

The secret Anglo-French War in the Middle East: intelligence and decolonization, 1940–1948, edited by Meir Zamir, Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern History, London, Routledge, 2015, 486 pp., \$168.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-138-78781-0

Nathaniel L. Moir

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BOOK REVIEW

The secret Anglo-French War in the Middle East: intelligence and decolonization, 1940–1948, edited by Meir Zamir, Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern History, London, Routledge, 2015, 486 pp., \$168.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-138-78781-0

The Secret Anglo-French War in the Middle East is the latest addition to the Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern History series. Meir Zamir, who teaches at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Israel, is an authority on Lebanon and produced two previous studies on the development of modern Lebanon in particular. This project, his most recent work, builds on those studies and is expansive in scope. A major component of the book is Zamir's use of new primary source material. These documents are presented as the second part to the book, and they follow a historical narrative which details the covert conflict between France and Great Britain during World War II.

Originally, Zamir began his project with the intent to create a third volume on Lebanon between 1939 and 1946 with a focus on Charles de Gaulle. In this book, his plan changed because of significant primary sources he discovered while conducting research in Paris. Instead of focusing on Lebanon alone, he decided to investigate the broader, complex and covert conflict between France and Great Britain in the Middle East. This conflict occurred, paradoxically, while the countries remained allies against the Axis and during their ill-fated attempts to retain their colonies and influence in the region.

Zamir first focuses on Great Britain and its policies in the Middle East which essentially operated along two tracks. This first path included formal plans developed through Winston Churchill's administration. However, a second secret channel was also implemented without clear approval from Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary. Churchill, on the other hand and, as Zamir suggests, provided tacit but difficult to substantiate approval as a means to discredit Charles de Gaulle. Churchill, allegedly, was concerned about the ability – or inability as he might claim – of France to contain the Soviet Union's influence in the region. Most critically, this secret track was devised to decrease French influence in Syria and Lebanon with a related goal to envelop them within Britain's sphere of influence. These two countries were part of France's mandate and important components of France's overall strategic vision in the post-war period.

As Zamir points out, North Africa in particular was France's priority, but it required Britain's assistance in maintaining control there. However, the cooperation between France and Britain in the Middle East was undermined by a group of British Arabists, known as 'the Club', who sought to subvert French control of Syria and Lebanon. Their goal, unabashedly but clandestinely accomplished, was to retain British 'Empire' through the creation of a greater Hashemite 'Greater Syria'. It was intended that a 'Greater Syria' would be united with Iraq which was already within British control. Usefully, Zamir cogently investigates this complex and covert war with copious supporting documentation and through a well-written narrative.

The evidence Zamir marshalls primarily consists of documents he discovered in the *Archives Nationales* in Paris in 2007. During his research there, he found references to Syria obtained by French intelligence in the correspondence between Charles de Gaulle and Georges Bidault, who served as the Foreign Minister in the French Provisional Government. After more detailed investigation of Bidault's papers, Zamir discovered hundreds of French documents. These papers consisted of top secret reports on the activities of British agents, private and official

correspondence between Anglo, French, Syrian and Arab leaders, as well as materials from the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Importantly, the documents revealed the underhanded work of Arabist specialists within the British intelligence apparatus. These individuals were the aforementioned British agents who comprised 'The Club'. Working in a freewheeling manner, not only did this group seek to undermine the French position in the Middle East but also sought to implement 'their own policies in the region ... which also deliberately undermined those of their Foreign Secretary (Anthony Eden)' (27). The documents detailing these efforts, translated into English, form the second part of *The Secret Anglo-French War*.

The first part of the book consists of three chapters delivered through a fast-paced narrative. At times, it is clear that Zamir has specialists in mind and his work, arguably, changes the historiography of the field. However, non-specialists still may derive a great deal through Zamir's analysis of the complex colonial competition between Britain and France as World War II concluded. The contested legacies of colonialism in Syria and Iraq, of course, remain a challenge. An early video posted on YouTube by The Islamic State – known as ISIS at the time – showed a map of Syria and Iraq and contended that their border, created by the 1916 Sykes-Pico Treaty, was no longer valid. Clearly, the region's colonial history is not forgotten by those fighting there, nor should it by anyone. Zamir's book on the colonial legacy of the Middle East, therefore, is timely as well as informative. For those unfamiliar with this legacy, at the book's core is the paradoxical conflict between France and Britain. As they decolonized their territories – against their wishes – they also subverted each other's hegemony. The back-dealing channels and competition between the two allies, and how they attempted to accomplish their goals, comprise Part I.

The first chapter of this section examines Britain's 'covert and political action in the Middle East during and after the Second World War'. These efforts were largely the work of the aforementioned group of British Arabists, intelligence officers, diplomats and administrators. As experts, they were in positions of power to conduct covert operations and shape British policies off the radar. These individuals, known collectively as 'The Club', included General Richard Spears, the British Minister in Syria and Lebanon, Brigadier General Iltyd Clayton, Lieutenant-Colonel Walter Stirling, Sir Walter Smart and Sir Kinahan Cornwallis. The Saddam Hussein, equivalent of his day in Iraq, strongman Nuri al-Sai'id, was not a direct member of this group but was complicit in helping the group achieve British goals in the Middle East. Importantly, these British Arabists were either former colleagues of, or indirectly connected with, T.E. Lawrence, and they were critically seeped in the glory of British imperialism. As Zamir points out, their shared beliefs also included Winston Churchill's antipathy for Charles de Gaulle and an aversion of decolonialization.

Churchill's love for and commitment to the idea of the British Empire served as justification for them to commit unacceptable and morally questionable acts against any forces they considered a threat to the Empire, whether friend or foe ... They could not come to terms with the painful reality that, despite its remarkable victory against the Axis Powers, post-war Britain was no longer a Great Power, but a weak, economically exhausted, declining empire, unable to compete with the United States and the Soviet Union. (7)

The efforts to maintain the Empire, and undermine French influence in the Middle East through covert action, are the focus of Chapter 2. Essentially, conflict was multilateral: British versus Vichy in the Levant; Britain against Free French forces seeking to maintain the French Mandate in Syria and Lebanon, and especially, Petain's Vichy France versus de Gaulle's Free French as World War II unfolded. Lest we forget, this was all undergirded by pre-war animosity between Britain and France. Furthermore, it was complicated during World War II by the cross-purpose efforts of British and Free French Intelligence efforts against Axis infiltration in the Levant.

Britain feared that France's rapid capitulation in 1940 indicated that France was weak. While Vichy was obviously not to be trusted, de Gaulle's Free French forces were also unreliable. Ensuring control in Egypt over the Suez and determining whether Vichy would allow the Axis to use the Levant for operations were key strategic issues for Great Britain. Therefore, because they were allies, ensuring the achievement of British goals meant addressing challenges through covert action, psychological warfare and political intelligence. On an organizational and individual level, the 'secret war conducted by the British intelligence services against Vichy in the Levant became a laboratory where they gained experience and honed their professional skills' (65). The majority of Chapter 2, in sum, focuses on anecdotal evidence of this development. One downside of Chapter 2 is that it moves too quickly at times, especially considering the complexity of events and personalities involved.

The final chapter of Part I covers the period between 1943 and 1948, and it emphasizes outcomes resulting from the clandestine war between the two allies. In the second period assessed in the chapter, after July 1944, for example, Zamir reveals how French agents sought to undermine British policies in the Middle East in retaliation for earlier subversion by British agents. These efforts focused on countering British attempts to evict the French from the Levant primarily. Secondly, the French actively undermined Britain's goal of uniting Syria with Iraq through the aforementioned Hashemite 'Greater Syria'. The British goal, of course, was to ensure that all of this would remain within the Union Jack's shadow. The multi-lateral conflicts of the region and this time period are a challenge to clearly narrate but Zamir succeeds in this task. Readers unfamiliar with the topic, however, should prepare by reading James Barr's *A Line in the Sand: The Anglo-French Struggle for the Middle East, 1914–1948*, first published in 2011.


The narrative section of the book concludes with a strong epilogue which ties Zamir's intriguing study together. More importantly, the epilogue sets the stage for further examination of the primary sources which follow and make up, as mentioned, Part 2 of the book. Altogether, 396 sources are presented. Translated into English specifically for this project, the sources include operation orders, correspondence and reports which vary in length from one to three short paragraphs. In conjunction with Zamir's highly detailed narrative, the overall work is a highly commendable contribution to the field of intelligence studies. Additionally, due to Zamir's presentation of such extensive primary sources, for the first time in English, it deservedly serves as a cornerstone for further work on the subject.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Nathaniel L. Moir is a Ph.D. graduate student in the department of history at the State University of New York at Albany.

Nathaniel L. Moir
State University of New York at Albany, Albany, NY, USA
 nmoir@albany.edu

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