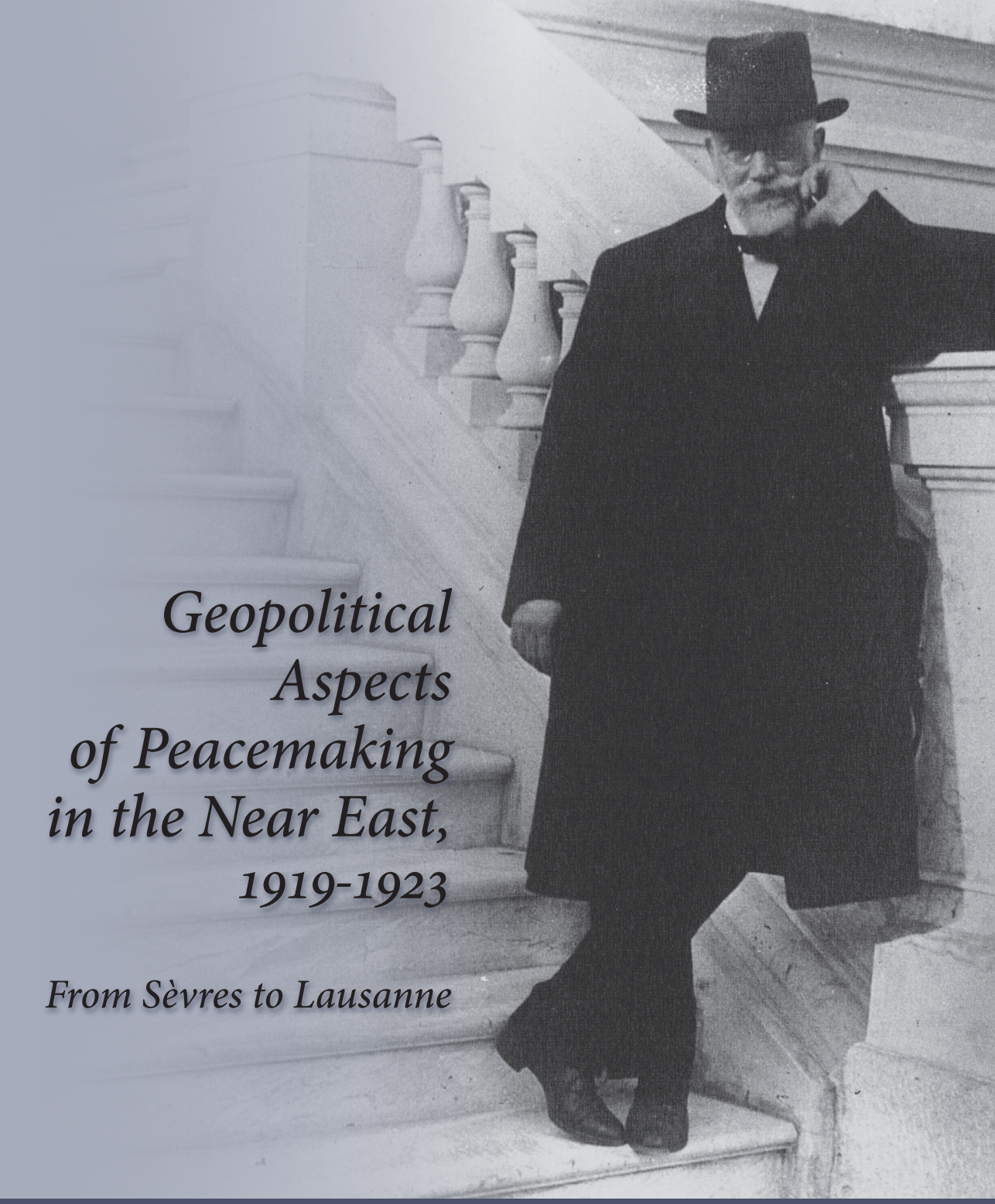


Geopolitical Aspects of Peacemaking in the Near East, 1919-1923

From Sèvres to Lausanne

THE HELLENIC PARLIAMENT FOUNDATION
FOR PARLIAMENTARISM AND DEMOCRACY

NATIONAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION
"ELEFTHERIOS K. VENIZELOS" - Chania

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Michel Foucher*

SÈVRES AND LAUSANNE TREATIES: A FRENCH GEOGRAPHER'S ANALYSIS

As a geographer, it seems to me essential, in the analysis of the treaties and of their context, to specify which are the relevant scales in order to fully understand the interplay of the actors who influence the decision in the negotiation of the two treaties, of which only the second lasted. What are the criteria and final objectives sought by the main actors, better said, powers?

In my view, the relevant scale is that of the regional Franco-British rivalry. Paris and London were allies in Western Europe, competitors in the Eastern Mediterranean. They were European powers of the first order, to use Montesquieu's categories, with international interests that were not shared by the two Powers, in the area covered by the treaties in question. Italy and Russia were second-rate powers; the declining Ottoman Empire had become a third-rate power until the adoption of the National Pact.

At this point of my introduction, let me make a personal remark. Insisting on the relevant scale of the negotiation does not mean ignoring the dramatic conditions of these settlements. Allow me here, in the enclosure of the *Vouli ton Ellinon,* a thought for the Greek victims of forced displacements, to preserve the memory of a tragic period for several minority peoples who found themselves on the wrong side of history. As a French geographer, I believe it is useful to share with you the conclusions of the Study Committee (*le Comité d'études*) which brought together French historians and geographers between 1917 and 1920 to prepare the territorial settlements after the anticipated victory of the

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Allied nations. Reading their work, supplemented by the study of positions taken by interest groups (Le Comité pour l'Asie française, L'Oeuvre d'Orient) makes it possible to identify the French vision in the Near East and in Turkey: French Christian imagination, influence, education, hospitals, priority rights for economic concessions, therefore maintenance of privileges and refusal of equality with the Turkish Republic. It means that treaties are not limited to the territorial dimension alone. For France, maintaining the already mentioned vectors of influence is central.

The Quai d'Orsay, the headquarters of the French Foreign Office, had a mentality of masters and ghosts. It was about dismantling what was left of the empire to better restore privileges. As the historian Jacques Tobie notes, "the stillborn masterpiece is, in this respect, the Treaty of Sèvres". There was still a colonial atmosphere in Paris. One proof? The first French Ambassador to Turkey was Albert Sarrault, former Minister of the Colonies (1925). He was appointed after a favorable agreement with France on the reopening of French schools.

The French interest in the region

I propose to deal first with the work and influence of the "Study Committee" (Comité d'études). It was a reflection group created by France in February 1917 in order to contribute to the elaboration of its war aims during the First World War. It was set up at the instigation of Aristide Briand, President of the Council and Minister for Foreign Affairs, by the deputy for Paris Charles Benoist and had as president the historian Ernest Lavisse.

The famous geographer Paul Vidal de la Blache, the founder of the French school of geography, was its first vice-president. During the two and a half years of its activity, the Study Committee submitted to the French authorities nearly sixty memoirs dealing with the future eastern borders of France (Alsace, Lorraine, Sarre, Left Bank of the Rhine, Luxembourg), its allies in Europe (Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Italy, Poland, Romania, Greece) and the Middle East (Anatolia, Syria, Armenia). As requested by Briand, all the reports were made with a view to a military victory for France.

Part Six of the Memoirs is dedicated to Turkey of Europe and Asia with six chapters, namely:

- I. *Constantinople and the question of the Straits,* by C. Diehl (p. 685)

- II. *Constantinople and the Straits, their economic role*, by P. Masson (p. 709)
- III. *Territorial formation of an international Straits state*, by A. Demangeon (p. 751)
- IV. *Smyrna and Hellenism in Asia Minor*, by P. Masson (p. 775)
- V. *The Armenian question*, by A. Meillet (p. 825)
- VI. *The populations of Syria*, by A. Bernard (p. 845)

The Committee was certainly influential in the conception of the Treaty of Sèvres since it was inclined to support a rather maximalist position on the drawing of new borders, which were not always in line with French diplomacy. It had the same proactive position for Germany.[1]

Questions relating to the Ottoman Empire, which in Europe had been reduced to Eastern Thrace since the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, mainly dealt with the Straits. Their fate was separated from the Constantinople dossier: the control of the one did not imply the annexation of the other, as France insisted from the start of the war. In March 1915, discussions between allies formalized, not without haggling over the Rhineland, Russian claims to Constantinople, the Straits and Eastern Thrace. Indeed, it was an obsession of the Russian ally to revise the Paris Convention of 1856 in order to control the Straits and thus guarantee its right of passage to the Mediterranean. In order also to prevent the passage of a possible enemy, the recommended solution was that of an international authority to which all the Mediterranean States of the Entente would join, ensuring the neutrality of the Straits. The Committee clearly affirmed its concern to protect Russian commerce from any German threat.

Regarding more distant territories, in Asia Minor and the Middle East, the discussions focused on the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire which, for the first time, was an objective of the allies. The Committee recommended at least the following successor States: an international State of the Straits, and an independent Armenia, Greece inheriting Thrace and France the mandates already defined. Indeed, these developments are useful in evaluating on the questions of the East. In the first place lay the Sykes-Picot agreements of 1916

1. The fact that the conclusions of the Comité d'études were not endorsed by the French decision-makers (with the major exception of Romania and Yugoslavia) explain the subsequent refusal of any reference to political geography by the French school of geography.

(recognized at most as a memorandum by the British) which delimited zones of influence and therefore broadly defined Allied war aims in the region.[2]

The French therefore wished to establish their protectorate on the North Syrian coast –including Beirut and Alexandretta– on the rich cereal plains of Cilicia and Armenia, as well as a zone of influence on Damascus, Aleppo and Mosul. With regard to Syria, which the Committee was particularly interested in during its last meetings, the members believed that "what we can and must seek in Syria is above all the development of our intellectual influence". The prevailing view was that this intellectual influence was already much stronger there than in other French colonies as was noted by the French Society of Geography which has been advocating since 1916 the attribution of Syria to France.

The Charity of the schools of the East (*L'Oeuvre des écoles d'Orient*) was born after the Crimean War when, according to the Treaty of Paris, France was recognized as the protector of Christians in the Ottoman Empire.[3] The association was intended to support French-speaking schools in Lebanon. It became involved in Lebanon after the massacre of Christians by the Druze (1860) and its director became a fervent defender of the Armenian cause. The issue of French schools became important in the negotiations for the Treaty of Lausanne.

To conclude on the French vision for the region under consideration (I shall name it: "Wider Near East") it is necessary to point out again the role of the Committees to promote a "colonial atmosphere" more than to convince decision-makers on borders: the Committee of Studies (*Comité d'études),* the Committee of French Interests in the East (*Comité des intérêts française en Orient*) (some of whose members were directly linked to members of the former) and the Committee of French Asia (*Comité de l'Asie française*).[4] French claims were basically justified by the historical mission conferred on France by its traditional protectorate over the Christians of the East and its centuries-old presence in the Levant. Army officers and Catholic circles were included. Influence was yesterday what "soft-power" is today.

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2. Michel Foucher, "Sykes-Picot, un siècle plus tard. Mythes et réalités", Telos.eu, 26 mai 2016.

3. Jacques Thobie, "De Constantinople à Ankara: d'un Empire piétiné à une République respectée (1920-1929)", *Relations internationales*, 31: *Les nouvelles formes de la diplomatie au XXe siècle* (automne 1982).

4. Jean-Paul Chagnollaud et Sid-Ahmed Souiah, *Les frontières au Moyen-Orient* (Paris 2004).

Rivalry between allies: a showdown to shape the new regional order

Let us recall the specificities of the imperialist moment, to borrow the formula of Henry Laurens: the Ottoman space was collectively dominated by Europe, in an already ancient concern for European balance. The survival of the Ottoman Empire was paid for at the high price of the formation of the Balkan states (from the Greek revolt of 1821 to the second Balkan war of 1913), according to the principle of nationalities based on a process of ethno-religious homogenization.

The Sublime Porte played on the rivalries between European countries in an attempt to neutralize them. An example of this was given in 1903 when Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1842-1918, deposed in 1909) told the French Ambassador that he regretted the perceived decline of French influence in Syria:

> I think I should tell your Excellency, in an absolutely friendly way, that for some years now, I have noticed, not without regret, that while the influence of certain Powers has not ceased to grow in Syria, that of France has declined: this weakening is not without inspiring me with legitimate apprehensions. French influence in fact counterbalanced in this region that of all the other Powers combined and maintained, consequently, a balance which I consider necessary to the interests of my government, and which threatens to be destroyed today for the benefit of your rivals. I have, moreover, always considered without anxiety the action which France has taken in Syria, knowing that it was inspired by the sentiments of the French Government and the principle of its traditional policy towards my Empire, which consists in maintaining the status quo and the integrity of Ottoman territory. I am aware that the aim of your rivals is quite different: the example of Egypt is there to remind me of it.[5]

With Balkan independence, the instruments of collective hegemony – capitulations, protections, religious protectorates were reduced, and the option of a territorial division into zones of influence, i.e. areas of economic preponderance, was affirmed. The hegemonic projects became more national. So, which were the main priorities of the major European powers?

Britain's priorities were Palestine and Mesopotamia, the land and, soon, air bridge of the route to India, in addition to the Suez Canal, the Bab el Mandeb, and the oilfields of Mosul, in Northern Iraq (part of the Ottoman Empire), which were identified by Churchill as a crucial asset for the Royal Navy. Lon-

5. Henry Laurens, *L'empire et ses ennemis. La question impériale dans l'histoire* (Paris 2009); see Chapter III.

don was able to convince the French to give up Mosul in exchange for a share in the new oil company.

Georges Clémenceau "ceded" Palestine and Mosul to David Lloyd George in 1918. This is a significant episode in the Franco-British rivalry over the Ottoman space and concerns the Mosul vilayet, which France considered a natural extension of its zone of influence in Syria. Lloyd George managed to link his support for Clémenceau and the recovery of Alsace-Lorraine –lost in 1871– by France to future French concessions in the Middle East. At a dinner in London on 1 December 1918, Georges Clémenceau, who had no interest in the Middle East but needed British support in the Peace Conference negotiations, asked about the British position.

> "What should we discuss?" Lloyd George replied: "Mesopotamia and Palestine". "Tell me what you want," asked Clemenceau. "I want Mosul". "You shall have it", the Frenchman assured him, "anything else?" "Yes, I want Jerusalem too". "You shall have it," Clemenceau repeated, not without warning his host that his very imperialist Foreign Minister, Stephen Pichon, would create difficulties over Mosul. Georges Clémenceau soon came to regret having been so generous. "I have to tell you that from the day after the armistice, I found you the enemy of France", Clemenceau accused Lloyd George, who replied: "Well, isn't that our traditional policy?" The two allies in Europe had once again become rivals in the East. Clémenceau commented: "He has managed to turn me into a 'Syrian' ".[6]

London created a corridor from Transjordan to Iraq, a prelude to the passage of an oil pipeline from Iraq to the Mediterranean (Haifa) and a series of stopovers for air links from London to Bombay via Gibraltar, Malta, Alexandria, Baghdad, Basra. Palestine was delimited on the basis of a biblical atlas and taking into account the fact that France did not want to have any Jewish colonies on its mandate territory.

These are interests considered vital by the British Foreign Office. At that time, the region was more important for London than for Paris. London had geostrategic objectives, in the context of the Empire, and therefore a global and operational vision.

We do not find an equivalent priority in France, where what mattered for economic and geopolitical reasons were: first, Indochina; second, Maghreb; third, West Africa. In the region, the French priorities were only Lebanon and

6. James Barr, *A Line in the Sand. The Anglo-French Struggle for the Middle East, 1914-1948* (New York 2011), 63-64, 70.

Syria, that is the question of the Syrian borders which involved negotiating with Mustapha Kemal.

There was an agreement between both great powers that the key concept here is influence, more than direct costly possession. It directly inspired the famous secret Sykes-Picot agreements of 1916.[7] These agreements were not concretely applied except on 700 km of the current routes: the Jordan-Syria border and the western half of the Iraq-Syria dyad. Out of 14,000 km of effective borders in the Middle East and 29 dyads (common boundaries between two contiguous states), French intervention covered 16% of the routes, British intervention 26% and Russian intervention 14.5%. But the motivations of rivalry and the sharing of zones of influence continued to influence subsequent treaties. And we find the diplomat George Picot in direct negotiations with Kemal in 1921 over Syria, even if Picot's dream of an "integral Syria" from Mosul to Gaza did not come true. Clemenceau had "ceded" Palestine and Mosul to Lloyd George in 1918.

We must mention here the negotiation conducted directly between the French special envoy Franklin-Bouillon and Youssouf Kémal Bey, in June 1921, for two weeks in Ankara, to prepare an agreement signed on October 21. It was signed on an equal footing, putting an end to anything reminiscent of capitulations or zones of influence. According to Jacques Thobie, "it is the first agreement with an Entente power that conforms to the diplomatic line of the new Turkey".[8]

The next stage was concluded in Lausanne, and Ismet Pasha, head of the Turkish delegation, had to compromise on Mosul, on the status of the Straits, on the Sanjak of Alexandretta and the control of foreign trade, postponed until 1929.

Conclusions

Moreover, not all borders in the East are of colonial origin and of late delimitation. Several major dyads owe nothing to exogenous interventions. The Peace of Zuhab of 1639 set the boundaries between the Persian and Ottoman empires, those of Iran with Turkey and Iraq. The Muslim empires had a very precise practice regarding borders and their fiscal functions. The intrinsic unity of the "Arab world", conceived in the unitary rhetoric (caliphate and ummah,

7. Foucher, "Sykes-Picot".
8. Thobie, "De Constantinople à Ankara".

Arab nation and Sunnistan), was a dream, disappointed after 1916, due to the establishment of distinct states. Several authors, such as Henry Laurens,[9] believe that the borders resulting from external arbitrations have, over time, been consolidated, most often in the context of authoritarian political regimes.

The map of the region was profoundly altered. A new Franco-British regional order was established. Everything was decided in London and Paris, not in Arabia, which had been recognised as a Saudi Kingdom under Ibn Saoud against the Hussein family, and in Turkey, which had become a republic under Mustapha Kemal. As for Eleftherios Venizelos, although he had lost the elections in 1920, he participated in the 1923 treaty negotiations in order to transform the military defeat of 1922 into a diplomatic success (with Greece retaining Western Thrace and the islands of the north-eastern Aegean), and signed the treaty on behalf of Greece.

9. Laurens, *L'empire et ses ennemis.*