

Arab Public Debate on the “Deal of the Century” in the “Versailles” Framework

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Abstract

The Trump administration has reportedly planned to publish its self-drafted Middle East peace initiative some time during the year 2019, exactly 100 years after the Treaty of Versailles (1919) was signed. Although previous and subsequent agreements, declarations and treaties, such as the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916), the Balfour Declaration (1917), the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) and the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) had much more to do with the fate of the Middle East than the Treaty of Versailles itself, the coincidence of the announcement of the “deal of the century” with the anniversary of “Versailles” provides great significance to the latter in current Arab public debate. While the above mentioned events and decisions did not meaningfully hinder the long-term Israeli–Palestinian peace process, the “deal of the century” might have harmful effects for it. Arab leaders as well as opinionmakers of all kinds agree on the existence of a strong parallel between the aims and design of the Versailles-related treaties and those of the “deal of the century.” They agree that both of them deny the right of self-determination to Arab nations and that they are both designed to foreshadow decades of bloody conflicts between the nations of the Middle East. The “deal of the century” might also sanctify the “acquisition of land by force” which has clear implications for state-to-state relations. In my analysis, I will provide a snapshot of the Arab public debate on the “deal of the century” and how it is related to the anniversary of the Treaty of Versailles and related agreements.

Keywords: Treaty of Versailles, deal of the century, Trump administration, Middle East, Israel, Palestine

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“Versailles” and the “Sykes-Picot System”

By today, most of the Middle Eastern societies from Morocco to Iran have accepted the transformation of the Ottoman empire into the nation-state system that has evolved in the early to the mid-1900s. The most general sentiment expressed towards the events of World War I and the end of the Ottoman caliphate is

“nostalgia for the bygone days of a multinational, multireligious, and multiethnic Ottoman Empire that, despite its many limitations, offered far more geographical fluidity and population mobility than is possible in today’s world of guarded national borders.” (Tarazi Fawaz, 2014: 276).

As Leila Tarazi Fawaz explains, although the world wars and the subsequent treaties had a long-lasting effect on the thinking of the generations who witnessed the events or participated in them, the governments of the newly established Arab states made sure to use these sentiments and the related acts of remembrance to reinforce nationalism among their peoples. In our era, only a limited number of ideologues and militants believe in the actuality of questioning the *raison d’être* of the so-called “Sykes-Picot system.” The voices who argue for “the end of Sykes-Picot” fail to recognize that no Western power will, in terms of policy, ever question the legitimacy of the borders drawn at the San Remo conference in 1920 (Gause, 2014). Similarly, Arab states in the Middle East strive to uphold the status quo of their borders which is a guarantee for their perseverance in the anarchic international system. As no state would agree on border changes, separatists in any part of the Middle East are in effect waging a war against the international system. The facts on the ground, however, point in a direction where states and the international system are striving to uphold the regional order in the Middle East in vain as minorities and non-state actors *de facto* started to deconstruct the “Sykes-Picot system”. Sub-regions based on historical and ethnic significance are now recognizable political units (Wright, 2013). Political scientists have put forward various scenarios involving a review of the “Sykes-Picot system”. in response to this However, the most expected scenario remains the one based on a permanent state of unrest, in which state and non-state actors do not simply disagree on the existing borders but also on the distribution of power among them (Mahfoud, 2016).

The Middle East is the only region (the sum of the three sub-regions of the Maghreb, Gulf and the Levant) in the world which did not succeed in founding an all-

inclusive security mechanism, such as the OSCE, during the 20th century, and, as such, the region is still dependent on outside powers who negotiate their peace instead of themselves (Jones, 2009: 105-115). Although many Arab leaders strived to be regarded at least symbolically as leaders of the “Arab nation” (*al-ummah al-arabiyyah*), i.e., leaders of the Middle Eastern Arab population, their rhetoric at best only helped them build more robust domestic legitimacy, while they remained short of real trans-regional political power.

As Ajami observes:

“The anticolonialism of the mandate years lent a great deal of unity to the Arab system, as an entire generation was traumatized by what they saw as the Arabs’ betrayal by the West. The Balfour Declaration and the Sykes/Picot agreement made their imprint on a large number of Arab nationalists, wherever they were, and forged a strong bond of unity among officials, publicists and officers who thought in terms of the Arabs and the West.” (Ajami, 1978: 366).

The sentiment of pan-Arabism has been exhausted by the end of the 1960s which has been clearly reflected in the growing sentiments of state nationalism (especially in the case of Palestinian nationalism) and pan-Islamism (Ibid., 360-364).

The nationalism projects have failed by the advent of the Arab Spring. Islamism, both as a nationalist and trans-national project, reemerged at that time to subsequently become very soon the object of states-led counter-revolutions in the 2010s (al-Anani, 2019). The region nowadays still suffers from a lack of the ability of self-determination as it stands largely penetrated by regional and world powers. In the post-Arab Spring environment, regional politics degraded largely into a set of subject-object relations between Gulf monarchies and dependent states in which the former try to rigorously apply their political doctrine on the latter.

The “deal of the century” was introduced against this backdrop: a plan designed to end more than 100 years of territorial dispute between Arabs and Jews in general, and Palestinians and Israelis in particular. At the time of writing this, the proposed “deal” is not known in full – although certain details have been revealed or leaked over the course of 2019 (see e.g. MEE, 2019).

Similarly to the principles of the Treaty of Versailles and all the previous and subsequent agreements, declarations and treaties, such as the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916), the Balfour Declaration (1917), the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) and the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), the “deal of the century” was designed to determine the fate of Arabs

based at least in part on American interests, without requesting real consent of the “objects” of the deal. Arab opinion-makers generally agree that both “Versailles” and the Trump administration’s deal aim to deny the free will of the Arab nations to decide on their own fate and that they both prospectively foreshadow decades of bloody conflict between the nations of the Middle East.

The irony behind Donald Trump and Jared Kushner’s plan is that it was similarly a US president, Woodrow Wilson, who exactly one-hundred years ago, in 1919, sent a fact-finding mission to the Levant in order to design his own deal of the century based on the desires of the peoples of the Middle East (Fisk, 2019). The King-Crane Commission found that most of the people of the Levant favored an independent Great Syria (including the present-day Lebanon, Israel, Palestine and Jordan) governed by the Hashemites with US backing, as the latter enjoyed general support vis-à-vis the French and British who had a long history of colonialism behind their backs.² The Commission’s final opinion reflected the above view which was also represented by the unitary opinion of the Syrian National Congress, a bold but premature initiative for an independent Syria which was abolished in 1920 by the French.

Unfortunately, the imperial powers of the French and the British persevered in the territorial dispute as the US Congress backed out from the Treaty of Versailles after the King-Crane Commission finished its mission. With that, the Balfour Declaration became the most pertinent principle-setting document (adopted during the San Remo conference in 1920) for establishing the long-term future of the Levant.

After WWII, the UN would become the primary force which legally delineated the borders between the prospective Jewish state and Palestine. After the independence of the nations of the region, both the US and European states again and again stressed the importance of providing the people of Palestine the right of self-determination as per the internationally accepted borders of the two states. Whatever the effects of the Balfour declaration and the US support behind Israel, the US itself became the main supporter of Palestinian independence and regularly consulted Arab leaders on this issue. Despite the clear political alliance between the US and Israel, many believed that the US would be the principal guarantor of the two-state solution in any circumstances. Trump and Kushner’s deal, in its abstract form, has therefore become a new symbol of the ignorance of the West, just as the time when the imperial powers denied the principle and right of

² For details of the King-Crane Commission’s role see Patrick, 2015.

self-determination – before, during and after Versailles. The King-Crane Commission thus remains the last collective effort in the last one-hundred years that aimed at creating a regional order in the Middle East that best suits the interests and will of the peoples of the region.

A few examples from Arab public debates may be enough to demonstrate that although the illness of the “Sykes-Picot system” is still a vivid topic in Arab public discourse, it has been obscured in the last couple of years by the pessimism regarding the US administration’s intentions. These examples point to a perceived analogy between “Versailles” and the current subject-object relations between outside powers and the Arab region.

The Arab perception of the “Deal of the Century” and “Versailles”

The debate about the “Sykes-Picot system” has generally focused on the misplacement of the borders within the Middle East and its effect on the permanent redistribution of sovereignty and power among the Arab subjects of the region within the existing state system. The “deal of the century” (*safqat al-qarn*) is perceived to limit the right of “self-determination” of the Arab peoples in general while also legitimising the “acquisition of land by force.”

While no one ever questioned the legitimacy of debating the *raison d'être* of the Sykes-Picot borders, few have asserted that the system itself hindered evolution towards a just regional order. Rather, the right to self-determination was seen as blocked by individual states themselves for their own parochial reasons. The “deal of the century,” however, will fundamentally change the moral bases of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and that of Arab-Israeli relations, regardless of whether it remains only an abstract concept.

Arabs living in Palestine at the time viewed the Balfour Declaration as a political decision constituting “a gross violation of the principle of self-determination proclaimed by the Allies” (Kapitan 1995, 15). The plan for the creation of the Jewish State of Israel then became reality after World War II and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process reached the point where Israel as a territorial entity gained legitimacy (1967 borders). Even so, the need for Palestinian self-determination remained a starting point of the negotiations. If the right of return for Palestinian refugees and the 1967 borders would be respected, even the radical elements of the Palestinian leadership would perhaps accept a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process (Abu Jahal, 2019). Thus, even if the right for self-

determination of the Palestinian people had been violated throughout the process, partly as a result of great power decisions, UN resolutions and acts of the international community, a settlement which respects the 1967 borders could still, possibly, ensure the national self-determination of the Palestinian people. The “deal of the century”, however, had been designed to ignore all of the main elements of self-determination and it is thus a fundamental violation of this right, exactly in the same way as it was the case with the “Versailles” principles.

The “deal of the century” up until today remains an abstract notion, but in the meantime, the Trump administration continuously sets the preconditions for the deal by recognizing the sovereignty of the state of Israel over territories beyond the 1967 borders. As one Arab commentator pointed out, while the world is waiting for the peace plan to be published, the US President, his advisors and Israel are working on a radical resolution of the conflict. Thus, a growing pessimism surrounds the anticipated plan even without the details known (Shatiri, 2019). Moreover, according to Shatiri who is not alone with his opinion, the forceful settlement of the conflict, which includes the withdrawal of economic support by the US to the Palestinian people refugees, will lead to an unjust deal exactly as it was the case with Versailles. It is difficult to imagine how an unfair deal would not lead to armed resistance and further rounds of violent conflict.

Al-Amir Al-Hassan Bin Talal, the uncle of King Abdullah II, the current ruler of Jordan, published an implicit warning in 2019, addressing the great power architects of the Middle Eastern regional order about the perils of applying the same ignorance towards the territorial sovereignty and the right for national self-determination of the Arab people as the architects of the Versailles peace agreement did (Bin Talal, 2019). Bin Talal is regarded as a political thinker as he was officially removed from the line of succession in Jordan. He rather implicitly noted in his oft-cited piece of opinion that the current state of affairs in the Middle East shows a huge similarity to the situation at the time of Versailles. As the societies of the Arab states are full of hatred based on ethnic and religious conflicts, the “deal of the century” further deteriorates the situation by legitimizing the forceful acquisition of lands and denying the right of self-determination to Arabs.

The effects of Versailles on Germany and the victors’ perceived responsibility for creating the grounds for the political motives of the Nazi regime is another recurring element which appears in the Arab public debate along with blaming the victorious European powers for the current state of affairs in the Middle East (Abdulrahman Thabit,

2018). Ironically, Abdulrahman Thabit notes that the US Congress clearly also saw the evil behind the Versailles treaty when they voiced their concerns that “this treaty will not provide peace or security, but will open the way to a more terrible war than the one that has just ended” (*ibidem*), leading it ultimately to reject the treaty. The writer draws a parallel between Versailles and the “deal of the century” as the latter might similarly set the stage for building up a more robust resistance against Israel.

Although the idea (and right) of “self-determination” and is in any case an important basis of the Palestinian “state-building process”, its application or re-application holds several questionable implications. As an Arab commentator pointed out, exchanging the established terms of “two-state solution” or “Palestinian state” for “the right for self-determination” is clearly a setback in the peace process (Yahya, 2017). As Yahya argues, re-introducing the term of “self-determination” without linking it explicitly to Palestinian statehood moves the whole narrative, and the process along with it, back to the time of the Versailles peace process.

The above examples only serve to highlight that Arab commentators recognized and warned that changing the narrative from that of a well-established legal process based on international law to a framework of principles and rights is not only a setback in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and Israeli-Arab relations but it is also, potentially, a very dangerous politically motivated act. The narrative behind the “deal of the century” or the forceful execution of an unfair deal, which denies well-established rights, might have the same effects in the Middle East of the future as “Versailles” did in post-WWI Europe.

Conclusion: As bad a deal as Versailles

In its report to the Paris Peace Conference on August 28, 1919, the King-Crane Commission expressed the following concern about the future of Palestine if the principle of self-determination is the rule applied for the Jewish people (as per the Balfour Declaration), while the will of the Arab people is denied: “To subject a people so minded to unlimited Jewish immigration, and to steady financial and social pressure to surrender the land, would be a gross violation of the principle just quoted, and of the people's rights, though it kept within the forms of law” (quoted in: Kapitan, 1995: 15).

The debate on the “deal of the century” clearly illustrates the double-standard applied towards Arabs and Israelis. The same double standard was applied after Versailles, and during the subsequent foundation of the state of Israel, towards Jews and

Arabs. While the Jewish immigrants were provided with the right of self-determination, this was denied to Palestinians. The shared political and economic vision of the US, Israel and implicitly some Arab nations denies a rightful deal to the Palestinian people based on the trajectory set out by the negotiations that have taken place since 1967. By sidelining the issue of the return of Palestinian refugees, legitimizing the illegal land acquisitions made by the Jewish state and placing all kinds of political and economic pressure on the Palestinian people, the supporters of the “deal of the century” ignore the basic elements of the Palestinian right of self-determination. In fact, under the current circumstances, a deal of this kind might even set a more far-reaching precedent regarding the right of a nation to forcefully acquire lands from another nation.

The aim of this analysis was to show some examples from the Arab public debate on the analogy between “Versailles” and the “deal of the century” – a parallel drawn with reference to the similar double standards manifest in both. In short, the “deal of the century” might ultimately be the steal of the century according to the near-unanimous view of Arab commentators.

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