



A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle for the Mastery of the Middle East

James Barr

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Through a stellar cast of politicians, diplomats, spies and soldiers - including T.E. Lawrence, Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle - 'A Line in the Sand' tells the story of the short but crucial era when Britain and France ruled the Middle East.

A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle for the Mastery of the Middle East Details

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Author : James Barr

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Andrew Fish says

Throughout my life the phrase Middle East crisis has seemed something of a tautology. One of my earliest recollections of world events was the shelling of Lebanon in the early 1980s. The problems of the region seem intractable, views on either side utterly entrenched, and those of us with the luxury to be thousands of miles away struggle to make sense of it all.

Part of the problem, of course, is that we never really discuss the root causes. There's a sort of collective memory that it has to do with imperialism, the Balfour declaration and some kind of collective guilt about the suffering of Jews in the Second World War, but this is far from a detailed picture. And we need to understand, because if we don't we will fall into the same trap as our poorly educated world leaders, painting a simple picture of good and evil which does nothing but perpetuate the violence.

Barr's book is a good place to start. Picking up the story of the region as the Ottoman Empire collapsed and World War One began, he examines the area through the lens of Anglo-French rivalry, completing his story with the end of the British Mandate and the foundation of Israel. Even though, as a British reader, I've long been conditioned to view the French with regard to events from 1066 to Agincourt, Joan of Arc to Waterloo, the revelations of just what happened in those few decades is truly shocking. Organising coups, rigging elections and sponsoring terrorism, nothing was beyond the pale. Oil is a factor, of course, but much less so than people would usually have you believe. Instead, what we have here is the pure arrogance of imperialism at its peak, the peoples of the region little more than pawns to be sacrificed for strategy or even just to save face.

The Zionists, too, are a major factor in the story. For those who see the region through the prism of the 1960s, or whose view of the Israelis is largely shaped by the atrocities of the Holocaust, some of this will be uncomfortable reading, but it is made abundantly clear that the current Arab-Israeli conflict has roots much deeper than the Six Day War.

Barr writes a balanced and breathtaking narrative. At times, the speed at which events emerge and reverse is astonishing, but his style makes it relatively easy to keep up with the complex politics of the region. His conclusions seemed a little too even-handed based on what had gone before, but this didn't detract from what was a very worthwhile read. Now all I need is something which covers the events from 1947 until the present day.

Koen Crolla says

The Sykes-Picot Agreement was a loose secret agreement between the British Empire and France signed in 1916, broadly dividing the territory of the soon-to-be-defeated Ottoman Empire between them. Barr traces the evolution of that agreement from 1916 to 1949, when Israel was founded.

The problem is that Barr is British and draws mainly from British sources—often primary sources, which he takes at face value if it's all possible to do so. He claims that an important reason for writing this book is his surprise at learning that French officials sold weapons to a Jewish militia fighting against the British

occupation of Palestine during WW2—when, he imagines, Free France owed its very existence to Britain's magnanimity—but the impression you get reading it is that what he really resents is France's refusal to roll over and accept Britain's colonial and military ambitions in the Middle East in their entirety. (That Britain armed the Druze against the French during the Druze Revolt two decades earlier, for example, is vaguely acknowledged but not considered a great crime.)

A lot of information is pulled directly from letters and reports by General Edward Spears, a man so hateful of the French even Winston Churchill had to call on him repeatedly to keep his Francophobia in check. I have little love for France and none at all for Charles de Gaulle, but even I have to acknowledge that the resulting story told is ridiculously lopsided. It goes without saying that the actions of France in the Levant (and in its wider colonial empire in general) should be a source of deep national shame, but every action taken by France or individual Frenchmen is painted as deeply malicious, informed by an out-of-touch superiority complex, Nazi sympathies, or (in one particularly slanderous case) alcoholism and spinelessness, while every action taken by the British is motivated by ill-conceived good intentions, kind-hearted concern that the French would break their word towards the native population, or (even the best will of the world can't whitewash Orde Wingate) implied mental illness.

It will come as no surprise that Barr used to write for the Daily Telegraph.

Still, the plain events are certainly laid out, and it's possible to ignore everything Barr writes about motivations and come away with a better understanding of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq (though being on the British side of the line and not the subject of French interference, that was glossed over very quickly), Palestine, and the creation of the state of Israel. I can't imagine better books haven't been written about it, though.

Nadim Karmoussa says

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Arukiyomi says

What the chart of my progress below does not reveal is that the day I started this was in fact in May 2013 whereas I didn't finish it, after a vast effort, until Sept. 2014. I used to read a great amount of non-fiction and this kind of history in particular. With that experience, I can tell you that Barr excels at taking what is a complex and intriguing series of historical events and rendering them as dull as watching water evaporate.

If you're into writers who can actually write this kind of book (Tolland, Shirer, Fisk or Beevor come to mind), you will be very disappointed by Barr's inability to make any character memorable or to connect themes so that you feel like you are following some kind of connected historical narrative. Individual chapters are a complete lottery. Some are fast paced and focussed. Others seem to be inserted just to pad the book out.

This is a great shame because there aren't many books out there that deal with topic for the layman. After all, we are all living in the legacy of the horrendous decisions that Britain and France made at the time. It is the responsibility of the writers of history to interpret the past so that we understand that the present is its result. Barr fails to do this in an engaging manner and thus risks burying this message in badly constructed narrative.

The writing aside, I came away with my dislike of the role of the French in 21st century history reinforced. Common belief was that they were our allies in WW2. They were, but only so far as it served to rid them of an enemy they couldn't keep at bay themselves. Meanwhile, they were very much stabbing Britain in the back in the Levant. More of their despicable exploits should be widely known: their needless massacre of Syrians after WW2 and their arming of Jewish terrorist groups being two that Barr brought to my attention.

But Britain comes off scarcely better. Desperate to oust the French from the area, they connived with any and every Arab faction that was sympathetic to this cause. And it is the direct impact of their policies on Jewish/Palestinian populations in what was to become Israel and the West Bank which we see on the news virtually every day. We got involved where we should not have done and screwed up. If Barr could write better, more people would know this.

Mark says

Well written, well researched and a pretty damning indictment about the imperialist powers of Britain and France vying with each other for their slice of the Middle-East during and after the First World War. It would have been interesting to get a further perspective on this sorry episode from the another view point such as from the peoples who lived there but that aside I found the book very well written and informative.

Katia N says

Very interesting, shocking in many parts the history of rivalry of the British and the French in the Middle East. You can trace the impact the two decaying empires had on the current conflict as well. I knew the role of the British in Palestine. But I did not know about the role of France in the region, how devious and powerless at the same time it was. Also based upon my understanding of the book, it seems that T E Lawrence was the first who applied the pure terrorist tactics with his Arab pupils in the region. And that the terrorist tactics was one of the main decisive factors for the Jews to achieve the statehood in 1949. So if it worked for the Jews then, it is less surprising that modern terrorist do not think their efforts are futile.

Christopher says

A jolly fun romp between a mildly dysfunctional odd couple on a fantastic east Mediterranean cruise.

Or actually, a tale of outright indirect, passive-aggressive competition for regional influence between two dying powers who had yet to realize their time was fast being eclipsed. Most of it is actually quite tragic, but considering that it ends with both powers embarrassingly kicked out of the region shortly after WWII (interestingly enough, when the rivalry was at its most violent and insane despite-or because of-being allies), it certainly also has an aura of comedy.

Salma Nagy says

The book is full of details and very informative, the main thought I'm left with is: the audacity of colonial powers! The audacity!!

Michael Finocchiaro says

I read A Line in the Sand to try to fill the gaps in my knowledge about the 20th C origins of many of the Middle East nations which were created - rather arbitrarily it turns out - by the colonial British and French powers following the precipitous fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1916 during WWI. I was appalled by the

violence employed by all the actors, the duplicity of the colonizers, the terrorism of the Zionists (!), but felt smarter and more informed about this delicate and explosive region once I finished it. James Barr, being a British writer, does not spare punches regarding British abuses, but does paint both the Zionists and the French in a particularly dark manner making me wonder if there is another "unbiased" account that I need to read.

Good readability, interesting anecdotes and still extremely relevant given the quagmire that Syria and Gaza are in as I write.

Abdullah Khasawneh says

As the author says at the end of the book, it is a tale from which neither country emerges with much credit.

What you can "learn" from this book is that (Western) politicians manipulate, lie, and even kill to serve their own interests. Arabs have always been the victims of Western imperialism and violence, and yet we're the ones that retain the reputation of being terrorists. Of course, I'm talking about Arab peoples, and not administrations.

I have never read or heard of worse terrorists than Israelis. They kill, burn, and destroy; and then - quite stupidly, if you ask me - they pretend to be the victims.

There's a saying about history "repeating itself". It is actually people that keep committing the same mistakes over and over again.

Pink says

I didn't enjoy the writing, so this was a struggle even at the 50 page mark. The events in this book are fascinating, but they were portrayed in such a long, drawn out style, with so many forgettable people that I quickly became bored. I'm not sure it really had the makings of a book, as I feel like I'd have preferred a Wikipedia article, which is never a good comparison for a work of non-fiction.

Seth Lynch says

The blurb above gives you a good all-round picture of the scope of this book. The first thing I should point out is that this book reads like a well written novel. Any history book holds the possibility of killing a subject with a dry regurgitation of facts. The skill lies in presenting them in such a way as to make them interesting, relevant, and memorable. James Barr has achieved this with consummate ease. I don't say that lightly – I've always read quite a lot of history books and some of them tried to write in a novelistic way and failed miserably. They tend to indulge two serious errors: they get too flowery, using a lot of adjectives and pointless description; they write as if the historical figures are characters in a book – and so start telling us what they were thinking (without and evidence to back it up) Many's the history book I've flung across the room after a few pages of twaddle like that. Anyway, I only mention it because this book reads like a novel – but in the good ways. Barr does not claim to know what a character was thinking – unless there is a diary or letter to back it up. He does not sink into the mire of purple prose. He keeps it moving. He kept me interested.

This was a little like one of those crime novels where we know who dies and we just want to find out who did it and why. There must have been countless points where it could have turned out differently. Moments in history where the Middle East could have developed into a peacefully place – even with a Jewish homeland integrated there somewhere. For that to have happened there would have had to have been no oil and no Suez. Even with the British holding on to Suez it might have been OK – had the British politicians really been interested in peace and the handover of power. However, once oil entered the equation there never was going to be a peaceful solution. The British of the time played the part of the modern day Americans: lots of talk about liberty and self-determination but only if that meant getting or keeping the oil. There were one or two noble figures along the way, along with a few sad victims. Like today the real victims are the people who live in war torn lands because the people around them want more; more land, status, oil, power...

If you are interested in this period of history or this region you should buy this book (or borrow it from the library). If you want to get an idea of why there are so many problems in the Middle East today – read this book. The period covers the incubation, birth and nursery of the present day struggles. It feels impartial, perhaps with a very slight English bias. You don't need any prior knowledge (I didn't really have any) and the book is pretty much jargon free. It is also an entertaining read.

Roisin says

This is a brilliant book! If you want to know why the Middle East and some parts of North Africa are in a state, read this. Mr Barr takes an almost blow by blow account of the events which lead to the Sykes-Picot line in Syria, (the line of the title), the fight for Arab home rule and the establishment of the State of Israel.

France and Britain have a lot to answer for and our author doesn't shy away from the terrible methods, racism, and imperialist attitudes that these countries had towards their colonies. These colonists were trying to get gains for themselves, stringing the Arabs along at times.

The acts of terrorism that took place before and in the run up to 1948 were appalling and it easy to forget that such things took place as a means to help bring about the State of Israel, and that large numbers of Palestinians were forced to leave their homes to create a Jewish homeland.

Our author knows his stuff, using archives, letters and documents he pieces together a breathtaking and sometimes shocking account of events. A powerful work.

Bridget says

Four stars overall. Some chapters were more like three stars and others were five stars. This was a fairly uneven read. There are a few very dull chapters in this book that don't really need to be entire chapters. For example, the author spends pages and pages on the dispute between the British and the French about the proposed route of the oil pipeline from Mosul to the sea. Britain wants it in Haifa. France wants it in Tripoli. And on and on and on. In the end, guess what??? They split the pipe and it goes to both ports. I just told you in a few sentences what it takes the book a very long slog of a chapter to convey.

A long slog, despite the fact that I am very familiar with the geography of the region treated in this book, and

I've read books about several of the main characters or peripheral aspects of this period of history. This book was not difficult to read because it was unfamiliar or a lot of new information. It was difficult to read because dude sometimes didn't know how to advance the story.

Other times, however, the storytelling was stellar. In the end, the book does a really good job explaining how the modern Middle East came to look like it does. It's just atrocious how it all went down. Sykes, for example, took a look at a map of what is now Syria/Lebanon/Iraq/Jordan/Palestine/Israel and proposed drawing a line from the 'e' in 'Acre' to the final 'k' in Kirkuk...and that would be the border dividing the French Mandate from the British one. Yikes.

A quote from Sir John Shaw, the former chief secretary of Palestine, in the final chapter of the book:

"It's not your business or my business, or British business, or [for] anybody else to interfere in other people's countries and tell them how to run it, even to run it well. They must be left to their own salvation."

D?nnis says

Will this lesson ever be learned???

"Years later Sir John Shaw, the former chief secretary of Palestine who survived the King David Hotel bombing, was asked to assess Britain's record in the mandate.

'In many cases we thought that we were doing good to the people concerned, and indeed we were,' he said. 'I mean we stamped out all sorts of abuses and malpractices and things but,' he hesitated, 'if you look at it from a purely philosophical, high-minded point of View, I think it is immoral, and I think it's... it's not only immoral but it's ill-advised.'

'Why?' Shaw was asked.

'Why? Well . . . because it's not your business or my business, or British business, or [for] anybody else to interfere in other people's countries and tell them how to run it, even to run it well. They must be left to their own salvation.'"
