

# “The War That Ended Peace”. How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs

## A Book Review

By [Jim Miles](#)

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Region: [Europe](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#),  
[USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

*Having just read [The War That Ended Peace](#) the title *How the West Stole Democracy From the Arabs* appeared as an intriguing and fortuitous follow up. Its subtitle describes its more narrow focus: *The Syrian-Arab Congress of 1920 and the Destruction of Its Historical Liberal-Islamic Alliance*. Essentially it is the story of how the imperial powers of Britain and France overcame the U.S.’ Wilsonian ideals being used as a formulation for the League of Nations. The colonialism of the prewar era resettled itself into the Middle East after the destruction of the Ottoman empire, wishing to retain imperial glory and control of the newly ‘free’ Arab sectors of the Ottoman empire and in this region, its relatively new found wealth of oil.*

Within this narrow slice of history many events are involved. The events of World War I and the many different promises made by different people to different entities, the most important ones made in secret (Sykes-Picot agreement) while others floated freely in public (the Balfour letter). For the Arabs the big hopes, the large promises, were those of the British to have their own independent state but more importantly the ideals of Woodrow Wilson, in particular his calling for national populations to have their own voice in determining their governance. It was not to be, as western imperial colonial desires managed to deter any independence for Arab countries. Many factors were involved, but as indicated the largest was the imperial desires of the European colonialists, and for Syria in particular, France takes the largest responsibility.

After the war, after the eviction of Ottoman forces, various Arab representatives established their own commissions and in short order made a remarkable achievement – a declaration of independence and a constitution that could serve as a guide even to contemporary western governments. Other forces prevailed, mostly political, some military.

The British remained in occupation of the southern portion of Ottoman Syria, the lands of Palestine, and argued for a mandate ostensibly until the Palestinians could govern themselves, more realistically to allow for the promised Jewish homeland and to secure access to oil, Iran, and India. The French had few forces in the region but quickly established their presence on the promise of the Sykes-Picot agreement.

One of the principal characters for the French was one Robert de Caix, a “powerful leader of the colonial lobby” who “considered Wilsonianism an epidemic.” Using the traditional language of colonialism he would, “by mobilizing the colonialist networks that he had cultivated for twenty years...single handedly reverse French diplomacy in the Middle East....He undermined any basis for Arab liberal democracy to flourish again.” His use of

Article 22 of the new League of Nations came “as an imposition, by force, of direct French rule.”

That does not let anyone else off lightly, as many other players did not want an independent Arab government anywhere in the Middle East (or the whole of the former Ottoman empire). The U.S. stepped aside, leaving behind broken ideals, ironically rejecting the Versailles Peace Treaty “because they feared it would enable colonial expansion.” The remaining Turkish rump state still had a large army and was able to secure for itself a much better outcome as it fought French forces to a standstill along its southern border and imposed its own ethnic cleansing on different groups within what was to become Turkey.

The Arab ideals centered on a secular state, “that would separate religion from state. They believed that Islam did not support unbridled kingship but rather required its leaders to consult the people and that legislatures exercising the authority of popular sovereignty could block corruptible monarchs from selling out their countries to Europeans, as the Iranian Shah and the Egyptian khedive had done,” and further that “liberal constitutionalism was an authentic expression of Islamic values, not a Western corruption.” Reading through Thompson’s work provides the justification that not only did they have the ideals, but contrary to colonial mythologies of Britain and France, they did have the ability to organize and establish such a government.

The western liberals lost out to their colonialist rivals and that makes up much of the story of this lost – stolen – Arab opportunity. The defeat was both military and political put also very slimly on the Arab leadership as it “had no time to gain the experience needed to combat the wily methods of Europe’s imperial diplomats,” nor it should be added, the overwhelming firepower of their military, for which it had no time to arm itself and indeed faced international embargoes on military supplies.

With its defeat the movement split and eventually disappeared. “France’s repressive apparatus and patronage of anti-democratic elite raised new barriers to democratic politics....the seeds of dictatorship and antiliberal Islamism sprouted.”

The book is well written, well referenced, and includes the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, but a broader historical background will help the reader understand the larger context of these events. The broader context is well presented in *The War That Ended Peace* (above) or *Paris 1919 – Six Months That Changed the World* (Margaret MacMillan, Random House, 2003). The latter enlarges on the Versailles Peace treaty discussions covering similar topics more narrowly focussed on in Elizabeth Thompson’s excellent work. Two other strong works on the era are by Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (Presidio Press, 2004) and *The Proud Tower* (Random House/Ballantine Books, 1996).

Elizabeth Thompson creates a readily accessible book detailing the many facets of this topic, facets of larger empires with larger goals. It is in essence the foundational period for our contemporary problems in the region and thus our current situation cannot truly be understood without reading works such as *How the West Stole Democracy From the Arabs*.

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*Jim Miles is a frequent contributor to Global Research.*

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