

Book Review

The End of Empire in the Middle East: Britain's Relinquishment of Power in Her Last Three Arab Dependencies

Glen Balfour-Paul. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991, xxiii + 198 pp.

Living memory has now faded concerning the scattered pieces of empire that Britain ruled in East Africa and South and East Arabia for up to a quarter of a century after the end of the Second World War. In the not-too-distant future, what Elizabeth Monroe once described felicitously as Britain's "moment" in the Middle East¹ will have passed from personal recollection into history. Mindful of that inevitability, British diplomat and quondam scholar Glen Balfour-Paul has undertaken to chronicle the post-war encounter between Britishers and Arabs in Sudan, Aden, and the Gulf states from which Britain withdrew in 1956, 1967, and 1971, respectively. The results of his study should be of particular interest to government officials requiring perspective for the formulation of policy and to neophyte foreign service officers about to depart for the regions discussed, as well as to scholars and advanced students of the contemporary Middle East.

To his subject, Balfour-Paul brings almost unique credentials. After experience in the Middle East during the Second World War, he became a member of the Sudan Political Service for nine years and, thereafter, served as a diplomat until 1977 in various Arab countries, in three of them as ambassador. The book under review was written largely in the late 1980s while the author was an honorary research fellow at the Centre for Arab Gulf Studies at Exeter University. In the meticulousness of its research, the objectivity demonstrated on contested issues, and above all in the elegance of its prose, the volume at hand is a model of what diplomatic history (a craft now rarely practiced by professional historians) should be. Those on both sides of the British-Arab divide have reason to be grateful that there is

now available an excellent comparative analysis on the process of decolonization in three very different parts of the Arab world.

This book is based on primary materials available in the British colonial office, the India Office Library, and Durham University's Sudan Archive as well as on such official government publications as the *Aden Government Gazette* and the *Persian Gulf Gazette*. The author draws heavily on the personal papers of such prominent British actors in the colonial drama as Sir James Robertson and Sir William Luce. Interlarded with such sources are Balfour-Paul's own recollections of developments in Sudan, the Trucial States, and Bahrain. The result is a book that attempts "[neither] a defense of the imperial ethos [nor] an attack on it," but endeavors to illuminate a slice of history that has now become "as indecipherable as cuneiform to today's generation" (p. 2).

What is truly remarkable, Balfour-Paul argues, is that the British attitude to empire swung from "unquestioning acceptance to apologetic disavowal" in less than a single generation (p. 177). He observes that by the 1970s, the predominant British sentiment had become one of relief that Britain's moment in the Middle East had proven so fleeting. Indeed, today the predominant British attitude, the author maintains, is one of "repudiation of the whole complex episode" (p. 197). A new sensibility, a new world of moral discourse, has, in his opinion, become so firmly established that there can now be little wonder that a rising generation finds incomprehensible the political culture supportive of colonialism and the defense of empire that shaped its parents and grandparents.

But that dramatic change was not anticipated by the British or the Arabs during most of the 1950s and 1960s. Certainly, British officialdom in the field held out the longest against evolving anticolonial attitudes, and some Persian Gulf rulers were so upset at the sudden British decision in 1968 to withdraw that they implored the British to stay and to continue to protect them from far more powerful neighbors. Of the three disengagements under discussion, Balfour-Paul stresses that withdrawal from Sudan was easily the most methodically organized and peacefully accomplished.

Anyone seeking a synoptic overview of Sudanese history between 1899 and 1956 can do no better than to consult the author's chapter on the subject. From the establishment of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (1899) to rule the reconquered Sudan to the day that Isma'il Azhari raised the Sudanese flag to mark its independence (1956), such major themes as British and Sudanese political maneuverings, conflicts between British authorities in Khartoum (largely pro-Sudanese) with those in Cairo and (especially) London, and Egypt's ongoing effort to replace Britain as the primary condominium authority and establish its formal sovereignty over Sudan are explored in detail. If high drama is lacking, the story is not an unhappy one, and reaches its conclusion before any rupture had occurred in the amity accumulated over many decades between the two peoples.

Balfour-Paul highlights the mutual goodwill that long characterized British-Sudanese relations. The British tended to develop an "instant sym-

pathy" for the Sudanese, he observes, that encouraged "a kind of relationship at the personal level rarely manifest elsewhere" (p. 170). British administrators in Sudan were in close and daily contact with Sudanese of all social classes. Over time, there developed an "intimate understanding right across the social spectrum . . . both parties, in cliché terms, laughed at the same jokes" (p. 170). The fact is that the Sudanese did work with the British as equals in a way that did not exist in any other part of the British empire. The author is correct to suggest that British-Sudanese consensus on most issues of significance was the single most important reason why the Sudanese transition to independence was relatively so smooth.

Spectacularly different was the case of Aden and its primitive hinterland, which Britain ruled either from India or London between 1939 and 1967. In South Arabia, British administrators as a whole had little contact with and less sympathy for the indigenous population and did little to assist the Arab tribes of the protected states of the Hadhramawt to come to terms with modernity. Federation of the backcountry with the port city of Aden was not adopted as a policy until 1959, and thereafter was never pushed by London with any degree of conviction. Always, British attention focused on Aden itself, originally occupied as a coaling station for ships traveling to or from India and considered during the early years of the cold war to be an important strategic asset due to its geographical location. Balfour-Paul gives particular attention to the heavy Yemeni immigration into Aden and its organization into increasingly politicized labor unions, and to the rise to power during the 1960s of the national Liberation Front (NLF) as a result of its military campaign against both the British and the pro-Nasser Front for the Liberation of South Yemen (FLOSY). This is a tale of bloodshed and woe, and suggests that if London may claim some credit for its accomplishments in Sudan, it must admit to failure in its half-hearted efforts to prepare South Arabia for independence.

Strikingly different from the situation in Sudan, relations between the British and the Arabs in South Arabia were marked by animus and segregation from the beginning. The British expatriate community in Aden, Balfour-Paul emphasizes, kept almost entirely to itself in what he suggests as a "kind of apartheid" (p. 182). Any contact with the indigenous population diminished inexorably as the expatriate community expanded. British soldiers, he notes, "knew nothing about Aden and had no means of communicating with one Arab in a thousand" (p. 182). Not surprisingly, an alien army "excite[d] the fiercest Arab xenophobia against [itself] and against the regime which [it] represented" (p. 192). Such passions were grist for the NLF mill and served to encourage the violence and instability that has continued to afflict South Arabia to the present day.

After the British East India Company's capture in 1819 of Ra's al Khaymah the burning of several hundred Arab ships, Britain proceeded to establish its authority over all of the tiny states of the Trucial Coast. Balfour-Paul describes the British storming of Ra's al Khaymah and the destruction of its fleet as a "holocaust" (p. 98) and challenges the British

assertion that Arab mariners in the Persian Gulf were "congenital pirates" (p. 98). On the contrary, he suggests that Arab seafarers may have been "established maritime traders" whose merchant fleets "posed an obstacle to the East India Company in its aim of cornering the profitable sea-trade between India and the Gulf" (p. 98). However that may be, for some 150 years the East India Company and the British Foreign Office succeeded in ruling the Trucial states with a maximum of only five political officers scattered along both sides of the Persian Gulf. "The human machinery for supervision," Balfour-Paul remarks, was "minimal" (p. 106). As stated by the British resident in Bushire in 1939, the British "achieve[d] [their] objective with astonishing economy . . . through non-interference, square deals and genuine protection" (p. 106). Such putative services rendered to the Arab Gulf sheikdoms may explain partially why, in 1968, two of the Arab rulers offered personally to pay to keep British forces in the Gulf if only the British would reverse their decision to withdraw. Such, however, was not to be. In 1972 Qatar and Bahrain became independent, and the seven other Trucial States joined together to form the United Arab Emirates."

In Balfour-Paul's opinion, British accomplishments in the Gulf were perhaps less impressive than in Sudan but certainly more so than in South Arabia. In the Trucial States more than in Sudan or Aden, Britain followed a strict policy of noninterference in the domestic affairs of the Arab states. Although lacking the intimacy characteristic of Sudan, British-Arab relations in the Gulf were cordial. Such British troops as were present in the Gulf remained inconspicuous and certainly never generated the intense resentment that British forces provoked in Aden. Arab nationalism of the Nasserite variety largely bypassed the sheikdoms, and both the British and the local rulers with whom they worked were spared the challenge of a determined political opposition. The author is correct in concluding that if the British record in the Gulf was higher "heroic" nor comparable to what Britain achieved in Sudan, neither was it "horrendous" as was certainly the case in South Arabia (p. 135).

This reviewer suspected that this book was as much a pleasure to write as it is to read. Academics and foreign policy professionals alike can be grateful that Glen Balfour-Paul has recaptured so deftly an era that is so close to us, yet now seems so very far away.

Endnote

1. See Elizabeth Monroe, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1963 and Methuen, 1965; and Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

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