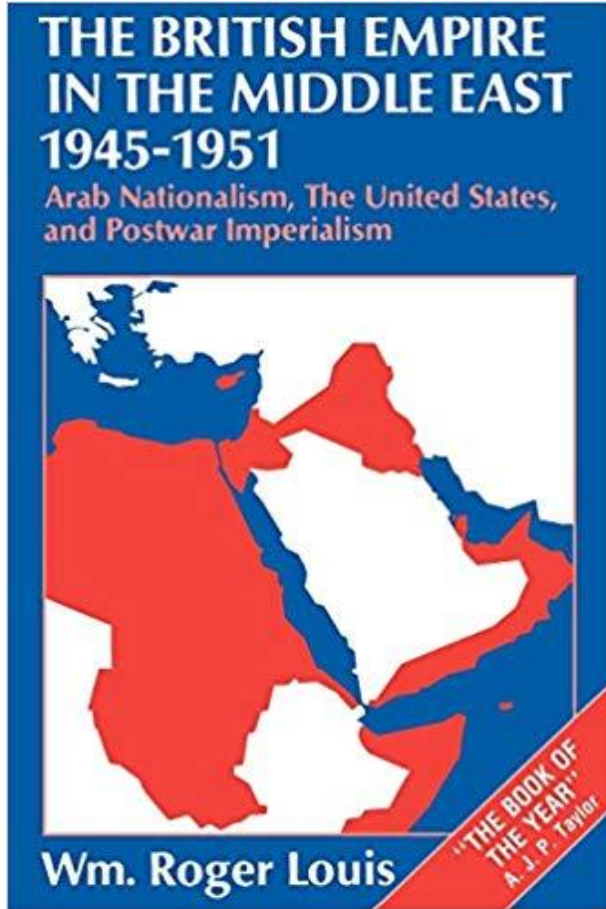


Book Review

Wm. Roger Louis, **The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945-1951: Arab Nationalism, The United States, and Post-war Imperialism**, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).
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“The British Empire in the Middle East” is a comprehensive book written on the British disengagement in the Middle East during the period of the Labour government 1945-51 by Roger Louis. Louis, in this book, discusses the changing nature of British influence in the Middle East. So the book, in a sense, is a comment on the British not only to Arab nationalism but also to Jewish and Iranian nationalism. Above all the book deals with the Anglo-Egyptian conflict over the Canal Zone and the question of British evacuation. Although the book does not systematically examine the Middle Eastern policy of the United States, sometimes the American point of view was focussed in order to explain the dilemmas which the British faced, especially in case of the Palestine problem. Anglo-American efforts to resolve the problem form a major part of the book. The book, which is mainly based on manuscript sources and private papers, can be divided into five parts.

Part one is, in a sense, a summary of the whole book. In this part Louis discusses the

changing of the British Middle Eastern policy in the era of unprecedented global change. The approach of the Labour government to the Middle Eastern issues are generally examined in the Post-war era. The history of the British Empire in the Middle East during the period of the Labour government, say Louis, may be interpreted as the unsuccessful attempt to prevent the passing of the initiative from the “moderate nationalists” to the “anti-British extremists” and to sustain British influence by economic and social reforms in order to maintain Britain’s position as a “world power” with predominant place in the Middle East. So non-intervention and equal partnership were regarded as an alternative means of preserving British power by the Labour government.

The point of view of the Labour government, especially of the statesmen who dominates much of the book, Ernest Bevin, and Labour’s “grand strategy” are explained on the Middle

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Eastern conflicts. In short, in the Post-war era the aim of the Labour government was to preserve the British economic and strategic interests in the Middle East.

Louis points out, therefore, the economic and strategic significance of the Middle East for the British Empire. In addition, Louis discusses how British Middle Eastern policy was affected by the economic difficulties which the British faced in the Post-war era.

The “Northern Tier”, which covers Turkey, Greece and Persia, forms the second part of the book. In this part, Louis discusses the Russian expansionist movements towards these countries and the British efforts to prevent the movements. For the British the importance of the countries is pointed out in order to preserve the British interests in the Middle east from the Russian expansion.

Louis examines separately the significance of each country to the British: In the case of Turkey, the Russian demands on the eastern provinces of Turkey and the Straits. Although the possible expansion of the Russians into the Mediterranean was a crucial matter for the British in the early Post-war era, it was a significant issue for Turkey as well.

For the British, the issue of the Straits, say Louis, was the preservation of the status quo. They wished to limit the Post-war negotiations to the Straits themselves because otherwise they might be forced to discuss Suez (or Gibraltar, or both), which they wished to avoid at any cost. The invasion of Turkey by the Soviet Union might be a first step to Russian expansion into the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East. Turkey might be holding the line against Russian expansion and Communism. So maintaining the independence of Turkey was one of the foundations of British foreign policy in the Post-war era.

In order to understand the Post-war Iranian crisis, says Louis, it is important to bear in mind the wartime chronology. Louis explains that after the Anglo- Soviet invasion of 1941, the British, Iranian and Soviet governments concluded an agreement in January 1942 by which troops would be withdrawn six months after the end of the war. But the Russians refused to withdraw the troops at the end of the war. That was a problem between two countries, Britain and the Soviet Union.

The British pursued the issue because Iran was, at that time, the largest oil producer in the Middle East and was vital to British Post-war economic recovery. Louis discusses the Russian motivations in Iran and says that it was just as possible to argue that the Russians had much less of a vital interest in Persian oil than did Britain and sought on oil concession less because of its importance to the Soviet economy than because they aimed at transforming Iran into a Soviet satellite.

The question of Greece, in the Post-war era, and the decisions taken about the future of Greece might determine the future of the British in the Middle East, or for that matter western civilization itself. In Greece there were principles of liberty and freedom at stake which symbolized, in British eyes, the justification of the Second World War. It is useful to bear in mind these questions, in relation to the specific purpose of examining the connection between Greece and the Middle East, because in the Post-war controversy about Greece may be found an indication of the vitality of the British Empire and Commonwealth and the sense of British purpose not only in the Middle East but throughout the world. That is the point which is discussed in the case of Greece by Louis.

In part three, Louis examines the turning points in the British defence of the Middle East. One in particular, the Arab-Israeli war of 1948, deeply affected Britain's Post-war relations with the Arab states. Louis also points out the strategic importance of the air bases such as Suez, Cyrenaica and Cyprus in the British Middle Eastern defence policy. Louis, after a general discussion about the turning points affected the British Middle Eastern policy, examines these points separately in detail.

In the case of the Arab League Louis quotes, from Cecil Hourani, that the Arab League was merely a British "trick to oust France from the Levant" and also against the Zionist interpretation prevalent in the United States that the Arab League had been invented by the British in order to frustrate the establishment of a Jewish state. In addition, Louis points out the controversy over the leadership of the Arab League between Egypt and Iraq and both countries attempt to use the league to their own benefit. Louis discusses, under the title of independence in Syria and Lebanon, the significance of the crisis of 1945 and examines the importance of the Levant for the French and the British.

The question of oil and the accommodation of the United States (in Saudi Arabia), American economic and strategic interests and triple relations between those countries which are the United States, Britain and Saudi Arabia are the themes of discussion in the Saudi Arabia section in the book. In part three other themes, argues Louis, are the importance of Cyprus in the strategic security of the Eastern Mediterranean and the cession of Cyprus to Greece, for the British the of the significance of Egypt and the issues of the British evacuation and the unity of the Nile valley, the state of the former Italian colonies and their importance for the British strategic aims in the Middle East, the question of Iraqi nationalism and Transjordan.

The Palestine problem, which forms the only theme of part four of the book, was a major disruptive element in the Post-war Middle Eastern controversies for the British. In this part Louis at first examines the roots of the Palestine problem for the British and the other two concerned communities which are Arabs and Jews. Louis points out the Balfour declaration of 1917 by which in Palestine a "National Home" was promised to the Jewish people. On almost all Middle Eastern questions the British and American governments were, says Louis, basically in agreement with the exception of the question of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine. On this question, Anglo-American relations were affected by the Zionist movement and anti-colonial tradition in the United States. Another disagreement between the two countries was the admission of Jewish refugees (100.000) into Palestine. Louis, nevertheless, discusses Britain's Palestine policy and its architect who was Ernest Bevin. Bevin's basic aim was taken as a common British aspiration of the area, says Louis.

Louis discusses the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry, which was formed to investigate the Palestine question, and its report which, at the end of the inquiry, was submitted to Attlee and Truman that recommended the immediate admission of the 100.000 refugees into Palestine and the solution of a binational state in which neither Arabs nor Jews would predominate. Louis examines the evolution of American policy and its reasons from the American point of view and points out the importance of Truman's statement which was declared on the eve of Yom Kippur. It was, says Louis, an important date in the history of Zionist movement and British imperialism in the Middle East. The British response to

Truman's Yom Kippur statement is also discussed from the vantage point of Attlee and Bevin.

In February 1947 the British decided to refer the Palestine issue to the United Nations. This move was, says Louis, not intended as an abandonment of the mandate but rather as an attempt to win international endorsement for a binational solution in Palestine. But the United Nations decided in favour of partition on the 29th of November 1947. After the vote in the United Nations the British set the time of the transfer of power for the 15th of May 1948. So the question was to whom the power should be transferred. The British proposed a trusteeship regime in which United Nations representatives would co-operate with British officials in at least maintaining public services. Louis points out that the Arabs would oppose trusteeship because it would postpone independence of a unitary Palestinian state; and the Jews would reject trusteeship because it would rule out partition. At the end of part four, Louis examines the Arab-Israeli war of 1948. He examines the reasons for the war and the results for Arabs, Jews, British and Americans.

In part five, which is the final chapter of the book, Louis discusses the Middle Eastern controversies in the 1949-51 period. He points out at first the Deir Yassin massacre in 1948 and says that it is a touchstone of historical controversy in the Middle East. After the end of the Arab-Israeli war of 1948 the situation of the Arab states and the British influence, which was deeply affected by the Arab-Israeli war of 1948, in the Middle East are examined by Louis. The rising of nationalist movements such as Egyptian and Iranian and the British efforts to conciliate these movements and to stay as a predominant power in the Middle East formed the core of the problems in the 1949-51 period.

The project of "Greater Syria" and the rivalries of the Arab states between themselves such as Hashemite-Saudi, oil, defence and economic viability and political stability are amongst the discussion themes of the last chapter of the book.

The year 1949 was, says Louis, a turning point in the history of British economic aid to the Middle East not only because of the resolution of the Palestine problem but also because it had taken nearly four years to complete the economic surveys necessary to persuade the Arab governments to put plans into action. For instance, in Iraq British officials who believed that collaboration with Nuri Pasha would be the best hope of achieving economic and social reforms and thereby averting revolution. For the British it was, says Louis, well-known throughout the Middle East that they were equally dependent on Nuri. However, economic aid was a means of sustaining British power from the British point of view.

The Aramco-Saudi fifty-fifty profit-sharing agreement of December 1950 signified as a great revolution in the economic affairs of the Middle East. Louis says that the quick and decisive action by Aramco helped to solve one set of problems, but in doing so the Americans set off a chain of crises for the British, not only in Iran but also in Iraq, Kuwait and Bahrain. Nevertheless, within the year 1951 all of the major oil producing states of the Middle East except Iran were, says Louis, brought into the fifty-fifty system of profit-sharing. The Iranians demanded a share of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company's profit not only in Iran but throughout the world and later demanded that the company be nationalized. That was a crucial problem between the British and the Iranians at the end of the period of the Labour government. Louis quotes from Sir Francis Shepherd that the British had failed to understand the nature of Asian

nationalism generally and therefore had been unable to come to terms with the Iranian nationalists. However, the British understood that the Iran of 1951 was not the Persia of 1901. In 1951 the withdrawal from Iran was, says Louis, merely accepted as an indication of British weakness and decline.

Louis also discusses the controversy between the British and Egyptians over the Canal Zone and Sudan and says that Egypt, more than any other issue, continued to dominate British thought about the Middle East. The British justified, says Louis, the occupation of the Canal Zone on the basis of the 1936 treaty but in 1946 they offered to withdraw British troops from Egyptian soil and to recognize the symbolic sovereignty of Egypt over the Sudan. But during the following years they wanted to maintain a presence in the Canal Zone and Sudan because of their importance for the British strategic and economic interests in the Middle East. Although they proposed a “Middle East Command” in which the Arab League states, Israel, Turkey, Iran and possibly Greece would be integrated. However, the plans for the Middle East Command came to nothing because of Egypt’s rejection. The Egyptians considered it as a camouflage of the continued occupation. The only tangible achievement of a general nature in the 1949-51 period was, says Louis, the “Tripartite Declaration” of May 1950. From the British point of view, the purpose of the declaration was to accommodate Israel as well as to stabilize the Arab countries in a pro-western alignment.

In the last section of part five of the book, which is the conclusion of the whole book, Louis examines the Middle East and the fall of the Labour government in 1951. Louis again points out that the principle theme of the book has been Labour’s “grand strategy” of non-intervention and the conciliation of the moderate nationalists. The purpose was to preserve British power by preventing the initiative from passing to anti-British extremists.

Consequently, he says that in the 1940s the problem the British faced in the Middle East had been how to deal with the old regimes. In the 1950s, it became a question of how to cope with the revolutionary Middle East.