

Promised Lands: The British and the Ottoman Middle East

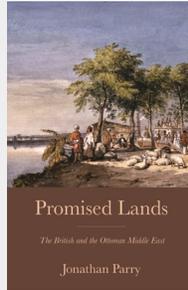
By Jonathan Parry

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A scholar of British politics and political ideas in the 19th century with a well-established reputation among modern British historians, Jonathan Parry was drawn to the Ottoman Empire while investigating the governing strategies of British liberalism and Victorian conservatism, especially as articulated by the conservative politician who twice served as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Benjamin Disraeli. In contrast, the liberal leader who was the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom for 12 years, William Gladstone's High Anglicanism and Disraeli's Jewish pedigree saw 'the East' from different mindsets. These clashes of policy and personality came to a head over the eastern question, the ambiguous fate of the Ottoman Empire.

The book charts the responses of the British Empire to secure the two routes to India, through Egypt and the Red Sea, and through Baghdad and the Persian Gulf, lands that were subjected to the Ottoman Empire from the European powers. This was especially important after Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, which showed the vulnerability of India to attacks, and the Crimean War. Considerable attention is devoted to the variety of strategies adopted by then policy-makers in London and their satellite officials locally, seeking influence in the region. Inciting Arab revolts against Ottomans, sharpening local factional disputes, deploying the Muslims into action



on behalf of British interests, and using the classical and biblical story of these, once fertile and holy lands, which were claimed would become the center of prosperousness again with British vision against alleged misgovernment of Ottoman Sultanate, were on the major plots. Specifically, along the fault lines with

Egypt, Iraq, Kurdistan, Persia, the Gulf, and Aden. Caustic relations with regional Arabs, Mamluks, Kurds, Christians, and Jews are not overlooked. Alongside tireless strategies to increase the influence of local agents in the field, the British Embassy's efforts to strengthen Ottoman central power, consequently increasing the British embassy's power in Constantinople, by supporting Tanzimat reforms to modernize the social and political foundations of the Ottoman Empire, was another key element to Britain's Middle East policy. However, it is strongly argued that those policies were not the results of an imperial journey but can be read as chronicles of British pragmatism, to extent that even the approach to archeology in the book is rather political. Excavations in Ninevah and bringing Cleopatra's needle, the obelisk from Egypt gifted by Egypt's ruler Mehmet Ali to London, all were echo of political competition between France and Britain as well as an opportunity for officials like Henry Layard to make their name.

Parry's pen portrays British power as a naval and commercial one, rather than a land

power, which was boosted by the arrival of steamships in the 1830s and charmed some of the local leaders to turn towards Britain. This brought the necessity of the Ottoman Empire's existence into question, the eastern question, should the Ottoman Empire be admitted to the Concert of Europe as leverage against each other or should they all put the final nail in the coffin of the "sick man of Europe" and divide the lands up among themselves.

Parry's exhaustive work chronicles tumultuous imperial efforts in the Middle East, in such a manner that challenges the work of Edward Said and the general perception of Orientalism. Parry argues that there is not a grand imperial plan with a single-minded intention to dominate the world, he paints Britain's activities in the region as born of anxiety about protecting British power in India and believes that political historians need to make distinctions across time, rather than searching general explanatory models like in Said's approach. According to Parry, the presence of British power in the Middle East had a different meaning in 1820 than it later had in 1840.

British politicians and diplomats and East India Company officers, differed, rather sharply, on policy and their activities, he contends. London and Calcutta both sent agents to Persia without knowing about each other. Local agents, like Claudius Rich and Sidney Smith, claim that they have better knowledge about locals and how things work than their 'distant bosses' in London. Parry demonstrates with lucidity and conviction just how far British officials employ uniform strategies for British interests in the Middle East. These are more often than not facilitated by the ambitions of officials desiring to make a name for themselves along with untold riches. Foreign Secretary, Viscount Palmerston, instigated Russophobia and attacked Wellington's govern-

ment for its feeble inaction "to make his name as foreign policy expert" (p. 116). Here, the book is rather original in its ability to uncover naked self-interest stalking the corridors of power, posing as valiant exploration.

Parry persuasively insists that Britain had no appetite to settle in the Ottoman sphere nor govern its territories directly. These, he contests were merely regions Britain needed to control to secure wider vested interests. Readers are urged to view the British presence with a pragmatic, rather than an imperial eye. Though he seems reluctant to present an explanation for Britain's sudden claim to nearly all the Middle East regions governed by the Sultanate pre-1918 and the existence of British bases in Malta, India, Gibraltar, Cyprus, and various lands in the region to date. In this regard, Parry seems shy of putting forth Britain's active role in world's Middle East politics for consideration.

The famous legend, Alexander the Great, asks Aristotle about what he should do with the locals of the lands he conquered. Should he exile, imprison, or kill them? Aristotle says: "You will sow seeds of discord among people and once they start to fight with each other, be the mediator." Parry devotes considerable attention to this strategy of divide and conquers, perfected by Britain in the Levant. Imperial agents in the field, such as Claudius Rich saw Kurds as a good leverage of influence over Persia and the Pasha in Baghdad. Rich tried to use the nationalism card to cause a revolt inspiring feeling of revolution with claims the locals should be independent. Figures like Harford Jones, on the one hand, busied themselves trying to persuade Wahhabis to be allied with Egypt against the French. Simultaneously, striving for an agreement between Baghdad and the Shia against the Wahhabist leaders. Britain's brilliant balance of power

system, built on ingenious strategies, is rather fascinating from the readers' perspective but conversely brings to mind how the short-term British dominance in the region became the source of some political and sociological problems whose impacts are present today, whether it was anticipated or not.

One of the most peculiar wars of history, the Crimean War, allegedly happened due to Russia's expansions in the Ottoman Balkan provinces and its claim that as protector of Eastern Orthodoxy, they needed to defend the honor of Christianity, which had been crushed underfoot in Jerusalem. Surprisingly enough France, the protector of Catholicism had the same argument. Parry points out the facade that great powers were putting on for their own interest and downplays the importance of Christianity, especially in policies that Britain employed, and states that "Balfour's declaration can be seen as offering a humanitarian spin on Britain's territorial objective – a spin that seemed necessary, especially in view of the likely importance of America in shaping the post-war settlement" (p. 426). Ostensibly to Evangelicals, wealthy Englishmen, and British officials, the aim of the Jewish restoration in Palestine was doing God's work for Christ's Second Coming. However, the other side of the coin is much more political, winning local predominance and financial support, British officials Lord Palmerston and William Young saw that earning the gratitude of wealthy Jews would

prove beneficial. Arguably it was also beneficial in the geopolitical aspect, Palestine borders with Egypt, Syria and most importantly it is in the Red Sea route consequently to secure its waterways to India, Britain had to influence the area. Having settled the Jews in the land which was ruled by Turks and Arabs living in it, was the perfect counterpart for ultimate chaos that would require a permanent peacemaker.

Promised Land is an exhaustive work that focuses on the often neglected early British encounter in the Middle East. Though the vast amount of details and solely the British Empire perspective can prove a source of disillusionment for some, Parry's effort to avoid all kinds of stereotypes, which often prove a distraction, can be appreciated by the readers. To him, the relationship between Mehmet Ali and Britain can be explained by Britain's reliance on the "quiet and natural industry of the Arabs" (p. 76), rather than pure imperialism. What is striking the most is there was no mention of the Young Turk Revolution and Committee of Union and Progress, *İttihad ve Terakki*. These are the key elements of anti-Ottoman sentiment in the period where Parry tirelessly argues that it was the enmity between the Ottoman Empire and other locals which forced Britain to get involved in the first place. Nonetheless Promised Land is an impressive work of scholarship and essential reading for anyone with an interest in the modern history of the Middle East.