

Title—Western Imperialism in the Middle East 1914-1958

Author—D. K. Fieldhouse

Year—2006

Categories: Imperialism/Colonialism, Middle East, British/French Empire, Politics

Place: The Middle East

Time: 1914-1958

Argument Synopsis:

Fieldhouse's book is a general survey of the politics and administration in the territories under British and French mandatory authority in the period after the Second World War. The central question of the book is what the effect was of the mandates held by Britain and France had on the one-time provinces of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle and Near East. He considers alternative possibilities had the British and French not taken control of these provinces in the form of mandates. Fieldhouse concludes that while mere withdrawal of the British and French from the Ottoman provinces after 1918 would not have resulted in a political vacuum, neither would a group of well-constructed indigenous states have emerged fully-formed. He argues that the Arabs in this period were competent to run their own affairs as municipalities but were not equipped to form viable nation states. Fieldhouse provides an assessment of the experience of the various countries under the mandates of Britain and France, including Iraq, Syria, Palestine, and Lebanon. He argues that the period of mandates was one of virtual social standstill in all these territories.

Fieldhouse demonstrates how the British relied heavily on the local notables in these territories to increase their social and political influence. In the case of Iraq, the British proved seriously inadequate at protecting minorities—he notes how into the present Iraq has remained a Sunni state. Fieldhouse argues that in Iraq the British created a state with reasonably efficient Western-style administration and political institutions. He criticizes the British for pretending to the League of Nations in 1931 that Iraq was a genuine democracy where the rights of all, including minorities, were secure. Fieldhouse argues that the British were very aware that the rights of minorities were not secure in Iraq. In the case of Palestine, Fieldhouse characterizes it as the major British failure in the region. Palestine was the first time that Britain ended its rule without leaving an established government behind. According to Fieldhouse, the failure in Palestine was caused by a mix of strategic ambitions and misguided philanthropy.

The main feature of both British and French rule in the region was that they depended on the established social classes and helped to perpetuate their dominance. Fieldhouse argues that the mandates left behind international instability. Within the new states, the British and French left ruling elites whose attitudes remained those of an unreconstructed patrimonial society, but who now had weapons of political control the Ottomans never had. When they left, the British and French bequeathed power to the old and new elites who succeeded them. Fieldhouse argues that the mandates differed from other European forms of imperialism mainly in their brevity.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Although the mandates became inevitable after the destruction of Ottoman rule, they did not fulfill the expectations of the idealists who created the guidelines for the system
- The period of mandates was one of virtual social standstill in all these territories
- Both British and French rule depended on the established social classes to help to perpetuate their dominance