Review Article

The Middle East Under the Mandate System

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Hillel Cohen, *Army of Shadows: Palestinian Collaboration with Zionism. 1917-1948*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008. viii + 346 pp. ISBN: 978-0-520-25221-9 (hbk.). $29.95.

Weldon C. Matthews, *Confronting an Empire, Constructing a Nation: Arab Nationalists and Popular Politics in Mandate Palestine*. Library of Middle East History. London: I.B. Tauris, 2006. 300 pp. ISBN: 978-1-84511-173-1 (hbk.). £59.50.

Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country*. Library of Middle East History. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. xviii + 318 pp. ISBN: 978-0-231-14200-7 (hbk.); 978-0-231-14201-4 (pbk.).

David K. Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East 1914-1958*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006 (2008). xviii + 384 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-928737-6 (hbk.); 978-0-19-954083-9 (pbk.). £71.00; $150.00 (hbk.); £24.99 (pbk.).

With the publication of four new titles (one of which is actually a revised edition of a work previously released dealing with the Middle East mandates, one might well ponder whether there is much left to be written on the subject, particularly where Palestine is concerned. Conversely, given recent developments, one might argue that there is still plenty still to be learned regarding what many historians consider *the determinative factor* underlying many of the problems currently confronting the region—namely the creation at the conclusion of the First World War of the modern nation-states that comprise the Middle East from the Arab territories of the Ottoman Empire, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Israel/Palestine, and Jordan. After the First World War, all were created as mandates subject to European authority until such time that the mandatory power in question—France in the case of Syria and Lebanon, Britain in the case of (then) Palestine (at the time, inclusive of Jordan) and Iraq—deemed them fit to govern themselves. Three of the four titles deal specifically with those mandates under British authority, the fourth with the mandates as a whole.

Hillel Cohen's *Army of Shadows* and Weldon C. Matthews, *Confronting an Empire, Constructing a Nation* are both directly concerned with the Palestine mandate, which was quite distinct from the other mandates created from the Ottoman Empire's Arab territories. All four mandates required that the mandatory powers groom their respective charges for eventual independence; the mandate for Palestine, however, also required that Britain facilitate the establishment there of a "Jewish national home". Not surprisingly, these two obligations would prove mutually incompatible. Certainly enough has been written on the subject; nevertheless, given the narrow focus of these two works—one regarding Arab collaboration

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and the other the Istiqlal Party—both might be seen as bringing something new to the table, and thus are welcome additions to the literature. The third title reviewed is Peter Sluglett's *Britain in Iraq*, an updated version of a book originally published in 1976, and one that provides what is essentially a diplomatic history of British-mandate Iraq. The final title considered, D.K. Fieldhouse's *Western Imperialism in the Middle East*, purports to provide an overview of the mandate period as a whole, as indicated on the jacket, one which accounts for both "European and indigenous points of views".

Cohen's *Army of Shadows* is the story of Arab collaboration with respect to Zionism in British-mandate Palestine. The book begins with a brief overview of Zionist activity aimed at recruiting Arab collaborators, quickly moves on to an examination of the different forms collaboration took, and then examines the manner in which the nature of collaborative activities changed over time in response to changing circumstances. Along the way, the reader is introduced to numerous individual collaborators and the various motives that drove them. Notably, Cohen considers the different ways in which these activities were understood by those who perpetrated them; many did not consider their actions traitorous, and indeed, the definition of what constituted "collaboration" or "treason" would greatly expand over the course of the mandate. Much of this reflected ideological changes (which are addressed in Matthews' *Confronting an Empire, Constructing a Nation*) as nationalist sentiment became more pervasive, the list of activities deemed traitorous grew exponentially, particularly following the start of the Arab Revolt in 1936. It was not always about ideology, however, and Cohen effectively demonstrates how the application of the term "traitor" often constituted what in essence functioned as a political "tactic", one employed, for instance, by members of the rival Husayni and Nashashibi camps in an effort to tar their respective political opponents.

While it is helpful if the reader has some prior knowledge regarding the general contour of developments during the mandate period, for the most part the author does a good job situating his topic within the context of larger events. That said, uninformed readers could come away with an exaggerated notion about the extent to which collaboration took place and the overall importance of collaboration within the larger scheme of things. Arguably, this is not entirely the fault of the author, but rather reflects the focus of the book. Still, one cannot help wondering if a little more care could have been taken in this respect; for instance, when considering the Bedouin—often targeted by Zionist operatives for collaboration—Cohen might have brought home more forcibly the fact that they were hardly representative of the larger Arab population of Palestine, whether politically, socially, culturally or, for that matter, numerically. A second, related criticism is Cohen's tendency to associate the nationalist movement with the more extremist Husayni camp; too often, the latter's definition of what constituted traitorous activity—something often motivated by a desire to undermine their more moderate political rivals—seems taken at face value. One wonders if this tendency might not reflect an over-reliance on materials derived of the Zionist Archives. Whatever its flaws, the work is highly recommended, not least for focusing on a subject not often dealt with in such a thorough fashion, and in a way that makes it relevant to the larger history of British mandate Palestine.

Weldon C. Matthews' *Confronting an Empire, Constructing a Nation: Arab Nationalists and Popular Politics in Mandate Palestine* provides a different take on Palestinian nationalism. Traditionally, historical studies on Palestinian nationalism during the mandate era have focused on notable politics, often leaving one with the impression that Palestinian nationalist sensibility was something largely restricted to the traditional elite. While there might have been some truth to this early on (though even this is questionable; see, for instance, Rashid Khalidi's *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*), certainly by the later part of the mandate, much had changed and Palestinian nationalism had begun to emerge as a movement with a much broader appeal. Through an examination of the Arab Istiqlal Party in Palestine—which first became prominent around 1933—

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Matthews fills in what has to some extent been a gap in the literature regarding the transformation of Palestinian nationalism into a popular movement.

Certainly the book is well researched enough, making as it does extensive use of British and Zionist archival documents, as well as the mandate-era Arabic-language press. Equally important, Matthews does an extremely good job rooting his discussion in a larger historical and theoretical context. The rise of the Istiqlal Party is presented as a response to the inability of the traditional leadership to respond adequately to the political crises of Zionism and British colonialism. This created an opening for new forms of political expression, whereby "new institutions and modes of political advocacy [were] developed to make demands on the government" (Matthews, 3). The Istiqlal Party was just such an institution, one founded on exactly these new modes of political advocacy. All of this is examined within the context of the changing relationship between an evolving "public" (the antecedents of which Matthews traces to reforms initiated during the final century of Ottoman rule), the modern bureaucratic state (drastically redefined in connection with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the advent of British colonial rule), and a burgeoning nationalism.

In addition to making sense of where the Istiqlal Party fit within the broader scheme of mandate Palestine's history, for the reader already familiar with the larger events the book adds another dimension to our understanding of mandate-era notable politics, a politics founded in large part on the willingness of notables to cooperate with the mandate administration. Matthews does a good job situating this aspect of notable politics within the context of broader British colonial policy, which generally sought to buttress existing elites—often on a sectarian basis—as a means of facilitating its indirect rule. The Istiqlal party came to represent a counterpoint to this particular mode of politics, promoting the nation-state as the appropriate political community, and thus helping to create a "public sphere" of political engagement, one that encompassed the so-called masses. While at times it may seem that Matthews provides more background than necessary, both historically and theoretically, it does help the reader better situate the story within the larger narratives of European colonisation, the global spread of nationalist ideology, and the eventual process of decolonisation. What was happening in Palestine was hardly unique, and in many respects reflected developments then taking place on a global scale. Matthews succeeds admirably in getting this across; given the extent to which Westerners even now are inclined to see developments in the Middle East, and in Palestine in particular, as somehow peculiar to that part of the world (too often, as something Islamic), this is perhaps no small thing.

Sluglett's *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country* is a reissue of a book first published in 1976. For the most part, the book has been left pretty much intact, though some parts were apparently changed to reflect the current situation in Iraq. Indeed, the decision to release it anew was largely inspired by the most recent Gulf War and its still evolving legacy; what quickly becomes apparent, even without reading the author's preface to the second edition, is that many of the problems currently confronting the Americans also confronted the British when they first created the Iraqi state after the First World War. Foremost among these was (and remains) how to maintain American/British interests in the country while at the same time devising "a system of control that could be exercised as unobtrusively and cheaply as possible" (Sluglett, xvi).

To be sure, then, this book is less a history of Iraq than of British colonialism in that country. (In this respect, the title of the book should be taken quite literally.) It is first and foremost the story of Britain's attempt at maintaining British interests in Iraq while at the same time adapting to the new realities engendered by Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points and his emphasis on the right of national self-determination and international cooperation. In some ways, this is the most fascinating aspect of the book, as it speaks to a larger transformation, one that extended well beyond the borders of Iraq. The old order of direct colonial control, wherein the victors of a conflict had an unquestioned right to the spoils, and where the sensibilities of indigenous peoples were of little consequence, was to be replaced by a new order,

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one based on the principle of self-determination. The mandates in many respects represented a compromise between the two, something well illustrated in Sluglett's book.

In its particulars, this is a diplomatic history in which the primary focus is on British administrators and their relationship with Whitehall and Iraqis play a secondary role, something reflected in the fact that the bulk of the primary sources are British colonial documents. This hardly makes the book any less valuable, certainly to the extent that lessons might be derived with respect to the current American occupation. Exactly this purpose would seem implicit in the decision to re-release the book (and is explicit in the author's preface, though with some qualification). As a political history of the more traditional variety, it is worth noting also that it is one expertly crafted; Sluglett does an admirable job maintaining a cogent narrative in spite of the large number of characters involved.

Indeed, *Britain in Iraq* is particularly recommended for those hoping to arrive at a better understanding of current events in Iraq. Much as the British public questioned a continued British presence in Iraq, an often sceptical public confronts the current American administration. The U.S. government faces the same dilemmas that its British precursor did: how to maintain American interests in the region at minimum cost in terms of lives and treasure and how to find the balance between a government on the one hand sufficiently dependent on the United States so as to secure American interests, while on the other hand credible enough to enjoy the support of the Iraqi people. Certainly it will leave readers wondering why many of those sent over to take part in Iraq's reconstruction were prepped using books dealing with the reconstructions of Germany and Japan post-World War II when a book like this has been available since 1976.

Fieldhouse's *Western Imperialism in the Middle East, 1914-1958* functions as an excellent survey of the mandate history of the Middle East, not only in terms of the events leading up to and encompassing developments during the inter-war period, but as an overview of the historiography of the subject. This is evident from the start, in Fieldhouse's examination of the state of affairs in the Ottoman Empire just prior to the First World War (was it really the "Sick Man of Europe"?) and of the rise of Arab nationalism. With respect to the latter, in particular, Fieldhouse does an excellent job examining the different phases through which the study of Arab nationalism has passed: starting with George Antonius, who saw Arab nationalism as something already full blown as of the start of the First World War; through C. Ernest Dawn who argued that Arab nationalist activity prior to the war did not reflect how the vast majority of Arabic speaking Muslims in the Ottoman Empire identified themselves; to more recently, Rashid Khalidi, who strikes a balance between the two, one that acknowledges Dawn's argument regarding the minor political role played by Arab nationalist groups prior to the First World War, while simultaneously making a compelling case for a growing sense of Arab cultural identity as represented by the then burgeoning Arabic-language press.

After providing some basic background, the book examines each mandate in turn, usually framing discussion around certain key questions: Was the collapse of the Ottoman Empire really inevitable? What were the aims and war strategies of the British and French? Why did the British position in Iraq eventually crumble? Why, in the end, was Syria so acquiescent to French political control? While at times Fieldhouse is perhaps overly speculative in his conclusions, on the whole this approach works to the book's advantage. Among other things, it provides a useful framework for the reader who desires more than a simple chronological accounting of events, while providing a touchstone for considering, in each case, the related historiography and the manner in which it has evolved. As such, it would certainly serve as a good primer for the reader not already familiar with the history in question. (I might note here that, much as one might expect of a primer, it makes limited use of primary sources.) Fieldhouse also writes lucidly and in general strikes a good balance in terms of providing the right level of detail while keeping the focus on broader developments. There is the occasional gap in the narrative, but not enough to prevent the reader from getting a sense of the bigger picture.

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In terms of substance, it is at heart a political history, though one that focuses more on structural elements than on the individuals involved (as with Sluglett's *Britain in Iraq*, for instance). Overall, it does a fairly good job accounting for broader social factors, particularly those pertinent to the situation on the ground. Having said that, it is, much as with Sluglett's work, a European story, primarily concerned with the British and French presence in the region, and the manner in which they sought to uphold their interests there. To the extent that Arab reactions are considered, it is usually in terms of how these informed British and French policy. This does not necessarily make it a less worthwhile read, but does make it less than the comprehensive history of the mandates the book claims to be (inasmuch as it claims to represent both European and Arab perspectives).

All four titles have much to recommend them, and in many respects, complement one another nicely. One might even suggest that, assuming the reader follows the order Fieldhouse, Matthews, Cohen, and Sluglett, collectively they would serve quite well as an introduction to the mandate history of the Middle East, albeit with an emphasis on the British experience.

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