

Allies once but forever rivals

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Was the Franco-British rivalry in the Middle East the driving force behind the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? After the First World War, as they were determined to hold on to their mandates—Syria and Lebanon for France, Iraq and Palestine for Britain—the two countries secretly worked to destroy each other by fuelling revolts and terrorism.

Reviewed: James Barr, *A Line in the Sand: The Anglo-French Struggle for the Middle East, 1914-1948*, New York, Norton, 2012, 264 p., \$29.95.

With *A Line in the Sand*, James Barr reassesses the rivalry between Britain and France in the Middle East during the first half of the twentieth century. While many books have underlined the collusion between the imperial powers to deceive the Arabs during the First World War, James Barr strives to demonstrate the duplicity of Britain and France towards each other. By using both British and French sources— an approach which is all too rare—he sheds light on the subject in an original and relevant manner, but does not bring any fundamentally new element. Yet Barr stresses the fact that he has discovered something in the British archives. He argues that during the Second World War, Britain and France waged a “secret war” against each other in the Middle East. He explains that after being the victims of British plots to evict them from Syria and Lebanon, the French, willing to take their revenge, supported and armed Jewish terrorist groups in order to kick the British out of Palestine. But it seems that those events, which the author claims to reveal, are in fact well-known. We shall now examine Barr’s description of this Franco-British rivalry.

The First World War as Genesis

In the first part of his book, James Barr tells the story of how the French and the British shaped the contemporary Middle East during the First World War. The two countries were allied at the time, but mistrust pervaded their relationship. The Fashoda “incident” still lingered in the minds of both the British and the French, and the *Entente* which had come out of this conflict, far from being really “cordial”, was only meant to counter Germany’s rising power. The alliance between the latter and the Ottoman Empire prompted Britain and France to conclude a secret agreement which divided the Arab provinces of the “sick man of Europe”. On the British side, it was Mark Sykes, a young MP, who was responsible for the negotiations. As Barr underlines, Sykes’ expertise was largely self-proclaimed. Unable to speak Arabic or Turkish, his knowledge of the region was entirely based on the family trips he made there and the travel books he wrote. Sykes was thus the archetypal amateur.¹ On the French side, François Georges-Picot had to make sure the British would take into account his country’s interests, mainly to be found in Syria. Picot was a member of the Comité de l’Asie française, a colonial pressure group which promoted France’s presence in the Levant. Thanks to their pre-war economic investments and their educational, religious and cultural influence, the French were undoubtedly the dominant power in Syria² and intended to keep their privileged position. Contrary to what the author seems to suggest (p.9), the British were not happy with this situation, which they reluctantly accepted.

In fact, before the war, the British had had no other choice but to recognize the primacy of France’s influence in Syria because their fleet was dependent on the French in the Mediterranean.³ In May 1916, after bitter negotiations, the French finally obtained the “direct” administrative control of a zone spreading from the Lebanese seacoast up to Mosul and stretching northwards over Anatolia. Britain won the direct control of the Mesopotamian region, from Basra in the south to Baghdad in the north, as well as that of the port of Haifa in Palestine. A few months before (from July 1915 to January 1916), through a series of letters exchanged between Henry MacMahon (the British High Commissioner in Egypt) and Hussein (*sharif* of Mecca and chief of the Hashemite dynasty), the British had intimated—in a

¹ This feature appears in the title of the biography Roger Adelson wrote about Sykes: *Mark Sykes: Portrait of an Amateur*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1975.

² See Henry Laurens “La France du Levant,” in *Orientales III*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2004, p. 128-129.

³ See Rashid Khalidi, *British policy towards Syria and Palestine, 1906-1914*, London, Ithaca Press, 1980, p. 92-93.

deliberately ambiguous manner—that they could reward Hussein for his role in the Arab revolt with the creation of an “independent” Arab kingdom on which he would reign after the war. However, in addition to the directly administrated zones, the Sykes-Picot agreement also split the territory promised to Hussein into two zones of “influence”, one French (in the north), the other British (in the south). The French part was called “Syria” and the British part “Arabia,” a division which refers to a mental representation which permeated the thinking of Sykes and other British but which the author fails to mention. On the one hand, the Levantine part of the Middle East, whose inhabitants often spoke French, was considered by the British as a melting-pot of the various Mediterranean civilisations. On the other hand, they saw the inland and the desert part of that region—the Bedouin territory—as the only pure and truly authentic Arab space.⁴ As they feared to damage their alliance with the French and to be deprived of the help of Hussein (who alone was able to counter the Ottoman Sultan’s call to *Jihad*), the British found themselves caught in the trap they had created. While supporting the Arab revolt from a military point of view, they hoped it would fail politically. But they had to reckon with Thomas Edward Lawrence, a British officer involved in the revolt with the Hashemites who was determined to rob the French of their Syrian trophy by seeing to it that the Arabs reach Damascus first. This happened on October 1st, 1918 and Faisal, Hussein’s second son, established an Arab administration in Syria.

The author then shows that as soon as the war was over, tensions appeared between the British and the French. Emboldened by their Middle Eastern successes, the British were willing to revise the treaty they had negotiated with the French, especially after they discovered that Mosul, which was in the French zone, was on oil-rich territory. They were also reluctant to give up Palestine. The support to Zionism, through the Balfour Declaration of November 2nd, 1917, was therefore a way to undermine the arrangement with the French, and to establish a foothold in a territory that was strategic given its proximity to Egypt and the Suez Canal. However, one should not see—as Barr sometimes does (p. x or p. 357)—this desire to thwart France’s ambitions as the sole explanation for the British support to Zionism. Other reasons motivated the British choice to encourage the creation of a Jewish national home in Palestine. For example, Sykes thought that the large Jewish population of Russia would have enough influence on the 1917 revolutionary government to convince its leaders not to withdraw from the war. He also believed that the British support to an oppressed people

⁴ About this division between the Levant and the “purely” Arab territory, see Henry Laurens, “La Révolte arabe, T.E. Lawrence et la création de la Transjordanie,” in *Orientales III*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2004, p. 190-191.

would induce the Americans to accept British ambitions in the Middle East after the war.⁵ Finally, the renewed interest for the Holy Land during the Victorian era—with the publication of travel books, geographical works or photographs used to illustrate the Bible—reinforced a British tradition of philosemitism or Christian Zionism.⁶ The French were determined not to yield to British ambitions. Faced with the pressure of the colonial groups, Clemenceau had to assert France's rights in Syria. The Americans were also a problem since Wilson did not recognize the validity of the Sykes-Picot agreement. With his Fourteen Points, the President put peoples' right to self-determination on the agenda. However, Barr probably overestimates Wilson's anti-imperialism (p.x), for even though he did not view the unrelenting colonialism of Britain and France favourably, he did not have it in mind to promote a complete independence for the Arab provinces. Rather, he considered giving them a degree of autonomy within the general framework of a new international institution.⁷ This vision led to the system of the League of Nations mandates, which can be considered as an attempt to create a halfway house between the imperial interests of the old European powers and the American willingness to promote the right to self-determination. In the end, France gave up Mosul and Palestine in exchange for a share in the profits of Iraqi oil and the recognition of her domination of Syria.

In accordance with this plan, the mandates for Syria and Lebanon were attributed to France during the San Remo Conference of April 1920, while Britain obtained a similar status in Iraq and Palestine. Faisal found himself alone to face the French, who eventually ousted him in July 1920 after the battle of Maysalun. From then on, Lawrence (now "of Arabia") relentlessly defended the cause of his champion. In a *Times* article, he described him as "the greatest Arab leader since Saladin" (p. 103). Convinced by some of Lawrence's arguments, Churchill offered to "re-make" Faisal king (this time of Iraq, and within the framework of the mandate), a plan which Faisal accepted. Meanwhile, the British also entrusted his brother Abdullah with a short-term Emirate (on the basis of a six-month trial period) in Transjordan,⁸ a region formally attached to the British mandate in Palestine. Those decisions infuriated the French in Syria, who resented being surrounded by territories under British domination and

⁵ See David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace, Creating the Modern Middle East, 1914-1922*, London, André Deutsch, 1989, p. 287.

⁶ Karl Meyer and Shareen Blair Brysac mention this tradition in the chapter on Mark Sykes in their book *Kingmakers, The Invention of the Modern Middle East*, New York, Norton, 2008.

⁷ See Henry Laurens, "San Remo, la France et la Palestine," in *Orientales II*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2004, p. 180. One can notice that with regard to the Arab territories, Wilson mentions an "autonomous development" (12th point), while he uses the word "independence" for the Balkans (11th point) or for Poland (13th point).

⁸ Which became Jordan after its independence in 1948.

formally headed by Hashemites (except in Palestine), whom they considered as British “creatures.” They also feared that Faisal and Abdullah might harm their interests through a potential collusion with the nationalists in Syria. According to Barr, this British move lies at the root of the discord between the two “neighbours.” In the Middle East, from then on, suspicion pervaded the relationship between France and Britain, once allies but forever rivals.

Rivalry between Mandatory Powers

In the second part of his book, Barr sets out to relate the history of France and Britain in their respective mandates by highlighting the sticking points between the two powers. The first of them was the British refusal to chase and extradite from Transjordan those who in 1921 attacked and almost killed General Gouraud, the French High Commissioner in Syria and Lebanon. The French were also irritated by the fact that during the 1925-1927 revolt in Syria, Britain gave the Druzes political asylum, and the latter once again took refuge in Transjordan. The British consul in Damascus, Salisbury-Jones, even exploited the revolt for political ends by portraying it in the press as a backlash against French misgovernment. Barr concludes that the British did all they could to make the rebellion last in order to oust the French from Syria (p. 142). Before putting Faisal and Abdallah on their respective thrones, the British had insisted that they should abandon any claim to Syria in order not to upset the French. But the British did not want to take the political risk of being publicly associated with the French government in Syria, which was extremely unpopular, according to the author. To illustrate his point, he quotes a British officer according to whom the French had an archaic way of ruling the natives (p. 120). Barr even states that in comparison with the French, whose rule was “arbitrary, confessional, exploitative, and corrupt” (p. 119), the British seemed “enlightened” (p.121).

Yet one can doubt the fact that the British, who in 1920 did not hesitate to bomb neighbouring Iraq for months, were indeed perceived by the Syrians or any of the inhabitants of the region as “enlightened.” Thus, Barr voices the impressions of the “men on the spot” but he also seems to take their comments at face value. In fact, what the British said about the French and what the French said about the British must be interpreted as the way through which the two rivals sought to reassure themselves about their own, often illusive popularity. Each country thus projected onto the other an idealised—yet distorted—image of the nature and the form of its power, as well as of the reception of that power by the local populations.

With the Great Arab Revolt (the revolt of the Palestinian Arabs in 1936-1939), the French were in their turn able to put a spoke in the wheel of the British. They refused to hand over the Palestinian fugitives who crossed the border into Syria and the British were convinced that they received help from the French authorities there. Barr states (p.154) that this French reluctance to cooperate “profoundly shaped” the response of the British, who got involved in guerrilla operations and resorted to tactics which as the author stresses (p.174) were reminiscent of those the Black and Tans had used in Ireland. However, while the French non-assistance may have increased the British sense of frustration, one can doubt the fact that the repression would have been less violent had the French proved more willing to help. In fact that violence was certainly inherent to the nature of the rebellion and the conditions on the ground and did not necessarily depend on the external context. As it had twenty-five years before, war brought Britain and France closer together, despite their mutual suspicion.

That period was a turning-point in the Franco-British relationship in the Middle East since the two countries reached yet another level in their common hostility. In 1940 however, after the fall of France, the alliance between the British and the Free French was essential since the Germans, who could use the air bases of Vichy France in the Levant, threatened the whole British Middle East. De Gaulle had to rely on his British allies but he feared their ambitions in Syria and Lebanon. General Catroux, one of his few supporters, raised the idea of granting independence to Syria and Lebanon after the war in order to obtain the support of the local populations in case of a military operation against Vichy in the Levant. The British, hoping to live down their difficulties in Palestine and to restore their image in the Arab world, decided to vouch for the French offer in order to bind De Gaulle to his promise after the war. Thus, the British and the Free French jointly fought for the liberation of the Levant in June 1941. However, the tensions resurfaced right after the operations. Indeed, the Syrian nationalists appealed to the British, who had promised not to let the French re-establish themselves in the Levant. The British were exasperated by the attitude of De Gaulle, who sometimes claimed to represent the whole of France, and sometimes argued that it was not in his power to put an end to the mandates. In 1943, the French eventually organized elections, but when the nationalists won them, they arrested the Lebanese President and Prime Minister and censored the press. For Churchill, such a situation was unacceptable. However, the British government in London also understood that De Gaulle wanted to negotiate a treaty which would grant his country a privileged position in the Levant before considering its independence, just as the British had done with Iraq. The independence of the countries

formerly under British rule being limited by treaties, the complete independence of Syria and Lebanon would have set a dangerous precedent in the region. Barr interestingly shows (p.250) the difference of point of view between the government in London and the « man on the spot », in this case Edward Louis Spears, the British Minister Plenipotentiary in Syria and Lebanon. Spears had been De Gaulle's most loyal British supporter, but he now dreamt of Arab unity and he was determined to obtain the complete independence of the Levant from the French. The final crisis eventually erupted in April 1945, when the Syrian government asked for the transfer of the military command of the Troupes Spéciales du Levant, which were the last symbol of French authority in the country. Expecting the troubles their refusal would provoke, the French landed troops in Syria. The situation rapidly deteriorated and the French bombed Damascus. Churchill sent an ultimatum to De Gaulle—the French had to cease fire or the British would themselves resort to armed might. De Gaulle accused the British of having armed the Syrian police force so that they could fight the French. However, the pressure of the British and of the Americans left the French with no margin of manoeuvre and they were constrained to yield. They transferred the command of the Troupes Spéciales and the following year (1946), the British and French troops left the region. In Barr's description of that trial of strength, the United States only appears in the background, while the country played a crucial role in the independence of the Levant states.⁹ So ended the French mandates in Syria and Lebanon. De Gaulle was furious and Georges Bidault, his Foreign Minister, warned the British that they would soon meet the same fate. James Barr tells us (p. 252) that as soon as 1944, some members of the French administration had indeed found a way to “get their revenge”.

The Zionist Strategy of the French

With those events, the author is finally able to underline what he considers as the apex of the Franco-British rivalry in the region. In Palestine, Britain was now faced with the violence of Jewish terrorists who wanted to put an end to the mandate. Now, the French decided to support and arm those groups which wanted to kick the British out of Palestine, just as they did. James Barr dramatically describes that discovery in the prologue of his book, when he tells his readers how flabbergasted he was when he came across some documents which, as he mentions several times, were only recently declassified. He does not hesitate to share his feelings with his readers: while some British sacrificed their lives alongside the

⁹ See Henry Laurens, “Les États-Unis et l’Orient arabe,” in *Orientales III*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2004, p. 236.

Americans to liberate France, the latter chose to support those who in Palestine were busy killing British soldiers and administrators (p. ix). Thus it seems that in the East, the old saying according to which « the enemy of my enemy is my friend » actually played an important part. Barr describes the tactic of the Stern Group, members of which sought to persuade the French to fight their common enemy. In 1944, tensions and suspicions rose even further after the Stern Group murdered Lord Moyne, the British Resident Minister of State in the Middle East. As there were more and more terrorist attacks—the most spectacular of which certainly was the bombing of the King David Hotel in July 1946—the Irgoun and the Stern Group became increasingly isolated, thus having to look for support abroad. But it seems that the author is not really the first to reveal the French support to those organizations. In the review he wrote about a book by the French journalist Charles Enderlin, Régis Debray described those apparently well-known events in the following way: “Begin, a Polish Jew who survived the Gulag, Moshe Dayan as a young volunteer who received a Vichy French bullet in his eye on the Syrian front; in 1942, postwar Paris, where Gaullists and socialists—with the help of the French intelligence services—provided the Haganah and the Mossad with a rear base, the pathetic odyssey of the *Exodus*: here are, among a hundred others, a few well-known reminders.”¹⁰

The *Exodus* episode indeed signalled the end of the British mandate, which was confirmed by the United Nations’ vote in favour of the Palestine partition plan in November 1947, after the Zionist delegation successfully lobbied several countries, notably France. The British however, had not said their last word. Through Abdullah’s ambitions, they still hoped to keep their influence in the region, so they provided Egypt and Jordan with arms, while the French armed the Irgoun. Despite their numerical superiority, the Arab armies were defeated and the state of Israel was proclaimed in May 1948.

Barr’s conclusion is that neither France nor Britain emerges with much credit from that history (p. 359) since the rivalry between the two countries played a part in the escalation of a conflict which is still lasting today (p. xii). The author deserves credit for interweaving several points of view within the same side and between the two countries concerned. The various sources, the colourful personal anecdotes and the vividness of the narrative—the tone of which can be somewhat polemical, but the author used to be a journalist—all make for a

¹⁰ The review (written in French) can be read online on the [website of France 2](#).

pleasant reading. It seems quite certain that Barr goes a bit too far with his vengeance theory when he interprets (p. 359) De Gaulle's rejection of the British membership to the Common Market in 1963 as the consequence of this turbulent Middle Eastern history. The reasons for that refusal—the most famous of which was the fear that Britain in Europe might be the “Trojan horse” of the United States – must be looked for elsewhere. Above all, what the story related by Barr shows is that despite the different conceptions they had about their respective power in the region, the same imperial logic actually guided Britain and France. As they were firmly determined to preserve their interests, those two countries pushed that logic very far, up to a point of no-return.

First published in laviedesidees.fr. Translated from French by the author.

Published in booksandideas.net 7th September 2012

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