We’ve been here before.

To many Americans, this war is being fought to free the Iraqi people from a brutal dictator. But to the people of the Middle East, the United States looks like another in a long line of conquering armies from the West, writes David D. Peck.

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Take a look at the map of the contemporary Middle East. Compare the borders to the typically crooked or irregular borders of other countries. They are not natural or historical borders. They are the result of the failed nation-building efforts of Britain and France following World War One.

How did this happen?

British Deceit and Arab Resentment
A young British officer (T. E. Lawrence “of Arabia”) was assigned to carry correspondence from the British government, specifically Henry C. MacMahon, to Sharif Husayn an Arab leader in Mecca. In 1915 and early 1916, these letters requested Arab assistance in defeating the Ottoman Turks.
The request coincided with a failed British attack on the Turks at Gallipoli. The British were pinned down on its narrow beaches for months. They sustained over 230,000 casualties, and were no longer in a position to fight the Ottoman Turks. They therefore courted Arab assistance.

In exchange for an Arab rebellion against the Turks, the British indicated they would establish an independent Arab Kingdom in what is now Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Israel, Palestine and parts of Saudi Arabia, and make Husayn its monarch. Lawrence trained and assisted the Arab rebels, but once the rebels arrived victorious in Damascus the British hesitated to uphold the bargain.

The change in British attitude was linked to a second agreement, made between Britain and France in 1916 (called the Sykes-Picot Agreement). Under its terms, Britain and France would divide up the Middle East between themselves once the war was over. The Sykes-Picot Agreement was incompatible with the prior arrangements of the MacMahon-Husayn correspondence, as the British well knew.

In addition to these irreconcilable agreements, the British government issued a third document in 1917, named the Balfour Declaration. This declaration called for a “Jewish National Home” in Palestine. Husayn felt that Palestine was part of his promised Arab kingdom. Now there were three contradictory plans for slicing up the Middle East. These became the seeds of a bitter harvest of continuing conflict.

Arab resentment only increased after the war. The British failed to create an independent Arab kingdom as promised. Instead, the British claimed Iraq and Palestine. Later they split Palestine into two parts, and called the second one Transjordan. The British never asked whether or not the local population approved of, or even desired, the split. Transjordan inherited a large, and sometimes angry Palestinian Arab population as a result. The French claimed Syria. Later, they split Syria into two parts, and called the second one Lebanon. They never asked permission of the local population to do this, and the action is resented by Arabs in Syria and Lebanon to this day.

Husayn’s family complained that their kingdom never materialized. In response, the British installed Husayn’s son Faysal as king in Iraq, and his other son, Abdullah, as king in Transjordan. No one consulted the wishes or desires of the populace or nationalist leadership of these new countries about whether or not they wanted a monarch.

From the Arab point of view the British and French were rewarded by the agreements of World War One, and the Zionists were rewarded with the creation of Israel in 1948. The Arabs considered themselves the losers, having no sovereignty.

America Comes to the rescue?

President Woodrow Wilson understood the disastrous consequences of the extension of European imperialism into the Middle East. He therefore encouraged Britain and France to abandon their colonial designs, and instead to allow local populations the right of democratic self determination. “Self determination,” he insisted, “is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative principle of action which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril.” He advocated that the former Ottoman territories receive an “unmolested opportunity of autonomous development.” Unfortunately, France and Britain had no intention of allowing this. We are today reaping the colonial and obstructionist harvest sown in the Middle East by the powerful nations of the west.

France’s failure in Syria

In 1922 the League of Nations gave France a mandate to control Syria. France governed Syria with occasional brutality, and with little regard for the desires or aspirations of the local Arab population. Instead of encouraging self rule, as the league of Nations mandate required, they pitted one Arab elite against another, weakening the authority of Arabs that might otherwise have formed the leadership of an independent and stable country.

Although France made a promise to withdraw from Syria at the end of World War Two, they stayed. In 1945 France responded to a popular revolt by bombing of the city of Damascus. This caused the deaths of
untold numbers of Arab civilians. Syria achieved independence only after the British intervened militarily, ousting the French colonial administration by force.

The whole affair had two results. First, the Syrian population was deeply resentful of Europeans generally, and the French particularly. Second, moderate leadership was suppressed during decades of colonial rule, and following the French exodus the torch of Syrian leadership passed into the hands of more radical elements.

These radicalized independence groups could not restore peaceful rule. A series of military leaders gained power. The first dictator was Colonel Husni al-Zaim who seized power in March 1949, followed by Colonel Sami al-Hinnawi, who took over in December 1949. Finally Colonel Adib al-Shishakli seized power in November of 1951. In less than three years, Syria had three different military regimes.

There was no long-lived regime in Syria from 1954 until Colonel Hafez al-Asad forcibly took power in 1970. President al-Asad resorted to violence as he saw fit to enforce his rule. For example, in 1982 he shelled Hama, a major city about 150 miles north of Damascus. The shelling lasted for a month. The Syrian Human Rights Committee (which operates outside of Syria) reported that thirty to forty thousand civilians were killed, and about fifteen thousand are still missing. Toward the end of his regime in 2000, al-Asad produced a more stable government, although political expression was far from free.

In summary, France’s colonization of Syria short-circuited a more natural political development, empowering increasingly extremist independence groups. After France left, it took nearly fifty years for Syria to settle into a pattern of relative stability. Democracy is still a long way off.

**Britain’s failure in Iraq**

The same general picture emerged in Iraq after the British gave the country its independence in 1932.

Actually it would be more accurate to say ‘almost’ gave Iraq its independence in 1932. Political moderates were then ready to take the reins of power pursuant to a new Iraqi constitution. However, anti-British sentiment had steadily increased in Iraq to the point where, in 1939 the country considered becoming a Nazi ally. Britain responded militarily, invaded Iraq, taking control until 1948.

In 1958, Colonel Abd al-Karim Qasim took forcible control of the government. Following a brief political union with Egypt (called the United Arab Republic) that lasted until 1963, Iraq fell into a succession of military coups. During an eighteen month period in the later 1960s, Iraq had over thirty separate military regimes, an average of one military coup every three weeks.

Saddam Hussein made his first political appearance in 1968, assuming full control of Iraq in 1979. Although he has been far from stable in the international arena, Hussein has not allowed internal political dissent. In much the same way that Augustus put an end to generations of Roman civil war by firmly establishing an empire, Hussein brought a level of stability to a country wracked by internal turmoil. His inexcusable atrocities, including the use of poison gas against ethnic minorities are well known. He is a violent man and a poor leader, but given the numerous military coups in Iraq’s past what guarantee is there that his demise will be followed by any measure of democratization or increased stability?

**America’s failure in Iran**

Although the United States maintained no formal colonies in the Middle East, its record of anti-democratic intervention does not indicate that it is any better at nation-building than Britain or France were. Iran is a case in point.

Most Americans believe the 1979 take-over of the Embassy in Tehran was not provoked in any way by America. Unfortunately, that is not correct. We now know the full extent of CIA interference with democratic government in Iran in the 1950. This provided a pretext for the takeover of the American embassy.
Central to the CIA’s political interference was the commercial exploitation of Iranian oil. Oil was discovered in Iran in 1908. The British government sought to control the extraction of this valuable resource, and as a result the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company was founded in 1911. There was much more that was “Anglo” than “Iranian” about the company. For decades, Iranian leaders sought ways to take control over oil exports for the benefit of Iran. In the 1950s, Iran therefore decided to nationalize the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, with compensation to its foreign owners. Tensions increased between Iran and Britain.

Cold War concerns and strong relations with Britain in turn prompted the United States to intervene. The nationalization of the oil company was legal under international law, but the government of Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadeq was nevertheless labeled subversive and unreliable. The United States decided that it would be easier to control Iran if the autocratic Shahs were back in power, unrestricted by constitutions or parliaments. In 1953 the CIA backed the forces of the Shah, who toppled the lawfully-elected Mossadeq government.

For the next quarter-century the Shah ruled with severity. His atrocities, once the subject of rumor, and his links to the CIA, are now well established fact. Torture was used liberally by the Shah through his dreaded secret police (the SAVAK). The CIA operatives in Iran apparently counseled and trained SAVAK in the efficient and effective use of torture. When the Shah died in 1979, a resentful population took out its frustrations on US embassy personnel.

Undermining democracy in Iran created more than a mere annoyance for the United States. As moderate voices were silenced by SAVAK, more radical and extreme leaders found a growing audience. Ayatollah Khomeini is associated in American minds with the most extreme forms of religious fanaticism embraced by the leadership of a major nation. Did America’s nation-building help create part of the so-called “Axis of Evil?”

**Is America capable of Successful Nation-building in Iraq?**
This very brief review is not comprehensive, but demonstrates that Nation building in the Middle East failed. Each failure compounded the others, and the pattern continues.

Reasons for failure include:
- Colonial powers don’t support the development of genuine democracy. The self-determination anticipated by a local population following the invasion of a ‘liberation army’ fails to materialize. Instead, colonial powers allow a veil of pseudo-independence to cover the raw power they exercise.
- Foreign colonial business interests dominate local politics. This makes the development of democracy difficult. Even in the rare cases where a foreign power intervenes with a genuine desire to assist the development of democracy, the interests of business come to dominate all others. Americans should keep an eye on corporations like Haliburton, each waiting for an opportunity to “rebuild” Iraq’s oil industry, holding the oil revenues in trust for the Iraqi people, of course.

History teaches that nation-building takes time and patience. The United States itself did not emerge fully-grown once independence was declared in 1776. The same careful construction of democratic values consistent with local culture in Iraq will probably take generations.

The straight line borders of the Middle East stand as a witness to the failure of nation-building in the Middle East. There is no historical evidence that current American attempts to re-draw them or to democratize the Middle East will work. Hopefully President Bush will recall his own words: “If we don’t stop extending our troops all around the world and nation-building missions, then we’re going to have a serious problem coming down the road.” It’s here.

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