

Opinion Balfour Is History. The Middle East's New Imperialists Are Turkey and Iran

The Arab Middle East is currently being carved into spheres of influence by imperial powers. This time it's not Britain and France but Iran and Turkey - but the reasons they seek to assert their domination are exactly the same.

The Arab Middle East is currently being carved into spheres of influence by imperial powers. They seek international prestige and covet the region's energy resources and geo-strategic location.

That may sound a familiar narrative, but this time, those powers are not Britain, France or the United States, but rather Iran and Turkey, two non-Arab states with imperial pasts who wish to reassert their domination.

One hundred years marks the Balfour Declaration, Great Britain's 1917 letter in support of a Jewish home in Palestine. The declaration was London's attempt to subvert the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement that aimed to establish British-French spheres of influence in the Middle East, with France presiding over what is now Syria and Lebanon and Britain over Iraq and Jordan. Palestine was left to be internationalized.

But having invested time, people and treasure in the Middle Eastern theater of World War I, Britain was resentful of France's share.

London demanded both Mosul, the oil region to the north of Iraq, and Palestine with the holy city of Jerusalem to serve as a buffer to both the Suez Canal and the route to the crown jewel of the British Empire, India.

The Balfour Declaration paved the way for the British Mandate over Palestine, which London maintained until the Jewish state of Israel was declared in May 1948, six months after the United Nations resolution in favor of partition. The Arab-Israeli war that followed claimed the lives of 1 per cent of the nascent Jewish state's population and led to the dispersal of the Palestinian people.

But that was then. Today, with the approval of Russia, Iran and Turkey seek to dominate the Arab world for the same reasons as Britain and France before them: Energy, geostrategic interests, trade, and good old-fashioned prestige.

The successor of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey considers itself a global power. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan recently remarked that the UN needs structural reform because the world is bigger than the five permanent members of the Security Council, adding that Istanbul should be made a UN center.

Turkey attempts to assert regional influence at every turn. Ankara set up a military base in Qatar, intervened in Syria and wishes to involve itself in nearly every regional development including the Gulf crisis, the Iraqi Kurdish referendum and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

There's also significant economic interests at stake. Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came into power in 2002, Turkey sought to increase business and trade links with the Middle East. Currently, Ankara is seeking to raise the volume of trade between Turkey and the Arab world to \$70 billion, a sharp increase from the \$9 billion it was worth in 2003.

Dormant in Turkey's imperial psyche is the post-World War I question of Mosul, which Ankara claimed was its territory. Although international arbitration ruled the province part of Iraq, many a Turkish nationalist considers Mosul rightfully theirs.

Over the past few years Ankara propped up Masoud Barzani, leader of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRG) as a local proxy, using him to win lucrative energy and construction projects. Ankara then played the imperial game of divide and rule by switching allegiance to Baghdad following the Kurdish independence referendum and was rewarded big-time by Baghdad which promised to reopen its pipeline to Turkey. Meanwhile, twice Turkey has intervened in Syria, maintaining a presence in the north of the country.

Iran also has a long imperial history stretching from the ancient Achaemenid Empire to the Qajars, who were replaced by modern Pahlavi dynasty of Shah.

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has made enormous domestic sacrifices including sanctions, poverty, isolation and massive loss of life in order to achieve imperial grandeur. This includes Ayatollah Khomeini's fateful decision to reject

Saddam Hussein's offer for a truce in 1980, prolonging the Iran-Iraq War for another 8 years in the hope of gaining territory to the cost of over one million lives.

Iran has exploited sectarian divisions in neighboring states, sowing the seeds of discord by sponsoring Shia militants in countries as far afield as Lebanon and Yemen in an attempt to carve a crescent of influence in the region.

Despite crippling sanctions, Tehran invested billions of dollars in constructing intercontinental ballistic weapons, developing nuclear energy, and sponsoring regional militant groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas which have managed to build Iranian sponsored states within states.

Iran was able to further carve its sphere of influence by sponsoring Shia paramilitary militias in Iraq as well as having the ear of the government of Baghdad. In Syria, Tehran managed to maintain influence by supporting Hezbollah and the chemical weapon wielding regime of Bashar al-Assad, all under the guise of the Astana process, an attempt for an international seal of approval not unlike the post-World War I peace conferences that legitimized Britain and France's hold over the region.

It was once the imperial powers of Britain and France which shaped the Middle East, but today, one hundred years after Sykes-Picot and the Balfour declaration, it is Iran and Turkey which seek to replace them.

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