

## **ENGLISH IMPERIALISM IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE IN THE LATE 19TH – EARLY 20TH CENTURY**

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**Annotation:** This study explores the political, economic, and cultural impact of British imperialism on the Ottoman Empire during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — a period marking capitalism's transition to its imperial phase. Using historiographical analysis and documentary evidence, the article examines how Great Britain employed financial instruments, diplomatic alliances, and cultural discourse to extend its influence over the weakening Ottoman state. It reveals that British control operated primarily through indirect economic dependence, exemplified by debt commissions, the acquisition of Suez Canal shares, and the annexation of Cyprus. The research also highlights the interplay between imperial strategies and Orientalist narratives that justified British hegemony under the guise of modernization and reform. The Tanzimat reforms, the Crimean War alliances, and the Treaty of Sèvres are analyzed as turning points illustrating the transformation of Ottoman sovereignty. The findings demonstrate that British imperialism not only reshaped the political geography of the Middle East but also contributed to the ideological foundations of modern Turkey's emergence from the ruins of the Ottoman order.

**Keywords:** British imperialism, Ottoman Empire, Orientalism, informal empire, economic dependency, Tanzimat reforms, Suez Canal.

### **Introduction.**

The history of the Ottoman Empire spans over six centuries, and primary documents on the empire's relations with other powers can be found in the archives of thirty-nine states. While the empire's historiography was previously based primarily on the analysis of the Ottoman Empire's military victories and defeats, modern approaches view it from a broader perspective that includes the social dynamics of territorial growth and collapse, as well as the study of economic factors and their role in the empire's eventual stagnation and decline.

This article proposes to examine the influence of British imperialism on the development of the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The "Eastern Question" is a major aspect of international politics that includes issues of armed conflict during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Such major imperialist powers as England, Russia, and France showed interest in this region. This interest was due to the precarious position of the Ottoman Empire, caused by the crisis phenomena in the economy, issues of national policy, etc. Although the Ottoman Empire had already begun to lose its power and authority, having received the characteristic in international politics as "Sick Europe", nevertheless it retained its importance for the strong European states, as it maintained the balance of power in Europe after the Napoleonic wars. In

addition to the Napoleonic wars, the Ottoman Empire had to participate in the Crimean War, the Greek War of Independence during this period. The continuing collapse of the Ottoman Empire led to two wars in the Balkans, in 1912 and 1913, which in turn became the prelude to the world war.

### **Methodology of the Problem**

Historians of British imperialism in the Middle East date back to 1798, when Napoleon invaded Egypt. Worried that France would block Britain's access to the eastern Mediterranean and thereby threaten vital trade routes to India, the British navy collaborated with the Ottoman authorities to expel French troops from Egypt. From this episode until decolonization in the mid-twentieth century, British policy in the region reflected the interplay of great power rivalry and the balance of strategic and economic interests. This paper examines the main trends in imperialist policy in the Middle East. It examines four major periods of interaction in which Britain influenced the Ottoman Empire, changed the political map of the region, and claimed new territories under the guise of mandates [4, p. 198]. The British and Ottoman Empires' relations with each other for much of the 19th century could best be described as cautious and diplomatic. Successive British governments in that century were reluctant to directly intervene in the Middle East unless British interests were threatened.

A good example of this was when Napoleon briefly invaded Egypt in 1798–1801, the British navy assisted the Ottomans by sinking a French fleet off the coast of Egypt.

This had more to do with Britain not wanting France to establish colonies in North Africa than with any real desire to support the Ottomans.

Britain again joined forces with the Ottomans in 1854–56 to fight the Crimean War against Russia. This time, Britain was concerned that Russia would take territory from the Ottomans in Eastern Europe. Such alliances were the first time in history that a Muslim and Christian empire had joined forces to fight other Christian states for political purposes. During the Crimean War, sections of the British press were outraged that the country had joined forces with the "infidel Turks" to fight their fellow Russian Christians.

The focus of Britain's attention was the colony of India. By the second half of the 19th century, all of India was under British control. Queen Victoria of England had been proclaimed "Empress of India" in 1876 by the then British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli. Britain was at the height of its Industrial Revolution, and its trade with India, especially cotton, had contributed to this success. No one, Muslim or Christian, was allowed to interfere with this arrangement. The Middle East, as the gateway to India by land or sea, was therefore a very important part of the world for Britain.

Before tracing the rise of British influence in the Middle East after 1798, it is necessary to look at the antecedents of British involvement in the region, as well as the political and economic state of the Ottoman Empire and Iran on the eve of Britain's rise.

English merchants, who were actively penetrating the eastern markets, managed to obtain some kind of commercial privileges to trade in the Ottoman Empire and later in Iran as early as 1580. They were called capitulations, from the Latin *capitulas*, they referred to certain chapters of the agreements, but were later revised several times. They proved to be an important basis for a number of extrajudicial and fiscal rights that the British continued to enjoy in the Middle East until the beginning of the twentieth century.

The financial cooperation between England and the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century created the conditions for the development of conditions for the spread of economic and cultural imperialism on the part of Great Britain. Since English literature became popular among the Turks, it was disseminated in the form of travelogues, various histories and plays. These representations formed the early subject of what literary scholar Edward Said called Orientalism, that is, a set of stereotypical images of the Islamic East that Western powers later used to justify their expansion in the Middle

East. The accumulated literary and artistic representations of an exotic, despotic East, retrograde and depraved, also served as the background against which British writers of the late 19th century constructed an image of the British national and imperial character as rational, modern, moral and strong.

The attempt to somehow rectify the situation, to reform the system, ended in failure. By the beginning of the 19th century, English domination in India was finally established. Muslim countries, in one way or another, experienced various kinds of dependence on England. The exception is the Saudi regime in the central part of the Arabian Peninsula, since this country can be said to have avoided any dependence, but even there, oil exploration, which began in the 1930s, led to European intervention. In the 19th century, Westernization and Islamic activism coexisted and competed [7, p. 58]. By the early 20th century, secular ethnic nationalism had become the most common mode of protest in the Islamic world, but the spirit of Islamic reconstruction also persisted, either in conjunction with secular nationalism or in opposition to it.

### **The Problems of the Development of the Ottoman Empire**

By the end of the 18th century, when Great Britain was ready to strengthen its primacy in the Middle East, the Ottoman Empire had already begun to suffer military losses to Austria, Russia, and France and to lose territory on its outskirts, such as Hungary and the Crimea. At the same time, Iran, which had recently been united under the Qajars, was vulnerable to Russian penetration. Great Britain, however, ranks alongside France and Russia among the so-called "Great Powers" [2, p. 14]. Ultimately, Great Britain was arguably the most important of these powers in shaping the political destiny of the region.

After 1798, the protection of the borderlands of northwestern India became the most important issue in British policy in Iran. Britain was initially concerned about a possible French invasion of India via Afghanistan and Iran, but this threat had dissipated by the time the Napoleonic Wars ended in 1815. In Iran's northern holdings in the Caucasus (present-day Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) by asserting its authority over the Caspian Sea and the Central Asian region. Neither Britain nor Russia wanted the other to seize control of Iran, because the region was strategically valuable to both. Competition with other rising European imperial powers also pushed Britain into closer involvement with the Ottoman Empire, which British sources of the time portrayed as the "sick man of Europe" that needed to be supported.

The British placed great importance on preserving the integrity of their borders to prevent wars and rivalries for influence among the great powers themselves. Of particular concern to British policymakers were the Ottoman territories in the Balkans, where nascent local nationalist movements, coupled with the imperial ambitions of Russia and Austria, threatened the stability of the region. Twice, during the Crimean War (1854–56) and the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878), Britain formed alliances with the Ottoman Turks to prevent Russian intervention [14]. Britain used both occasions to its advantage.

In 1856, for example, Britain helped influence the Ottoman Sultan to issue the famous Humayun Edict (one of the signature measures of the mid-19th-century Ottoman Tanzimat, or reformist period), which proclaimed religious equality between Muslims, Christians, and Christians, Jews. In theory, if not in practice, this edict reversed the traditional Islamic imperial assumption of Muslim hegemony over non-Muslim subjects [8, p. 352].

At the same time, the British managed to convince the Turkish authorities to give them the island of Cyprus for a naval base. And this in turn helped the British to some extent to establish control over the island, which remained until 1960 and outlived the Ottoman Empire itself by forty years.

As for the banking system, in the 1870s, Ottoman politicians in Istanbul and their colleagues under

Khedive Ismail in Egypt began to receive loans from European enterprises, in particular English and French, to carry out Westernizing and modernizing reforms. When the loans came due in 1875, the governments of the Ottoman Empire and Egypt were unable to pay. Hoping to raise the necessary funds, the Egyptian government unsuccessfully sold its 44% of the shares of the Suez Canal Company, which ended up in the hands of the British. At the moment when the Ottoman and Egyptian treasuries declared bankruptcy, the British and French introduced joint commissions on the national debt in order to be able to exercise control and guarantee payments from Istanbul and Cairo [1, p. 39]. In essence, these measures meant the loss of Ottoman and Egyptian economic sovereignty.

Great Britain, like France, influenced the destabilization of the Ottoman Empire, and also formed a political leadership that was beneficial to itself, which later influenced the collapse of the empire, which led to the formation of new national states. During the San Remo Conference in 1920, France and England ensured the substantial implementation of the Sykes-Picot Agreement during the war. The San Remo Conference separated the Arab provinces from the Ottoman Empire and allocated spheres of influence to France and Great Britain, indicating the outlines of the country's borders.

An important event after the end of World War I was the signing of the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920. The treaty had a decisive effect on the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. It transferred the Ottoman region of Thrace to Greece and secured French and Italian interests in railways and coal mining. It also confirmed British and French control over the region's finances (since the empire's debts were still outstanding at the end of the 19th century) [3, p. 56]. However, Turkish-speaking nationalists led by an Ottoman war veteran named Mustafa Kemal (later called Atatürk, or "Father of the Turks") gathered to prevent the treaty from being implemented and set up a counter-government in the central Anatolian village of Ankara. These resisters, who declared the emergence of a new state, the Turkish Republic, on the political scene in 1920 and the end of the Ottoman regime, succeeded in achieving international recognition for the new country, Turkey, and in preventing the full implementation of the Treaty of Sèvres.

#### The Impact of British Imperialism on the Ottoman Empire

This overview of British imperialism in the Middle East focuses on the political and diplomatic history and the decisions of government policymakers. However, it is important to note that the British in the Middle East included not only government officials but also missionaries, travelers, soldiers, traders, archaeologists, and many others—a diverse group of historical figures who exerted cultural, political, and economic influence. [6, p. 184] Moreover, as historians increasingly recognize, the cultural and social influences were mutual. British government officials during the imperial era may have had the power to dictate or otherwise alter the political destinies of the Middle East, but colonial encounters with the Middle East and other parts of the empire had a significant impact on British society, culture, and national identity.

Like Britain's imperial growth elsewhere, its expansion into the Middle East was not achieved without conflicts, both with the local population and with other European powers. Indeed, given the region's complex structure and its vital strategic location, these conflicts were particularly severe.

Fears that Turkey would collapse, leaving a power vacuum, meant that British attention was focused on this part of the world long before it assumed a direct role on the ground. Concerns about Russian ambitions in the area led to a series of clashes in the 19th century. However, Britain's greatest rival, as was often the case, was France. [13] The well-known history of Anglo-French colonial confrontation is central to both countries' histories and is particularly vivid in the Middle East.

During the Tanzimat period, which means reorganization in Turkish, which lasted from 1839 to 1876, many significant changes were made:

- a modern conscript army was organized;

- the banking system was reformed
- guilds were replaced by modern factories.

Economically, the empire had difficulty repaying loans to European banks, while at the same time it faced military problems in defending itself from foreign invasion and occupation in Egypt, for example, it was occupied by the French in 1798, and Cyprus was lent to the British in 1878 in exchange for British support at the Berlin Congress after the Ottoman Empire's defeat in the war with the Russian Empire in 1877-1878. After Turkey made visible changes in diplomacy and military policy, the empire ceased to act alone in conflicts. The Ottoman Empire now finds itself in conflicts in alliance with powerful European powers such as England, France, Holland, etc.

From Napoleon's Egyptian campaign to the construction of the Suez Canal and France's desire to play a role in protecting the holy sites in Palestine, Anglo-French tensions never fully subsided. The establishment of the British protectorate in Egypt in 1882 also did not allay its concerns about French influence in the region. Indeed, the clash at Fashoda was typical of Britain's desire to expand its position into the surrounding areas in order to guarantee the security of the Suez Canal. This rivalry in the Middle East continued after 1918 and continued to poison Anglo-French relations for years to come. [5, p. 2].

Thus, the Middle East was never formally part of the British Empire. Already by the end of the 19th century, British statesmen saw it as a region of vital interest to the Empire, and increasingly so as Turkey declined. The construction of the Suez Canal (1859–69) opened up a new and strategically important route into the Empire in the East. Elsewhere, the discovery of oil in Iran in 1908 added to London's growing attention to the region.

In July 1918, Britain assumed a more formal role, although not full colonial control, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 and its Middle Eastern territories were divided into League of Nations mandates, most of which were granted to the British (in Palestine). For all these reasons, the Middle East became an important part of the global mosaic of the 'British world'.

In 1923, Arnold Toynbee wrote of the 'tradition of rivalry'. It is therefore not surprising, given the long history of Anglo-French problems in the Middle East and their almost atavistic mutual distrust, to which were added questions of religion and race, Zionism and Arab nationalism, that the Middle East would become a particularly difficult issue for Britain [11, p. 14]. Moreover, Britain's Middle East policy could not be seen in isolation, but was conditioned by, and in turn conditioned by, British policy in Europe.

The 19th century was a period characterized by the rise of the nationalist movement, a process that also affected the Ottoman Empire. Nationalist sentiments and growing ethnic nationalism became the dominant idea imported from Europe. Nationalist policy issues were especially important for Turkey, as it dealt with them both within its own territories and on the outskirts of the empire. Some Turks considered external factors to be the culprits of conflicts and did not connect them with issues of domestic political governance. Although this era was not without some successes, the ability of the Ottoman state to influence ethnic uprisings was seriously questioned. The reforms did not stop the growth of nationalism in the Danubian Principalities and Serbia, which had been semi-independent for almost a decade in 1875 [15]. In 1875, Serbia, Montenegro, Wallachia, and Moldova declared their independence from the empire, and after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78, independence was formally granted to Serbia, Romania, and Montenegro, with the remaining Balkan territories remaining under Ottoman control.

In the 19th-century Ottoman Empire, selective Westernization coexisted with a redefinition of Islam. The reform program known as the Tanzimat, which lasted from 1839 to 1876, sought to emulate



European law and governance by granting all Ottoman subjects, regardless of religious affiliation, equal legal status and limiting the powers of the monarch. In the 1860s, a group known as the Young Ottomans attempted to identify the basic principles of European liberalism, and even love of nation, with Islam itself [10, p. 78]. In Iran, the Qajar shahs introduced a special Cossack brigade trained and led by Russians, while the Shiite mujtahids regarded the decisions of their spiritual leader as binding on all Iranian Shiites and declared themselves independent of the shah. One Shiite revolt, the Revolt of the Bab, led to the emergence of an entirely new religion, Baha. Like the young Ottomans, Shiite religious leaders came to identify with constitutionalism in opposition to the ruler.

Islamic protest often took the form of jihads against Europeans. Between 1905 and 1911, religious leaders such as the Shiites in Iran took part in constitutional revolutions. These activities were based on pan-Islamic sentiments that drew on very ancient notions of the ummah (Muslim community) as the supreme solidarity group of Muslims. Three of the most prominent Islamic reconstructionists were Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, his Egyptian disciple Muhammad Abduh, and the Indian poet Sir Muhammad Iqbal. All warned against a blind pursuit of Westernization, arguing that the fault for Muslim weaknesses lay not with Islam but rather with Muslims themselves, since they had lost touch with the progressive spirit of social, moral, and intellectual reconstruction.

While al-Afghani, who taught and preached in many parts of the Islamic state, acknowledged that organization along national lines might be necessary, he considered it less important than Muslim identity. He also argued that Western technology could advance Muslims only if they preserved and cultivated their own spiritual and cultural heritage. He pointed out that Muslims had once been the intellectual and scientific leaders of the world, highlighting the golden age under the Abbasid Caliphate and pointing to the many contributions Muslims had made to the West.

Like al-Afghani, Iqbal believed that without Islam, Muslims could never regain the strength they had enjoyed when they were a vital structure in the world, united in a single international community and untouched by linguistic or ethnic differences. This aggressive reclamation of the past became a recurring theme of Islamic reconstruction.

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