Rethinking Britain's Moment in the Middle East

Introduction

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Britain was left as the last power standing in the Middle East. From 1918 until the years leading up to the catastrophe of the Suez Crisis in 1956, the Middle East experienced regional unipolarity, with the British Empire as the hegemon. Writing in 1963, Elizabeth Monroe described this period as "Britain's Moment in the Middle East"[i], emphasising the dominance of Britain over regional politics. This idea has been taken up in the subsequent literature on the region, with the Israeli historian Avi Shlaim describing the interwar Middle East as experiencing no great power competition, but instead "effective domination" by the United Kingdom.[ii] Yet this narrative implies a freedom of action for Britain that simply did not exist. This article argues that, in the interwar period at least, whilst Britain was the sole great power active in the region, it was not in control of the situation. The context in which Britain became a hegemon was not one of its choosing, and it spent much of its "moment" on the back foot to powerful forces it could not control. From the start, British policy was constrained by its previous commitments. These commitments included the domestic: the maintenance of order, the re-development of industry and society after the war, and the paying of its huge wartime debt to American banks. But other foreign policy questions also defined British action, with the unsteady peace in Europe, and the difficult questions being raised in India requiring attention and resources. Against this backdrop, Britain was faced with rising expectations in the Middle East, fuelled by wartime British support for both Arab and Zionist national aspirations and the prevalence of Wilsonian discourse. These expectations created popular forces that grew into conflict with each other and with Britain and limited the possible action of the British government.

Background: A Hegemon Emerges

The First World War would see Britain in an unrivalled position in the Middle East. At the close of hostilities, it was Britain alone that had a strong military force in the region, occupying most of the Levant. Britain also benefitted from a long-standing informal empire in the area, a staging-post to its Indian possessions, and strong influence with Arab leaders in the Hashemite and Saudi families. This influence is noted in the comment of Faisal (son of Emir Hussein of the Hejaz, later the King of Iraq) that he would help Britain establish a foothold in Palestine, even to the point of accepting large-scale Jewish immigration, but would "oppose any other power".[iii] In addition to its pre-war influence in Egypt, Aden, and the Persian Gulf, Britain added the League of Nations mandates of Transjordan, Iraq and Palestine to its possessions. It also ended the war with a strong position of influence in what would, in 1932, become the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and increased its role in the domestic and foreign politics of Iran.

Though French mandates were created in Syria and Lebanon, and French power was well-established in North Africa, the reduced power of France after the war, and ongoing domestic insecurities limited their willingness to engage in colonial adventures.[iv] This was compounded by Arab resistance to French control, which placed France in no position to engage in a great power rivalry. L. Carl Brown, in his *International Politics in the Middle East*, presents this negative attitude as stemming from the violent seizing of power by French forces in the toppling of Faisal's Damascus government.[v] The suspicion of French control also derives in part from the settler policies pursued in its North African possessions, and the state discrimination in favour of the Pied-Noir that resulted. Whatever the reason, we see a strong anti-French attitude recorded amongst Arab leaders in Syria and Iraq, as well as an opposition to French control in the Zionist movement.[vi]

This meant that not only was France required to spend more on controlling the mandate territories, but it was additionally unable to attempt to expand regional influence beyond them. This is evident in French willingness to give up its spheres of influence in Anatolia in the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, and its accommodation of Turkish demands in the handing over of Hatay (then known as Alexandretta) to Ankara in 1939. Other powers had also retreated from the region with the defeated powers (Germany and Turkey) unable and unwilling to construct grandiose systems of colonial influence, the pyrrhic victors in Italy and revolutionary Russia too chaotic to concern themselves with far off lands, and the retreat from global affairs of the isolationist United States.

Equally, no regional power had the capabilities to challenge the hegemon. The independent states in the region were generally weak, and often subjects of informal empire. In Saudi Arabia, the lack of industrial or political development prevented any movement outside of the orbit of the British Empire. Iran had a reasonably developed urban middle class, and the potential for considerable growth, but continued interference of Britain in its he domestic and foreign politics prevented the establishment of any serious regional influence. Only Turkey, under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, developed the political independence and industrial capacity to present a challenge, but the pursuit of domestic order and wide-ranging domestic reforms as well as the need to counter Russian ambitions in the 1930s, distracted Ankara's attention from its southern neighbours. However, Turkey was one of the few states which managed to achieve meaningful concessions from the European powers, in its independence, the abandonment of the idea of a Kurdish state in Anatolia, and the favourable border adjustments with French Syria.

David and Goliath

Despite the unipolarity of regional politics in the period, the British position was significantly weaker than the expanse of pink on the map might suggest. The material position of Britain was weak, with few financial or military resources to control and exploit the patchwork of mandates, protectorates, colonies, and informal client states. The decision to control the region through the use of the RAF, rather than a fully-fledged army of occupation, was described by the British diplomat and colonial officer Reader Bullard as a cost-saving measure suggested T. E. Lawrence. The decision to use the RAF, which proved ineffective at controlling of populated areas, reflects the financial constraints on deployment decisions, and demonstrates of the dominance of domestic concerns over policy requirements.[vii] Added to these material concerns, the regional and global political picture was not one which London could control. Ongoing troubles at home, in Europe, and in India meant that the freedom of action of British authorities in the region was limited, and crucial decisions were forced responses to external circumstances. In the region itself, the political situation was far from the familiar and stable state of affairs that existed pre-1914, with the wartime growth of powerful and competing forces of Arab nationalisms, Zionism, and increasingly self-confident local rulers. The "Wilsonian moment" and the shift towards more radical political discourse which the British responses only served to fuel, changed the landscape considerably, pointing to power of norms in international politics. Britain's moment in the region then, was fragile and ultimately ephemeral, the final proof of which came during the darkest days of the Second World War. However, the deep fractures in British power had emerged much earlier.

Britain's fragility in the period is notable in its security failures. This was particularly problematic for the British administration, as the territories and protectorates in the region did not provide any financial or commercial output for the metropole but required significant investment in the police and military to maintain control. Popular agitation in Egypt, led by the nationalist and increasingly radical Wafd Party led to a hasty granting of partial independence in 1922, and ongoing bitter resentment against the British. The unilateral declaration of that year left the Suez Canal Zone, foreign policy, and the governance of Sudan in British hands, to the chagrin of Egyptian nationalists. In Iraq, the failure was revealed in the danger posed by the Arab uprising, and the difficulty in assuring the re-imposition of British rule. In Palestine, the only mandate Britain maintained throughout the period, continuing communal violence disrupted control. Disaffection between Jewish and Arab populations prevented the creation of local governance systems, and repeated British efforts to maintain order failed to make inroads into the chaos. These failures and weakness, despite the notional unipolar moment in the region, were the inevitable result of the fact that, in the Middle East, the British were acting in a world not of their making, and in which it had little freedom to choose its courses of action.

Britain's Goals in the Middle East

This lack of deployment and engagement with the Middle East has been explained by some as being a result of the interests of the British government, rather than a reflection of the weakness of Britain in the region. It is true that the British interests in the region were limited, as is shown by the case study of oil supplies. Oil, which would later become a dominant feature of western policy in the region, would not reach its later importance until the 1950s and 1960s. Monroe records that by 1938, after considerable commercial exploration and development in Iran and Iraq, Middle Eastern oil accounted for 22% of British consumption.[viii] Of this 82% came from Iran, and even this could be replaced from other sources.[ix] For most of the region south of Baghdad then, oil played no role at all, and where it did it was as a commercial interest, rather than strategic necessity. Given this lack of exploitable resources, British interests lay primarily in the stability of the region and the defence of air and sea communication routes to India. This led to a common view of the Middle East as, in Monroe's words, a "desert with two ends".[x] This strategic view of the region can also be seen in Brown's claim that "to imperial Britain, Egypt was not so much a country as a route to India".[xi] These vivid descriptions of British interests in the Middle East, reflect a general British apathy towards a region in which, up until the Sultan's declaration of a jihad in November 1914, Britain was happy to retain the Ottoman status quo.

However, these interests were not created in a vacuum but were the result of the conditions in which the British government found itself. It was unable to expand its interests when its position became assured, as it had done elsewhere. Furthermore, these relatively limited ambitions, of restoring pre-war order to the region were left unfulfilled. The explanation for British failures, then, must come from somewhere else, particularly in the limited freedom of action for the British government. Most crucially, the action of the state was restricted by the domestic circumstances in which the government found itself.

"A Valuable Adjunct to Our Propaganda"[xii]

All foreign policy and colonial decisions made by states are necessarily influenced by the political conditions in the metropole. The British historian Roger Owen has placed this in the particular context of the Middle East's colonial experience, with the sudden acquisition of large expanses of territory making it easy for domestic interest groups to demand (and receive) certain policies.[xiii] This was especially true for Britain, given the domestic crises in the metropole, from the post-war bankruptcy, through the general strike of 1926, and the effects of the great depression. In addition, the continuing tensions in Europe, in the drawn-out conflicts in Eastern Europe, French aggression in 1924 and, eventually, the rise of a revisionist Germany, meant that resources could not be reallocated from home defence. Yapp describes the order of British overseas priorities as being (1) European security, (2) imperial integrity in Africa and India, (3) far-eastern security, and only (4) Middle Eastern security.[xiv] Elie Kedourie, in his revisionist account of the McMahon-Hussein correspondence, has argued that these communications, that would be of central importance to interwar Arab policy, were at most only ever a marginal issue in contemporary decision-making in the metropole.[xv] This prioritisation of other questions not only drained the Middle East of resources and policy attention but made decisions on Middle Eastern politics subject to priorities in other areas.

The Balfour Declaration in support of a Jewish National Home in Palestine is a case study in this dominance of non-Middle Eastern concerns in Middle Eastern policy. This Declaration, given legal effect by the League of Nations in the Mandate for Palestine, tied the hands of the British civil administration. Furthermore, the one sentence declaration governed relations between the British, Zionists, Palestinian Arabs and Arab leaders elsewhere in the region until 1948 and led directly to the creation of the State of Israel. Yet the origins of the declaration lay in Petrograd, not Jerusalem. The reasons for the Balfour Declaration are heavily contested, with some, such as Naomi Shepherd, arguing that it was motivated by primarily regional concerns about the stability of the region around the Suez Canal.[xvi] There is good evidence that Britain felt it would benefit from having a large, educated Jewish population, with reason to be gratefully loyal to the British empire within 100 miles of Suez but, as the former Political Secretary to the World Zionist Organisation Leonard Stein has argued, by the time of the declaration, this was not central to the decision-making.[xvii] Mark Levene has shown the regional strategic argument makes little sense given the contemporary military situation in the Levant and the fact that Britain had built close relationships with non-Egyptian Arabs, including in Palestine.[xviii]

Instead, Levene argues, the Balfour Declaration was the result of purely European concerns about the continuing war against Germany. At this time there seems to be a widespread acceptance in the British establishment of longstanding tropes about a united Jewish power that controlled both the forces of capital and Bolshevism, the support of both of which was crucial for Britain's war effort. In Russia, the February Revolution had ushered in a new Provisional Government under Prince Lvov, and Russian Jews were believed to hold significant power in this new arrangement. This influence was viewed as being crucial in persuading the Bolsheviks to support the governments under Lvov, and later Kerensky, who argued for remaining in the war. It was believed that a British commitment to Zionism would bring the whole body of Russian Jewry into the allied camp.[xix] Levene considers this to be based on establishment *idée fixe*, and a misjudgement by British intelligence about the prominence of Zionism in Russia.[xx] However, Stein argues that from the British perspective, one can see how the conditions of total war might require the taking of this chance "however slender" to keep Russia in the war.[xxi] Meanwhile, the support of the American Jewish population was seen as a crucial aim in ensuring US popular support for a war that many Americans saw as pointless.

The Balfour Declaration's impact, however, was decidedly regional. Together with the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 and the McMahon-Hussein correspondence starting a year before, it was the starting point for British regional policy. There is a major debate on the question of whether these documents were contradictory in their commitments, with the conventional view that they were attacked by the revisionist account of Elie Kedourie, who argued that each of the documents were scrupulously written to avoid contradictions.[xxii] However, this argument is largely irrelevant for the purposes of this article. What matters is that what many Zionists and Arabs believed it promised them was more than either Britain or the other side could accept. From 1918, therefore, the contradictory interpretations of British wartime promise, which were made to achieve specific strategic objectives, governed the demands of groups in the Middle East with which Britain had to deal.

The Wilsonian Moment

British decision-making freedom was further restricted by the regional and global context in which they were working. The events of the First World War shifted the nature of regional politics, pushing groups towards more radical demands than they had held before, and creating the conditions for uprisings against British control. A crucial part of this changing international discourse was the growth of self-determination movements in the Middle East, who reacted against British influence and control of domestic governments. Nationalist movements had existed before the war in colonial possessions and client states, in particular the quasi-protectorate of Egypt. Here, the British-sponsored system promoted a prosperous intellectual and politicised middle class, who were expected to form a cadre of leaders of an independent and Britain-friendly state. It was among this elite, influenced by western thought on nationalism and liberalism, that there developed a reformist movement for increased self-rule and eventual independence.[xxiii]

This liberal reformism had transformed by the end of the war into a more radical call for independence, Egyptian sovereignty over the Suez Canal Zone, and British withdrawal from the Anglo-Egyptian Sudanese condominium. In part this change was a reaction against the unilateral declaration of a protectorate over Egypt in 1914, and the removal of the pro-Ottoman Khedive. This, together with the wartime experience of conscription made the political situation in Egypt particularly tense. However, Erez Manela, in examining the global impact of the "Wilsonian Moment" has argued that this radicalisation was a response to the changing discourse of global politics. The endorsement of the principle of self-determination in the speeches of Woodrow Wilson created an expectation that there would be a post-war new world order under American stewardship, in which the rights of colonial subject peoples would be respected.[xxiv] It is doubtful if

Wilson's personal views held much Egyptian nationalists would be pleased about, and the actions of his advisors Lansing and Dulles in ignoring repeated Egyptian appeals to the US shows that America had hardly intended to concern itself with every colonial claim. We see, then, that Wilson's language on self-determination established high expectations of America's impact on the world that the reality failed to live up to. The reaction of the Wafd Party to the American "betrayal" in recognising the British protectorate in 1919 shows the degree to which the promise of a 'new world order' had shaped their thinking and radicalised their nationalism.[xxv] This was a pattern repeated across the region, energising expectations that had already been raised by British wartime promises. This period created forces that the colonial power could not control, and throughout the rest of the interwar period, even until the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Agreement and the abortive 1939 White Paper on Palestine, Britain was on the back foot, with most of the action taken being defensive.

Conclusion

The British position from 1918-1939 was, on the surface, all-powerful. No great power challenged its domination of the region, and no local state could engage in sustained resistance. Yet despite this, Britain's position was weak. Buffeted by pressures from many sides, decision-making took place within a limited range of possible action, with requirements to first account for the situation in Europe and the empire. The changes in global politics towards the end of the First World War, especially the growth of demands for self-determination, and the shock of the sudden end of hostilities, meant Britain had little control over the political situation in the region. Therefore, despite the regional unipolarity making this formally Britain's moment in the Middle East, this moment was one of weakness and, after the Second World War it proved ultimately ephemeral.

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[i] Elizabeth Monroe (1963)

[ii] Avi Shalim (1994) p.18

[iii] Comment recorded in notes of a war cabinet meeting in David Lloyd George's (1938) *Treaties* (p.121)

[iv] Avi Shlaim (1994) p.19

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[v] L. Carl Brown (1984) p.117
[vi] Leonard Stein (1961) p.549
[vii] Reader Bullard (1964) p.87
[viii] Elizabeth Monroe (1981) p.95
[ix] M. E. Yapp (1991)
[x] Monroe (1981) p.
[xi] L. Carl Brown (1984) p.111
[xii] A quote attributed to Lord Curzon recorded by David Lloyd George (1938). Curzon in fact felt that the declaration was a mistake, which set things in motion in Palestine that Britain could not control. However, this comment sums up the rest of the themes of the cabinet meeting as they appear in the comments by both Lloyd George and senior FO officials.
[xiii] Roger Owen (2004) p.14
[xiv] M. E. Yapp (1991) p.380
[xv] Elie Kedourie (1976) p.309
[xvi] Naomi Shpherd (1999) p.7
[xvii] Leonard Stein (1961) p.551
[xviii] Mark Levene (1992) p.68
[xix] Mark Levene (1992) p.71
[xx] Mark Levene (1992) p.70
[xxi] Leonard Stein (1961) p.550
[xxii] Elie Kedourie (1976)
[xxiii] L. Carl Brown (1984) p.78
[xxiv] Erez Manela (2001)
[xxv] Erez Manela (2001)