodus of populations throughout the Middle East to Europe are also outcomes of a lack of just governance and the privileging of the interests of states over those of the population. As a country that spends a significant amount on humanitarian aid around the world, and hosts more than 3 million Syrian refugees, Turkey has a responsibility to continue its humanitarian foreign policy and pursuit of justice in the region, by protecting the civilians caught up in the theatres of conflict. By doing so, it can act as a stabilising force, as well as lead by example in restoring peace and justice in a fragmented world.

