

Propheying disaster:
The regional repercussions of partitioning Palestine

The Middle East according to the British Foreign Office, 1937-38

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Contents

Preface	IV
A short note on the primary sources	V
Introduction	1
The accuracy of the Foreign Office prophecies	8
The rationale behind the Foreign Office policy	11
Theoretical approach	13
Egypt	16
British-Egyptian relations	16
Egypt and Palestine in British strategy: linkages	18
The Palestine issue in Egypt	19
The impact of the Partition plan	22
The likelihood of a hostile, pro-Italian Egypt	27
Lampson's role	32
Saudi Arabia	36
Anglo-Saudi relations	36
Arab nationalism and the Palestine issue in Saudi Arabia	40
The Arab Rebellion	42
Ibn Saud, Palestine and Pan-Arabism	43
The release of the Peel plan	45
Ibn Saud as an Arabist icon	49
Ibn Saud's regional claims	52
The Italian factor	53
German approaches	55
Conclusion	58
Iraq	62
Anglo-Iraqi relations	62

The Palestine question in Iraq	65
Prelude – the Palestine Arab Rebellion.....	66
The Peel report	69
The Iraqi military intervenes	72
Mounting discontent with the Midfa’i Government.....	74
The fall of the Midfa’i Government	76
Palestine as a constant in Iraqi politics.....	78
The Partition proposal’s effect on Anglo-Iraqi relations.....	79
The deterioration of Anglo-Iraqi relations 1939-1941	81
The Foreign Office prophecies – the verdict.....	84
Transjordan	86
Transjordan and Palestine	88
The Palestine Rebellion.....	91
The Peel Report.....	93
Abdullah and the Arab world	97
British reactions.....	98
Abdullah’s options	99
The Foreign Office and Abdullah...and Ibn Saud	101
The likelihood of a major rising in Transjordan.....	105
Conclusion.....	107
Conclusions	110
Why did the Eastern Department oppose partition so vehemently?.....	112
A pro-Arab policy?.....	117
Bibliography	118
Literature	118
Archives consulted	122
Printed primary sources.....	122

Preface

It took a long time to get this project airborne. Completing it took even longer. This matters little now as I am not one who dwells much with the missteps and frustrations of the past. The work is finished and I am ready to move on to different fields. Actually, I have already moved on. Last October my family and I returned to our hometown of Skien. Since then I have worked fulltime in the social services at NAV. While I find the work rewarding, I intend eventually to find something which is more related to my education.

A substantial part of the preface is usually devoted to expressing gratitude towards fellow students and researchers. Well, from a scholarly angle only, this venture has been a rather lonesome journey. Not that I haven't been surrounded by some really nice people throughout, I just never involved them much in my work. Looking back, in fact, I cannot remember letting any of my closest colleagues read through my manuscripts.

While I did not bother my surroundings with my own work, the surroundings certainly made the experience more enjoyable. I must thank all the students who helped make the break room such a pleasant and tight packed space. Extra special thanks go out to Johannes Due Enstad and Magnus Haakenstad. Good luck to both of you, whatever you decide to do in the future.

One who was forced to involve herself in my *work* was my advisor Hilde Henriksen Waage. I could go on praising her for her vast knowledge, or even more so, for her astonishing work ethic. I choose, nonetheless, to honour her personal qualities. Hilde is just one exceptionally likable individual. She is not only refreshingly outspoken, her confidence is such that she sees no need to cover up the fact that there are things even she doesn't know. Although Hilde must have been frustrated at times over my lack of progress, she never gave up on me. And equally important, she never let any of the frustration she must have felt affect our working relationship. I thank her for the work she put in and for the comments and corrections she provided. I must also honour her for the great courage she displayed in a truly testing time. I wish her the best of luck and hope she eventually recovers fully from the illness which has been troubling her lately. I would also like to thank the students who participated in the study group Hilde put together. They offered valuable criticism on parts of my thesis.

Finally I have to thank my beloved wife and our two children. While my wife has been patient throughout, she is definitely happy to see my work completed.

As for the thesis itself, I am not quite sure how I ended up writing about the aftermath of Lord Peel's partition proposal. I spent far too long a time reading general literature on the Palestine Mandate before settling on a particular topic. Eventually I think I came to realize that the 1937 partition plan – and especially the demise of that scheme – raised some interesting questions. Not so much if partition would have been a success or not, but questions relating to Palestine's significance in Britain's wider strategy, and, the effects of her Mandate policy on Britain's reputation in the region. In 1935 Palestine was of little or no concern to the British Foreign Office. By 1938, it seems, the same department regarded the same strip of land as crucial to Britain's fortunes in the entire Middle East.

A short note on the primary sources

I spent a frantic week at the Public Record Office in London. Thanks to good preparation, modern technology (i.e. digital camera) and a helpful and knowledgeable staff I was able to amass what I consider to be staggering amount of documents in a very short time. Of course, this way of working left me with weeks of organizing upon returning home.

This material comprises the greater part of the primary sources utilized in this thesis. Being what it is – for a large part an account of the inner workings of the British bureaucracy – these documents are essential to this study. Through the Gale Group's databases I have also had access to *The Times Digital Archive*, *Arab – Israel Relations, 1917 – 1970* and *Iraq, 1914 – 1974*. The former two contain additional material comprised from the Public Record Office. Well into the working process I discovered that the National Archives was just starting to publish relevant material on their web pages. This resource gave me access to additional Cabinet Papers as well as important documents from the Chiefs of Staff.

A common objection to relying solely on a single state archive is that the material tends only to convey a one-sided perspective. There is often a lot of truth to this. This sort of criticism, however, does not seem fitting for this particular venture: much of this thesis is dedicated at exposing the various dispositions and attitudes of leading policy-makers *within*

the same bureaucracy. And the sources do indeed reveal that there was no “one-sided perspective” within the policy-making machinery. Quite the opposite.

Introduction

British policy towards the Palestine mandate was revised several times during its 28 year existence.¹ At no time, perhaps, was the shift as marked as during the period 1937-38. As a direct result of the Arab Rebellion which had erupted in Palestine in April 1936, the British set up a commission under Lord Peel with the aim of finding a permanent solution to the current unrest.

There were several reasons for the outbreak of Arab Rebellion. Perhaps the most decisive were related to Jewish immigration. The wave of Jewish settlers which had entered Palestine in the preceding years instilled in many native Palestine Arabs a fear of someday becoming a minority.² Moreover, the immigrants bought land on a large scale and competed for many of the same jobs as the Arab population.

The Royal Commission concluded that the present mandate was unworkable because of the irreconcilable aspirations of the Jews and the Arabs. As a result of this finding, the long overdue report - released on 7 July 1937 - recommended the partitioning of Palestine into a separate Arab and Jewish state. The commission considered this alternative to be the only one which might eventually bring about a lasting peace. The solution had been silently encouraged by the department primarily responsible for Palestine policy, the Colonial Office. The head of that office, Colonial Secretary William Ormsby-Gore, would in fact become the partition scheme's chief proponent, and arguably its most ardent defender.

The publication of Partition Plan caused immediate enmity within Palestine as well as throughout the Middle East. A more or less concerted Arab world denounced the scheme, regarding it as grossly unjust and as a surrender to the Zionists' unlawful demands over Palestine.

As it would turn out, however, the proposal to set up a separate Jewish state was not to initiate a turn towards a policy which might be accused of favouring the Zionists, but rather

¹ While the British were granted the Mandate in 1920, it came into being two years later. It would perhaps be equally correct to say that British rule lasted for 26 years.

² In 1925 Jewish immigration passed the 30.000 mark for the first time. At this stage, however, the Jewish settlers encountered numerous difficulties. For the next seven years Jewish immigration dropped significantly, never exceeding 10.000 a year. 1933 again witnessed Jewish immigration of more than 30.000. In 1935 immigration peaked at more than 61.000 settlers. Shaw, J. V. W., ed., *British Mandate: A Survey of Palestine, prepared by the British Mandate for UN prior to proposing the 1947 partition plan* (London 1991), p. 185.

one in the opposite direction.³ By the early months of 1938 the British Cabinet had decided that a new commission was to reevaluate the recommendations made by the Royal Commission the previous year. It soon became apparent to those inside the decision-making process that the real purpose of this Technical Commission was to discard the partition proposal altogether.⁴ Indeed, by autumn 1938 signals emanating from the Commission's ongoing investigation more than hinted that the original proposal was by all measures dead and buried. This was made official on 9 November 1938 when the Technical Commission under Sir John Woodhead released a report devoted in large part to underscore the many difficulties inherent in the previous partition scheme. On the day of its release the British Government issued a statement which said that:

after a careful consideration of the Partition Commission's report, [the Government] have reached the conclusion that this further examination has shown that the political, administrative and financial difficulties involved in the proposal to create independent Arab and Jewish States inside Palestine are so great that this solution of the problem is impracticable.⁵

16 months after the Cabinet had accepted the principle of partitioning Palestine, they had annulled their own decision. What exactly had happened during this time?

Broadly speaking, historians have tended to focus their attention on two, closely related issues in their attempt to account for the shift in British Palestine policy set in motion shortly after the release of the Peel Plan. Firstly, the regional repercussions of setting up a Zionist state in the Middle East were considered too damaging for British interests. It was assumed that the introduction of a policy strongly deplored throughout the Arab world would inevitably bring about a sharp rise in anti-British sentiment. Secondly, this alienation would be further reinforced by current changes in the strategic context. The Italian conquest of Abyssinia (today Ethiopia) in late 1935 had altered the balance of power in the region permanently. From now on Fascist Italy was an intimidating neighbour of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. The concurrent build up of Italian forces in Libya only increased British anxieties. Indeed, an increasing number of Britons and Egyptians alike saw these developments as

³ There is no consensus among historians as to the direction of British policy in the period prior to the Peel Report. The evidence suggests that it is misleading to talk either of a Zionist or Arab line. The British ruled Palestine primarily out of self-interest. In the early to mid 1930s, when Palestine was generally calm and the mandate could be dealt with in isolation, policies were first and foremost directed towards creating a peaceful balance between the two peoples in order for Britain to employ a minimum of investments both in terms of capital and personnel.

⁴ This has at various times been labeled the Woodhead Commission, the Technical Commission and the Partition Commission.

⁵ "A statement of Policy by His Majesty's Government", Cmd 5893, 9 November 1938.

confirmation of Mussolini's imperialist ambitions. This was made further apparent by Italy's increasing use of propaganda. Through the state-sponsored Radio Bari Italy did its utmost to reduce Britain's hegemony in the region by broadcasting vicious attacks on the imperial superpower.⁶

Somewhat simplified, many historians have since concluded that the combined implications of a hostile Middle East aligned with Britain's enemies effectively overrode the arguments in favour of partition.

While these two factors were undoubtedly important for the turnaround in policy, there was at no time thorough agreement within the British political machinery on how to interpret them, and thus, on how British Palestine policy should be conducted.⁷ Within the political establishment there existed at this point a diverging set of outlooks concerning both the nature of the Arab world, and on the connection between the Arab world and the Palestine question. This divide was brought to the fore over the partition proposal as it cut straight across the two British agencies responsible for conducting foreign policy - that is the Colonial and the Foreign Office.

Up until the second half of 1936 Palestine policy had in effect been the sole responsibility of the Colonial Office. But the aforementioned developments were to change all that. The Arab Rebellion and the sympathy it created throughout the Arab world alerted the Foreign Office of the increased importance of the Palestine issue on a regional level. However, it was the passionate reactions in the wake of the Royal Commission's Report a year later which made them irrefutably conclude that British interests were at risk under the present line of policy. This realization compelled them to interfere and thus implicitly challenge the Colonial Office position. From August 1937 until around February 1938 the two departments were engaged in an intense and at times hostile debate over whether partition

⁶ While visiting Libya in March 1937 the Duce proclaimed himself to be "the friend and protector of Islam". While not an entirely truthful assessment, it certainly underscores his regional ambitions. Burgwyn, James, *Italian Foreign Policy in the Interwar Period, 1918-1940* (London 1997), p. 159.

⁷ The leading authorities on British Palestine policy disagree over the forces which shaped policy in this period. Historian Elie Kedourie maintains that policy was on the whole vague, lacking both guidelines and principles. He argues that that this was a result of the autonomy enjoyed by the ruling elite within the Foreign Office. Furthermore he insists that the line of policy advocated by the Foreign Office exposed a clear pro-Arab persuasion. (Kedourie, Elie "Great Britain and Palestine: the Turning Point", *Islam and the Modern World* (New York, 1980)). Political Scientist Gabriel Sheffer acknowledges that the arrival of the Foreign Office saw a major change in Palestine policy. However, he argues that this was largely the result of current changes in the regional context, and not a product of the leading officials' "personal whims". (Sheffer, Gabriel "Reevaluation of British Policies toward Palestine in the 1930s", Dann, Uriel, ed., *The Great Powers in the Middle East 1919-1939* (New York, 1988)).

should be implemented or not. The Foreign Office gradually convinced the Cabinet that a partitioning of Palestine would spell disaster for Britain's longstanding hegemony in the region. It was thus their particular outlook on the Middle East which would form the basis of British policy towards Palestine up until the outbreak of WWII, and arguably until the termination of the mandate in 1947.⁸

There is little doubt that the Foreign Office brought with them new images into the policy-making system.⁹ Prior to this Palestine policy had been conducted according to a principle dubbed by one scholar as "symmetrical separation".¹⁰ Its main purpose had been to prevent the linkage of the Palestine question to the general problems of the Middle East as well as thwarting any attempts of Arab rulers from meddling in Palestinian affairs. This principle was now abandoned in favour of one which regarded Palestine not only as part of an "organic whole" - which was said to constitute the Middle-East - but from a British point of view, arguably *the* most crucial element in this "whole".¹¹

The section responsible for Palestine within the Foreign Office was the Eastern Department.¹² Head of Department was George Rendel. At the centre of the Eastern Department's thinking lay an assertion which held that the future potency of Arab unity was closely tied up with the direction of British policy in Palestine. The Eastern Department maintained that a continued "pro-Zionist" policy in Palestine would spell disaster for Britain as it would alienate Arabs everywhere and consequently strengthen a particular anti-British brand of Pan-Arabism.¹³ The papers produced by the department throughout this period accentuates this argument by portraying a Middle East where the various Arab states cautiously observed the current development within Palestine and where both governments and population were ready to turn against Britain should her policy fail to satisfy the Palestinian Arabs' demands.

⁸ The Foreign Office would preside over Palestine affairs for the remainder of the mandate. Kedourie argues rather convincingly that the line of policy devised by that department during the 1937-38 period was one that was to persist until Britain's demise in 1948. Kedourie, "Great Britain...", p. 93.

⁹ Sheffer, Gabriel, "Arab and Jewish Images in British Policy", Lustick, Ian S., ed., *Arab-Israel Relations: Historical Background and Origins of the Conflict, volume I* (New York 1994), p.125.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.124.

¹¹ George Rendel would repeatedly describe the Arab world as an "organic whole".

¹² By 1937 the Eastern Department of the Foreign Office was responsible for Iraq, Persia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey and gradually also Palestine. While Egypt was formally situated under the Egyptian Department, it will be seen that during the contest over partition the Eastern Department had extensive contacts with the British embassy in Cairo.

¹³ It is definitely debateable whether the partition proposal should be labelled as a pro-Zionist policy. The Commission itself would certainly not have approved of such a characteristic. Rendel, however, would frequently refer to it as "our current pro-Zionist policy".

This impression of the Middle East is problematic for several reasons. As will be thoroughly demonstrated throughout, each of the Arab rulers had interests concerning Palestine which were not connected to the rights and wellbeing of the Arab population in that country. These interests, whether dynastical or political, were undoubtedly a crucial factor in explaining the Arab States' concern over the Palestine question. Yet, there was a persisting tendency within the Eastern Department to downplay or altogether ignore this issue when evaluating the various proposals and appeals put forward by the Arab Kings.¹⁴ A leading historian on Pan-Arabism underlines the importance of inter-Arab rivalry in understanding the actions of Arab leaders.

The trouble was that very rarely could Pan-Arabism as a political force be separated from the state or dynastic interests of one protagonist or another. Therefore the reaction of other Arabs was usually connected with, or even resulted from, their own particular interests and necessitated Britain's taking account of the reactions of the various rival factors among the Arabs.¹⁵

While the release of the Peel Report in July 1937 caused major uproar throughout the region and saw an increase in anti-British sentiment, the Eastern Department's assumption that partition would inevitably lead large sections of the Arab world to "turn against" Britain seems highly contentious. A lengthy report produced by the War Office in February 1938 concluded that:

there are many considerations...to dissuade the present rulers or governments of the Arabic speaking countries from combining under existing conditions in concerted opposition to H.M Government, even on such an important issue as the future of Palestine.¹⁶

It is also open to debate whether a Jewish state in Palestine would in fact strengthen the Pan-Arab movement. The Eastern Department's main adversary over the Palestine question, William Ormsby Gore, concluded in the opposite:

Our policy always has been and must be aimed at preventing the growth of unity and solidarity in the Moslem world, and in the Sudan and Nigeria, as well as vis-à-vis Egypt and other Islamic states, we have rightly encouraged the growth of local nationalisms as being the lesser danger than Pan-Islamic solidarity.¹⁷

¹⁴ During 1936 the various Arab leaders had been allowed by the British involve themselves actively in Palestinian affairs in order to quell the ongoing rebellion. This practice was to persist right up until the termination of the mandate.

¹⁵ Porath, Yehoshua, *In Search of Arab Unity 1930-1945* (London 1986), p. 223.

¹⁶ War Office to Foreign Office, FO/371/21873/ E788, 9 February 1938.

¹⁷ Ormsby-Gore to Prime Minister, FO/371/ 21862/ E559, 9 January 1938.

This line of policy, Ormsby-Gore maintained, would be sustained by the partitioning of Palestine.

The last issue of contention concerns the Eastern Department's depiction of the Pan-Arab movement. Was Pan-Arabism the highly potent, potentially unifying force the London office portrayed it to be? Or was it, in any of its many guises, a predominantly theoretical construct, flawed by inherent contradictions. The British official most vocal in his critic of Pan-Arabism's potential and validity was Gilbert MacKereth, Consul at the British Embassy in Damascus. MacKereth argued that:

Pan-Arabism or Arab nationalism has never flourished otherwise than as a subversive movement finding its chief stimulus in a revolt against law and order...especially when established by foreign rule. It has thrived only under what is thought to be oppression, and has always died in liberty...The leaders of the movement are themselves extremely vague to the meanings they attach to the terms nation, nationalism, confederation or Pan-Arabism...Militating against the ideology of Pan-Arabism is...the creation and growth of separate Arab states (imbued with all the chauvinism and individuality that the word "nation implies)...Herein, perhaps, exists a force that will grow increasingly inimical to Arab cohesion and confederation. ¹⁸

While MacKereth would tirelessly denounce the legitimacy of Pan-Arabism from his rather remote position in Damascus, London operated in a totally different environment.¹⁹ As the heat was turned up in contest over partition between the Foreign and Colonial Office, the Eastern Department's line of reasoning became increasingly pessimistic:

every punitive measure and every act of reprisal which our present policy is obliging us to take in Palestine is a step further in the consolidation of Arab opinion against us, in the development of intenser and more united Arab nationalism, and in the creation of a more compact and solid anti-British block in the Middle East. It is inconceivable that our rivals and enemies should not draw the maximum advantage from this unhappy situation. We are...playing straight into Italian and German hands.²⁰

In a lengthy memorandum written in January 1938 George Rendel further elaborated the departmental view:

experience suggests that, under the stimulus of an external irritant, such elements can coalesce into compact and aggressive national blocks. The process is already beginning, and the Foreign Office are

¹⁸ MacKereth to Foreign Office, FO/371/19980/ E3039, 15 May 1936.

¹⁹ During the second half of 1937 MacKereth managed to attract the hostility of George Rendel. As a result of this MacKereth's memorandum would often not be distributed further.

²⁰ Foreign Office memo, FO/371/20818/ E6317, 27 October 1937.

convinced that the one element calculated to drive the Arab countries into a condition of acute aggressive nationalism will be supplied if a Jewish state is created in Palestine.²¹

From the numerous papers written on Palestine by the Eastern Department, it is apparent that the officials within that office did not always wish to go into specific details as to the actual consequences of enforced partition. This was of course understandable, as it was a particularly difficult task to accurately predict the moves of a “potential enemy”. Nevertheless, their memoranda on the Palestine issue were frequently built around a sort of catastrophic logic in which the potentially disastrous outcome of a failed policy seemed an essential part of the overall argument. Consequently, the reports occasionally ventured into more specific territory:

I think there is no doubt at all that opposition will continue to grow, and will mean that it will only be possible for us to impose partition by force of arms...We know that the northern tribes of Saudi Arabia are only being prevented from launching a holy war against the Jews by Ibn Saud’s firm hand, but we clearly cannot expect him to continue to restrain them if we are at virtually open war with the Arab world. We also know that organisations are springing up as soon as hostilities begin...Feeling is likely to be almost equally strong in Egypt and Iraq, when in spite of our treaties, a great deal of help is likely to be furnished to the rebels.²²

On 19 November 1937 the Foreign Office put before Cabinet a weighty report on the regional repercussions of a partition in Palestine.²³ It would be inadequate to describe the memorandum as merely a compilation of previous arguments. The tone was more alarmist and the predictions more clear-cut. Iraq, Egypt, Saudi-Arabia and Transjordan were each treated in separate sections. The prophecies were authored by the Eastern Department, but since this was Cabinet meeting, it was presented as the work of Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden.²⁴

The Foreign Office arguments were further augmented by the selective use of reports emanating from British officials in the region. Among them was a particularly depressing account on the situation in Egypt, written by the influential Ambassador to Cairo, Sir Miles Lampson. While each analysis differed slightly, the overall predictions were very much alike:

²¹ Foreign Office comments regarding Ormsby-Gore’s letter to Prime Minister, FO/371/21862/E559, 9 January 1938.

²² Foreign Office memorandum, FO/371/ 20814/E5501, 22 September 1937.

²³ Anthony Eden’s memorandum, CAB 24/273, CP 281(37), 19 November 1937.

²⁴ Evidently, Eden had little interest in Palestine. He therefore seems to have left the question largely in the hands of the Eastern Department.

should Cabinet decide to establish a Jewish State in parts of Palestine much of the Arab world might possibly align itself with Italy and become an outright enemy of Great Britain.

It is impossible to determine exactly how decisive the 19 November paper was in winning over the Cabinet. It definitely dealt a blow to Ormsby-Gore's own campaign. The contest between the two departments had previously seen a steady exchange of memorandum, each contribution challenging the previous. On this occasion the Colonial Secretary was unable to produce a report which managed to refute the claims made by the Foreign Office. He simply stated:

I hope I do not underestimate the strength of the Pan-Arab movement, but, with all deference, I venture to doubt whether it is yet possible to argue with any plausibility that "the Middle East is an organic whole." I do not propose to comment in detail on the paragraphs of Mr. Eden's memorandum...I cannot say what impression these paragraphs may have made upon the minds of my colleagues, but, for my own part, I find no conclusive or final evidence in those paragraphs of any widespread or permanent feeling in those countries with reference to the Palestine question.²⁵

Ormsby-Gore's somewhat subdued memorandum did in fact prove to be the last chapter in the inter-departmental struggle. One week later the Cabinet assembled for what was to prove a crucial meeting. It was decided that partition would be postponed indefinitely. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's intervention was decisive in tipping the scale in favour of the Foreign Office. In an accompanying statement he emphasized his fear of Italian advancements in the region (especially in the case of Saudi Arabia) as the main reason for his new-found reluctance. These were, of course, key arguments in the 19 November memorandum. While the dispute over partition would continue into the early months of 1938, the proposal was never again to recover from the blow it received at this meeting.

The accuracy of the Foreign Office prophecies

This thesis will look at how the Peel Commission's partition plan was received in the different Arab states. Developments in Egypt, Saudi-Arabia, Iraq and Transjordan will each be treated in separate chapters. The proposal will be considered in light of how it affected their relationship with Great Britain, and to some extent how it affected domestic politics. In order

²⁵ Ormsby-Gore's memorandum, CAB 24/273, CP 289(37), 1 December 1937.

to better understand the current British strategy, each chapter also describes briefly the imperial power's role in that country during the preceding decades.

The Eastern Department considered the Pan-Arab movement to be on the rise in the Middle East. Furthermore, they currently believed there was a widespread interest in the Palestine issue throughout the Arab world. This issue, they contended, had the potential to cause significant political turmoil in each country should Britain come up with a solution which failed to satisfy the Arab "demands". Each of the four main chapters will query this assessment. It will look closer at the current level of interest regarding Palestine and the partition issue. Also, was this growing awareness a result of Pan-Arab sympathy? In addition, the Palestine question's role in domestic politics will be examined. In the cases of Iraq and Egypt especially, just how important was the Palestine issue in the political scene during 1937-38?

A greater part of each chapter is nonetheless dedicated to Anglo-Arab relations. Simply put: would a partitioning of Palestine run the risk of permanently alienating that country, possibly transforming it into an outright enemy of Britain?

This question touches directly upon the prophecies put forward by the Foreign Office on November 19. The predictions will be assessed mainly in light of information available at the time. Obviously, since partition was never implemented, it is impossible to draw any final conclusions. One important aspect does however make this a more viable task. While it was known to insiders that the Technical Commission would most likely advise against partition, people on the outside continued to believe that partition was still a likely outcome of the ongoing investigation. Both the Arab leaders and the Arab population thus continued - at least until October 1938 - to actively oppose such a decision. Consequently, developments in the Middle East from late 1937 up until autumn 1938 are enlightening as to how partition might have been received.

While the above summary certainly suggests that Eastern Department was inclined towards a fatalistic and arguably flawed outlook on Britain's future in the Middle East, a denunciation of their Palestine policy is not the objective of this thesis. It is not assumed - as is largely the case in one major work on this episode - that the department were altogether mistaken in their approach to the Palestine issue.²⁶ What is assumed is that the Foreign Office

²⁶ For a more or less consistent disapproval of the Foreign Office' role in the formulation of Palestine policy from 1936-38, see Kedourie "Great Britain and Palestine..."

thinking was marred by a dogmatic position. This rigid attitude was damaging in a several ways. As the Eastern Department often refused to incorporate conflicting intelligence into their analysis, they ended up advocating policies which did not always correspond with the information available. Overall, their pessimistic approach tended to obscure some of the available options, which in turn reduced Britain's room of maneuver in their policy-making towards Palestine rather than the other way around.

It is thus the orthodoxy of Foreign Office assessments which are queried. In practical terms this involves demonstrating that there were highly proficient individuals in other departments and elsewhere who at the time offered contrasting, yet equally plausible analysis on the Palestine question and its effect on developments in the region. Fairly often, in fact, these competing analyses seem to have been better founded than the ones provided by the Eastern Department. These individuals were sometimes counteracted by the Eastern Department, but more often they were ignored altogether. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the Head of Department had a different version to tell:

It seems to me that the Departments directly concerned are shutting their eyes to the realities of the situation and are pursuing a policy which can only steadily increase our difficulties. It is a thankless task to prophesy disaster, but I have seldom seen a case where disaster is approaching more inexorably. It may be said that this is not mainly a question for the Foreign Office and that we shall allow the other Departments to deal with it as they think best. My reply is that if the disaster which I foresee comes about...the consequences will be such as deeply to involve Foreign Office interests.²⁷

It can certainly be argued that a discussion that for the most part centres on how a partitioning of Palestine would affect Britain's standing in the region is somewhat redundant: partition would, for a list of reasons, probably not solve Britain's problems in the mandated area. Equally likely, it seems, would be an increase in her troubles.²⁸ Such an objection, though, misses the quintessence of this study. The basis for this thesis is very much the outlook of the Foreign Office, the causes behind this outlook and the line of policy which derived from it. A look at the relevant documents will show that their gloomy predictions regarding future

²⁷ FO memo, FO/371/20818/E6410, 30 October 1937.

²⁸ For a meticulous treatment of the many difficulties inherent in the partition scheme, see Klieman, Aaron, "The Resolution of Conflicts through Territorial Partition: The Palestine Experience", in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23 (1980). For a contemporary, well argued criticism of Lord Peel's proposal, see the Woodhead Commission's report of November 1938.

Anglo-Arab relations formed a decisive part of their case, and, that this line of reasoning was crucial in tipping the scales in their direction.²⁹

The rationale behind the Foreign Office policy

While the above attempts to evaluate the soundness of the policies recommended by the Foreign Office, it deals less with the components which shaped their particular course of action. As demonstrated above, the two departments competing over the direction of policy drew conclusions that were largely incompatible. This detail undermines an explanation centred primarily on strategic motives. For how could two branches within the same administration, with access to the same intelligence be so far apart if both parties were guided only by strategic thinking?

There can be little doubt that some of the departmental disagreement had to do with dissimilar responsibilities and objectives. The Colonial Office had for many years enjoyed close contact with the Zionist movement. Under Ormsby-Gore's period in office these relations became especially cordial, in many ways resembling a patron-client relationship. Furthermore, the Colonial Secretary definitely had a personal desire to see the creation of a Jewish state. In an emotional letter to Eden in July 1937, prompted by a formal Iraqi attack on partition, Ormsby-Gore wrote: "no more unfriendly act, or one more personally embarrassing to me, could have been committed."³⁰

The Eastern Department, on the other hand, had little if any contact with the Zionist movement during the 1930s.³¹ Their efforts were instead dedicated towards safeguarding Anglo-Arab relations. These relationships undoubtedly instilled in many officials a general sympathy with the Arab position. The number of outspoken Arabists serving in the Foreign Services during this era underlines this tendency. Indeed, many of the leading consuls and Ambassadors referred to throughout this thesis were of a definite Arabist persuasion.

²⁹ Sheffer, Gabriel, *Policy Making and British Policies towards Palestine 1929-1939*, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Oxford (1971), p. 400. Sheffer argues that it was the negative reactions from region which became "the main British reason for rejecting partition."

³⁰ Ormsby-Gore to Eden, FO/371/20809/E4098, 17 July 1937

³¹ According to Chaim Weizmann's personal secretary Anthony Eden never met the London based Zionist spokesman. Rendel also admitted to having had very few dealings with Weizmann or any of his associates. Klieman, Aaron, "Bureaucratic Politics at Whitehall in the Partitioning of Palestine, 1937", Dann, Uriel, ed., *The Great Powers...*, p. 147.

This tendency was not lost on the Zionists at the time. When information on the inter-departmental struggle reached them, their anger was vented towards the alleged chief villain: George Rendel. Prominent Gentile Zionist, Blanche Dugdale, recorded in her diary: “the author of the attack is Rendel - head of Middle Eastern Department – and a Papist.”³²³³ Rendel’s main opponent, William Ormsby-Gore, expressed similar sentiments. In an internal memo he wrote. “I realise that Mr Rendel is a sincere pro-Arab and anti-Jew and a critic of His Majesty’s policy”.³⁴ In conversation with his colleague, the Conservative politician Leo Amery, Ormsby-Gore used even more harsh terms. The Colonial Secretary said that partition was “being held up...thanks to Rendel a strong RC [Roman Catholic] and anti-Semite.”³⁵

As these assessments were provided by persons either belonging to - or sympathetic towards - the Zionist movement they must be treated with a great deal of scepticism. Nonetheless, political scientist and leading authority on this subject, Aaron Klieman, has to some extent pursued the anti-Zionist trail. To begin with, he maintains that Rendel was both the architect and initiator of the campaign to override partition; secondly, he implies that Rendel was to a large degree influenced by a latent anti-Zionism. Klieman’s trump card, so to speak, is a brief characteristic made by Oliver Harvey, private secretary to Anthony Eden and “thus in privileged position to judge Rendel from within the Foreign Office.”

You will have been reading a number of papers on Palestine. From the point of view of objective it is worth remembering that Rendel is a Catholic and a passionate anti-Zionist and that the question is also viewed from the Eastern Department only.³⁶

What Klieman fails to mention is that Mr. Harvey can only be described as a passionate Zionist himself.³⁷ Not only does this fact strip Harvey of any objectivity on this matter, it is also highly doubtful if he in any way can be said to represent the Foreign Office position.

In large part the anti-Zionist approach seems to be a blind alley. Obviously, neither Rendel nor Lampson had much sympathy with the Zionist project, but their opposition towards partition seems have derived neither from a methodical anti-Zionism nor a latent anti-

³² Blanche Dugdale was Lord Balfour’s niece. She was also a life-long friend and confidante of Chaim Weizmann. She could perhaps best be described as an ardent Zionist campaigner.

³³ Rose, Norman, ed., *Baffy: The Diaries of Blanche Dugdale, 1936-1947* (London 1973), p. 67. George Rendel belonged to the Roman Catholic Church. Papist is here used by Dugdale as derogatory term, implying that his Catholicism accounted for his anti-Semitism.

³⁴ Cohen, Michael, *Palestine: Retreat From the Mandate* (New York 1978), p. 33.

³⁵ Barnes and Nicholson, ed., *The Empire at Bay: The Leo Amery Diaries 1929-1945* (London 1988), p. 545.

³⁶ Klieman, “Bureaucratic Politics...”, p. 147.

³⁷ A quick look at Oliver Harvey’s diaries shows he was an active supporter of the Zionist project. He frequently dined with Chaim Weizmann where the two of them discussed Palestine. Harvey, John, *The Diplomatic diaries of Oliver Harvey, 1937-1940* (London 1970).

Semitism. The years spent consolidating British-Arab relations had convinced them that British imperial and strategic requirements necessitated friendly ties with the Arab world. Observing how the partition proposal was denounced throughout the region, they came to regard the scheme as a possible threat to British hegemony in the area. Consequently, they did what they could to prevent its implementation.

But there was definitely another, more emotional factor. Many British officials had come into contact with the Arabs through government work in the region where they had become deeply fascinated by Arab customs. This seems to have induced in them a romantic infatuation with the traditional, Bedouin way of life. In one way this ascetic lifestyle offered a way of holding on to a lost past and of defying the modernization that was occurring in the West where they lived.³⁸ For quite a few the Zionist project appears to have disrupted this somewhat picturesque view of the Arab world. Observations made by George Rendel in his autobiography support this impression. He seems to have regarded the Zionists' progress in Palestine as artificial, and as the manifestation of increased western influence in the region:

The new Jewish colonies, however, had greatly multiplied since our previous visit in 1932, and the countryside was beginning to take on a rather brash modern look...stout young women from Central Europe in exiguous tight shorts, made an odd contrast to the then still more numerous native Arabs, glaring suspiciously at these strange invaders.³⁹

The motives for the Eastern Department's Palestine policy will be discussed at various times throughout this thesis. A recurring theme will obviously be to what degree the Arabist leanings of key officials influenced their thinking regarding the partitioning of Palestine.

Theoretical approach

The notion that political decision makers operate in a setting (the psychological environment) which rarely corresponds with the actual one (the operational environment) is a common concept in political theory.⁴⁰ The discrepancy between the two can result in the following

³⁸ Miller, Rory, "The Rhetoric of Reaction: British Arabists, Jewish Refugees and the Palestine Question", *Israel Affairs*, 14:3, p. 469.

³⁹ Rendel, George William, *The Sword and the Olive* (London 1957), p. 99.

⁴⁰ This concept was first formulated by political scientists Snyder, Bruck & Sapin in *Decision-Making as an Approach to the Study of International Politics* (London 1954).

scenarios: The decision-maker may think there are possibilities for action which do not fully exist, if so, his psychological environment is broader than his operational, or as is most often the case; he may ignore genuine possibilities, as a consequence, narrowing his own room of manoeuvre in relation to the operational one.⁴¹

This simple model can help shed light on the increasingly rigid stand of both departments. Regarding Palestine, it is apparent that the psychological environments of the Colonial and Foreign Office were vastly different: a development in a certain direction - which one might assume would bring their positions closer together - often, brought them further apart.⁴² Also, where the Colonial Office saw partition (at least partly) as fulfilling a 20-year old pledge to the Jewish people, the Foreign Office increasingly came to regard the same proposal as a betrayal to the Palestine Arabs.

In continuation of this, another question emerges: was the psychological environment of the Eastern Department in 1937 largely the product of its head, George Rendel, or was it mostly the other way: that is a situation where the rules and customs “accompanying” the office to a large degree determined how the officials behaved?⁴³ Among political scientists there is some disagreement over how much influence a mid-level official such as George Rendel might have possessed.⁴⁴ This discussion is centred on two closely connected levels: how much personal autonomy does a bureaucratic system allow for, and how strong an influence does a senior official have on the “political climate” inside his own office.

Rendel was not the first Foreign Office official to vent scepticism at the Zionist endeavour. It is evident, however, that his personal opposition to the project was rather passionate. More importantly, his commitment was crucial in redefining British policy towards Palestine. Remember, it was Rendel personally who interfered in the Palestine issue during the second half of 1936. In the following 18 months he alone drafted all the important

⁴¹ Frankel, Joseph, *The Making of Foreign Policy: An Analysis of Decision-Making* (London 1963), p. 4.

⁴² The Colonial Office regarded the growing signs of inter-Arab cooperation, as witnessed by the Arab leaders' joint initiatives at mediating in Palestine during 1936, mainly as attempts to raise their own prestige in the region. Also, should their efforts prove successful they would be certain to receive a considerable amount of British goodwill. The Foreign Office regarded the same process as a manifestation of a sincere commitment to their Arab brethren in Palestine.

⁴³ In his famous study, *Essence of Decision*, political scientist Allison Graham refuted the notion that officials, when entering a new office, fully conformed to the conventions accompanying the post. Instead Graham stressed the fact that “each person comes to his position with a baggage in tow”, Graham, Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, (London 1971), p. 298.

⁴⁴ Political scientist David Vital acknowledged that there existed something which he chose to call the “artful bureaucrat”; senior officials who had the “authority, or more rarely the courage to take major decisions without reference to higher authority.” Vital, David, *The Making of British Foreign Policy*, (London 1968), p. 45.

papers on Palestine - apparently without any directives from his superiors. Even Rendel himself acknowledged that great degree of leverage given to him at the time.

I... found myself responsible for dealing with all its [the Near East] problems...and free to formulate policy, to make recommendations, and to organize the work more or less as I choose...Heads of Department had more responsibility and a freer and wider field than they had after the Second World War.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Rendel, p. 56.

Egypt

speeches at Geneva by the Egyptian representative on the League of Nations and a recent statement in the Egyptian Parliament by Nahas Pasha [Egyptian Premier] clearly indicates that the [Palestine] question is one of interest to the Egyptian public and that the Government is under the necessity of showing that they are not indifferent to Arab opinion. If this sympathy is not at the moment very active, it is, at any rate, latent and ready to take active form if an occasion arises. Such an occasion would be Arab resistance to our forceful imposition of a [Palestine] policy hateful to the Arabs. There is, indeed, a real and ever-present danger that the nationalism and religious sentiment of the Egyptians, always readily inflammable, may be roused to new excitement by sympathy with their Arab co-religionists, of whose civilisation they regard themselves to some extent as leaders...the general delicacy of the internal situation in Egypt provide a promising field for Italian propaganda which would not be slow to fan the flames of pro-Arab resentment...even in the best circumstances in Palestine...we might find ourselves faced with a situation in Egypt which demanded the retention of all our forces in that country.⁴⁶

British-Egyptian relations

In 1922 the British granted Egypt its formal independence.⁴⁷ While the country received a fairly liberal constitution, based largely on western parliamentary lines, Egyptian sovereignty was limited by several British-imposed conditions. Britain retained responsibility for securing imperial communications, for the defence of Egypt against outside aggression and for the protection of foreign interests and minorities.⁴⁸

Upon his arrival in Cairo in 1934, the new Egyptian Ambassador, Miles Lampson, was instructed by the Foreign Office that non-intervention in Egyptian affairs should be his guiding

⁴⁶ Anthony Eden's memorandum, CAB/24/273, CP/281 (37), 19 November 1937.

⁴⁷ The declaration was published on 28 February 1922. Mainly due to opposition from King Fuad it was not formalized until 19 April the following year.

⁴⁸ Botman, Selma, "The Liberal Age 1922-1952", Daily, M.W., ed., *The Cambridge History of Egypt, Vol. 2: Modern Egypt, from 1517 to the End of the Twentieth Century* (New York 1998), p. 285.

principle.⁴⁹ The intention was to minimize friction with Egyptian leaders in order to create a stable political situation where Britain could best pursue its interests. However, the unequal distribution of power between the political parties in parliament and the palace, and the conflicting interests of Britain and Egypt on key issues created tension the British Embassy could not overlook.⁵⁰

But for Britain, this was not necessarily a bad thing. While it was never going to be an easy task, the tension which existed between the Egyptian Palace and the Egyptian Parliament created opportunities for Britain to strengthen its own position. This was done by playing the two sides off against each other.

Britain's position was strongest vis-à-vis the Palace. It was made perfectly clear that they had the power to unseat the Monarch if he challenged their fundamental interests, and, that they alone possessed the real military and financial power of the Egyptian state.⁵¹ While the King was clearly vulnerable to British pressure, the constitution of 1923 awarded him extensive powers in relation to domestic rivals: the King could appoint the prime minister, dismiss the government, dissolve parliament and his assent was required for all bills.⁵² While the Wafd party won every open election from 1923 and onwards, King Fuad (1917-36) – and later his son Farouk (1936-52) – would repeatedly find ways of ousting the Wafd from power and rule without them for longer periods at a time. The Wafd was Egypt's leading nationalist party and dominated the political scene during the 1920s and 1930s. Early on it became the centre of the anti-British movement. This trait was in fact an important reason for its success, as anti-British sentiment was prevalent in all sectors of the population.

As a consequence of these recurring setbacks the Wafd would continuously work towards an agreement with the British which would award the country genuine independence. After trying for more than 14 years the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty was signed in August 1936. This long and frustrating process had seen a gradual transformation of the Wafd. The party leaders had learnt the lesson that they could never hold power for long against British opposition. While the Wafd never toned down its hostility towards the Palace, it had gradually adopted an increasingly moderate attitude towards Britain.⁵³

While Wafd's increasingly moderate stance certainly contributed to the process, there can be little doubt that it was Italy's current aggression which was the single most important reason for why the Anglo-Egyptian treaty finally fell into place. The Italian invasion of Abyssinia and the

⁴⁹ From 1934-36 Lampson was High Commissioner to Egypt. In December 1936 his titled was changed to Ambassador.

⁵⁰ Kolinsky, Martin, *Britain's War in the Middle East: Strategy and Diplomacy, 1936-42* (London 1999), p. 32.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 34.

⁵² Yapp, M. E., *Politics and Diplomacy in Egypt: the Diaries of Sir Miles Lampson* (Oxford 1997), p.14.

⁵³ Mansfield, Peter, *The British in Egypt* (New York 1972), p. 264.

reinforcement of her garrison in Libya from September 1935 onwards made Egyptians of all parties painfully aware of their country's vulnerability vis-à-vis Italy. The only solution, it seems, was to rely on Britain for her defences. Upon the treaty's release the intellectual weekly, *al-Risa*, made a distinction between the "neo-Roman fascist imperialism" of Italy and the "traditional imperialism" of Great Britain. As Britain was the lesser of the two evils, the Wafd Government was judged to have done the right thing in accepting the treaty.⁵⁴

The Egyptian leadership was in fact fairly happy with the treaty as it recognised Egypt as a sovereign state. Moreover, they were convinced that the country would eventually be moving towards full independence. For the British, military considerations were decisive. The treaty guaranteed them the right to intervene in the event of an emergency, and it ensured them access to Egyptian military facilities.⁵⁵ While the British had to withdraw their military forces from Egyptian territory, they were allowed to station up to 10.000 men in the Suez Canal Zone for 20 more years. The treaty also barred Egypt from concluding any treaties on her own or adopting an attitude inconsistent with the alliance.⁵⁶ Like the Egyptians the British were fairly pleased with the outcome. There was the appearance of Egyptian independence, but the reality was that British forces remained in the vicinity.⁵⁷

Miles Lampson was employed in Cairo until 1946. Throughout the 12 years in office he held a powerful position in Egyptian domestic policies. Even after Egypt was awarded its independence in 1936, Lampson for the most part bypassed the Egyptian minister of foreign affairs and instead dealt directly with the prime minister.⁵⁸ The British embassy in Cairo was in fact considered to be an extension of the British state. It was by far the largest and most senior diplomatic institution in the country, and to most people's great dismay it held an imposing position in Egyptian political life.⁵⁹

Egypt and Palestine in British strategy: linkages

The British acquired Palestine first and foremost to use it as a buffer zone to the area north of the Suez Canal. The Suez Canal was crucial because it connected the Mediterranean and Red Seas. By the 1930s Palestine was regarded by Britain's strategic thinkers as an asset by its own, but its merits were still linked primarily with Egypt. Palestine gave Britain a foothold in the eastern Mediterranean unrestricted by any treaty. Moreover, when the Anglo-Egyptian treaty of 1936 was set to expire in

⁵⁴ Morewood, Steven, *The British Defense of Egypt: Conflict and Crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean* (New York 2005), p. 95.

⁵⁵ Botman, p. 295.

⁵⁶ Morewood, p. 96.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Kolinsky, p. 32.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 33

1956, Palestine might be required accommodate the imperial garrison in the Middle East, now located in Egypt.⁶⁰

However, by the later 1930s Palestine had become something of a strategic liability. In order to quell the uprising which had erupted in 1936, Britain was gradually forced to divert troops and equipment from the United Kingdom and Egypt.⁶¹ For Miles Lampson this perceived weakening of Egypt's defence became increasingly difficult to accept. Especially so, since he was convinced that the Rebellion would eventually die down if Britain would concede to the general Arab demands: scrap the partition proposal and halt Jewish immigration into Palestine.⁶²

The Italian factor undoubtedly reinforced Lampson's conviction that the current Palestine policy created unnecessary burdens. By January 1938 there were reportedly 95.000 Italian soldiers stationed in Libya. British forces in Egypt were numbered at mere 10.000.⁶³ Lampson and Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden were among those most alarmed by Italian expansionism in the Middle East. As they both believed Italy's ambitions stopped short of nothing less than the rebirth of the Roman Empire, they were convinced that a trial of strength between the two powers was inevitable.⁶⁴ Consequently, the Ambassador would repeatedly appeal to the British Chiefs of Staff for a strengthening of Egypt's defences against a possible Italian invasion.

Lampson's concerns regarding Palestine could thus be said to have be twofold. The Rebellion pinned down an increasing number of British troops in Palestine. By the second half of 1938 there was still no end in sight. Lampson considered this as potentially damaging for the defence of Egypt. More importantly, though, Lampson was together with the Eastern Department of the Foreign Office convinced that a continuation of the current Palestine policy would alienate Arabs everywhere. In the case of Egypt, this might involve a break with Britain and a rapprochement with Italy.

The Palestine issue in Egypt

The notion that Egypt was an integral part of the Arab world found few adherents in Egypt during the first three decades of the twentieth century.⁶⁵ Pan-Islamism and Pan-Arabism was largely rejected because both movements were perceived to detract from the main goal: a distinctive Egyptian national

⁶⁰ Cohen, Michael, "The Egypt-Palestine Nexus", same, ed., *Bar-Ilan Studies in History III*, (Jerusalem 1991), p. 68.

⁶¹ Pratt, Lawrence, "The Strategic Context: British Policy in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, 1936-1939", Dann, Uriel, ed., *The Great Powers...*, p. 20.

⁶² Lampson to FO, No. 507, 1 October 1938, CO/733/368/6, 1938, Situation/Reactions in Egypt.

⁶³ Kolinsky, p. 42.

⁶⁴ Pratt, Lawrence, *East of Malta, West of Suez* (New York 1975), p. 67.

⁶⁵ Mayer, Thomas, *Egypt and the Palestine Question 1936-1945* (Berlin 1983), p. 6.

identity. Egyptian politicians focused most of their attention towards the domestic political struggle and to efforts aimed at ending the British presence in the country. Involvement in the Arab and Islamic areas around Egypt were minimal.⁶⁶ The Palestine question was no exception. For the most part Egyptians were indifferent or ill-informed about the burgeoning Arab-Zionist conflict.⁶⁷ In the press, no more space was awarded Palestine during the 1920s than any other foreign parts of the world.⁶⁸ However, during the Wailing Wall disturbances of August 1929 Palestine did become a key issue in the Egyptian newspapers.⁶⁹ But as the unrest was brought to an end, Egyptian interest in Palestine receded to its previous level. What is more, during the incident the press made no attempt to link Palestinian and Egyptian affairs. Instead the secular press portrayed the disturbances as a grim example of sectarian violence. More than anything else, this ought to serve as a warning to Egyptians of the dangers associated with basing unity around religion rather than nationalism.⁷⁰

On an official level, the Egyptian Government followed a policy of strict neutrality and non-involvement.⁷¹ Not only was there a general lack of interest in the fortunes of the Palestine Arabs, considerable support was expressed by certain publicists and politicians for the Jewish National Home now emerging in Palestine.⁷² In the 1920s Zionism was in fact regarded as a legitimate concept in Egypt. Zionist organisations and associations were allowed to stage various events and Egyptian Zionists were allowed to collect funds for the creation of Jewish settlements in Palestine.⁷³ Several prominent Egyptian's - some of whom would a decade later become ardent sympathisers with the Palestine Arabs - expressed admiration for the Zionist ideology. One such figure, writer Ahmad Zaki, wrote in 1922 that "the victory of the Zionist idea is the turning point for the fulfilment of an ideal which is so dear to me: the revival of the orient."⁷⁴

The British were at the time well informed on the difficult and complex affiliation between Egypt and the Arab world. Percy Lorraine, British High Commissioner in Egypt made the following observation in 1931. "Egypt is so isolated from the Arab World that it is not easily drawn into movements such as Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism."⁷⁵

The early 1930s saw a slight increase in the interest awarded Palestine. The real shift, however, did not occur until 1936 and the start of the Arab Rebellion. Soon after the outbreak in April,

⁶⁶ Jankowski, James, "Egyptian Responses to the Palestine Problem in the Interwar Period", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 12 (1980), p. 2.

⁶⁷ Mayer, p. 10.

⁶⁸ Jankowski, p. 3.

⁶⁹ After a prolonged dispute between Muslim and Jews over who should have access to the Western Wall in Jerusalem, violent disturbances erupted in August 1929. After a week of violence each community had lost more than a one-hundred people.

⁷⁰ Jankowski, p. 7.

⁷¹ Mayer, p. 10.

⁷² Jankowski, p. 4.

⁷³ Mayer, p. 12.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 11.

⁷⁵ Mayer, p. 26.

various initiatives in support of the Palestine Arabs were organised. These included protests, appeals and speeches. The main organisers were the Muslim Brotherhood and the Young Men's Muslim Association.⁷⁶ The magnitude of these protests did place the Wafdist government in a somewhat awkward position, largely because they at this time were about to complete the Anglo-Egyptian treaty. Even so, Premier Nahas did not conceal his pro-Palestinian views to the British. He warned them in June that they were "sitting on an oven" in Palestine and urged them to halt Jewish immigration immediately.⁷⁷ At this point, however, the overtures were kept secret to the Egyptian public.

The opposition was not slow to act on what appeared to be Government inaction. In parliament anti-Wafdist politicians accused Nahas' ministry of suppressing news from Palestine in order not to infuriate public opinion at a time when treaty negotiations were nearing its conclusion.⁷⁸ Similar sentiments were expressed in the media. Several newspapers urged Nahas to become directly involved in the Palestine issue.⁷⁹

There seems to be several causes for this shift in Egyptian attitude towards Palestine from 1936. Obviously, the outbreak of the Rebellion was decisive. An armed revolt by a neighbouring Arab people against Egypt's traditional imperialist occupier was bound to create sympathy in Egypt.⁸⁰ But there were also changes inside Egypt itself which contributed to this development. From the early 1930s there had been an increase in Islamic religious sentiment in Egypt. This led to a greater concern for the protection of Muslim rights everywhere. The predominantly Muslim character of Palestine meant that many Egyptians considered the revolt to be a struggle in defence of Islam. There were also mounting interest in Egypt's role in the Arab world. In the press there were debates on the degree of "Egyptianess" and "Arabness" found in the Egyptian national character.⁸¹

Nonetheless, when calm once again fell over Palestine from October 1936, general Egyptian interest in the matter faded quickly.⁸² All through the first half of 1937 - when the Royal Commission deliberated - public and private manifestations of support were virtually non-existent.⁸³ Gilbert MacKereth's disparaging assessment of Pan-Arabism which maintained that it thrived mainly under oppression and "always died in liberty", seems to have had some justification.⁸⁴

⁷⁶ Porath, Yehoshua, *In Search of Arab Unity 1930-1945* (London, 1986), p. 162.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Jankowski, p. 17.

⁷⁹ Gershoni, Israel and Jankowski, James, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation, 1930-1945*(London 1995), p. 171.

⁸⁰ Jankowski, p. 9.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁸² Mayer, p. 92.

⁸³ Gershoni and Jankowski, p. 173.

⁸⁴ MacKereth to Foreign Office, FO/371/19980/ E3039, 15 May 1936.

The impact of the Partition plan

The Peel Report received a lot of attention in Egypt upon its release in July 1937. From the traditionally pro-Palestine circles - the Muslim fundamentalists, the Pan-Arab politicians and the anti-Wafd opposition leaders - reaction to the partition proposal could best be described as hostile.⁸⁵ In a meeting with Sir Miles Lampson held some two weeks after the report was issued, head of the Wafd Government, Nahas Pasha, summed up the Egypt position on the matter. Personally “he could not too strongly deplore suggestion of partition.” Apparently he feared the potential threat of an independent Jewish State. “Who could say the voracious Jews would not claim Sinai next?” The main impression given by Nahas was nevertheless a sense of doubt over the scheme’s actual potential. The Egyptian Premier put forward a rhetorical question which would be repeated frequently by the Eastern Department the following months:

Why should His Majesty’s Government deliberately estrange the whole Arab world as they seemed set on doing?...As a genuine friend, supporter and ally of Great Britain he most earnestly begged His Majesty’s Government would pause before proceeding with what he could only regard as their fatal policy.

The Eastern Department reacted positively to Lampson’s despatch. Their comments reveal that the content was in line with their current outlook. The factors which had previously done much to counter Pan-Arab development in Egypt (i.e. the historically contentious relationship between Egypt and the Arab world) were not mentioned.

It is clear that Arab and Moslem opinion is steadily hardening against partition...there is no doubt that the Arab reaction against our proposals is spontaneous and widespread and that it would be a mistake to attribute it to any individual act on the part of any Arab leader...It must be remembered that the Arabs look on the whole of Palestine as essentially an Arab country...I think we are likely to be in for an increasing amount of trouble in the Middle East over Palestine.⁸⁶

Nahas approach to Lampson on 24 July initiated Egypt’s official involvement in the Palestine question. There seems to have been several reasons for this decision. To some degree it was motivated by the international prestige which would accompany a successful intervention. Also, Palestinians and Arabs alike looked to Egypt and expected that she would take centre stage in the struggle against partition, as she was considered by many to be the predominant regional power. This position would

⁸⁵ Porath, *In Search of...*, p.168.

⁸⁶ Lampson to Foreign Office, FO/371/20810/E4320, 25 July 1937

inevitably be reinforced should the British be compelled to depart from partition.⁸⁷ There can neither be any doubt that strong pressure from the Egyptian public and opposition parties - both essentially accusing Nahas of passivity on the Palestine issue - forced the Premier to come out passionately against partition. Finally, Nahas was personally committed to the Palestinian cause. Neither Lampson nor the generally more cautious High Commissioner to Egypt, David Kelly, doubted the sincerity of his appeals.⁸⁸

On 18 September 1937 Egyptian Foreign Minister Butrus Ghali made the most definite statement on Palestine so far. At the annual meeting of the League of Nations Butrus argued strongly against partition. According to the Minister the issue was “engaging the closest attention of the Egyptian Government, because of the neighbourly relations between Egypt and Palestine“. He went on to assert that “right and justice require that Palestine should remain in the hands of the Palestinians. This is the natural law in its simplest and clearest form.”⁸⁹ Kelly reported that his speech had a favourable impact in Egypt. By publically opposing British Policy in Palestine, the Wafd had displayed genuine independence and gained considerable credit for itself.⁹⁰

After this official reproach, however, Egyptian involvement in Palestine waned considerably. This development was undoubtedly tied to an emerging domestic political crisis. The young King Farouk had replaced his father in July. Like him, he wanted his own men in charge. This move would clearly limit Nahas powers, and he therefore opposed it. But Farouk’s popularity was rapidly increasing while that of the Wafd’s was in decline. In December Farouk judged that he could remove Nahas. On the 30th he was dismissed.⁹¹ The internal situation continued to be highly fragile into the early months of 1938. This effectively relegated the Palestine issue to the back.

On 27 October 1937, while Lampson was absent on leave, his direct subordinate, David Kelly, sent a despatch discussing in length current Egyptian attitudes to the Palestine conflict. The educated classes showed little interest in Palestine. They looked more towards Europe than to the East. President Nahas did himself possess strong feelings towards the Palestine Arabs, but this was not indicative for most politicians. The outlook of opposition leader Muhammad Mahmud was, according to Kelly, “largely coloured by the desire of making local political capital out of the question.” The masses themselves, the report stated, were largely unaware of the unrest of the problems in the first place. Kelly did acknowledge the sympathy shown by the religious classes towards the Palestinian Arabs. Still, their agitation could not affect the general apathy towards the conflict. Also, there was

⁸⁷ Gershoni and Jankowski, p.178.

⁸⁸ Kelly to FO, FO/371/20819/E6568, 8 November 1937

⁸⁹ Woolbert, Robert Gale, “Pan Arabism and the Palestine Problem”, *Foreign Affairs* 16 No. 2, (1938), p. 319

⁹⁰ Gershoni and Jankowski, p.178

⁹¹ Kolinsky, p. 39.

“still a large measure of goodwill towards ourselves due to the liquidation of Anglo-Egyptian relations through the Treaty.”

Kelly concluded, nonetheless, that Britain should remain cautious. Egypt was primarily a Moslem country, and this “renders her instinctively sympathetic to the tribulations, supposed and otherwise, of her co-religionists.” Increased support for the Palestinians could thus be expected if conditions in Palestine deteriorated further.

Kelly’s despatch is important for several reasons. Like other deviating material, it was not well received in the Eastern Department. Rendel wrote: “I am afraid this despatch may be seized upon by the Colonial Office in support of their contention that it is quite unnecessary to worry about reactions to our Palestine policy in neighbouring Moslem countries. If the despatch is carefully read, it shows... that the present lull is in fact due largely to accidental circumstances.”

It is difficult to disagree with Rendel on this account. The strong reactions in July and August did indeed indicate that frustration over British policy in Palestine would increase rather than decline. And as Rendel pointed out, Kelly himself acknowledged the favourable factors operating in Egypt at the time of writing. “All thoughts have recently been concentrated on the growing tension between the Palace and the Wafd and the difficulties of the present Ministry.”⁹²

According to historian Thomas Mayer, Kelly’s assessment’s was supported by Egyptian, American, German Arab and Zionist sources. Furthermore, the similarity in content of the October report and one Kelly had written in August 1936 “may illustrate how small and unimpressive was the ground gained by Arabism during this period.”⁹³ Elie Kedourie - also citing Kelly’s report as his main source - draws much the same conclusion and argues that this lack of interest in Palestine was no “lull” but indicative of Egyptian’s general attitude.⁹⁴ Both scholars fail to acknowledge that the diminution of Palestine related activity was clearly linked to the current political crisis. This seems especially odd considering that Kelly himself made reservations on the report’s accuracy exactly on these grounds. The conclusion drawn by Mayer and Kedourie is that that only after Nahas dismissal was there in Egypt any widespread interest in the Palestine conflict. While it is true that the following ministry of Muhammad Mahmud saw a definite increase in Palestine related activity - both at an official and non-official level – it would be a mistake to neglect similar developments under Nahas’ Wafd Government. Evidence indeed shows that from July 1937 and onwards political parties and organisations were strongly engaged in the Palestine issue.

While the Palestine question was used by certain politicians as a useful tool - and thus did not always reflect genuine solidarity with the Palestine Arabs – the issue cannot be dismissed so easily. A

⁹² Kelly to FO, FO/371/20819/E6568, 8 November 1937.

⁹³ Mayer, p.81.

⁹⁴ Kedourie, “Great Britain and Palestine...”, p.158.

contemporary piece in the renowned *Foreign Affairs* magazine seems to capture essence of the Egyptian sentiment vis-à-vis Palestine:

You may say if you wish (though I think it untrue) that Egyptian politicians do not really care what happens in Palestine, that they raise the question only for demagogic reasons in order to deflect popular attention from the crying need for internal reforms...But does not the very fact that the cabinet feels obliged to defend the Arab case indicate that there must be many Egyptians who do have a lively interest in Arab nationalism?..The politicians may be insincere and their appeal may savor of demagoguery, but the fact that they make it shows the inclinations of the electorate.⁹⁵

After Muhammad Mahmud and his coalition government took over on 30 December 1937 Egyptian concern with the Arabs of Palestine only increased. By the following spring, developments in Egypt regarding Palestine seemed to have come full circle. Strong commitment to the issue was evident among the Egyptian public as well as among the policy-makers themselves. It appears that Sir Miles Lampson was not exaggerating when he by May 1938 wrote:

Every Egyptian is pro-Arab: and Wafd undoubtedly want to embarrass the present government by championing so popular a cause. Whilst, therefore, the government are genuinely anxious to prevent agitation becoming serious, their position is increasingly difficult as the whole nation sides with the Arabs.⁹⁶

The summer saw a series of violent demonstrations against the Zionists, the British and the Egyptian Government. By championing the Palestine issue the main organiser of these events - the Muslim Brotherhood - reinforced their position in Egyptian politics.⁹⁷ The organisation's phenomenal growth in the later 1930s was indeed closely related to its Palestine related activism.⁹⁸

Interesting to note is that less than two years earlier Lampson had stated that the "the Egyptian...is inclined to look on the Arab as an uncivilised person and the Arab is inclined to despise the Egyptian for lack of moral fibre." Consequently the Pan-Arab movement had "very little real strength in Egypt."⁹⁹ In view of that, the 19 months separating these statements must have seen a dramatic change in Egyptian attitudes regarding their own role in the Arab national movement. Why this transformation?

While the interest in Palestine was aroused from 1936 onwards, the partition proposal set alight even stronger feelings. This development seems to have been connected as much with Egyptian

⁹⁵ Woolbert, p. 319. According to Mr. Woolbert he had conversations with several members of the Egyptian cabinet, including Nahas Pasha himself.

⁹⁶ Lampson to FO, CO/733/368/6, 1938, Situation/Reactions in Egypt.

⁹⁷ Kolinsky, p. 43.

⁹⁸ Gershoni and Jankowski, p. 180.

⁹⁹ Mayer, p. 48.

national interests (real and perceived) as any Pan-Islam or Pan-Arab sympathy. While concern of Zionist expansionism had been expressed by some voices in 1936, the Peel Commission's proposal of an independent Jewish state on Egypt's border greatly enhanced this fear. Some spoke of a Jewish expansion within Palestine itself - engulfing the areas assigned the new Arab state. Others considered this as just the beginning. One Egyptian newspaper argued that "one day [the Zionists would] direct their Zionism towards Egypt." An editorial in al-Jihad saw the Zionists spreading "into all Arab land"¹⁰⁰ Similar fears, remember, were voiced by Nahas in his meeting with Lampson on 24 July 1937.

It seems that it was largely the domestic agitation which developed over Palestine that made both the Nahas and the Mahmud ministries involve itself actively in the issue. While both Premiers seem to have possessed genuine affinity with the Palestine Arabs, they would probably have preferred not to get too involved in the issue, the obvious reason being the primacy of Anglo-Egyptian relations during this period.

As reported by Kelly in October 1937, Palestine did prove a useful tool for Mahmud while he was in opposition. The same could be said for the Nahas and his Wafd party. When they were removed from power in late 1937, they began to take a far more active approach towards the Palestine issue while simultaneously decrying the current efforts of the Mahmud ministry.¹⁰¹

While expressions of Pan-Arabism flourished during 1937, it is doubtful whether the movement as it appeared in the first half of the 1930s actually "befitted" Egypt and Egyptians. That is not to say manifestations were not genuine, but the public emotions aroused by the Palestine during this period tended to obscure the inconsistencies which had previously existed between Egypt and the Arab national movement.¹⁰² However, rather than a return to the Egyptian nationalism so prevalent in the 1920s and early 1930s, developments in the years after 1938 demonstrate that Egypt's shift towards the Arab world (at least on an official level) was indeed permanent. Egypt's presence at the St. James Conference on Palestine in February 1939 was arguably the first manifestation of this new role, a role which in subsequent years was to be unmistakably Arab.¹⁰³

Despite the fact it was highly visible, and that it contributed to the growth of Arab nationalism, the Palestine question cannot be said to have been a decisive element in the political developments in Egypt during 1937-38. There were simply far too many other pressing issues in Egyptian policies. Also, no party in Egypt would benefit from a situation where Palestine took centre-

¹⁰⁰ Jankowski, p. 22.

¹⁰¹ Gershoni and Jankowski, p. 182.

¹⁰² In May 1936 Gilbert MacKereth wrote about Egypt: "The position of Egypt in the Pan-Arab movement is by no means clear. It has shown little sign of wishing to take any collective responsibility in an Arab or Islamic confederation. Indeed, it has been said that Egypt has yet to make up its mind whether it is an Arab, a Pharaohic or a would-be-western State. FO/371/19980/ E3039, 15 May 1936.

¹⁰³ Kedourie, Elie, "Arab Unity then and now", *Islam and the Modern...*, p. 78.

stage. Such a political environment would put immense strain on any Egyptian government - especially if Britain was to have defied Arab demands and forcefully implemented partition.

The likelihood of a hostile, pro-Italian Egypt

What were the military risks for Britain of alienating Egyptian opinion over Palestine? From a strategic standpoint this was indeed a far more decisive issue than the amount of Egyptian goodwill lost over policy in Palestine. If - as argued by the Colonial Office - partition would best solve Britain's grave problems in Palestine, Britain would obviously be able to endure a great deal in terms of negative reactions from the neighbouring states. There was nevertheless a limit to how much the British was prepared to put up with. A military hostile Egypt, for instance, could not be tolerated.

Many of the leading politicians in Egypt asserted the Palestine issue had the potential to destabilize Egypt by "sparking uncontrollable trends" within the country.¹⁰⁴ The development in Egypt throughout 1938 and the first part of 1939 certainly seems to support the notion of widespread resentment. Popular pressure on the government increased steadily and a variety of organizations and institutions undertook fundraising activities in support for the Palestine Arabs. Evidence suggests that the Muslim Brotherhood's appeal for *jihad* in late 1938 may also have found some adherents in Egypt.¹⁰⁵

Was Egyptian resentment towards British policy in Palestine only to result in domestic disturbances, however, the Egyptian army - with the assistance of British forces if necessary - would have little difficulty in toppling it. During the negotiations which led up to the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936 the British had in fact taken developments of this nature into account. Should the Egyptian Government fail to respond to serious disorder Britain reserved the right to institute appropriate legislative measures such as martial law and censorship.¹⁰⁶ The British could also look to the recent past for reassurance. During the 1920s there had been several instances of unrest in Egypt. These had been readily detained by a surprisingly small number of British forces.¹⁰⁷

A graver situation would of course arise should the Egyptian government turn unfriendly. Indeed, this prospect was a key argument in the decisive Foreign Office memorandum of 19 November 1937. Such a development would in the current circumstances mean an Egyptian-Italian

¹⁰⁴ Gershoni and Jankowski, p. 191

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 183.

¹⁰⁶ Morewood, p. 96.

¹⁰⁷ Kolinsky, p. 1.

alliance of some kind. In an appendix to the memorandum, Sir Miles Lampson made the following assessment:

I have become increasingly impressed by inherent danger to our position in Egypt and Eastern Mediterranean if our policy in Palestine remains unchanged...I have reported growing suspicion that Great Britain is not in a position to protect Egypt from Italian aggression...She [Italy] is at the same time fomenting a powerful agitation in Arab countries that threatens to drive them towards Italy if our policy in Palestine remains repugnant to the Arab world...we should gravely consider whether it is in our power to risk a course which may well end in general Italo-Arab co-operation against us.¹⁰⁸

Miles Lampson is often credited as the architect of the Anglo-Egyptian treaty of 1936.¹⁰⁹

Consequently, he more than anyone ought to have been aware of the special circumstances which finally made the treaty a reality after more than a decade of bickering. Even at the time of its creation it was widely acknowledged that it was fear of an Italian attack which compelled the Wafd Government into signing the treaty. Moreover, fear of Italian colonial ambitions was not that of the Wafd alone but was shared by a vast majority of Egyptian politicians.¹¹⁰ Lampson was thus perfectly aware that the Italian threat in this instance had significantly benefitted British interests in Egypt. Likewise this experience must have demonstrated to Lampson that Britain's reputation in Egypt – although marred – was significantly greater than that of Italy.

The aforementioned article in *Foreign Affairs* gave the following explanation for Italy's failure to attract support in the region.

Whether Italian propaganda, money and arms had anything to do with the revolt of 1936 is difficult to say...few Arabs have any desire to substitute Mussolini for George VI. They vividly recall the barbarities of Graziani's conquest of Cyrenaica. What it comes down to is largely this: Fascist and Arab for the time being have a common interest in making trouble for the British Empire.¹¹¹

Similar observations were made by renowned American journalist John Gunther. After conducting extensive research throughout the Middle East in the second half of the 1930s, Gunther observed that "Italy, however ambitious it may be, impedes the growth of Fascism by its own policy in Libya. This Italian colony, the Arabs say, is not a good advertisement for Fascist ideals...The Libyan Arabs have been fleeing wholesale to oases on the Egyptian border."¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Lampson to Eden, appended in CAB/24/273, CP/281 (37), 19 November 1937.

¹⁰⁹ Morewood, p. 95.

¹¹⁰ Clayton, Anthony, *The British Empire as a Superpower, 1919-1939* (London 1986), p. 467.

¹¹¹ Woolbert, p.315. Cyrenaica was the eastern half of what is today Libya. Throughout the 1920s the area witnessed brutal fighting between Italian forces and Arab rebels fighting for independence from colonial rule.

¹¹² Gunther, John, *Inside Asia* (New York 1939), p. 577. Gunther and his wife actually had lunch with Lampson in November 1937. According to the Ambassador they were "[a] nice couple and he certainly very intelligent." Yapp, P. 925.

From spring of 1938 and onwards developments took place which should have alleviated both Lampson and the Foreign Office. While publically speaking out in support of the Palestine Arabs, Egyptian Prime Minister Muhammad Mahmud launched a series of measures in order to dampen the more extreme pro-Palestinian activism within the country. This was done primarily in order to not to further offend the British.¹¹³ Lampson himself was well aware that this Oxford-educated politician was well disposed towards Britain. Even more importantly: Mahmud was a weak leader without popular support.¹¹⁴ While his concurrent effort in bringing about a reversal in British Palestine policy illustrates that he certainly did not approve of partition in any way, Mahmud knew that he was fully dependent on Britain regardless of how the issue was settled.

A reading of the reports on Palestine transmitted from Miles Lampson to London from late 1937 throughout 1938 reveals that the British Ambassador failed to acknowledge the severe limitations that currently existed in the Egyptian Government's autonomy, limitations which clearly increased Britain's room of manoeuvre on the Palestine issue. On the contrary, the Italian factor continued to be portrayed as restricting goodwill towards Britain rather than the other way around. By comparison the aforementioned War Office report of February 1938 drew entirely different conclusions:

Egypt has no desire to risk her newly acquired independence and the development of her military resources by offending Great Britain. It is realised that British political and military support is essential, especially against Italy, whose policy is widely feared in Egypt. ...neither he [the King] nor Egyptian Pan-Arab enthusiasts are likely to be in a position to throw Egyptian resources into the scales against Great Britain on the Palestine question, either now or for some years to come. In any case the presence of British armed forces is likely to be a sufficient deterrent for a considerable period...Egypt would probably remain within the British orbit in any case, from motives of self preservation.¹¹⁵

At the end of 1938 British Defence Security Officer in Egypt made an equally dismissive assessment of Italian sympathy within Egypt:

Whatever may be the views of the Palace, there is practically no pro-Italian feeling in the rest of the country, which still manifests towards Italy a healthy contempt and dislike, not unmingled with fear. In spite of the events in Palestine, the good feeling towards ourselves which has existed for the last two-and-a-half years, shows little signs of weakening.¹¹⁶

The arguably most convincing observations came from a traditionally pro-Arab source. The brothers Samuel and Edward Attiyah were employed as intelligence officers at the British controlled Sudan

¹¹³ Mayer and Jankowski, p. 183.

¹¹⁴ Kolinsky, p. 39. Kolinsky suggests that Lampson contemplated removing him from power outright, but refrained from doing so because of Mahmud's perceived weakness and his pro-British attitude.

¹¹⁵ WO to FO, FO/371/21873/ E788, 9 February 1938.

¹¹⁶ Morewood, p. 163.

Agency (nickname for a British-controlled Sudanese Intelligence unit in Cairo). Their pro-Arab leanings would at times annoy some of the more hard-headed British officials.¹¹⁷ As a result, there was frequent debate within the administration regarding the worth of these intelligence reports. While generally extremely alarmist about the regional repercussions of Britain's current Palestine policy, the Attiyah's saw significantly less reason for concern in Egypt:

As regards Anglo-Egyptian relations, the Treaty has been eminently successful. It has produced not only a friendly atmosphere, a general attitude of good will towards England, but a certain feeling of pride in the British alliance. At the same time most thinking Egyptians continue to regard the British Embassy as ultimately the real pivot of Egyptian politics, and are not really sorry that this should be so. Nor do I think a different Government would be less amicably disposed towards the Embassy, or less inclined to co-operate with it...The chief merit of the treaty is that it has removed the emotional hostility to England and the English, which means that Anglo-Egyptian relations are now determined only by considerations of interest; and in these considerations one can see no reason for conflict. Indeed, the international situation is acting, and should continue to act, as a strong cementing force on the Anglo-Egyptian alliance. Nor do I believe the alleged pro-Italian sympathies of the Palace will be allowed to affect Egyptian policy, even if the Palace comes to have a more active share in the Government.¹¹⁸

For Great Britain the short-lived Munich crisis of September 1938 was to some degree a test of allegiance. In an evaluation Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax stated in Cabinet that "one of the most satisfactory features of the recent crisis had been the attitude of the Egyptian Government which had responded admirably in every way."¹¹⁹ Colonial Secretary, Malcolm MacDonald, spelled it out even clearer:

I think that some people exaggerate the extent to which this [Palestine policy] is at present likely to place these countries amongst our enemies. It was remarkable that during the international crisis last September, when the unpopularity of our Palestine policy was at its height, the Governments of Egypt and Iraq did not hesitate to assure us of their full support in case of trouble, with scarcely any mention of the embarrassing situation in Palestine...It would take a lot to make these countries adopt any other attitude.¹²⁰

Despite their reassuring conduct, the Foreign Office remained unconvinced that future Iraqi and Egyptian loyalty would be unconditional. They pressed two issues as decisive. One was that the Arab Governments retained belief in British determination and ability to defend them from external

¹¹⁷ In an internal Colonial Office memo dated 20 November 1937 the causes of Lampson's opposition towards partition is debated. First Secretary H. F. Downie writes; "I have some hesitation in suggesting that Sir M. Lampson may have drawn some of his inspiration from the F.O. itself, but there is little doubt that he is influenced to some extent by the extremely "pro-Arab" memoranda of Mr. Attiyah", CO/733/354/75730, part I.

¹¹⁸ Notes on the Near East by the Intelligence Officer, Khartoum, in FO/371/20786/E5360, 25 August 1937.

¹¹⁹ Foreign Secretary, CAB/23/96, CP 49 (39), 19 October 1939.

¹²⁰ Memorandum by Colonial Secretary, CAB/24/282, CP 4 (39), 18 January 1939.

aggression; the second depended on the outcome of the upcoming London conference on Palestine.¹²¹ As Lord Halifax made clear, the British “*must* come to an agreement regarding Palestine with Egypt, Iraq and Saudi Arabia...even if it means stopping Jewish immigration into Palestine.”¹²²

By early 1939 it is safe to argue that threat of Arab intransigence was established as probably *the* most important aspect when Palestine policy was to be drawn up. While it seems likely that a partition of Palestine would have infuriated many Egyptians and increased anti-British sentiment, it is difficult to accept the notion that the Palestine issue was crucial in preserving the Anglo-Egyptian alliance. What the Egyptians sought from Britain was security. The policy of concessions and compromise which was now implemented in Palestine might have succeeded in conciliating many Egyptians, but it also sent a very different signal: namely one of hesitancy. As a Great Power Britain ought to have been aware of the “rules” which accompany such a position. A power which is unwilling or unable to resort to the pressure of arms in defence of its interests cannot remain a power for long.¹²³

It was Britain’s military power - not her appeasing policies - which made her an attractive partner to Egypt. This point was in fact made by Ormsby-Gore’s during a Cabinet discussion on Egypt’s defences in November 1937. The Colonial Secretary simply stated that:”The support of the Arab world as a whole would go to the Power which showed the greatest strength.”¹²⁴

There is little to surmise that the conciliatory line Britain chose over Palestine impaired Egyptian trust in Britain’s readiness to apply force against Italian aggression. But, it is equally doubtful that this approach contributed to its declared goal of cementing the Anglo-Egyptian alliance. When war finally came in September 1939, Britain expected Egypt to issue a declaration of war on Germany. As the Egyptian Government was unable to reach unanimity for such decision, no such declaration was made. Then Prime Minister, Ali Maher, told Lampson that several members of his government deemed Britain to possess an insufficient number of forces for the protection of Egypt.¹²⁵ Although Egypt would comply fully with British demands throughout the war, the Egyptian Government maintained its neutrality. The policy of appeasement in the Middle East - primarily tied to the Palestine issue – seemed to matter little when it was time for Britain to reap its benefits. This was very much what the War Office had predicted in 1938: “History shows that the Arabs are disinclined

¹²¹ Kolinsky, p. 73.

¹²² Pratt, “The Strategic Context...”, p. 22.

¹²³ Pratt, “The Strategic Context...”, p. 25. Historian Lawrence Pratt sees the pacification over Palestine as a chapter in the mistaken appeasement policy of the late 1930s.

¹²⁴ Colonial Secretary, CAB/24/273, CP 283 (37), 18 November 1937.

¹²⁵ Kolinsky, p.124.

to take decisive action to support even their friends until they see definite evidence that the side they favour is in the ascendant. Until then, their practice is to “sit on the fence.””¹²⁶

Lampson’s role

The clear-cut observations referred to above leave Lampson’s own reports in a somewhat dubious light. Taking into account Lampson’s experience and immense knowledge of Egyptian affairs, certain questions are bound to arise. Did he genuinely believe that Britain’s supremacy in Egypt was in jeopardy over the Palestine issue? Or, did his passionate opposition to the partitioning of Palestine also stem from personal objections to a Jewish state in the Middle East?

Chaim Weizmann held the view that “the misgivings of the Foreign Office are to a great extent based on reports from Egypt and Iraq.” This can only be said to be partially true, but there is little doubt that Lampson’s views carried much weight in London. As a result of these suspicions Weizmann travelled to Egypt to observe firsthand the current situation in the country and also to meet Miles Lampson himself. When arriving in February 1938 he found a country in some turmoil. Weizmann attributed this mainly to current economic difficulties and to the Wafd government’s recent collapse. In view of this, Weizmann was “more than a little astonished” when he found Lampson to be:

attaching a grotesquely exaggerated importance to the Palestinian problem, which he seemed to regard as the main cause of unrest in Egypt. This seemed to me to be an extraordinarily short-sighted view...I cannot understand why all the troubles of Egypt should be laid at the door of Palestine, and I am unable to accept a proposal which, in my opinion, would do nothing to relieve the situation in Egypt”¹²⁷

Though essentially a moderate, Weizmann was still President of the World Zionist Organisation. This hardly made him the most objective of men. Indeed, his attempts at dissecting Lampson’s hostility reveal a lack of refinement. Oriental Secretary at the Cairo Embassy, Walter Smart, was the renowned author George Antonius’ brother-in-law.¹²⁸ Weizmann deduced that Lampson “is necessarily bound to rely a good deal on the information which comes to him through his Oriental Secretary...this channel

¹²⁶ War Office to Foreign Office, in FO/371/21873/ E788, 9 February 1938.

¹²⁷ Litvinoff, Barnet, ed, *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann*, Vol. 18 January 1937 – December 1938 (London 1979), p. 421, The proposal Weizmann is referring to recommended a postponement of the partition scheme and a halt to Jewish immigration into Palestine for five years.

¹²⁸ George Antonius was author of the landmark book *The Arab Awakening*. When released the book generated a debate over the nature and origins of Arab nationalism. It found many adherents in Great Britain. Antonius was also a big admirer of Mufti Hajj-Amin al-Husseini. In 1939 he performed as the Mufti’s informal advisor during the St. James Conference on Palestine.

cannot be described as unprejudiced.”¹²⁹ In conversation with the prominent Gentile Zionist campaigner, Blanche Dugdale, Weizmann (referring to the Cairo Embassy) said that the “smell comes from the milieu.”¹³⁰

In due course, however, Lampson’s vigorous campaign managed to annoy the very person set to liquidate the partition scheme. By late 1938 Colonial Secretary Malcolm MacDonald was an outspoken opponent of partition. He nonetheless maintained that Lampson had been “out-Arabiing the Arabs...He was simply giving reign to his preconceived ideas...[I] have really got rather impatient with the way in which he has created difficulties for us by innocently encouraging Arab opposition.”¹³¹

Lampson was not especially fond of the Balfour Declaration. In October 1937 King Edward VIII told Lampson he thought “Old Balfour was a silly old man; and had given (or promised to others) something already belonging to someone else!” Lampson said he “personally agreed”. This statement was nonetheless confined to his diary. Debating Jewish immigration with the Foreign Office in October 1938 Lampson gave the following evaluation of the Balfour Declaration:

I still maintain that on moral and equitable grounds we could legitimately claim that with over 400,000 Jews in [the] country (that is one-third of [the] total population) [the] Balfour declaration has been adequately implemented. We promised a national home not a national refuge for the Jews: and that we have already given.¹³²

There is little however to suggest that Lampson was motivated in any way by anti-Semitic beliefs. It was the Zionist idea he could not approve of. Like many of his fellow officials Lampson belonged to the “romantic” school of British Arabists.¹³³ And like the majority of these he genuinely felt that a separate Jewish state in the Middle East was an alien creation and a betrayal to the native Palestinian Arabs.

It would not do Lampson justice, however, to insist that his opposition to partition derived only from his personal beliefs. It seems that a good part of the Ambassador’s hostility must be ascribed also to his obsession with Egypt’s security. In November 1938 Lampson tried to assure Foreign Secretary Viscount Halifax of his objectivity on Palestine issues. “As recorded in previous reports, I approach this matter mainly from the strategic angle and as affecting our position from that angle in the Eastern Mediterranean: not from the angle of the Jew or the Arab, but from the angle of British Safety.”¹³⁴ Straight away, this does not seem entirely convincing. More than anything, perhaps, it indicates a desire to counter recent muttering of the Ambassador’s own partisanship in the

¹²⁹ Litvinoff, p. 338.

¹³⁰ Rose, *Baffy: The Diaries...*, p. 82.

¹³¹ Cohen, *Palestine: Retreat*, p. 68.

¹³² Lampson to Foreign Office, CO/733/386/16, 30 October 1938.

¹³³ Cohen, *Palestine: Retreat...*, p. 32 Cohen places both Rendel and Lampson in the same tradition as the more illustrious T. E. Lawrence and John “Abdullah” Philby.

¹³⁴ Lampson to Halifax, E6508/10/31, 7 November 1938, CO/733/368/6: “Reactions in Egypt”.

matter. However, it is certainly not impossible that Lampson himself considered this description to be accurate. Evidence suggests that the Ambassador - in the wider strategic context - saw Palestine first and foremost as an annexe to Egypt. Thus, if a mandate policy had the makings to cause difficulties for Anglo-Egyptian relations, Lampson would most likely oppose it. An indication of this approach is found in the Ambassador's account of the abovementioned meeting with Chaim Weizmann in February 1938:

I made it plain at once that my only status to the question was in regard to the effect which events in Palestine were having or were likely to have upon opinion in Egypt and in the surrounding Arab countries. The merits or demerits of partition was not my affair though I admitted that I had been surprised and considerably taken aback when the Royal Commission had recommended it.¹³⁵

Throughout 1937 Lampson became increasingly convinced that Great Britain was not in a position to protect Egypt from Italian aggression. While his argument that British Palestine policy was driving Egypt into the Italian fold has been closely contested here, Lampson's concern regarding troops and material seems slightly more convincing. In order to quell the uprising in Palestine, Britain was gradually forced to divert troops and equipment from the United Kingdom and Egypt.¹³⁶ For Miles Lampson any potential weakening of Egypt's defence due to commitments in Palestine was difficult to accept.

Lampson's fears do however seem somewhat exaggerated. Two weeks before the decisive Foreign Office memorandum of 19 November, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir Cyril Deverell, had made it clear in Cabinet that "any troops that may be despatched to Palestine from Egypt will be immediately replaced from elsewhere."¹³⁷ An apprehensive Lampson would later receive further guarantees in this direction. In April 1939 General-Officer-Commanding Egypt reassured Lampson that "Defence of Egypt is given definite priorities over requirements for Palestine."¹³⁸ Given Lampson's preoccupation with Egyptian security, it is nonetheless possible to accept his opposition to a policy that might detract from her defence capabilities.

A full examination of the arguments put forward by the Ambassador suggests that, from an objective angle, his antagonism towards an independent Jewish state seems to have been stimulated as much by his political beliefs as by strategic calculations. Whatever the case, his involvement proved to be important for the outcome.¹³⁹ To prevent the implementation of a Jewish state in Palestine Lampson

¹³⁵ Evans, Trefor E., *The Killearn Diaries 1934-1946* (London 1972), p. 94.

¹³⁶ Pratt, "The Strategic Context...", p. 20.

¹³⁷ CAB/24/272, CP 259 (37), 29 October 1937.

¹³⁸ Cohen, "The Egypt-Palestine Nexus...", p. 77.

¹³⁹ Gabriel Sheffer maintains that "The Cairo Embassy's demands (i.e. military reinforcements for Egypt and pacification of the Arab governments) constituted a turning point in the process of rescinding partition. Sheffer, Gabriel, "Appeasement and the Problem of Palestine", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Volume 11, Issue 03, (1980), p. 389.

took on a central role the anti-partition campaign initiated from London.¹⁴⁰ What made his contribution effective - and what set him apart from most officials - was his considerable influence. His experience, the general importance of Egypt in the Middle East as a whole, and his determination to convey strong views on regional affairs all contributed to this.¹⁴¹ His cordial relationship with Anthony Eden also placed him closer to the decision-making authority than other British officials in the region.¹⁴²

The Colonial Office was well aware of Lampson's outlook and of his considerable influence in London. As a result, his conduct over the Palestine question greatly annoyed the officials in that department. Referring to a specific episode First Secretary H.F. Downie wrote that this:

affords a good illustration of Sir Miles Lampson's inertia in the matter of expounding and defending the Partition policy of H.M.G. When the Royal Commission was published, he was supplied with explanatory material, but he has never made use of it and has throughout contented himself with listening to misguided and ill-informed criticism by Egyptian ministers and others, and passing those criticisms on to the Foreign Office."¹⁴³

It is doubtful if this sort of frustration had been vented had Lampson been an official of lesser importance. Indeed, it was this authority which made him a favourite with their rivals in the Eastern Department. Lampson's account of how his contribution in the 19 November memorandum came about sheds light on the nature of this relationship and on Lampson's independent nature. Two days prior to the Cabinet meeting the Ambassador received a private letter from Rendel:

saying that the whole question of our Palestine policy was to come up for review by the Cabinet on November 19th and asking whether I might not feel disposed to put in my views (of which he was aware) in time to reach London before the Cabinet meeting...As in all cases of a policy that has been passed and decided on by the Cabinet it is always a matter of difficult[y] and some delicacy to seem to change it...But in light of Rendel's letter and of the subsequent official telegrams from the F.O. I should imagine that there is little risk of a rap over the knuckles. Anyway if it comes it matters not, for if one has strong feelings on this question clearly it is one's job to express them. There are two schools of action: those who confine themselves to putting up what they think is acceptable, or at any rate not unacceptable; and those who say what they really think. I am sure that the latter line of action is really the only one. Indeed, one would not be doing one's job properly if one didn't follow it.¹⁴⁴

Not only did Lampson share Rendel's view on the predominance of Palestine on regional affairs, both men seem to have revered the autonomous qualities of the civil servant.

¹⁴⁰ Cohen concludes that "Lampson played a major role in urging the Foreign Office to eliminate the British commitment to the Zionists, and appease the Arabs in Palestine", Cohen, "The Egypt-Palestine Nexus...", p. 74

¹⁴¹ Kolinsky, p. 12.

¹⁴² Fry, Michael G. and Rabinovich, Itamar, *Despatches from Damascus: Gilbert MacKereth and British Policy in the Levant, 1933-1939* (Syracuse 1986), p. 47.

¹⁴³ CO/733/368/6, 1938, Situation/Reactions in Egypt, date unknown.

¹⁴⁴ Yapp, p. 928.

Saudi Arabia

There are strong indications that King Ibn Saud may before long driven to reconsider his whole attitude towards us, and possibly even to throw in his lot with Italy if we cannot give him some satisfaction over Palestine...¹⁴⁵

His Majesty's Government have informed King Ibn Saud that it is their intention to put into execution in Palestine a scheme of partition, one of the effects of which would almost certainly be to make the Amir Abdullah...and independent Sovereign...if the reports of military activity on the Saudi side of the frontier are correct, it is perhaps not unnatural that he should therefore already take preliminary measures to prepare for a possible struggle against the Amir...It has been suggested that, in spite of his strong feelings on the Palestine question, King Ibn Saud will not become openly and actively hostile to His Majesty's Government unless some major development should occur, such as a European war. But it must be remembered that the leaders of the Arab opposition to the Palestine policy of His Majesty's Government are likely to make every effort to induce King Ibn Saud to intervene actively on their behalf.¹⁴⁶

Anglo-Saudi relations

In 1927 Ibn Saud signed a treaty with Great Britain which put him and his Kingdom in a unique position. As the first Arab state, Saudi Arabia was awarded its independence. This was not the sort of limited independence given to Egypt in 1936, but one which recognised Saudi Arabia as autonomous in every way. Developments throughout the 1930s indeed demonstrated that Ibn Saud was by and large his own master. He was treated according to international protocol and his foreign relations were not constrained – despite certain British attempts do to so. Throughout the 1930s Britain was in fact unable to put any real pressure on Ibn Saud, be it military or economic.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Anthony Eden, CAB/24/273, CP/281 (37), 19 November 1937.

¹⁴⁶ George Rendel, annexed letter, *ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Leatherdale, Clive, *Britain and Saudi Arabia, 1925-1939: The Imperial Oasis* (London 1983), p. 331.

Two years earlier, in 1925, Britain had displayed an emerging preference for the Saudi Monarch by remaining passive during his victorious campaign in the Hejaz.¹⁴⁸ Ruler of the Hejaz, Ali bin Hussein, had been forced to flee the region as Ibn Saud's fighters entered Mecca.¹⁴⁹ As the new ruler of the Hejaz Ibn Saud suddenly found himself adjacent to the Amir Abdullah and his principality of Transjordan.¹⁵⁰ Neither Ibn Saud nor Abdullah were content with the borders as they appeared in 1925. Their ever-present enmity would in due course burden the British and affect inter-Arab relations - not least over the Palestine issue.

Britain's decision to "let go" of Saudi Arabia in 1927 was, not surprisingly, based on certain strategic assessments. In the late 1920s the Kingdom was considered both remote and inaccessible, far removed from the stage of great power rivalry. Moreover, the barren region was uninviting and underdeveloped. Consequently, Britain could simply see no immediate benefits of maintaining a firm grip on the Saudi state.¹⁵¹

But there were also motives which were tied specifically to Ibn Saud. After his conquest of Hejaz, the British - and especially the Foreign Office - deemed Ibn Saud to be the only leader who could control the potentially volatile Arab Peninsula. His achievements in the preceding decades had indeed been remarkable. The Monarch had succeeded in dispersing the raiding tribes which had been a destabilising feature on the Peninsula for centuries. This he had accomplished either through combat or by incorporating key tribal leaders into his government.¹⁵² Also, thanks to the Bahra agreements of 1925, relations with the Hashemites could in the late 1920s be described as satisfactory.¹⁵³

Most importantly, though, was Ibn Saud's outspoken desire for continued friendship and cooperation with Britain. In the late 1920s and early 1930s Ibn Saud not only accepted Britain's hegemonic role in the Middle East, but encouraged its continuation.¹⁵⁴ The British thus reasoned that by preserving a close and cordial relationship with local strongman Ibn Saud their regional interests would be secure - all this at a very low cost, and with no military involvement whatsoever.¹⁵⁵

Britain's only real concern lay with Ibn Saud's expansionist leanings. There was a genuine fear amongst some British officials that the Monarch intended to enlarge his Kingdom - like he had

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, pp. 44-45.

¹⁴⁹ Al-Rasheed, Madawi, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge 2002), p. 3. Hussain bin Ali stepped down in October 1924 after suffering severe military setbacks. His son Ali bin Hussein succeed him. Fighting nonetheless continued. In December 1925 Saudi forces finally emerged victorious. Ali bin Hussein fled to Iraq where he died in 1935.

¹⁵⁰ The Amir Abdullah was Hussein bin Ali's son.

¹⁵¹ Leatherdale, p. 319.

¹⁵² Kostiner, Joseph, "Britain and the Challenge of the Axis Powers in Arabia: The Decline of British-Saudi Cooperation in the 1930s", Cohen and Kolinsky ed., *Britain and the Middle East in the 1930s: security problems, 1935-39* (London 1992), p. 128.

¹⁵³ Leatherdale, p. 72

¹⁵⁴ Kostiner, "Britain and the Challenge..." p. 129.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 128.

done so successfully in the previous decades. This route would not only bring about a deterioration in Anglo-Saudi relations but would likely impair Britain's interests elsewhere in the region. Since the independence that was about to be awarded Ibn Saud effectively gave him a free hand in foreign affairs, the British would have no legal grounds to restrain him should he decide to pursue an aggressive regional policy.¹⁵⁶

Initially the Anglo-Saudi axis proved a success. In 1933 the British helped settle renewed Saudi-Transjordan hostility. The treaty of friendship signed in July virtually terminated the border clashes which had pestered the northern Hejaz area for some time. This induced in the British a certain optimism. They became convinced that – despite a lack of formal control vis-à-vis the Saudi State - their position as the sole regional superpower allowed them to solve political and territorial disputes to their advantage.¹⁵⁷ Subsequent events, however, were to reveal that this was more or less an illusion.

The prolonged Saudi-Yemeni dispute - which resulted in all out war in 1934 - exposed fully the difficulties associated with Saudi expansionism. This conflict also introduced Italy as an unwelcome element in the Anglo-Saudi equation. Italian incursions in the region were in fact to plague that relationship repeatedly until the outbreak of war in 1939.

In 1930 Ibn Saud had annexed the Asir region. This brought him in direct conflict with Imam Yahya of Yemen who also had strong ambitions in the area. Exploiting the anti-Saudi feelings in Asir, Yahya encouraged the former rulers - the Idrisi clan – to stage a revolt against Saudi Arabia. Ibn Saud responded immediately and rushed forces to quell the uprising. This would have been a fairly straightforward operation had it not been for the Italian presence. Italy had since the early 1920s aspired to establish a stronghold in Yemen and her fleet regularly patrolled its shores. Since an Italian warship was currently located on the coast of Asir, Yahya decided he could adopt an uncompromising position towards the Saudis. He sheltered the fleeing Idrisis and rejected repeated Saudi requests for a handover.¹⁵⁸ But it did not stop there. Imam Yahya soon ordered his own troops to enter the Asir region. Once they were in position he ordered Ibn Saud to return all of the Idrisis' dominions. This was unacceptable to the Saudi Monarch. Prepared to wage war Ibn Saud turned to Britain for additional arms. This request caused immediate concern in the British camp. Generally speaking, Britain had no desire to become involved in an inter-Arab conflict.¹⁵⁹ Nor did they wish to infuriate the Italians. Reactions from the Eastern Department of the Foreign Office do however suggest that by 1933 Ibn Saud had somehow come to hold a special position in the minds of certain officials. While the Cabinet declined to supply any weapons, George Rendel nonetheless suggested that Britain should at once issue an ultimatum to the Yemenis in order to secure the release of a small group of Aden

¹⁵⁶ Leatherdale, p. 234.

¹⁵⁷ Kostiner, "Britain and the Challenge...", p. 129.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 133.

¹⁵⁹ Leatherdale, p. 151.

hostages held by the Imam ever since 1928. A failure to comply should be followed up by aerial bombardment of targets inside Yemen. Rendel maintained that this ought to work to Ibn Saud's advantage by providing an unwelcome distraction to Yahya. Rendel was however promptly rebuffed by the Air Ministry, the Colonial and the India Office.¹⁶⁰

Deeply troubled by the possible repercussions, London tried to dissuade Ibn Saud from initiating a full-fledged war with Yemen and stressed their objection to any Saudi accession of Yemeni territory. This was all to no avail. While Saudi Arabia was clearly hampered by the lack of British support, Ibn Saud had no desire to see Britain blocking him from defending an area that he considered to be lawfully his own.¹⁶¹

By early April 1934 Saudi forces had ousted the Yemeni troops encroached in Asir and launched a fierce counter-attack which had brought them into Yemeni territory. The Italians saw which way the wind was blowing and urged Britain to halt the Saudi offensive. Britain informed Italy that it was prepared neither to see Ibn Saud be defeated by their protégé, the Imam, nor accept any Italian intervention. But, while Britain was acting tough on the international stage, they were simultaneously conducting frantic talks with Ibn Saud in Jeddah to prevent any further escalation of the conflict. Luckily for the British, Ibn Saud decided to end his offensive on 12 May 1934.¹⁶²

Rendel - always sympathetic to Ibn Saud - considered the assessments put forward by most British officials as to why the Monarch had ceased his operations to be marred by an intense anti-Saudi bias. He himself maintained that the Saudi Monarch had decided to end his offensive early because he was afraid that an annexation of Yemeni territory might jeopardise regional stability. A more plausible explanation was put forward by the Minister to Saudi Arabia, Andrew Ryan. He argued that the war campaign was constrained by the Monarchy's limited financial resources. Furthermore, the Saudi soldiers had shown little enthusiasm for a war being fought on a distant front. In view of the fact that these desert soldiers also lacked experience fighting in mountainous areas, Kelly surmised that strategically adept Monarch had halted operations following a thorough assessment.¹⁶³

The Saudi-Yemeni war taught both Britain and Ibn Saud important lessons. The King had observed how the British were prepared to intervene only when the Saudi defence was at stake - that is when Italy threatened to force the Saudis from Yemeni territory. Ibn Saud thus realised the hard way that his long-time ally was so constrained by the regional situation that they would not support further Saudi expansion. More worrying still, Britain's failure to stand up against Italy demonstrated to Ibn

¹⁶⁰ Leatherdale, p. 151.

¹⁶¹ Kostiner, "Britain and the Challenge..." p. 132.

¹⁶² Ibid, p. 133.

¹⁶³ Leatherdale, 157. Ibn Saud was widely considered to be an eminent strategist, the British being especially impressed by his pacification of the raiding tribes. Kostiner, Joseph, *The making of Saudi Arabia, 1916-1936: From Chieftaincy to Monarchical State* (Oxford 1993), p. 61.

Saud that the balance of power was shifting: Britain – despite her superior military capacity - was a power in decline while Italy was a likely candidate to replace her. While the Monarch was highly apprehensive of increased Italian presence, it must have been equally obvious to Ibn Saud that Italy might become useful at a later stage: prospects of a Saudi-Italian alliance would almost certainly ensure a British policy more favourable to Saudi Arabia.¹⁶⁴

As for the British, Ibn Saud's conduct throughout the affair helped confirm previous fears of his expansionist leanings and his independent nature. Moreover, the Italian entrée was an unwelcome element in their Arabian strategy and did nothing to allay their rather fatalistic outlook. British officials realised that Britain - in accordance with her current policy of appeasement - was bound to give priority to Anglo-Italian relations. The experiences of the Saudi-Yemeni War clearly demonstrated that this might very well compromise future Anglo-Saudi dealings.¹⁶⁵

Arab nationalism and the Palestine issue in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia was even “less” of a nation than Iraq. The Kingdom consisted of various tribes which Ibn Saud had successfully merged between 1902 and 1932.¹⁶⁶ This could not in any way be described as an evolutionary process as the population on the peninsula were divided by regional and tribal differences which militated against national unity and unification. The Saudi Kingdom was in fact imposed on a people with no common historical memory or any sense of national heritage.¹⁶⁷

Generally speaking, the Saudi Arabia of the 1930s was on “a much lower plane of social evolution” and had witnessed a “slower growth of national spirit” than other Middle Eastern states.¹⁶⁸ Ibn Saud's policies in the preceding decade had in fact done little to strengthen the national identity. In contrast to the nationalist rhetoric so prevalent in both Egypt and Iraq, Ibn Saud focused his nation-building project on the one element which the vast majority of his subjects had in common: Sunni, Wahhabi Islam.¹⁶⁹

The lack of a strong nationalist movement in Saudi Arabia was also tied to Britain's weaker position in the country. In Egypt and Iraq, much of what impelled Arab nationalism in the inter-war

¹⁶⁴ Leatherdale, 159.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 160.

¹⁶⁶ Al-Rasheed, *A history of...*, p. 3

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ MacKereth to Foreign Office, FO/371/19980/ E3039, 15 May 1936.

¹⁶⁹ Al-Rasheed, *A History of...*, p. 4, Leatherdale, p. 262.

years was a universal hatred of the British presence. Since this was not the case in Saudi Arabia, Saudi attitudes were destined to be of a different nature.¹⁷⁰

The Saudi state in the 1930s was an underdeveloped and isolated desert Kingdom.¹⁷¹ No real public sphere existed. The people inhabiting Saudi Arabia were simply not in a position to formulate any real opinions on Palestine, the simple reason being that they lacked channels of information. Two newspapers were founded in 1932 – *Umm al Quara* and *Saut al Hejaz* – but they were both closely monitored by the Saudi Government.¹⁷² The papers must also have had a limited circulation due to the high degree of illiteracy at the time.¹⁷³ There was an Iraqi radio station based in Baghdad broadcasting regional news, but there is no indication that this reached a wide audience in Saudi Arabia. Finally, one of the principal sources of outside information in normal times was partly down. The pilgrimage, which usually brought in huge crowds from the entire region, was severely affected in the early to mid 1930s by the concurrent economic depression.¹⁷⁴

Prior to 1936 there seems to have been no major public expressions regarding Palestine in Saudi Arabia. Unlike Iraq and Egypt, civic displays in support of the Palestine Arabs were in fact to remain virtually nonexistent throughout the decade.¹⁷⁵ As regards official Saudi involvement in Palestine during the first half of the 1930s, this seems to have been an equally low-key affair.

There was however one prominent individual who was determined to involve Ibn Saud in Palestine matters. From 1929 and onwards Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husseini tried time after time to implicate Ibn Saud in the Palestine issue.¹⁷⁶ While the Saudi Monarch's response was always sympathetic, he repeatedly declined to take up an active role in support of their cause. Perhaps the most interesting part about these correspondences was that Ibn Saud as early as 1932 warned the Mufti that they should "not give the enemies an opportunity to win and succeed." This was indeed a caution to al-Husseini regarding the aspirations of other Arabs - more precisely the Amir Abdullah of Transjordan. It is thus apparent that the Saudi position on Palestine was from the very outset shaped by Hashemite and Saudi rivalry.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁰ Kostiner, *The making of...*, p. 191.

¹⁷¹ In a diary entry, dated 29 May 1937, Reader Bullard writes; "[T]his is one of the countries where it is difficult to know what anyone thinks, owing to the lack of contact between foreigners and the population and the absence of a free press." Bullard, Reader, *Two Kings in Arabia: Letters from Jeddah 1923-1925 and 1936-1939* (Lebanon 1993), p. 168.

¹⁷² Leatherdale, p. 78. The British Annual Report for 1936 affirmed that the Mecca press had "conspicuously" avoided mention of the unrest in Palestine. Ibid, p. 271.

¹⁷³ Al-Rasheed, Madawi, "Saudi Arabia and the 1948 Palestine War beyond official history", <http://www.madawialrasheed.org/index.php/site/more/133/>. The online article is not divided into separate pages. An abridged version of this text is to be found in; Rogan and Shlaim, eds., *The War for Palestine: rewriting the history of 1948 War*, 2nd edition (Cambridge 2007), pp. 228-248.

¹⁷⁴ Al-Rasheed, "Saudi Arabia and the...".

¹⁷⁵ There is no reference to such activity in either the primary sources or the literature available to this study.

¹⁷⁶ Yehoshua Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion* (London 1977), p. 9.

¹⁷⁷ Al-Rasheed, "Saudi Arabia and the...". Letter dated 19 February 1932.

Ibn Saud's warning to the Mufti in 1932 was conveyed in a letter where the Monarch apologised for not having been able to attend the Pan-Islamic conference held in Bagdad the previous month. Prior to the event the British Ambassador to Iraq had the following to say about the Monarch's position: "Ibn Saud, apprehensive of Hashemite influence, had now expressed disapproval of the whole idea."¹⁷⁸

The Arab Rebellion

Soon after the Rebellion erupted in Palestine, Ibn Saud began sending letters to the British consulate in Jeddah. The incentive behind this approach was yet another appeal from the Mufti calling for Ibn Saud's active support.¹⁷⁹ The initial British response - authored by the soon-to-be departing Andrew Ryan - was sincere and to the point. "The Arab agitation in Palestine is directed against the policy of his Majesty's Government, and for Ibn Saud to declare his sympathy to it would be to declare himself on the side of those hostile to British policy in a country under British administration. This would be incompatible with his professions of friendly sentiments."¹⁸⁰

Turned down by the local British representative, Ibn Saud decided to approach the Foreign Office directly. The Saudi Minister to London, Hafez Wahba, told the Deputy Under-Secretary, Lancelot Oliphant, that fellow Arabs were "upbraiding him as a coward and alleging that he was a British Agent for not doing something for the Arabs."¹⁸¹ As shown already, the Foreign Office were often responsive to Ibn Saud's demands. Convinced that that the Saudi Monarch ought to be given a free position on Palestine, Oliphant approached the Colonial Office for their take on the matter. Somewhat surprisingly the Colonial Office's response was all enthusiastic. "If King Ibn Saud can use his influence to persuade the Arabs to give up the campaign of violence he will be doing a service not only to H[is] M[ajesty's] G[overnment] but to the Arabs himself." Exactly why the Colonial Office decided to promote this approach is not entirely clear. One likely explanation is that due to great strain – caused by the rapidly deteriorating conditions in Palestine – the department was prepared to embrace any scheme which might ease the situation. Moreover, they seem to have clung to the rather naive

¹⁷⁸ "Pan-Arab Congress Bagdad", FO/141/768/27, 21 December 1932.

¹⁷⁹ Rose, Norman Anthony "The Arab Rulers and Palestine, 1936: The British Reaction", *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 44, No. 2. (1972), p. 215.

¹⁸⁰ Al-Rasheed, "Saudi Arabia and the...".

¹⁸¹ Kedourie, "Great Britain and Palestine...", p. 97.

belief that they would be able to control the extent of the Arab leaders' future involvement in Palestine.¹⁸²

The details of Ibn Saud's involvement leading up to the armistice of October 1936 have been laid out elsewhere and will not be repeated here.¹⁸³ In short, Ibn Saud exploited the opening given to him and soon attained an important mediating role in the Anglo-Palestinian negotiations. In July 1936 Hafez Wahba informed Oliphant that in order for Saudi Arabia and Iraq to co-operate with Britain over Palestine, Jewish immigration must be stopped while awaiting the Peel Commission's report. This, Wahba maintained, "could not be interpreted as a concession to mob violence." But how could it not? The Colonial Office, recognising their earlier blunder, now admitted that it was "difficult to distinguish...between the Arabs in Palestine and the Arab Kings outside acting as mediators."¹⁸⁴

After several rounds of bargaining, a settlement was reached on 12 October 1936. Not only was Ibn Saud a key figure in the negotiations leading up to the final agreement, he had acquired a right to be heard on future Palestine policies.¹⁸⁵ But why did Ibn Saud choose to get involved in Palestine in 1936? And what was his opinion of the Palestine Arabs?

Ibn Saud, Palestine and Pan-Arabism

In view of the attention the Foreign Office was paying to the relationship between the Palestine question and the Arab States, it is somewhat paradoxical that Ibn Saud – the Monarch which arguably enjoyed the most respect in that office – does not seem to have cared much for the Palestine Arabs. There is probably no simple explanation for his apparent indifference. Part of the answer might lay in the fact that he to some extent saw the Palestine Arabs as Europeanised due to the transformation of Palestine into a largely agricultural society. In doing so they had renounced their Arab tribal ancestry. Furthermore, as they were not Wahhabis they did not fit into Ibn Saud's image of either true Arabs or true Muslims.¹⁸⁶

Neither was Ibn Saud's lack of sympathy for the Palestinians much of a secret at the time. Chaim Weizmann - at a moment of frustration – wrote to Ormsby-Gore in early 1938: "I am sure, however, that the Foreign Office is well aware that Ibn Sa'ud was completely disinterested in the

¹⁸² Leatherdale, p. 269 and Cohen, *Palestine: Retreat...*, p. 29. Elie Kedourie places the blame directly on Colonial Secretary Ormsby-Gore who was inexperienced, "not tough or forceful" and "may have been cramped by his reputation as a Zionist sympathiser". Kedourie, "Great Britain and Palestine...", p. 98.

¹⁸³ See Cohen, *Palestine: Retreat...*, pp. 18-31, Rose, "The Arab Rulers...", pp. 213-231 and Kedourie "The Arab Rulers...", pp. 96-113.

¹⁸⁴ Kedourie, "The Arab Rulers...", p. 101.

¹⁸⁵ Sheffer, *Policy Making...*, p. 369.

¹⁸⁶ Leatherdale, p. 268.

Arabs of Palestine, whom he despises...But he hates Abdullah and any addition of strength to him.”¹⁸⁷
The British Annual report on Saudi Arabia for 1937 stated that the Monarch quite simply regarded the Palestinians as inferior Arabs.¹⁸⁸

Cultural and religious differences and inter-Arab rivalry also affected Saudi Arabia’s affiliation with the Pan-Arab movement. Ibn Saud’s religious and political beliefs were far removed from the Arab nationalist ideas which flourished among the intellectuals of Damascus. Indeed, Saudi Arabia’s social and economic make-up together with its isolation from European and Ottoman influences made the Kingdom into something quite dissimilar from the countries of the Fertile Crescent.¹⁸⁹ They shared a common language, but not a common history, culture, reading of Islam or forced subservience to European powers.¹⁹⁰ Ibn Saud was first and foremost a religious fundamentalist who sought to awaken an authentic form of Islam based on monotheistic Puritanism. It would thus be more correct to label Ibn Saud’s ambitions Pan-Islamic rather than Pan-Arab.¹⁹¹

From his position in Damascus, the British consul Gilbert MacKereth described the ongoing changes in Arabic political thought:

The more advanced, and possibly the most energetic, protagonists of Pan-Arabism have been ready to appeal for support to the “free thinkers” in England, France, Germany and Russia, and to propose a union of agnostic and communistic forces against Christianity; anything, in fact, to get freedom from the Western yoke. In this way Pan-Arabism has begun to be divorced from Pan-Islamism after but a brief marriage.¹⁹²

Agnosticism and communism were ideas abhorrent to a deeply religious person such as Ibn Saud. Moreover, they were categories imported from Europe by “progressive” Pan-Arabists. Ibn Saud’s Wahhabi Islam sought precisely to repudiate and exclude European influences such as these.¹⁹³

In May 1937 Reader Bullard noted that “Ibn Saud has been coming out strong as a fundamentalist...[H]e published a proclamation criticising on religious grounds the Saudi young men who want modernisation, freedom, progress, civilisation, and the like...Perhaps Ibn Saud fears that the freer manners of other Moslem countries such as Egypt may spread to the Hejaz by the contact of pilgrims with the local population.”¹⁹⁴ The Monarch’s repeated refusals to court any Pan-Arab

¹⁸⁷ Barnett, p. 295. Letter dated 20 January 1938.

¹⁸⁸ Leatherdale, p. 282.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 261.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 262.

¹⁹¹ These terms were far from clear cut. As one keen observer stated in 1938; “It is quite incorrect to confuse the two but that is exactly what the Arab Nationalists are constantly doing, intentionally or otherwise, Woolbert, p. 316.

¹⁹² MacKereth to Foreign Office, FO/371/19980/ E3039, 15 May 1936.

¹⁹³ Leatherdale, p. 262.

¹⁹⁴ Bullard, pp. 167-168.

conferences - despite numerous appeals for him to do so – also demonstrated his ambivalence towards the Arab nationalist movement.¹⁹⁵

When Ibn Saud decided to approach the British regarding Palestine in May 1936, it was - according to himself - because he had received appeals from Mufti al-Husseini and consequently needed guidance from the British Government as how to proceed.¹⁹⁶ Considering that the Mufti had previously sent scores of letters requesting the Saudi ruler's active support - none of which had met with much success – there must have been something more to Ibn Saud's decision to intervene at this point.

The stir created by the Rebellion in 1936 was vastly different in scale than any previous unrest witnessed in Palestine. Ibn Saud immediately recognised this and realised that the situation presented him with a set of profound challenges. But imbued in these were also opportunities which Ibn Saud could exploit to enhance his own position. Generally speaking, Ibn Saud sought a leading role in inter-Arab activities. Simultaneously, he was aware that his rivals - most notably the Amir Abdullah - sought exactly the same thing. More than any previous event, the Rebellion in Palestine offered a window for the various Arab leaders to engage in such activities and thereby increase their own prestige. Thus, when Britain not only allowed for Saudi involvement, but actively encouraged it, there was nothing to keep Ibn Saud from adopting a leading role in the negotiations over Palestine. From being a potential threat to the Monarch's regional standing Britain's preferred approach in Palestine made for a situation where Ibn Saud could draw several benefits. By taking part in the common appeal put forth by the Arab Kings in October 1936 he was able to secure British good-will and also to enhance his status as an influential Arab Monarch.¹⁹⁷

The release of the Peel plan

Ibn Saud's initial reaction to Lord Peel's recommendations was quite restrained. Perhaps equally significant: it was not made public but conveyed directly to British officials. The issues raised by Ibn Saud during this meeting regarding the proposed partition are also telling because they give an indication of the Saudi ruler's main priorities.

¹⁹⁵ Ibn Saud refused to partake in the Jerusalem conference in 1932. In the face of strong appeals from Mufti al-Husseini, the Monarch declined in 1937 to participate in the large conference on Palestine to be held in Bludan, Syria. An account written in 1939 maintains that the conference "failed largely because Ibn Saud sent no representative." Gunther, p. 547.

¹⁹⁶ Rose, "The Arab Rulers...", p. 215.

¹⁹⁷ Watt, Cameron D., "The foreign policy of Ibn Saud 1930-39", *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, 50: 2 (1963), p. 154.

The British Minister to Saudi Arabia, Sir Reader Bullard, was the first official to meet Ibn Saud following the release of the Peel report. He reported after his conversation with the Monarch that he “seems increasingly to regard his security as bound up with ours.” The King’s principal objections, it seems, were concerned with the incorporation of the proposed Arab area into the Transjordanian state. “he considers liberation of Abdullah from mandate as dangerous to his interests”¹⁹⁸ In a second meeting between the two, held just four days later, Ibn Saud further elaborated his position. The King realised that his own interests would be “affected very unfavourably by prospective renunciation of British mandate over Transjordan.” Ibn Saud apparently considered the current form of government to benefit his position: “So long as mandated lasted...he knew Abdullah’s intrigues would be held in check.”¹⁹⁹

There is thus clear evidence that Ibn Saud was opposed to the Peel Plan’s recommendations from the outset. Still, it is important to record on what grounds he initially based this opposition. Despite the fact that the proposed partition was reviled by most Palestine Arabs – and that it would involve the enforced transfer of some 225.000 people from that population – no expression of sympathy or consideration was conveyed by the Monarch at this stage.

Had Ibn Saud’s concerns been restricted to those relating to his arch rival Abdullah, it is likely that he would have abstained from publically condemning the partition proposal, especially if the British had sat down with the Monarch to negotiate some sort of compensation or reward for his neutrality.²⁰⁰ However, other developments prevented this course of action.

While the Saudi King was not set on destroying his long standing relationship with the British, he wished also to maintain and even strengthen his position as the most prominent of the Arab Kings, a role which he had buttressed so successfully the previous year. Consequently, it can be argued that it was mainly the fierce, largely uncontested attack from the Iraqi Government under Hikmat Sulayman which forced Ibn Saud to come out more openly against partition. Because of his hegemonic ambitions he could simply not afford to leave it to the other Arab leaders to direct criticism of the partition plan. Nor could he hold back on the religious and political rhetoric which dominated their appeals. Hafiz Wahba explained the situation to Lacy Baggalay of the Foreign Office: “It was true that the people at large knew that he [Ibn Saud] was opposed to the plan of partition, but they could not understand why he did not make his views public in the same way that the Iraqi Government had done.”²⁰¹ It is with this in mind one must evaluate Ibn Saud’s further actions in the struggle over partition.

¹⁹⁸ Bullard to FO, FO/371/20808/E3885, 10 July 1937.

¹⁹⁹ Bullard to FO, FO/371/20808/E4034, 14 July 1937.

²⁰⁰ Reader Bullard at this point proposed to Lacy Baggalay of the Foreign Office that Ibn Saud might be prepared to accept partition if one of his sons were ultimately put on the throne of Arab Palestine. Bullard was thus implying that Arab Palestine should not be incorporated into Transjordan. Porath, *In Search...*, p. 231.

²⁰¹ Saudi Minister to FO, FO/371/20812/E4898, 20 August 1937.

Hikmat Sulayman had temporarily postponed his demise in Iraq by publically denouncing the Partition Plan. Unlike Sulayman, however, Ibn Saud was currently under no such threat. But that did not stop him from applying much of the same strategy as the Iraqi Premier.

How could Ibn Saud come out against official British policy and still remain on good terms with the British Government? To escape from this muddle Ibn Saud would make use of the internal Saudi opposition, an opposition which supposedly represented a serious threat to his regime. Throughout the winter of 1937 and the first half of 1938 the King conveyed repeatedly to the British that he would be powerless in restraining the Saudi tribes should the *Ulema* publish a fatwa declaring jihad against partition.²⁰² While evidence suggests that there were elements within the Saudi Kingdom set on forcing Ibn Saud to oppose British Palestine policy, it is far less plausible that he would not be able to contain this should he wish to do so.²⁰³

On 18 September 1937 Hafiz Wahba transmitted to the Foreign Office a report in which he informed of the dangers posed to Ibn Saud by the *Ulema*:

if disturbances should break out afresh in Palestine as a result of partition being forcibly carried out against the wishes of the people...His Majesty might find his subjects, the members of the tribes on the frontiers, participating in the disturbances in support of the Arabs of Palestine against the Jews...If his Majesty attempted to stop them...he would undoubtedly be accused of treason to the cause of the Arabs and the cause of Islam, and would consequently lose his position among his people, as well as among the rest of the Arabs and Muslims.²⁰⁴

This line of argument was to dominate the appeals Ibn Saud put before the British in order for them to scrap the partition proposal. It was a version fully accepted by the London office as well as by the local representative, Reader Bullard. It was their opinion that Ibn Saud was at all times doing what he could to satisfy British interests, but that there was nonetheless limits to what he could endure before the powerful *Ulemas* would turn against him. Bullard made the following observation in February 1938:

if a serious revolt broke out in Transjordan, it would attract the spontaneous participation of the Saudi tribes on the border, and when once the movement had begun Ibn Saud would have to allow it to continue or perhaps even to take part in it...There is no doubt that at present Ibn Saud does not want anything of the sort to happen. If he had not been really attached to the view which he has professed on several occasions during the last eighteen months...that his interests and those of His Majesty's

²⁰² Porath, *In Search...*, p. 167. An *Ulema* is a community of legal scholars of Islam and the Sharia.

²⁰³ Major Hawthorn of the War Office argued that the only groups fully sympathizing with the Palestine Arabs were the tribes along the Transjordan border. They were nonetheless not of the "fanatical type" and showed "no signs of being prepared to march against Great Britain in a Holy war". Moreover, Hawthorn emphasized that Ibn Saud was at the moment "exceptionally strong internally" and that his authority was "unquestioned". Hawthorn (WO) to Etherington-Smith (FO), FO/371/21873/E788, February 9 1938.

²⁰⁴ "Situation in Saudi Arabia", CO/733/352/8, 18 September 1937.

Government are identical, he would hardly have acted as he has done in regard to Palestine. The important question is how far he will continue to adhere to that view if there is no radical change in the Palestine policy of His Majesty's Government. I have recently recorded my opinion that he continues to support His Majesty's Government as far as he can because he cannot believe that in the long run they will carry out a policy grossly unjust (from his point of view) to the Arabs, and that his strong professions of friendship must not be regarded as a blank cheque.²⁰⁵

This account was not merely along the lines of what Ibn Saud and his representatives were serving British officials, it was in fact a direct echo of that version. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, there were voices within the British establishment which were not equally convinced by this line of reasoning. The aforementioned War Office report - circulated in the same month as Bullard's analysis - generally concurred with the Eastern Department that Ibn Saud's fears of unrest following partition were genuine:

He fears Jewish political and economic expansion...religious and worldly interests combine to induce him to oppose the execution of the [Peel] report...the fact that he has recently done more in two months to reorganise and strengthen his frontier defences than in the past seven years shows that his warnings to H.M. Government are genuine and that he is alarmed at what may be the outcome of enforced partition.

However, on the matter of how the Saudi Monarch would react should British policy on Palestine continue to displease him, the two versions diverged. On this question Major Hawthorn contradicted the alarming version put forward by the Eastern department:

We have...good grounds for believing that Ibn Saud regards British friendship and support as a cardinal point in his foreign policy, and that his fear of Italy's aims will keep him aligned with Great Britain in spite of his genuine distress over the Palestine question. We also know that he disapproves of the efforts being made by certain Arab nationalist leaders to embarrass Great Britain and to intrigue with Italy. He also regards most Arab leaders as self seekers rather than genuine Arab patriots. Apart from this, he is instinctively jealous of any attempt to ascribe to any individual or country the leadership of the Arabic speaking world...We may therefore conclude that it would be with the greatest reluctance that Ibn Saud would join in any move directed against H. M. Government.²⁰⁶

A somewhat similar point of view was put forward by the Chargé d'Affaires at Jeddah, Alan Trott. His approach to the issue, compared to that of Hawthorn, was slightly more pragmatic. He seemed less concerned whether Ibn Saud would accept partition or not. Nor did Trott believe that Britain should automatically rule out enforced partition *even* if it was likely to cause a major insurrection inside the Saudi Kingdom.

²⁰⁵ Bullard to Eden, E1099, CO/75720/6, 28 February 1938.

²⁰⁶ WO to FO, FO/371/21873/E788, 9 February 1938.

If partition is enforced without consent of majority of local Arab population, present tendencies will be greatly accentuated and Pan-Arab feeling will grow. The Ulemas will probably issue their call for a Jihad: in that case anti-British feeling would certainly be inflamed and might become very severe. The King's dilemma would be made still more difficult and though he would continue to endeavour to control his tribes he might find himself obliged to lead them or fall himself. British aeroplanes in the Amman would deter raiders but the King who has made no secret of his dislike for partition would bear us a grudge.²⁰⁷

Trott's contribution to the debate was considered anathema by the Eastern Department. "If we continue our Palestine policy, Ibn Saud will do much more than merely "bear us a grudge." More importantly, though, Trott's logic broke completely with the framework in which the Eastern Department operated. His thinking went something like this: if we assume the absolute worst case scenario - in this case Saudi tribes and paramilitary groups entering Transjordan and possibly Palestine - would this be an insuperable task for the British forces to deal with? Furthermore, *if* partition would gradually relieve the grave situation the British were currently facing in Palestine, should she not be prepared to pay a fairly a tall price to carry through that policy? While the Colonial Office generally cast doubt over the Eastern Department's "worst case scenario" predictions, Trott was asking - from a strictly British point of view - if these same scenarios really were sufficiently bad.

Ibn Saud as an Arabist icon

Trott's realist approach also helps to illuminate a certain "romantic" aspect of the Eastern Department's thinking. This aspect was especially apparent in their dealings with the Saudi Monarch who, for a number of peculiar reasons, had come to hold a unique position in that department.

Alan Trott, like Gilbert MacKereth in Damascus, frequently questioned the sincerity of the Pan-Arab idea as well as the methods used to spread it. "A strong though vague feeling of solidarity for Arabs of Palestine has however recently grown up as a result of religious propaganda initiated from abroad." This reading of events was promptly rebuffed by London: "it is inaccurate and misleading to speak of Saudi feelings on this question having grown up as the result of religious propaganda "initiated from abroad". The opposition in Saudi Arabia to our Palestine policy is not due to foreign instigation, but is spontaneous and deep-seated." In January 1938 William Ormsby-Gore managed to generate a similar response: "I think we ought to go as far as we can to secure if necessary to buy – the friendship of Ibn Saud, either financially or by territorial concessions. He is the only Arab leader for whom I have any respect." George Rendel was appalled by such an idea suggestion:

²⁰⁷ Trott to FO, FO/371/20820/E6815, 18 November 1937.

I submit that it is a grave misconception to speak of “buying Ibn Saud’s friendship”. Ibn Saud is not to be bought. His strength lies in the consistency of his principles and support and respect of his people. It would neither accord with his character, nor serve his own interest, to sell what he regards as the birth-right of his race for a mess of potage.²⁰⁸

What qualities did Ibn Saud possess to warrant such praise? Both George Rendel and Reader Bullard both seem to fit into the mould dubbed by one scholar as “sentimental pro-Arabs”.²⁰⁹ In contrast to the anti-establishment groups which in the last decades have made up much of the anti-Zionist movement, these officials were very much members of the establishment. Consequently, there was never any doubt that their pro-Arab persuasion was motivated by national interests as they were convinced – correctly or not - that British imperial and strategic requirements necessitated friendly ties with the Arab world. Nonetheless, there was definitely a romantic element in their outlook. Most of them - Rendel and Bullard included - had come into contact with the Arabs through work in the region where they had become deeply fascinated by the Arab way of life. But their sympathy towards the Arab was largely born out of a romantic infatuation with one type of Arab, the Bedouin. This stereotype had limited relevance in the contemporary Middle East. What it did, however, was to offer these officials a glimpse into an earlier, more glorious period. Arguably, the attraction of this lost past was also enhanced by the fact that it defied the modernization that was happening all around them.²¹⁰

Observations made by George Rendel in his autobiography seem to support this impression. What is more, he seems to have regarded the Zionists’ progress in Palestine as artificial, possibly as a manifestation of an increased outside influence in the region. On a visit to Palestine in 1937 Rendel recorded the following:

The new Jewish colonies, however, had greatly multiplied since our previous visit in 1932, and the countryside was beginning to take on a rather brash modern look...stout young women from Central Europe in exiguous tight shorts, made an odd contrast to the then still more numerous native Arabs, glaring suspiciously at these strange invaders.²¹¹

In his memoirs Rendel refers to the prominent British Arabist Gerard De Gaury and his account, *Arabia Phoenix*. On one level the book is a travel account of an official visit to Ibn Saud in 1935 made by the author along with Sir Andrew Ryan - then British Ambassador to Saudi Arabia. On another level, the book is very much a chronicle of contemporary, British Arabist thinking. The foreword

²⁰⁸ Ormsby-Gore to Prime Minister, FO/371/21862/E559, 31 January 1938.

²⁰⁹ Miller, p. 469. According to Miller the term “sentimental pro-Arab” was coined by Michael Ionides in his book; *Divide and Lose: The Arab Revolt, 1955–56* (London, 1960). Ionides had worked as a civil servant in Transjordan during the 1930s.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Rendel, p. 99.

written by the influential Frey Stark - referred to by Rendel as “our mutual friend” – is especially enlightening as to their outlook on the Bedouin.²¹²

And here lies the charm of Arab travel. We visit something that has vanished from our West long ago, and in the East can linger but a short while longer. It is this unconscious background of catastrophe which lures us to the Bedouin of the desert rather than to the modern effendi who lives in towns like ours and shares our future, whose transitory nature is as yet unapparent.²¹³

As for de Gaury himself, his fascination with Ibn Saud seems to have been absolute:

Sometimes in England one hears it asked in which other age one would have liked to have lived...None of us had ever thought it possible to combine the two worlds as Ibn Saud had done – to follow the law and life of the seventh century while using the amenities of the twentieth.²¹⁴

British historian John Marlowe seems to perfectly capture the unique standing of the Saudi Monarch:

This bearded Bedu figure, with his flowing robes, his classical Arabic speech and his traditional Arab ways...in contrast to the cosmopolitan appearance and manners of nearly all the other Arab sovereigns and statesmen, was, both for the Arabs themselves and for the Western statesmen who dealt with him, a perpetual reminder of the common origin from which Arab nationalism derived both its inspiration and its justification.²¹⁵

Finally there is Rendel’s own portrayal of the King:

The most striking characteristic of King Ibn Saud was his commanding personality...in any group or company by which he might be surrounded he appeared at once the outstanding figure...The large scale of his mind and outlook seemed to correspond to his to his physical appearance...It is perhaps dangerous to attribute complete sincerity to anyone where international politics are concerned...But broadly speaking it would have been difficult to imagine any Eastern ruler with whom it would have been more satisfactory to deal.²¹⁶

These comments were made in connection with Rendel’s official visit to Ibn Saud in March 1937. It has in fact been proposed elsewhere that the unique position which Ibn Saud enjoyed in the Foreign Office by late 1937 was to some extent a result of this very visit.²¹⁷ The reports Rendel submitted to the Foreign Office following his stay at Jeddah certainly serve to support this interpretation. Rendel reported, after several conversations with Ibn Saud, that he felt justified “in expressing the opinion that the course of our future relations with King Ibn Saud will depend almost entirely on the nature of the report of the Royal Commission and of the decisions which His Majesty’s Government take thereon.”

²¹² Rendel, p. 108.

²¹³ de Gaury, Gerard *Arabia Phœnix* (London 1946), p. 5.

²¹⁴ Ibid, p.100.

²¹⁵ Marlowe, John, *Arab Nationalism and British Imperialism: A Study in Power Politics* (London 1961), p. 29.

²¹⁶ Rendel, pp.114-115.

²¹⁷ Klieman, “Bureaucratic Politics...”, pp. 149-150.

It is clear from Rendel's memoranda that Ibn Saud was indeed alarmed over the possible conclusions of the Peel Commission. Should the recommendations favour the Zionist course, he would be unable not "to support the Palestine Arabs in the new revolt which will inevitably break out." Rendel, however, "would go further". It was his "considered opinion" that "if His Majesty's Government are unable to give the Arabs of Palestine some guarantee that they will not – as must happen if our present policy is continued – ultimately become a small minority in a Jewish State, Ibn Saud will be forced to change his whole policy towards us and may well become a dangerous enemy." Rendel was thus drawing up alarming conclusions about the repercussions of partition several months before the Peel Commission were to publish its findings. Even more troubling was the fact that these conclusions seems not to have been founded on statements made by Ibn Saud, but were essentially Rendel's own.

Ibn Saud's regional claims

Less than two months after the Peel Commission had put forth its report, Ibn Saud decided it was time to reopen another delicate affair, the Aqaba -Maan issue.²¹⁸

Aqaba and Maan had been under Hashemite control since it had been captured during the Great Arab Revolt in 1917. After nearly a year of fighting it became apparent by spring 1925 that Ali bin Husein would be unable to fend off Ibn Saud's offensive, and that the Hejaz would soon be under his control. The prospect of Aqaba and Maan befalling Ibn Saud caused serious concern in London. The Foreign Office, by now seeking a conciliatory line towards the new regime, argued that Aqaba belonged to the Hejaz and thus proposed ceding it to Ibn Saud. The Colonial Office – at the time presided over by the ardent imperialist Leopold Amery – adopted a different position. Amery was not really concerned about whether Aqaba formally belonged to the Hejaz or not. To him it was only a "lent" anyway.²¹⁹

Amery, supported by the armed forces got it his way. It was decided that Aqaba-Maan should not "accompany" the Hejaz but instead be incorporated into Transjordan. To lessen the blow for Ibn Saud it was decided that Hussein bin Ali, who was currently seeking refuge in Aqaba, should be sent into exile. Ibn Saud reluctantly accepted the decision. It was no secret, however, that he did not consider this to be absolute. Consequently, the issue was discussed on numerous occasions with British officials throughout the 1930s.

²¹⁸ If Transjordan were to lose control of Maan it would effectively cut her access to the Aqaba seaport and thus invite Saudi access to Palestine and Egypt. Leatherdale, p. 44.

²¹⁹ Ibid, p. 45.

When the partition proposal was laid out in July 1937 Ibn Saud was quick to recognize its wider implications. Transjordan's merger with the Arab part of Palestine would involve the termination of the current mandate. The Monarch thus surmised that this would give him the justification to renew his claim on Aqaba-Maan. There was obviously also a fair degree of bargaining involved. Bullard wrote: "If Abdullah is to be independent Ibn Saud wants two towns [Aqaba and Maan] and a corridor...to Syria."²²⁰

What is remarkable about this affair is not so much Ibn Saud's request: the Monarch saw in partition an opportunity to attain something which he had coveted for a long time and rather predictably pursued this opening. No, the astonishing feature is how the British responded. In 1925 Aqaba-Maan had been transferred to Transjordan because of its great importance. Ever since, Ibn Saud's cautious inquiries had been rebuffed on exactly the same grounds. Now the Foreign Office, on advice from Reader Bullard, was prepared to do a volte face. Bullard maintained that the transfer of Aqaba-Maan area to Ibn Saud would prevent him from actively supporting the insurrection in Palestine. Once again then, the overall motive was appeasement, the beneficiary once more Ibn Saud. What Bullard failed to grasp was that Saudi Arabia – with the addition of Aqaba – would have been given a stranglehold on the proposed Arab state. This was arguably not a good starting point for any nation considering Ibn Saud's earlier ventures. The military planners, however, did not buy into the Foreign Office reversal. The proposal to relinquish Aqaba-Maan went before the combined Chiefs of Staff on 15 November 1937. The Committee rejected the idea on wider strategic grounds: Italy's enhanced position in the Red Sea demanded the retention of Aqaba under British mandate.²²¹

The Italian factor

For Ibn Saud one of the more alarming experiences in the years 1935-36 had been to witness Britain's passive response following Italy's aggression in Abyssinia. Apparently, the King had been under the impression that Britain with her superior fleet would never allow Italy to get away with it.²²² In June 1936 Andrew Ryan transmitted a detailed assessment of Anglo-Saudi relations in the wake of the Italian-Abyssinian war.

Obsessed for many years with Italy he [Ibn Saud] fears that they will turn on the Arab peninsula. As a Moslem ruler still engaged in consolidating his position in Arabia, and jealous of his newly won independence, he has no genuine love for Britain, a power which blocks his way in various directions,

²²⁰ Bullard to FO, FO/371/20808/E4034, July 14 1937. Ibn Saud argued that he needed a corridor through Transjordan in order for the Saudi tribes to migrate without hindrance. Leatherdale, p. 277.

²²¹ Leatherdale, p. 277.

²²² Leslie McLoughlin, *Ibn Saud: Founder of a Kingdom*, (Basingstoke 1993), p. 136.

but he has much less to fear from British policy on this side than he thinks he has from Italy...He probably still believes a breach with them [Britain] would be fatal to him, and hopes against hope that they will see him through in the event of a breach between him and any other European power. He dare not offend Italy. He dare not go against Britain.²²³

Ryan's analysis was in fact first-rate. He had outlined the key components in Ibn Saudi's position towards Italy: fear and distrust. These factors were not to change much during the subsequent years, but the British evaluation of them was.

In early November 1937 George Rendel wrote a lengthy memorandum on Ibn Saud's attitude towards Britain. Especially interesting is the section devoted to the Saudi ruler's position regarding the Italian threat. Rendel acknowledged that Reader Bullard, "with his great experience and knowledge, does not consider that Ibn Saud will come in actively and openly against us over Palestine unless there was a European war." While he hoped Bullard was right and hesitated "to suggest a more extreme possibility", he nevertheless stressed for the need to at least "allow for an even more disquieting possibility":

Ibn Saud has had good reason to be friendly with us up until now, but it seems to me quite possible that he may now be beginning to question the value of that friendship if, in his view, it means the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine likely rapidly to spread its influence and control over all the neighbouring countries. May it not be, then, that Ibn Saud is in fact beginning to toy with the idea of turning elsewhere for the help he needs? May he not feel that, if he were to accept Italian assistance – in spite of his dislike of the Italians and their methods – he might still be able to free himself from Italian control once he had made use of Italian help, and that it would be better to accept the very real advantages which the Italians can offer him, than to continue for the sake of a friendship which has brought him comparatively little direct material advantage, to keep his hands tied in what is now, to the Arabs, the dominating question of the day.²²⁴

This assessment was written by Rendel under the belief that the question of partition would resurface in Cabinet before long. Rendel thus presented the paper to Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden in order to provide him additional ammunition in the anticipated exchange with the Colonial Secretary. In other words, this was an important statement. Possessing no actual evidence that Ibn Saud was in fact courting Italy - or for that matter considering doing so - Rendel still made an effort to substantiate his claims. While he believed Ibn Saud "to be more sincere and straightforward than the great majority of Eastern rulers...it would be mere ordinary prudence to continue to maintain the façade of friendship with us until he was obliged to come into the open as our enemy."²²⁵

²²³ Leatherdale, p. 295.

²²⁴ Rendel to Oliphant, FO/371/20818/E6320, 3 November 3 1937.

²²⁵ Ibid.

In a peculiar turn of events the Italian factor would eventually undermine Saudi-Anglo relations, albeit only temporarily. In April 1938 an Anglo-Italian agreement was made public, something which apparently came as a shock to Ibn Saud. Up until this point he had relied on the hostility between the two powers to maintain his own standing. Now those same adversaries pledged themselves “not to acquire a privileged position of a political character in Saudi Arabia and the Yemen.”²²⁶ Ibn Saud took the agreement as a personal insult and refused to acknowledge it. His apprehension over its content would persist well into 1939.²²⁷

The great irony of the affair was that the British official assigned to lead the negotiations in Rome was none other than George Rendel. Rendel himself - having spent the previous year placating the Monarch - refused to concede that the final agreement was compromising for Ibn Saud. The King did certainly not agree to such assessment. Nor did all the officials within the Eastern Department.²²⁸

The Anglo-Italian Agreement was a part of Britain’s appeasement policy in Europe. Their gradual retreat from a partitioning Palestine was also motivated by similar logic, but this time involving the pacification of the Arab rulers. The problem was that in this instance the two “parallel” policies collided at the expense of Saudi Arabia. This possibility, remember, had been vented by British officials four years earlier. Fortunately for Ibn Saud the Italians made no attempts to adhere to the agreement, leaving it more or less worthless. Having come on top of the Peel Plan the Anglo-Italian Agreement was nonetheless important as it further weakened Ibn Saud’s trust in the British. This seems to have taught him two lessons: he would have to reduce his dependency on Great Britain: this could best be done by bringing in Germany to provide aid and a balance against Italian and British pressure.²²⁹

German approaches

In contrast to the British Foreign Office, their German counterpart, the *Austwärtiges Amt*, seemed to have regarded the Arab world as largely divided over the issue of partition. They believed the decisive political circles in the Arab countries would to their utmost to avoid a serious conflict with Great Britain - in spite of the aversion felt towards the emergence of a Jewish state. This viewpoint dominated German thinking in the months following the release of the Peel Plan and prevented the Germans from exploiting the situation during this time.²³⁰ Despite numerous Arab requests for

²²⁶ Watt, p. 156

²²⁷ Leatherdale, p. 298.

²²⁸ Ibid, p. 298.

²²⁹ Watt, p. 155.

²³⁰ Hirszowicz, Lukasz, *The Third Reich and the Arab East* (London 1966), p. 36.

material assistance for the Arab revolt in Palestine, Germany would continue to reject these due to the Government's desire to keep out of the conflict. This policy was upheld through the first half of 1938 with the growing suspicion that partition would in fact be discarded.²³¹ This is the background from which one must evaluate German reactions to Saudi approaches in this same period.

In November 1937 Shaykh Yusuf Yasin, Ibn Saud's private secretary, approached representatives of the Otto Wolff company to enquire if they would be able to supply the King with 15,000 rifles.²³² Ibn Saud had for quite some time been dissatisfied with the quality and quantity of arms supplied by Britain. It is not clear whether Ibn Saud considered weapons from Germany to be more easily achievable following the release of the partition plan, but that may very well have been the case.

It was not the Foreign Office which had prevented the sale of British arms to Saudi Arabia but the War Office and the Treasury.²³³ Considering the lengths which the Foreign Office was generally prepared to go in order to placate the Saudi Monarch, it is surprising that they were unable to convince the two departments to comply with this request. One likely answer is that the Foreign Office misread Ibn Saud's list of priorities and consequently failed to appreciate just how important Ibn Saud considered the supply of arms. Much more important, it seems, than the far more publicised Palestine issue.

Because Germany wanted to avoid any confrontation with Britain at this point, they treated Yusuf Yasin's appeal with great caution. After some deliberation the request was eventually turned down. German diplomat, Franz Grobba, told Yasin that Germany wished to remain on friendly terms with Britain and was therefore unable to supply the rifles.²³⁴ Further approaches were made by Saudi officials throughout 1938. The outcome was always more or less the same: A polite German rebuff. Germany did not wish to anger Britain unnecessarily and it did not want to furnish arms to a sovereign they might very well be at war with before long.²³⁵

Generally speaking, the Germans seem to have carried a deep mistrust towards Ibn Saud. Despite repeated promises by Saudi officials of their country's neutrality in the event of war, the Germans remained unconvinced. Berlin also raised the possibility that Ibn Saud desired closer relations with Germany so that he could play the British and the Italians off against each other.²³⁶ This

²³¹ Nicosia, Francis *The Third Reich and the Palestine Question* (London 1985), p.181.

²³² Hirsowicz, p. 47

²³³ Leatherdale, p. 301.

²³⁴ Nicosia, p. 181.

²³⁵ Michael Wolffsohn, "The German-Saudi Arabian Arms Deal of 1936 Reconsidered", Uriel Dann, ed., *The Great Powers in...*, p. 288.

²³⁶ Hirsowicz, p. 49.

seems to have been an excellent reading of the situation. Interesting to note is that the Germans even believed the Monarch's opposition to the formation of a Jewish state in Palestine to be insincere.²³⁷

The breakthrough in Saudi-German relations came in the early summer of 1939. Franz Grobba had finally managed to convince his superiors in Berlin that Ibn Saud's overtures were sincere. This change in official attitude was obviously also a result of Germany's lessened concerns regarding the British position - seeing that war with Britain would most likely ensue anyhow following the planned invasion of Poland.²³⁸

In July 1939 Ibn Saud's pro-German envoy, Khaled al-Qarqani, met Ribbentrop and Hitler in Berlin. For the first time all Saudi demands were met. Al-Qarqani was promised 8000 rifles, 8 million rounds of ammunition, and a credit of six million German Marks. The deal never materialized however. Before the arms could be shipped, Germany had invaded Poland. Britain's declaration of war and her subsequent imposition of a naval blockade made delivery impossible.²³⁹

When Britain declared war on Germany Ibn Saud all but suspended his newly-formed relations with Germany. Throughout the war the Monarch maintained a policy of benevolent neutrality towards the Allies.²⁴⁰ A closer look at Ibn Saud's political manoeuvring in the first half of 1939, however, reveals a highly proficient politician, largely uninhibited by his alleged bonds to Britain.

Britain did not believe Ibn Saud's policy was one of playing them off Germany and vice versa.²⁴¹ The sources reveal nonetheless that was exactly what the Monarch was doing. In secret meetings with Grobba in February 1939 the King spoke about their common "deadly enemy", the Jews. The question was, according to Ibn Saud, "a matter of survival" to both nations.²⁴² Grobba's reports on his talks with the King seem to suggest that he was beginning to trust Ibn Saud no less than his British opposites. "He feels himself to be encircled and oppressed by England ...he assumes a friendly attitude towards the British, but in the depths of his heart he hates them and complies with their desires only reluctantly."²⁴³ This did not tally well with the version Ibn Saud was feeding the British. In October 1937, during a meeting with the retired Political Agent, Colonel Harold Dickson, he described Germany as a ravenous wolf "flirting with me at the present moment, but I know they will wish to devour me later."²⁴⁴ During 1938 he repeatedly stressed in meetings with Reader Bullard that his interests and those of the British were identical. Obviously unaware of the nature of Ibn Saud's previous meetings with Grobba, Reader Bullard wrote on 24 October 1939:

²³⁷ Hirzowicz, p. 48

²³⁸ Nicosia, p. 188.

²³⁹ Watt, p. 158.

²⁴⁰ Kostiner, "Britain and the Challenge...", p. 140.

²⁴¹ Leatherdale, p. 306.

²⁴² Wolffsohn, p. 290.

²⁴³ Leatherdale, p. 303.

²⁴⁴ Kedourie, Elie, "Ibn Sa'ud on the Jews", *Islam in the...*, p. 72.

I found the King not at all inclined to sit on the fence, waiting to see how the war in Europe would go, but outspoken in his sympathy for the Allies...We need have no fear that Ibn Saud may become a centre for anti-British intrigue during the war...Ibn Saud showed no sign of wanting anything from His Majesty's Government. He is not of the blackmailing type, and he would probably admit that the defeat of Germany, whom he regards as a danger to Islam and to the East generally, will be a reward in itself for his benevolent neutrality. When talking about the course of the war ...Ibn Saud said with feeling: "When I heard that[a] battleship of yours had been sunk I felt as though one of my sons had been drowned." It would be possible to belittle this statement as diplomatic exaggeration, or perhaps as the remark of a man to whom a son more or less makes little difference, but I am sure that the utterance was genuine.²⁴⁵

It seems that Ibn Saud was no more "friend" of Britain than he was of Germany. However, he appears to have been convinced that in the long run his interests were best served by remaining within the British orbit. Consequently, the Monarch's German overtures should be regarded as political manoeuvring - aimed primarily at obtaining arms and securing satisfactory relations - rather than a contemplated attempt at forming an alliance.²⁴⁶

Ibn Saud's decision to adopt a benevolent neutrality towards Britain demonstrates excellent judgement. Indeed, one historian has argued that the King's understanding of the power of balance in the Middle East was far greater than any other Arab leader. In comparison, Iraq's decision to court Germany resulted in a 6 years of British occupation. The Mufti's decision to side with the Axis was possibly just as unfortunate as it contributed to the dispossession of the Palestine Arabs in the post-war years.²⁴⁷ Ibn Saud for his part seems to have taken into consideration Germany's weak position in the Middle East. From this he appears to have deduced that her ambitions in the region were at present limited - something which made a German intervention far less likely.²⁴⁸

Conclusion

While Partition was not officially abandoned until the release of the Woodhead report in November 1938, the Cabinet decision of 8 December 1937 to suspend partition until the new commission had re-examined the issue was arguably the most decisive moment. As it turned out, fear of Italian advances in Saudi Arabia was the first issue referred to by the Prime Minister during the Cabinet meeting:

²⁴⁵ Bullard, p. 276.

²⁴⁶ Kostiner, "Britain and the Challenge..." p.140.

²⁴⁷ Mattar, Phillip, "The Mufti of Jerusalem and the Politics of Palestine", Lustick, ed., *Arab-Israel Relations...*, pp. 239-240.

²⁴⁸ Watt, p. 160.

He [Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain] was conscious of the dangers which had presented themselves to the mind of the Foreign Secretary lest our policy in Palestine should present Italy with a further opportunity to make mischief by means of propaganda...This applied particularly in the case of Ibn Saud, whose attitude had been perfectly sound and straightforward. He did not wish that Ibn Saud should form a lower opinion of us than in the past.²⁴⁹

Looking at Chamberlain's comments regarding the importance of Ibn Saud it is impossible not to conclude that the Eastern Department had been able to pass upwards their way of thinking. Palestine was by this point largely a Pan-Arab issue and few within the system of government seem to have questioned this development.

It is not known at what time Ibn Saud realised that partition would not be carried through. What is certain is that it happened well before the release of the Woodhead report. According to the Colonial Office their colleagues in the Foreign Office was very much to blame for this. On 19 March 1938 First Secretary at the Colonial Office, Harold Downie, made following assessment:

It is deplorable that the Foreign Office and our representative [Reader Bullard] in Saudi Arabia should have encouraged or allowed Ibn Saud to obtain an entirely false impression of H.M.G's Palestine policy...It is clear...that Ibn Saud has been left with the impression that H.M.G. are not committed even in principle to Partition, and that the new Commission will hear evidence at large, not so much with regard to possible schemes of Partition, but with regard to alternative policies.²⁵⁰

Contrary to what the Foreign Office had been saying, however, this realisation on the King's part did little to change his general conduct. The officials seem not to have realised that it was useless to satisfy Ibn Saud by concessions over Palestine alone when his main grievances against Britain concerned lack of military and financial security, and with their refusal to concede to his territorial claims.²⁵¹

Despite his overtures towards Germany Ibn Saud made no anti-British before the war. Both Alan Trott and Colonel Harold Dickson had after individual meetings with the King predicted that he would indeed refrain from such action. The Eastern Department, with the support of Reader Bullard, had disagreed with their assessment. They maintained persistently that there was not sufficient evidence to draw such conclusions.²⁵² Bullard, once war had erupted and Ibn Saud had adopted a correct attitude, praised the Monarch's unwavering support and seems to have forgotten all about the gloomy reports he had written only a year earlier on the repercussions of a partition in Palestine. This seems to suggest that Bullard – like Rendel - was personally opposed to the partition proposal and was

²⁴⁹ "Palestine: Government Policy", CAB/23/90A, CP/46 (37), 8 December 1937.

²⁵⁰ Internal CO memo, CO/733/381/4, 19 March 1938.

²⁵¹ Sheffer, *Policy Making...*, p. 409.

²⁵² Leatherdale, p. 276.

only too happy to transmit the dire Saudi warnings with little if any unwillingness – even though he might have considered them to be somewhat exaggerated.

It is argued here that *had* the Saudi Monarch decided to ally himself with Germany it would not have been because of the Palestine issue, but because of what he considered Britain's neglect of Saudi security. Because of their own, inflated view of the Palestine matter the Foreign Office failed to separate the issues which were imperative for the Monarch from those which were at best secondary. Their failure to grasp Ibn Saud's apprehension over the Anglo-Italian agreement is very much a confirmation of this predisposition. Equally telling was their ill-informed decision not to provide the quantity and quality of arms requested by Ibn Saud. There can be little doubt as to the Foreign Office will to appease Ibn Saud. It seems, nonetheless, that they chose to do so over an issue which was not decisive to the Monarch's own security, thus leaving their policy largely ineffective.

Another question to consider is whether appeasing Ibn Saud, over *any* issue, really was a sound strategy. A different school of British Arabists had long cautioned against such an approach. According to them concessions and appeasement were regarded by a "predatory race" like the Arabs as a sign of weakness. In 1931, while serving as Intelligence Officer in the Arab Legion, John Bagot Glubb made the following evaluation of British dealings with Saudi Arabia:

There is no use imagining that we are dealing with a civilised government, apprehensive of public opinion, or restrained by moral considerations. We are dealing with a greedy, savage, and predatory people who regard war and rapine as the natural occupation of man..., who have learnt sufficient from us to know that we can be put off by specious talk of friendship while they simultaneously rob, abuse, insult, and despise us, and who will stop at no treachery...Bin Saud, for some inexplicable reason, we insist on treating like the USA.²⁵³

This assessment is somewhat belittled due to the obvious racial prejudice of the author. What is apparent, nonetheless, is that Glubb managed to grasp something of the Arab consciousness which eluded the officials in the Eastern Department years later. Despite the attention which he received and the heap of praise awarded him it, is obvious that the likes of Rendel and Bullard were unable to fully understand the Saudi Monarch. One historian maintains that the British failed to "attribute Ibn Saud's "friendship" to a *realpolitik* rooted in fear and suspicion."²⁵⁴ Weizmann seems to have reached much the same conclusion when he in 1937 wrote: "as an astute politician he [Ibn Saud] chooses his time for the exercise of gentle pressure on the Foreign Office and he unfortunately finds a sympathetic ear in some Foreign Office circles."²⁵⁵

²⁵³ Leatherdale, p. 322

²⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 326.

²⁵⁵ Litvinoff, p. 295.

On no issue, perhaps, were the British as credulous as over Palestine. Despite Ibn Saud's obvious ambiguity towards the Palestine Arabs, the sincerity of his pleas on their behalf was rarely questioned by British officials. Quite the opposite, his recurring "bouts of despair" were frequently alluded to. The following is taken from one of Reader Bullard's memos, addressed to none other than Anthony Eden:

For four months he [Ibn Saud] had not listened to the Jerusalem wireless: he had the news taken down and brought to him, but to listen with his own ears to the accounts of what was going on in Palestine was more than he could bear...he had decided, however, that he would listen to the inauguration of the Arabic broadcasts from London...What were his feelings when he heard the announcement that an Arab had been executed in Palestine! He felt as though the rope were round his own neck and could not refrain from tears, and the Arabs with him wept too...²⁵⁶

Bear in mind that this was a man not easily put off by violence. An acquaintance of Ibn Saud, the British Orientalist Courtenay Armstrong, once remarked about the Monarch: "Ibn Saud would never curse anyone. He might slap a man in the face, or cut off his hands, but he would not curse him."²⁵⁷ During Ibn Saud's campaigns in the 1920s execution by decapitation had been commonplace.²⁵⁸

In view of Ibn Saud's initial response to the partition proposal – one which focused solely on the gains of his rival Amir Abdullah – Reader Bullard's wholehearted approval of the Monarch's apparent grief seems somewhat odd. The tendency to accept Ibn Saud's explanations outright was very much the same in the Foreign Office. In the numerous pages devoted to Ibn Saud from late 1937 and onwards, little space was awarded to the King's personal ambitions in the region and how these might affect his political behaviour over Palestine. In contrast, the immense emotional strain placed on the Monarch because of the injustices in Palestine was referred to frequently. Their conduct must be ascribed in part to their overall goal, namely that of discarding the partition proposal. In the case of Saudi Arabia especially, it is nonetheless impossible to ignore the Ibn Saud factor. Indeed, the Eastern Department's persistent desires to placate the Monarch resulted in some dubious reasoning. Fully aware of the problems caused by the Iraq denunciation of partition in July, Rendel saw no reason why Britain should advise against a similar outburst from Ibn Saud. Quite the contrary:

I submit that we should give King Ibn Saud some sort of assurance to the effect that we will not take it ill if he makes known his views publicly...it would be asking too much of him, considering how loyal he has been in so many ways, to press him to keep his views to himself any longer. I...will entirely understand any action which he may feel compelled to take in order to protect his own position in the way of making known to the Arab world the fact that he disapproves of the plan of partition.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁶ Bullard to Eden E440, CO/733/381/4, 24 January 1938.

²⁵⁷ Thompson, Jerald L., *H. St. John Philby, Ibn Saud and Palestine*, (Amsterdam 1982), p. 53.

²⁵⁸ Sander, Nestor, *Ibn Saud: King by Conquest* (Portola 2001), p. 31.

²⁵⁹ Rendel memo, FO/371/20812/E4881, 18 August 1937.

Iraq

It must be remembered...that our position in Iraq is by no means too secure, and that Governments in that country have of late not been noted for their stability. Arab and Moslem feeling runs high...Were public opinion and religious fanaticism to be inflamed by some event or incident in Palestine, such as a serious encounter with an Arab band of Iraqi origin, or some serious clash with British forces in the process of the establishment of the Jewish State and the eventual eviction of its Arab inhabitants, the danger cannot be excluded of a wide movement against us.²⁶⁰

If responsible leaders now controlling the situation are actually faced with enforced partition, these influences will no longer count, and leaders will almost certainly yield to despair and will not only cease restraint, but will actively encourage extremist elements in opposing His Majesty's Government.²⁶¹

Anglo-Iraqi relations

When the British Mandate of Iraq was terminated in 1932, the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty signed two years earlier came into effect. The treaty ensured continued British military presence in the form of access to air bases at both Basra and at Al Habbaniyah as well as the right to move its troops freely across the country.²⁶² It also established that the two nations would co-operate closely over foreign policy. By such an arrangement the British were convinced that their strategic interests would be secured in the coming decades.

The treaty was a somewhat odd creation. In what can perhaps be described as an act of deception, Britain boasted of bringing the first non-European territory to independence. The reality was that the agreement only refashioned their previous relationship, retaining many patron-client features.²⁶³ But what initially appeared to the British as an excellent arrangement in many ways turned out to be the very opposite. The Iraqi state was not a well functioning unit. In simple terms, Britain had created a state but it had not been able to introduce either British governing principles or any real

²⁶⁰ Anthony Eden, CAB/24/273, CP/281 (37), 19 November 1937.

²⁶¹ Archibald Clark-Kerr, CAB/24/273, CP/281 (37), 18 November 1937.

²⁶² Clayton, p. 471.

²⁶³ Ibid, p. 472.

Iraqi national ideology.²⁶⁴ As early January 1934 an article in *The Times* tried to rationalize Britain's failures: "It is not fair to look at Iraq from the point of view of the British official who had hoped to set up lasting British standards of justice and efficiency...We must realize that we have to deal in Iraq with a country of retarded development and Oriental standards from which 12 years of British administration have by no means weaned it."²⁶⁵

One major problem was Iraq's heterogeneous makeup. From the outset the Shias and the Kurds - who together constituted the majority of the population - felt alienated. As a result they adopted an apprehensive attitude toward the Iraqi state.²⁶⁶ Indeed, the ruling elites were comprised predominantly of Sunni Arabs. Within the higher echelons of the officer corps the situation was very much the same.

Constituting approximately 20 percent of the total population in Iraq, the Sunni Arabs was always going to be a minority. For many of Iraq's key political and military leaders this was not a satisfactory situation. This frustration was further aggravated by their lacking sense of Iraqi national identity. The kinship felt to the predominately Sunni Arab population of Syria, Transjordan and Palestine was in many ways stronger than the affiliation to their Shia and Kurdish countrymen. In fact, for the most intransigent Arab nationalists the Iraqi state was only considered a transitional unit, a step toward the realisation of their ultimate national objective: a fully independent and united Arab confederation - made up of the Sunni dominated lands of the Fertile Crescent.²⁶⁷

Rather than a much anticipated sovereignty, Iraq was left with a continued British presence. The British, for a number of different reasons, were not favourably disposed towards Arab unity in the 1930s. In order not to oppose the movement openly - seeing how popular it was among Iraqi leaders - Britain officially declared that it would view sympathetically any steps taken by the Arabs themselves in order to further the cause of Arab unity.²⁶⁸ Their actions spoke in a different direction, however, and few if any Iraqis were convinced of their alleged support to the Arab cause.

Thus, for the Pan-Arabic minded Sunni elites the Anglo-Iraqi treaty was terrible disappointment, depriving them of any real independence and in effect suspending their dream of a united Arab nation indefinitely. This development augmented the anti-British sentiment of their Pan-Arabism.

²⁶⁴ Simon, Reeva Spector, *"Iraq Between the Two World War: The Militarist Origins of Tyranny"* (New York 1986), p. 5.

²⁶⁵ "Transition In Iraq: The Trend Of Nationalism, British Relations", 11 January 1934, *The Times Digital Archive*.

²⁶⁶ Eppel, Michael, *The Palestine Conflict in the history of Modern Iraq: the dynamics of involvement, 1928-1948* (London 1994), p. 2.

²⁶⁷ Khadduri, Majid, *Independent Iraq, 1932-1958* (London 1960), p. 307. At this time the Fertile Crescent comprised Palestine, Transjordan, Syria and Iraq.

²⁶⁸ Silverfarb, Daniel, *Britain's Informal Empire in the Middle East: A Case Study of Iraq* (Oxford 1986), p. 59.

The extreme dislike certain influential Sunnis displayed for their patron was also affected by their social background. The ruling elites of the major cities - Baghdad, Basra and Mosul - were originally composed of former Sharifians, ex-Ottoman Army Officers who had rebelled against their former masters and fought under King Faisal I during the First World War.²⁶⁹ Their brief alliance with Britain during the war did not remove in them a certain Ottoman thinking on national identity. They continued to stress the importance of authoritarian command and military discipline in the creation of an ordered society.²⁷⁰ Not only did these ex-officers abhor liberalism in general, but this particular variety had more or less been enforced on the Iraqi state. Even worse, it was basically a sham. Britain was the occupier, and thus used non-liberal methods to keep control. They tampered with elections, deported oppositional politicians, manipulated politics and encouraged reactionary elements.²⁷¹ This obvious hypocrisy induced in many an intense dislike for Britain and her alleged liberal ideas.

Indeed, a large part of the Iraqi officer corps was to be characterized by Pan-Arabic and anti-British thinking. What was to become even more damaging for Britain was that these officers commanded an army which was gradually growing more powerful.

In August 1933 General Bakr Sidqi and his troops massacred hundreds of Assyrian villagers. The Assyrians were - despite the small size of their community - presented in the Iraqi press as a threat to the national integrity of Iraq.²⁷² Consequently the onslaught was seen as a great victory for the Iraqi state. Moreover, it was a swipe at the "oppressors" as it crushed a community associated with service to Great Britain. Most importantly, perhaps, the trouncing of the Assyrians raised the Iraqi Army's status as saviours of the country.²⁷³ This in turn served to convince the public that the large resources devoted to the military was essential for the defence Iraqi state.

The Arab Rebellion in Palestine served to expose the incompatible positions of the British and the Iraqi military. But it also exposed a split among the Sunni elites when it came to Iraq's relationship to Britain. The urban politicians - in contrast to the officers - were far more constrained by the political realities. While wishing for greater independence they were painfully aware that British presence ensured Iraq's survival as a unified state despite its internal centrifugal tendencies. More importantly, it helped protect Iraq from the threat posed by neighbouring states Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.²⁷⁴ So, while certain politicians adopted a similarly anti-British rhetoric when expressing support for the Arab struggle in Palestine, their practical approach was bound to be different than that of the officers. The problem was, from a British perspective, that during the period in question the "reasonable" and

²⁶⁹ Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict...*, p. 3.

²⁷⁰ Tripp, Charles, *A History of Iraq*, (Cambridge 2000), p. 94.

²⁷¹ Simon, p. 169.

²⁷² The Assyrians were by many regarded as alien because of their Christian beliefs and their close links to Britain.

²⁷³ Tripp, p. 80.

²⁷⁴ Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict...*, p.5.

“moderate” politicians were losing ground to the politicised officers. Indeed, between 1937 and 1941 a climate developed where no Iraqi government could enter or leave office without the consent of the army leaders.²⁷⁵

The Palestine question in Iraq

In the late 1920s Iraqi Arab nationalists began paying attention to developments in Palestine. As in Egypt, the Western Wall disturbances of September 1929 were covered extensively in Iraqi newspapers. The British High Commissioner to Iraq, Gilbert Clayton, reported in the aftermath that the events had “no serious repercussions in Iraq” but “that the country at large has been profoundly stirred.” Also, while no spread of the disorders should be expected in Iraq, “Moslem sentiment...has undoubtedly been aroused.”²⁷⁶

Unlike Egypt, awareness of the Palestine issue seems never to have waned completely after the 1929 troubles subsided. That is not to say the interest was constant or all-encompassing throughout the first half of the 1930s: it increased markedly when divisive events took place in Palestine (such as the Islamic Conference in Jerusalem in 1931 and the Jaffa Riots in 1933) and, real comprehension of the issue was in the early 1930s confined largely to a small section of the Iraqi population, for the most part well-educated people of the middle-class.²⁷⁷ Nonetheless, in the wake of the loathed Iraqi-British treaty of 1930 a passionate debate arose in influential circles on Pan-Arabism. Among those who professed to Arab nationalism, Palestine was considered to be an important part of the future Arab federation. As Britain was gradually compelled to expose the iron hand of domination in order to secure a peaceful Mandate, interest in Palestine itself – and the wellbeing of the Arabs living there – was destined to be adopted by the Arab nationalists in Iraq. Moreover, while the segment dedicated to the Palestine issue was relatively small, its members made up a large part of Iraq’s administrative and educational services and of the press. These factions were to have a significant effect on the formation of national opinion.²⁷⁸

It became apparent by the mid 1930s that the Palestine issue was not going to be just *any* element in Iraqi Pan-Arab ideology, but rather one of its more important components. This development must be ascribed in large part to the emergence of Syrian and Palestinian activists in the Iraqi educational system. During the 1920s and early 1930s these individuals were instrumental in spreading their particular brand of Pan-Arab thought in Iraqi schools. This was no mere coincidence,

²⁷⁵ Tarbush, Mohammad, *The role of the military in politics: A case study of Iraq to 1941* (London 1982), p. 186.

²⁷⁶ “Policy in Iraq”, C.P. 239 (29), CO/730/151/5, September 1929.

²⁷⁷ Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict...*, pp. 20-24.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p. 24.

however, but rather an intended development. The “father” of the Iraqi educational system, Arab nationalist Sati 'al-Husri, had been actively recruiting the activists and placing them in influential positions. It was indeed their historical interoperation which was to dominate the history textbooks. This resulted in a curriculum which emphasised Pan-Arab political matters at the expense of Iraqi national concerns.²⁷⁹ One widely used history book - written by the prominent Palestinian Darwin al-Miqdadi- declared that Palestine was an indispensable part of the Arab territory. It went on to describe how the “unholy” alliance of Britain and Zion was set on establishing a Jewish national home in Palestine. This was going to be a difficult task however, for as book on ancient history proclaimed, it was “impossible for it [Palestine] to lose its Arabism as long as there are Arabs in the world.”²⁸⁰

Consequently, the strong link that was established between Pan-Arab ideology and the Palestine question must not be seen as an inevitable development. At this time - in what must be described as Pan-Arabism’s infancy - the movement was something of an empty shell. It was thus up to its various proponents to define its particular character. The Syrian and Palestinian activists operating in Iraq had a similar anti-imperialistic agenda: the liberation of Syria from France and Palestine from Great Britain. This undoubtedly influenced their brand of Pan-Arab ideology.

Time would show that many of the young Iraqis who were privileged enough to attend secondary schools in the first half of the 1930s were to make up the core of the anti-British protesters few years later. While this faction was to become the dominant force in Iraq by the end of the decade, it is important to note that there were other trends prevalent in the heterogeneous society. As early as 1934 Pan-Arab teaching had succeeded in offending large sections of the Iraqi populace. Shias and Kurds now objected strongly to the Pan-Arab nature of the secondary education. They spoke of the Palestinian and Syrian teachers as foreigners, and in several demonstrations they carried the slogan “Iraq for Iraqis”.²⁸¹

Prelude – the Palestine Arab Rebellion

Of all the Arab states, it was Iraq who witnessed the strongest reactions to the 1936 unrest in Palestine. One reason for this was the relative independence of the Iraqi state. Compared to Syria and Egypt, the Iraqi press and public were freer to express the general dismay caused by current events in Palestine.²⁸² Another, possibly more important reason, was the current political environment in the country. As seen, Pan-Arabism had been gaining ground since the late 1920s. The outbreak of

²⁷⁹ Simon, p. 88.

²⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 98.

²⁸¹ Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict* ..., p. 28.

²⁸² Porath, *In Search...*, p. 163.

violence in April 1936 corresponded perfectly with the worldview furthered in this ideology: the suppressed Arabs were finally rising up against the imperial oppressor. As elsewhere in the region, Britain's stature was also impaired by the Italian invasion of Ethiopia the previous year and by the ideological challenge brought about the emerging German state.

Throughout the summer emotions ran high. Soon the Iraqi Government realised the immense difficulties this situation was going to cause them. Both for reasons of internal policy and for the sake of their good relations with Britain, they did not want to be involved in any sort of anti-British agitation.²⁸³ But public pressure proved too great. While banning open meetings and demonstrations, they were forced to allow public mourning campaigns. The Government treated the press in a similar way. Newspapers whose anti-Semitic and anti-British content was considered too strident were closed down.²⁸⁴ Generally though, the press would continue to enjoy a relatively high degree of freedom. As a result, the unrest in Palestine quickly became a major issue in most newspapers. According to a Foreign Office memorandum from June 20 1936, circulated all the way up to Cabinet, "the calamities besetting the Arabs in Palestine were [in the press] placed solely upon the shoulders of the mandatory power."²⁸⁵

In June, the Palestine Defence Committee was set up in Iraq by two leading Palestinians with clear Pan-Arab leanings. Leaflets spreading extremely distorted news about the revolt in Palestine were an important component in the Committee's campaign. Although its activity in Iraq must be described as fairly successful, it was in this early phase limited in scope.²⁸⁶

While the Iraqi Government in June delivered a "friendly but serious warning" to the British Ambassador Archibald Clark-Kerr about the dangers of a pro-Zionist policy in Palestine, they were wary of undermining Anglo-Iraqi relations.²⁸⁷ More forceful opposition to Britain's Palestine policies was thus confined to politicians of the oppositional parties. Observing how public support for the Palestine Arabs were growing, and also how crippled the government was in dealing with the issue, the more independent politicians of the opposition were quick to take advantage of the of the current conditions. The government's situation was made even worse by the fact that the current ministry under Yasin al-Hashimi based part of its standing on Arab nationalists, many of whom were outspoken supporters of the Palestine Defence Committee.²⁸⁸

Needless to say, the Iraqi government wanted nothing more than an early solution to the unrest in Palestine. From August onwards Iraqi Foreign Minister, Nuri al-Sa'id, made attempts to mediate

²⁸³ Porath, *In Search...*, p. 164.

²⁸⁴ Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict ...*, p. 34.

²⁸⁵ Rose, "The Arab Rulers...", p. 215.

²⁸⁶ Porath, *In Search of...*, pp. 163-164

²⁸⁷ Klieman, p. 215.

²⁸⁸ Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict ...*, p. 35.

with the British on the behalf of the Palestinian Arabs. Reactions to this initiative in Iraqi newspapers are indicative of how dominant Pan-Arab ideology had become by 1936. Nuri's mission was hailed as "a big stride towards the cementing of Arab unity and the making of Palestine as an integral part of the system of Arab countries" and "as an act which has done away with the local character of Palestine and put upon it the international Arab stamp."²⁸⁹

Bringing an end to the Rebellion in order to quiet the domestic situation in Iraq was not the only motive guiding Nuri. If the Foreign Minister could contribute in restoring peace in Palestine it would award his government credit and prestige in Britain as well as inside Iraq.²⁹⁰ But at the back of his mind lurked even greater plans. Nuri had for years dreamt of establishing a Fertile Crescent Arab Federation, where Iraq, and indeed Nuri himself would play a leading role. An end to the troubles in Palestine brought about by his mediation would be a first step towards this ambitious goal.²⁹¹

The process of outside intervention also exposed inter-Arab rivalries. King Abdullah of Transjordan was convinced that Nuri's mediation was undertaken following a British initiative. He was fearful that a move to award Iraq a preferred status in Palestine was a confirmation of Britain's partiality of the Iraqi Hashemite wing over his own.²⁹²

Even more profound was the situation which arose vis-à-vis Saudi-Arabia. Ibn Saud had unsuccessfully attempted to mediate on behalf of the Palestinians in July. The fact that Nuri was now given the go-ahead aroused Ibn Saud's suspicion. It did not help the situation that the Iraqi Premier had remarked to Saudi Minister Hafiz Wahba that Ibn Saud's failure had been due to British mistrust.²⁹³ Ever since his conquest of Hejaz in 1924-25 - and with it the expulsion of the Hashemite Kings - mutual suspicion had existed between Ibn Saud and the Iraqi rulers. Consequently, the Saudi ruler strongly opposed any strengthening of the Iraqi Hashemites. An Arab federation created under Iraqi leadership would be nothing less than the materialization of such fears.²⁹⁴

After several failed attempts, the first phase of the Rebellion was brought to an end on 10 October 1936. Both Iraq and Saudi Arabia had been actively involved in the negotiations leading up to this agreement. For Britain, however, the decision to allow for outside mediation - one largely spurred on by the Foreign Office - turned out to be a costly affair. Ibn Saud, and even more so the Iraqi Government, were of the opinion that by their contribution they had acquired a permanent right to be

²⁸⁹ Taggar, Yehuda, "The Iraqi reaction to the partition plans for Palestine, 1937", Ben-Dor, Gabriel, ed., *The Palestinians and the Middle East conflict* (Israel 1978), p. 201.

²⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 207.

²⁹¹ Porath, Yehoshua, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion* (London 1977), p. 208.

²⁹² Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict ...*, p. 39

²⁹³ Porath, *The Palestinian Arab...*, p. 211

²⁹⁴ Silverfarb, p. 58

heard in Palestine matters.²⁹⁵ Britain had by their own decision in fact turned Palestine into a Pan-Arab issue, abandoning their tried and tested policy of treating the Mandate in isolation. Once this principle was discarded there would be virtually no turning back.²⁹⁶ While Britain refused to halt Jewish immigration – the Palestine leadership’s chief precondition for ending both the strike and the insurgence – few saw the agreement as a victory for Britain. The Cabinet continually rejected the War Office proposal of introducing martial law and terminating the uprising by the use of military force. Instead they chose to follow the recommendations put forth by the Foreign Office and the High Commissioner in Palestine, Arthur Wauchope. This was essentially a surrender to violence, achieving something which resembled an armistice more than a lasting peace.²⁹⁷ This was made further evident by the fact that Britain was precluded from disarming the rebels, leaving the insurgents fully organised and equipped when fighting recommenced in September 1937.

As for Iraq, the Pan-Arab sentiment which had prevailed throughout summer and autumn 1936 was not shared by every Iraqi. On 26 October the government was deposed by a military coup headed by General Bakr Sidqi. Most members of the new government, among them Prime Minister Hikmat Sulayman and Sidqi himself, were not active in Pan-Arab circles and had no links whatsoever to the Palestine Defence Committee.²⁹⁸ The new administration - comprised of Shiites, Kurds and Sunnis – was considered anathema to most Pan-Arabs. They saw in it everything which they despised: it was deemed separatist, anti-nationalist and anti-Arab.²⁹⁹

The Peel report

When the Peel report was released in July 1937, it encountered violent protest from the Iraqi government under the joint control of Prime Minister Hikmat Sulayman and Bakr Sidqi. Iraq was still a close ally of Britain and such an official attack on British policy was considered both surprising and out of line. Yet, the official British response was rather muted. The Times’ correspondent passed on the reactions of the Iraqi public:

²⁹⁵ Sheffer, *Policy Making...*, p. 369.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Leatherdale, p. 271.

²⁹⁸ Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict ...*, p. 32

²⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 26

some has gone so far as to argue that the Prime Minister of a country so dependent on British good will as Iraq would never have ventured to use such strong language if he had not been encouraged to do so by the Foreign Office, which for reasons of its own wishes to see the Royal Commission's dropped.³⁰⁰

A month later, the Times further elaborated on the Iraqi response to the Peel Report. The prime minister's "inappropriate" behaviour had to be seen in its proper context, something not lost on the paper's Special Correspondent:

the Arab Nationalists have distrusted the apparent pro-Turkish trend, both in sentiment and practice, that has recently seemed to mark the policy of the Baghdad Government. There is therefore material for surmise that Hikmet Sulayman welcomed the Palestine issue as affording an opportunity to "prove" to the Pan-Arabs his devotion to the Arab cause. An Arab Prime Minister in Baghdad would be under no such necessity; indeed, one of the complaints made by present Iraqi Ministers, when they took power after the coup d'Etat, was that the former Cabinet had been sacrificing Iraqi interests in chasing Pan-Arab will-o'-the-wisps...Until his views had been made known the partition proposal was received calmly enough in Baghdad. But as soon as the Prime Minister had declared himself protests came flooding in from the Press, professional associations, and from the Moslem religious leaders...If the Royal Commission had proposed that the Kingdom in Iraq should take over the Arab part of Palestine (including the outlet on the Mediterranean coast) Baghdad's reaction to the partition might have been very different.³⁰¹

This version is essentially consistent with the later historiography of the episode.³⁰² Not because of any particular brilliance on the Times correspondent's part, but because the circumstances surrounding Hikmat Sulayman's public denunciation of the Peel proposal were easily evident. Observers of the Iraqi political scene knew that Sulayman faced serious difficulties. Not only was he not of Arab origin, he had also previously been an outspoken opponent of the Pan-Arab idea. While the strong public opposition to the Peel proposal in Iraq put him in a further difficult position, it also awarded him a way out of the current political crisis. Sulayman seized the opportunity, and indeed tension was relieved - albeit only temporarily. British Ambassador to Iraq, Archibald Clark-Kerr, observed: "The press and public in Baghdad praise the Prime Minister's attitude and provinces have expressed their approval in the usual way by sending telegrams of support."³⁰³

Sulayman did not really wish to antagonize Britain. He was therefore quick to admit to the "falseness" of his recent appearance. In two separate meetings with Clark-Kerr Sulayman argued that

³⁰⁰ "The Future of Palestine", July 15 1937, *The Times Digital Archive*. Hikmat Sulayman was of Turkish decent. This was frequently made use of by his political opponents who sought to question his allegiance to the Iraqi state.

³⁰¹ "The Murders in Iraq", *The Times Digital Archive*, Saturday, August 14, 1937.

³⁰² See for example Michael Eppel's article "The Hikmat Sulayman-Bakir Sidqi government in Iraq, 1936-37, and the Palestine question", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 24:1, 25-41(1988) and Y. Porath's, *In Search ...*, pp.166-167.

³⁰³ Clark-Kerr to FO, FO/371/20808/E3965, 12 July 1937.

in order to survive politically he saw no other opportunity than to condemn the Peel proposition. Clark-Kerr wrote the following: “while he in no way wished to embarrass His Majesty’s Government his Government would be obliged to show that they fully shared popular feeling in this matter, for if they did not, everyone would be against them and they would not be able to control the situation.” Sulayman also believed that partition in the end could not be carried out: “without the consent of the League of Nations and that time would show that this consent would be withheld.”³⁰⁴

Not only was the Iraqi Premier trying to calm the situation through communication with the British Ambassador in Baghdad, similar efforts were made in Britain. On direct orders from Sulayman, the Iraqi Minister to London contacted the Foreign Office in order to arrange an appointment. In a meeting with George Rendel he stated that “his Government were obliged to take this line because of their public opinion, but admitted confidentially that he himself saw no alternative to partition.”³⁰⁵ While the last statement might just as well been the Minister’s personal opinion, there could be little doubt as to the Iraqi Government’s desire to remain within British orbit.

Sulayman’s opposition towards partition was undoubtedly also tied up with his own dynastical ambitions. Unsurprisingly, this issue was not announced in the Prime Minister’s public outburst. They were nonetheless familiar to the British as similar schemes had been vented previously by Sulayman himself. Intent on finding a lasting solution to the Palestine question the Prime Minister had conducted talks with the Foreign Office the previous February. Like Nuri Al-Sai’d before him the Iraqi Premier’s proposal involved setting up a loose federation of Iraq, Transjordan and Palestine, admittedly under the Iraqi Hashemite crown. “This would conjure the minority bogey and the Arabs would no longer worry if a million Jews came in.” Although the Foreign Office once more rejected the offer, regarding it as both impracticable and imaginary, the idea stuck with Sulayman.³⁰⁶

The implementation of Lord Peel’s recommendations would in fact have disposed of this scheme once and for all: a Jewish state would have made it very difficult to create a viable Arab federation encompassing the entire Fertile Crescent. The Jews, being awarded the coastal area of northern Palestine, would be in a position to block Iraqi oil and other exports that moved through Palestine on their way to Europe. The proposed handover of the remaining Arab part of Palestine to Iraq’s rival, King Abdullah of Transjordan, would effectively put an end to all hopes of such a federation.³⁰⁷

The circumstances surrounding Sulayman’s position arguably warranted a certain scepticism towards the Iraqi Government’s role in the Palestine issue. No such reservations seem to have affected the Eastern Department as they tacitly went on to accept both the Iraqi Premier’s objections to the

³⁰⁴ Clark-Kerr to FO, FO/371/20808, E3919, 10 July 1937

³⁰⁵ FO meeting with Iraqi Minister, FO/371/20809/E4150, 16 July 1937.

³⁰⁶ Porath, *In Search of ...*, p. 70.

³⁰⁷ Silverfarb, p. 61.

Partition proposal and his right to express them publically. The main reason for this passivity on the Eastern Department's part seems to be the perceived usefulness of Sulayman's renunciation. Their own campaign against partition was by now gaining momentum and Arab opposition - whatever its incentive - would undoubtedly strengthen their case. On 30 July Sulayman reiterated his objections to the Partition proposal in a communication put before the Permanent Mandates Commission at Geneva. The Eastern Department made the following comment on the Premier's statement:

it does not necessarily follow that the general effect of the communication has been entirely bad. For instance, some of the Geneva correspondents say that it has opened the eyes of the Mandates Commission, which has hitherto been apt to look at the problem from an exclusively Jewish point of view, to the fact that there is an Arab side to the question and to the difficulties which confront the Mandatory Power.³⁰⁸

Keep in mind that at this point Partition was official British policy. It was thus rather peculiar for an official to argue that new-found scepticism on the part of the Mandates Commission was a good thing.

The Iraqi military intervenes

Within the armed forces resentment of General Bakr Sidqi arose gradually. Sidqi's competing bloc, the so called *nationalists*, was afraid that the General might seek to establish a dictatorship.³⁰⁹ These officers also felt that Sidqi had neglected Pan-Arabism, an issue they believed should be paramount in any Iraqi government. On 11 August Sidqi was assassinated in Mosul. Despite having been totally dependent on Sidqi's faction, Hikmat Sulayman made an attempt to continue his rule without the General. This was to no avail. On 16 August Sulayman was forced to resign after strong pressure from the leading nationalist officers.

As regards Palestine, there seems to be no indication that the issue played much of a role in the downfall of the Sulayman-Sidqi government. If anything, Sulayman's strong condemnation of the partition proposal in July might have prolonged public support towards the increasingly unpopular administration.

Both Sulayman and Sidqi had from the outset been branded as anti-nationalist, separatist and anti-Pan-Arabist.³¹⁰ This, however, had little to do with their Palestine policy. It was their desire to establish links with Iran - and in particular with Turkey - which aroused such hostility among many Iraqis. The Iran-Iraq Frontier Treaty of July 1937, in particular, created suspicions among the Sunni

³⁰⁸ Rendel (FO), FO/371/20811/E4597, 6 August 1937.

³⁰⁹ Khadduri, p. 121. They were referred to as the nationalists. However, their nationalism was Arab not Iraqi.

³¹⁰ Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict* ..., p. 65.

elites. What Sulayman branded as an “Iraq first” policy, they considered an attack on their Sunni hegemony and a betrayal to Iraq’s Arab obligations.³¹¹

King Ghazi now called upon veteran politician Jamil al-Midfa’i to form a new government. The main reason for this decision was the support Midfa’i enjoyed among the officers presumed to be responsible for the murder of Bakr Sidqi – the so-called “Seven”.³¹² Fearing that this group might once again decide to meddle in political affairs, Midfa’i demanded that they pledged to abstain from any such activity.³¹³ This was agreed to. In return Midfa’i promised not to open an inquiry into the murder of Sidqi. He also appointed all of the Seven to prominent positions.³¹⁴

On 26 October 1937, a few weeks prior to the important Foreign Office memorandum on the regional repercussions of partition, the Eastern Department received a despatch from Sir Oswald Scott, Chargé d’Affaires at the Baghdad embassy. Scott had recently held a meeting with the upcoming Head of the Palestine Defence Committee, Naji al-Suwaydi, and wished to convey the apparent changes this made to Iraqi position. Scott wrote:

There is nothing of the fanatic in him and he is clearly most anxious to find a way out of the present deadlock without getting on bad terms with us. This morning he outlined a solution which appeared to be on the lines of cantonisation with a modified British mandate. He had obviously obtained the assent of the Prime Minister [Jamil al-Midfa’i].³¹⁵

While it was evident that the Pan-Arab movement was gaining further ground in Iraq - with the Palestine question acting as a unifying element - it should have been equally obvious to the Foreign Office that al-Midfa’i was essentially a moderate, British oriented politician. His decision to employ the overtly pro-British Tawfiq al-Suwaydi as Defence Minister conveyed his desire to tighten control over the pro-Palestinian activities in Iraq as well as preventing Pan-Arab quarters from damaging his country’s relation with Britain.³¹⁶

In fact Tawfiq’s similarly minded brother, Naji al-Suwaydi, had delivered the opening speech at the Bludan congress on Palestine the previous month.³¹⁷ The British Consul at Damascus, Gilbert MacKereth had written a very thorough report on that event which he had duly transmitted to the London office:

[Suwaydi’s speech]...was quite moderate and full of common sense: he said that the Arabs were at all times good friends and allies to the British Government and we should like that our friendship

³¹¹ Tripp, p. 91.

³¹² These were seven senior officials. This coalition was to dominate the Iraqi military in subsequent years.

³¹³ Tarbush, p. 150

³¹⁴ Ibid

³¹⁵ Scott to Rendel, FO/371/20818/E6291, 26 October 1937

³¹⁶ Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict ...*, p. 69.

³¹⁷ In September 1937 Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husseini arranged a Pan-Arab congress on Palestine in Bludan Syria.

continues. At present however on account of this unfortunate Zionist question we reached a bifurcating road. The British Govt. will have either to choose to back up the unjust demands of the Jews and thus lose the confidence and old friendship of the Arab race in general or to render justice and equity to the Arabs and thus strengthen their old friendships...we are now at the gate of a great war and hope that we shall be faithful allies of Britain as in the past.³¹⁸

The speech was clearly not made by a person wishing to oppose Britain. This becomes especially apparent when considering the composition of the audience. The congress assembled Pan-Arabists from all over the Middle East, many of whom held extremist positions. Suwaydi's speech stood out as probably the most moderate contribution made during the three-day assembly. MacKereth affirms that the speech was not well received, the Palestinian and Syrian delegations being especially dissatisfied. These delegates did increasingly come to dominate the congress with a "striking demonstration of Pan-Arabism" and an "exhibition of Anglophobia." It was according to the consul "only with growing difficulty the moderates led by Iraqian Naji al Suwaydi, were able to tone down the violent recommendations."

The Bludan congress turned out to be a rather unsuccessful affair. The main reason for this, it seems, was that delegates could not agree on a common policy towards Great Britain. The extremists proposed to give the British Government an ultimatum: it must renounce its previous decision to partition Palestine and withdraw the accompanying plan of deporting approximately 300,000 Palestine Arabs. Al Suwaydi, nonetheless, "objected by saying that we have always been friends and allies [of Britain] and we desire to reach to an equitable understanding and agreement."³¹⁹

Interesting to note is that the Colonial Office quickly perceived the positive effect the new government under al-Midfa'i was likely to have for Britain. Also taking into account the division witnessed at Bludan they concluded in October that the Arab world was not united in their denunciation of British policy in Palestine. They also argued that the failure to reach agreement at such a highly anticipated congress would have a positive effect inside Palestine itself their as many more Palestine Arabs would now inevitably acquiesce in partition.³²⁰

Mounting discontent with the Midfa'i Government

While the Foreign Office could to some extent be criticised for not acknowledging the positive development which the al-Midfa'i Government initially represented, their predictions on how the

³¹⁸ MacKereth to FO, FO/371/20814/E5515, September 15 1937.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Gabriel Sheffer, *Policy Making...*, p. 406.

Palestine issue might serve to increase anti-British sentiment - and thus serve to destabilize Iraq - did eventually prove to be sound judgements. Major Hawthorn of the War Office had in February 1938 pointed out that political disunity in Iraqi society – one largely drawn between Sunnis and Shias - did extend far into the military. His conclusion had been that no Iraqi Government could expect the wholehearted support of the armed forces.³²¹ Thus, if the Government did indeed wish to challenge Great Britain, it would be highly uncertain that the military would back it. The observation made by Hawthorn was at best only partially correct. What he failed to understand was that it was precisely the army and its leading officers who possessed truly Pan-Arab and anti-British sentiments.

Midfa'i had been forced into a complicated balancing act ever since his takeover in August 1937. His initial approach was one of "forgetting the past".³²² One element in this policy was to allow the return of politicians which had been expelled under the Sulayman government. This decision caused a lot of problems for Midfa'i as many of the restored exiles were actively opposed to his administration. The result was that Bagdad once again became the scene of intense political rivalry and intrigue.³²³ But it was Midfa'i's inability to keep the Seven out of politics which proved to be the most detrimental aspect. Despite promises in the opposite, the officers did eventually decide to intervene in political affairs. Frustration over the Midfa'i ministry's handling of the Palestine issue was according to the officers themselves a contributing factor for their decision to go back on previous guarantees.³²⁴

Within the Seven there were four officers known as the Golden Square. The most prominent of these - the ardent anti-imperialist Salah al-Din al-Sabbagh - was to take on a leading role in the overthrow of Midfa'i. The general was to remain at the forefront of Iraqi politics until he was forced to flee the country in 1941. Sabbagh is indeed a particularly intriguing character. His political views as they are expressed in his memoirs are valuable for understanding the singularities of the Iraqi brand of Arab nationalism.³²⁵ The following is Sabbagh's assessment of Great Britain's historic role in the Middle East:

There is no wolf so deadly to the Arabs, and no such sworn enemy of Islam as Great Britain; as for the Arabs, it carved up their body into ministates, parties, and tribes, for them to fight each other while [Britain] picks up the spoils.³²⁶

Sabbagh deplored Britain's continued presence in Iraq. He believed the country was actively obstructing the growth of the Iraqi armed forces. According to Sabbagh Britain did not wish to create

³²¹ Hawthorn (WO) to Etherington-Smith (FO), FO/371/21873/E788, February 9 1938.

³²² Khadduri, p. 127.

³²³ Tarbush, p. 151

³²⁴ Ibid, p. 154

³²⁵ The memoirs, entitled *Fursan al-Aruba fil Iraq (Knights of Arabism in Iraq)*, were released posthumously by Sabbagh's son in 1956. They are widely considered to offer excellent insight into Iraqi Pan-Arabism.

³²⁶ Bengio, Ofra, *Saddam's World: Political Discourse in Iraq* (London 2002), p. 121

an Arab army, but an Iraqi. This was to be controlled by Britain and intended for use mainly against internal opposition. The arms dispute (which remained largely unresolved under the Sulayman or the Midfa'i ministries) only served to reinforce Sabbagh's conviction.³²⁷ Sabbagh believed that Britain – having witnessed the strong opposition to the Peel plan in Iraq - would not rearm the Iraqi army because she feared that Iraq might intervene militarily in Palestine.³²⁸ Moreover, he maintained that Britain's favoritism of the Jews in Palestine was the definitive confirmation of their desire to keep the Arab world weak and divided.³²⁹

In Sabbagh's mind the historical struggle between Christianity and Islam had never ended. At present, it was the British imperialists who fought the Christian battle.³³⁰

The fall of the Midfa'i Government

In August 1938 fatwas were issued by leading Sunni and Shia clerics. These stated that all Arabs were bound to join their brothers' struggle in Palestine. The Government responded by refusing a public procession in support of the fatwas.³³¹ Not only that, but Midfa'i instructed the media to report that his government had actively prevented this demonstration from taking place.³³² This decision was clearly in line with his previous approach to the Palestine issue, namely that of countering public activity which might damage Anglo-Iraqi relations. This time, however, Midfa'i had miscalculated the situation. The Prime Minister seemed to have forgotten that he owed his own elevation to power to the army. Thus, if his policies ran fully counter to the wishes of the Seven, he was bound to come up against severe problems.³³³

The August decision greatly annoyed the Pan-Arab officers, but also the Iraqi public in general. This collective frustration led to a definite increase in pro-Palestinian activity. Under the support from oppositional elements, a series of attacks on Jews and bombings of Jewish clubs were instigated from August and onwards.³³⁴ Already at the end of the month Midfa'i confessed to Jewish

³²⁷ Hemphill, P.J., "The Formation of the Iraqi Army, 1921-33", in Kelidar, Abbas, ed., *The Integration of Modern Iraq* (London 1979), p. 96.

³²⁸ Simon, 128

³²⁹ Hemphill, p. 103.

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Tarbush, p. 262.

³³² Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict ...*, p. 78.

³³³ Khadduri, p. 131.

³³⁴ Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict ...*, p. 78.

Community Leader, Hakham Sasson, that he was powerless in restraining the Pan-Arab nationalist circles.³³⁵

Knowing that he had aroused the suspicion of the Seven, Midfa'i was forced to take certain steps. Instead of trying to placate them a second time around, he aimed instead to reduce their influence. On 30 October, the Premier instated Colonel Sabihb Najib as Defence Minister.³³⁶ Najib immediately set about to undercut the disgruntled officers. A part of this process involved elevating a counter-group known for their Iraqi nationalism.³³⁷ This process backfired badly however. On 24 December the Seven were informed that the Government was planning to place certain officers on the retired list. After a short meeting they decided that it was time to overthrow Midfa'i. The Premier was immediately informed of this decision. Midfa'i had no desire to see violence and thus decided to step down immediately.

According to Sabbagh's memoirs the Palestine issue were among the reasons why the Sevens decided to remove Midfa'i. He also mentioned the Government's failure to meet the army's demands for equipment - in effect a criticism of Midfa'i's total dependence on Britain for Iraqi security.³³⁸ The accuracy of Sabbagh's statements is obviously open to debate. They were committed to paper while he was in British detention awaiting the implementation of his death penalty. Sabbagh clearly had a desire to go down in history as renowned Pan-Arabist – a feat which he undeniably achieved. His vehement anti-British/pro-Palestinian stance undoubtedly contributed to such a reputation. Nonetheless, Al-Sabbagh's track record does clearly strengthen his claims. From the early 1930s he had been outspoken in his beliefs regarding the centrality of Palestine in Pan-Arab thought. Moreover, throughout the Arab revolt in Palestine Al-Sabbagh was personally involved in a gun smuggling operation to aid the rebels.³³⁹

The Foreign Office predictions of November 1937, that the Palestine question had in it the potential power to topple any Iraqi government, did prove at least partially correct. As in neighbouring countries the public outrage in Iraq towards Britain and its Palestine policy was formidable. This did not prove decisive in either Egypt or Saudi Arabia. Unlike those countries, however, Iraq boasted a largely independent, highly powerful officer corps. Influential segments of this corps possessed strong Pan-Arab as well as anti-British attitudes. Even more importantly, unlike the Iraqi politicians who were still tied to Britain these officers were not afraid to act on these beliefs and provoke their former patron. As the British Ambassador to Iraq put it in early 1940:

³³⁵ Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict ...*, 78.

³³⁶ Khadduri, p. 131.

³³⁷ Tarbush, p. 154.

³³⁸ Khadduri, p. 132.

³³⁹ Al-Marashi, Ibrahim & Salama, Sammy, *Iraq's Armed Forces: An Analytical History* (New York 2008), pp. 38-39.

In any debit and credit balance for Iraq...Arab sympathies for Palestinian rebels and agitators should certainly be given full weight on the debit side. The Army is the most important single factor. In most countries the Army is very nationalist here it is inclined to be extremist and Pan-Arab, and to resent our special position in Iraq and Palestine and elsewhere in Arab States.³⁴⁰

Palestine as a constant in Iraqi politics

While there is little doubt that British Palestine policy played a role in the chain of events leading up to the Midfa'i government's removal, the process reveals that its impact in Iraq was less and less responsive to British adjustments of that policy. Indeed, a closer study does raise the question if the current dismay was attached primarily to the partition proposal itself.

Although a decision to abandon partition looked likely from the early months of 1938 to those inside the decision-making process in Britain, those outside it were obliged to wait significantly longer for information in that direction. It is clear that Foreign Minister Tawfiq al-Suwaydi gathered that the British were intent to withdraw from the partition plan after a meeting he had with the Colonial Office in September 1938. Two months later, on November 9 1938, the Woodhead Commission's report made it officially clear that Britain had postponed partition indefinitely. The al-Midfa'i government immediately attempted to represent the change as having resulted from its own diplomatic activity, and highlighted this claim in addressing pro-Palestinian circles in Iraq.³⁴¹ The British embassy in Baghdad reported that the Woodhead statement "has for the moment quietened agitation concerning the future of that country [Palestine] and thereby strengthened the hand of the Government which appears at present to be maintaining its position."³⁴² This lull proved to be short-lived however. Within few weeks demonstrators again filled the streets, reiterating their previous Pan-Arab slogans and accusing the government of failing to assist the Arabs of Palestine. What this indicates is that the Palestine issue was in the process of becoming an established component in Iraqi domestic politics. While the release of the Woodhead report might have lessened the pressure somewhat, the protests and opposition carried on largely as before. This was precisely because the uncertainty over Palestine was used as a lever by the opposition. Their decision to increasingly employ this device from August 1937 and onwards effectively "overrode" any good news emerging from Palestine during the same period. So whilst the Iraqi Government had to all intents and purposes been awarded with a decision on Palestine which they had strived for since their inauguration in August the previous year, the

³⁴⁰ Basil Newton to FO, FO/371/24559/E495, January 18 1940.

³⁴¹ Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict* ..., p. 73.

³⁴² Peterson to FO, FO/371/21847/E7060, November 16 1938.

opposition and their supporting demonstrators continued to accuse the government of failing to assist the Palestinian Arabs and of co-operating with Great Britain.³⁴³

The problem was that the release of the Peel plan seems to have altered the political realities in the Middle East on a permanent basis. On one side it strengthened the Pan-Arab movement in every single country - developments that would only be sustained the following decade. At the same time it introduced a tool which politicians of all colours could employ - especially useful, it seems, for oppositional groups. Once this instrument had been brought into politics it was not in the interest of those who employed it to discard it easily. The effect of the Palestine issue as a device for rivalling groups was of course further increased by the fact that every Arab government (some more than others) were obliged to maintain a "proper" relationship with Great Britain. The case of the Midfa'i government serves as a prime example of the difficulties this caused the party in power. The release of the Woodhead report, which *clearly* stated that the implementation of the Peel Commission's recommendations was infeasible, was simply insufficient in shutting down this effective vehicle.

The Partition proposal's effect on Anglo-Iraqi relations

There can be little doubt that the proposed partitioning of Palestine played a definite role in Iraqi domestic politics during the period in question. It is also clear that it served to complicate relations between Iraq and Britain. However, did the Palestine issue have the potential to cause a complete breakdown of the Anglo-Iraqi alliance?

As in Egypt a departure from the British alliance would inevitably necessitate a rapprochement with another major power. In Egypt it was feared that Italy might fill that role, in Iraq concerns were directed at Germany. However, while it has been argued here that Britain's fear of an Egyptian-Italian alliance was overrated, others have argued that very opposite was the case with Iraqi-German relations. It does seem that Britain - at least until 1936 - did minimise the scope of German influence in Iraq and also failed to notice the growing Iraqi fascination with Nazism.³⁴⁴

In October 1936 the Foreign Office expressed unease over possible German incursions in Iraq. This was primarily tied to Bakr Sidqi who was suspected of having German sympathies. There seems to have been some truth to these assertions. According to the German envoy in Baghdad, Dr Fritz

³⁴³ Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict ...*, p. 79.

³⁴⁴ Lukitz, Liora, "Axioms Reconsidered: The Rethinking of British Strategic Policy in Iraq during the 1930s", Cohen and Kolinsky ed., *Britain and the Middle East in the 1930s: security problems, 1935-39* (London 1992), p. 117.

Grobba, Sidqi would repeatedly enquire about the prospects of purchasing arms from Germany.³⁴⁵ The Foreign Office conveyed unease over the outcome of such purchases: German instructors would soon follow and German influence in Iraq would increase.³⁴⁶ Despite fears that Sidqi and the military establishment might eventually turn its arms against the poorly defended British airbases at Basra and Habbaniyah, it was decided to adopt a more forthcoming position regarding Iraqi arms requests in order to prevent any further “Germanification”.³⁴⁷

Following the violent reactions to the Peel Commission’s report in July 1937, the Foreign Office reintroduced the German bogey. This time the fear was not connected with the delivery of arms but over the effects of policies in Palestine.

Looking at the many papers written by George Rendel in late 1937, it becomes apparent that both his interest in and his knowledge of Iraq was rather limited. He preferred instead of dealing with Saudi Arabia, and to a somewhat lesser extent, with Egypt. Given that his main argument against partition revolved around the detrimental effects such a policy would have on the whole region, he was nonetheless bound also to consider Iraq. On 3 November Rendel drew up a chain of events which he considered likely to ensue should partition be implemented. Regarding Iraq he predicted that anti-British sentiment would reach new heights:

A new massacre of Assyrians would be a not improbable consequence, and the trouble is likely to become very serious in the more fanatical districts of Syria and Iraq. This in turn could hardly fail to lead to an Anglo-Iraqi crisis, with difficulties over the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty, and the position of our Air Force in Iraq.³⁴⁸

A week earlier he had recorded that Britain were “by practically every measure we take in Palestine, playing straight into Italian and German hands.” Furthermore, it was inconceivable “that our rivals and enemies should not draw the maximum advantage from this unhappy situation.”³⁴⁹ Archibald Clark-Kerr, seemed to have held similar sentiments. In the crucial 19 November memorandum he argued that an enforced partition “would leave the field clear for unfriendly foreign activities, the effect of which might well be disastrous.”³⁵⁰

It appears as if the Foreign Office attitude towards Iraq found ready adherents among the military planners.³⁵¹ In a Cabinet meeting on 15 December 1937 regarding future defences, the Air

³⁴⁵ Tarbush, p. 143.

³⁴⁶ Silverfarb, p. 82.

³⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 81.

³⁴⁸ Rendel memorandum, FO/371/20819/E6483, 3 November 1937.

³⁴⁹ Rendel memorandum, FO/371/20818/E6317, 27 October 1937.

³⁵⁰ CAB/24/273, CP/281 (37), 19 November 1937.

³⁵¹ Military historian Lawrence Pratt concludes that there exists little or no evidence that “the Chiefs of Staff [the Air Staff constituted one third of this department] had concrete intelligence of any such prospect aside from the

Staff put forward memorandum of their own. This branch spoke with great authority on Iraqi matters owing to the importance of the British air bases in the country:

Events in Iraq...have of late given rise to some doubt whether the political stability of that country will be maintained and developed to the extent which is necessary for our Imperial interests...Moreover, the internal stability of both these States [the other being Egypt] is of the utmost importance to us, a matter over which we have now renounced the means of immediate and effective control, but which may, nevertheless, require active intervention on our part should any serious degree of deterioration occur. Furthermore, the situation in Palestine is far from satisfactory, and it is apparent that our relations with the Moslem world...contain the germs of possible future troubles.³⁵²

The Midfa'i Government did of course maintain proper conduct vis-à-vis Britain throughout the Munich crisis. It appears, nonetheless, that the event was damaging for the present ministry and for pro-British forces in general. For the sections in Iraqi society already predisposed towards Germany, her ruthless approach and subsequent success during the autumn of 1938 further augmented their admiration. Thus, it appears that after Munich the orientation of Iraq towards or away from Germany became a crucial dividing line in Iraqi politics.³⁵³ And even more importantly, the momentum was increasingly with Germany.

The deterioration of Anglo-Iraqi relations 1939-1941

While this thesis deals primarily with the 1937-38 period, the particular developments in Iraq warrants a brief look at the ensuing period.

Britain would eventually experience a complete fall-out with Iraq. This led ultimately to the short-lived war of May 1941. According to the Iraqi government of the time, this rupture was caused in part by dismay over Britain's Palestine policy.³⁵⁴ Consequently, it would appear that the most pessimistic Foreign Office predictions of November 1937 did eventually transpire almost four years after they were first presented.

Despite the fact that it was the Pan-Arab faction of the army which brought down the Midfa'i ministry, its successor was in many ways of similar make-up. Like Midfa'i before him, Nuri al-Said's pro-British persuasion did not prevent him from allying himself with the nationalist officers headed by

lurid and catastrophic evaluations that they had undoubtedly received from the Eastern Department of the Foreign Office and certain – not all – British diplomats in the region.” Pratt, “The Strategic Context...”, p.21.

³⁵²CAB/24/273, C.P 316 (37).

³⁵³, Longrigg, Stephen Hemsley, *Iraq, 1900 to 1950: A political, social and economic history* (Oxford 1953), p. 273.

³⁵⁴ Silverfarb, pp.114-115.

Salah al-Din al-Sabbagh.³⁵⁵ In due time, however, he would experience the very same problems as his predecessor. While Britain had anticipated that the White Paper of 1939 would finally satisfy Arab grievances over Palestine - and thus relieve the domestic situation for moderates like Nuri - this was not to be. Following the lead of the Mufti and his Higher Arab Committee, the Iraqi Pan-Arabists denounced the White Paper's recommendations outright. The political realities in Iraq were such that Nuri was bound to follow suit and publically condemn the paper - despite being a supporter of the recommendations himself.³⁵⁶

In accordance with a prearranged deal Nuri Pasha resigned as Prime Minister on 31 March 1940.³⁵⁷ Nuri apparently believed he could maintain control of Iraqi foreign policy from his new post as Foreign Minister. His assumption, however, proved to be erroneous.

Nuri's successor, Sunni Rashid Ali al-Gaylani, had a long history of opposition to the Anglo-Arab treaty of 1930. Furthermore, as a staunch Arab nationalist he held strong views on the Palestine issue. After he assumed power Anglo-Iraqi relations deteriorated fairly quickly. This development was closely related to the serious military setbacks suffered by Britain in the spring of 1940. As a result of these blows most of the Iraqi ruling elites were by mid 1940 convinced that Germany would emerge victorious in the war.

Rashid Ali repeatedly told the British that he was prepared to cooperate more willingly once their Palestine policy had been modified even further.³⁵⁸ These demands led to serious discussion in the British War Cabinet. Foreign Secretary Halifax, Colonial Secretary Lloyd and War Cabinet member Chamberlain were all in favour of ceding to the Iraqi demands. Prime Minister Churchill, however, was not. The ardent anti-appeaser stated that: "Iraq had done nothing to deserve special consideration from us, and would be far more likely to be impressed by military success."³⁵⁹ Churchill's view prevailed and no further concessions were given.

The Golden Square soon took full control of the Rashid Ali ministry. This time around the officers were prepared to challenge the Anglo-Iraqi treaty. Counting on German support should hostilities ensue, the Iraqis informed Britain that any further landing of imperial forces at Basra was dependent on prior approval.³⁶⁰

Britain had long been concerned about developments in Iraq. Rather than comply with the new Iraqi restrictions the British Ambassador to Iraq, Kinahan Cornwallis informed Rashid Ali that more British troops was soon to arrive at Basra. This was met with Iraqi intransigence. The government

³⁵⁵ Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict ...*, p. 86.

³⁵⁶ Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict ...*p. 89.

³⁵⁷ Silverfarb, p. 110.

³⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 114.

³⁵⁹ CAB/65/7/62, W.M. (40) 167, 15 June 1940. See also Eppel p. 97,

³⁶⁰ Kolinsky, p. 156-157.

ordered Iraqi troops to take up positions in the hills surrounding the Habbaniyya airfield. The Iraqis then informed Britain that all her air activity was to cease immediately and that any plane trying to take off would be shot down. Britain refused to comply and instead demanded the Iraqi forces encircling the air base withdrawn. When the Iraqis failed to act on these instructions, the British commander at Habbaniyya ordered his troops to attack on 2 May. War had erupted.³⁶¹

Three days later a major dispute arose within British ranks. The nature of this discussion was such that it is possible to see it as a continuation of the debate of 1937-38. This time, however, opposite attitudes prevailed.

To alleviate the British forces at Habbaniyya the Chiefs of Staff ordered an Iraqi relief force to be diverted from Palestine. This was labelled the Habforce. General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of Middle East Command, Archibald Wavell opposed this move. For one, he doubted that the Habforce would be strong enough to relieve Habbaniyya. Secondly, he feared the regional ramifications of open war with Iraq. In a letter to the war cabinet Wavell wrote that it was his “duty to warn you in the gravest possible terms...that I consider the prolongation of fighting in Iraq will seriously endanger the defence of Palestine and Egypt. The political repercussions will be incalculable...I therefore urge again most strongly that a settlement should be negotiated as early as possible.”³⁶² Wavell’s argument very much resembled that which the Eastern Department had fostered almost four years earlier. In 1941, however, the British prime minister was not an appeaser. Winston Churchill replied that he was “deeply disturbed at General Wavell’s attitude...He gives me the impression of being tired out.”³⁶³ To renewed protests from Wavell, the Prime Minister ordered British forces to march on Baghdad.

From a British perspective, the operation turned out to be very successful one. By the end of the month Iraq had surrendered. It seems highly likely that Churchill’s swift decision-making was crucial. German documents do reveal that Hitler had concrete plans for Iraq which he described as significant for the Middle East as a whole because of their effect on British communications and for her capacity to wage war in other theatres. British bombing of the airfields at Baghdad and Mosul effectively averted such developments as it prevented the German’s from establishing themselves in Iraq.³⁶⁴ Left on their own the Iraqi army was no match for the British forces.

It is important to note that the events of 1941 did arise following events which were more or less unforeseeable in 1937. In neighbouring Syria an anti-British regime had been installed following the collapse of France in 1940. Accompanied by serious British military setbacks in the spring of 1940 – and corresponding German success - this served to create conditions were the militant Arab

³⁶¹ Tripp, p. 105.

³⁶² Churchill, Winston, *The Second World War, Volume 3: The Grand Alliance* (London 1950), p. 228.

³⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 228.

³⁶⁴ Kolinsky, p. 162.

nationalists finally deemed it possible to form a viable government entirely opposed to the Anglo-Iraqi treaty.³⁶⁵

The key to understanding Iraq's increasing hostility towards Britain lies perhaps not so much in external factors such as Palestine, but in the Anglo-Iraqi relationship itself. What made Iraq different from Saudi-Arabia and Egypt was the depth and longevity of anti-British sentiment among influential groups, and interconnected with this a strong desire for genuine independence. Britain's efforts to solve the mess in Palestine certainly contributed to reinforce their preconceptions: Britain was an imperial power which sought to control the Arab World indefinitely, and their backing of the Zionist project in Palestine was a branch in the larger scheme of domination. But this was in one sense a "wanted" development as such an outlook on the world benefitted the forces which sought an absolute break with Britain. In that respect the Palestine issue can be seen not only as an important instrument in domestic politics but also one in the larger struggle for Iraqi independence.

The Foreign Office prophecies – the verdict

In contrast to their largely misconstrued predictions on Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the Foreign Office prophecies concerning Iraq seem to have materialized with the coup of 1941. However, when the total breakdown of Anglo-Iraqi relations occurred Britain had pursued the conciliating line to the limit. This does indeed suggest that whole idea of appeasement over Palestine was something of a dead end all along. It should have been pretty obvious from 1938 and onwards that it was always going to be Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husseini and his unyielding faction who would dominate the political arena. Their approach was one of constantly calling for further concessions regardless of the offers currently on the table. This was made perfectly evident when the Mufti denounced the 1939 White Paper and in effect denied every other Arab state the option of accepting it.³⁶⁶

By 1941, in fact, all of the main recommendations outlined by George Rendel in the second half of 1937 had been adopted: partition had been called off, Jewish immigration severely limited and serious restrictions on land sale to Jews had been imposed. These concessions had not put an end to the Palestine Rebellion (the revolt was suppressed in 1939 only through the extensive use of military force), not checked Iraqi criticism of British policy and it did not prevent Iraq from adopting a pro-German position when global developments finally allowed for this to happen.³⁶⁷ What thus becomes

³⁶⁵ Clayton, pp. 477-478.

³⁶⁶ Nuri apparently did everything he could to convince the Mufti of the White Paper's many virtues, but to no avail. Tripp, p. 100

³⁶⁷ Of the increasing demands put forward by Rashid Ali in 1940 regarding policy in Palestine, British historian David Silverfarb writes: "Possibly Rashid Ali was sincere in this matter, although more likely the fulfillment of

apparent is that by the late 1930s Britain's standing in Iraq was such that she was incapable of improving her reputation in Iraq simply through any adjustment of policy in Palestine.

this demand would have merely led to new demands designed to undermine British paramountcy in the Middle East.”, Silverfarb, p. 114

Transjordan

there are indications that trouble is brewing in Transjordan. The Amir Abdullah, partly by his ready acceptance of our partition policy, and partly by his ill-timed flirtation with the Turks at a moment when they were being particularly anti-Arab, has become regarded as a traitor to the Arab cause by the great majority of the Arabs. It may well be then that, when we begin enforcing our Palestine policy, or when the situation in Palestine enters on the next stage in its inevitable process of deterioration, a movement against the Amir Abdullah will develop. Ibn Saud, who has been told that we propose to relinquish our control over Transjordan may well be preparing to step in in such an emergency, if only with a view to protecting his northern flank.³⁶⁸

Having been thoroughly routed by Ibn Saud's Wahhabi forces in the battle at Turaba in 1919, and having received no encouragement from the British regarding the "vacant" Iraqi throne, Abdullah realised his options were fading quickly.³⁶⁹ As a result Abdullah decided to turn his attention to the rather uninviting area east of the Jordan River. Abdullah and his entourage set off from Medina on 26 September 1920. After a long journey which included a stay in Maan, Abdullah finally reached Amman on 2 March 1921. Here he set up a permanent camp. Abdullah soon declared to the British that he intended to raise an army in with the objective of invading Syria from the South.³⁷⁰

Ten days later, on 12 March, Britain convened a Middle East conference in Cairo. When the attention turned to the area east of the Jordan, Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill suggested Abdullah as the future ruler of that Kingdom. As Churchill had already promised the Iraqi throne to Abdullah's younger brother Faisal, not to mention that Abdullah himself was already situated in Amman, the Colonial Secretary considered this to be convenient solution for all the parties involved. Abdullah's qualities also seem to fit the bill. The ideal person, in the words of the illustrious T.E. Lawrence, was someone "who was not too powerful...who was not an inhabitant of Transjordan, but who relied on His Majesty's Government for the retention of his office."³⁷¹

³⁶⁸ Rendel memo, FO/371/20818/E6320, 27 October 1937.

³⁶⁹ Shlaim, Avi, *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdullah and the Zionist movement, and the partition of Palestine* (Oxford 1988), p. 26.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³⁷¹ Shlaim, p. 28. Lawrence served much of 1921 as an advisor to Winston Churchill on Arab affairs. During Churchill's negotiations with Abdullah in March, Lawrence acted as the go-between.

Despite certain misgivings by some conferees, it was decided to pursue this solution. Following a series of talks between Churchill and Abdullah in Jerusalem, Abdullah – on the condition that he renounced his declared intention of conquering Syria and recognized the legitimacy of the British Mandate - accepted the administration of Transjordan for a period of six months, with a personal grant of £5,000 per month.³⁷² Deemed highly unlikely at the time, but for Abdullah these six months were in fact to stretch into a lifetime.

After three troublesome years where Abdullah managed to get into heavy debt and attract the hostility of Major-General Peake Pasha – Commanding Officer of the newly constituted Arab Legion – relations with Britain reached a low point in August 1924. While Abdullah was away on his yearly pilgrimage, the British decided to frame an ultimatum. For Abdullah to return to Amman, it was demanded of him that he resolved the economic mess, that he allow for more British military inspection and control and that he abolished the department of tribal administration. On 14 August - the same day that the newly appointed Resident to Transjordan, Colonel Henry Cox, was suppose to deliver the ultimatum to Abdullah - Wahhabi raiders conducted a violent attack on villages south of Amman.³⁷³ Aeroplanes from the RAF intervened and bombed the Wahhabis into retreat. The incident was the perfect reminder that Abdullah was entirely dependent upon the British to retain his throne. The ultimatum was delivered as planned, and Abdullah – allegedly with tears in his eyes – had no option to accept the conditions.³⁷⁴

The event marked a new phase in Abdullah's relations with Britain. The policy now pursued by Cox was one of relegating Abdullah to the role of a decorative head of state - a person who reigned but did not rule.³⁷⁵ In this he largely succeeded. Contrary to Egypt, where Britain at least tried to give an illusion of an Anglo-Arab partnership, no such endeavour was deemed necessary in Transjordan.³⁷⁶ It was thus apparent for all to see that Abdullah's dynasty rested entirely upon British might and money. Were they to go away, his Kingdom would crumble.

Abdullah recognised the limitations of his rule as much as anyone. He did not have any particular liking for the British, but furnished with more pragmatism than the majority of

³⁷² Dann, Uriel, *Studies in the History of Transjordan, 1920-1949: The Making of a State* (Boulder 1984), p. 3, Shlaim, p. 28.

³⁷³ Mary Wilson, *King Abdullah, Britain and the making of Jordan* (Cambridge 1987), p. 84.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 84.

³⁷⁵ Dann, p. 7.

³⁷⁶ Shlaim, p. 38.

Arab leaders he accepted the current realities and tried to manipulate British rule rather than oppose it. While these traits made Abdullah fairly popular among the British, it did not sit equally well with Arabs in general. His blatant subservience to the British made him a pariah to the more nationalistically minded – a perpetual reminder of Britain’s continued hold on the region.

In 1928 Transjordan finally acquired an official agreement with Britain. While it gave Abdullah a recognised status in international law - as His Highness the Amir of Transjordan - its foremost purpose was once again to consolidate British control. The law basically stated that the Amir agreed to be guided on any issue which the British might wish to guide him. Also, due to fears that Syrian nationalists might seek to convert Transjordan into an anti-French bastion, no officials other than Transjordanians could be appointed without British consent.³⁷⁷

Transjordan and Palestine

Although their governments were different Transjordan and Palestine fell under the same mandate. The high commissioner for Palestine was at the same time the high commissioner for Transjordan. Their economies were also much intertwined: from 1927 they shared a common currency; the long border between them was more or less open allowing scores of seasonal workers from Transjordan to freely enter Palestine; likewise, the new Transjordanian bureaucracy was partially manned by educated Palestinians.³⁷⁸

Like in the rest of the region the Wailing Wall disturbances in 1929 aroused some compassion in Transjordan. Demonstrations were held in several towns and some tribes even threatened to cross the Jordan River in order to actively join the unrest. From a British perspective this was obviously unacceptable. Abdullah was thus given the task of checking all further manifestations in support of the Palestine Arabs. The Amir’s effort proved highly successful, so much so that Britain could move forces stationed in Transjordan to Palestine

³⁷⁷ Dann, p. 8.

³⁷⁸ Wilson, *King Abdullah...*, p. 103.

where they were needed to quell the unrest. Following this ordeal Britain decided to award Abdullah by giving him a private estate of lands.³⁷⁹

While his efforts to repress aspiring Arab nationalist sympathies in Transjordan hardly made him popular, Abdullah's ties with the Zionist movement were to become far more damaging to his reputation. In fact, no other aspect of his rule was to incite as much suspicion and anger from the region as Abdullah's flirtation with the Zionist leadership.³⁸⁰

Despite British warnings that leasing land to Jews was highly unwise, Abdullah decided to do just that. In January 1933 he signed what was supposed to be a secret agreement with members of the Jewish Agency granting them the right to lease large areas of mostly barren land in the Jordan Valley. It was not to remain a secret for long however. When made public it caused a storm of protest in the Palestine press.³⁸¹ Even inside Transjordan, where public censure of Abdullah was usually restrained, the agreement produced quite a bit of uproar.³⁸²

As for Abdullah's motives, they seem to have been twofold. Given that Abdullah was almost totally dependent upon British grants – funding which in any case never seemed sufficient - he was keen to find alternative sources of income. The second motive was far more grand. Despite promises to Britain in the opposite, Abdullah had never discarded his previous goal of uniting Greater Syria under his crown. Acquiring Palestine was seen as the first stage in such a scheme. Abdullah reasoned that by establishing good relations with the Zionists in Palestine he would then be able to bridge the gap between the two populations. This would put him in a situation where both the Zionists and the Palestine Arabs were more liable to accept him as the future ruler in a unified Palestine-Transjordan.³⁸³

In the spring of 1934 Abdullah was ready to publicly announce his designs. His emissary, Muhammed al-Unsi, was sent to Political Department of the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem where he put forward several suggestions. Apart from the unification itself al-Unsi proposed that: the Arabs would have to recognise the Mandate - including Jewish rights; the Prime Minister from each community would be at Abdullah's disposal and carry out their policy after consultation with the Amir; an agreement had to be reached between the Jews and

³⁷⁹ Wilson, *King Abdullah...*, p. 108.

³⁸⁰ Shlaim, p. 40.

³⁸¹ Ibid, p. 51

³⁸² Wilson, *King Abdullah...*, p. 110.

³⁸³ Porath, *The Palestine Arab...*, p. 73.

the Palestine themselves regarding Jewish immigration and land purchases. If that was not enough, Al-Unsi revealed the full dimension of Abdullah's strategy by adding that Syria might join the Kingdom at a later stage.³⁸⁴

While al-Unsi was in Jerusalem Abdullah himself met representatives from the two leading parties in Palestine (the Palestine Arab Party of the Husseinis and the National Defence Party of the Nashashibis) where he put forward his ideas - though hardly in the same blunt fashion as his emissary had done in Jerusalem. The outcome of these meetings is illustrative for how the Palestine issue was to play out in the coming years. Hajj Amin al-Husseini rejected the proposals outright. He insisted that the Mandate had to be dissolved, the Balfour Declaration proclaimed void and the Arab population be given full independence. Raghib Nashashibi on the other hand declared his full support to all of the Amir's proposals.³⁸⁵

Having shown restraint in their treatment of Abdullah following his ill-timed leasing agreement with the Zionist Agency in January 1933, the Husseini controlled newspaper *al Jami'ah al-Arabiyyah* now decided it was time to release all their venom upon Abdullah. The Amir was described as the "Jews' friend" and his Nashashibi allies as traitors.³⁸⁶ The cause of this fury was obvious: the question was no longer about Jewish immigration into Transjordan but Palestine's very future.

Following the Husseinis' bid to tarnish Abdullah's reputation the Nashashibis were forced to initiate some sort of counter campaign. This effort became apparent when Abdullah on his way to London in June 1934 passed through Palestine. The Nashshibi Party had arranged for enthusiastic crowds to greet the Amir as his procession entered the various Palestinian towns. Soon after it became obvious that the Abdullah-Nashashibi alliance had become a permanent affair. In connection with Italy's attack on Abyssinia in 1935 the two parties collaborated in an anti-Italian propaganda conceived by Britain. Then, at the end of 1935 Raghib Nashashibi went as far as to declare his support for Abdullah's Greater Syria scheme.³⁸⁷

As regards Arab nationalism, this remained during the first half of the 1930s a fairly low-key affair in Transjordan. The elites inside the country were not primarily of the literate

³⁸⁴ Porath, *The Palestine Arab...*, p. 73.

³⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 74.

³⁸⁶ Shlaim, p. 54.

³⁸⁷ Porath, *The Palestine Arab...*, p. 74.

type but tribal sheikhs. These elements - very much like in Saudi Arabia - stood outside the orbit of Arab nationalism.³⁸⁸ Also, since these elites were highly dependent upon their British patron any ideology which might be considered to be hostile to British presence in the Middle East was not a sound one to adopt.

There was nonetheless a political opposition in Transjordan, and this faction established in the early 1930s contacts with the Pan-Arab movement centred around Abdullah's Hashemite rivals. In the summer of 1933 King Faisal of Iraq visited Amman. Abdullah suspected that this had come about as a result of contacts with the Iraqi Monarch and Sharif Shakir – the Amir's former friend and comrade-in-arms. Following Abdullah's recent dealings with the Zionists the opposition in Transjordan – consisting mainly of members of the Istiqlal party – had been strengthened by a growing fear that the country was about to be thrown open to Jewish colonisation.³⁸⁹ As a result these elements sought a solution where Transjordan was to be united with Iraq under King Faisal.³⁹⁰

Throughout the summer of 1933 the situation in Amman became very intense. Both factions organised conventions and open meetings where they endorsed their own scheme and hurled abuse at the other party. Faisal's untimely death in September 1933 would however put an end to the political tensions inside Transjordan. Upon receiving news of his brother's demise Abdullah arranged for a reconciliation with the Istiqlal. As for an Iraqi lead Arab federation, Gilbert MacKereth noted in 1936 that "much hope of this died with the late King Faisal in 1933". But the same MacKereth now reported that "the Pan-Arab phoenix [was rising] again with an astonishing display of vigour".³⁹¹ This time the arena was Palestine.

The Palestine Rebellion

The Rebellion probably presented Abdullah with more opportunities than any other Arab leader. His relations with Britain were excellent and he was not caught up in internal unrest like Iraq. The stage was set for Abdullah to do what he had failed to do in 1934, that is, to

³⁸⁸ Alon, Yoav, *The Making of Jordan: Tribes, Colonialism and the Modern State* (London 2007), p. 6.

³⁸⁹ The *Hizb al-Istiqlal* was a Palestine based, nationalist party established in 1932. Its loyalty lay originally with Faisal, and its long-time goal a Greater Syria under his command. A branch of this party emerged in Transjordan and soon developed into the leading opposition group.

³⁹⁰ Wilson, *King Abdullah...*, p. 111.

³⁹¹ MacKereth to Foreign Office, FO/371/19980/ E3039, 15 May 1936.

enhance his own position in Palestine and in the region as a whole. This Abdullah hoped to accomplish by mediating peace between Britain and the Palestine Arabs.³⁹²

It must have been very satisfying for the Amir when the newly-founded Palestinian organisation - the Arab Higher Committee - elicited the Amir's active support. The AHC was made up of both the Husseini and the Nashashibi clans. While the Mufti was personally opposed to the request forwarded to Abdullah in April 1936, he was unable to prevent this course of action.³⁹³

As has been told already, several rounds of negotiations were held before the first wave of unrest was brought to an end in October 1936. As a whole, the process can be seen as one where Abdullah expanded his support base in Palestine and strengthened a legitimacy which of late had been waning. He had undoubtedly been the most "moderate" of the Arab leaders - asking the Palestine Arabs to compromise and play down their demands. But, he had also tried to extract concessions (most importantly a temporary suspension of Jewish immigration) from both the British and the Jews.³⁹⁴

It would be a mistake, however, to maintain that the negotiating process only brought benefits for Abdullah. Throughout the summer of 1936 the Husseini faction – mainly through intimidation and outright violence - acquired an ever more dominating role in the AHC. Then, in August Amin al-Husseini himself informed Abdullah that his services were no longer needed. Al-Husseini was quoted saying that "the Amir and the moderates are trying to end the strike without getting anything in return."³⁹⁵ To make matters even worse the Iraqi Foreign Minister Nuri al-Said was called in to replace him. When an agreement was reached in October Abdullah's name was included in the final document. Despite having had nothing to do with this part of the process Raghīb Nashashibi insisted that the Amir be credited.³⁹⁶

Compared to Egypt and Iraq, public manifestations in support of the Palestine Arabs remained fairly modest during the summer and autumn of 1936. British reports throughout these months in large part credited this to Abdullah and his determination to maintain peace inside the country. The same reports did nonetheless describe numerous instances of sabotage

³⁹² Wilson, *King Abdullah...*, p. 116.

³⁹³ Nevo, Joseph, *King Abdullah and Palestine: A Territorial Ambition* (New York 1996), pp. 31-32

³⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 33.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 32.

³⁹⁶ Wilson, *King Abdullah...*, p. 119.

related to the Rebellion in Palestine. British owned oil-pipelines were destroyed and government buildings vandalised.³⁹⁷

While Arab nationalist thought was not particularly widespread or well-developed in Transjordan, Palestine was all the same its closest neighbour. The population of Transjordan was thus bound to feel compassion with the Palestine Arab populations' plight, regardless of their feelings towards the more extreme demands of the Husseinis.

In June 1936 John Bagot Glubb, from his position in Amman, focused on the distinct nature of the Transjordanian public to explain the relative peace in the country. Glubb maintained that the majority of Transjordan's 350,000 population lacked any serious anti-Hashemite or anti-British sentiment. "Just as in Palestine every Arab thinks he has a grievance...in Transjordan, the ordinary Arab has no grievance at all."³⁹⁸ Glubb's superior, Resident Harold Fox had a slightly different take on the matter: "peace reigns because it has an Arab Amir and Government and no Jewish problem."³⁹⁹

The Peel Report

While several of the Eastern Department's gloomy reports predicted armed uprising in Transjordan following a partition of Palestine, the country was never a centre of attention when threats to Britain were assessed. For a number of reasons, however, Transjordan and its ruler were to play an important role in the process which led to the partition proposal's demise.

The Peel Commission's report recommended that the proposed Arab section of Palestine be incorporated into Transjordan. Although not spelled out directly in the final draft, it was assumed by all that Amir Abdullah was to become ruler of the new Kingdom. It is difficult to exaggerate the level of dismay this decision caused throughout the Arab world - especially so among the Arab leaders. To them, the elevation of Abdullah was almost more

³⁹⁷ The monthly "Transjordan Political Report" gave details of such activity throughout the summer of 1936. These are found in the FO/371/20019 series.

³⁹⁸ Morris, Benny, *The Road to Jerusalem: Glubb Pasha, Palestine and the Jews* (London 2002), p. 37.

³⁹⁹ CO to FO, FO/371/20019/E4201, 6 July 1936.

intolerable than the setting up of the Jewish state itself.⁴⁰⁰ Intentionally or not, by this decision the British had awarded themselves with yet another major obstacle on the already difficult path towards the partitioning of Palestine.

When reviewing the Peel report one week before its publication, George Rendel (who at this point had not yet adopted his vehement resistance to the principle of partition) jotted down a number of objections. Regarding Abdullah especially, he made the following assessment:

the proposal that the new Arab state should be incorporated in Transjordan, while no doubt sound in principle, is open to the somewhat accidental objection that this will presumably mean that it will come under the rule of the Amir Abdullah, who is regarded by most of the Arab world as very doubtfully loyal to the Arab cause...The Amir Abdullah, though possessing many virtues, is politically short sighted, and a good deal given to petty intrigue. It may be then that to hand over large areas of Palestine to a new state under his rule will lead to difficulties of a new type between Transjordan on the one hand and other Arab states, such as Syria and Saudi Arabia, on the other. This aspect of the problem will need careful consideration, and may make it desirable to impose severe conditions on the on the Amir Abdullah before the Arab areas are definitely handed over to him.⁴⁰¹

This evaluation not only made a lot of sense, but much of it was fairly obvious. Consequently, Rendel was not the only official expressing qualms over Abdullah's projected role. The blatantly "partitionist", William Ormsby-Gore, seems to have been equally unconvinced of the decision to elevate the Amir. Indeed, this aspect was especially problematic as the report did not go into details as to why the commission had decided to recommend a unification of Transjordan and Arab Palestine. What is more, promotion of Abdullah was not supported by *any* influential British official. Nor was it part of the commission's original intentions.⁴⁰² As a result of these concerns Ormsby-Gore requested leading member of the Commission and professor of Colonial History at Oxford, Reginald Coupland, to clarify this issue. Coupland's response was subsequently appended in a paper Ormsby-Gore presented to Cabinet on 25 June 1937.

Lord Peel and his colleagues considered the unification an act of justice. They regarded the decision to cut off Transjordan from the Palestine state in 1921-22 to be a mistake, and consequently saw in their work an opportunity to amend this. Furthermore, the

⁴⁰⁰ Caplan, Neil, *Futile Diplomacy Vol. II: Arab-Zionist Negotiations and the End of the Mandate* (London 1986), p. 63.

⁴⁰¹ Rendel memo, FO/371/20807/E3427, 23 June 1937.

⁴⁰² Shlaim, p. 58.

proposed Arab State would on its own be very small. In contrast, a merger with Transjordan would make for a viable unit. Also, the entry of educated Palestinian Arab officials would help to counter the “desperately backward” features of Transjordanian society.

These were on the whole reasonable arguments, but they formed only a part of the dilemma. Concerning Abdullah especially, the commission seemed to believe that he would be able to attract the moderates in Palestine and thus counteract the more extremist elements. “the Nashashibi and all those Arabs who desire a quiet life (though under present conditions they dare not openly oppose the Extremists) are probably on Abdullah’s side at heart.”⁴⁰³ This was simply a dreadful reading of the current situation. To begin with, the promotion of Abdullah gave the Mufti of Jerusalem and his radical following an additional cause to oppose partition. Secondly, this section was contrary to the commission’s belief considerably more powerful than their moderate rivals.

Arguably, the most crucial aspect of their decision was the effect an Abdullah led Palestine-Transjordan unit under would have for inter-Arab rivalries. This aspect, in fact, was discussed neither in the final report nor in Coupland’s complementary letter. To the Amir’s life-long adversary Ibn Saud and to his Hashemite rivals in Iraq, it was simply unacceptable that Britain intended to enlarge Abdullah’s Kingdom.

Beginning in March 1937 more specific rumours began leaking from the Royal Commission. The word was that Amir Abdullah was to receive the proposed Arab areas following partition. Many Zionists quietly welcomed such an outcome.⁴⁰⁴ The same thing could not be said of the Arab leaders.

The reaction of the Mufti serves to illustrate the scale of the Arab resentment. The Turkish consul in Jerusalem reported to the Zionists that he was so hostile to partition that he might be prepared to make a deal with them.⁴⁰⁵ Although nothing came out of this incident, it should anyhow have demonstrated to the British that setting up Abdullah as King over the new Arab state would dramatically increase the difficulties of implementing partition. Indeed, when the Commission’s report was finally released in July the reactions to Abdullah’s proposed gains were spontaneous and violent. More importantly, they had an instant, detrimental effect on the Amir’s standing in the region.

⁴⁰³ Memorandum by the Colonial Secretary, FO/371/20807/E3531, 25 June 1937.

⁴⁰⁴ Shlaim, p.62.

⁴⁰⁵ Caplan, p. 63.

Raghib al-Nashashibi, leader of the moderate National Defence Party and the Mufti's main political rival, had upon hearing the preceding rumours come to the conclusion that Abdullah's leadership might offer his party considerable advantages. They would replace the then ousted Husseini clan as leaders of the indigenous Arab community, and they would be awarded key positions in the new administration.⁴⁰⁶

Shortly before the release of the Peel report Abdullah urged the Nashashibi party to initiate a campaign against the Mufti faction. They acted upon this request and withdrew from the AHC only two days before the report was released. This was widely interpreted as a support for partition. The problem was that there existed no unity within the Nashashibi organisation. The leadership also seemed to lack resolve. Upon witnessing the almost universal denunciation of the report doubt crept into the party. Two weeks after its release they saw no other way than to revoke their previous support for partition and return to the Arab fold.⁴⁰⁷

Inside the Zionist camp the shortcomings of the Nashashibi clan were well known. Moshe Shertok, then head of the political section of the Jewish Agency, had for some time warned his associates of the dangers which lay ahead should they choose to cooperate with the Nashashibis. Shertok regarded the National Defence Party as unreliable, of an unstable make-up and inclined to modify its position according to popular opinion.⁴⁰⁸ It thus seems as though Abdullah may have made much the same mistake as the Peel Commission, that is overlooked the Nashashibis' volatility and miscalculated their standing within Palestine society.

Within weeks of the Peel reports release Abdullah found himself all alone. Several assassination plots against him emanating from both Syria and Palestine were averted. Even among his own followers they were those who were opposed to partition. Rumours suggested that the most intransigent were in fact prepared to act against him should Ibn Saud agree to invade Transjordan. So strong was Abdullah's sense of isolation that he sent his close confidant Muhammad al-Unsi to Jerusalem to ensure that the Jewish Agency was not about to desert him in favour of more popular Arab leaders.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁶ Nevo, p. 36.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ Shlaim, p.61.

⁴⁰⁹ Wilson, *King Abdullah...*, p. 124.

Abdullah and the Arab world

Part of the Iraqi outburst against partition had been targeted directly at Abdullah. Despite being told by the British that he should not rush to publicly announce his support for partition as it would leave him open for criticism, Abdullah had made several statements in this direction. The Amir thus earned himself the dubious honour of being the only Arab leader to have come out in support of partition. Iraqi Prime Minister Hikmat Sulayman expressed in his opening contact with the British, that “by his acceptance of the partition scheme, Abdullah had brought himself in contempt.”⁴¹⁰ Sulayman’s denunciation set the standard for what was later to be printed by the Iraqi press. The *London Times*’ correspondent had the following to say, “The Amir Abdullah, who stands to gain most from the partition of Palestine, has been treated so roughly by the Iraqi Press as to suggest that the Pan-Arabs or the Court had hoped that Great Britain would obligingly hand over the proposed Arab State in Palestine to the Government of Baghdad.”⁴¹¹

Once again it must be emphasized that there were other issues at play. The Iraqi Government had its particular reasons to come out strongly against Abdullah. The Bakr Sidqi coup of October 1936 had brought about the loss of power for Abdullah’s nephew Ghazi, King of Iraq. As a result, Abdullah had initiated his own private campaign to secure the Monarch’s continued influence. His tactless attempts to interfere in Iraqi politics, however, had left even Ghazi annoyed.⁴¹²

The Iraqi Government was furious. They repeatedly tried to get Britain to curb Abdullah’s indiscrete meddling, but with little success. Thus, when Abdullah flagged his support for partition it awarded the Iraqi Government with the perfect opportunity to discredit him and to counteract the potential effect of his intrigues.⁴¹³

The underlying reason for Ghazi’s aversion towards the Amir was linked to Hashemite rivalry. When Abdullah’s brother, King Faisal of Iraq, passed away in 1933 Abdullah was convinced that he was going to be the bearer of the Hashemite claim to the Syrian throne and leader of the Arab unity movement. As a result, he adopted a paternalistic attitude towards

⁴¹⁰ Sulayman to Clark Kerr, CO/733/352/5, 10 July 1937.

⁴¹¹, “Pan-Arabism: Iraq, Syria, And Lebanon, After The Bludan Conference”, 20 October 1937, *The Times Digital Archive*.

⁴¹² Wilson, *King Abdullah...*, p. 124.

⁴¹³ Wilson, *King Abdullah...*, p. 124.

Faisal's heir, Ghazi. Ghazi however, was not to be intimidated. His father had been - despite certain treaty obligations to Britain - an independent head of state. In contrast, Abdullah was totally reliant upon British guidance and subsidies and thus incapable of pursuing an independent policy.⁴¹⁴ Under no circumstances would King Ghazi accept that this "British client" be head of the Hashemite dynasty.

These issues were in fact crucial to how Abdullah was perceived not only in Iraq, but throughout much of the Arab world. The way the Amir had risen to power, indeed the very creation of the Transjordanian state, implied the non-fulfilment of the Great Arab Revolt's vision of an Arab Kingdom. Abdullah wished to present himself as the Arab champion of the desert set on liberating Damascus and restoring Arab glory. The reality was somewhat different. By 1937 he was still a puppet ruler by British grace in a remote artificial principality.⁴¹⁵

British reactions

Ormsby-Gore immediately realised the damage Sulayman's attack had inflicted on the partition campaign. His denunciation "heartened the Mufti and the irreconcilable elements long opposed to Britain in Palestine, and depressed Abdullah and the friends and moderate elements favourable to us in Palestine"⁴¹⁶ This was all perfectly true, but should not the Colonial Secretary have foreseen that this was by far the most likely outcome considering the Arabs well-known antipathy towards the Amir? Like most British officials Ormsby-Gore would probably preferred a solution where the Mufti would preside over the proposed Arab State. Al-Husseini's increasing intransigence towards Britain - and towards partition in particular - effectively ruled out any such solution.⁴¹⁷

The difficulties associated with elevating Abdullah was not foreseen by the specialists only. In the Common's debate on the partition proposal held on 20 July 1937, Scottish Labour politician Cambell Stephen made the following observation:

⁴¹⁴ Porath, *In Search...*, pp. 24-25.

⁴¹⁵ Gelber, Yoav, *Jewish-Transjordanian relations, 1921-48* (London 1997), p. 3.

⁴¹⁶ Porath, *The Palestinian Arab...*, p. 231.

⁴¹⁷ Shlaim, p. 59.

I can quite well understand that the Arabs in Palestine do not want to have anything to do with the Emir Abdulla and his rule, because there are only 300,000 people in a territory three and a-half times the size of Palestine, and there has been no development of it under the Emir Abdulla. They will go to the most backward ruler in the whole of that vast country, and it is to be said that, as a reward for his misgovernment of Transjordan, that part of Palestine is to be added to his domains. I cannot understand what the members of the Royal Commission were thinking about when they made that suggestion.⁴¹⁸

Abdullah's options

While there can be little doubt as to British short-sightedness regarding their decision to elevate Abdullah, it is tempting to put some blame on the Amir himself. Arguably more aware of Arab sentiment than any British official, should he not have predicted the trouble that would ensue from his support of partition?

It seems as though Abdullah throughout his reign was preoccupied above all with one concern: the territorial expansion of the Transjordanian state. Former Resident to Transjordan and close friend of Abdullah, Sir Alec Kirkbride, said of the Amir some thirty years later that he was “a born land grabber”.⁴¹⁹

Regarding Palestine especially, one leading historian on Abdullah maintains that up until 1937 this area had little place in his territorial ambitions. However, when the Peel Plan proposed that he was to rule over the new, enlarged Transjordan, “Abdullah jumped at the chance.”⁴²⁰ It is difficult to disagree with this assessment, but it misses an important aspect. Did in fact Abdullah have any real alternatives when the proposal was put forth? Taking into account Abdullah's strong dependency on Britain, it seems as though they were at best very limited. As regards Abdullah's own reputation, it is tempting to conclude that he was prepared to sacrifice this in order to enlarge his Kingdom. There was not really too much to sacrifice anyway. The Amir's standing, keep in mind, was seriously tarnished by years of British affiliation.

⁴¹⁸ House of Commons debate on Palestine 21 July 1937, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/>.

⁴¹⁹ Shlaim, p. 221.

⁴²⁰ Wilson, Mary, “King Abdullah and Palestine”, *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1987), pp. 37-41.

Misgivings over Britain's determination to implement partition did nevertheless arise early. In August Abdullah's emissary Mohammed al-Unsi met with Jewish representatives. Al-Unsi expressed that his master doubted Britain's sincerity. This wariness was based on several issues. The British Government had shown ambiguity during the Parliamentary debates, and again before the League of Nation's Permanent Mandates Commission. Like many, Abdullah was also concerned over the circumstances surrounding Iraq's denunciation. "The Amir believes that Hikmat Sulayman would not have dared to act in this way if the British had not allowed him to do so." Finally, the Government in Palestine was not applying any measures to curb the freedom of action of the opponents of partition.⁴²¹ These were indeed sound judgements. But while there might have been a an ever so slight possibility for Abdullah to have turned down Britain's offer in July, there was at this point no way the Amir could break with the British. Just as Abdullah had become a serious liability for the British section in pursuit of partition, so had Britain more than ever before become a burden for Abdullah.

If Abdullah did indeed make crucial miscalculations, it seems that the most detrimental were over British conduct rather than over the damage his support would cause him throughout the region. By early 1938 Abdullah had come to realize that Britain was probably not set on imposing its policy. Because of the Amir's apparent misgivings the High Commissioner to Palestine, Lord Wauchope, had tried in January to assure Abdullah of Britain's commitment to the Peel Commission's report. This was apparently to no avail. In a meeting with representatives of the Jewish Agency a few days later, the Amir made it perfectly clear that he no longer had any confidence in the British to stand by their previous commitments. He rightly regarded the Cabinet's decision to appoint a technical committee the previous December as a "considered and contemplated withdrawal". Abdullah emphasised that he for the duration of the Arab uprising had stood firmly behind the British. Now, while paying the price for this absolute support, the British showed no inclination to come to his aid. Abdullah could in fact reach no other conclusion that only the obstinate and violent Arabs had succeeded in extracting their demands from the English.⁴²²

When partition was officially abandoned in November 1938, Abdullah immediately conveyed to the British that he expected compensation for his unfaltering support in the partition scheme, and for his success in keeping the internal opposition quiet throughout the

⁴²¹ Gelber, p. 118.

⁴²² Gelber. p.129.

affair. Without much delay, London awarded Abdullah with a non-recurring grant of £1,500. In addition, the Amir's chief minister, Tawfiq Abu'l-Huda, was invited to the round-table conference on Palestine ahead of the other Arab delegates in order to discuss Transjordan's status.⁴²³ It is difficult to interpret the British response as anything other than an acknowledgment of the difficulties caused by their wavering over partition.

The Foreign Office and Abdullah...and Ibn Saud

By first dragging Abdullah into the Partition affair, only to depart from the scheme six months later, it seems rather obvious that Abdullah became an unintended victim of British vacillation. Indeed, when the Foreign Office initiated their campaign to overturn partition in order to appease the "prominent" Arab states Abdullah's fate was not really a concern of theirs. It is thus illuminating to observe how the Foreign Office perceived the Transjordanian ruler and how they rationalized when advocating policies clearly detrimental to his position.

September through October 1937 saw a delicate affair involving both Saudi Arabia and Transjordan. Major John Glubb, then commander of the British Legion's Desert Patrol, had for some time warned London that Ibn Saud had increased the number of forces along the Transjordanian border. In a report posted on September 10, Glubb concluded that Ibn Saud's motives were most likely of an aggressive nature. Glubb was also convinced that weapons designated for the Arabs in Palestine were passing through Saudi Arabia. Given that these stories, if true, posed a definite threat to British interests - and that they were presently causing disquiet in Transjordan - Glubb suggested that the issue be looked into by the British Minister in Jeddah. In the following week Glubb dispatched two more reports on the threat posed by Ibn Saud, each more alarming. So how did the Foreign Office react to the advice given by this highly respected officer?

It appears as if the Foreign Office at first were prepared to ignore Major Glubb's request altogether. Only when the Colonial Office picked up on the affair and urged for a response did the Foreign Office provide a statement.⁴²⁴ To begin with, Rendel strongly advised against having the British representative currently located in Jeddah look into the

⁴²³ Wilson, *King Abdullah...*, p. 126.

⁴²⁴ Kedourie, "Great Britain...", p. 120.

matter. While Reader Bullard was on leave Arthur Trott was Britain's leading official in Saudi Arabia. According to Rendel, Trott's inexperience, and the fact that he was situated in Hejaz and not Jeddah, precluded him from running a thorough investigation. The fact of the matter was that Rendel very much disliked Trott's outlook, or as he put it himself, "We recently received a despatch from Mr. Trott which, in our view and in that of Sir R. Bullard...and of the Embassy at Cairo...gave – quite unintentionally – a very misleading view of the Saudi attitude towards Palestine." It is thus reasonable to assert that Rendel feared Trott's investigation would confirm Glubb's allegations. Such an outcome would have been embarrassing for Ibn Saud, but even more so for his British advocate, George Rendel.

The alternative, as suggested by Rendel, was to approach the Saudi Minister, Sheikh Hafiz, in London. Anyhow, this approach was also somewhat problematic as the minister was probably "in so indignant a frame of mind about our Palestine policy that it may be a little difficult to ask him for any favour on this question...which I am personally – after my recent painful interviews with him – most reluctant to do."

More than anything else the memo reads as an apologist statement in favour of Ibn Saud. On the receiving end, Amir Abdullah - Britain's closest associate in the region. Rendel maintained that it was "natural enough that he [Ibn Saud] should take preliminary measures to prepare for a possible struggle against the Amir. This does not, I think, mean any aggressive intention on his part at this stage. To anyone familiar with the attitude adopted by the Amir Abdullah towards Ibn Saud during the past seven years, it is obvious that Ibn Saud could not be expected to trust the Amir an inch." A more impartial estimate of previous Saudi-Transjordan enmity would invariably show that Ibn Saud was no less the aggressor than Abdullah.

The Amir did not receive any credit from Rendel for his support of Britain's current Palestine policy. Quite the contrary. "The Amir Abdullah, partly by his ready acceptance of our partition policy, and partly by his ill-timed flirtation with the Turks at a moment when they were being particularly anti-Arab, has become regarded as a traitor to the Arab cause by the great majority of the Arabs."⁴²⁵

⁴²⁵ Rendel memo, FO/371/20818/E6320, 27 October 1937. On his way home from an official visit to London in May 1937 Abdullah had made a stop in Turkey where he conducted talks with Atatürk. The general Arab reaction to this meeting was so bad that the Amir had to reroute his journey home. Wilson, *King Abdullah...*, p. 121.

The underlying message of this statement is problematic. Was not the support of Abdullah called for by the British in the first place? From Abdullah's point of view, was not collaboration the only genuine alternative?

As predicted by most British officials the Amir's support of partition had made him immensely unpopular throughout the Middle-East. But, as this was a British proposal it is difficult to accept that the Foreign Office was not prepared to take at least some responsibility for his difficulties. More troubling still was the Eastern Department's tendency to side with Abdullah's main adversary Ibn Saud. This decision was obviously influenced by their general dislike of the partition proposal and must be seen as part of their campaign to overturn that decision. However, when considering the ease in which the Eastern Department explained away the palpable Saudi hostility, it is tempting once again to ascribe some of it to the special position held by the Saudi Monarch.

Even more troubling, perhaps, was Rendel's predictions regarding Abdullah's likely actions. The Head of the Eastern Department implied that following a partition - which awarded Abdullah with the Arab section of Palestine - the Amir would virtually overnight invade Saudi Arabia to reclaim contested areas. Adhering to this version Rendel ascribed military movement along the Saudi border to defensive measures, measures which to most observers indicated hostility on Ibn Saud's part.

The fact of the matter was much simpler. Ibn Saud could not accept the aggrandizement of Abdullah, not mainly because of fear, but because of long-standing rivalry and general contempt. This was not lost on all British officials. From Transjordan, acting High Commissioner, W.D. Battershill, made the simple observation that "There is reason to believe that Ibn Saud dislikes the scheme for the partition of Palestine, if only for the effect which he fears that such a scheme would have upon his own interests." Furthermore, Battershill proposed that Ibn Saud might very well have seen the whole affair, whatever its outcome, as an opportunity to obtain a bargaining lever vis-à-vis the British. "It seems probable that these factors have induced him to oppose partition of Palestine and that he has decided to foment a more or less artificial agitation against it in the Nejd and Hejaz for use as a diplomatic weapon in negotiating with His Majesty's Government and as a means of preserving or even enhancing his popularity in the Arab world."⁴²⁶

⁴²⁶ Battershill to FO, FO/371/20818/E6320, 27 October 1937.

Although inter-Arab rivalry was not exactly the Eastern Department's favourite line of argument against partition, they could not deny its existence. In the case of Ibn Saud and Abdullah, the reason was simply that the Saudi King right from the outset made it perfectly clear that Abdullah's proposed gains was a major reason for him to oppose the partition scheme. What is interesting to note, however, is that Ibn Saud altered his rhetoric along the way. In the crucial 19 November Foreign Office Rendel gives the following account of his transformation:

It is true that, when the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Palestine and the conclusions of His Majesty's Government thereon were originally communicated to the King at the beginning of July, His Majesty did not at once react as violently as he has done since, and that it looked at first as though his main preoccupation was with his own immediate interests, in so far as they might be threatened by the emancipation of the Amir Abdullah from British control, and the constitution of Transjordan and "Arab Palestine" into a single independent and possibly hostile state. There are now indications, however, that King Ibn Saud has now realised that the formation of a compact homogenous and independent Jewish sovereign State on the Mediterranean coast of what he regards as an essentially Arab country...must involve a serious threat to the hopes which he is known to cherish of the evolution of an independent Arab confederation.⁴²⁷

This was not an entirely sincere account of Ibn Saud's "conversion". In the preceding months Rendel and Bullard had made little secret of their disbelief in the partition proposal when meeting Saudi officials. Nor had they failed to disclose the causes behind this opposition. Hafez Wahba and Ibn Saud were both experienced politicians. Consequently, they adapted their arguments so as to fit the Foreign Office version.⁴²⁸ This seems to have mattered little as Rendel's version found its adherents among the more influential British officials. On 7 February 1938 Sir Miles Lampson was approached by Chaim Weizmann in Cairo. Lampson's own diary gives the following account on their differences over Ibn Saud's position over Palestine:

I countered his [Weizmann's] suggestion that Arab leaders such as Ibn Saud were not particularly keen about Palestine itself and that the main preoccupation of Ibn Saud was lest the Emir Abdullah of Transjordan should be given the Arab State of Palestine. I told Weizmann that this did not tally at all with the reports that I had seen regarding Ibn Saud's attitude.⁴²⁹

⁴²⁷ George Rendel, annexed letter, CAB/24/273, CP/281 (37), 19 November 1937.

⁴²⁸ Kedourie, "Great Britain...", pp. 150-153.

⁴²⁹ Evans, p. 94.

The likelihood of a major rising in Transjordan

Ever since the start of the Palestine Rebellion in the spring of 1936, Italian propaganda had been employed to weaken Britain's position in the Middle East. Part of the Italian strategy involved undermining Amir Abdullah's authority. Already in June 1936 Radio Bari reported that "the Mandatory Power in Palestine is very much afraid of Trans-Jordan whose Arabs have decided to cooperate in the Holy War"⁴³⁰ Mufti Amin al-Husseini notified Rome in September 1937 that he intended to have the Amir overthrown. Mussolini must have agreed to this strategy because he immediately approved a payment of £15,000 to the Mufti's organisation. Italy's other contribution, so to speak, was to step up its propaganda campaign. In late October 1937, Radio Bari announced fictitious reports on the alleged destruction of the Allenby Bridge that crosses the Jordan River, and on skirmishes on the Transjordan-Saudi frontier.⁴³¹

Once again, the Eastern Department's reaction must be described as peculiar. Even though these accounts were patently false, Rendel advised against refuting them. As he firmly believed that there "was every possibility of an early rising in Transjordan...it would be embarrassing if we had to follow a denial by an admission that the story we were denying was merely prophetic."⁴³² It is difficult to determine what exactly was the motive behind this dubious logic. Either Rendel genuinely believed an uprising in Transjordan was imminent, or he considered anything which would foster such an idea to benefit his cause.

Sincerely or not, the Foreign Office advocated through official papers that a movement against Amir Abdullah, and thus against Britain, might materialize should partition be enforced:

there is likely to be a rapid recrudescence of terrorism, and the gradual formation of bands, particularly in Transjordan. The Amir is notoriously unpopular and his authority is precarious. The bands may therefore operate from Transjordan, where it is very possible that there might be a widespread rebellion, which it would be very difficult for us to control with our very exiguous troops.⁴³³

⁴³⁰ Arielli, Nik, "Italian Involvement in the Arab Revolt in Palestine, 1936-1939", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 35:2 (2008), p. 201.

⁴³¹ Ibid.

⁴³² Kedourie, "Great Britain...", p. 134.

⁴³³ Rendel minute, FO/371/20819/E6483, 4 November 1937.

What are we to make of this prediction? The Amir might have been “notoriously unpopular” in the region as a whole, but that was definitely not the case inside Transjordan. As for his authority, how could this in any way be “precarious” when British military might lurked just behind his shoulder? Furthermore, British soldiers had proven in the past- and would prove in the upcoming years – that Transjordan was generally one of the less demanding districts to defend.

Once again the War Office report of February 1938 offers a far more credible appraisal of the current situation:

The present government in Transjordan depends largely on British support for its stability. The influence exerted by British officials over the desert tribes has so far proved more than sufficient to prevent subversive movements making any headway either against British interests or the Emir Abdullah. The presence of British air forces, and the proximity of British troops in Palestine are also deterrents. The fact that the Palestine Royal Commission’s proposals would enhance the political and economic status of Transjordan, and the latent fear of Saudi Arabia, also impose a brake on any tendency to give way unduly to sentimental feelings for their brethren in Palestine. The Emir Abdullah enjoys a certain prestige as the eldest surviving member of the Hashemite family, and although he is not personally popular, this helps to minimise internal opposition to his pro-British attitude.⁴³⁴

The peasants of the Ajlun district in the northwest corner of Transjordan served as a safe haven for rebels during the uprising in Palestine, supplying them with cover and provisions. Indeed, the population in this area had always been rather suspicious of Abdullah, feeling more akin to the Palestinian peasants of the Hauran and the Galilee than to the tribal traditions of Transjordan.⁴³⁵ Nonetheless, the effect of the Arab Legion and the Transjordan Frontier Force can hardly be overstated. George Rendel had himself acknowledged the strength of this force only few weeks before predicting disturbances in Transjordan. Regarding the Saudi-Transjordanian border, it was “only the presence of Major Glubb and the British frontier force that has kept any kind of peace on this singularly artificial and purely de facto line.”⁴³⁶

The Legion was arguably the best trained army in the entire Middle East. Like almost everything else in the Transjordanian state it was fully financed by the British. Consequently, it was at all times loyal to Abdullah and Britain and, unlike the Iraqi army, not in pursuit of any political influence.

⁴³⁴ WO to FO, FO/371/21873/E788, 9 February 1938.

⁴³⁵ Wilson, *King Abdullah...*, p. 125.

⁴³⁶ Rendel memo, FO/371/20818/E6320, 27 October 1937.

During March-April 1936 armed bands from Syria had descended upon the Ajlun district. These were successfully engaged by the Legion on at least two occasions. The Legion had thus proven its efficiency prior to the release of the Peel report. Moreover, the events of 1936 had led to a further strengthening and militarisation of the Legion.⁴³⁷

In February 1938 the Committee of Imperial Defence met to discuss how to best secure British strategic interests in Palestine. They made the following assessment regarding threats to Transjordan. “Any attack by Saudi Arabia would be of the nature of raids into Transjordan and Southern Palestine and should be adequately dealt with by the British forces that would be available.”⁴³⁸

In March and April 1939 a militant movement based in Syria, formed largely of displaced Palestinians attempted to bring down the Transjordan government. This group consisted of more than 100 insurgents. They were quickly spotted and successfully defeated by divisions from the Arab Legion and the Frontier Force. Contrary to what the insurgents had anticipated, they received no support from the Transjordanian population. The lack of assistance put an abrupt end to the insurgents’ ploy of igniting a mass uprising inside the country.⁴³⁹ A contemporary account goes far in explaining the reasons for their failure: “On the whole, the Bedouin nomad tribes of the desert were not enthusiastic...the normal attitudes of the tribesmen was that this trouble between cultivator and townsmen, whether they were Arabs or Jews, was not their immediate concern.”⁴⁴⁰

Conclusion

Though not exactly a decisive argument in their case against partition the Foreign Office’s predictions of a serious uprising in Transjordan may have been among their least convincing prophecies. In the words of one historian Transjordan remained in the 1936-39 period, by and large “an oasis of peace by the side of storm-shaken Palestine.”⁴⁴¹ The little fighting that did

⁴³⁷ Vatikiotis, P. J., *Politics and the Military in Jordan: A study of the Arab Legion 1921-1957* (London 1967), p.73.

⁴³⁸ CID report, FO/371/21870/E879.

⁴³⁹ Clayton, p. 480.

⁴⁴⁰ Jarvis, C.S., *Arab Command: The Biography of Lieutenant Colonel F. G. Peake Pasha* (London 1943), p. 147.

⁴⁴¹ Dann, p. 12

take place actually strengthened the Arab Legionnaires' attachment to Britain. It also helped justify the Legion's further expansion in the forthcoming years.⁴⁴²

The general lack of support from the Transjordanian population has been ascribed to an undeveloped Arab nationalist sentiment and also to the rigid control imposed by the Amir Abdullah. Like in the rest of the region it was mainly the educated section of the Transjordanian population who displayed Arab nationalist sentiment. In the words of Glubb: "[The more] European influences there is in any class or district, the stronger is the national feeling." The problem was that the pro-Palestinian officials – many of whom were themselves Palestine Arabs – were unable to translate their sympathies into action due to their official positions.⁴⁴³ There was also another far more obvious reason for the general inaction: few people were likely to object to the expansion of their own state.

Any way you look at it, the Abdullah factor made it considerably easier for the Foreign Office to overturn partition. Having witnessed how the Amir's collaboration with Britain over partition had rendered him a traitor in the eyes of most Arabs, officials in the Eastern Department realised that they could use the Amir as an instrument in their own bid. Since the "Arab cause" was seen by as perfectly justifiable reaction to the "Zionist policy" - which partition purportedly represented - Iraqi and Saudi hatred towards the Amir was considered to be a legitimate and just reaction to his disloyalty. Indeed, this opposition was not only tolerated but eventually abided by: the Arab states' strong opposition to partition and their gloomy predictions regarding the regional consequences of such a policy was fully adopted by the Foreign Office and soon formed the nucleus of their own campaign.

Regardless of the Foreign Offices' less than honourable campaign, there can be no doubt that the proposed elevation of Abdullah was a major blunder on the part of the Peel Commission. It is difficult to determine to what extent the schemes' main proponent, the Colonial Office, might have been able to coerce the Commission members into revising this aspect prior to the report's release. In view of the independent nature of the Commission and its work – as well as the great attention attached to it - there was little the Colonial Office could do once the report was made official.

Enlightening in this respect are also observations made by Major Glubb. Apart from being one of Abdullah's closest and most loyal servants, Glubb (having almost single-

⁴⁴² Ibid.

⁴⁴³ Morris, p. 46.

handedly transformed the Arab Legion into the most respected fighting force in the Middle East) knew the make-up of Transjordanian society better than most. The officer concluded in the summer of 1937 that the mentality of Palestinians and Transjordanians had grown further apart during the last two decades. “Apart from Amman Transjordan is still tribal, old-fashioned, Muslim and Arab. In Palestine, the influx of Jews and foreigners, and 17 years of direct British administration have made the country Levantine or Mediterranean, rather than Arab.” Following unification the better educated Palestinians were “likely to monopolize all the lucrative appointments.”⁴⁴⁴ This could hardly have been a good starting point for the proposed state.

⁴⁴⁴ Morris, p. 43

Conclusions

During 1937-38 the question of Palestine affected each of the countries examined here differently. In Egypt and Iraq the issue became during this period a more or less permanent component in domestic politics. Many of the committees and organizations established in support of the Palestine Arabs were set up by individuals who unquestionably believed strongly in the Pan-Arab idea. Nonetheless, when the issue entered official politics other factors also came into play. In Iraq – and even more so in Egypt – the governing party was bound to preserve good relations with Great Britain. Consequently, the government was often forced to tone down their posture on an issue which may otherwise have scored them many free points. More than anything else this left the door open for the opposition to exploit the issue to the full. The activities of the Egyptian oppositional leader, Muhammad Mahmud, during 1937 was apparently “largely coloured by the desire of making local political capital out of the question.”⁴⁴⁵ This tendency was equally apparent with the behaviour of the Wafd Party. While in power they had to show considerable restraint when handling the Palestine issue. This was evident in 1936 during the first phase of the Arab Rebellion and once again in 1937 after the release of the Peel Plan. Then, after being removed from power in late 1937 the Wafd – and the newspapers they controlled - adopted a more forceful approach towards British policy in Palestine.

Despite the fact that the Palestine issue was to some extent exploited for political reasons, there can be little doubt that by 1938 Palestine’s future was a genuine concern for large groups of the Egyptian population. What is also evident is that the growing awareness of the Palestine Arabs plight during this period accelerated a process which saw many move away from a strict Egyptian identity towards one which was unmistakably Arab.

In Iraq the hatred of Britain was stronger than in Egypt. Generally speaking the Iraqis were more impatient since they were convinced that their objectives could only be secured through a radical break with Britain. This point is vital in understanding the Iraqi attitude towards Palestine. While many in Iraq were devoted Pan-Arabists with strong feelings on the Palestine issue, its centrality in Iraqi politics during this period should be seen first and foremost in the light of the prevailing anti-British sentiment. Thus, when the Iraqi Prime

⁴⁴⁵ Kelly to FO, FO/371/20819/E6568, 8 November 1937.

Minister Rashid Ali during 1940 repeatedly cited British policy in Palestine as crucial for the deterioration in Anglo-Iraqi relations, it should be treated with great caution. In the eyes of the ardent Iraqi nationalists British policy in Palestine – regardless of any concessions the Mandatory Power was prepared to make – would always be interpreted as the work of the “imperialist oppressor”. Accordingly, the policymakers at the Foreign Office should have realized that continued British influence in Iraq required not compromises over Palestine but a Britain that was either prepared to abandon the country completely or one that was still determined to apply the amount of force “befitting” that of a colonial superpower.

The role of Saudi Arabia in this matter was different from both Iraq and Egypt. In contrast to those two nations, the Saudi state was fully independent with no British bases or troops stationed on its territory. The decision to award Saudi Arabia independence in 1927 had been made after the British military planners had concluded that area’s strategic importance was limited. The situation was somewhat different by 1937, but from a military point of view Saudi Arabia remained very much in the vicinity. As has been frequently demonstrated throughout, however, no Arab ruler received the same degree of benevolence as Ibn Saud. Where Miles Lampson’s anxiety over partition was reasonable in light of the great strategic importance of Egypt, London’s motives for appeasing Ibn Saud were far less obvious. The importance of maintaining the Monarch’s long-lasting “friendship” to Britain was often quoted as a motive. So was Ibn Saud’s alleged role as the foremost mold of Arab opinion. Historian Clive Leatherdale has shown in his comprehensive study covering the 1925-1939 period that Foreign Office preference for Ibn Saud was a well established practice by 1937. It appears, nonetheless, that the years 1937-38 saw the most striking displays of such favoritism to date. By late 1937 Foreign Office officials were prepared to comply with Ibn Saud’s objections to the partition proposal - despite the fact that his previous commitments to the Palestine cause had been less than remarkable, and, that his initial reaction to the proposal had focused solely on the gains promised to his main adversary, Amir Abdullah.

While many of the prophecies put forth by the Eastern Department were quite extensive, they often revealed an insufficient grasp of Middle Eastern affairs. A common theme in many of the reports was the growing unpopularity of Abdullah. It was argued that the Amir’s support of the scheme would disgust his own populace and that this might bring about serious unrest inside Transjordan and eventually the downfall of Abdullah. This was not a convincing analysis. Abdullah’s position in Transjordan was not and had never been connected to his “popularity”. Rather, the Amir’s legitimacy rested on the extent of his

powers. These powers were provided by Great Britain. It was thus at they and they alone who decided over Abdullah's future in Transjordan. In a similar fashion, the Eastern Department expressed concern over Ibn Saud's standing in his desert Kingdom. They maintained that should Britain decide to partition up Palestine "his own position will become impossible and he himself go under."⁴⁴⁶ Ibn Saud was in many ways the "archetypal" despot. His rule was based mainly on conquest and intimidation and not on popular support. Also, Saudi Arabia was essentially a barren and backwards country. Unlike the population in Egypt and Iraq most Saudis had little or no access to outside information. Finally, most Saudis considered themselves to be of a different "stock" than the Arabs of the Fertile Crescent. Consequently much of the Saudi populace was either unaware or indifferent to the direction of British policy in Palestine. It seems highly unlikely that these people would be prepared to rise against Ibn Saud over an outside issue such as Palestine.

Why did the Eastern Department oppose partition so vehemently?

By and large the Foreign Office tended to exaggerate the consequences of carrying out a policy in Palestine which ran counter to general Arab opinion. While they repeatedly cautioned against the preeminence of Palestine, the record tells a different story. Simply put, British relations with Iraq, Egypt and Saudi Arabia were decided by issues other than Britain's policy in Palestine. This leaves one crucial question: *why* did the Eastern Department adopt such an overly pessimistic outlook regarding the repercussions of partitioning Palestine when developments suggested that such a decision would in fact not ruin Anglo-Arab relations?

One notable scholar has gone far in arguing that the Foreign Office' entry into Palestine affairs did not really represent a break with the policies previously devised by the Colonial Office. He contends instead that the line pursued by the Foreign Office from mid-1937 and onwards was largely the result of a rapidly changing strategic context and not a change in the general outlook.⁴⁴⁷ This seems to be an unsatisfactory explanation. Before the

⁴⁴⁶ Rendel minute, FO/371/20823/E7537, 29 December 193.

⁴⁴⁷ "Changes in policies were made within the framework of...[previous]...principles. [W]hat otherwise might have been deemed vacillation or contradiction was in reality the adjustment of the long-range principles and attitudes necessary in view of changing international conditions. [P]ersonal attitudes of leading officials were less important than assumed by many." Sheffer, "Reevaluation of British Policies...", p. 110.

Foreign Office approach was fully adopted, the Colonial Office continuously questioned the analyses and fought the recommendations of their senior department. This clearly shows that there existed an informed alternative to the line that was eventually taken. Thus, had the Colonial Office remained at the helm, policies towards Palestine would surely have been different from those that were ultimately pursued. As for partition in particular, it seems very likely that there would have been serious attempts at implementing this policy.

This thesis has shown that the efforts of certain individuals – in particular George Rendel and Miles Lampson – were decisive in reshaping Palestine policy. This policy was in general based on beliefs vastly different from the ones held by their main adversary, Colonial Secretary William Ormsby-Gore. The overall logic behind the Eastern Department's approach was undoubtedly one of conciliation. It is nonetheless doubtful if the leading proponent of this policy, George Rendel, saw his effort towards the Middle East only as an extension of the appeasement policies concurrently directed towards Italy and Germany. Although these hostile states were mentioned repeatedly in Rendel's memoranda on Palestine, the overall content of his reports leave the impression that he very much sought to placate Arab opinion for its own sake.⁴⁴⁸ For Rendel, appeasement over Palestine was not only strategically sound, it was also the morally right thing to do: the creation of a Jewish State in Palestine would not only be a gross injustice to Arabs everywhere, it would be an artificial construct - one which would be culturally at odds with the entire region.

While Rendel's autobiography from 1957 rather unashamedly plays down his own role during the disagreements of 1937-38, one passage is illuminating as to Rendel's overall thinking on Palestine.⁴⁴⁹ "I still believe that that this issue ...played a major part in altering the whole trend of our relations with the Arab and Moslem world, and that many of our Middle Eastern difficulties today are due to the inconsistencies of our Palestine policy during this critical period."⁴⁵⁰ These observations written with nearly twenty years of hindsight reflect an unusually strong belief in the preeminence of Palestine on Anglo-Arab relations.

⁴⁴⁸ Historian Martin Jones is also opposed to an explanation which sees the shift policy towards Palestine only as a continuation of the conciliatory line pursued by Britain in Europe. "It is not possible to explain this turn of events solely in terms of the appeasement of Germany...Certainly this was the context, and appeasement of the Arabs was seen to be necessary because of their capacity to cause trouble [for Britain]...But there was more to the Whitepaper than *realpolitik*...Rendel...successfully promoted the intervention of the Arab States in Palestine because in this he perceived the means by which "the correct view of the Palestine problem would prevail in London.", Jones, Martin, *Failure in Palestine: British and United States Policy after the Second World War*, (London 1986), p. 8.

⁴⁴⁹ "My own connexion with this unhappy business had always been rather indirect." Rendel, p. 124.

⁴⁵⁰ While released in 1957, Rendel's autobiography informs the reader that the book was written before the pivotal Suez crisis of October 1956.

The experiences of WWII had apparently done little to modify Rendel's conviction even though developments – especially in Egypt and Saudi Arabia - clearly demonstrated that issues other than Palestine were decisive in maintaining good relations between Britain and her traditional allies. Also, to suggest that Britain's handling of the Palestine issue was the cause of much of the current (i.e. from a 1956 perspective) grievance towards that country in the Middle East seems farfetched. The general dislike of Britain in the Arab world was at the time of writing related mainly to the imperial project as a whole, a venture which had succeeded in dominating the Middle East for decades.⁴⁵¹ It is in fact tempting to argue that the likes of George Rendel sometimes forgot that they were leading representatives of the world's greatest imperialist power. None of their attempts at placating Arab demands – however generous they may have been - would come close to alter this stark reality.

In a seemingly homogeneous milieu such as that of the British bureaucracy, the Eastern Department and their rival counterpart, the Colonial Office, repeatedly reached disparate conclusions. This wide discrepancy can perhaps best be explained through the concept of a psychological and operational environment. Rendel's fascination with "Arabia", his rather obsessive belief in Britain's need to maintain the best possible relations with the region, his close affiliation with Ibn Saud and the Eastern Department's "nonexistent" relationship with the Zionist movement undoubtedly shaped his psychological environment.

The Eastern Department was however not the only organisation suffering from "harmful" commitments. Ormsby-Gores close relationship with the Zionist movement was – at least politically - not a healthy one. In his rejoinder to the 19 November memorandum Ormsby-Gore warned that "the grave consequences of abandonment, on grounds of expediency, of our obligations to the Jews must be weighed in the balance against any "Middle Eastern" interests that may be held to justify so formidable change of policy."⁴⁵² A competent policy-maker at this level, and at such critical point in time, should almost certainly be more concerned with the "expediency" of a policy rather than its capacity to live up to an ambiguous pledge given twenty years before.

⁴⁵¹ Near East historian Carl Brown makes the following assessment of Britain's plummeting stature in the Middle East during the post-war years. "[T]he Palestine problem was only a major catalyst, setting in motion what was bound to happen. Britain would have faced essentially the same challenge in roughly the same manner even if the Palestine problem could have been somehow magically conjured away. The workings of the system itself produced such a reaction. By reaching a pinnacle of power in the Eastern Arab world, Britain automatically became the focus of all discontent in the area." Brown, Carl, *International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules Dangerous Games*(London 1984), p. 138.

⁴⁵² Ormsby-Gore's memorandum, CAB 24/273, CP 289(37), 1 December 1937.

This thesis has also shown how George Rendel was able to exert decisive influence on the decision-making process. Although Rendel in his memoirs “purged” himself of any responsibility regarding Palestine, on more general terms he admitted that during his stint as Head of Department he was “free to formulate policy, to make recommendations, and to organize the work more or less as [he] choose.” Rendel ascribed this to the pre-war system which he depicted as less organised than its successor. While there is probably a lot of truth in this, this was not the only factor which played in Rendel’s favour. Anthony Eden’s lack of commitment regarding Palestine was arguably even more important. To all intents and purposes the Foreign Secretary left the question entirely to George Rendel.⁴⁵³

The assertion that a bureaucrat was able to attain almost decision-making powers is certainly not considered unfeasible among political scientists.⁴⁵⁴ In this connection they stress one important fact: the person/department which provides the information is very often the actual decision-maker.⁴⁵⁵ In our case it is apparent that the Head of Department hand-picked the information sources and interpreted these according to his own psychological environment. Finally, Rendel did not merely present his own recommendations for Anthony Eden, he was given authorization to produce the office’s final reports under the Foreign Minister’s name. The most important of these - the November 19 memorandum – was Rendel’s project altogether: he authored the majority of the texts, the rest was provided by officials who shared his outlook on Palestine. In the case of Miles Lampson, Rendel personally instructed the Ambassador to make a statement.

The main criticism of the Eastern Department should arguably be directed at their inability to readjust their course. As has been demonstrated numerous times throughout this thesis, alternative assessments on Palestine written by officials from other offices were readily available. Had these been treated with a fair degree of detachment they would inevitably have

⁴⁵³ The question of Palestine, or the Middle East in general for that matter, did not appeal much to Eden. In the words of one official and long-time acquaintance, Sir Robert Vansittart, Eden had “taken a First at Oxford in Oriental languages and knew much more of them than I; but he rarely mentioned the East... Europe was his acre.”, Vansittart, R. G., *The Mist Procession: The Autobiography of Robert Vansittart*, (London 1958), p. 429.

⁴⁵⁴ “This image of the division of labour between politicians and bureaucrats [i.e. where civil servants obediently serve their political masters] exalts the glittering authority of the former and cloaks the role of the latter in gray robes of anonymous neutrality...For administrators, this presumed separation of administration and politics allows them to engage in politics without the bother of being held accountable politically for the outcomes of their action.”, Aberbach, Putnam & Rockman, *Bureaucrats & politicians in Western Democracies* (London 1981), p. 5.

⁴⁵⁵ Joseph Frankel points out that before a political decision is taken, many types of choices are involved (of information sources, of interpretation methods, of values, of objectives etc.) While these additional choices are usually made by authorities subordinate to the authority making the final decision, they are very often conclusive in determining the direction of the final decision. Frankel, p. 5.

served to shift their psychological environment closer to the operational. Instead this “deviating” material was for the most part rejected forthright. Illustrative in this respect was the department’s handling of the much cited War Office report of February 1938. Despite an obvious lack of military knowledge Rendel and his subordinates frequently dabbled with predictions on likely uprisings following a partition - several of which found their way into the crucial 19 November memorandum. The meticulous War Office report - written by an officer with far greater knowledge of British military capacity and of the various groups who might consider causing trouble over Palestine - was swiftly rebuffed. “It gives nothing like enough importance to the dangers, which cannot be stressed too highly, which partition will present in the event of a war...if partition is enforced our prestige and reputation will never be the same again and...the Arab world will wait, if necessary for years, for the revenge upon us and the Jews, which any preoccupation on our part elsewhere will give them.”⁴⁵⁶ These were prophecies of the sweeping kind. Where officer Hawthorn had treated each country in isolation, looking at which were invariably tied to Britain and which were not, the Eastern Department officials preferred to operate on the more general level. Like in the example above, these assessments often revealed a lack of knowledge and conveyed a sense of fear which to quite a few at the time seemed exaggerated, and in retrospect appears to have been out of all proportion.

By the time of War Office report, it seems, the psychological environment of the Eastern Department had become so fixed that it effectively shut out any information which might challenge its framework. In fact, the officials seemed incapable of accepting that a policy towards Palestine which might serve to temporarily upset Arab opinion did not automatically rule out the possibility that it may very well be the best policy for Britain in the long run. More worrying still, they appeared oblivious to the fact that British relations with the various Arab countries rested mainly on issues which for the most part had nothing to do with Palestine.

⁴⁵⁶ WO to FO, FO/371/21873/E788, 9 February 1938. Lacy Baggallay was a senior member of the Eastern Department, serving directly under Rendel and sharing fully his views on Palestine.

A pro-Arab policy?

There can be no doubt, then, that the determination to overturn partition stemmed in large part from a conviction that the conciliation of Arab opinion was essential. In that sense the policy that was formalized by the White Paper in 1939 must be seen as one heeding to Arab demands, demands which invariably came at the expense of those previously presented by the Zionists. But does that necessarily make it a pro-Arab policy? In accordance with the conclusions drawn above it would be erroneous to label the Palestine policy pursued either pro-Arab or pro-Zionist. The policy devised in Palestine was always first and foremost pro-British. The line drawn up in the 1939 White Paper was no exception. What is apparent, however, is that this particular policy was founded on a number of false premises. This was clearly reflected in the outcome, one which can hardly be said to have achieved its main purpose. While the scrapping of partition might have brought about a certain amount of goodwill throughout the region, there is nothing to indicate that it helped secure British regional interests in the long run. Quite the contrary, British vacillation over Palestine seems to have reinforced in some quarters the impression that Britain was a superpower in decline, either unable or unwilling to enforce its policy to the extent she had done in the previous decades.

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