Britain’s Middle Eastern Policy, 1900-1931: Dual Attractions of Empire and Europe

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Britain’s ambiguous position on the edge of Europe has long been the source of much debate. For many observers the country’s insular and maritime situation means that it is essentially non-European, different from the continentals, closer in national temperament and practical interests to the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ world or the Empire-Commonwealth; that its physical proximity to Europe is outweighed by other stronger bonds elsewhere. From such staunch imperialists as Joseph Chamberlain to today’s Eurosceptics, many have believed that Britain is more naturally at home in the world of the Empire-Commonwealth, a world of its own making, than in the fundamentally alien Europe. Language, culture, family ties and economic, financial and commercial interests have all, at one time or another, been put forward to support this image of a non-European Britain. It would, however, be quite wrong to regard Britain as being somehow irretrievably cut off from the continent. Indeed, not even the most ardent imperialists or, with a few exceptions, the most vitriolic Anglophobes on the continent have taken such arguments quite so far. These may have been understandably tempting to many people who looked to the Empire to satisfy the country’s commercial, political, even psychological needs. However, once in office, the majority of British leaders have recognized, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, that Britain cannot isolate itself from its immediate neighbours. Indeed, some of those most frequently associated with coolness towards the continent have also pointed to Britain’s European credentials. Such ‘little Englanders’ as Stanley Baldwin, of whom it was said that ‘foreigners made him peevish or sent him to sleep’,¹ also accepted the unavoidable truth that Britain was ‘indissolubly bound to Europe’.² Such views expressed Britain’s long-established interest in European affairs and a recognition that its defence could not be assured without giving due regard to the continent.

Instead of portraying Britain in a sort of ‘splendid isolation’, it makes better sense to accept that it has been both a European and global actor and that it has played these roles simultaneously. Nonetheless, the attractions, or repulsion, of Europe and Empire have varied considerably over time and it has often been a difficult task to combine them in anything like a harmonious whole, still more to arrive at a situation where the imperial and European dimensions of policy have been mutually enhancing. British policy since 1945 has been based on the idea that Britain can, and should, play a role in various international spheres, that these are not exclusive but rather a reflection of its pivotal international position. In the same way the question that lay at the heart of British policy in the first decades of the twentieth century was

² *The Times*, 11 November 1932.
how to reconcile the country’s interests and objectives in the imperial and European spheres, to overcome any contradictions, conflicts or incompatibilities between them, and how to maintain British security in an increasingly threatening Europe while holding onto its imperial role; how to prevent commitments in one undermining the position in the other. These ambitions inevitably required a delicate balancing of competing demands and could never be reduced to a straightforward decision to concentrate exclusively on one at the expense of the other. No analysis, therefore, of the ‘British world’ overseas could ignore its parallel links with Europe. Nor indeed could a clear dividing line be drawn between the two, given the long history of European rivalries in the colonial world spilling over into European affairs and vice versa. Although there was a tendency for the various decision-makers in Whitehall to take different, often contradictory, perspectives depending on whether they were looking at the world from the Foreign Office, the Colonial Office or any of the other departments of state that had an input into policy, the European and the non-European worlds could never be easily disentangled.

One of the most obvious examples of this overlap between the imperial and the European aspects of British policy can be found in the record of Anglo-French relations in the Middle East in the first years of the twentieth century. This occupied a vital place in British thinking towards its position around the world. Firstly, it revealed the tensions between Britain’s objectives in Europe, which required it to maintain friendly relations with France, and its ambitions in the Empire where many in Britain continued to see France more as a rival than as a partner. Secondly, it showed the dangers of problems in one sphere, Europe or Empire, spilling over into the other, or, alternatively, how success in one sphere could reinforce Britain’s place in the other. The question was, therefore, how to work with both and overcome the apparent incompatibilities between them.3

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The Middle East: A Keystone in Britain’s World

If, strictly speaking, the Middle East was never formally part of the British Empire, already by the late nineteenth century British statesmen regarded it as a region of vital interest for the Empire, and increasingly so as Turkey slid into decay. The building of the Suez Canal (1859 to 1869) opened up a new and strategically vital route to the Empire in the East. Elsewhere the discovery of oil in Iran in 1908 added to the growing attention London gave to this region. Britain took on a more formal role, although one short of full colonial control, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 and its Middle East territories were parcelled up into League of Nations Mandates, most of which were granted to the British (in Palestine, Trans-Jordan and Iraq). For all these reasons, the Middle East had become an essential piece in the global jigsaw of the ‘British world’.

Like Britain’s imperial growth elsewhere, its expansion into the Middle East was not achieved without conflicts with both the local populations and the other European powers. Indeed, given the complex make up of the region and its vital strategic position, these conflicts were particularly serious. Fears that Turkey would collapse leaving behind it a power vacuum meant that British attention focused on this part of the world long before it took on a direct role on the ground. Concerns over Russian ambitions in the area had led to a series of clashes in the nineteenth century. It was, however, France that was, as so often, Britain’s greatest rival. The well known record of Anglo-French colonial confrontations is central to both countries’ histories and is particularly evident in the Middle East. From Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign to the building of the Suez Canal and France’s ambition to play a role in the protection of the holy sites in Palestine, Anglo-French tensions had never fully abated. Nor did the imposition of Britain’s protectorate in Egypt in 1882 remove its fears regarding France’s influence in the region. Indeed the clash at Fashoda was typical of Britain’s desire to extend its position to surrounding areas in order to guarantee the security of the Suez canal. This rivalry in the Middle East continued well beyond 1918 and

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4 The term “Middle East” has often been a source of confusion and its meaning has varied over time. Although the term “Near East” was still widely used at the beginning of the twentieth century Middle East became increasingly widely used. Nor has the extent of the area covered by the term ever been precise. It is taken here to mean the area stretching from the eastern shore of the Mediterranean to the limits of the Indian Empire.

5 Glen Balfour-Paul’s chapter in Judith M. Brown and William Roger Louis (eds), The Oxford History of the British Empire, vol. 4, The Twentieth Century (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999) is entitled “Britain’s Informal Empire in the Middle East”. It has been described elsewhere as “Britain’s pseudo-Empire” (Peter Mansfield, foreword to E. Monroe, Britain’s Moment..., op. cit.)

6 In July 1918, Maurice Hankey, the influential Secretary to the War Cabinet, argued that “the retention of the oil-bearing regions in Mesopotamia and Persia in British hands, as well as a proper strategic boundary to cover them, would appear to be a first class British war aim”. Quoted in Malcolm Edward Yapp, The Making of the Modern Near East, 1792-1923, London, Longman, 1997, p. 332. For a more detailed analysis of the influence of oil on British policy see R. Adelson, The Invention of the Middle East..., op. cit., and M. Kent, Moguls and Mandarins..., op. cit.
continued to poison Anglo-French relations for many years to come. It was hardly surprising, therefore, given the long history of Anglo-French problems in the Middle East and their almost atavistic mutual distrust, which was added to by issues of religion and race, of Zionism and Arab nationalism, that the Middle East would be a particularly difficult question for Britain. Moreover, Britain’s Middle Eastern policy could not be taken in isolation but was conditioned by, and in turn conditioned, British policy in Europe.

The Great War clearly illustrated the value of the Empire to Britain in the supplies of manpower and resources. The initial British contribution on the western front was relatively limited and while the new mass army could be mobilized, equipped and trained the only other forces immediately available came from the Empire, mostly from India. Over the course of the war, the Empire contributed some three million men (compared to the seven millions mobilized by Britain), including 900,000 from the Dominions and 1,500,000 from India. It was not, however, simply a question of the Empire’s contribution to the campaign in France. British strategic thinking was torn between giving absolute priority to the western front or focusing instead on the naval blockade or on the other fronts such as the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign against the Turks, in Palestine and in Mesopotamia. For advocates of the western strategy, the Middle East was a side-show, while for ‘easterners’ it was an opportunity to achieve the breakthrough that seemed so illusive in France. This fundamental disagreement over strategy reflected a corresponding Anglo-French split, with most French decision-makers focusing almost exclusively on the western front and many, although not all, British decision-makers preferring to take a global vision of the conflict. This was to have important consequences after the war.

Although Britain’s own direct security was at stake on the western front, British leaders also felt they were conducting an imperial war in which the Empire had to be defended as well as Britain. Thus, for example, David Lloyd George, the Prime Minister from December 1916, clearly appreciated the importance of the war against Turkey both for its strategic implications and for the psychological impact that defeating, or being defeated by, a largely non-European, non-Christian power would have on the prestige of the British Empire. The Middle East in particular was pivotal to Britain’s global position, a vital link in its communications with the East and a cornerstone of the southern British world which ran from the Cape through Cairo and Baghdad, to India, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand. The defeat of Turkey would inevitably leave a power vacuum in this key area. British statesmen, however, disagreed as to how far Britain should seek to fill it. Some in the Cabinet thought further annexations should be ruled out on the grounds that Britain had already as

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8 For more detailed figures see R. Adelson, The Invention of the Middle East..., op. cit., p. 171.

9 Leo Amery saw Palestine in particular as “a central pivot of support for our whole Middle East policy as well as assuring the effective control of our sea and air communications with the East”. Leo Amery, My Political Life, vol. 2, War and Peace, 1914-1929, London, Hutchinson, 1953, p. 115.
much territory as it was able to hold. However, as the war progressed this viewpoint increasingly lost ground to those like Herbert Asquith, Lloyd George’s predecessor in Downing Street, who argued that if ‘we were to leave the other nations to scramble for Turkey without taking anything ourselves, we should not be doing our duty’. Other ministers went even further, arguing that they should take control of as much territory as possible, to maximize Britain’s position in the final peace settlement vis-à-vis both the defeated enemy and Britain’s wartime allies who would also want their share of the spoils. Almost inevitably this increased the tensions in Anglo-French relations. During the war these were in part, although never wholly, pushed into the background as the two countries focused on achieving victory, but they were already storing up trouble for the future. France may have been Britain’s key ally, and the British government accepted that it had no choice but to stand by France for so long as the war was being fought. However, when British statesmen turned to the future of the Middle East the long tradition of Anglo-French rivalry remained barely beneath the surface, to re-emerge as strong as ever. Few, if any, had absolute faith that the Entente with France could be relied upon to continue unscathed beyond the end of the war, and the Middle East was clearly a likely zone of discord between them. They were, therefore, already looking to keep France out of the region, to prevent it from establishing a position from which it could threaten British interests. Much of this was also simply a question of national pride and prestige, along with a sense of imperial superiority not only over the peoples of those areas to be brought under European control but also over the other European colonial powers whose rule most British observers believed would be much less favourable than that imposed by London.

**Peace Making: Sharing out the Spoils of War**

The complicated exchanges and agreements between Britain and its wartime allies with regard to the post-war settlement of the Middle East were marked throughout by duplicity. Writing of their wartime commitments to each another, to the Arabs, and to the Jews, one British historian has concluded that ‘the only sensible conclusion to be drawn is that everybody lied to everybody else, and none with more aplomb, given

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10 Cedric James Lowe and Michael Dockrill, *The Mirage of Power*, vol. 3, London, Routledge, 1972, p. 526-527. In August 1918, Austen Chamberlain argued that “with regard to Mesopotamia, Palestine, and East Africa, the question resolved itself into one of the security of the British Empire and of its Allies. No one conversant with the position of the Indian Empire could contemplate the possibility of allowing a revival of the threat implied in the old Baghdad railway scheme”. Chamberlain also added, however, that “it would be fatal for our future in Europe if we created the impression that we should extend our responsibilities, or invite the jealousy involved in great extensions of British territory”. Quoted in C. J. Lowe and M. Dockrill, *The Mirage of Power, op. cit.*, p. 628.

their ambitions, than the British’. Following Russia’s withdrawal from the war in 1917, Britain and France became the two key actors in the post-war Middle East. Talks between them began in earnest in late 1915 and reached an initial conclusion with the Sykes-Picot agreement of January 1916. This was a simple partition of the region with Britain and France carving out their respective zones from the carcass of the Ottoman Empire. Other wartime agreements clouded the picture however. Notable amongst these was the 1917 Balfour Declaration promising British support for the establishment of a Jewish home in Palestine. At much the same time various promises were made to different Arab leaders regarding a future Arab state, although these did not specify how far British support would go, what its territorial limits would be, or the degree to which it would be truly independent. All such promises were made in the context of the war. The Balfour Declaration was in large part drawn up to win over Jewish opinion, especially in the USA, concessions to France in the East were offered to bolster its fighting spirit in Europe, and the promises to the Arabs of independent states in Syria and Mesopotamia were intended to encourage them to fight alongside the British. After 1918, Britain was therefore faced with a complicated and often contradictory set of ideas in applying the various wartime agreements. There was, however, underlying all British policy a belief that Britain must assume the leading role in the region. For reasons of imperial security and communications, economic interest, most notably oil, and prestige, Britain felt that it had no choice but to move into the area lest someone else did so in its place. And, of course, there were rivals laying claim to the same regions. For the British, however, such claims, whether they emanated from rival colonial powers or from the local populations, were less valid than their own.

At the end of the war, Britain found itself in the driving seat in the Middle East due to the simple fact that it alone was in military occupation of the area with an army, mostly drawn from the Empire, of close to a million men. The British lost no time in reminding the French of this reality, putting it forward as a justification of their claims. Lloyd George made the point, often in the most undiplomatic terms, that the British had practically single-handedly overthrown Turkey while the ‘number of French troops taking part in the campaign had been so small as to make no difference’ and that as Britain had paid the highest cost in the war in the Middle East it should therefore reap the greatest gains. If the French and Italians were prepared to ‘refund the £750,000,000’ that Britain had spent on the Turkish campaign, Lloyd George told them, then they ‘could have Mesopotamia and Palestine, and everything else’. Given their sacrifices on the western front, this argument naturally infuriated the French. The position on the ground, nonetheless, gave Lloyd George the whip hand in the inter-allied talks and encouraged him to undertake a complete rewriting of the various wartime agreements.

The British haughtily dismissed the whole basis of French claims in the region, arguing that France’s position was entirely dependent on the British and that

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whatever the French got out of the region would be thanks to them. Britain’s claims, on the other hand, were taken for granted. Thomas Edward Lawrence even regarded them as Britain’s ‘birthright’. For him, and for other influential voices, France as much as Turkey was Britain’s enemy in the Middle East and they should work to eliminate French influence there altogether. Further evidence of the tendency to denigrate the French, and simultaneously to praise British accomplishments, can be found in the widely-held belief that a French presence in the region would be unwelcome, indeed would be forcefully resisted whereas the British would be welcomed by the local inhabitants. Lloyd George even went so far as to quote Arab complaints that the French education being imposed in the region led to ‘familiarity with that kind of French literature which is irreligious and immoral’ and that the women ‘who receive French education tend to become uncontrollable’. This fitted in very well with his own view that it would ‘be an outrage to let the Holy Places pass into the possession of ‘agnostic, atheistic France’. Britain was clearly adopting double standards here. The French vigorously disputed the claim that the Arabs in Iraq ‘recognize the British right of conquest, and would acquiesce in a British protectorate’ while the French would be rejected in Syria. British complaints that the French were ‘inclined to a policy of colonization’, and that ‘their real purpose was to annex the country (Syria) and constitute it an integral part of their Empire’ were scarcely justified given Britain’s own record.

The British between Arabs, Jews and the French

British sympathy for the Arab cause was, however, kept within strict limits by the belief that the peoples of the region were not yet ready to rule themselves. Lawrence’s ‘ambition… that the Arabs should be our first brown dominion, and not our last brown colony’, and Sykes’s affirmation that the Arabs ‘have physique, fire and

15 Balfour wrote in 1919: “I have never been able to understand on what historic basis the French claim to Syria rests. Frenchmen’s share in the Crusades of the Middle Ages, Mazarin’s arrangements with the Turk in the seventeenth century, and the blustering expedition of 1861, lend in my opinion very little support to their far-reaching ambitions.” DBFP,1,IV,No.242. Balfour Memorandum, 11 August 1919.
17 In 1915 Thomas Edward Lawrence wrote that “so far as Syria is concerned it is France and not Turkey that is the enemy” and that he had “no belief in an Anglo-French understanding in the East” where he saw “France as our natural enemy”. Quoted in E. Kedourie, England and the Middle East, op. cit., p. 98.
nimbleness of mind and a sense of breed which makes it impossible to adopt the white versus coloured attitude towards them’, reflected one British point of view. Other British observers were far less flattering. Lord Grey thought that an Arab state was ‘a castle in the air’ and that assurances made to the Arabs did not ‘matter much’, and the British Consul in Beirut described its population as ‘semi-savage’ and praised the French for their ‘strong line’ ‘which the Syrians, being Orientals, would probably in their heart of hearts appreciate’.

The British Foreign Secretary even condemned Feisal, whom the French regarded as a British puppet, as a typical Arab chief ‘whose duplicity and love of intrigue... were notoriously typical of the Arab character’. Moreover, in none of their expressions of sympathy for the Arabs did the British envisage allowing them full control of their own affairs, free of European or British influence. While Sir Arthur Balfour, as Foreign Secretary, argued that the Arab states ‘should be independent’ and ‘live their own life in their own way’, he added that this ‘would be under the patronage, and for certain purposes under the control’ of the ‘superintending Powers’. ‘Such an overlordship’, he argued, was ‘not alien to the immemorial customs and traditions of this portion of the Eastern world’.

Turning to the League Mandates granted to Britain and France, Balfour recognized that they were mere fig leaves. Rejecting outright any suggestion that Britain meant to consult the Syrians, he argued that they would get French rule ‘whatever the(y) may wish’. In Palestine, likewise, he believed that Zionist interests should have priority over the wishes of the 700,000 local Arabs. He concluded that ‘so far as Palestine is concerned, the Powers have made no statement of fact, which is not admittedly wrong, and no declaration of policy which, at least in the letter, they have not always intended to violate’. Whatever the new rhetoric of the League of Nations, of President Wilson’s Fourteen Points and national self-determination, it would be hard to find a more brutal expression of British colonialism than Balfour’s words here.

British officials and ministers were, therefore, confronted with a series of contradictory concerns in the Middle East. Over Syria they recognized that they were in an awkward position, torn between the need to preserve France’s friendship and sympathy for the Arabs. Lloyd George’s attempts to gloss these over as somehow complementary obligations were never convincing and were not accepted by the French or by all his colleagues in London. Indeed Balfour himself acknowledged that ‘the literal fulfilment of all our declarations is impossible... they are incompatible with each other and... they are incompatible with facts’. Choices, therefore, had to made or at least priorities set. Some, like Lord Curzon, initially favoured an agreement with

28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
the Arabs over one with the French. Senior Foreign Office officials thought the Arab movement held out potential advantages for Britain in the Moslem world that outweighed any diplomatic embarrassment which it might cause with Paris. There also remained the strategic view, frequently presented during the war itself, that by supporting Arab nationalism the British could find a means of keeping the French out of the region altogether. Similar thinking lay behind British support for Zionism, which held out of the promise of giving Britain informal control without the cost of annexation.

Certain officials, however, warned against focusing on ‘the purely parochial importance of the Arab question at the expense of the ecumenical importance of the maintenance of cordial relations with France’. They rejected the attempt to align British policy in the Middle East with some form of Arab nationalism (even if this would necessarily be under British guidance), fearing that it would become uncontrollable and possibly take on a dangerous pan-Islamic dimension. Similar arguments came from the French. The idea of adopting a less confrontational stance towards the French in the Middle East was backed up by the argument that Britain could no longer afford an overly ambitious policy and by the recognition that despite the country’s military victories its position was not as bright as it appeared. Some in Whitehall accepted that Britain lacked the vitality and vigour necessary to make a go of new territorial commitments. This in turn found support from even such a keen imperialist as Churchill who, as Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1924, stressed the need for the country’s financial situation to be borne in mind in the conduct of policy in the Middle East, particularly with regard to the cost of stationing British troops. As a result of this complex and contradictory array of concerns British policy was necessarily confused. As Prime Minister until October 1922, Lloyd George did little to clarify it.

The British in their conduct of policy in the Middle East displayed little regard for the feelings of their principal ally. During the armistice talks with the Turks in October 1918, the French were for the most part excluded. At Versailles, the negotiations over the Middle East were among the most problematic showing more danger of producing an Anglo-French rift than many of the more important questions in Europe. However, painfully and slowly, compromises were reached. By the time the outstanding issues were settled at San Remo in April 1920 it was generally accepted in London that, as Lawrence had earlier feared, Britain’s smaller, Arab, friends would have to be sacrificed in the interests of preserving good relations with its bigger friends in Paris. Any remaining ambiguity about British support for Feisal

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31 David George Hogarth from the Foreign Office thought that the “Empire has reached its maximum and begun the descent. There is no more expansion in us... and that being so we shall make but a poor best of the Arab countries; had the capture of Baghdad ended the War we could have done much; but the rest of 1917 and all of 1918 and 1919 have lowered our vitality permanently. We started out in 1914 young and vigorous and we have come out in 1919 to find we are old and must readjust our ideas”. Quoted in A. S. Klieman, *Foundations of British Policy*, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
32 Lawrence had forecast in November 1917 that “the need of bolstering up French courage and determination in the war” meant that “we may have to sell our small friends in pay for our big friends, or

in Syria was ended and when the French moved physically to oust him the British acquiesced with only minor expressions of sympathy for their former ally. Even Curzon, no friend of France, raised no objection, publicly stating in June 1920 that it lay squarely with the conquering powers to dispose of these lands as they saw fit and not with the League, and even less with the representative structures the Arabs were attempting to set up in Damascus. The majority opinion in the Foreign Office now was that it was better to allow the French to have their way in Syria. In 1921 Churchill, who had previously expressed his sympathy for the Arabs and disgust at France’s brutal actions in Syria, recognized that Britain’s ‘strong ties with the French’ would ‘have to prevail’. At the same time, many British officials in the region were inclined to consider the imposition of effective French control in Syria as on the whole a favourable development which, they hoped, remove the source of the most radical Arab nationalism. This was backed up by the feeling that the British and the French had to hold together against the threat of Pan-Arab and Pan-Islamic movements. In Curzon’s words, they faced a ‘struggle between East and West from which Britain suffered no less than France’. He warned that ‘both Arabs and Turks are, after all, or perhaps before all, Moslems, and capable one day of sinking their differences to the detriment of their respective backers’. The message was that Britain and France must stand together to uphold the authority and prestige of the Europeans in the face of a common threat and avoid local factions playing them off against one another. Lloyd George attempted, somewhat unconvincingly, to assure the French that, given ‘the tremendous task upon which [they] were jointly engaged’, he was keen to avoid any friction between them. Balfour recognized that if a settlement could be found for the ‘small but irritating questions which are perpetually raising points of difference between French, Italians and British in Africa and the East’, and if ‘all petty jealousies between these Allied Nations could be finally [removed], not merely those three Allied countries, but all the world would greatly gain’. This, however, proved very difficult to achieve.


34 R. Bullard, *Britain and the Middle East*, op. cit., p. 90.

35 K. Bourne and D. Cameron Watt (eds), *British Documents*..., op. cit., II, 3, Doc.18. 15 October 1921. Sally Marks has emphasized the racially motivated thinking in British foreign policy at this time: “The European club had divisions within itself but its members stood above all others. Lord Curzon... once remarked that Frenchmen ‘are not the sort of people one would go tiger-shooting with’. If necessary, however, Curzon would have found it possible to go tiger-shooting with a Frenchman or an American or perhaps a Czech, but not with an Indian princeling, even one holding a better degree from Oxford than his own. Indians, among other Asians and Africans, were Untermenschen, regarded by Englishmen in essentially the same light that Nazi Germans later viewed Slavic peoples.” Sally Marks, *The Illusion of Peace: International Relations in Europe, 1918-1933*, London, Macmillan, 1980, p. 27.


37 DBFP, 1, IV, No.211. Balfour, 2 July 1919. Lloyd George later lamented in his memoirs that the allies’ failure to reach agreement over the Middle East was “a fatal step, for it broke up the unity which alone would enable the Western Powers to deal effectively with the Turk. This unity was never fully recreated. There can be no reunion without confidence. There can be no trust in the West that is broken in the East”. L. George, *Peace Conference*..., op. cit., p. 878.
Despite reaching agreement on the territorial settlement in the Middle East, this did not spell the end of Anglo-French suspicions. Personal relations between London and Paris were never good and accusations of double dealing flew between them. On the ground in the Middle East each side accused the other of trying to undermine its position. The French complained that British officials had armed anti-French insurgents preparing to oust them from Syria. In similar fashion the British accused the French of harbouring ‘Mesopotamian agitators’ and later of giving refuge to the Mufti of Jerusalem wanted by the British for inciting an Arab revolt. British agents in Palestine condemned French support to anti-Zionist forces as the ‘most dishonourable conduct on the part of an ally’ and as an attempt to ‘wreck’ Britain’s ‘administration and policy’. The French in turn complained that the British were sheltering perpetrators of the assassination attempt against General Gouraud. Such recriminations continued on and off for the next two decades, poisoning Anglo-French relations to the detriment of both countries’ interests in this region and beyond.

If Britain and France fell out over the Arab world, their relations with Turkey produced an even more serious crisis. The peace settlement signed with the Turks in August 1920 was the source of almost immediate troubles. British support for the Greeks inevitably brought a diplomatic clash with the new Turkish regime led by Kemel Ataturk and almost led to armed conflict. When Britain sought to apply pressure on Ankara to back down, including the threat of a naval blockade, London found that its wartime allies in Paris could no longer be relied on. The new French Premier, Poincaré, was in no mood to break with the Turkish government, particularly if this was to be done to defend the interests of the Greeks, and behind them the British. The French made it plain that if Britain would support them more on the Rhine, they would help Britain more in the East. Such a trade off between East and West proved difficult. Instead they continued, in the words of one Times journalist, a ‘policy of backing the protagonists in the... Eastern war as if they were race-horses’. This came to a head in 1922 when, following the defeat of the Greek forces, the French decided to withdraw their troops from the port of Chanak, leaving the British alone. Although an armed clash was avoided, the British felt let down by what they regarded as their ally’s treachery and underhand diplomacy. Poincaré was accused of ‘stabbing (the British) in the back’ and ‘doing his utmost... to destroy the Entente which it took so many years to build up’. The fear that the Dominions might not automatically follow Britain into a war against Turkey and that Britain’s defence budget was being increasingly stretched by the country’s overseas commitments heightened these concerns. Similarly the fact that these events were

38 DBFP, 1, XIII, No. 212. Meinertzhagen to Curzon, 2 March 1920.
39 Berthelot of the French Foreign Ministry told the British in December 1920 that “if we would support the French more on the Rhine, France would help us a great deal more in the East, recognizing that the Rhine is the frontier of France and that the East is our frontier”. Hardinge to Curzon, 17 December 1920. Quoted in C. J. Lowe and M. Dockrill, Mirage..., op. cit., p. 367.
taking place simultaneously with a crisis in Anglo-French relations in Europe, where tensions were growing over the implementation of the peace treaties, only added to British worries and the anger felt towards the French. All these factors inevitably pointed to the need to reconcile Britain’s colonial and European policies, which in turn underlined the fact that if Britain was to maintain its position in the Middle East, which remained a linchpin of its global position, and if it were to maintain its security in Europe, without incurring unbearable costs, then it was necessary to keep Anglo-French relations from breaking down.

**Conclusion and Postscript: Empire and Europe**

Paradoxically the experience of the Second World War again showed the vital importance of the Empire while also fatally undermining Britain’s imperial position. While it created an even stronger sentimental attachment to the Empire, and a corresponding deepening of the psychological distance that separated the British from the other Europeans, it also demonstrated that Britain’s primary preoccupation had to be Europe. Perhaps more importantly, it showed more clearly than ever than the colonized peoples of Africa and Asia were no longer prepared to accept the old colonial order and that the white Dominions were being increasingly drawn into the American sphere of influence. The ensuing disappearance of the Empire and the gradual decline of the Commonwealth, contributed to Britain’s belated acceptance of, and acceptance into, the European Economic Community (EEC). Britain, however, has remained ambivalent towards Europe, unsure whether to throw in its lot with the other Europeans or to maintain a semi-detached position. A clear expression of preference for Europe over a global role has never been entirely accepted in Britain which has attempted to reconcile its interests in both. The Middle East in the years immediately before and after the First World War vividly illustrates how elusive this aim has been. Instead of achieving a harmonious policy encompassing both Empire and Europe British statesmen allowed colonial disagreements to dangerously impinge on their greater need to maintain good relations with their principal ally. Without ever producing a rupture, the Middle East caused a serious loss of confidence between London and Paris that damaged what was for both of them the key relationship.

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Abstract
The ambiguity of Britain’s place in the world as a European and non-European power, closely linked to the Continent yet drawn towards extra-European interests, has long been a central influence upon its foreign policy and national identity. The Middle East, a region Britain has considered of vital importance since the beginning of the twentieth century, demonstrates the difficulties Britain has experienced in reconciling its economic and strategic interest in Europe and its ambition to remain the head of its world Empire. From the start of the century, the Middle East was the scene of numerous clashes with Britain’s principal ally, France, which demonstrated the growing precariousness of its global position and the incompatibility of its European and imperial ambitions.

Résumé
L’ambiguïté de la place de la Grande-Bretagne dans le monde, entre l’Europe et le reste du monde, entre ses relations avec le continent et, en même temps, son attirance pour le grand large, est depuis longtemps au centre de sa politique étrangère et même de sa propre identité nationale. Le Moyen-Orient, considéré comme une région-clé du monde britannique du début du XXe siècle, démontre les difficultés que le pays a rencontré dans ses efforts à concilier ses besoins immédiats en Europe, fondés sur ses intérêts économiques et stratégiques, et ses ambitions de maintenir son rôle à la tête de l’Empire. En particulier, cette région a été le terrain de nombreux clashs avec son allié principal, la France, montrant ainsi la précarité croissante de sa position dans le monde au début du XXe siècle et les incompatibilités entre ses ambitions en Europe et dans l’Empire.

Keywords: Franco-British relations; Middle East.

Mots-clés : Relations France-Grande-Bretagne ; Moyen-Orient.