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British and French Colonial Attitudes Towards the Arab World

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‘Britain and France act as mandatory powers with very different conceptions of the task and with diverse attitudes towards the Arab territories they administered’ Discuss.

In 1916, during the Sykes-Picot agreement, the future of the territories of the disintegrating Ottoman Empire were drawn up between Britain and France. These agreements came to be realized in the aftermath of the war, when on 28th June 1919, article 22 of the United Nations issued the mandates for Ottoman Mesopotamia and Ottoman Syria between Britain and France, with the former taking control over modern day Iraq and Palestine and the latter taking control over the regions of Syria and Lebanon. To examine the mandate powers conception and attitudes towards the task we must examine the framework within which they operated, their broader interests for the region and their application of rule.

With Wilson’s 14 points creating what Penrose describes as a *‘changed political atmosphere’*,^[1] Britain and France were to operate as tutors of the territories, who’s *‘flower was independence and democracy’*.^[2] As such, the mandate powers were to act through *‘legal aid and moral duty’*^[3] for the interests of the territories they administered with the ultimate goal of securing their independence. This propagated nature of the mandate would ideally form the framework for how the two European powers would go about their task and hence would help formulate their attitude towards the people and territories they now controlled.

Running alongside this moral framework was the general attitude of the mandate powers, which too would mould their attitudes towards the administered territories. Khoury has described the French mentality following the war as *‘restrictionist’*, with further expansion frowned upon but the maintenance of existing territories deemed necessary,^[4] an attitude born out of the crippling effects of the Great War and the diminishing economic benefits of an empire which now absorbed only 20% of French exports.^[5] Therefore the conception of the French task was not one of gaining *further* economic benefit, as there was little to gain economically from their mandate territories. In light of this *‘restrictionist’* attitude I would agree with Watson that the general overview of the task from a French perspective was of *‘maintaining and strengthening ... presence in the area’*, a point emphasized by the Army of the Levant’s growth to some 70,000 by 1921.^[6]

In contrast, the British undoubtedly had great economic interests underpinning their aforementioned conception towards the task as shown by their vehement power struggle for the control of the oil rich territory of Mosul with Turkey. At the heart of such struggles lay the need to fuel the British navy and its subsequent policing of lucrative trade routes, which in relation to the mandate territories was principally the Suez Canal, where 9-14% of all British trade passed through.^[7] In this sense I agree with Yapp that Britain’s overall attitude towards the task *‘was in the preservation of peace’*; especially as such conditions would be indicative of increasing trade, the cornerstone of British affluence.^[8] Furthermore, the retention of air bases in Basra and Baghdad through the 1930 Anglo-Iraq treaty and garrisons later in Egypt helps bolster Yapp’s views.^[9]

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The attitudes of the mandate powers was to also differ in that the French saw their role as consisting of a more moral obligation with the protection of Christians and the spreading of French culture. The former is evident in Lebanon with the protection and promotion of Levant Christians through the promotion of pro-Maronite policies,^[10] whilst in Syria, a policy of supervising waqf land was aimed at reducing and thus weakening the power of the Muslim Ulema.^[11] The extension of French culture can be examined through the expansion of Franco-Muslim secondary schools and the creation of institutions such as the Jesuit Universite St-Joseph in Beirut.^[12] This perceived obligation of extending education and promoting French culture cannot be understated, with their efforts resulting in the number of primary and secondary school students in Syria doubling between 1924-1934.^[13]

Britain did not have the attitude of any such moral or cultural obligation towards her mandated territories outside those outlined by the United Nations. However, historians such as Okkenhaug have argued that supporting Zionist immigration could be seen as '*an extension of Western Civilization*',^[14] which I find insufficient given that the 1930 white paper put a cap on immigration of 75,000 over the proceeding five years. Thus, I would agree with Sluglett who writes that the British government had no particular feeling of moral purpose and that, initially, the establishing of a Jewish settlement in Palestine was not grounded in an attitude of extending western culture but rather to create something '*secular and modern*'.^[15]

An attitude both European powers shared was that of economically developing their mandated territories. France went about the building of factories, canals and roads in Syria using cheap, conscript labour whilst attempting to integrate the territories into the world economic market,^[16] as shown by the cultivation of cotton in Northern Syria following a 1922 commission that found some 300,000 hectares available for production.^[17] This highlights the French attitude of making the territories economically viable given their poor financial situation domestically. Penrose believes that Britain also had an attitude of making the states, '*pay their way*',^[18] a statement I agree with given that the British '*Efficiently intensified*' the tax system and that domestically,^[19] the '*Quit Mesopotamia*' campaign had much grounding in the financial costs of the mandates.^[20]

However, given that the British government owned a 51% share in the Anglo-Persian oil company and in light of the conflict over the vilayet of Mosul, it would seem apparent that the British sought more than just to make their territories viable, as shown by the later oil concessions.^[21] In light of this I think Penrose's statement is more applicable to French attitudes and would agree with Sluglett, who points out that '*French business was not genuinely interested in the French colonial empire*', given that so little trade now came from the empire.^[22] Although this perception is threatened by the proposed '*service des interets communs*' as outlined in the rejected Franco-Syrian treaty, which meant the French would continue to control the states economic resources even after independence,^[23] I do not view this as the reaping of economic benefit but rather an arrangement in keeping with the general French attitude of maintain a presence in the area.

Indeed, this attitude of economic expansion in the case of the French was to facilitate the Army of the Levant, which is evident in that 24% of its budget was paid for by the mandate territories.^[24] Khoury's argument that economic benefit lay at the heart of French policy making seem flawed in this light,^[25] and as such I would view French economic policy making as a continuation of their desire to strengthen control.

In order to obtain this control, the French took a more direct role in the governance of their territories, as shown by what Longrigg refers to as an '*enormous bureaucratic machine*' that operated within Syria; at the time consisting of over 400 French officials.^[26] This can be held in complete contrast to the British rule in Iraq in which a '*half-dozen officials*' formed the office of high commissioner in Baghdad following the 1921 Anglo-Iraqi treaty.^[27] However, we must remember that initially through the abolishment of municipal councils and the installation of British officials throughout provinces Britain too took a very active role in the governance of Iraq.^[28] This change is shown by the reduction in operating costs; which represent a decrease from 23.4 million in 1921 to 480,000 in 1930.^[29]

This highlights how, generally speaking, Britain took the attitude of governing with varying degrees of activity depending on what the perceived situation required. This is emphasized by the termination of the military administration in Palestine in July 1920 and the downsizing of the administration in Iraq from 3000 British officials in 1920 to just 100 in 1932.^[30] This can also be extended to the military sphere, with the British in 1938 offering 50,000

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troops to suppress the Palestinian uprising in 1938.^[31] As such, the British attitude was one of intervening as much as conditions necessitated and in this respect I agree with Hourani that there was no long term planning as such by the European powers with decisions being made at the '*last moment*'.^[32] This is key in terms of how we look at their attitudes towards the territories they administered as on this basis, the attitudes and conceptions were bound to change as the conditions altered, as shown by the British using stronger military tactics to enforce their control when it was required. This is highlighted by the use of the R.A.F against rebellious Kurdish tribes in Iraq whilst more indirect military action was preferred in Palestine, given the deteriorating political climate, with the use of disaffected peasants in so-called '*Peace Bands*' used by the British to battle the rebels of the Galilee Highlands in 1938.^[33]

Working with these '*Peace Bands*' highlights Britain's readiness to collaborate with the local populations. Such an attitude was not one wholly shared by the French. One great diversification between the two powers was their attitude towards the landed classes of the mandates. The French tried to weaken the landed classes by promoting peasant proprietorship and attempting to deconstruct absentee landholdings in an attempt to weaken the politically conscious urban classes who they saw as the source of the aggressive nationalism they faced.^[34] With a polar opposite attitude, the British continued the land patronage system in Iraq under Henry Dobbs in order to strengthen the landed classes to garner their support.^[35] Furthermore, up to 1927 all tribal shaykhs enjoyed immunity from property tax,^[36] thus showing that unlike the French, the British believed in strengthening the notables of their mandated territories, which again fits in with their overall attitude of maintaining peace in the area by not radically changing the existing power structures.

On a more micro level the attitude of the two powers towards the tribal elements of the territories the administered greatly differed also. On one hand, the French attempted to '*sedantize*' and weaken the Bedouin tribes of Syria through camel companies known as the '*Contrôle Bedouin*' and the rigorous enforcement of livestock taxes, thus again showing the force-orientated rule of the French.^[37] In contrast to this, the British attitude was one of enforcing the tribal elements of their mandates, as shown through the Tribal Civil Regulation and Criminal Disputes Regulation in 1924 in Iraq, which gave tribal shaykhs the power to settle local disputes and collect taxes.^[38]

As such, we can see a fundamental change in the two European powers dealings with the tribes. The British attitude was to allow a certain amount of free-reign among the tribal elements, thus again falling into their attitude of leaving the existing power structures and there were certainly no policies as invasive as the '*Contrôle Bedouin*'. The French were to only later pay subsidies to shaykhs as a result of their non co-operation following the failures at the 1927 Assembly of Shaykhs at Hama and also in light of their role within the great revolt.^[39] This highlights, as I have demonstrated with the British, that the French attitudes and conceptions of the task were to change depending on what the conditions they operated within called for.

Although the French may have employed some 13,000 Arab bureaucrats as intermediaries within their mandates,^[40] I would agree with Sluglett that the French '*never established much of a client base*' among the local populace given their overall attitude towards the landed classes and tribal elites.^[41] Yet, as shown by the subsidies they paid later on to the shaykhs I would not go as far as Okkenhaug, who states that the French, '*refrained from intensive interaction with the local inhabitants*',^[42] as when their power looked unstable their attitude towards the old political elites was certainly more co-operative. Indeed, in the old quarters of Damascus for example the French were still reliant on the local notables for tax collection, as old customs required permission from the local imam and mukhtar to do so.^[43]

As such, France's attitude towards collaboration with locals very much depended on local conditions as well as the wider political climate. Indeed, the collaboration between the British and the local populace was by no means uniform across their two mandated territories. In Palestine, where the administration faced fervent nationalist opposition, the high commissioner was the supreme executive, presiding over both the executive and advisory councils which were both exclusively British.^[44] Indeed, Antonius refers to him as '*one of the least fettered autocrats in the world*'.^[45] Again, this highlights how the attitudes of the two mandate powers varied according to the changing conditions they worked within.

In light of this statement, the French conception of '*divide et imperia*' on one hand represents a diversification in attitudes between the two European powers in terms of how to go about the task. The partitioning of Syria into fiver

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separate states can be held in contrast to British policy in Iraq where no partitioning as such took place, but it is similar to the approach in Palestine, which was divided into three districts, each with its own British commissioner and Palestinian subordinate.^[46] This emphasizes again how attitudes and conceptions were not consistent among British policy making, as shown by the lack of administration delegated to locals in Palestine in contrast to Iraq.

Yet, despite this relationship between changing attitudes and conditions, the treaties that were ultimately established help to highlight that both powers, whatever attitudes they took, were confined to their general conceptions of the task at hand which were outlined at the beginning of this essay. The French treaties of 1936 differ greatly from the British treaty with Iraq of 1930 in that the abolition of the mandate regime was not committed to and that furthermore, in the Franco-Syrian treaty, French military activity was not confined to specific regions unlike the Anglo-Iraq treaty which had confined the R.A.F to just Basra and Baghdad.^[47] As such, we can view the French as operating within their attitude of maintaining a presence whilst the British tried to preserve peace whilst reaping some economic benefit; again shown by the oil concessions made prior to the Anglo-Iraqi treaty in July 1928.

Overall, it is clear that the conceptions of Britain and France towards the task were influenced by their own special interests, which, for the British, was principally the maintenance of peace and trade (which includes the interests in oil) whilst the French interest was one of maintaining a presence in the area. These different conceptions of the task would provide the framework for the attitudes towards the mandated territories they administered, with Britain attempting to secure peace through collaboration and the French presence being maintained with a large official bureaucracy and military force. Whilst there were undoubtedly diverse attitudes between the two powers, particularly in relation to dealings with the local populace and the tribal aspect, these were not consistent across all the mandates; particularly as British attitude towards administration differed between Palestine and Iraq. Furthermore, as Hourani states, neither European power had any long term plan for the territories they administered and as such, attitudes and conceptions towards the task changed accordingly to necessitate the conditions both Britain and France faced within the mandated territories.

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