

Fieldhouse, David K.: *Western imperialism in the Middle East 1914–1958*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006. ISBN: 978-0-19-928737-6; 376 S.

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The central focus of this book is the effect British and French imperial rule had on the former Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire following its partition at the end of the First World War. Overall Fieldhouse provides an excellent, and most welcome, survey of the principal works of scholarship written in English. Little of the information presented is new, but students and instructors alike will appreciate Fieldhouse's ability to dispassionately and comparatively reflect on the key questions raised in the extant literature.

The work is basically divided into two parts. The first part consists of two chapters that examine political developments in the Ottoman Empire over the course of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The main focus is on the tension between the Ottoman drive for greater efficiency through internal reconstruction and growing Arab demands for autonomy or decentralization. Fieldhouse observes that Ottoman reform efforts did successfully result in a more centralized (if truncated) imperial administration. By 1914, the empire was far from being on its deathbed and indeed more than capable in dealing with Arab nationalist movements still in their infancy. It was therefore world war, not Ottoman sickness or Arab dissent, that dismembered the Ottoman Middle East into fragments. Accordingly, Fieldhouse goes on to discuss, in great detail, the eight year period of diplomacy and fighting between 1914 and 1922.

The second part of the book adopts a mandate-by-mandate case study approach, looking in turn at Iraq, Palestine (two chapters), Transjordan, Syria and Lebanon. Here, the focus is on the tension between, on the one hand, the will and the capacity of Britain or France to assert control over the newly created states and, on the other, the growing demands of the dependencies to declare themselves independent. As Fieldhouse himself

explains, because these were largely political processes a great deal of emphasis is placed on political structures and developments. Relatively little attention is therefore given to other imperial themes, such as economics or culture.

Fieldhouse's careful efforts to understand how local political factors shaped British and French colonial administrations result in an especially useful exploration of how the landed and urban elites of Ottoman times (the old notables, as described by Albert Hourani and others) were able to reclaim or maintain their dominance during the period of European rule. In his study of Iraq, for example, Fieldhouse examines the pattern of British accommodation with the remnants of a quasi-feudal social structure that prior to the war had in fact been in decline relative to a reforming Ottoman central government bent on increasing its power. However much these Iraqi elites might have complained at British rule, alien domination in fact worked very much to preserve the hierarchies of the ancien regime. Fieldhouse describes the period of mandates as „the last golden age of the indigenous elites“ (p. 346). Throughout the region this era would not be eclipsed until well after political independence from Western imperial rule, when the forces of radical change were finally able, thanks to the growing influence of the national armies, to express themselves.

In a twelve page conclusion, Fieldhouse sets himself the task of drawing up a sort of balance sheet of imperial rule. Underlying his assessments is the counter-factual question of whether the general well-being of the region turned out to be better under mandate rule than it might have done had it remained under Ottoman administration. His broad conclusion is that mandates, by leaving behind a multitude of potential conflicts throughout the Middle East, „sowed dragon's teeth that were eventually to grow into the complex of tensions and despotism that constitute the contemporary Middle East“ (p. 348). Compared to the primarily selfish motives that characterized European imperialism, a reformed Ottoman state would likely have been a much better guardian of the interests of the Arab Middle East. In a particularly

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blunt assessment of Britain's experience with promoting a Jewish national home in Palestine, he describes it „a classic late example of the European imperialism of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whose effects it has proved impossible to unravel“ (p. 219). Fieldhouse disparages the Palestine mandate as „the greatest failure in the whole history of British imperial rule“ (p. 151). The book's treatment of the problems confronted in Palestine benefits greatly from the special attention paid to the significance of the failure to create an elected legislative council. When placed in the larger context of British imperial history, these councils (where they existed) are readily seen as the crucial means of transferring power.

Published in 2006, this text has already proved its worth in the classroom. Its comparative approach helps fill a huge gap in Middle East scholarship. Generally when historians study European rule in the Middle East they do so by referencing its separate post-World War One state constituencies, with little attention given to comparisons with other administrations. Students in introductory courses may question the excessive level of detail and wish for more maps to accompany the descriptions of various territorial administrations. Instructors may question a narrowly political narrative that does not more thoroughly consider matters of economics and culture. There are a number of typographical mistakes (for example, inconsistent transliterations and capitalizations). There is also the odd error: among them, Arab rulers are described on p. 201 as making their first prominent incursion into Palestinian affairs in September 1937, when presumably he meant 1936. But these can be easily corrected in a future edition.

As well conceived and impressive a synthesis as this text is, there are two issues which require a brief comment. One is the extent to which the absence of Egypt represents a real missed opportunity. A study of western imperialism in the Middle East would benefit enormously from an examination both of the regional significance of influential political events (for example the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian treaty, or the 1956 Suez crisis) and of the colonial administrative structures that were first

developed in Egypt, and then applied elsewhere (for example cadastral surveys). A second issue relates directly to the decision to focus on the post-1922 League of Nations mandates. Apart from a few thought-provoking paragraphs in the conclusion, there is limited analysis of how the mandate system in fact worked. For example, very little reference is made to the permanent mandates commission despite the significant role it played as a forum in which Western imperialism might be contested.

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