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THE CHALLENGES TO FRENCH COLONIAL RULE IN TUNISIA: REALPOLITIK IN THE MEDITERRANEAN*

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Abstract: *This research posits the dynamics behind impediments over the French colonial rule over Tunisia in the context of International Relations discipline. In doing so, anarchy notion will be beneficial for explaining the dynamics in the area; main assumptions of this research regard actors that pursues their self-interests in order to maintain their security, and gain power under the anarchic structure. This structure "acts as a constraining and disposing force" in the relations among states. On the other hand, under these circumstances, competition or rivalry among states is inevitable. The process of the collapsing Pax Ottomana replaced hierarchy with anarchy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in the course of time, which resulted in the arising "Eastern Question" and power competition among European powers in the area. Under French rule, the Tunisian case constituted power rivalry between France, Italy, and British Empire. While their main interests differed in the area, those interests also were conflicting in the time-space bound. The French Empire sought to establish Francophone Empire in Maghreb; on the other hand, Britain's core interests originated from maintaining the strategic holds and preserving her global status via Mediterranean access. For Italy, which had already prominent settler colonies in Tunisia, it was essential to participate in the colonial race. Indeed, policies in Tunisia were geographically enabling to increase power roles in the Mediterranean, where Britain and*

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especially Italy prevented France from gaining dominant power in the area by benefiting from their subjects there. Especially prominent existence of the Italian settlers and acknowledgment of their national identity by France in 1896 brought forth more challenges to French rule in which was soon troubled by Tunisian nationalism as well.

Keywords: *Tunisia, Realpolitik, French Colonial Rule, Decline of Pax Ottomana, Mediterranean*

TUNUS'TAKİ FRANSIZ SÖMÜRGEÇİ YÖNETİMİN KARŞILAŞTIĞI ZORLUKLAR: AKDENİZ'DEKİ REELPOLİTİK

Öz: *Bu araştırma, Tunus üzerindeki Fransız sömürge yönetimin karşılaştığı engellerin ardındaki dinamikleri Uluslararası İlişkiler disiplini bağlamında ortaya koymaktadır. Bu süreçte, bölgedeki dinamikleri açıklamak için anarşi kavramı, yararlı olacaktır; bu araştırmanın temel varsayımları, aktörlerin, anarşik yapı altında güvenliklerini sürdürebilmek ve güç kazanmak için kendi çıkarlarını gözeten oyuncular olduklarıdır. Bahis konusu yapı, devletler arasındaki ilişkilerde “kısıtlayıcı ve kontrol altında tutan bir güç işlevi görmektedir”. Diğer yandan, böylesi koşullar altında, devletler arasında rekabet veya çekişme kaçınılmazdır. Osmanlı Barışının yıkılma süreciyle beraber, zaman içinde Orta Doğu ve Kuzey Afrika (ODKA) bölgesinde hiyerarşinin yerini anarşi almış, “Doğu Sorunu”nun ortaya çıkması ve Avrupalı kuvvetlerin bölge içinde güç rekabetine girmeleri ile sonuçlanmıştır. Fransız yönetimi altındaki Tunus örneği, Fransa, İtalya ile İngiliz İmparatorluğu arasında bir güç rekabeti yaratmıştır. Bölgedeki temel çıkarları farklılık gösterirken, söz konusu çıkarlar zaman-mekân olarak da çakışmıştır. Fransız İmparatorluğu Mağrip’te bir Frankofon İmparatorluğu kurmaya çalışmış; diğer yandan, İngiltere’nin temel çıkarları, Akdeniz’e erişim yoluyla stratejik kalelerini korumak ve küresel statüsünü sürdürmek şeklinde ortaya çıkmıştır. Tunus’ta zaten önemli yerleşim kolonileri olan İtalya için sömürge yarışına katılmak gerekliydi. Nitekim Tunus’a ilişkin politikalar, coğrafi olarak Britanya ve özellikle İtalya’nın buradaki tebaalarından yararlanarak, Akdeniz’de güç olma rollerini artırmaya olanak sağlamış, Fransa’nın bölgede egemen güç konumu elde etmesini engellemiştir. Özellikle bölgedeki İtalyan yerleşimcilerin göze çarpan varlığı ve 1896 yılında Fransa tarafından ulusal kimliklerinin kabulü, çok geçmeden Tunus milliyetçiliği tarafından da rahatsız edilen Fransız yönetimi için daha fazla meydan okumalara yol açmıştır.*

Anahtar kelimeler: *Tunus, Reel politik, Fransız Sömürge Yönetimi, Osmanlı Barışının Çöküşü, Akdeniz*

Introduction

Today, French traces can be seen clearly in Tunisia. For example, Tunisian Arabic appears as a dialect blended with French to some degree. In fact, *dégage* (get out), one of the slogans against former president Zeynel Abidin Bin Ali in 2011 during the Arab Spring, was also in French. Such and many French traces in Tunisia are the outcome of a process that started with the occupation of Tunisia by France in 1881. On April 24, 1881, when the French army occupied Tunisia, using the attacks carried out by the Khmir tribe on the Tunisian-Algerian border as an excuse. After the occupation, in May 1881, the Bardo Treaty was signed with Tunis Bey. According to this agreement, Tunis Bey had full control over the Muslim and Jewish population in the country, but France assumed the protection of the European population. As a matter of fact, after the Crimean War (1856), France had already gained the right to protect the Christian population over the Ottoman Empire. Also, in accordance with the La Marsa Convention (1883), Tunisia was independent in domestic affairs, but it was bound to France in foreign affairs and had been under the auspices of France. However, with the La Marsa Convention, France also had the right to reform Tunisia “administratively, judicially, and financially if it deemed necessary” which provided a basis for weakening the autonomy of the Bey.¹ The domestic autonomy of the country finally recognized by France in 1955, one year before the independence.² If it is remembered that Algeria was one of the main factors in the policies on North Africa followed by France in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the occupation of Tunisia can be understood more easily. As a matter of fact, Tunisia is located right next to Algeria and draws attention with its proximity to the European continent and could also serve as a buffer zone in North Africa. Considering the relations among Italy, Britain, and France on North Africa in the anarchic structure, Tunisia’s status had not been only determined by one power. France had been facing challenges to realize its interests in the context of its colonial rule in Tunisia; to this extent, rivalry and demographic challenges played a role during the French colonization process in Tunisia.

What were the challenges for Paris during the colonization of Tunisia? In order to answer this question, the research is comprising of three sections:

1 Leila El Houssi, “The History and Evolution of Independence Movements in Tunisia”. *Oriente Moderno* 97, No.1 (2017): 67-88.

2 Ibid.

1. The theoretical framework attaches importance to power competition under the region's anarchic structure.
2. The general power competition in the Mediterranean (pre-WWI) between France, Italy, and Britain will be observed in the context of Realpolitik in the anarchy in which arose by the weakening of the Ottoman Empire.
3. The status of Tunisia under that rivalry will be examined while the colonization attempts and the challenges of that process also will be argued.

Anarchy Regarding Ottoman Decline?

In the structure of “the absence of an ultimate political authority”; states are inclined to cooperate or compete to attain their goals.³ Nevertheless, “the underlying tragedy of world politics” signifies that the activities of the states in order to gain power, secure themselves or pursue their self-interests incline to harm other states' interests in the anarchic structure; furthermore, in this structure, alliances formed to ensure the participants' unity and interests are also fragile.⁴ The system entails in self-help principle that the states are distinguished by their power capabilities, and self-regards (egoism) themselves in the meantime power competition has been dominant element between those units in the anarchy; however only if the survival of the units acquired, they maintain their goals of struggling for power and their profits.⁵ In this sense, the self-help principle, which is the governing principle of anarchy (that primarily orients states to be concerned with the relative power alterations), prioritizes power considerations for not being a relatively weak power on the international stage; indeed, these considerations also results in the occurrence of balancing behavior.⁶

3 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis*. 96-206. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

4 Fred H. Lawson, “International Relations Theory and the Middle East” in *International Relations of the Middle East*, edited by Louise Fawcett, 19-36. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

5 Kenneth N. Waltz, “Reflections on Theory of International Politics: A Response to My Critics” in *Neorealism and Its Critics*, edited by Robert O. Keohane, 322-346. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

6 Daniel H. Nexon, “Review: The Balance of Power in the Balance”. *World Politics* 61, No. 2 (Apr., 2009):330-359.

Anarchy does not refer to chaos or disorder, but the ordering principle of international politics; order is given assumption in this sense but not in a hierarchical form established on “centralized authority or ultimate arbiter” as in domestic politics.⁷ Anarchy indicates the decentralization in the interactions among multiple separable units and the absence of central authority.⁸ According to Hoffman, the order in the world system carries very different characteristics from the domestic order, in which social collectivities exist, due to the absence of high-powered common norms and dominant power above all actors, which defines the anarchy in IR.⁹ In this “jungle”, states are inclined to bandwagon or balance against the rival states in order to maintain their security and interests. The balancing behavior of the states is linked to their power capabilities, the relative distribution of power, geographic proximity, and perceived intentions.¹⁰

These assumptions above indicated in this research are mainly shared by the Realist approach¹¹ in the IR. However, Realism (and its *neo* variant) is not able to find the proper ground entirely in the 19th century due to its ontological base regarding the order between modern states behaving as unitary actors rather than (roughly) composite collectivities.¹² Nonetheless, the second half of the 19th century demonstrates itself as a transitional period between empires and modern nation-states that were

7 John J. Mearsheimer, “Structural Realism” in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, edited by Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith, 77-93. 3rd Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

8 Nuri Yurdusev, *International Relations and the Philosophy of History: A Civilizational Approach*. 102-111. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

9 Stanley Hoffmann, *Janus and Minerva: Essays in the Theory and Practice of International Politics*. 85-86. Colorado: Westview Press, 1987.

10 Although Walt argues the balance of power in terms of “threat”, the term “threat” is more related to *Machtpolitik*, on the other hand, this research considers *Realpolitik* in the case of balancing behavior regarding interests. It can be assumed that the sentence above is also valid for maintaining interests: Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*. 1-16. New York: Cornell University Press, 1987.

11 According to realism, the pursuit of self-interest rather than any moral obligation has been instrumental in achieving any goal for the states: Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations*. 23-26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.; Inter-state interactions and actions occur at the unit level; however, “the structure of a system acts as a constraining and disposing force” that also determines the outcome of actions and interactions, and the behavior of rational units to maintain their self-interests: Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*. 66-93. Philippines: Addison-Wesley, 1979.; Structural realism assumes that the power rivalry is derived from the wealth and security concerns in the self-help system in which policies and activities of the states are limited or enabled by anarchy: Kenneth N. Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War.” *International Security* 25, no. 1 (Summer 2000): 5–41. doi:10.1162/016228800560372.

12 Christopher Pierson, *The Modern State*, 2nd Edition. London: Routledge, 1996. pp. 127-154.

institutionalized and formed in the process of time historically.¹³ Since the late 18th century the system had been changing due to the centralizing political authority and power inside of the distinct borders unique to each particular state based on “nations” instead of dynasties exercising the political control mechanisms outside of their territories, and emerging characteristics of a plurality of egoistic uniform states rather than composite *Respublica Christiana* in Europe.¹⁴

This research relates the concept of anarchy to regions rather than to the world system; the anarchy in the territories that were dissolving from the Pax Ottomana constitutes the ontological ground. Nevertheless, nationalism waves, the decline in the coercive instruments as well as hard power in comparison with European powers, and lacking consent over the local rulers in the course of time entailed the dissolving Ottoman Empire while arising the Eastern Question. Those determinants had been debilitating the Ottoman reign and dominance, resulting in losing the region’s hierarchical structure. In fact, the dissolution of the hierarchical structure was replaced by anarchy which would be a proper playground for the European powers.

The emergence of the French Revolution (1789) and the Industrial Revolution (19th Century) in England led European powers to surpass the Ottoman Empire’s power and capabilities in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region as well as to gain influence in this region.¹⁵ As soon as Eastern Question, which demonstrates the unequal engagement, arose, the MENA region has challenged the Great Power politics for 200 years; Western influence penetrated Middle Eastern society, political structures, and diplomacy.¹⁶ The beginning of the

13 On the other hand, the 19th century also indicates a period of the expansion and rise of European empires, however, in the 20th century, the global spread of the nation-state became a new phenomenon: Andreas Wimmer, and Brian Min, “From Empire to Nation-State: Explaining Wars in the Modern World”, *American Sociological Review* 71, No. 6 (Dec., 2006): 867-897.

14 Wolfgang Reinhard, “Empires, Modern States, and Colonialism(s): A Preface” in *Shifting Forms of Continental Colonialism: Unfinished Struggles and Tensions*, edited by Dittmar Schorkowitz, John R. Chávez, and Ingo W. Schröder, 1-22. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.; Carl Schmitt, “Somut ve Çağa Bağlı bir Kavram Olarak Devlet” in *Devlet Kuramı*, edited by Cemal Bali Akal, 245-256. 4th Edition. Ankara: Dost Kitabevi, 2013.; F. H. Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace: Theory and Practice in the History of Relations Between States*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963. pp. 153-185.; Stephanie Marrone, “Whither the Nation State?”. *Origins* 1, No. 4 (November 1993): 17-22.

15 Roger Owen, *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*. 5-7. 3rd Edition. New York: Routledge, 2004.

16 L. Carl Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East*, 3-8. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.

Eastern Question went back to the 1774 Küçük Kaynarca (that signifies Russian reach to the Black Sea), and 1798 French invasion in Egypt (which feared Britain for her access to India and strategic routes); nevertheless, the prominent weakness of the Ottoman Empire brought for provincial challenges to İstanbul and led European powers to plan partition of the lands and their competition in that area resulted in contending claims; however, there had less risk of the occurrence of the use of force between European powers in the MENA region by comparison within Europe.¹⁷ While *Pax Ottomana* was collapsing, the MENA region's hierarchical structure under Ottoman suzerainty was replaced by anarchy in the area where the power vacuum occurred to be filled by European powers. That structural change paved the way for rivalry among Italy, Britain, and France in the Mediterranean. The catalyzer of the "Eastern Question" was to be events in the 1877- 1878 Russo-Turkish War, Treaty of San Stefano, and then the 1878 Congress of Berlin. After the harsh Ottoman defeat, Russia imposed a very oppressive treaty on Istanbul, which would enable Russia to be a dominant power in the European balance of power system; that prevented by the Congress of Berlin.¹⁸ On the other hand, 1878 was a significant watershed on European powers' behavior related to the Ottoman Empire, the inevitability of the collapse in *Pax Ottomana* was a prominent perception among great powers that resulted in adjusting their policies; for instance, supporters of Ottoman unity, Britain (in the same year settled in Cyprus) and Austria-Hungary (attempted to be more dominant in Bosnian affairs and annexed it in 1908) also changed their position to get a slice of the cake and fill the power vacuum created by collapsing of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁹ Nevertheless, preservation of the Ottoman integrity agreed upon by Britain, France, and Austria after the Paris Peace Treaty in 1856 against the probability of Russian access to the Mediterranean via the Straits (which was "the nightmare of British diplomacy since the 1780s" considering the preservation of her imperial gains) was relinquished by 1878.²⁰

17 Ibid. pp.22-41.

18 Fahir Armaoğlu, *19. Yüzyıl Siyasi Tarihi*. 732-746. İstanbul: Alkım, 1997.

19 Ibid. pp.749-752.

20 John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.; Halil İnalçık, *Devlet-i 'Aliyye, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu Üzerine Araştırmalar-IV, Ayanlar Tanzimat, Meşrutiyet*, 10th Edition. 272-293. İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2021.; The Eastern Question and the Paris Treaty of 1856. Pamphlets. Williams and Norgate, 1871. <https://jstor.org/stable/10.2307/60235878>.

Realpolitik in Mediterranean

In order to consider in detail, the power politics in Europe should be stressed in the *zeitgeist* of the period, which could be accounted as the Concert of Europe. The term refers to a period in the 19th century that had great implications for both world history and international relations. The *geist* of the Concert was based on “national self-restraint,” respect for European internal dynamics, and concerted action in the case of any activism or crisis that enabled the conference system in relations between European powers.²¹ “Concert diplomacy assigned itself the delicate task of restraining revisionist or aggressive states as well as of regulating European difficulties by peaceful means-replacing the confrontation and inherent brinkmanship of balance-of-power politics.”²² Nevertheless, the Concert had urged European powers to solve their territorial disputes through dialogue and a conference system concerning avoiding severe clashes in the continent (which was mainly ceased by the Crimean War in 1853-56, and Franco-Prussian War in 1870-71), and abstaining from redrawing new borders in Europe regarding the maintenance of the current balance of power.²³ The Concert was founded after the Napoleonic Wars by the Vienna Congress (1814-1815); on the other hand, the Italian and especially the German unification altered the dynamics of the balance in the continent; however, after those unification movements, the *geist* of the Concert was willing to preserve the new balance of power and adapt to the new emergent status quo; because tensions in Europe had directed to colonies, not in the continent until 1914 that enabled great powers to pursue their interests elsewhere.²⁴ Besides, the conferences organized in context with the Concert were often attended to the issues concerning the Eastern Question.²⁵ On the other hand, the second half of the 19th century still indicated itself as the era of imperial advances in the vast areas; still, the vastness of which enabled imperial powers to ease their disputes to settle through conference systems until all of the *terra incognita*'s spaces was fulfilled and discovered by imperial powers.²⁶

21 Richard B. Elrod, “The Concert of Europe: A Fresh Look at an International System”. *World Politics* 28, No. 2 (Jan., 1976): 159-174.

22 Ibid.

23 Owain Wright, “Concert of Europe” in *The Encyclopedia of Diplomacy*, edited by Gordon Martel, John Wiley & Sons, 2018. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781118885154.dipl0058> (accessed: September 02, 2021).

24 Oral Sander, *Siyasi Tarih: İlkçağlardan 1918'e*, 242-247. 22nd Edition. Ankara: İmge, 2011.; F. H. Hinsley, Ibid.

25 Carsten Holbraad, “The concert of Europe”. *Australian Outlook* 25, No.1 (1971): 29-44.

26 Rene Albrecht-Carrie, *The Concert of Europe*, 309-311. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1968.

Following the principles of the Concert, European powers averted from the use of force between each other in the continent as possible; nevertheless, that does not mean to abstain from the use of force over the other regions and autonomous lands under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire. Initial policy responses determined by the maintenance of the Concert, which was founded on shared values of prevention of the use of force in the European Continent in the context of the balance of power; hence the invasion of Tunisia did not lead to *Mactpolitik* in the continent among the parties possessing conflicting interests.²⁷ In the case of Tunisia, *Machtpolitik* (Power Politics) had not applied between France, Italy, and Britain, although other power measures rather than coercive force were highly utilized in order to gain influence in the country. That was also an output of the application of *Realpolitik* regarding the issues in Tunisia. Termed by Ludwig von Rochau (1853) and gained popularity by Otto von Bismarck in the 19th century; *Realpolitik* indicates the policy deriving from the calculations based on “the existing distribution of power within a state (*Herrschaft*); the socioeconomic structures of society; and the cultural and ideological setting of the time” while abstaining from unnecessary *Machtpolitik* among the states.²⁸ Kissinger defines *Realpolitik* as:

“Foreign policy based on calculations of power and the national interest... For the practice of *Realpolitik* avoids armament races and war only if the major players of an international system are free to adjust their relations in accordance with changing circumstances or are restrained by a system of values, or both.”²⁹

The term remarks on the “practical politicians” to constitute “realistic” political behaviors based on cost-benefit calculations as well as in proportion to their ability rather than “idealistic” and moral concerns or miscalculated adventuristic preference in order to form policy for the state’s actual needs.³⁰

27 Mary Dewhurst Lewis, *Divided Rule: Sovereignty and Empire in French Tunisia, 1881–1938*, 3-22. California: University of California Press, 2014.

28 John Bew, *Realpolitik: A History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

29 Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*. 137. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.

30 Charles S. Gochman, and Russell J. Leng, “*Realpolitik* and the Road to War: An Analysis of Attributes and Behavior”. *International Studies Quarterly* 27, No.1 (Mar., 1983): 97-120.; Henry C. Emery, “What is *Realpolitik*?”. *International Journal of Ethics* 25, No. 4 (Jul., 1915): 448-468.; Michael C. Williams, “Reason and *Realpolitik*: Kant’s “Critique of International Politics””, *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique* 25, No. 1 (Mar., 1992): 99-119.

Calculated political behavior based on the interests in the expansion through the Mediterranean in context of occurring dynamics was not a new phenomenon for the European powers. In addition to the regulations for the protection of European trade routes by naval force against barbary pirate activities in Mediterranean and the developments in the increasing European commerce mobility in which had been connecting Europe to the Maghreb, leading to the acquisition of further economic and legal concessions and privileges from the local elites in the Maghreb since 18th century; the scramble for North Africa mostly coincided with the decline of Ottoman power against Europeans and local rulers in the region in 19th century.³¹ As a matter of fact, the Lepanto (İnebahtı) War in 1570 already symbolized the ongoing decline of Ottoman naval power -which also resulted in unstringing İstanbul's reign over the Maghreb- in comparison with its rising European counterparts in the Mediterranean.³² In addition to this phenomenon, by the 19th century, the French and British forces not only surpassed the Ottoman naval power in the area, but they also managed to subdue barbary pirates who had held the commerce routes in the sea.³³

Initial French expedition for imperial rule attempt occurred in Egypt (1798-1801) by Napoleon; this expedition sparked the scramble for the Mediterranean followed by North Africa between Britain and France; after this expedition mentioned above, London colonized Malta (1802) and established direct or indirect rule over the most of the Eastern Mediterranean; while France concentrated mostly on North Africa.³⁴ Then other European powers engaged in North Africa, for Spain, Morocco attached importance to her domain, while for Italy it was firstly Tunisia and then Tripolitania and Cyrenaica; even these two states developed similar conceptions as "mare nostrum".³⁵

As soon as Italian unification (*Risorgimento*), which ended in 1870-1871, ensured Italy's survival by maintaining its territorial control,

31 Ian Coller, "Barbary and Revolution: France and North Africa, 1789– 1798" in *French Mediterranean Transnational and Imperial Histories*, edited by Patricia M. E. Lorcin and Todd Shepard, 52-75. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016.

32 Trandafir G. Djuvara, *Türk İmparatorluğunun Paylaşılması Hakkında Yüz Proje (1281-1913)*. 419-421. Translated from French into Turkish by Pulat Tacar, 4th Edition. İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2020.

33 Joseph S. Roucek, "The Geopolitics of the Mediterranean, II", *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 13, No. 1 (Oct., 1953): 71-86.

34 Manuel Borutta & Sakis Gekas, "A Colonial Sea: the Mediterranean, 1798–1956". *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 19, No.1 (2012): 1-13, DOI: 10.1080/13507486.2012.643609.

35 Ibid.

sovereignty, and internal order in its land, Italy was able to determine its self-interests. Since Risorgimento, Italian interests were composed of the desire for diplomatic supremacy in the Mediterranean while avoiding any conflict with a great power alone, and sustaining its political unity as well as sovereignty against any interferences from the Vatican or any other powers during the 19th century.³⁶ Nevertheless, Italian interests formed around these priorities; firstly, its land possessed a lack of products of the soil and primary materials that led policymakers to settle in different lands to colonize, and secondly; Italy is in the middle of the Mediterranean and its borders surrounded by this sea by approximately 80% which attached importance to preserve its interests especially in that geography.³⁷ And thirdly, Italy could not afford to face British influence in the Mediterranean; on the other hand, in order to challenge another great power (France), it was needed to side with the British Empire.³⁸ As a matter of fact, Britain was also eager to balance France with Italy in the Mediterranean, as it can be analyzed from the rapprochement to Italy. For instance; in 1887, an agreement was reached between those states, acknowledging the recognition of British interests in Egypt where was occupied in 1882 after the French occupation of Tunisia, while allowing Italians to conduct their policies in North Africa especially in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica; furthermore, it was agreed upon mutual support in the Mediterranean in a conflict with the Third power.³⁹ 1887 was also the year that the Mediterranean Agreements (between Austria-Hungary, Italy, and Britain) signed, asserting the preservation of the status quo in the area against the French policies and influence in North Africa.⁴⁰ Due to its weakness economically and militarily as well as lacking industrialization and resources compared with the other European powers, Italian state officials (until Benito Mussolini) preferred to avoid any kind of war against more industrialized European powers while attaching importance to the balance of power in the continent. On the one hand, the French colonial expansion in the Maghreb was contradicting Italian interests, Italy also needed France in

36 Federico Chabod, *Italian Foreign Policy: The Statecraft of the Founders*, Translated from Italian into English by William McCuaig, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996.

37 R. Salim Burçak, "İtalya'nın Dış Politikası (1882 - 1915)". *Ankara Üniversitesi SBF Dergisi* 1 (1943): 703-742.

38 It should also be remembered that; although Italy was part of the Central Powers in the initial phase of WWI, Rome averted from declaring war on England while preserving its neutrality until the Pact of London (Patto di Londra, 1915) in which Italy sided with the Entente Powers: *Ibid.*

39 W. N. Medlicott, "The Mediterranean Agreements of 1887". *The Slavonic Review* 5, No. 13 (Jun., 1926): 66-88.

40 *Ibid.*

order to balance other European power in case of war against Austro-Hungary and Germany; so the policy towards Tunisia diverted to acquiring financial, economic, and cultural (especially Italian schools in Tunis had huge importance for its interests) concessions from Paris.

Because of the deep resentment of the invasion of Tunisia by France, Italy had already joined the Triple Alliance with Austria-Hungary and Germany in order to balance France in Central Europe in 1882.⁴¹ As a matter of fact, while Italy was uncomfortable with the French domination over Tunisia due to its geopolitical proximity and dense Italian population, Britain also viewed a strong French dominance over the Mediterranean negatively. On the other hand, after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the Mediterranean region was of particular importance for Britain, which solidified its position in the mentioned region by gaining control over Malta and Cyprus (1878) regarding its short-cut passage to South Asia and India.⁴² As a matter of fact, securing the transitional route via the Mediterranean was the sine qua non for the sustainment of the global power status of the British Empire.⁴³ Principally British and French interests determined by their global ambitions differed in the area; Britain's main aim was to "access to coastal ports along the Persian Gulf, Indian Ocean, and Red Sea littorals, to protect the communication routes to its imperial possessions in India and beyond", on the other hand, France sought for Francophone Empire especially in the Maghreb.⁴⁴ Indeed, the defeats from the Franco-Prussian wars (especially after Sedan in 1870) led Paris to concentrate more on North Africa rather than Europe in order to explore and exploit the geography.⁴⁵ In order to preserve the routes for access to the world oceans and to secure the passage to India, the Mediterranean had a prominent role for British policymakers, as could be seen from the settling in the strategic areas such as Gibraltar where was designated as a British colony in the same year of French occupation in Algeria, 1830. While these empires' main interests necessitated differentiated policies,

41 Henry Kissinger, *Ibid.* p. 159.

42 Joseph S. Roucek, "The Geopolitics of the Mediterranean, I", *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 12, No. 4 (Jul., 1953): 347-354.

43 Kirsten Greer, "Geopolitics and the Avian Imperial Archive: The Zoogeography of Region-Making in the Nineteenth-Century British Mediterranean". *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103, No. 6 (2013): 1317-1331.

44 Rosemary Hollis, "Europe in the Middle East" in *International Relations of the Middle East*, edited by Louise Fawcett, 344-362. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

45 Donald Vernon McKay, "Colonialism in the French Geographical Movement 1871-1881". *Geographical Review* 33, No. 2 (Apr., 1943): 214-232.

the application of their activities had been conflicting with each other in the time and space bound. In this imperial rivalry, Italy also reoriented its activism according to the British position in world politics to balance France; however, the 1896 defeat (which also resulted in the fall of the government in Italy) in Abyssinia resulted in rapprochement with France due to the lack of support from Britain to Italy in Ethiopia during the war.⁴⁶

Status of Tunisia

It was argued that; French public opinion and decision-makers' hesitancy on the full possession of Tunisia as well as a possible disturbance in Algeria, which had been a long rival to Tunis⁴⁷ (before the annexation by the Metropole of France), prevented the annexation of Tunisia and designated it under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs instead of Ministry of Internal Affairs⁴⁸ by Paris.⁴⁹ These assumptions oversimplify the dynamics behind the French rule in Tunisia by neglecting the international dimension interconnected with demographic challenges to Paris. Nevertheless, the core determinants of the events were not per se domestic but also international from the point of the rivalry among France, (especially) Italy and Britain in the Mediterranean. France attempted to engage more in Tunisian internal dynamics and diminish

46 R. Salim Burçak, *Ibid.*

47 In the Ottoman rule, autonomous units divided by "marches," which signifies their authority such as taxation and territorial control under their not clearly cut territorial control but influence area; however, when Europeans came to the fore in the region, clear-cut border lines became problematic in the division between the units. Despite both Algeria (since 1830 and officially became administrative part of France in 1848) and Tunisia was under French control, the two countries had problematic relations as can be demonstrated from the works of the 1892 Border Commission by France, which the territoriality and the wells in these areas between those units signified troubled relations: Hélène Blais, "An intra-imperial conflict: the mapping of the border between Algeria and Tunisia, 1881-1914". *Journal of Historical Geography* 37 (2011): 178-190.; Indeed, these two countries, even under Ottoman suzerainty had not agreed upon the control of their territoriality as one can see from the 1756 Algerian invasion: Julia Clancy-Smith, "A view from the water's edge: Greater Tunisia, France and the Mediterranean before colonialism". *French History* 29, No. 1 (2015): 24-30.

48 The best example that was under the authority of this Ministry is Algeria during the colonial rule. Apart from its geostrategic importance related to Africa and Mediterranean, "Algeria was not an internal colony run by the *pièdes noirs*, but a French colony ruled ultimately by France despite substantial local control by the settlers." Thus the very importance of preserving the status of Algeria can be examined from many areas in accordance with the French interests: David Prochaska, *Making Algeria French: Colonialism in Bône, 1870-1920*. 8. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

49 Donald Vernon Mckay, "The French in Tunisia". *Geographical Review* 3 (Jul., 1945): 368-390.

the Bey's autonomy; however, the international structure was a limiting factor for Paris.

“By Husayn Bey's reign (1824–1835), the country sat at the convergence of three empires: French, British, and Ottoman. Slightly later, a fourth wannabe empire, the Italian, came into play. For half a century, Tunisia shared a fluctuating border with a European colonial state and was perilously close to Great Britain's Mediterranean outpost, Malta.”⁵⁰

However, in the second half of the 19th-century Ottomans' weakness became more apparent in its rule over North Africa's territories. The already virtually independent Beys,⁵¹ with regards to preventing Ottoman direct rule and maintaining their “independency”, engaged more with European powers by the time passed, and Europeans had become more prominent in the region over time.⁵²

Tunisia's leading phosphate production in the world, its economic assets, mineral resources, as well as its geography in the Mediterranean, which is bridging North Africa to Center Africa while situated in proximity to Sicily and Marseilles, constituted an essential element for imperial rivalry during the colonial epoch.⁵³ Moreover, in order to protect Algeria along with its border, Tunisia situated in a strategic position in which any insurgency would have a direct effect on Algeria considering the construction of the railway from Tunis to the border which had an accelerating effect on social mobility.⁵⁴ The revolts against the Bey in 1864 and state bankruptcy in 1869 demonstrated a negative effect on Algeria; nevertheless, those events also paved the way for more intensive penetration in Tunisia by European powers, especially by France.⁵⁵

Due to its strategic importance in the Mediterranean and conflicting interests, Tunisia was the issue among these powers; it was important to preserve the balance of powers by preventing the acquisition of a

50 Julia A. Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans: North Africa and Europe in an Age of Migration C. 1800-1900*, E-book. California: University of California Press, 2011.

51 Beys were juridically part of Ottoman suzerainty, however, they possessed their own bureaucracy, military, and political structures: L. Carl Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East*, Ibid. p. 63.

52 Ibid. pp.69-70.

53 Donald Vernon McKay, Ibid.

54 Dwight L. Ling, “The French Invasion of Tunisia, 1881”. *The Historian* 22, No. 4 (August, 1960): 396-412.

55 Ibid.; L. Carl Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East*, Ibid. p.74-76.

dominant role over the country. Indeed possession of both sides of the Sicily Strait would enable Italy to establish a dominant power capacity in the middle of the Mediterranean; even, during the Congress of Berlin in 1878, while Eastern Question was on the agenda, London favored French rule in Tunisia rather than Italian dominance despite rapprochement with Italy.⁵⁶

“Reworking the map of Africa was not France’s original intent; the government planned to consolidate French Algeria’s eastern frontier and counter the new Kingdom of Italy’s possible plans. Emperor Napoleon III of France had not wanted the Italian peninsula to join together under a single monarch, changing the Mediterranean balance of power forever.”⁵⁷

On the other hand;

“It was conceived by the first treaties (Le Bardo in 1881 and La Marsa in 1883) between Tunisia and France as a “soft” colonial regime that should only protect the local administration...The protectorate turned into a harder colonial regime to some extent, similar to the Algerian regime, with an increase in the number of French officials in Tunisia and the rise of the “Résidence générale,” the central administration, which depended on the French Foreign Office.”⁵⁸

As stated in the introduction section, France already provided a ground for future plans for colonization via La Marsa (1883) while Paris did not neglect Tunis’ strategic importance in the Mediterranean and Maghreb. France repeated its Algerian experiences in Tunisia and accelerated its attempts to gain more influence and colonize Tunisia by enacting naturalization laws for other European subjects as well as Muslims and Jews (whom subjects were under the rule of the Bey), compulsory primary schools (which are French medium), and settling more French at the beginning of the 20th century.⁵⁹ So, what were the reasons behind

56 Mark I. Choate, “The Tunisia Paradox: Italy’s Strategic Aims, French Imperial Rule, and Migration in the Mediterranean Basin”. *California Italian Studies* 1 (2010): 1-20. <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/8k97g1nc>

57 Ibid.

58 M’hamed Oualdi, “Provincializing and Forgetting Ottoman Administrative Legacies: Sons and Grandsons of Beys’ Mamluks Facing French Administrators of Tunisia (1890s–1930s)”. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 34, No. 2 (2014): 418-431.

59 Thomas Willing Balch, “French Colonization in North Africa”. *The American Political Science Review* 3, No. 4 (Nov., 1909): 539-551.

unsuccessful attempts to reach full colonial rule in Tunisia could be found in international and demographic dynamics, which were related to power competition in the area.

Lewis argues that there was a divided sovereignty in Tunisia not only between France and Tunis Governor, but also between France and other European powers, especially between Italy and Britain.⁶⁰ While France recognized the autonomy of Bey, the local courts had to recognize Tunisian institutions such as the tax system and the Bey's army (but this did not prevent France from using the Bey's army to suppress the rebellions in Algeria).⁶¹ In addition, the competition of Western powers over Tunisia prevented France from establishing full control over Tunisia; for example, France's obligation to accept that all treaties previously signed between Bey and other countries with the Treaty of Bardo are valid (1882), and its statement to European states that it would not annex Tunisia can be seen as the influence of other European powers on the country.⁶²

Demographically Italian population far outweighed the other European subjects in Tunisia, which brought about demographic power to Italy while maintaining informal and formal ties with this community in many areas, such as culturally and economically; moreover, Italians regarded Tunisia as "a permanent Italian colony, despite French rule".⁶³ Nonetheless, since the *Risorgimento*, poor conditions for the millions of Italians forced them to immigrate to the Americas, and the areas belonging to French colonial rule, particularly the most proximate Tunisia which would be outweighing the French demographically in the country.⁶⁴ Societal dynamics played a role in that Italian dominant presence; conditions such as overpopulation, poverty, and political hardships resulted in the migratory flow from especially Italy and Malta (subjects of whom were proto European settlers who pioneered the European "colons" in Tunisia), while France had been facing hardships to populate the French settlers in Tunisia after the Bardo Treaty; indeed these hardships erstwhile had been challenging French authorities in Algeria as well because of the fact that France, comparatively had better

60 Mary Dewhurst Lewis, *Divided Rule: Sovereignty and Empire in French Tunisia, 1881–1938*, 3. California: University of California Press, 2014.

61 Ibid. pp.68-83.

62 Ibid. pp.26-97.

63 Mark I. Choate, Ibid.

64 Ruth Ben-Ghiat, and Mia Puller. "Introduction" in *Italian Colonialism*, edited by Ruth Ben-Ghiat, and Mia Puller, 1-12. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

conditions and was not overpopulated as Italy.⁶⁵ The beginning of the Italian colonization in Libya, 1912 challenged French authorities as well, nevertheless, many Tripolitians immigrated to Tunisia before Italian naturalization in which their nationality would belong to Italy, and neo-Italianism occurred among the Jews in Tunisia; to this point, the augmenting influence of Italy discomfited Paris on the treatment of Italian identity in Tunisia.⁶⁶

Due to the naturalization laws in Algeria, many Europeans, including Italians, assimilated into a French identity; albeit in Tunisia, Italians (that formed approximately half of the European population and were growing in numbers while the French population's growth rate was hard to catch up that speed) resisted the naturalization by vigorously protecting their national identity.⁶⁷ Moreover, in 1896, Paris recognized Italian identity and institutions in its protectorate while Italy acknowledged the French rule in Tunis, which was a result of the mentioned 1896 Franco-Italian rapprochement; in other words, that event brought forth renegotiated Italian rights in pre-1881 and allowed to strengthen Italian identity in Tunisia.⁶⁸ British Maltese subjects in Tunisia were problematic in the Franco-British relations on the treatment of these subjects as well; however, in the course of time the solution was reached, and it was agreed that the Tunisia-born European subjects would become French subjects in the 1920s.⁶⁹ As can be analyzed here, even the issue of densely populated non-French European subjects was challenging Paris, a more problematic case than the Frenchization process in Algeria.

As soon as the status of Maltese subjects was agreed upon with Britain, France enacted naturalization laws. The naturalization law (1923), following the Algerian model, also included Muslim subjects, which enable questioning the protectorate status in Tunisia more; especially Tunisian nationalist Destour Party criticized that was the clear violation of Le Bardo which constituted protectorate and co-sovereign regime in the country.⁷⁰ Also, the long discontent between *colon* and *indigène*,

65 Julia A. Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans: North Africa and Europe in an Age of Migration C. 1800-1900*, Ibid.

66 Mary Dewhurst Lewis, Ibid. pp. 103-111.

67 Mark I. Choate, "Identity Politics and Political Perception in the European Settlement of Tunisia: The French Colony versus the Italian Colony". *French Colonial History* 8, (2007): 97-109.

68 Ibid.

69 Mary Dewhurst Lewis, Ibid. pp. 98-164.

70 Ibid.

together with the changing space of the indigène, resulted in another challenge for Paris.⁷¹ In the 1930s, Neo-Destour progressed the nationalist arguments and rejected the co-sovereignty by claiming the existence of two sovereign states:

“Adopting the notion of “cosovereignty” as its own but giving it a different interpretation, Neo-Destour insisted that the Treaty of Bardo itself had recognized the coexistence of two sovereignties: that of the bey, over domestic affairs, and that of France, which would represent the bey in his relations with the rest of the world. According to this argument, any role France had played in the domestic governance of Tunisia had been a perversion of international law.”⁷²

Moreover, the changing character of international politics in the post-WWII era brought about realizing the Tunisian nationalists’ ideals in the country. The dramatic loss of power of the European colonial states and the establishment of a permanent and effective institutionalization in international relations, especially through the UN system made great contributions to the nationalization and independence of the colonial peoples.⁷³ On the other hand, the Cold War restructured world political relations; in this context, while the US tried to remain with the idea of ending European colonialism but keeping the nationalist movements away from the sympathy of communism, it was necessary for the colonialism to come to an end for the USSR.⁷⁴ The positions of the two polars catalyzed the decolonization movements as well; in this structure, Tunisian independence gained ground leading by Habib Bourguiba and Neo-Destour, in 1956.

Conclusion

The decline of the Ottoman power constituted a power vacuum in the MENA region in which the power rivalry occurred among the European powers. However, this rivalry realized in the means of non-coercive power instruments while preventing the use of force in Europe as much as possible. The continent’s main objective in the 19th-century was to

71 L. Carl Brown, “The many faces of colonial rule in French North Africa”. *Revue de l’Occident musulman et de la Méditerranée*, No. 13-14 (1973): 171-191.

72 Mary Dewhurst Lewis, *Ibid.* p.165.

73 Oktar Türel, *Küresel Tarihçe, 1945-79*, 122. İstanbul: Yordam, 2017.

74 *Ibid.*

protect the current balance among the powers while avoiding any states to gain a dominant role and unsettle the current balance. Nonetheless, this did not impede Europeans from colonizing the rest of the world and gaining more power in world politics. In this context, French rule in Tunisia posits a compelling case to explain the dynamics for balancing behavior; it was not the per se powers were balanced but also the conflicting interests. The dominant Italian presence in the middle of the Mediterranean would have harmed France and Britain's interests. On the other hand, stronger French domination over the Maghreb would have threatened the British access to world oceans via the Mediterranean; that was one of the reasons why London invaded Egypt (1882) after the French invasion in Tunisia, 1881. Although France may not have intended to annex Tunisia, Paris attempted to consolidate its colonial rule in order to transcend its authority from the protectorate regime. However, in doing so Paris had some challenges from the international perspective. Due to its proximity and the strong presence of the Italian settler colons, Tunisia was one of Italy's prominent influence areas. Tunisia is a case in terms of the balance of conflicting interests in the area, which was also the result of the balance of power politics in the 19th century. The balance of power politics in the regional anarchic structure limited French activism in Tunisia and the Frenchization of other European subjects. This balancing behavior mostly came from Italy, and the balancing of conflicting interests demonstrated itself in terms of demographic power. As soon as the agreements were achieved on the treatment of the European subjects (Maltese and Italians), France attempted to enact naturalization laws, including Muslims and Jews which were under the rule of Bey. Moreover, France had already paved the way for any future dominance over Bey's autonomy by La Marsa Convention in 1883. The challenges to French colonial rule in Tunisia, in the context of European Realpolitik, derived from the balancing of the conflicting interests which inhibited France to be the only actor in determining the degree of colonization in the country.

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