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Historiography 1918-Today (Middle East/Arab Lands)

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Anglo-French historiography on the Arab lands during World War I originated as European personal reflections and campaign analyses. Following World War II, scholarly literature reexamined the same campaigns but also considered promises made by the imperial powers to Arab and Zionist leaders during the war. The latter subject became a battleground in itself over the legacy of the wartime agreements as justifying the creation of Israel. Recent scholarship has moved away from this Eurocentric focus to research on the experiences of the Arab and Jewish inhabitants of the Arab lands during the war.

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1. Introduction

General studies on World War I and its significance for the Arab lands of the [Ottoman Empire](#) date from shortly after 1918 to the present day, the latter inspired by the centennial observance of the war. Overviews include a recent special issue of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* devoted to the subject.^[1] The region had long been a matter of Anglo-French rivalry for future control. This issue emerges in the extensive scholarship on the [war aims](#) and military campaigns of both countries during and after the war and the conflicting promises made, especially by [Britain](#), to both Arab officials in the region and [Zionist](#) leaders in England and [France](#) regarding the fate of Palestine. Scholarship on these promises, especially since the 1970s, has varied in quality, some material omitting key documentation to fit the author's arguments. The literature on the region has expanded greatly in recent decades with major fields emerging in subjects such as intelligence gathering; the wartime experiences of the regions' inhabitants who suffered from widespread famine and [disease](#); treatments of key figures, Arab and Jewish; and events such as the issuance of the [Balfour Declaration](#) in November 1917 and its impact on the Palestine mandate; and the resistance of Arab nationalist movements to [European occupation](#). As a result of the war, new countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon were created by their [imperial](#) overseers, and in Palestine Britain took responsibility for sponsoring Jewish immigration that, from the Zionist perspective, would result in a Jewish state in Palestine. Whereas nationalist movements had opposed British or French occupation in [Egypt](#) and Iraq (Britain) and Syria (France), competing [nationalisms](#), Palestinian and Zionist, existed in Palestine.

2. Wartime and Post-War Historiography: Personal Experiences, Historical Accounts, and Links to Contemporary Scholarship

Concern over the fate of the Arab lands emerged at the outbreak of the war when a Lebanese Maronite Catholic cleric visited France to seek guarantees of French protection.^[2] Later publications indicated French interest in Syria and Palestine, and similar British concern for Mesopotamia, as well as a 1916 account of Ottoman political repression and [food shortages](#) in Syria, including Lebanon. The subject of famine would not be mentioned again until the publication of Jean Pichon's *Le Partage du Proche Orient* appeared in 1938. Scholarly awareness of the extent of the impact of famine and natural disasters on the populations of Greater Syria, including Palestine, in part due to the Anglo-French naval blockade of the Syrian coast depicted in [L.B. Weldon's \(1875-?\) 'Hard Lying': Eastern Mediterranean, 1914-1919](#), awaited Linda Schatkowski Schilcher's *The Famine of 1915-1918 in Greater Syria*, using German sources.^[3] Since then, the subject has grown in importance, establishing a counterpoint to the numerous studies of imperial policies and goals in the region, with [Elizabeth Thompson](#), like Schilcher, viewing the blockade as a major contributing factor, and recent studies such as that of Leila Fawaz, *A Land of the Aching Hearts*, recounting the views of the indigenous populations during the war. The horrors of famine and the impact on food supplies in especially Syria and Lebanon are also made clear in the articles found in the works edited by Olaf Farschid et al., and [Heike Liebau](#), and in [Najwa al-Qattan's](#) "When Mothers Ate Their Children:

Wartime Memory and the Language of Food in Syria and Lebanon”, and [Melanie Tanielian's](#) “Feeding the City: The Beirut Municipality and the Politics of Food During World War I”.^[4] Following the war, personal memoirs, publication of official records, and advocacy of retention of regions dominated the [historiography](#) of the war to after World War II.^[5]

3. Archival Access and Scholarship on European and Ottoman Campaigns, Military Intelligence, and Goals in the Arab Lands

The era following World War II saw an explosion of especially British studies on Anglo-French interests (including oil), in the Arab lands, as archives became available to researchers. For the most part, studies of Iraq focused on that country, with few efforts to widen the scope of investigation, notably those of Marian Kent, *Oil and Empire: British Policy and Mesopotamian Oil, 1900-1920*; Priya Satia, “Developing Iraq: Britain, India, and the Redemption of Empire and Technology in World War I” and Ian Rutledge, *Enemy on the Euphrates: The British Occupation of Iraq and the Great Arab Revolt, 1914-1921*.^[6] Works on Egypt, Syria and Palestine have been often more wide-ranging and comparative, including studies of Italian interests in Palestine.^[7] A sub-genre has dealt specifically with Ottoman suppression of [Arab nationalist](#) circles in Syria and Lebanon, as first addressed by Nicholas Ajay in 1978 and subsequently in works such as Najwa al-Qattan’s “[Safarbarlik](#)” and [M. Talha Çiçek's](#) study of [Ahmet Cemal Pasha's \(1872-1923\)](#) governorate in Syria.^[8] A broader subject involves French claims to those regions that led to the crushing of the incipient Arab state in Syria after the war.^[9] Finally, there has been an explosion of publications on the uses of military intelligence covering all of the Arab lands and including Zionist-British collaboration.^[10]

4. T. E Lawrence, Sharif Husayn of Mecca, and the Arab Revolt: The Sincere British Imperialist Theory of the Arab Lands and World War I

A separate field exists for works on [Thomas Edward Lawrence \(1888-1935\)](#) in both English and French. The best study, using French archives as well as British, is Jeremy Wilson’s *Lawrence of Arabia: the Authorized Biography* (1990). Lawrence backed Arab independence in Syria not for its own sake but to deprive France of control of the region, a matter debated down to the present.^[11] Lawrence’s own intelligence analyses during the war can be found online at [www.telstudies.org](#) as selections from *The Arab Bulletin*, intelligence information sent from the Hejaz to the [Arab Bureau](#) in Cairo, parts of which were published in 1980.^[12]

Lawrence’s role in the war was to advise [Husayn ibn Ali, King of Hejaz \(c.1853-1931\)](#) and Sharif of Mecca in the progress of the June 1916 [Arab Revolt](#), led by Husayn’s son, the Emir Faysal, who later became [Faysal I, King of Iraq \(1885-1933\)](#). Sharif Husayn has been the subject of two monographs, by Randall Baker and Joshua Teitelbaum, and articles that include studies of French and German policy toward him, but also Alia El Bakri’s use of oral history to recount the [siege of](#)

Medina by Faysal's forces.^[13] Husayn's importance in the literature is based on his correspondence with the British Consul in Cairo, Sir [Henry McMahon \(1862-1949\)](#), and the significance attached to it with respect to promises of Arab independence after the war when set against Anglo-French agreements for control of the same lands. Here scholarship has varied considerably in quality and accuracy. A number of monographs argue that Sharif Husayn was not promised independence for the Arab lands or that the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 fulfilled such promises that were made. Moreover, Sharif Husayn was supposedly fully informed of Anglo-French agreements and of the implications of the Balfour Declaration of November 1917 that provided protection of civil and religious rights for Palestinian Arabs but reserved political rights for incoming Jewish immigrants.

This argument originated with the publication in 1956 of Elie Kedourie's *England and the Middle East* (1978). Without access to still-unavailable archival materials, Kedourie argued that British officials had been sincere and open in their exchanges with Sharif Husayn and other Arab representatives, but had never promised the full independence of Arab lands after the war, especially Palestine. This theme was adopted more forcefully by Isaiah Friedman, once archives had opened, in an exchange of articles with [Arnold J. Toynbee \(1889-1975\)](#) and then with the publication of his own study, *The Question of Palestine: British-Jewish-Arab-Relations, 1914-1918*.^[14] Friedman's work, especially his book, contained inaccurate representation of documents, and omission of materials, practices then followed by Elie Kedourie in his *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth: The Hussein-McMahon Correspondence and Its Implications*, deficiencies detailed by Charles D. Smith's "The Question of Arab Acceptance of the Zionist Right to Palestine", and "The Historiography of World War I".^[15] David Fromkin and Efraim Karsh acknowledged Kedourie's work in defending the sincerity and openness of British officials in their dealings with the Arabs, arguing that Arabs generally and Palestinians in particular had no right to protest Zionist claims to Palestine, while Doreen Ingram's compilation of British reports remains a useful counterpoint.^[16]

A key element in the arguments of these works, accepted by Fromkin based on Kedourie's work, is that [David Hogarth \(1862-1927\)](#) of the Arab Bureau in Cairo had visited Sharif Husayn in January 1918 and fully informed him of the elements in the Balfour Declaration and had gained Husayn's agreement. In fact, Hogarth lied to Sharif Husayn, telling him that Palestinian political rights were protected in the Balfour Declaration, when they were not. Moreover, Hogarth reported to Cairo that Husayn would never accept a Jewish state in Palestine and he, Hogarth, had withheld that information from him. As Hogarth himself acknowledged after the war, Husayn, as opposed to [Ibn Sa'ud, King of Saudi Arabia \(c. 1880-1953\)](#), had been the "only possible spokesman for the Arabs from the British point of view" but "in adopting this policy we were not looking beyond the war".^[17] In short, Husayn was not fully informed, agreed to nothing, and British promises had no lasting value. This view was also held by [Mark Sykes \(1879-1919\)](#), who negotiated with [François Georges-Picot \(1870-1951\)](#) to formulate the Sykes-Picot Accord, and had a major role in British policy declarations from 1916-1918.^[18] Despite some shortcomings, the arguments advanced by George Antonius and A.L. Tibawi regarding British promises to the Arabs, the former depicted as "worthless" by Kedourie,

retain their credibility with respect to treatment of the war and British policy.^[19]

5. Zionism, the Balfour Declaration, Palestine and Jerusalem

The basic work on the Balfour Declaration and its origins remains that of Leonard Stein.^[20] More recent scholarship discusses the Declaration in itself and with respect to Zionist leaders, especially that of [Chaim Weizmann \(1874-1952\)](#), in more detail but accepts the argument made by Kedourie and Friedman that Sharif Husayn accepted Palestine's exclusion from Arab lands that would be independent.^[21] Mark Levene has broadened the perspective on Zionist activities during the war with his study of [Lucien Wolf \(1857-1930\)](#), but Zionist activities with respect to the war remain contested.^[22]

In contrast, works on Palestine and, in particular, Jerusalem, have multiplied in recent years. The earlier focus on war and postwar political developments has shifted to an emphasis on the lives of the inhabitants, women as well as men. These include their diaries, along with that of the Spanish Consul in Jerusalem who remained there during the war, and American relief efforts, aimed mainly at Jews and Armenians as noted by Abigail Jacobson.^[23] A key American in the region at the time was [William Yale \(1887-1975\)](#), initially based in Cairo, who provided private information on Arab as well as British political activities, examined by Max Reibman, and by Scott Anderson in his book on T.E. Lawrence.^[24]

6. The Paris Peace Conference and the Arab Lands

Studies of the [peace conference](#) and the Arab Lands have generally dealt with the entire Middle East, but there are key works that examine the mandate system and its application to the Arab lands. The earliest was [John de Vere Loder's \(1895-1970\) *The Truth About Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Syria*](#) (1923) that compared the French mandate statements for Lebanon and Syria with the British mandate for Palestine. Whereas the French opening paragraph referred to the eventual independence of these areas in accordance with the Covenant of the League of Nations, that paragraph was omitted from the British mandate for Palestine since political rights, based on the Balfour Declaration, were reserved for incoming Jewish immigrants. Michael Dockrill and Douglas J. Gould challenge the Kedouriean interpretation of British promises in their *Peace Without Promise* while [Philip Bonsal \(1903-1995\)](#), a member of the American delegation, recounts his interactions with Arab and Zionist delegates in his *Suitors and Supplicants*.^[25]

7. Conclusion

Anglo-French historiography on the Arab Lands of the Middle East during World War I retains to some extent the focus on campaigns and personalities found soon after the war. On the other hand, important new areas of research have opened, permitting the emergence of Arab and indigenous

Jewish voices to be heard, as recounted by scholars. It is hoped that this process will develop further, although the lack of access to national archives in several Arab lands due to political conflicts remains an obstacle.

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Notes

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Post-1918 historiography. In the years immediately following the 1918 armistice, most historical writings sought to establish causes and apportion blame for the war. Most historians in Allied nations were intentionalists who believed the war was started by specific leaders and governments, acting with deliberate and hostile intent. Another Kriegsschuldreferat-sponsored historian, Hermann Lutz, focused on the actions of Britain. Lutz's 1927 book, *Lord Grey and the World War*, honed in on British foreign minister Sir Edward Grey, suggesting that Grey's intriguing and interference in 1914 was a significant provocation for war. To survey the historiography of World War I is no easy task. Seldom has as much been written about any historical topic. The 2011 Arab uprisings known as the "Arab Spring" reshaped the Middle East. The new order is fundamentally one of disorder, where power operates through influence peddling and proxy warfare and violence instead of formal alliances and conventional conflicts between major states. The catalog of despair in the Middle East today is difficult to fathom. The Syrian civil war has become one of the greatest human catastrophes in history, killing at least half a million civilians and displacing more than ten million. Iraq.