



## Z. Levey and E. Podeh (Eds.), *Britain and the Middle East: From Imperial Power to Junior Partner*

(2008). Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 368 pp., \$95.00, £65.00

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## Book Review

Levey, Z., and Podeh, E. (Eds.) (2008). *Britain and the Middle East: From Imperial Power to Junior Partner*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 368 pp., \$95.00, £65.00.

*Britain and the Middle East* is the product of a conference organized by the Harry S. Truman Institute at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2004. The third in a series, earlier conferences were devoted to the involvement of France and Germany in the region. In this volume, the editors set themselves the ambitious task of studying both Britain's historical impact upon the Middle East as well as its contemporary involvement there. The book's principal theme, as reflected in the subtitle, is the transformation of Britain from the status of leading power in the region to a role secondary to that of the United States.

Given the general paucity of comparative research on imperialism in the Middle East, the editors are to be commended for their attempt to deal with the period of British rule in its totality. Generally when historians study British rule in the Middle East they do so by referencing its separate post-World War One national constituencies, with little attention given to comparisons with other British administrations (and almost none to French ones). As a welcome attempt to help fill this lacunae in Middle East scholarship, this volume can be usefully compared to other recent works such as D.K. Fieldhouse's *Western Imperialism in the Middle East, 1914–1958* and *British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Peter Sluglett and Nadine Meouchy, as well of course as Elizabeth Monroe's *Britain's Moment in the Middle East* (still commanding an influential presence after 40 years).

The individual contributions address a very broad range of topics. Of the eighteen chapters, those papers that provide the freshest insights are those that consult the widest variety of primary sources and examine critically the visions and stereotypes underlying the strategic thinking of British officials. For the mandate years, Amos Nadan focuses on the paradigms that guided colonial officials in their attempts to reshape the Palestinian rural economy while, in a rather similar manner, Noga Efrati examines the contradictions in British practices impacting upon Iraqi women. For the post Second World War era, Mordechai Bar-On considers the ramifications of

Anthony Eden's personal self-delusions during the 1956 Suez Crisis, while Neil Caplan offers a highly detailed and well-documented examination of evolving British (as well as American) perceptions of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the early 1950s. Concerning more recent subjects, Wm. Roger Louis assesses the changing interests that determined British foreign policy following the 1967 war, and Rosemary Hollis studies the origins and consequences of Prime Minister Tony Blair's decision to join the 2003 US invasion of Iraq.

The volume also includes some effective overviews which, though specialists may find relatively little new in them, might usefully be considered for undergraduate reading lists. In his introductory historiographical essay, Yoav Alon draws comparisons between the large literature on British imperialism and the relatively sparse writing on British colonial rule in the Middle East. For different parts of the region, Simon Smith, Uzi Rabi and Rami Ginat and Meir Noema offer surveys of the rise, fortunes and fall of British rule. What is perhaps most useful about many of these essays is the extent to which they in fact challenge simplifications and generalizations of the nature of Britain's suggested trajectory "from imperial power to junior partner." Thus, British power is not only portrayed in many of the essays as much less than hegemonic, even at its height, but also the extent to which Britain played the role of a limited partner during its decline is questioned.

As with many edited volumes that are derived from conference papers, one can take issue with the editors' choice of subjects to be included and, in particular, the absences incurred (chief among them the lack of space given to the significance of 1958 as a turning point). But the real missed opportunity, in the mind of this reviewer, is the division of the papers into sections organized according to a geographic focus, rather than a thematic or chronological one. Too often the history of British rule in different Middle Eastern regions has been treated separately, when what is needed are more well crafted opportunities to see how the patterns and structures, the perceptions and misperceptions, are deeply interconnected.

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