

THE POLICIES OF THE PERSIAN, OTTOMAN, AND RUSSIAN EMPIRES IN THE MIDDLE EAST REGION

Abstract

The policies of the Persian, Ottoman, and Russian empires in the Middle East were strategically, militarily, economically and culturally aimed at expanding control and influence over the region, significantly shaping the regional power distribution and the formation of the modern political landscape of the Middle East. The Persian Empire was distinguished by its developed administrative system, religious tolerance and promotion of trade. The article pays special attention to the Persian-Ottoman wars of the 16th and 17th centuries, which had a significant impact on the regional balance of power. The discussion of the Ottoman Empire includes its „golden age,“ Suleiman I's campaigns in Iran, conquests in Africa, and the empire's eventual decline. Particular focus is placed on the centuries-long rivalry with Russia, which defined the foreign policy and regional strategy of both empires. Regarding the Russian Empire, the work examines its efforts to control the straits, expand influence in the Caucasus and Iran, and participate in the „Great Game“ with Britain. The concluding section shows that these three empires collectively shaped the geopolitical map of the Middle East, established the foundations of the modern state system, and left a historical legacy whose influence is still evident today in regional conflicts and power relations.

Key words: Empire, Middle East, Politics, Balance of Power, Expansion

Persian Empire

The Persian Empire, which reached the peak of its power during the rule of the Achaemenid dynasty (558-330 BC), was the first so-called global empire that united vast territories of the Middle East under one political system. Established by Cyrus the Great and strengthened by Darius I, the empire was not merely a project of military expansion; it was also based on an efficient administrative system, religious tolerance, and a policy of coexistence among diverse ethnic groups. Analyzing all these aspects allows us to understand how Persia managed to secure long-lasting influence in the region and contributed significantly to the historical dynamics of the Middle East (Stolper 2011).

Political Governance Structure and Administration

The policy of the Persian Empire in the Middle East was primarily based on a complex administrative system that effectively governed a multiethnic population. The empire was divided into satrapies, or provinces, each

governed by a satrap. Each satrapy retained a certain degree of internal autonomy but was subordinate to the central authority and paid tribute to the king's court. The reforms of Darius I brought stability to this system: he established an imperial bureaucracy, introduced a standardized taxation system, and improved communication routes, including the „Royal Road,“ which connected Ephesus and Susa (Stolper 2011). This road was important not only for military logistics but also facilitated political control and economic integration. Additionally, Darius made significant contributions to the legal system, modeling it after The Code of Hammurabi. The Code of Hammurabi, created in Babylon in the 18th century BC, consisted of 282 laws.

Policy of Tolerance Toward Conquered Peoples

Persian policy in the Middle East was not limited to administrative or military approaches; it was also based on the principles of cultural and religious tolerance. The conquest of Babylon by Cyrus the Great in 539 BC is often regarded as a remarkable example of tolerant governance. After capturing Babylon, Cyrus did not plunder the city; on the contrary, he acknowledged the importance of local deities and allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem - an event that played a decisive role in their historical destiny (Stolper 2011). Such a policy enhanced Persian legitimacy in the conquered regions. The empire did not attempt cultural assimilation but instead allowed local populations to preserve their religious and socio-cultural identities, which served as an effective mechanism for maintaining stability.

Regional Military Strategy and the Dynamics of Wars

Persia's policy in the Middle East involved active military engagement. The Achaemenid dynasty regularly conducted military campaigns in Egypt, Syria, the Levant, and Asia Minor. For example, during the reign of Darius I, Persia successfully conquered Egypt and integrated it into the imperial system. At the same time, frequent uprisings in Babylon demonstrated that maintaining control required the regular use of force. The Persian army was an ethnically diverse force, composed of Medes, Babylonians, Egyptians, and other peoples. This diversity created a kind of “multiethnic imperial identity,“ through which the Persians were able to mobilize extensive military resources and preserve the stability of the empire (Stolper 2011).

Economic and Transport-Communications Policy

The Persian Empire strengthened the network of trade routes across the region and promoted economic integration. The „Royal Road“ was not only a key element of politics and military strategy but also an essential part of the economic system. The flexible economic policy of the satrapies was accompanied by a unified monetary system - the daric (gold coin) introduced by Darius I - which significantly contributed to the strengthening of trade and financial stability within the empire (Stolper 2011).

Particularly noteworthy were the relations between the Greek city-states and Persia, especially in the Asia Minor region, where political interests developed alongside economic involvement. This escalation ultimately culminated in the Greco-Persian Wars.

Cultural Policy and Historical Legacy

Persia played a significant role in shaping the cultural identity of the Middle East. Persian architecture, literature, and the influence of Zoroastrianism were reflected in local cultures throughout the region. However, Persian cultural policy was not oppressive; rather, it was based on a systematic policy of cooperation that allowed for the natural exchange of civilizations. This was clearly evident in the discussion of Persia's tolerant governance. Persian cultural and political legacy endured even after the conquests of Alexander the Great. The Hellenistic empires adopted many Persian practices - such as the satrapal system of governance, bureaucratic structures, and royal ideology - which clearly demonstrated the enduring strength of Persian cultural influence.

Persian Empires

As time passed, circumstances and conditions changed, yet the role of the Persian Empire in the Middle East remained exceptionally significant. We have already examined the Achaemenid Empire, its policies, and its state vision, but the history of the Persian empires is far more extensive and complex. The next stage was marked by the Sassanian Empire, followed by the Safavid, Afsharid, and Qajar empires. Although these empires eventually declined and were replaced, Persian political traditions succeeded in transforming the region and shaping the political culture of the Middle East for many centuries.

The legacy of the Persian empires is still evident today in the linguistic, cultural, and governmental structures of the region. The policy of the Persian Empire in the Middle East was multifaceted and far-reaching - combining military strength, diplomacy, cultural influence, and effective governance.

The Persian-Ottoman Rivalry in the Middle East

We have already reviewed the general policy of the Persian Empire in the Middle East and emphasized its profound influence; however, it is impossible to discuss the empire without addressing specific and memorable historical events. Therefore, we now turn to the Persian-Ottoman rivalry in the region.

The confrontation between Persia and the Ottoman Empire in the 16th-17th centuries was one of the main factors shaping the political balance of the Middle East. The conflict primarily reflected the clash of territorial, religious, and geopolitical interests between two powerful empires. The Ottoman Empire was founded on Sunni Islam, while Persia represented a Shiite state, which gave the rivalry a strong religious dimension (Savory 1980).

The main area of confrontation included Iraq, Syria, the shores of Kars, and the territories of Armenia and Georgia - regions of great strategic importance both for trade routes and military advantage. The most significant and decisive conflict was the Battle of Chaldiran (1514) between the Ottomans and Safavid Iran, during which the Ottomans defeated Shah Ismail I and occupied the eastern part of Anatolia (Savory 1980).

Despite treaties and established borders, the underlying rivalry remained unresolved, as both sides continued to pursue their competing ambitions. This confrontation influenced not only the regional distribution of power but also the dynamics of Shiite-Sunni relations within the Islamic world. Ultimately, the Persian-Ottoman conflict contributed to the political diversity and chronic instability of the region - a legacy whose resonance can still be observed in the contemporary realities of the Middle East.

Ottoman Empire

The Ottoman Empire was one of the most powerful, multiethnic, and multireligious empires in world history, regarded as a leading power on the international stage for nearly six centuries (1299-1922). Its influence extended from Southeastern Europe to North Africa and the Middle East, granting it immense significance not only in regional but also in global political affairs. The empire's political, military, economic, and religious systems enabled it to successfully maintain control over diverse territories and cultures (Barkey 2008).

The rise and expansion of the Ottoman Empire were closely linked to the geopolitical developments of the Middle East. This region, historically known as the cradle of civilizations, was strategically important both militarily and economically. The Ottomans' desire to establish control over the holy Islamic cities (Mecca and Medina), to secure trade routes, and to counterbalance the influence of Shiite Persia shaped a significant part of the empire's foreign and domestic policy.

An empire that spanned three continents

The Ottoman Empire reached the peak of its power during the 16th and 17th centuries. This period of the empire is known as the "Golden Age of the Ottomans." During this time, the empire significantly expanded territorially, strengthened its military, political, and economic power, and transformed into the largest regional empire whose influence extended not only over the Middle East but also South-eastern Europe and North Africa.

The most famous and influential ruler of the Ottoman Empire was Sultan Suleiman I the Magnificent (reign: 1520-1566). Under his rule, the empire made significant advances in political, military, and cultural spheres. Suleiman led Ottoman military campaigns in Central Europe and the Middle East, which later greatly expanded the empire's borders (Faroqhi 2000). At that time, the Ottomans controlled important territories such as the Balkans, Asia Minor, much of the Middle East, Egypt, and North Africa.

During this period, the Ottoman army was considered one of the most advanced. Its main military force, the Janissaries, was known for its high professionalism and combat skills, including the use of Turkish artillery units and firearms (Barkey 2008). The Ottoman Empire was one of the first empires to equip its army with modern technology, giving it a significant advantage in battles.

Economically, the empire served as a crucial trade hub between Europe and Asia. It controlled major trade and customs routes that transported grains, spices, silk, and other valuable goods. Ottoman influence contributed to the economic stability and development of the Balkans and the Middle East region.

During the "Golden Age," the Ottoman Empire excelled in architecture, art, and literature. In the center of Constantinople (Istanbul), Suleiman's Mosque was built, which is still recognized as a masterpiece of Muslim architecture.

The end of the Ottoman "Golden Age" is associated with the mid-17th century when the empire's military and administrative systems gradually weakened. Nevertheless, the achievements of this era significantly shaped the subsequent history of the Ottoman Empire and its role in the Middle East region.

The Ottoman Empire and the Middle East

The Ottoman Empire's policy in the Middle East was multifaceted and strategic. The empire's goal was to strengthen political, military, and economic control over the region, securing its central position within the Islamic world. From the 16th century onward, the Ottomans conquered Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Iraq, and parts of the Arabian Peninsula. The conquest of these territories allowed the Ottoman Empire to establish complete political and economic dominance in the region, which meant controlling key trade routes in the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf (Faroqhi 2000).

The Ottoman policy in the region was based not only on military power but also on an administrative system that integrated local elites and applied Islamic law. The empire restored political stability to lands that had previously experienced prolonged turmoil. At the same time, Ottoman rule promoted the spread of Islamic culture, architecture, and education.

However, over time, the central authority of the Ottoman Empire gradually weakened. Bureaucratic crises and economic difficulties within the administrative system granted local rulers greater autonomy, leading to a loss of central control. Alongside this process, from the 19th century onwards, the political and economic influence of leading European powers - particularly Britain and France - increased significantly in the Middle East. Their interests clashed with Ottoman influence in the region, further exacerbating internal crises and political instability within the empire. As a result, this confrontation became one of the decisive reasons for the gradual collapse of the empire and the final consolidation of European colonial influence.

Suleiman the First's Campaigns in Persia

Suleiman I the Magnificent, as previously noted, actively expanded the empire's borders during his reign, with particular importance given to his campaigns against Persia. Persia, then ruled by the Safavid dynasty, was the Ottoman Empire's main rival in the Middle East, especially regarding religious and territorial interests. Suleiman's campaigns against Persia represent a significant episode in the rivalry between the two empires, which lasted throughout the 16th century.

In 1526, Suleiman launched a wide-ranging military campaign toward Persia, aiming to conquer Safavid territories and expand Ottoman influence. In 1534, Suleiman successfully captured much of the western provinces of Arabia and Persia, including Mesopotamia and key strategic cities (Savory 1980). This campaign was especially important as the Ottomans managed to extend their control over the Tigris and Euphrates river basins, facilitating dominance over vital trade routes.

Suleiman's campaign in Iran was marked not only by military success but also by strategic and religious significance. As a center of Sunni Islam, the Ottoman Empire opposed the Safavid dynasty, which represented the core of Shiite Islam, not only territorially but also religiously. In this conflict, Suleiman sought to contain Iranian Shiite influence and expand Sunni dominance in the Middle East (Savory 1980).

In addition to military campaigns, Suleiman employed diplomatic and administrative methods to govern the conquered territories. As a result of his campaigns, the Ottomans solidified their position in Mesopotamia and western Persia, which had a considerable impact on shaping regional geopolitics.

Suleiman's campaigns in Persia are regarded as one of the Ottoman Empire's most extensive military operations of strength and expansion, significantly contributing to the consolidation and enlargement of Ottoman influence on the political map of the Middle East.

The Russo-Ottoman Conflict

The Russo-Ottoman conflict was one of the longest-lasting confrontations in the history of Europe and the Middle East, significantly shaping the regional and global balance of power. This rivalry was based on territorial, religious, and geopolitical disagreements.

The Russian and Ottoman empires clashed multiple times, especially during the 18th and 19th centuries. The Ottoman Empire, already in decline, was a multiethnic and multireligious empire stretching from Southeastern Europe to the Middle East and North Africa. Russia, as an imperialist state, sought to expand its influence, particularly in regions populated by Orthodox Slavs and around the Black Sea basin. The main cause of the conflict was territorial ambitions, especially in the Black Sea and Caucasus regions. Russia aimed to control the southern shores of the Black Sea and the strategic straits (Bosporus and Dardanelles) to gain unrestricted access to the Mediterranean Sea and strengthen its economic and military position (Seton-Watson 1967).

Additionally, Russia sought to protect Orthodox Christians within the Ottoman Empire, where they often faced discrimination. This factor reinforced Russia's policy as a protector of Orthodox communities, especially in the Balkans.

The Russo-Ottoman confrontation consistently invited the involvement of major European powers (Seton-Watson 1967). Britain and Austria-Hungary, concerned about Russia's growing influence in the Caucasus and Balkans, sought to maintain the balance of power in the region. Their involvement clearly influenced the eventual outcomes of the conflict.

The Russo-Ottoman rivalry profoundly shaped the geopolitical development of the Middle East during the 18th and 19th centuries. Although the main epicenters of conflict were the Caucasus and the Balkans, its direct consequences and global reverberations significantly impacted the Middle East, both structurally and politically.

First, the conflict weakened Ottoman rule in the region. The Ottomans, who had controlled much of the Middle East for centuries, were forced to focus on the northern front against Russia, resulting in a diminished influence over Arab provinces, including Syria and Mesopotamia. This weakening of central authority became the foundation for growing autonomy movements among Arab elites by the late 19th century.

On the other hand, Russia's expansion in the South Caucasus gave it direct geographical access to Iran and the Levant. This region - Transcaucasia, Iran, and northern Mesopotamia - became a significant area for Russian diplomatic and commercial activity. As a result, Russia's diplomatic influence increased in Syria, Lebanon, and the Islamic world, which were in the process of distancing themselves from Ottoman control.

Furthermore, the Russo-Ottoman rivalry reflected the political narrative of confrontation between Orthodoxy and Islam, which had real effects on ethnic and religious tensions among groups in the region.

In conclusion, the Russo-Ottoman confrontation accelerated the process of imperial order breakdown in the region and contributed to the formation of the political structure of the Middle East in the early 20th century.

Russian Empire

The Russian Empire's policy in the Middle East was long-term and purposeful. From the 18th and 19th centuries, the empire began active involvement in the political sphere of the Middle East, aiming both territorial expansion and strengthening strategic influence south of the Black Sea, in the Caucasus, and toward Persia. This policy was based on several central aspects: the struggle for control over the straits, confrontation with the Ottoman Empire, expansion toward Iran, and competition with Britain in the so-called "The Great Game."

The Strategic Importance of the Straits in Russian Empire's Policy

The Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, known as the “Gates of the Black Sea”, were one of the main focal points of the Russian Empire’s foreign policy. These straits connect the Black Sea with the Mediterranean Sea, and controlling them meant opening international trade routes and strengthening military influence toward the south for Russia (Seton-Watson 1967). Russia’s economic interest in these straits developed as early as the 18th century. Agriculture along the Black Sea coast, especially grain production, required maritime export to European markets. Through these straits, Russia conducted exports to the Mediterranean and Western Europe. Any restrictions imposed by the Ottomans or other powers directly caused economic harm to Russia.

Besides economic interests, the straits had great military and strategic importance. The Russian fleet’s access to the world’s oceans had to be secured through these passages. A geographically partially isolated empire, Russia sought to seize these “choke points.” This is clearly demonstrated by the numerous Russo-Ottoman wars and diplomatic pressures throughout the 19th century.

Russia sought international guarantees over the straits or, if necessary, direct control. In this context, the 1833 Treaty of Hünkâr İskelesi between Russia and the Ottoman Empire must be considered (Seton-Watson 1967), which effectively granted Russia a monopoly over the straits. This provoked strong protests from Western powers.

Thus, it is evident that the straits formed the core of Russia’s southward strategy, where economic interests, military goals, and geopolitical ambitions were unified.

Russian Expansion in the South Caucasus and Iran – Impact on the Middle East Region

In the 19th century, the Russian Empire became very active southward, in the Caucasus and Iran, causing decisive geopolitical changes for the Middle East. This expansion was not driven solely by territorial ambitions but was based on strategic goals: gaining influence in the Middle East, establishing positional advantages against the Ottoman Empire and Britain, and strengthening its role in “The Great Game” (Hopkirk 1990).

Russian expansion in the South Caucasus began in the late 18th century and intensified especially in the early 19th century. The formal annexation of Georgian kingdoms - Kartli, Kakheti, Imereti, and others - allowed Russia to move southward and exert military-diplomatic pressure on both the Ottoman Empire and Iran. The annexation of the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti in 1801 marked Russia’s direct border with Iran, which quickly led to Russo-Iranian wars. Russia defeated Iran in the wars of 1804-1813 and 1826-1828. As a result, two critical treaties - the Treaty of Gulistan (1813) and the Treaty of Turkmenchay (1828) - were signed. Through these treaties, Russia annexed the northern parts of modern Azerbaijan, as well as Erivan (Yerevan) and Nakhchivan, which completely shifted the regional balance of power.

These wars not only revealed Iran’s military weakness but also demonstrated that Russia had become a key actor in the Middle East. For Iran, these territorial losses meant a decline in imperial self-awareness and a blow to national prestige. Russia established a significant military and administrative infrastructure in the region, ensuring its permanent presence in the South Caucasus and on the border of the Middle East.

Russian expansion toward Iran increased British fears, as it threatened the security of India. Consequently, British activity in Iran intensified, with London trying to limit Russia’s advance through Persian support and to strengthen its influence in the Persian Gulf and southern Iran. Thus began the so-called “The Great Game”, in which the Middle East became a strategic arena for the two empires, Russia and Britain.

Against this backdrop, Russia not only acquired territorial zones but also increased political ties with Azerbaijani and Armenian populations living in northern Iran, which facilitated its soft influence and cultural expansion. Russia's consolidation in the South Caucasus and northern Iran deepened instability across the entire region. It opposed both Ottoman interests (for example, regarding the Armenian issue) and Iran's internal balance. Russia actively began manipulating the balance between Shiite and Sunni groups and intensified the use of religious divisions for political purposes.

This expansion was also marked by the creation of a geographic, military, and cultural bridge between the Russian Empire and the Middle East region, which later laid the foundation for Russian political intervention in Syria and the Levant.

Conclusion

The policies of the Persian, Ottoman, and Russian empires in the Middle East significantly shaped the region's historical development, balance of power, and geopolitical configuration. Each of these empires, both competitors and seekers of influence, aimed to control strategic territories, secure access to trade routes, and establish regional dominance.

Thus, the policies and rivalries of these empires considerably accelerated the breakdown of the imperial order in the region and laid the foundation for the emergence of modern Middle Eastern states and their conflictual structures. Their legacy continues to be reflected in the complex reality of regional tensions and power dynamics today.

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