

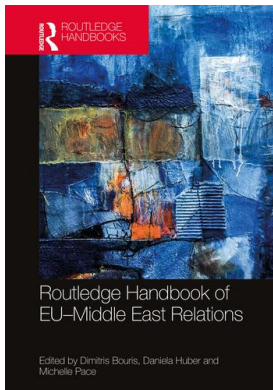
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4

LONGUE-DURÉE REFLECTIONS ON ANTI-COLONIAL MOVEMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST (1798–TODAY)

Nora Laft¹

Introduction

The object of this chapter is to discuss the nature of anti-colonial movements in the Middle East region throughout the late eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries up to present times. The aim is to unearth the roots and ideological fundaments of such movements. It is also to analyse continuities and ruptures as well as the ambiguities of the relationships between anti-colonial movements, state-building processes and the outside world, Europe in particular. The historiography of anti-colonial movements has long been fragmented along national borders, paradoxically themselves often inherited from the colonial period. Studies have also been tracking the anti-colonial roots of national movements in the region (Khalidi, 1991; Müge Göçek, 2002). In the context of theoretical reflections on the meaning of postcolonial and decolonial research attitudes (Sefa and Asgharzadeh, 2001; Sibeud, 2004; Johnson et al., 2007; Grosfoguel, 2011), which rarely came from scholars studying the Middle East, other studies have insisted on the global dimension of anti-colonial movements, focusing on the role of ideologies and on the geopolitical context as well as on sociological change (Lawrence, 2013; Wattenpaugh, 2012). The idea here is to adopt the methodology of *longue durée* perspectives in order to unearth and decipher logics and connections that more chronologically focused studies sometimes underestimate (Braudel, 1958).

The emergence of anti-colonial movements in late-Ottoman times

In order to determine when anti-colonial movements were born in the Middle East, it is important to reflect on when European actions in the region became of a colonial nature. There is of course a form of continuity, both factual and ideological, between the history of the Crusades, the time of the Spanish “*Reconquista*” and incursions in North-Africa and later European attempts at colonising provinces of the Ottoman Empire. There is also a narrative continuity in the discourses of both Europeans and people of the region mobilising against such attempts. The nature of European incursions into the Arab and Muslim world changed however with the construction and modernisation of European nation-states and with the theorisation in European political thought of a sentiment of civilisational superiority and of a desire to control the populations of the region by means of violent occupations. This is probably where one

can perceive the emergence of colonialism: hence, the importance of the French and British occupation of Egypt and Palestine at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the understanding of the emergence of such new logics.

Cairo revolted twice (in October 1798 and in March 1800) against French occupation and against the violence of repression vis-à-vis forms of local resistance (Lafi, 2015). What these crucial episodes illustrate is the importance of urban civic networks at the scale of neighbourhoods and streets in mobilisation, as well as the role of urban factions and notables. These factions were also in contact with Ottoman troops outside the city. During these episodes, Ottoman authorities developed a new rhetoric calling for resistance against European occupation. This is a major indication as for the functioning and organisation of anti-colonial resistance: its capacity to articulate various scales, from geopolitics to local logics. The occupation of Egypt and Gaza, and later the role of Great Britain in the negotiation of the formal reintegration of Egypt into the Ottoman Empire also illustrates the definition of new modalities of interaction between Europe and the Middle East. The evolution of Egypt between the aftermaths of the French defeat and British colonisation in 1882 shows how modernisation efforts by Muhammad Ali and his successors represented both an instrument of resistance against the peril of colonisation and sometimes the vectors of a greater integration into a world in which colonial logics were growing. In the region, Great Britain already occupied parts of Yemen since 1839 and Cyprus since 1878. Kuwait, Ottoman since 1552 but de facto controlled since 1792 by the British East India Company, had been occupied since at least 1899 (Mantran, 1991).

Arguments pertaining to anti-colonial mobilisation became central in intellectual debates. Petitions by local notables, cities, guilds and confessional communities from the whole Ottoman Empire denouncing such growing interferences can be found in the central archives of the Ottoman Empire (BOA, Istanbul). In general, the Empire tried to find solutions against European efforts at colonising its provinces. While European geographers, archaeologists (Kamel, 2015) and consuls, many of them pursuing a double career in the military intelligence, often acted as spies and *agents provocateurs* preparing a possible colonisation, playing also on local rivalries and building networks of connivance, imperial authorities developed modernising policies – one of the main aims of which was to counter colonial appetites. This context is crucial in the interpretation of the reforms of the era of the *Tanzimât* in the Ottoman Empire: renegotiation of the local pact of governance with notables, élites, commercial networks and confessional communities, modernisation of the army, of commerce, justice and of the whole administration. In the Late-Ottoman Middle East (1850–1918), European powers, partially on the model of their support for the Greek national movement in the 1820s and 1830s, which consisted in redefining the identity of Ottoman provinces and in transforming a local insurrection into a national liberation movement, acted in the direction of building proto-national identities and often instrumentalised confessional rivalries. Against such moves, a secret policy of anti-colonial resistance by the Empire was enacted, in the context also of the actual colonisation of other Ottoman provinces like Algeria (starting in 1830) and Tunisia (enacted in 1881 after decades of European pressures of a colonial nature). The Ottoman secret police either killed or allowed the killing of a series of European consuls, from Jeddah (Freitag, 2012) to Macedonia (Perry, 1980). It also tried to limit the action of European consuls towards *protégés*, local Ottoman inhabitants and often members of non-Muslim confessional groups, who escaped common imperial rule (and fiscal policies) by seeking the protection of foreign powers. The European policy of protection included a major ambiguity in its colonial nature as it tended to separate non-Muslim communities from the rest of the Ottoman population and to assimilate them with foreigners. This is the context of a series of violent riots in the Middle East, from Mosul to Aleppo and Damascus to Nablus and Mount Lebanon during the 1850s and 1860s (Masters, 1990; Kremsti, 2014).

A particularly relevant episode is when Abdelkader, a leader of the Algerian anti-colonial resistance against French occupation, in exile in Damascus, protected Syrian Christians during the riots (Temini, 1979). After the events of 1860 though, local equilibriums in the Ottoman Middle East remained fragile (Makdisi, 2002). The reforms of the *Tanzimat* era, locally promoted by notables and governors whose anti-colonial conscience was developing (Provence, 2017), managed, together with the action of secret networks of imperial pro-Ottoman mobilisation, to contain European influence and colonial appetites. Under the government of the Young Turks at the beginning of the twentieth century, anti-colonialism was one of the main mobilisation vectors (Ergil, 1975). Some provinces were lost however, but pro-Ottoman resistance in regions such as Tripolitania and Cyrenaica – occupied by Italy during the 1911–1912 war – acted in the name of anti-colonial watchwords (Šarīf, 2015; McCollum, 2018). Anti-colonial rebels, including female fighters of various origins and confessions fought against colonial occupation (ANT). It took an event of the inedited tragic magnitude of World War I to take the Ottoman Empire down. During the war, the Ottoman government denounced the colonial content of European war objectives in the Middle East (Aksakal, 2008). The German-Ottoman alliance fuelled, in the name of anti-colonialism, Jihadi resistance movements against British and French troops invading the region (Ludke, 2005; Zürcher et al., 2016). Women too mobilised in the framework of pro-Ottoman anti-colonial movements (Akin, 2014). In Syria, Ottoman authorities saw Arab secessionist militias as proxies manipulated by Great Britain and France pushing their colonial agendas (Çiçek, 2014). When the war ended in Europe, it continued in the Middle East, and French and British troops conquered most of the region (Tachjian, 2004; Khoury, 2014). French colonialist lobbies pressured the government for an extension of the colonial domain. In contradiction with the principles set by US President W. Wilson (Manela, 2007), their aim, materialised by secret agreements between France and the United Kingdom (Saul, 2015), was to establish a colonial domination over the region.

The nature of anti-colonial resistance during the Mandates of the League of Nations

In 1920, the League of Nations, weakened by the refusal of the new American administration to join and thus de facto dominated by the colonial powers, attributed to France a Mandate over Syria and to the United Kingdom a Mandate over Palestine and Iraq (Méouchy and Slugglett, 2004). This put an end to the ephemeral existence of an independent Kingdom of Syria and fuelled an active resistance of an anti-colonial nature. France and Great Britain pursued a violent policy of military occupation. Resistance arose in various forms: pro-Ottoman and national Syrian (Cahen, 2006), but also civic. Insurgents fought the occupation troops in most cities, villages and mountains. In Geneva, seat of the League of Nations, representatives from the whole region presented petitions denouncing the colonial nature of the French and British occupation (UN Archives (1)). They also denounced the numerous war crimes that occupation troops committed during their conquest and the repression of revolts. These petitions, alongside voices protesting in Geneva against colonisation in general, were not heard. France and Great Britain systematically rejected them. Only a few members of the League of Nations, amongst which were Haiti and Brazil, protested.

One of the most important moments of anti-colonial mobilisation was the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925 (Provence, 2005; Khoury, 2014). In the context of France implementing violent colonisation techniques (Neep, 2012) deriving from the experience of the repression of resistance in Algeria, and of many French administrators having previously served in Algeria, various cities and regions revolted. This mobilisation happened according to networks of civic

conscience among inhabitants, as well as through networks of military resistance. The French Army, overwhelmed by the massive scale of the mobilisation, launched campaigns of violent repression, which included deliberate aerial bombings against civilian neighbourhoods, massive extra-judicial killings and war crimes. France mobilised colonial troops, including regiments of Senegalese fighters, to suppress the revolt. Violent repression never really ended as long as the Mandate lasted. Among the cities that resisted most were Damascus (Poulléau, 1930) and Hama (Bou-Nacklie, 1998). Both cities were heavily bombed and scores of civilians and insurgents were killed. Torture and mass executions were common policy. The archives of the League of Nations in Geneva reveal the huge scale of the repression. In Damascus, the French Army also pursued a policy of deliberate food blockade (op. cit. UN Archives, 1926 (2)). Its representatives in Geneva failed to convincingly contradict the multiple and convergent denunciations of its exactions in Hama (ibid.: (3)). Anti-colonial committees of Syrians in exile in Cairo sent desperate telegrams to Geneva, describing the horror of the repression (ibid.: (4)). The anti-colonial conscience in the region largely grew out of the mobilisation against such exactions, as this telegram from Jerusalem to the League of Nations by the president of the Palestine Arab Congress illustrates: “The French persist in their atrocities. On the tenth instant they attacked Me’idan quarter, the largest in Damascus, annihilated the inhabitants, they filled the place with benzine then shelled the quarter for nine consecutive hours, fires ruined 2000 buildings, killed 700 innocent woman, children, old men. Palestine Arabs vehemently protest against these barbaric acts, demand you fulfil duty for which your League was established by preventing the French from this barbarism unprecedented in history” (ibid.: (5)). The actions of the British authorities in Palestine and Iraq were also denounced by numerous protests.

In 1920, British troops, which included Indian colonial regiments, violently suppressed a widespread revolt in Iraq (Jacobsen, 1991). During that same year, they also used indiscriminate violence to suppress a revolt in Jerusalem (Mazza, 2015). At the beginning of the 1920s they also used aerial bombings against insurgents and civilians in Palestine (Omissi, 1990). The whole period of the Mandate was marked by the use of violent techniques of occupation which fuelled anti-colonial sentiments. In Palestine, again, a huge revolt took place between 1936 and 1939. It was brutally repressed by British troops, with the massive use of torture, punitive actions against civilians and mass killings (Hughes, 2009; Norris, 2008). In the whole *bilâd al-shâm* (Levant) a new shared anti-colonial conscience developed. Intellectuals published essays and pamphlets insisting on this dimension. In Paris (Goebel, 2017) and London, but also Berlin and Amsterdam (Stutje, 2016), often in contact with anti-colonial activists from North Africa (Stenner, 2016) and Asia, a whole new sphere of anti-colonial reflections developed. World War II represented another key moment in the definition of anti-colonial engagements. British troops, together with French anti-Vichy rebels, took over Syria against Vichy France (Hokayem, 1994). After 1941, Gaullist administrators attempted to implement limited access to independence for Syria, but the manoeuvres of the Gaullist administration against the claims for full independence led to the brink of a new revolt. In 1945, the British army impeded Gaullists to repress pro-Independence movements (Thomas, 2000; Zamir, 2007). French troops withdrew from Syria and Lebanon in 1946 (Bruchez, 2005). That same year, Syria obtained independence (Lebanon, a country created by France during its Syrian Mandate, had formally obtained it in 1936). What these episodes illustrate is how, very early, anti-colonial activists realised that formal independence did not necessarily mean the end of colonial occupation. After World War II, the geopolitical contexts changed considerably, with the rapid emergence of the Cold War, the affirmation of new American objectives in the region (Dulles and Ridinger, 1955; Sebrega, 1986), and the redefinition of the access to petrol pumping rights between France, Great-Britain and the US (Gemignani Saxstad, 1998).

Reflections on the anti-colonial dimension of independent regimes

During the 1950s and with moments of high tension in 1957–1958, the US fought the ascent of pro-communist anti-colonial movements in Syria (Little, 1990). The country was led by Shukri al-Qawatli after independence, a former anti-French activist based in Geneva who came back to Syria during the Great Revolt of 1925. He pursued a policy aimed at decolonisation. In the wake of Syria's defeat against Israel in 1948, he was ousted in 1949 by Husni al-Zaim, a former officer of the French colonial army with pro-US and anti-Soviet positionings, during a military coup whose context included strong foreign interferences (Çati, 2016). Thus, for anti-colonial activists, formal independence was far from actual independence. In Iraq, formal independence was acquired in 1930, but after World War II a 1948 treaty with Great-Britain, promoted by Regent 'Abd al-Ilah, strongly limited its effects (Khadduri, 1960; Eppel, 1999). In 1958, a military coup with fierce anti-colonial rhetoric led by General Abd al-Karim Qassim suppressed the Monarchy (Dann, 1969; Worrall, 2007). The Royal Family, accused of being complicit in foreign domination, was killed. An Anglo-US military invasion was planned but did not go forward (Blackwell, 1999). Anti-colonial sentiments, in the context of the Cold War, were also instrumental in the creation of the ephemeral United Arab Republic in 1958 when Syria unified with Nasser's Egypt (Al-Hassoun, 2011).

In addition to a myriad of parties, movements and militias of Marxist inspiration (Pencar, 1968), the main proponent of anti-colonial ideology was the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, founded in 1947 as the merger of various Ba'ath movements of the early 1940s (Kaylani, 1972; Aldoughli, 2016). Among the most important theoreticians and activists of this generation were Zaki al-Arzuzi, Salah al-Din al-Bitar and Michel Aflaq (Salem-Babikian, 1980; Omar, 1996). The party rose to power in Syria and Iraq in 1963. In 1966, its pro-Soviet wing, led by Salah Jedid and Hafez al-Assad became hegemonic in Syria. In the context of the 1967 defeat against Israel and of the conflict in Jordan (a country created in formerly Ottoman Transjordan by the British during their Palestine Mandate and which gained formal independence in 1946) between the Hashemite regime and the Palestine Liberation Organisation in 1970, Hafez al-Assad evicted Jedid (Rabinovich, 1972). In Iraq, in the context of the Cold War and of the fight against pro-Soviet factions, the local branch of the Ba'ath Party took power during a coup in 1963 with the support of the United States (Matthews, 2011; Jacobsen, 2013) but was then marginalised by the Nasserians. The Ba'ath Party acceded to power again in 1968 during a coup, with suspected American support (Avneri, 2015; Wolfe-Hunnicut, 2017). Saddam Hussein then became the dominant figure of the regime. At that time, the anti-colonial movement was deeply divided due to the Cold War, strong foreign involvements and the opposition between Pan-Arabist Nasserians and communists. Their common position was the denunciation of the postcolonial nature of early independent states. New anti-colonial movements emerged however. The previous resistance against British and French colonialism was largely replaced by anti-colonial movements opposed to Zionism and American intrusive geopolitical games.

The ascent of political Islam in the region was itself ambiguous as for its relationship with anti-colonial rhetoric: it happened both in the context of contestations of foreign domination and in that of the fight, subject to foreign interferences, against anti-colonial movements of a communist and Marxist nature (Bayat, 2008; Ende and Steinbach, 2010). Hassan al-Banna (Krämer, 2014) and Sayyid Qutb (Musallam, 2005), two of the main early thinkers of political Islam, developed anti-colonial and anti-imperialist visions and many proponents of political Islam have referred to them as an inspiration for their own ideological postures. In Palestine,

anti-colonial resistance developed under the form of movements inspired by political Islam in the 1980s and 1990s (Seif, 2009). In Lebanon, Hezbollah also developed its anti-colonial discourses (Saber, 2011).

Anti-colonial movements and the “Question of Palestine”

One of the main ideological points of convergence of anti-colonial movements in the region has been the support for the Palestinians. Zionism developed from the very beginning in the context of strong colonial ambiguities (Kayyali, 1977; Reinhartz, 1980; Khalidi, 1993; Yazbak, 1999; Wolfe, 2006; Baisez, 2016). This ideology mirrored the project by European Jews, themselves marginalised and persecuted in their own countries of origin, with violent anti-Jewish pogroms and growing discrimination, to settle in the Ottoman Empire with ambitions of state-building. Since the 2000s, historiography has insisted on this colonial nature of Zionism (Pappe, 2008). Under the British Mandate and in the wake of the Balfour declaration of 1917, Zionist organisations clashed with the British colonial administration (Shamir, 2000). The Jewish agency and other Zionist institutions organised and supervised settlements and land acquisition (Essaid, 2014). In 1948, at the time of the creation of the state of Israel, the systematic expulsion of Palestinian inhabitants, the destruction of hundreds of Palestinian villages and the massacre of numerous inhabitants was a strategy of ethnic cleansing (Pappe, 2006; Rashed et al., 2014). During the following decades, resistance by Palestinian organisations was made in the name of anti-colonialism. In the 1960s, the Palestine Liberation Organisation insisted on the colonial dimension of Zionism, denouncing the historical “alliance” between “British Imperialism and Zionist Colonialism”, as well as “racism, violence, terrorism and territorial expansion” as instruments of colonisation (Sayegh, 1965). These arguments constituted the anti-colonial core of the ideology of resistance and liberation in the whole region. After the 1967 occupation of other parts of Palestine by Israel and the continuation of settler colonialism with the constant support of the Israeli government (Salamanca et al., 2012), anti-colonial movements denounced this new phase of colonisation. They also denounced the ideologically oriented Zionist exploitations of Biblical myths as motivated by colonial postures (Masalah, 2007). Anti-colonial movements also turned against the evolution of Zionism under American influence, seeing it as a new vector and form of colonisation (Raider, 1998; Sasson, 2014). In the 2000s, with the end of illusions on the peace process and on the feasibility of a two-states solution, scholars and activists continued to use the anti-colonial paradigm to decipher Israeli strategies (Al-Rimmawi, 2009) and expose the colonial nature of present-day evolutions (Yiftachel, 2012). From the point of view of anti-colonial thought, Palestine also saw the development of new interpretations, and it was even at the heart of academic debates on postcolonialism (Shimoni, 2007). Following Edward Said who developed an anti-colonial narrative against Zionism (Said, 1979) and proposed, in *Orientalism*, new paradigmatic interpretations of the relationship between Europe and the Middle East (Said, 1978), anti-colonial thought evolved in the direction of more encompassing analyses (Gilmartin and Berg, 2007). Present-day BDS activists, particularly in the wake of the 2008 Israeli war against Gaza, see the necessity to bring their anti-colonial fight to the US and Europe, as it is for them these two powers who sustain Israeli policies.

Before and during the 2021 war, social movements in Jerusalem, sometimes under the leadership of young Palestinian female activists, managed protesting against the occupation and evictions at the scale of neighbourhoods and streets, to develop new forms of anti-colonial activism and new methods of resistance, that found a wide echo in global anti-colonial movements, including in the US.

Protesting against the colonial dimension of oil exploration

The opposition to the influence of oil companies in the region has historically been one of the vectors of anti-colonial movements. Indeed, oil companies were born, as emanations and instruments of the colonial apparatuses. European and American colonial appetites in the Middle East date back to the late-Ottoman period (Kent, 1976). Conquering the oil fields of Mesopotamia was part of the reasons why Great Britain and France wanted to suppress the Ottoman Empire. The Anglo-Persian Oil Company, created in 1909, had already been an early instrument of colonial appetites in Persia (Behraves, 2012). The Compagnie Française des Pétroles (CFP, becoming Total in 1954) was created by circles close to French military intelligence following the obtention by Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau after World War I of the former share of the Deutsche Bank in the Turkish Petroleum Company (which was extracting oil in Iraq), in which the British Anglo-Persian Company (becoming British Petroleum in 1954) had acquired a 50% share in 1914 (Gemignani-Saxstad, 1998). The CFP was at the core of the French colonial policies during the Mandates and remained the expression of French interests after formal decolonisation. In 1920, the San Remo conference gave the control of Iraqi oil to British colonial interests, (McBeth, 2013). Following the Hejaz war, the creation of Saudi Arabia in 1932 (Leatherdale, 1983), and its passage under American influence in 1938 [Miller, 1980] – when Standard Oil of California and Texas Oil Co., through the Arabian-American Oil Company (ARAMCO) discovered massive oil fields – is also deeply connected to a history that mixes oil interests and colonial predation (Vitalis, 2007). The American government and American oil companies had been looking for new oil fields since the aftermaths of World War I in order to counterbalance their exclusion from Iraq (Earle, 1924; DeNovo, 1956). The 1945 Pact between US President Roosevelt and King Ibn Saud was a symbol of this declension of the colonial relationship for anti-colonial activists. The birth of the independent states of the Arabian Peninsula also took place in the context of colonial powers and oil companies securing control and access (Askari, 2013). After World War II, American policies, denounced by both nationalist and communist anti-colonial movements as being of a colonial nature, interfered increasingly in oil extraction in Iraq (Tristani, 2010). Oil sovereignty was thus a major claim of regimes and anti-colonial activists. The coup d'état organised by the CIA against Prime Minister Mossadegh in Iran in 1953 in the context of a conflict over oil extraction rights illustrates this dynamic (Dietrich, 2015). In Iraq, the regime of Saddam Hussein, in the wake of the refusal by General Qassim to recognise the granting of Independence to Kuwait by Great Britain in 1961 made this refusal a symbol of anti-colonial fight (Ishow, 1968), resulting in the emergence of new anti-colonial protests during and after the 1990–91 Gulf War.

Conclusion: discussing the anti-colonial nature of present-day insurgencies

Since the turn of the century, new insurgencies – often of a Jihadist nature – have been using elements of anti-colonial and anti-crusade rhetoric in their contestation of foreign domination and existing regimes, denounced as colonial constructs (Hassan, 2004; Rich, 2016). Global Jihad thus has an anti-colonial dimension. However, it also has roots in the Cold War, as an instrument of the Pakistani-Saudi-American alliance contesting Soviet influence in Afghanistan and aiming at provoking a Soviet military intervention, which happened in 1979 (Riedel, 2014). Some of these groups, among them al-Qaeda, later attacked Europe and the US and spread new anti-colonial discourses (Steinberg, 2005). Such motivations are shared by numerous insurgents

in the Middle East, notably in Iraq, where resistance against the 2003 military invasion and occupation by a US-led coalition (Baskin, 2015) rallied around the protest of the colonial nature of this intervention. In the Levant during the 2010s, the Jihadist organisation Daesh, in the context of multiple geopolitical ambiguities, also used anti-colonial rhetoric aimed at contesting the borders inherited from the colonial era (Mello, 2018). This illustrates the entanglement of scales and ideologies in the complex interaction between Europe and the Middle East.

What a *longue durée* perspective on anti-colonial voices from the region reveals is a strong entanglement with the chronology of European and American actions in the region, as well as the persistence of logics of mobilisation and protest. Another key element is the constant adaptation of anti-colonial movements and voices to changes in the forms of colonisation or colonial influence. Hence the importance of reflecting on the nature of anti-colonial movements in discussions on the definition of what “postcolonial” means.

Note

- 1 This chapter is dedicated to the memory of my dear colleague Ahmed Badawi (1967–2020).

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