

Western Powers in the Middle East (part 2)

Britain's Role After the First World War

The outbreak of the First World War saw Britain in a very powerful position in the Middle East: Britain had dominated the Persian Gulf since the 1820's, she had held Aden since 1839; and Egypt, Sudan and Kuwait were under its control. During the war she entered into treaty relations with Sharif Hussain of Makkah, Ibn Saud of the Najd, and Idris Sayyid of Sabya (north of the Yemen). By the end of the war Britain was in control of all of the territory later to be known as Iraq, Transjordan and Palestine.

Britain's Arab Policy

Britain's policy in the Middle East was one framed by the Arab Bureau, which had been formed in 1916. Because of the involvement of several major European powers in the area. Britain's policy was to break up the Ottoman Islamic state into buffer states wherein Britain would work through its regional clients.

The Arab revolt against the Ottoman state had been organised around Sharif Hussain of Makkah and his sons Faisal and Abdullah. Ibn Saud was paid to ensure his neutrality.

British-French Rivalry

With the division of the Ottoman state governates, Britain fell into conflict with the French. France held that Britain had agreed to an equitable division of the Ottoman state's territories, but Britain had promised to Sharif Hussain an independent state in Syria. France believed Britain's support of the Arabs was a plan to create a local puppet (Sharif Hussain's son, Faisal) who would dismantle France's interests in the Levant (Lebanon and Syria). In July 1920 France decided to act. The French army marched on Damascus, dismissing Faisal in the process.

Syria had been declared an independent constitutional monarchy by the Syrian Congress in March 1920 and Faisal was declared King of Syria and his brother, Abdullah, declared King of Iraq. With Faisal dismissed from Syria by France, Britain chose Faisal as King of Iraq and Abdullah was asked to give way in favour of his brother. In return Abdullah was made Amir of Transjordan.

Although France was Britain's major rival in the Middle East, the manner in which France has established herself in Syria effectively limited her diplomatic control over the area. Apart from Algeria, France's only real power base, in terms of political support came from the Christian Maronites of Lebanon. However, the Maronites desire for a politically separate entity in Lebanon was out of tune with a policy, pursued by Britain, of creating and supporting a number of large political units that would replace the Ottoman state.

Between the First and Second World Wars Britain acted as king-maker and general arbiter for the region. France was unable to develop with Arab political leaders the same relationship Britain had cultivated with the Hashemites.

Germany's occupation of France during the Second World War severely weakened France's position in the Middle East. Notwithstanding the best efforts of de Gaulle and the Free French, France could not stand up to the British. Lebanese and Syrian independence was recognised by the United Nations and France was forced to withdraw from the area at the end of the war. Her last troops withdrawing from the area in 1946.

The interwar years saw Britain develop its clients. Britain concluded the Anglo-Iraq Treaty of 1930 which provided Britain with military bases, transit rights, mutual aid in war and consultation on foreign policy. In 1936 she negotiated a treaty with Egypt obtaining in the process the required base and transit rights. Britain also drew up treaties that settled border disputes between its clients Iraq and Turkey, and Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

Between the fall of France in June 1940 and the Battle of El-Alamein in October 1942 Britain's control of the area was briefly tested by Hitler and Mussolini.

The Arab League

In May 1941 Anthony Eden had announced British support for any plan to bring about Arab unity. In December 1942 the very pro-British leader of Iraq Nuri al-Said announced his proposals for a Fertile Crescent unity. Thereafter in 1944, with the firm backing of Britain, delegates from Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Transjordan and Yemen (as well as observers from Palestine and the Maghrib) produced the basis of the Arab League which came into existence in the following year. Through this forum, made up of its clients, Britain hoped to control the area.

Britain invites the U.S.

Britain's efforts in the Second World War had exhausted her. The cost of maintaining its presence in the area was one that it could no longer afford. Furthermore, Russia was making major efforts to re-establish its standing as a major power in the area. The Soviet threat in Iran, Turkey and Greece in particular forced Britain into inviting America into the area. The United States overwhelming economic and military power provided Britain with the resources it needed to keep Russia out of the area. However, once in, America was not willing to play the role of passive partner.

Conclusion

This very brief overview of Britain's role in the region since 1918 demonstrates that Great outside powers really determine developments in the Middle East. The region's political leaders are puppets. Therefore to understand the disputes in the region one has to make reference to a complex relationship of international and local interests. These factors will become even clearer in subsequent issues when we explore the Palestinian question and the development of America as the region's dominant power.

Overview of events covered in the article:

1920 - British Mandates to Iraq, Transjordan and Palestine. French Mandate to Lebanon and Syria.

1921 - Abdullah recognised as Amir of Transjordan, Faisal made King of Iraq.

1924 - Attaturk abolishes the Khilafah.

1926 - Ibn Saud proclaimed King of Hijaz.

1927 - British recognition of independent Ibn Saud's Kingdom.

1930 - Britain terminates Mandate in Iraq and sponsors Iraq's membership of League of Nations.

1932 - Ibn Saud's Kingdom named Saudi Arabia.

1933 - King Faisal of Iraq dies and is replaced by his son Ghazi.

1934 - War between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, ended by British mediation with border changes favouring Saudi Arabia.

1936 - Beginning of Arab revolt in Palestine. Bakr Sadiqi coup in Iraq.

1937 - Peel Commission proposes partition in Palestine.

1939 - Anglo-Turkish Treaty. White Paper on Palestine.

1940 - Rashid Ali government formed in Iraq.

1941 - British military intervention in Iraq, overthrowing Rashid Ali's government.

1942 - British impose Wafd Party government on King Faruk. Jews demand Jewish state.

1945 - Arab League pact signed in Cairo.

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