

Western Imperialism in the Middle East, 1914–1958

Review Number:

575

Publish date:

Thursday, 1 February, 2007

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ISBN:

9780199287376

Date of Publication:

2006

Price:

£65.00

Pages:

400pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Publisher url:

<http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780199287376.do>

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

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D. K. Fieldhouse's goal in this major comparative study of British and French imperialism in the Middle East is to consider the effects of the imposition of the mandate system on the former Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. He brings to this task the wide-ranging knowledge accrued through a lifetime's research in various aspects of British imperial history, and, more recently, specific regional expertise acquired through the preparation of his study, *Kurds, Arabs and Britons: The Memoir of Wallace Lyon in Iraq, 1918–1944*. The result is a work that offers both some fascinating broader insights into the place of the Middle East in the broader pattern of Western imperialism, and some detailed thoughts on the individual mandates themselves. So, Fieldhouse argues that in the broader sense the pattern of British and French rule in the Middle East was similar to that followed elsewhere. Both imperial powers tried to rule through established elites, although the British were much more willing than the French to move their mandates forward towards a qualified form of independence. At the specific, local level, though, Fieldhouse finds no parallel in his wide knowledge of imperial practice elsewhere to compare to the disastrous experiment in social and political engineering undertaken by the British in Palestine. Here, he pulls no punches in his criticisms. The Palestine mandate was, 'probably the most ignominious failure of its kind in British imperial history, the first time that Britain had ended its rule without leaving an established government behind it' (pp. 344–5).

As Fieldhouse himself acknowledges, this study is essentially a work of synthesis, although one which enriches the existing scholarship by offering a series of astute assessments of the existing state of historiographical debate in the field. Beginning with the Ottoman legacy, Fieldhouse traces the developments in the early years of the twentieth century, including the genesis of Arab nationalist sentiment

and the reform of the Ottoman system. In essence, he concludes that, despite its military defeats in the early years of the twentieth century, by 1914 the Ottoman Empire was in the course of reconstruction. Indeed in respect of the Arab lands, one can even talk of a 'reconquest' and reintegration. The great majority of Ottoman subjects remained loyal to the empire and fought for it during the First World War. There was thus no pre-war inevitability about the empire's collapse. In terms of the Arab nationalist movement, Fieldhouse provides a lucid summary of the subsequent course of the historiographical debate sparked by George Antonius's seminal (and still eminently readable) tract, *The Arab Awakening*. For Fieldhouse, Antonius makes a huge jump from charting the revival of cultural interest in the Arabic language, and the development of Arab nationalist secret societies in Syria, to broader claims about the awakening of a widespread Arab consciousness and desire for independence.

Antonius's arguments were challenged first by C. E. Dawn, who attacked the notion of a dominant and ideologically based Arab nationalist movement before 1914, and held that the majority of Arab notables remained loyal Ottomanists. Thereafter, Albert Hourani, while agreeing with much of Dawn's critique of Antonius's arguments about pre-war Arab nationalism, argued that Antonius also placed too much emphasis on the unity and solidity of the Sharif Hussein's wartime movement. For Hourani, and subsequent commentators including Mary Wilson, the Hashemites were in essence pursuing the defence of their own interests via alliance with the British under the banner of Arab revolt. That Antonius overstated the unity of the Hashemite Arab Revolt, and the role of Arab nationalist ideology in its instigation, is perhaps no surprise in view of the support he received from the Hashemite family in his research. Indeed, the Great Arab Revolt, as formulated by Antonius, remained an ideological reference point for the Hashemites until at least the end of the twentieth century.

If the Ottoman Empire was reviving itself before 1914, and if the appeal of Arab nationalism was by no means widespread in the region, then the First World War emerges as the key event, which shattered the existing order, led to the creation of the mandates system, and originated much of the contemporary instability of the region. In terms of the impact and outcome of the war, probably the most interesting and important question Fieldhouse addresses is why, in view of their wartime promises to the Hashemites about Arab independence, the British ended up cooperating with France in the establishment of a League of Nations mandates system for the former Arab lands of the Ottoman Empire? In terms of the promises to the Hashemites contained in the famous Hussein-McMahon correspondence, Fieldhouse points to what he sees as the 'ambiguities and absurdities' (p.57) of McMahon's 24 October 1915 letter to the Sharif. Antonius too, in his original analysis of the correspondence, was scathing about the British missives, particularly, with his astute eye for style and dignity, the inappropriate and fawning terms in which the Sharif was addressed. In terms of the substance of what was offered to the Sharif by the British, the correspondence certainly provided a weak and imprecise foundation on which to base subsequent claims to Arab independence. Although the British allowed Feisal, Hussein's third son, to march into Damascus at the head of the Arab army in October 1918, they proved unwilling to champion his claims to retaining his Syrian kingdom once his relations with the French had broken down in the wake of the 1920 San Remo conference. The apportionment of mandates agreed between the powers at San Remo, which saw the British given Mesopotamia (hereafter Iraq) and Palestine (sub-divided in 1922 into Palestine and Transjordan), and the French given Syria and Lebanon, was dictated by Anglo-French relations and interests. For the Hashemites it remained a betrayal of earlier promises, although compensation was subsequently offered to them, first in the shape of the British installation of Feisal as King of Iraq, and, later, in the form of the British acquiescence in the assumption of authority in Transjordan by the Sharif's second son Abdullah.

The British establishment of the new state of Iraq, and its political development under the mandate, is a matter of more than academic interest from the perspective of the early-twenty-first century. Most wisely, Fieldhouse avoids indulging in any misplaced attempts at drawing comparisons between the British imposition of political authority in the wake of their military conquest, between 1918 and 1921, and the singular Anglo-American failure to do likewise in the wake of the contemporary invasion of Iraq, between 2003 and 2006. Nevertheless, book reviewers have the licence to be more self-indulgent than serious authors, so I trust readers will forgive me one or two comparative sallies in this direction. First of all, it is

clear that at the end of the First World War, the British in Iraq were regarded not as deliverers, but as infidel invaders. Secondly, 'post-invasion policy' was also poorly thought out. There was no clear plan for Iraq between 1918 and 1920, and thus political developments were prey to competing pressures on the ground, bureaucratic competition back in London, and political tensions in the international arena. The result was drift, and it should have been no surprise when, in July 1920, a major revolt broke out in the Euphrates valley against British rule. Consider Fieldhouse's description of the causes of the revolt: 'the rising was a general reaction to the realities of foreign occupation, sparked off by evidence of apparent British military weakness in Mosul, and given a crusading spirit by the clerics' (p. 87).

The costs of suppressing the insurgency were high. The British lost 426 dead, 1,228 wounded and 615 missing or taken prisoner. There were around 8,000 casualties among the insurgents. What mattered more, though, in terms of securing the relative political stability which subsequently prevailed in Iraq through the 1920s and 1930s, was the British political response to the crisis. Here, the essence of the subsequent British strategy was to co-opt, as far as possible, the existing elites. Albeit that at the apex of the Iraqi political system the British imposed an alien monarch, in the shape of Feisal I, who brought with him his own retainers from the Hashemite Arab army, nevertheless, their goal was to establish under him a 'national government' that would attract genuine Iraqi support. Moreover, as Fieldhouse points out, once again illustrating the benefit of his wide knowledge of the workings of British imperialism elsewhere, 'the key to the British approach to creating the Iraq constitution lies in the fact that, uniquely in British imperial history, it was intended to lead to early independence rather than extended imperial rule' (p. 97).

Fieldhouse is unsentimental about the realities of the political system established by the British in Iraq. It was 'democratic' in form only, with real power lying in the hands of a small circle of notables, and ex-Sharifian officers close to the king. Parliamentary elections produced little more than a shuffling of the existing pack, while, even after independence in 1932, the British remained the dominant influence behind the scenes until the 1958 revolution swept away the existing social and political order. In essence, what the British did in Iraq was to rule through, and depend on, what H. Batatu, in his monumental study, called the 'old social classes'. Moreover, their establishment of a 'centralized bureaucratic regime', and an 'unnecessarily large army', laid the groundwork for the subsequent revolution (p. 116). Thus while, in Fieldhouse's view, the British succeeded in creating a viable state from three former Ottoman vilayets, and in satisfying most of what they wanted in terms of their economic and strategic interests for forty years, thereafter they left Iraq to its own devices. 'Iraq could then fall into what became the common mould of other revolutionary Middle Eastern states under military regimes, almost as if the mandate had never existed' (p. 116). This characterization reminds me very much of the comments of one Arab official from the former mandate administration in Palestine, who described for me the disappearance of his British superiors almost overnight. 'The mandate dissolved', he told me, 'like salt in water'.

Fieldhouse's decision to choose 1958 as the terminal date for this volume is, therefore, logical in the sense that the Iraqi revolution of that year marked the effective overthrow of the social and political order established by the British during the early 1920s. It is nevertheless refreshing for those of us who are used to having to deal with 1956 as the supposed terminal date for the British imperial role in the Middle East, to see it thus subtly revised. As the former British diplomat Harold Beeley observed some while ago, 'the event which more than any other symbolized the end of an era was the death at the hands of the Baghdad mob... of [Iraqi Prime Minister] Nuri Said ... for whom association with Britain had been axiomatic throughout his long career' (1).

While the British achieved some limited, if transient, success in Iraq, Fieldhouse finds nothing to recommend either the conduct or legacy of the mandate in Palestine. Whether conceived of in terms of British imperial interests, the interests of the indigenous inhabitants, or its longer-term effects on regional and international stability, British mandatory rule over Palestine was an unmitigated disaster. The Balfour Declaration of November 1917 was originally framed, in Fieldhouse's view, largely 'to ensure that no potentially hostile country controlled Palestine' (p. 147). As problems mounted in the mandate during the 1930s, a key argument against altering or surrendering it remained the fear that the French might step in instead. Thus, although Fieldhouse acknowledges that certain British officials were driven by a belief in the

essential justice of the Zionist cause, in his view it was principally considerations of imperial interest and prestige that predominated in the British acquisition and maintenance of the Palestine mandate. That the eventual collapse of the mandate would do significant harm to Britain in both of these respects is certainly a considerable irony.

In respect of British attempts to make the mandate workable, Fieldhouse points out that the principal difficulty lay in the attitude of the Arab majority population. The one concession which the British might have offered to win over Arab opinion, the cessation of Jewish immigration, was not in their power to grant under the terms of the mandate. The British also made an unfortunate choice in selecting, as the Mufti of Jerusalem, Amin al-Husayni, who proved to be a most unreliable collaborator. Meanwhile, cooperation with the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish community in Palestine or Yishuv, which had been the foundation of British rule through the 1920s and 1930s, also came under pressure in the wake of the 1939 White Paper, with its proposed limits on Jewish immigration. By 1943, Fieldhouse argues, 'the majority of the Yishuv had already come to see total independence as essential and were ready to fight Britain to achieve it' (p. 186). The 1948 dénouement in Palestine, and the unseemly British scuttle for the door without leaving any effective administration behind, ranks, in Fieldhouse's view, 'as one of the major defeats in British imperial history, comparable with that by the Thirteen Colonies in 1776–83 and the fall of Singapore in 1942' (p. 195). In this respect one might once again note that it is odd that so much of the historiography of the decline of the British imperial role in the Middle East has focused on the humiliation of Suez in 1956. Certainly in terms of Arab perceptions of the British role in the region, it was the outcome in Palestine that mattered much more in ensuing years.

Without question, the most successful outcome of the British experiment in mandatory rule lay in Transjordan. Herein, one might observe an irony, for the British approach in Transjordan was almost wholly ad hoc in the early years of the mandate. Indeed, even the creation of Transjordan as a separate mandate was largely unplanned, although Churchill's famous description of the emirate as 'that country I created one Sunday afternoon' surely overstates the case. Certainly the first ruler of Transjordan, the Emir Abdullah, played a significant role in establishing the foundations of the state during the 1920s and 1930s, albeit that he could not have succeeded without British support. Here Fieldhouse draws another interesting comparison from his wider knowledge of British imperial rule, noting that Abdullah was in 'much the same subservient position as rulers of princely states in India or in Northern Nigeria' (p. 226). He was the nominal ruler, but in practice was obliged to do as the British representative, or resident, wanted. Abdullah's success in re-negotiating this position was rewarded with Transjordan's independence after the Second World War, although the country did not fully break free of British influence until the negotiated termination of the Anglo-Jordanian Treaty under his successor, Hussein, in March 1957.

In terms of the pattern of French mandatory rule in Syria and Lebanon, probably the more surprising element to emerge from Fieldhouse's account is the extent of the similarities with the British approach. In both cases, the methods adopted involved ruling through elements of the established elites. In both cases, each imperial power took up its mandates principally to defend perceived imperial interests against the possible encroachment, or excessive aggrandisement, of the other. The main difference between the British and French, though, was that the French refused to offer a schedule for independence in their mandates. Moreover, France had relatively little experience of the region to fall back on in working out how to govern its mandates. The French had, in fact, done little actual fighting to gain their share of the Ottoman spoils. It was mainly the British determination to preserve the entente in Europe and Britain's post-war lack of resources which explained their willingness to bring the French into the region (p. 251). Thereafter, Fieldhouse draws an interesting comparison between the methods of French colonial rule in Syria and British rule in Iraq. 'The main difference', he argues, 'lay in the façade' (p. 260). In Baghdad, all the main departments had Iraqi ministerial heads who notionally made policy, even if in practice this had to be cleared with a British advisor. 'This never happened in Syria', where all the main departments were under exclusive French control. Nevertheless, the French succeeded in maintaining control because the local Syrian notables proved largely docile under their rule, which effectively preserved the social status quo.

In Lebanon, meanwhile, the French found ready collaborators in the form of the Maronite Christian

community, which feared being swamped in an independent Arab state. France reciprocated their loyalty, with Lebanon representing ‘the jewel in its new Middle Eastern empire’ (p. 328). Nevertheless, the carving out of a greater Lebanon from Syria, incorporating large Sunni and Shia Muslim minorities, laid the foundations both for Lebanon’s eventual civil war, and the ultimate eclipse of Maronite leadership. In short, Fieldhouse contends, ‘it is arguable that the worst thing the French did in Lebanon was not to postpone independence and continually interfere in Lebanese politics, but to create a plural society’ (p. 329).

Fieldhouse concludes his analysis with an interesting counter-factual section looking at what other outcomes might have been possible had the mandate system not been imposed on the region in the wake of the First World War. He effectively dismisses the possibility that the Allies might have allowed Ottoman rule in some form or another to continue after the war. There had been too much blood spilt for that. What then of the possible outcome had the British honoured their promises to the Hashemites and created an independent Arab state? Fieldhouse argues convincingly that a single Arab state stretching from the Mediterranean to the Yemen under the Sharif was ‘beyond all probabilities’ (p. 338). There was simply no existing political, administrative, or economic basis on which to found such a state. Could separate, independent Arab states have survived after the war? Probably the best chance would have been in Syria, although Fieldhouse finds the evidence provided by the brief period of Feisal’s regime in Damascus far from promising. The probability of success elsewhere, he believes, was even lower. Had the British simply withdrawn, then, ‘there would have been no state system and probably a great deal of confusion and rivalry’ (p. 340). The mandates were, in theory, a good way to avoid this chaos. Had they in fact acted as devices to aid political development, they could even have been a good thing. In practice, though, Fieldhouse points out (in a choice phrase) that, ‘the mandate was the weasel word that would appear to combine the reality of effective Western control with the ethics of President Wilson’ (p. 341). In sum, he finds the British record as a mandatory power to be ‘very mixed’ (p. 345). The French, meanwhile, failed to allow the development of true self-government. Overall, Fieldhouse’s conclusion on the effects of the system is fair and judicious, reflecting the balanced judgements made throughout this volume: ‘the mandates sowed dragon’s teeth that were eventually to grow into the complex of tensions and despotisms that constitute the contemporary Middle East’ (p. 348).

For any student wanting a good introduction to the workings of British and French imperialism in the Middle East this volume is to be highly recommended. Regional and imperial historians, too, will find food for thought in Fieldhouse’s cogent summaries of the evolution of the historiography in this field. Overall, this is a thoughtful and erudite volume which goes a long way towards locating the apparently exceptional case of the Middle East in the mainstream of British and French imperial history.

Notes

1. H. Beeley, ‘The Middle East’, in *The Special Relationship*, ed. W. R. Louis and H. Bull (Oxford, 1986), p. 290. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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