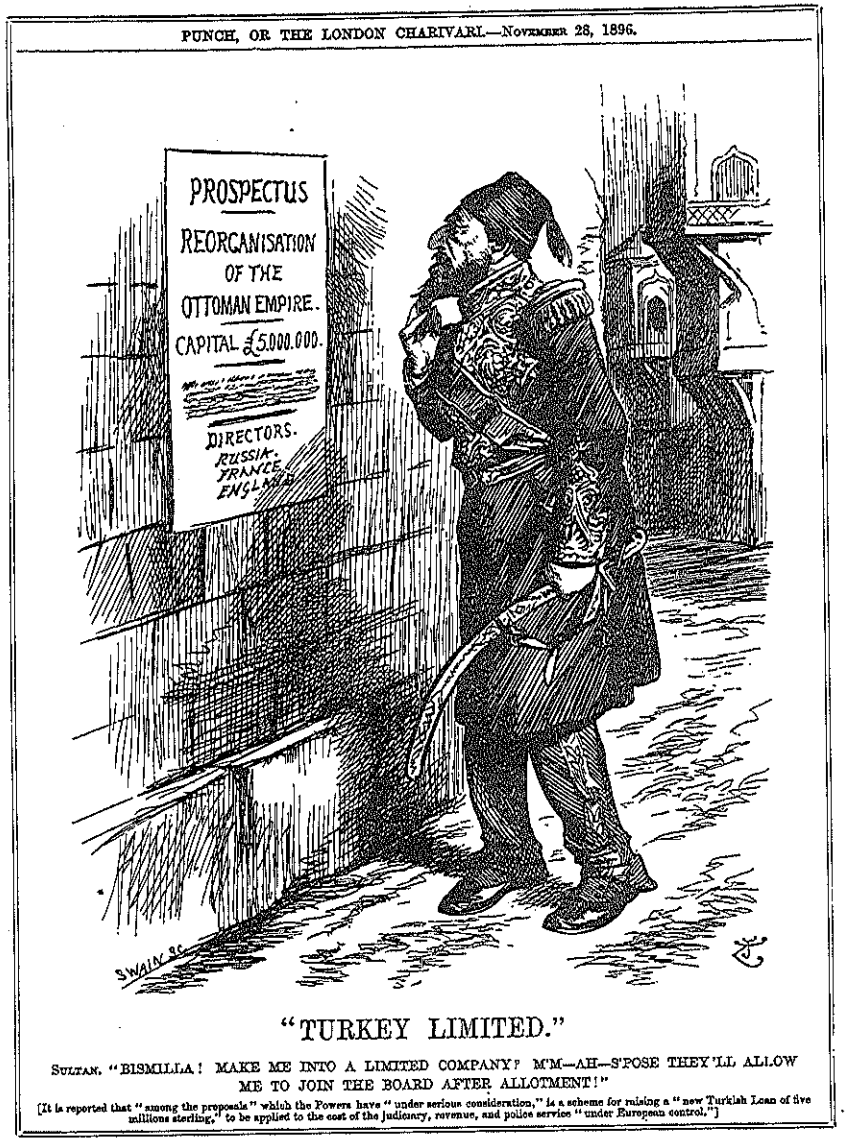

RETHINKING MIDDLE EAST POLITICS

State Formation and Development

Simon Bromley

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2

From Tributary Empires to States System

Introduction

At its greatest extent, in the fifteenth century, the lands of the Ottoman empire comprised most of what is now the Middle East (excepting the interior of the Arabian peninsula and Iran), virtually all of North Africa along the Mediterranean coast, Greece and Turkey, together with most of the Balkans, the Crimea, Georgia and Armenia. It was the long historical decline of this dominion, a decline both slowed and aggravated by the intervention of outside powers anxious to put off the large-scale conflicts which would surely attend any final collapse, which forms the substance of the famous Eastern Question. For a century and a half (1774–1923) this combination of progressive internal enfeeblement and external management was to be the leading feature of the development of the region. It was clear on all sides that without internal reform this could only be a postponement of the inevitable. For, in the words of Tsar Nicholas in 1853, Europe had a 'sick man, seriously ill . . . on its hands'.

In the nineteenth century no serious observer doubted that internal reform was urgent, but would it succeed? The optimism of Stratford Canning, 'whose dearest wish was to see "the Bible . . . go forth with the engine, and every choice assortment of Manchester stuffs . . . [and] have an honest John Bunyan to distribute them" ', was poignantly matched by Lord Clarendon's pessimistic, and as it turned out accurate, view that 'the only way to improve [the Ottomans], is to improve them off the face of the earth' (quoted

in Kedourie 1987:15). Quoting the quite modest views of the English traveller, Albert Smith, who on encountering the 'dancing dervishes' of Istanbul found them 'inexpressibly sly and offensive' and longed to 'hit them hard in the face', Victor Kiernan reminds us that in the mid-nineteenth century 'the consensus of opinion was that Islam was hopelessly sterile and stationary, that its devotees had walled themselves up in a mental prison from which they could neither escape nor be rescued' (1969:139, 140). The cartoons of *Punch* bear ample testimony to the truth of this judgement.

Despite such strength of feeling, it remained wholly unclear what could or should replace the Ottoman empire. Clearly, an imperial scramble would ensue, for no educated European would dissent from the judgement that the peoples of the empire were demonstrably unfit for self-government. Indeed, for much of the nineteenth century it was only the prospect of imperialist conflict over the remains that bolstered Ottoman integrity. When the empire finally collapsed, however, towards the end of the First World War, the Western armies finally moved in and occupied the region. Now the question which had been postponed for so long had to be confronted head-on: it was thus during the First World War – the long-feared conflagration of the imperialist powers which was indeed sparked by a sub-plot of the Eastern Question – that the alternatives really began to be elaborated. Looking at the states system of the Middle East today, it is all too easy to forget that before, during and even shortly after the First World War, the idea that Ottoman power should be replaced by a set of independent states was treated with derision in the capitals of the European powers. The idea did not make any more sense to the subject peoples of the empire. In fact, it is only a small exaggeration to say that the victorious European allies in the First World War, the British and the French, stumbled into creating a state system in the Middle East for want of a better alternative, not out of belief or design. And once the state-building strategy had been fixed upon, it was prosecuted with indecent haste and with little or no attention to the realities on the ground.

If we are to understand this process of Ottoman decline, European expansion and state building and the legacy it left for the resulting states of the region, then we must, first, examine the nature of Ottoman disintegration and European penetration. This will enable us to fix some of the salient features of the socio-economic changes that occurred in the later empire. The classes formed by

these changes, together with the accompanying political ferment, provided one set of factors affecting subsequent development. Secondly, we need to consider the character of European, and especially, British interests in the region. The competition of rival imperialisms, and the strategies of the major European powers, did much to shape the pattern of the modern Middle East. Thirdly, these investigations will allow us to rethink the Eastern Question itself. Too often, the Eastern Question is portrayed either as a European response to a purely degenerative and internally driven Ottoman decline, or as the safety-valve for the pressures emanating from the European balance of power. In each case, the actual structure and dynamics of Ottoman society are ignored, as are the extra-European dynamics of the problem. Finally, we must look at the period of state building that issued from the First World War. For between 1914 and 1922 the Ottoman empire, which had ruled most of the Middle East (Iran and a few Arabian tribes excepted) for nearly five hundred years, was destroyed and a new, European-inspired states system was put in its place. This truly remarkable exercise in political engineering was the origin of the modern Middle East.

Ottoman disintegration

As we have seen, Ottoman jurisdiction was located athwart the East–West trade routes that stretched from China to Europe, both by land and sea. On the Arabian peninsula, desert nomads and urban merchants had long coexisted, while from the steppes of Central Asia the pastoral, cavalry-based peoples swept across Turkey, Persia and India. Forging these together, Ottoman society came to comprise a structure of agrarian surplus production, linked to an urban, tributary form of appropriation, involving centralized taxation of the peasantry and direct political regulation of urban production and trade, organized by the Osmanli state and a subordinate *ulema*. Because of the tributary character of society, there was little impetus for agricultural or industrial improvement. Any dynamic that this society possessed was based on perpetual military conquest; the Ottoman polity was a 'plunder machine' (Jones 1981). In such a social order, the cessation of territorial expansion implied a gradual disintegration of the state and an increasingly counter-productive form of surplus extraction.

External accumulation was necessary in order to provide revenue for the state and to sustain the *sipahi*. Once its path was blocked by absolutist Europe in the north and the existence of rival empires or desert on its other flanks, surpluses could only be raised by an increased resort to tax farming. This in turn led to growing pressure on the peasantry and the rise of provincial notables who became competing centres of appropriation and political power. At the end of the sixteenth century, tax farming did increase as the state sought revenues for military reorganization, and as merchants attempted to benefit from the expanding trade with Europe. However, this predatory appropriation served to undermine the authority of the state, and with it the productivity of agrarian activity. To begin with, tax farms were civilian and non-hereditary, but by the late seventeenth century they began to develop their own armies and *de facto* control. This commercialization of political power through tax farming inevitably tended to result in local conflicts between warring magnates. The general form of the breakdown of tributary power has been identified by Wickham as follows:

> The nineteenth century proceeded with a continual struggle between state and notables as to how far private property law should be accepted, and whom it should benefit; but even the weakened (and commercially undermined) Ottoman state of the late nineteenth century could at least hold notables to a standoff until World War I. . . . Real local independence was . . . only possible by usurping the powers of *central* government – and, in Muhammad Ali's Egypt, actually using them more effectively. (1985:181)

Riven by this basic contradiction, the internal composition of the empire was further transformed by a number of external changes. The re-routing of trade from the East, as the Portuguese, Dutch, French and English pushed into the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, undermined much of the Ottoman maritime trade. The need to replace lost income had the effect of encouraging the export of primary products in return for European manufactures (especially cloth), further expanding circuits of trade outside centralized, political control. The revenues of the state, already reduced by the retention of rising shares of the surplus by local magnates, were also cut by the diversion of trade routes to the Indian and Atlantic Oceans.

Internal response

Thus the fundamental causes of Ottoman decline derived from the internal, tributary structure of society. As Perry Anderson has observed, 'the natural tendency of the system was always to degenerate into parasitic tax-farming' (1974b:500). This dynamic obtained in all of the Islamic land empires (Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal). In fact, there was what amounted to a 'general crisis' (Bayly 1989) of the Muslim land empires in the eighteenth century. The Mughal and Safavid empires were destroyed by 'tribal breakouts', India falling to outright conquest by the British, and Persia maintaining an uneasy independence in the face of Russian and British encroachments. In Qajar Iran central tributary power was never restored, and formal independence coexisted with informal domination by Britain and Russia. Meanwhile, as we have seen, in the Ottoman domains the authority of the Porte was challenged by the rise of provincial rulers: military pashas in Egypt and Syria, *derebeys* (valley lords) in Anatolia, *ayans* (dynastic notables) in Rumelia and *Wahhabi* tribes in Arabia.

Although the fundamental causes of Ottoman decline were internal, these were supplemented in the eighteenth century by the external pressures of European expansion. The European thrust into the Ottoman realms was accompanied by a formidable deployment of military power, especially after the creation of the 'second' British empire following the Treaty of Paris (1763) and the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt (1798). The Porte was far from idle in the face of this twin threat. On the contrary, beginning with Mahmoud II (1809–33), the nineteenth century witnessed a series of vigorous attempts at internal reform as forces within the Ottoman empire sought to overhaul its military and economic capacities. Despite a number of attempts by the Porte to undertake internal reform – most importantly, during the Tanzimat era (1839–76) – the Ottomans proved unable to resist the centrifugal forces from within and the growing pressure from without. The ambitions of Muhammad Ali in Egypt (1805–48) only compounded the fragmentation of the Ottoman state. Nevertheless, the eventual failure of these (and other) reforms should not detract from their importance. If it is true that the Ottoman regime only lasted as long as it did because of external diplomatic support, it is also the

case that the internal projects of development had a considerable impact.

The rulers in Turkey and Egypt sought to modernize their armies by adopting weaponry and tactics from the West and replacing mercenaries by conscripts, and this required increased taxes. The attempt to raise revenue by abolishing tax farming, appointing salaried officials and regularizing legal administration exacerbated conflicts between the central administration and local rulers. Additional resources were also required for educational reform to staff the expanding military and administrative posts. As long as the centre held (in the Ottoman core until the First World War, under Muhammad Ali in Egypt from 1805 to 1848), the resulting loss of localized power – as what had become virtual fiefs were replaced by salaried officials – had the effect of drawing the state into a closer infrastructural role, strengthening rural security and thereby laying the basis for sustained economic progress. In Turkey military reorganization was a result of European pressure, whereas in Egypt it was motivated by a desire for independence from the Ottoman centre. In both cases, however, it was the need of the state for revenues which laid the grounds for the formation of a settled, agrarian capitalist class, rather than pressure from landed and commercial elements. In the Turkish case the central tributary apparatus remained strong and no real landed class emerged, but in Egypt a class of big landowners did develop, and they came to monopolize political power. The onerous loans contracted to finance modernization had the effect, secondly, of leading to growing financial penetration by the West. Before long, the failure of the reforms to generate sufficient growth and revenue resulted in the bankruptcy of the state (1875 in Turkey and 1876 in Egypt), followed by direct European supervision of the public finances. In the case of Egypt, European influence produced revolt and this, combined with its strategic position, led to outright occupation by the British in 1882. Let us now review in a little more detail how this came about and with what consequences.

Trade, finance and bankruptcy

Until the late eighteenth century, Ottoman trade with the East was probably more important than that with Europe, at any rate for regions close to the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. Certainly, until the nineteenth century, the Middle East had a trade surplus with

Europe and a deficit with India and the Far East. Trade with Russia came across the Black and Caspian Seas, Austrian trade traversed the Balkans and the Mediterranean provided the conduit for western Europe. Ottoman tariff policies reflected the interests of the dominant groups, namely bureaucrats and soldiers, whose main concern was the raising of taxation and the provisioning of the cities: tariffs were aimed at maximizing the surpluses under the state's control, and hence they encouraged imports and discouraged exports. By 1789 France accounted for one half of the region's trade with the West; Britain, the Netherlands and Venice took most of the rest. But after the Napoleonic Wars and the industrial revolution in Britain, French trade in the eastern Mediterranean was rapidly replaced by British dominance; and overall, trade with Europe expanded relative to trade within the region.

Who ran this trade? At first minority, non-Muslim communities – Greeks, Jews, Armenians, Syro-Lebanese Christians – garnered much of the commercial and financial activity within the Ottoman domains. But as imports of precious metals from Europe in exchange for exports of agricultural produce and raw materials increased, so European merchants came to play a more important role. In turn this penetration was backed up by geopolitical pressure from the relevant European states. At the Treaty of Kutchuk Kainardji (1774), the Russians established rights of protection over the Christian Holy Places, the Porte's Orthodox Christian subjects and thus their considerable economic activities. The English had already gained a capitulation from the Porte in the seventeenth century.[1] These new networks were increasingly regulated by commercial tribunals controlled by the Europeans. After Muhammad Ali challenged Ottoman authority, the Porte proved more willing to accommodate British demands which were, in any case, aimed more at Egypt than Turkey. The result was the Anglo-Turkish Commercial Convention of 1838 which imposed virtually free trade on the region. France and Russia both gained similar concessions from the Porte. For some forty years Muhammad Ali imposed monopolistic control over the foreign trade of Egypt, the Sudan and parts of Arabia. But eventually, and after considerable pressure,

1 Capitulations, from the Latin *capitula*, take their name from the chapter headings of the texts of commercial agreements between the Porte and foreign merchant. Originally struck at a time of Muslim strength, these agreements allowed foreign merchants a high degree of autonomy within the empire.

the Ottoman tariff was also imposed on Egypt. Once defeated, Muhammad Ali was forced to reduce the size of Egypt's army, thereby diminishing the incentive for industrialization even further. Still later, conventions were signed (1861–2) which opened the Middle East market to penetration by European manufactures almost without hindrance. Yet the significance of this trade was always asymmetrical: the importance of Europe for the trade of the Middle East was not matched by a comparable role of Middle East trade for Europe.

The degree of economic change wrought by these free-trade measures should not be overstated. For example, the Anatolian economy remained dominated by peasant production and, under the control of landlords, industry continued to be confined to foodstuffs and textiles. However, in some regions, pastoralism and communal or tribal forms of land tenure were replaced by settled agriculture and the creation of landed estates. Charles Issawi has summarized the results elsewhere in the empire as follows:

> In Iraq and Syria the settlement of titles was carried out in conditions that transferred huge amounts of tribal and village lands to sheiks and other notables; in Egypt Muhammad Ali laid the basis of a large landlord class; and in North Africa a large proportion of the land was acquired, mainly by expropriation or chicanery, by European settlers. (1982:4)

This steady commercialization of tributary appropriation and rule laid the basis for a rapid expansion of trade with Europe during the nineteenth century, facilitated by falling transport and communication costs arising from steamships and the building of telegraphs, railways and ports. Large amounts of European capital were also invested in building the requisite infrastructure, and a financial system emerged to cope with the foreign trade, much of which was handled by local but minority intermediaries and Europeans. Considerable settlement of Europeans occurred in Palestine, Egypt and North Africa.

Increased connections with Europe drove many indigenous manufacturers out of business and encouraged the expansion of cash crops. As a result, economic activity concentrated on the building of infrastructure and the provision of irrigation. In the case of the former, port cities formed the major points of growth; as to the latter, the bulk of agricultural expansion was extensive

in character. In addition, the plague disappeared at the start of the century, and later there were improvements to public health. But most of the increased rural surplus did not feed back into further agricultural improvement. Instead it was either consumed by or channelled into the emerging client-patron political activity of the urban notability.

State finances before the contraction of foreign loans may be judged from Roger Owen's estimate that at the end of the eighteenth century the public revenue of the Ottoman empire was perhaps one-fifth that of the British state. Moreover, in the late 1830s, just prior to the Tanzimat reforms mentioned above, some 70 per cent of revenues were spent on the forces of coercion – and still many soldiers went unpaid (Owen 1981). Most of the disposable income from foreign loans to the government was spent on arms and luxury consumption in the Turkish case and on cotton for export in Egypt. Debt servicing sometimes accounted for one-half of the public revenues of Turkey, Egypt and Tunisia. Private sector investment directed towards utilities, mining and manufacturing was generally more productive. None the less, servicing all debts – both public and private – accounted for as much as a quarter of the exports of Egypt and Turkey at times during the period from the 1850s to the 1870s.

The first Ottoman loan took place in 1854, occasioned by the need for finance during the Crimean War. By 1875 one-third to one-half of *all* public revenues went on servicing the debt and the government was bankrupt. Of the foreign loan finance contracted, Issawi has calculated that in the period 1854–1914, 34 per cent went on commissions and the difference between the nominal and issue price; 45 per cent was used to liquidate past debts; 6 per cent was spent on the military; and 5 per cent was invested productively. Wars against Balkan rebels and the Russians, combined with bankruptcy, resulted in the loss of prosperous regions of the empire at the Congress of Berlin (1878). On the other hand, the repeal of the English Corn Laws and the disruption of the Russian grain trade during the Crimean War greatly increased the demand for Turkish produce, further integrating the most prosperous regions into the European market. The Decree of Muharram (October 1881) established the Ottoman Public Debt Administration, which gave control over finance to Britain and France and, soon, Germany. This signalled the complete failure of Turkish efforts to catch up. None the less, the Hamidian era (1876–1908) continued

the Tanzimat reforms, with attention being paid to improving communications infrastructure by means of foreign concessions. The effect of this policy was double-edged. For in addition to further encouraging crops for export, 'the railways were also used as the spearhead of European economic penetration of the interior' (Owen 1981:113).

Egypt followed a similar path to Turkey, attempting to construct the basic institutions of a modern state, with bankruptcy coming in 1876 (see Owen 1972 and Marsot 1984). Muhammad Ali employed monopolies on agriculture and customs on foreign trade, in addition to the seizure of tax farms. By these means, most agricultural produce was bought by the state at a politically determined price, with the central authorities appropriating the difference between this and the market price. Corvée labour was used to build irrigation works and the state sponsored some industrial development, especially in the areas of military equipment, textiles and agricultural processing. In this case, the money borrowed went not on administration and coercion but on cotton. Cotton production in the Delta altered the pattern of land tenure (towards large, privately owned estates), increased Egypt's integration into the world economy and turned Upper Egypt into a source of labour for the Lower (northern) region. Although both the demand for, and the price of cotton rose as a result of the loss of American exports during the Civil War, revenues were still unable to keep pace with the debt servicing. In this case, the weaker position of Egypt, economically and strategically, meant that much harsher terms were imposed. In 1878, British and French officials joined the khedive's Council of Ministers, taking the posts of finance and public works, and the subsequent Law of Liquidation specified the ambit of the Egyptian government acceptable to Britain and France. By these means, Europeans were recruited to the very centre of civil rule. The end result was the Urabist revolt and the British occupation of 1882.

Thus the Europeans dominated the economies of the region by a mixture of: the intrusion of foreign currencies; the development of consular or mixed courts administering European legal codes for their subjects within the Empire; foreign control over public revenue and expenditure, or direct occupation; and foreign merchants who came to control large parts of commerce and finance (and even some cotton production and export). And underpinning these forms of influence were the capitulations that were traded by the

Porte for European diplomatic support. As Issawi comments, 'By 1914, Europeans held all the commanding heights of the economy except for landownership in the Middle East, and the minority groups occupied the middle and some of the lower slopes' (1982:9). Not surprisingly, after 1815 the trade balance with Europe deteriorated and remained in deficit until the First World War. The result was the creation of a dependent economy: 'In the course of the 19th century the Middle East was integrated, as a producer of primary products and market for manufactured goods and colonial produce, in the international network of trade' (Owen 1981:29). In sum, the growth of the Middle East in the nineteenth century was shaped by the expansion of the European market for agricultural products, on the one hand, and the reactive attempt to construct strong, centralizing regimes in Istanbul and Cairo in the face of European (and in the Egyptian case, Turkish) pressure, on the other (see, generally, Owen 1981).

European expansion

The Turkish and Egyptian attempts to reform political and economic affairs in order to withstand the pressure from European merchants and states were of course prompted by the spectacular increase in European dynamism and power that gathered pace in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. What was the character of this expansion and what course did it take across the globe? During the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries the speculative activity of merchant capital dominated long-distance trade between Europe and the rest of the world: imports of grain from the Baltic were just under two-thirds the value of spices from the Far East and a little over one-quarter that of precious metals from the Americas. At this time, only the North Sea and the Baltic regions were trading in products of mass consumption, while the Mediterranean remained preoccupied by the traditional spice and luxury trade from the Orient and Spain traded with the Americas. This still essentially feudal mercantile activity declined in the first half of the seventeenth century and was replaced by an aggressively mercantilist new colonial system. It was the latter that was to provide one of the essential preconditions for the industrial revolution, a large market in which to buy and sell without hindrance. The other critical condition was an industry which, by revolutionizing its technical means and thus constantly cheapening its output, could create its own demand. For without these advantages, the effort of technological and organizational innovation that lay at the centre of the industrial revolution could not be justified. In turn, this necessitated an end to the fetters placed on widespread proto-industrialization by the persistence of feudal relations in the rural areas. Put another way, for capitalist growth 'what was needed was not the spice trade, but sugar-plantations . . . [and] a cotton rather than a silk industry' (Hobsbawm 1960:103; see also Hobsbawm 1954; and Kriedte 1983).

Thus in the increasingly capitalist growth that followed the 'general crisis' of the seventeenth century, the locus of trade shifted towards the north and the west. Among the Atlantic economies, the period from the 1730s to the 1820s was one of generally rising output; and after the Treaty of Utrecht (1713), intercontinental trade expanded more rapidly than that within Europe. In the course of the War of the Spanish Succession, England emerged from its alliance with Holland against France as the dominant commercial and naval power. However, Amsterdam sustained its predominant role in finance until the French Revolution and the subsequent British victory in the Napoleonic Wars. Meantime, the Seven Years' War (concluded by the Treaty of Paris, 1763) damaged France's position in the triangular trade of the Atlantic networks and fatally unbalanced the fiscal stability of the *ancien régime*. In marked contrast, the British plunder of India provided the means for the national debt to be bought back from the Dutch.

As far as European trade with the East was concerned, the Portuguese failure to restructure Asian trade, together with the continued expansion of such commerce, meant that some 60–80 per cent of Asian exports to Europe continued to come overland in 1600. With the arrival of the English and Dutch East India Companies in the seventeenth century, however, the overland routes became insignificant. The commodity balance of trade also altered: in the Dutch case, for example, spices fell from three-quarters to one-quarter of purchases, while textiles and raw materials for textiles rose to over one-half. Simultaneously, the Companies sought to reduce the European trade deficit with Asia by entering the inner-Asian trade. And while Europe's trade with Asia remained in deficit throughout the eighteenth century, steadily the latter's markets were opened to European textiles and metal goods. By the end of the seventeenth century, English cloth manufacturers were already

exporting some two-fifths of their output, and by 1799 over two-thirds went overseas. Together with the exports of other European producers, these were already undercutting indigenous Ottoman production by the 1780s.

While European manufactures were beginning their conquest of the world's markets, states were attempting to sponsor industrial development. But without a fundamental break in agrarian class relations, this proved all but impossible. In England, however, based on a prior transition to capitalist agriculture, the bounds of proto-industrialization were broken by the mechanization of cotton production from the late 1760s. The cotton boom of the 1770s resulted in England consuming twice as much cotton as France by the time of the Revolution. If the last two decades of the eighteenth century saw over half of Britain's new industrial output exported, the cotton boom itself was based on both the home and the overseas market. Only at the turn of the century did exports completely gain the upper hand. Equally, international exchanges were vital for raw material imports: from the 1780s to the 1790s, the share of British cotton imports coming across the Atlantic rose from 69 to 88 per cent. The industrial breakthrough meant that, notwithstanding the loss of the American colonies in the 1770s, the victory at Waterloo gave Britain global supremacy.

British ascendancy

Externally, the creation of the 'second' British empire delivered Britain a formidable reach across the world. After the Treaty of Paris, Britain constructed a commercial network in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, founded on trading ports and naval bases. With the signal exception of India, this was not based on directly colonial arrangements. However, in response to the loss of the American possessions, French gains in the Mediterranean and, most of all, the international threat to property unleashed by the French Revolution in the core and peasant and slave revolts on the periphery, a revived imperial state organization was constructed between the 1780s and the 1830s. Indeed, during and immediately after the Napoleonic Wars much of the Old Corruption of the state as well as a good deal of state regulation of productive activity was abolished.

Challenges to the state and property, both domestic and imperial, came from all quarters. The European 'Age of Revolution', which

followed the progress of the armies of the French Revolution, was accompanied by the decline of the Muslim land empires as well as numerous colonial crises. In response, the patriotic, Christian (and increasingly racist) mobilization against the 'levelling' French, together with the pressures on colonial administration, resulted in a dramatic change in the forms of political rule. This entailed separating law and administration on the one side from agrarian reform, private property and freedom of contract on the other. During this 'imperial revolution in government', the state constructed new fiscal instruments (customs and the first consolidated income tax), developed new forms of administration (concerned with land registration and use), created a permanent officialdom subject to supervisory boards (again focused on the creation of property rights and legal innovation), and rationalized the militias into an imperial army (for use against other states, 'native' enemies and workers and peasants at home).

This kind of reorganization was applied as fully to the colonial possessions as domestically – if not more so. Moreover, the regional projects of renewal within the Islamic land empires were essentially similar. The strategy of Muhammad Ali in Egypt or Tanzimat Turkey – settling the peasantry, forming a landed class, creating monopolies over trade and bolstering territorial integrity and identity – was essentially the same as that of Britain's regional governors in India. Throughout the Asian world, whether colonized or independent, rulers sought to make the means of state administration (transport, currency and public order) serve the ends of commerce. Settlement, private property and production for the market were seen as central to this project; free trade and responsible government could come later. By these means, regions that had long been external to the capitalist world, resistant to commodification and (on the whole) maintaining trade surpluses with the European core were gradually incorporated into its orbit.

The establishment of British dominance, if not hegemony, within the global system was thus both cause and consequence of the incipient generalization of the capitalist market and the initial breakdown of the great Asian empires. World trade quadrupled between 1780 and 1850. Speaking of the role of the East India Company, Bayly has argued persuasively that 'the commercialisation of political power within Islamic empires and the eastern seas, as much as the ruthless drive of European capitalism, was a critical

precondition for European world-empire' (1989:74). Bayly has further outlined some salient features of the resulting British 'Imperial Meridian' as follows:

> Long dominant in the northern waters, the Royal Navy had now replaced French, Spanish and Venetian paramountcies in the western Mediterranean and was soon to destroy Ottoman supremacy, and engross the import – export trade of the eastern Mediterranean. Dutch and French shipping, once powerful in the Persian Gulf, Indian Ocean and Red Sea, had lost its teeth, and Britain ranged over the newly explored Pacific Ocean. The significance of naval dominance was increased by the new prestige of British land forces. . . . By 1815 the army had invaded France over the Pyrenees. It had also staked out Britain's role as a great Eurasian land power by using the new Indian army to intervene in Egypt in 1801 and underwriting the independence of Iran in 1809. The balance of power in Europe was now to be enforced in both East and West. Through the Indian empire, Britain could now challenge Russia on land as her naval predominance in the Mediterranean could by sea. (1989:3, 4)

The empire, and critically the position in India, was crucial to Britain's material capabilities on the world stage: prior to the mid-Victorian boom in the 1840s, the gross national product of metropolitan Britain was similar to that of France and Russia; yet the resources of the British empire may have been two and a half times that of the French and the Russian empires. In India, Clive's victories and the subsequent expropriation of the revenues of Bengal allowed the creation of a large army; not only was this 'used in large measure to hold down the subcontinent itself, but after 1790 it was increasingly employed to forward British interests in southern and eastern Asia and the Middle East' (Bayly 1988:1; see also Kiernan 1969 and 1982). On the economic front, in addition to subsidizing the British exchequer, India became an increasingly important means of balancing the Asian trade as well as providing an export market for textiles. In the service of the latter, a massive de-industrialization of India took place: between 1815 and 1832 the value of Indian cotton exports fell thirteen-fold, while imports from Britain increased sixteen-fold.

Although the experiments in reform outside Europe were soon overrun, especially in the period from the 1830s to the 1880s as the massive expansion of the world market based on the railways, steam ships and coal swept away all but the most resilient

formations, the connections between the European and the Asian experiences should be registered. Above all because, as Bayly concludes, 'the period between the end of the American War and the Western-inspired Tanzimat reforms in Turkey during the 1830s seems to stand as a watershed in the creation and consolidation of new forms of power' (1989:255, 256). Everywhere, the capitalist market and recognizably modern forms of state administration, the latter mightily advanced by mercantilist competition, were seen as the only viable means to economic advance and military power.

The Eastern Question

Thus the context of the Eastern Question was given by the process of Ottoman decline on the one hand and the expansion of European capitalism on the other. But the fortunes of north-western Europe and the lands of the Porte were not simply uneven – capitalist dynamism as contrasted with pre-capitalist stagnation. They were also combined. The dynamic of colonial expansion and aggrandizement was itself critically determined by the 'general crisis' of these land empires, and this expansion complemented the hold capitalism had already established on the Atlantic seaboard. Equally, the reformist impulses and recuperative powers of the periphery played an active role in its own incorporation into the world economy and state system. Through this process of combined and uneven development, then, a systemic antagonism between capitalist nation-states and a tributary empire was worked out in which the former achieved a decisive victory by virtue of their economic vitality and military power.

Malcolm Yapp has noted, appropriately enough, that: 'Most people know the Eastern Question as an affair of diplomacy conducted in the chancelleries of Europe; in the Near East it was a bloody battle for land' (1987:16). At the centre of this struggle was the means by which property relations and forms of rule in the Middle East were to be recomposed by, and then incorporated into, the capitalist market and state system of the West. Yet this long decline and incorporation was precisely the epoch in which, first, the distinction was forged between the advanced and the underdeveloped world and, secondly, the capitalist world market and a small number of rapidly industrializing states established their

global dominance. Thereafter, all development was to be dependent development.[2]

Empire to states system

Broadly speaking, the diplomatic manoeuvring of the Eastern Question itself may be divided into four stages. The first period concerned the expansion of Russia into the regions bordering the northern shores of the Black Sea, coupled with the Anglo-French rivalries over the route to India and influence in the eastern Mediterranean. After the end of the Russo-Turkish War (1768–74), Russia reached the Black Sea and at the Treaty of Kutchuk Kainardji gained ill-defined rights over the Orthodox Christian subjects of the Ottoman empire and rights of passage for its merchant shipping through both the Bosporus and the Dardanelles. With the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt (1798), the French Directory sought to challenge the British in the East, prompting a closer engagement on the part of the latter. The British supported the Ottomans against the French, as did the Russians. Britain invaded, and briefly occupied, Egypt in 1801. After the eclipse of France's maritime power following the Battle of Trafalgar (1805), Napoleon's attempt to impose the Continental System against Britain, together with Russian and French antagonism over the Ottoman empire, resulted in war between France and Russia. Just as the prospect of French expansion into the Middle East threatened the overland routes to India for the British, so the danger of expansion in the Balkans and the straits of the Dardanelles and Bosporus worried the Russians. Indeed, both Britain and Russia came to see that the preservation of the territorial integrity of the empire, if feasible, was the best long-term strategy for the safeguarding of their otherwise divergent interests in the region. Equally, as powers concerned with counter-revolution on the European continent, Russia and Britain also sought to discourage challenges to Ottoman authority, lest they provoke instability elswhere.

2 By this I do not mean to signal agreement with the specific claims of dependency theory, but rather to indicate that late and late – late industrialization faced an environment significantly different from that of the original development of industrial capitalism. The new environment contained both constraints and opportunities, but it was now dominated by a few essentially European powers and witnessed an accelerating progression of the economic and military leading edge. This meant that things had to be done differently in those regions that were in a relation of economic and military subordination to the European world and its offshoots.

A second phase was opened with the Greek War of Independence in the 1820s, representing the spread of 'nationalist' ideas into the European parts of the empire and the entry of public opinion (in the form of the Romantic nationalism of revolutionary Europe) into Western decision-making.[3] At first the powers adopted a policy of non-intervention, but the refusal of the Porte to accept their mediation brought about the sinking of the Ottoman and Egyptian fleets at Navarino (1827). The Ottomans then declared a jihad against Russia and after facing effectively total defeat signed the Treaty of Adrianople in 1829. The Russians continued their traditional policy of favouring the integrity of the empire over plans for partition. Similar threats to the empire were raised by Muhammad Ali's attempt to strengthen the position of Egypt in the 1830s, including the invasion and occupation of the Syrian provinces in 1831. In 1840, the Egyptians were defeated by a contingent of British and Turkish forces, and Muhammad Ali was forced to withdraw from Syria. A loss of central control in Egypt marked the last decade of Muhammad Ali's rule.

During the 1850s, growing capitalist penetration of the empire, fissiparous forces from within and continued Russian encroachments from without, resulted in further crises. Russian attempts to gain further influence over the Porte and especially to strengthen its position in the Black Sea and the straits prompted French and British military intervention. Russian defeat in the Crimean War (1853/4–6) enabled the Western powers to secure the demilitarization of the straits (Treaty of Paris 1856), and Britain, France and Austria soon declared that any breach of the Treaty would constitute a *casus belli*. These provisions did not last. With the French preoccupied by war against Prussia, in October 1870 the Russians repudiated the military clauses of the Paris treaty.

Meantime, the pressures behind Balkan separatism were increasing. On the one side, Balkan claims against the Ottomans were strengthened by the increased wealth that the Christian commercial

3 In this context we must recall Eric Hobsbawm's comment on Greek 'nationalism': 'The literate champions and organizers of Greek nationalism in the early nineteenth century were undoubtedly inspired by the thought of ancient Hellenic glories . . . Yet the real Greeks who took up arms for what turned out to be the formation of a new independent nation-state, did not talk ancient Greek . . . Paradoxically, they stood for Rome rather than Greece (*romaiosyne*), that is to say they saw themselves as heirs of the Christianized Roman Empire (i.e. Byzantium). They fought as Christians against Muslim unbelievers, as Romans against the Turkish dogs' (1990:76, 77).

class derived from a shift away from subsistence to capitalist farming and increased trade with Europe; among the nobility, struggles over access to state power emerged, fought out through local armed conflicts and aggravated by the onerous demands of Muslim landlords; and the spread of literacy, in conjunction with Ottoman resistance to employing Greeks for official posts, further exacerbated a tense situation. On the other side, Ottoman attempts to maintain the integrity of the empire meant that Russian intervention on behalf of the Balkan Christians led to another Russo-Turkish War (1877–8). Throughout the Eastern Crisis (1875–8), the British cabinet was divided as to how to respond to Russia. No direct action was taken, but the Russians were warned that any action against British interests – in the straits and on the routes to the East – would lead to war. At the Congress of Berlin (1878) Russian aims were checked and Britain was satisfied, despite Russia's acquisition of bases in eastern Anatolia. Austria gained some of the empire's European territories.

In the course of these events, however, a subtle alteration in the underlying issues occurred: the strategies of the powers changed, and above all the interests favouring the integrity of the empire were weakened. In addition, German interest in the future of the Eastern Question came to centre-stage as its trade and investments increased, rapidly taking second place in trade to Britain and to France in finance. German financial imperialism was focused above all on the proposed Berlin-Baghdad railway. Both Russia and Britain were concerned lest German influence spread to the straits: Russia feared that a German alliance with the Ottomans could threaten the Caucasus; Britain felt that her dominance in Egypt, Iraq and the Gulf could be compromised. Secret agreements between the Entente powers and the Germans did little to resolve the growing rivalries. This increasingly *capitalist* rivalry effectively opened a third stage, one that only came into its own during the general crisis of European imperialism, leading to the First World War and the Ottoman entry on the side of the Central Powers. Of course, the inevitable consequence of this was the final disintegration of the empire. But the ground for the latter had already been laid by the accelerating annexation of Ottoman lands following the settlement of the Congress of Berlin (1878): France occupied Tunisia in 1881, Britain took Cyprus in 1878 and Egypt in 1882, Austria-Hungary having occupied Herzegovina and Bosnia in 1878 formally annexed them in 1908, Italy took Libya in 1911 and the Balkan

Wars of 1912–13 severed many of the remaining European provinces from Ottoman jurisdiction.

The fourth and final phase concerned the conduct of the First World War and, in particular, the wartime diplomacy of the leading powers, a phase which extended into the 'peace', eventually reaching a conclusion at the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. In this period a number of schemes for the future of the Ottoman domains were canvassed as the contending parties tried to clarify their long-term interests and as the peoples of the region struggled to assert their claims. At the core of the empire a new state, Turkey, emerged, while in the former Arab regions a number of dependent states were created: in Lebanon and Syria by France, and in Iraq, Jordan and Palestine by Britain. The Gulf sheikhdoms remained, in effect, British protectorates, and in Saudi Arabia and North Yemen new states developed. In Iran also a new state was forged. Egypt remained under British control and in North Africa French influence persisted. Despite this continued European predominance, the terms of imperialist rivalry in the region were altered by the growing importance of the region's oil, together with the entry of the United States into the picture. At the same time, the balance of social conflict was changed by the spread of nationalist movements, as well as the existence of a state socialist regime in the Soviet Union. Finally, with the Balfour Declaration (1917), and more importantly the incorporation of the Zionist programme into the British mandate for Palestine (1920), the seeds of future Arab-Israeli antagonism were sown by the consolidation of Jewish settler colonialism.

Britain, India and the Middle East

In order to grasp the principal war aims of and the changing claims made by the powers, especially the role of Britain as the dominant power in the region, it is necessary to sketch in something of the interests and strategies of the central players. British interests in the East centred on a number of concerns. The most important of these was the security of the overland routes to India. Related to this was a growing unease about Russian imperial designs in inner and central Asia. Expanding trade, especially Egyptian cotton, and financial links provided a final motive for involvement. By contrast, the adjacent landpowers – Russia and Austria (-Hungary) – were primarily interested in the future of the European regions of

the Ottoman empire and their rights of access to the Mediterranean. What made this mix so explosive, however, was the fact that as capitalist industrialization accelerated in the second half of the nineteenth century, the expansion of European economic interests served further to entangle the region in the deepening inter-imperialist rivalries of the major powers.

In the eighteenth century, Mughal power and authority were declining as India underwent a commercialization of political power. Whether from Asia or Europe, traders were interested in India for its cloth, silk, indigo, pepper, cardamom and other spices. In return, the Europeans exchanged silver from the Americas, copper from Japan and (some) gold. These precious metals expanded the monetary base of the Indian economy and further extended the scope for commercial networks (precious metals were in short supply from indigenous sources). Trade with China expanded after the Opium Wars (1839–42). British hegemony on the subcontinent, based on its naval supremacy in the Indian Ocean and the Arab seas, had been assured by the time the Seven Years' War ended. At this point, Clive determined that the East India Company should use the revenues from Bengal to finance its trade, to maintain its dividend in London and to pay its army. (The opium trade alone provided some 15 per cent of the Company's revenue and 30 per cent of India's trade down to the Mutiny.)

Thus the lure of profits from tribute and trade in India, combined with the energizing threat from the French in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, provided a fertile terrain for mercantilist expansion on the subcontinent. Already in 1784 duties on the import of tea from China into Britain had been slashed and the Company needed a major increase of Indian cotton exports to finance this lucrative trade. After 1834 the Company lost its monopoly over the China trade, and the attractions of further commercial advantage, together with concerns to check the Russians in central Asia, stood behind British expansion in north-west India. It was the collapse of a regional power, that of Ranjit Singh's polity in the Punjab, which provided the immediate context for action: the invasion and occupation of Sindh (1838–43), the defeat of Punjab (1845) and the push to Afghanistan. Throughout India, this pattern of collapsing regional authority and expanding networks of trade and plunder drove British expansion ever forward.

It was only after the reorganization of rule following the Mutiny (1857) that British penetration of India accelerated, and commercial and agrarian elites were stablized. Several developments were of great importance in this context, helping to integrate the Indian economy into a wider international network of exchanges and production: between 1857 and 1880 the railway mileage in India increased from 570 to 4,300; in 1869 the Suez Canal was opened; and between 1856 and 1864 demand for Indian cotton almost trebled as a result of the Civil War in America. On this economic and military basis, the British position in India became central to its world-wide empire: as Eric Wolf has remarked, 'Indian surpluses enabled England to create and maintain a global system of free trade' (1982:261; see also Ingham 1984). Consequently, the need to protect the passages to India, and with this the desire to prevent other powers gaining substantial influence in the Middle East, increased. In turn, these aims could be best accomplished by preserving the territorial integrity of the Ottoman empire while promoting the expansion of British economic interests in the region.

In addition, creation of a naval hegemony in the Gulf was regarded as vital to protect the position of India. Yet during the course of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, neutral nations and regional trading empires, such as the Muscat Arabs, the Beys of Tunis or the Bugis of Indonesia, engrossed much of the eastern trade. In a bid to restore the capital and credit position of the Company, as well as ensure trading stability, the British destroyed local traders and imposed a new law of the sea – British paramountcy.

Throughout the eighteenth century the British had clashed with local traders in the Gulf, especially with the Qasimi tribal confederacy which commanded a fleet of some 900 vessels and a naval force of 8,000 men. Moreover, the power of the Qawasim was strengthened by forging links with the Wahhabi movement on the Arabian peninsula. For inland, the rise of the puritanical Islamic movement, Wahhabism, based on the tribal and pastoral peoples of eastern and central Arabia, had all but undermined Ottoman authority by 1800. In effect, the Qawasim became the naval arm of Wahhabism. In 1809 and 1820 the British destroyed the entire Qasimi fleet, and henceforth 'the trucial system was set in motion. The Qawasim and the shaikhs of Ajman, Umm al-Qaiwain, Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Bahrain capitulated and signed separate agreements with the British government' (Said Zahlan 1989:7).

The tribal leaders of the Arab littoral also established arrangements to prevent maritime warfare in 1835, and in 1853 signed the Perpetual Maritime Truce. The resulting Trucial system (the

sahel Oman) guaranteed British control over the external affairs of the United Arab Emirates (1820s), and was later extended to Bahrain (1861), Kuwait (1899), Oman (where French influence was thwarted by an agreement with the sultanate in 1891 and with the imamate in 1920) and Qatar (1916). At the junction of the Red and Arabian seas, the British seized Aden in 1839, as a coaling station on the route to India and as a counter to the threat posed by the power of Muhammad Ali in Egypt and the Sudan. At this time, and until the First World War, 'British control was based upon cheap sea power and hardly extended more than a gunshot from the coast. Further inland Britain attempted to do no more than exclude foreign influence' (Yapp 1987:177).

If to begin with the British strategy involved support for the integrity of the empire as the means to keeping Russia at bay and protecting the routes to India, then during the Eastern Crisis (1875–8) an alternative strategy became increasingly attractive. In this rethink, the Suez Canal and hence Egypt played a central role. Initially, having control over the two entrances to the Indian Ocean (the Cape and the Straits of Malacca), the British government opposed the creation of a third in the Canal. As Palmerston memorably put it, sensing that control would require occupation:

> We do not want Egypt or wish it for ourselves, any more than any rational man with an estate in the north of England and a residence in the south would have wished to possess the inns on the road. All he could want would have been that the inns should be well-kept, always accessible, and furnishing him, when he came, with mutton-chops and post-horses. (quoted in Mansfield 1991:87)

Less mindful of such strategic concerns, British shippers and merchants were strongly in favour. None the less, *The Economist* had the measure of the situation when it noted that the Suez Canal had been 'cut by French energy and Egyptian money for British advantage'. Indeed, according to Issawi:

> By 1881, Britain accounted for over 80 percent of Canal traffic (declining slowly to 50 by 1938), and nearly two-thirds of its trade east of Suez passed through the Canal, as did half of India's *total* trade and a substantial and increasing share of that of Australia and New Zealand. Moreover, as holder of 44 percent of the Canal stock after the purchase, in 1875, of the Khedive of Egypt's shares, the British government drew a substantial income. (1982:51)

Together with the huge seapower at Britain's disposal, this meant that the position of India might be best assured by naval hegemony in the Gulf and influence in Arabia and Mesopotamia. For the Iraqi provinces of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra, the opening of the Suez Canal had the effect of rapidly expanding their regional trade and their international commerce with Europe. The provinces were drawn together, agricultural production increased and Britain displaced India as the main trading partner. As the First World War approached, then, the British were reconsidering their overall strategy in the region. The outcome of this was to play a crucial role in the post-war shaping of the Middle East state system.

Let us turn briefly to the question of Russian expansion in central Asia and, in particular, the pressure this imposed on the Ottomans. The growth of grain exports from the Ukraine and the strategic importance of the passage from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean meant that Russia had vital interests in the future of the empire. In addition, the large Orthodox Christian population under the authority of the Porte provided another legitimation for Russian designs. This was further compounded by the rise of demands for autonomy and independence in the Balkans and the competition between Austria and Russia for influence here. Several times the Russians contemplated plans for the partition of the Ottoman empire, but in each case the stability, both international and domestic, provided by its continued survival seemed more important. As the leading counter-revolutionary power on the continent between 1815 and 1848, the Russians could ill afford a general war in Europe. Whether directly or otherwise, the French Revolution had abolished serfdom over most of west and central Europe, but Napoleon's defeat in 1812 ended the immediate threat to Russian autocracy. However, any attempt to break up the empire in Russia's favour was certain to involve conflict with Austria and Britain. Defeat at the hands of the Western, capitalist powers would only increase the pressure for internal reform – as was amply shown by the defeat in the Crimea and the subsequent abolition of serfdom (1861). In fact, the only potentially dissatisfied power in relation to the Eastern Question was France, a result of its eclipse in the eastern Mediterranean under the shadow of British power. Yet here too, and again primarily for domestic reasons, no French government between 1815 and 1848 was prepared to attempt to mobilize 'the revolutionary energies of Jacobinism at home and of liberalism and nationalism abroad' (Hobsbawm 1962:135).

The First World War and peace-making

For these reasons, it was always unlikely that any localized conflict would bring about a complete collapse of Ottoman rule. Rather it was to take the general crisis of European imperialism to restructure the state system in the Middle East. (Thus while it may be accurate to say that the Balkans provided the fuse for the First World War, it was the more general crisis of imperialism that was at the heart of the conflict.) Prior to the imperialist epoch, the overseas expansion of the European capitalist powers into their periphery did not involve the formal annexation of territory 'so long as their citizens were given total freedom to do what they wanted, including extra-territorial privileges' (Hobsbawm 1975:160) – as was provided for under the Ottoman capitulations and commercial treaties. But with the rise of protectionism (at least outside Britain) during the Great Depression of 1873–95 and the growing concentration and centralization of capital in the core associated with the rise of finance capital, new relations began to form as these economies sought out markets and raw materials (minerals, foodstuffs and soon oil) in the periphery.

The determining process here, as Lenin and many others implicitly grasped at the time, was at once political and economic, a new conjuncture in the development of the capitalist world economy – imperialism. Combined with the extraordinary material advance of Europe during the imperialist boom of 1895–1914, the 'New Imperialism' both undermined the socio-economic stability of the periphery and destroyed its archaic polities (ancient empires, multinational autocracies and stateless orders), thereby prompting the onset of formal colonialism as well as preparing the ground for a wave of revolutionary developments of which the Russian revolution of 1905 was the first. The fact that there was a strategic dimension to this rivalry does not undermine the accuracy of this judgment, for as Hobsbawm explains in the British case:

> speaking globally, India was the core of British strategy, and . . . this strategy required control not only over the short-sea routes to the subcontinent (Egypt, the Middle East, the Red Sea, Persian Gulf and South Arabia) and the long-sea routes (the Cape of Good Hope and Singapore), but over the entire Indian Ocean, including crucial sectors of the African coast and its hinterland. . . . [But] India was the 'brightest jewel in the imperial crown' and the core of British global strategic thinking precisely because of her very real importance to the British economy. This was never greater than at this time, when anything up to 60 per cent of British cotton exports went to India and the Far East, to which India was the key – 40–45 per cent went to India alone – and when the international balance of payments of Britain hinged on the payments surplus which India provided.[4] (1987:68, 69)

As the new stage of capitalism consolidated itself, the attendant national rivalries underlay the formal colonization of 1880–1914, for they were now intertwined with the inevitable collapse or revolt of peripheral formations. In turn, colonial disputes between the rival powers, and specifically the attempts to avoid unnecessary colonial conflicts, assisted the formation of military alliances. Meantime, on the European continent the formation of the German empire (1864–71) challenged the continental balance struck at the Congress of Vienna (1815), while the precocious German economic advance gave it global ambitions requiring an ability to project power and to trade. The pursuit of a global navy was increasingly seen as a necessity. Given the conjuncture just defined, and given also the economic and strategic position of Britain, this could not but challenge Britain's global position. In the context of this incipient global rivalry, what Hobsbawm has termed the 'combustible material' of the periphery provided the fuse to the First World War, which in turn provided the context for the most significant revolution of the epoch, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

The countdown to war itself was simple enough: the large-scale industrial development of Germany, in conjunction with the imperial compromises made possible between France, Russia and Britain, meant that imperial rivalries would hinge on Anglo-German competition. Although Britain and Germany were able to resolve their differences over the Portuguese colonies and the Berlin – Baghdad railway, the shift from purely colonial entanglements to a more generalized European and global rivalry could not be accommodated by agreements alone. After the demonstration of tsarist weakness in the war against Japan, the French and the

4 The significance of cotton can be seen in the fact that: 'In 1880, textiles and clothing were 55.7 per cent of world trade in manufactures by value. In that sector Britain was still in 1880 responsible for 46.3 per cent of world exports: in cotton alone perhaps 80 per cent' (Crafts 1985:144).

British forged the Entente Cordiale based upon reciprocal support in Morocco and Egypt, respectively. In 1907, Russia and Britain came to a similar deal over Iran, Afghanistan and the Far East (this formed the Triple Entente), securing British interests in the Gulf. Once struck, these alliances set the framework for war. The crumbling authority of the Ottoman empire and the tensions thereby created in the Balkans provided the fuse: the Russians supported the Balkan League against Turkey and contested the role of Austria-Hungary; only Germany could guarantee the position of Austria-Hungary; the Franco-Russian alliance strengthened as German power increased; and Britain was threatened by German expansion. The fact that the Entente powers (above all Russia) constituted the greatest threat to the Ottomans and refused the empire an entente made it all but certain that the Turks would enter the conflict on the side of the Central Powers.

British war aims, the peace and state-building

The entry of the Ottoman empire into the war on the side of the Central Powers sealed its fate. The conduct of the conflict itself brought economic ruin to large parts of the empire, and military attrition further eroded central control. But for the duration of the war the influence of the imperialist powers over the economy was reduced. In British planning circles, political and military opinion was divided as to what role operations in the east might play in the War. Clearly, Germany was the main enemy and, by itself, Ottoman power posed no serious threat to the Allies. (Indeed, prior to the outbreak of the war a German military mission to Istanbul had concluded that there would be little or no benefit from an alliance with the Ottomans.) But the war was fought not merely to block German dominance of the European continent but also to defend the British empire. This meant that while Germany was the adversary in Europe, Russia was a potential challenger in Asia. Yet Russia was for the moment an ally against Germany. How, then, could Germany be defeated without also bringing about an expansion of Russian power? It was originally in answer to this question that the importance of military operations in the Middle East was recognized.

At the beginning of the war, British liberals such as Asquith, Grey and Churchill had no territorial designs on Ottoman lands, but the minister for war, Kitchener, saw things differently. Kitchener, whose entire career had been devoted to the military administration of the British empire and who had served in the Sudan, India and Egypt, argued that Russia had to be kept in the war until Germany was vanquished, and that afterwards the Muslim caliphate should be transferred to Arabia which Britain could then control with its naval power. Extraordinary though this now seems, Kitchener and others believed that the Middle East and much of Asia beyond was ruled by Islam; that Islam was something like an extreme form of Catholicism, or at least that the institution of the caliphate was like that of the papacy; that a Muslim holy war against Britain was a real and frightening possibility, especially given the position of the Muslim population in India; and that Britain should therefore seek future control over the empire's Arab regions through the creation of a new, British-backed, Arab caliphate (a 'Pope' of Islam).

In Damascus in 1898 the Kaiser had proclaimed Germany the protector of the world's 300 million Muslims, and the British feared that the Ottoman alliance with the Central Powers would facilitate German manipulation of the Islamic world.[5] Furthermore, military engagements in the Middle East turned out to be far from negligible. As William Keylor points out: 'The closing of the Turkish straits had sealed Russia off from her European allies; the Anglo-French effort to force Turkey out of the war in the Dardanelles expedition of 1915 was a costly failure. Turkish pressure on Egypt pinned down British forces that might have been deployed elsewhere' (1984:60, 61). Thus, Kitchener's stance was no mere whim, but part of a grand, imperial, strategic vision to combat German (and Russian) influence and to secure the Middle East for India and the British empire. The logic of Kitchener's approach has been emphasized by David Fromkin:

> The War Minister's plan was for Britain to take possession of Alexandretta [now Iskenderum in Turkey], the great natural port on the Asian mainland opposite Cyprus, and to construct a railroad from it to the Mesopotamian provinces (now in Iraq), of which Britain would also take possession. It was generally believed (though not yet proven) that the Mesopotamian provinces contained large oil reserves which were deemed important by Churchill and the Admiralty. It was believed, too, by Kitchener and others, that

5 John Buchan's novel *Greenmantle* (1916) dramatizes just such a scenario.

> the ancient Mesopotamian lands watered by the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers could be developed so as to produce agricultural riches; but in Kitchener's view the principal advantages of his proposal were strategic. The British railroad from the Mediterranean to the head of the Persian Gulf would enable troops to move to and from India rapidly. The broad swath of British-owned territory it would traverse would provide a shield for the Persian Gulf, as well as a road to India. (1991:140, 141)

In view of these developments, Britain's aims came to include the removal of Ottoman claims to sovereignty over Cyprus and Egypt, an extension of its position in the south of Iran to include the neutral zone, and Iraq, together with support of it to the west, namely Palestine. France's main territorial claim was for Syria and Lebanon where French colonialists saw themselves as the protectors of the Maronite community. In the Constantinople Agreement of March 1915, the French and the British promised to Russia the straits and Istanbul if the Allies won the war, thereby attempting to prevent Russia from signing a separate peace with Germany. But with the advent of the Bolshevik Revolution and the withdrawal of Russia from the war (and its separate peace with Germany), the British occupied Palestine, Syria and Iraq. The Allies also proposed to occupy Turkey.

In pursuit of its strategy, Britain thus came to favour the dismemberment of the Ottoman empire and the independence of the Arab provinces. Of course, by this British officials meant 'independence' from Ottoman suzerainty; since the Arabs were unfit for self-government, the Europeans (the British and the French) would have to establish authority and take control. After all, even such a partisan and romantic myth-maker as T. E. Lawrence told his biographer, Liddell Hart, that 'Arab unity is a madman's notion' (see, especially, James 1990). And, on the Arab side, the indigenous resources available for projects of state formation were slender. Certainly, the Arab interlocutors that British officials fastened upon, Hussain the sherif of Mecca and the Hejaz and his sons Faisal and Abdullah, were not nationalists or even proto-nationalists. At the outset of the war, Hussain was an Ottoman governor who had used Turkish troops to quell fractious Arab tribesmen. It was the *policies* of the Ottomans that he opposed, not the Sunni caliphate as such, for the Ottoman proposal to extend the Damascus – Medina railway to Mecca would have threatened the basis of his

power which was located in control over the trade and pilgrim routes in Arabia.

The Arab Revolt of June 1916 was itself a relatively trivial affair, 'a side-show within a side-show' as one official described Colonel Lawrence's operations more generally. Although the subject of much later nationalist myth-making, the 'Arab Revolt' is symptomatically misnamed. In the first place, the scale of the revolt was pitiful; at most a few thousand tribesmen took part, attracted by the gold paid as a subsidy by the British. No Arab sections of the Ottoman army defected, and the supposed secret, military organizations of Arab patriots failed to materialize. The Mecca revolt could not even take Medina. Later, it was Allenby's forces that conquered Syria and Palestine, with the Northern Arab Army playing but a minor role. Most importantly, on neither side was there any thought of establishing a pan-Arab state (see, especially, Kedourie 1987 and Fromkin 1991). On the British side, Lawrence, for example, had nothing but contempt for urban, proto-nationalist Arabs. As for the Hashemite cause, Hussain and his sons were primarily concerned to break with Ottoman control, to augment their position in the tribal politics of Arabia and to extract booty from the British.

However, the activities of Lawrence and the Arab Bureau (established in Cairo in 1916) did have the effect of raising the salience of 'Arab' questions in British foreign policy. London's interest in the Middle Eastern dimension of imperial strategy was further increased by the accession of Lloyd George to the position of prime minister in December 1916, with his keen support for the Zionist cause and dreams of creating a pan-Hellenic empire in Asia Minor. At the same time, and fortunately for Britain, the presidency of Clemenceau in France had the opposite effect, bringing to power a less colonialist faction whose single-minded concern was the defeat of Germany in Europe.

After hostilities ended, it was Churchill who recognized most clearly that domestic pressure for economic retrenchment and demobilization might deny Britain the fruits of victory. At home, the economic constraints on overseas expenditures were powerful, especially as the economy went into slump in 1920–1. Thus, on 18 July 1921 *The Times* condemned the government in the following terms: 'while they have spent nearly £150,000,000 since the Armistice upon semi-nomads in Mesopotamia they can find only £200,000 a year for the regeneration of our slums, and have had

to forbid all expenditure under the Education Act of 1918.' Coming from a source not known for its social concern, such comment was a clear indication that unless a low-cost solution to the problems of imposing imperialist control could be found, then British gains might be lost altogether. In the Middle East, popular pressure throughout the region soon threatened the British position. Uprisings took place in Egypt during the winter of 1918–19; Afghanistan revolted in the spring of 1919; Ibn Saud and Hussain crossed swords in Arabia from the spring of 1919; the Kemalist revolt began in early 1920 and in the summer Greek forces invaded Turkey with British backing; Arab nationalists confronted French power in Syria in the spring and summer of 1920; and in the summer of 1920 there were tribal revolts in Iraq, which were only put down in early 1921.

During the war Anglo-French competition over territory and oil had been partly resolved through the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 to divide the Arab provinces. Britain's positions in Iraq, Egypt, the Gulf, Arabia and Iran were kept off the Versailles agenda, and Clemenceau and Lloyd George agreed that Palestine should come under British control. This left only the fate of Lebanon and Syria to be determined. A final settlement of Allied conflicts was made at the San Remo Conference in 1920, where it was agreed that France would take Syria and Lebanon, that Britain would control Iraq, Transjordan and Palestine, and that Iraqi oil would be shared.

The other major Allied power, the United States, had only limited interests in the Middle East before the First World War. But in 1919 the State Department began to prosecute US interests with vigour, essentially because of oil. As William Stivers has cogently demonstrated, the US oil companies 'were in the vanguard of U.S. penetration into the Middle East' (1982:110). However, the United States did not seek to supplant Anglo-French power. On the contrary, US 'jackal diplomacy' favoured the retention of European hegemony over the region. As Fromkin explains:

> both the Department of State and the oil companies were in favor of British hegemony in the area. The oil companies were prepared to engage in exploration, development, and production only in areas governed by what they regarded as stable and responsible regimes. . . . many officials . . . expressed dismay at the thought that Britain and France might relinquish control of their Middle Eastern conquests, and . . . expressed fear for the fate of American interests should they do so. (1991:535)

Meantime, even with the solution of inter-Allied rivalries, the development of new forms of influence in the region was complicated by the support given to anti-colonial movements by the Soviet Union. No longer was it the threat of pan-Islamic revolt that worried British officials, but rather the dangers of Bolshevism: they blamed 'the supposedly Jewish-controlled, German-influenced Young Turk leadership and now its international ramifications, chief among which were Islam and now Bolshevism in a line that ran from Enver through Alexander Helphand to Lenin' (Fromkin 1991:468).

More seriously, after the defeat of the Central Powers, the Allies, and in particular Britain, had turned towards a campaign against the Bolshevik Revolution. This meant that the Soviet Union 'soon found itself committed, in default of other means of defence, to a general diplomatic offensive against Great Britain in Asia' (Carr 1966:244). Contestation occurred in Turkey as well as Afghanistan and Iran, as the Soviet Union signed treaties with Afghanistan and Iran and provided support to Kemal in Turkey. The importance of Soviet involvement in this new situation was that it made the reimposition of European colonial forms of control all the more difficult. And whether or not Bolshevik activity provided significant levels of material support, the demonstration effect of the Revolution and its corrosive effects on European control were real enough.

To begin with there was considerable uncertainty as to how to resolve these questions; and, given that Egypt was already a British protectorate, the central remaining question was the future position of Iraq. Iraq played an important role in the British strategy for the Middle East because (together with Transjordan, Palestine and Egypt) it connected the eastern Mediterranean to the Gulf and hence to India. As well as being a key crossing for transport routes and having considerable capacity for crop and cotton production, the control of northern Iraq was seen as essential for the control of the south, which in turn was necessary for the military defence of Anglo-Persian's oil fields in Iran. In addition, in time of war the Iraqi oil fields would be vital to naval power in the region. It was considerations such as these that led the secretary to the cabinet, Maurice Hankey, to note that 'the retention of the oil-bearing

regions in Mesopotamia and Persia in British hands, as well as a proper strategic boundary to cover them, would appear to be a first class British war aim.' Accordingly, Britain wanted the oil-bearing region of Mosul to be incorporated into Iraq so that its revenues could finance the proposed Iraqi administration. France and the United States were prepared to accept this arrangement in return for shares in the new oil concession.

But how was British power to be maintained at low cost? The British faced a dilemma. Could control of Iraq be maintained by the usual recipe for dealing with tribal magnates, the mixture of fraud and force, gold and silver for bribery and RAF bombs for coercion, as proposed by the colonial government of British India (otherwise known as Simla)? Or was the Arab Bureau of the Foreign Office correct to suggest that the wartime mobilization of the region made 'nation-state building the wave of the future' (Brown 1984:114). Against the arguments of the latter, Simla had opposed the arming of tribal forces during the war as this would inevitably bring with it problems of pacification when hostilities ceased. More importantly, such overtures might have the effect of undermining the low-cost mechanisms of informal control that the security of the routes to India relied upon. Any talk of statehood and independence could only weaken the British position in India in the long run.

To begin with, when the French ousted Faisal from Syria (July 1920), and as conflict raged between Ibn Saud (a client of Simla) and Hussain in Arabia, the Arab Bureau's strategy of backing the Hashemites did indeed seem dangerous. But the spread of revolt in Iraq (September 1920) cast doubts on the methods of the British India official Sir Arnold Wilson. On a wider canvas, the era of Lenin and Wilson, together with the costs and uncertainties of direct colonial administration, argued for a new method of European control through the indirect rule of the League's mandate system.

The solution (agreed under Churchill's leadership at the Cairo Conference in March 1921) was to install Faisal as head of an Arab government in Iraq, to deploy air power for the purposes of tribal pacification and to increase the subsidy paid to Ibn Saud. The logic of the solution was simple. Having failed to involve American power directly in support of their designs (the Senate refused to ratify US membership of the League of Nations), the British decided to follow the tried and tested policy of getting the colonized to pay for their own subordination. If the Americans would not follow

Kipling's injunction to take up the white man's burden, then the 'natives' must be forced to do the job instead. In Iraq a client government was established in which the British maintained effective control over military, fiscal and judicial administration. The revitalized Turkish Petroleum Company operated the Mosul and Basra fields, now with US and French participation. Mosul oil and its revenues financed the state, thereby relieving the British taxpayer of the expense. Revolts were pacified through the vicious use of (low-cost) air power. In October 1922 the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty largely replaced the mandate, but these new arrangements still maintained British control over finance, administration and defence and foreign policy.

Something similar occurred in Egypt. This time a nationalist revolt in 1919 resulted in a reassessment of imperial strategy by the British. In February 1922 the protectorate was renounced, but control over defence and foreign policy, the security of the Suez Canal, the government of the Sudan and the future of the capitulations remained in British hands.

The emergence of the Turkish Republic

In addition to resolving Anglo-French rivalry, the San Remo Conference saw the development of a proposal to bring the Dardanelles under international control, to grant independence and autonomy to Armenia and Kurdistan and to award eastern Thrace to Greece. The sultan's government, no longer fully in control of Turkey, reluctantly signed at Sèvres (August 1920). At this juncture, Allied forces were in control of Istanbul. The situation remained unstable and many of the San Remo proposals proved otiose. Kemal's nationalist forces contested the authority of the sultan; the Greeks claimed territory in Turkey but were thrown out; a proposal that the United States take up the mandate for Armenia came to nothing; Kurdish aspirations fell foul of Iraq's need for Mosul; British and French policy diverged over the Greek – Turkish war; and the Allies had insufficient forces to garrison Turkey. Yet without a long-term solution to the future of Turkey, British designs in Iraq, and thus its power elsewhere in the Middle East, would be compromised.

Amidst the disintegration of Ottoman authority, the Hamidian regime had been overthrown by the Young Turk revolution of 1908 – a movement composed of junior army officers and minor

bureaucrats in which the army was the chief beneficiary. The Committee of Union and Progress finally ended the ensuing uncertainty and seized power in a coup (23 January 1913). The CUP continued the formula of Ottomanist reform for the empire: a secular system of law and education, a liberal constitution, a strengthened army and administration and more emphasis on economic development. But given the reality of secessionist movements in the Balkans under protection from Christian powers and dependent incorporation under the aegis of a non-Muslim bourgeoisie, the Turkish national movement increasingly assumed a dictatorial and Muslim-nationalist form, as Ottoman identity proved incapable of providing a unifying framework for programmes of renewal. (Ottomanism had become simply the formula for disintegration, the Sunni *ulema* a bulwark of reaction.) It was from this matrix that the Turkish Republic was forged by Mustafa Kemal after the war.

As noted, immediately after the war, the Allies determined to maintain control of Turkey, and to this end they occupied Istanbul in March 1920. The Soviets supported Kemal from 1919 and renewed their commitment after deteriorating Anglo-Soviet relations in 1921. By the spring of 1922 the (British-backed) Greek forces fighting in Turkey had been routed. Domestically, the civil war was won by the end of 1920 and Kemal was thereafter free to move against the radicals of the coalition that constituted the Green Army, strengthening the Islamic and nationalist elements against the radical forces around the Turkish Communist Party. Allied designs, then, not only failed, but they also had the effect of compromising both the position of 'moderate' nationalists and the legitimacy of the sultan. None the less, it was to take until January 1921 for Mustafa Kemal to persuade the Grand National Assembly that sovereignty resided in the 'nation'. The climax was reached when the Allies invited both the official Ottoman government *and* the Nationalists to the conference at Lausanne. This slight precipitated the abolition of the sultanate (November 1922) and the subsequent formation of the Turkish Republic.

Having consolidated his position internally and secured Turkish independence internationally, Kemal had no further use for Soviet support. Indeed, Turkey's relations with the West might even be harmed by too close an alignment with the revolutionaries in the East. At the Lausanne Conference the British negotiator, Lord Curzon, was able to separate Turkey and the Soviet Union, secured a regime for the straits which suited British interests and 'walked

off with the prize of Mosul' (Stivers 1982:141). In return, plans for Allied suzerainty over Turkey and the continuation of the capitulations were abolished. Finally, Anglo-Turkish relations were consolidated in 1926 when Turkey agreed to comply with the League's award of Mosul to Iraq in return for a 10 per cent share of the royalties for twenty-five years. Thereafter, Turkey supported Britain in the region against Russia.

Arabia, the Gulf and Iran

Further south on the Arabian peninsula, the nineteenth century had witnessed a reassertion of Ottoman authority in the north and west and the British had intervened in the south and east. But after 1900 the Ikhwan recovered some control in eastern Arabia, and Ottoman authority was eclipsed by 1914. Ibn Saud increased his power, aided by British subsidy and weapons. However, the role of Hussain as ruler of the Hejaz and thus controller of the pilgrimage, and as head of the Hashemites (his sons Faisal and Abdullah ruled in Iraq and Transjordan, respectively), constituted a threat to the authority of the Saudis. Fortunately for the latter, Hussain undermined his own position through heavy taxation of merchants and pilgrims. Before long (by 1924), Hussain was defeated militarily by Ibn Saud and the Ikhwan. After this, Ibn Saud signed the Treaty of Jedda with the British in 1927 and then used the provision of mechanized weaponry by the latter to suppress the Ikhwan. Founded on the Wahhabi-Saudi movement, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was thus established in 1932.

On the Arab littoral of the Gulf we have already seen that Britain carved out a series of client polities, regulating their external affairs and having a virtual veto over their pattern of development. Of particular importance for subsequent events was the position allocated to Kuwait. Before the outbreak of the war, the British were worried by German proposals for a railroad to run from Berlin to Baghdad, fearing that this might compromise the integrity of communications and transport to India. In 1899 what was to become Kuwait came under British control, and the latter agreed to become the patrons of the locally dominant al-Sabah family. This arrangement was formalized by the 1913 Anglo-Ottoman agreement. After the war, acting on 'behalf' of Kuwait, Sir Percy Cox managed to get Ibn Saud to abandon his claim for much of the Basra vilayet in what was now Iraq in return for a large part of

the Kuwaiti territory on the Gulf. Nevertheless, these negotiations were to leave Iraq with only a limited direct access to the Gulf at Umm Qasr.

Finally, on the Iranian side of the Gulf, the structure of society and power had evolved somewhat differently to that of the traditional Ottoman pattern. From the end of the eighteenth century, Iran was ruled by the Qajars, a noble class of Turkish tribal origin which had defeated the Zand dynasty of southern Iran. The central state was much weaker and the power of the nobility greater, even extending to foreign policy. In 1906 a Constitutional Revolution took place. Largely a Tehran affair, the deadlock between the Qajar government and the Majlis was ended by the shah's coup in 1908. Against the liberal movement, Britain went along with Russian support for the shah, placing the dictates of the Triple Entente above the appeasement of liberal sensibilities. Then in July 1909 the constitutional forces were bolstered by the support of two provincial groups: the anti-landlord movement in Gilan, led by Caucassian revolutionaries, and the Bakhtiyari tribal nomads. Still, no real government, let alone state, was consolidated. Finally, Russian troops intervened to end the constitutionalist experiment for good in 1911.

This fragmented society had been reduced to the status of a semi-colony by the incursions of Russia in the north and Britain in the south. An arrangement was formalized by the Anglo-Russian convention of 1907 'which divided Iran up into three respective spheres of influence; Russian in the north, British – with the oil concession area – in the south, and neutral in the middle' (Halliday 1974:467). The British D'Arcy Concession of 1901, which formed the basis of Anglo-Persian's power in Iran, had excluded the five major northern provinces precisely because of Russian claims in the region. Iranian weakness rendered it unable to prevent the flouting of its neutrality by Russia and Britain during the war. Also, the closing of the Dardanelles and the collapse of Russia severely damaged the economy. Finally, the Bolshevik Revolution deprived the shah of his key ally, a revolutionary movement broke out in Gilan and by the spring of 1920 Soviet power was established in neighbouring Azerbaijan. The Soviets gave support and recognition to the Soviet Republic of Gilan founded by the nationalist leader, Kuchik Khan.

Meantime, the British Foreign Office sought to establish a semi-protectorate with the Anglo-Persian Agreement signed by Curzon on 9 August 1919, and this involved the supply of British financial advisers for the Iranian government, the retraining of the army and the provision of engineers for railway construction. However, Britain was not willing to assist in quelling internal revolts, though General Ironside did provide support to Reza Khan through 1921. On 21 February 1921 Reza Khan's coup laid the basis for a process of state formation. This was now supported by various elements of the elite because of the fears of Communism and for Iran's independence. This was recognized by Tehran's repudiation of the Anglo-Persian Agreement and the signing of a Soviet-Iranian Treaty on 26 February. Equally significant was the fortune of the Gilan Republic. Kuchik quarrelled with the Soviets, and 'Persian forces reoccupied Gilan with Soviet approval, and hanged Kuchik as a rebel' (Carr 1966:465). Relations between Britain and Russia improved with the Anglo-Russian Trade Agreement of 16 March. Russian and British forces then left Iran in April. The military nationalist leader, Reza Khan, continued to consolidate his rule and, after abolishing the Qajar dynasty, crowned himself Reza Pahlavi Shah in 1925. None the less, British influence remained extensive by virtue of its position in the Gulf, its oil concession and its links with tribal chiefs in the south.

Conclusion

Fromkin has rightly pointed out that 'having destroyed the old order in the region, and having deployed troops, armoured cars, and military aircraft everywhere from Egypt to Iraq, *British policy-makers imposed a settlement upon the Middle East in 1922 in which, for the most part, they themselves no longer believed*' (1991:562). That is to say, the replacement of an empire by the system of mandates was known to be arbitrary and known to be incapable of providing political stability. But the thesis originally advanced by L. Carl Brown (1984) and repeated by Fromkin, that Britain 'while bringing to an end Europe's Middle Eastern Question, gave birth to a Middle Eastern Question in the Middle East itself' (1991:563), is only partly correct.

To begin with, the description of the new Eastern Question – at least as formulated by Brown and Fromkin – relies on an ahistorical picture of the region in which its constitutive social groups are taken to be either substate forms, tribes, or supra-state communities, the

Islamic *umma* or pan-Arabism. In each case, it is assumed that the Middle East is in some primordial sense inherently resistant to the politics of a nation-state system. Now, of course, the post-war process of state-building did not produce stable forms of rule and economic progress. Drawing lines on the map, appointing rulers, elaborating structures of bureaucratic administration and taxation, even training and equipping armies, do not by themselves create durable state forms. However, the closing of the Eastern Question by means of the dismemberment of the Ottoman empire, in conjunction with the nationalist and revolutionary legacy of the First World War, did mark a major turning point in the evolution of the modern Middle East. Thereafter, projects of state-building began. And henceforward the politics of tribe, Islam and Arabism were all shaped by this context, rather than constituting impregnable barriers to modernity. As we have seen, the context itself was defined by the inheritance of tributary formations in decline and the presence of classes whose mission consisted in facilitating dependent incorporation into the world market and the consumption of any accumulated domestic surplus.

Viewed in these terms, on the morrow of (semi-)formal independence, the region could be differentiated roughly as follows: in Turkey the Ottoman bureaucracy dominated surplus appropriation (though with the support of rural notables in the west and Kurdish tribes in the east), while the Sunni clergy was dependent on the state and thus lacked an autonomous base of operation; in Egypt, Syria and Iraq urban-based absentee landlords dominated the land and surplus appropriation, gained support from the relevant foreign powers, and there was a Sunni *ulema* (there were also significant ethnic or religious minorities, especially in Iraq and Syria); in Arabia the elite was tribal (and owed its continuing position to British support), and much of the population was nomadic; and in Iran absentee landlords, tribal peoples and a powerful Shi'ite clergy coexisted with a weak polity.

The second difficulty with the thesis of a Middle Eastern Question *within* the Middle East is that it diverts attention away from the persistence of, and even the continuities in the forms of, imperialist control. Obviously, much had changed in the shift from the original, extra-territorial forms of jurisdiction claimed by Europe's traders and investors, through the policies of formal colonialism and military occupation, to the (semi-)independence granted in the period after the First World War. But throughout these changing

strategies and forms of political regulation there was an underlying consistency of purpose, especially in the British case. We can see this most clearly if we recall Gallagher and Robinson's discussion of the imperialism of free trade (1953 and Robinson 1972), in which they defined imperialism as the political moment of the process of integrating new regions into the expanding international capitalist economy. The period up to the 1870s, with the important exception of India, was characterized by the attempt to use naval and diplomatic power both to open up these regions to European trade and investment and to encourage them to reform their domestic institutions along European lines. Progress in this, and in particular the project of fostering an export-oriented, commercial class, was further advanced by the practice of extending lines of credit to the reforming polities. In many cases, however, the strains imposed by separating property from rule in order to facilitate commerce and order broke the stability of the societies concerned. At this point formal colonialism or direct, military occupation was sometimes necessary to safeguard imperialist interests. At root, from the standpoint of the West, the project of post-war state-building is best understood as a further element in the development of the imperialist construction of the capitalist world market and its linked sovereign state system. Of course, not all indigenous forces were prepared to tolerate such a project. Let us now turn to a more detailed examination of the subsequent patterns of state formation and economic development in the Middle East.