British Middle East Policy In The Late 1930 Essay, Research Paper

British Middle East Policy in the Late 1930’s:Middle East was seen as the central junction for the communication of the British global empire. The shortest sea connection between Britain and India was through the Suez Canal, while the air and land routes connected Africa and Egypt to Palestine and the Middle East. This area was also a major source of oil. Oil was to become one of the most useful chemical needed by the economy of a country both in peace and most importantly for war. The British commitment to a Jewish National Home in Palestine, agreed upon in the Balfour Declaration of 1917, created a series of conflicts for the British-Arab policy. This pledge to the Zionists, created a great uprising by the Arabs both in Palestine and the neighboring countries. It was apparent that the British were losing control over this area. The Italian conquest of Abyssinia in 1935-1936 and the take over of Rhine land by Hitler in 1936 added to the apparent breakdown of British prestige and power. The Arabs fully aware of the British loss of superiority in the world and specially Asia, added to their restlessness with British policy on Jewish immigration made them think again about their relations with the British. The Arabs started to lose faith in Great Britain as their protector and their friend. They were forced to look the other way for protection, to a country which also sees Jews as a major problem, and is willing to cooperate with the Arabs both economically and politically. This country was Germany. The British were on the verge of losing all control in the Middle East. By the late 1930’s, the British in an attempt to hold on the Arab-British relationship before the preceived second world war, change their policies in the Middle East; and started to gear their policy toward the Arabs and away from the Jews. Arabs relationship with the British long pre-dated World War I. It started towards the middle of the nineteenth century. British interest blossomed into excitement over literary discoveries in Arab culture, such as the sixteen volumes of the Arabian Nights which were printed in Richard Burton’s translation between 1885 and 1888. The Arab counterpart of these British sentiments was respect for the British institutions. During World War I, T.E. Lawrence, a British agent, met Sharif Hussein of Mecca, who was the head of Arabs in the Moslem holy city of Mecca, to come to an agreement. Great Britain sponsored the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire in exchange for independence of Turkey’s Arab provinces. Sharif Hussein of Mecca agreed to help the British in the war by attacking the Ottoman Empire, which was an allie of Germany in WWI. The British fought alongside Sharif of Mecca against the Ottoman Empire. Two people shared a great experience, but as far as the Arabs were concerned this was quickly changed to bitter disappointment. The British government’s promise of support for the independence of Turkey’s Arab provinces was flatly contradicted by a series of agreements concluded with its allies in the course of the war, which provided for the partitionaning of the Ottoman Empire into “spheres of interest” among Great Britain, France, Italy and Russia. As soon as the British conquer and take over the land from the Turks, their relationship with the Arabs changes automatically. The Arabs saw that their helpmate in beating the Turks turned into a policemen in Iraq and Palestine and assisted the French to do the same in the Levant States. So from the Arab point of view, the area instead of becoming liberated and free, remained in bondage under another ruler. The Arab leaders were extremely dissatisfied since they expected more from the British. The British, still interested in keeping the relationship with the Arabs, puts one of Sharif’s son Feisal as the ruler of Iraq and another one, Abdulah, as the ruler of Trans-Jordan. Meanwhile Sharif himself loses his throne to Ibn Saud in 1924-1925. The Anglo-Arab connections survived through Sharif’s son, but virtually all the friends of Britain belonged to a single generation, and generations die out. A new generation was created and bred in the turmoil of the Young Turk revolution. Some young people were adrift because their families had lost their tradition values and dogma and an established pattern of behavior. They had to look for new roots to follow. New religious movements such as the Moslem Brotherhood (founded in Egypt in 1928) did not adequately answer the needs of this new generation. Moslem Brotherhood wanted to restore the past, whereas most young men wanted to look forward. These young men were ready to put religion away in exchange for the Western model of lifestyle and culture. They wanted to enjoy freedom and democracy for themselves, but the leading strings were held by the foreign mentors. The growing interest of the younger generation in public activities created a number of organizations. They included social and political associations, sports clubs and youth movements. Two groups that emerged from that background had the greatest on the future armed struggle: their veterans to become the backbone of the 1936-1939 revolts. They were Izz al-Din al-Qassam’s ‘Black Hand’ and Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni’s Al-Jihad al Muqaddas (The Sacred Holy War). Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni was from most distinguished Arab family in Palestine. His father, Haj Amin al Husseini, was the mayor of Jerusalem and the president of PAE (the leader of the Palestinian national movement). Abd al-Qadir lay the foundation for a revolt. He gathered the young villagers with the spirit of the holy war (Jihad), organized them in secret cells raised funds and purchased weapons.Qassam and his group the Black Hand used similar methods as Husayni to get support in Palestine. He had extreme fundamental beliefs with strong nationalistic principles. He was killed by the British in 1935 after he killed a Jewish police officer. He is considered “not only the founding father of the Palestinian Jihad, but also the pioneer of Palestinian armed revolutionary thinking, who had laid down the principles of an all-out armed struggle against the mandatory authorities”. This hostility to Britain grew, but it was not only the Arabs in the Middle East that were sick of the British and the Europeans, a similar feeling was seen all across Asia. “Early 1927, the Chinese turned the British out of their concession at Hankow; later in the same year, Reza Shah denounced the capitulatory privileges of foreigners in Persia. In 1930, Ghandi gave notice that he was defying the government salt monopoly and led his march to the sea for a symbolic ‘making of salt’. In 1931, Japan defied the League of Nations in Manchuria.” The Palestinian revolts of 1928-1929, which shocked the British, was a result of this wide movement in Asia against the Europeans and the relatively new problem of Jewish immigration in Palestine. This Jewish immigration to Palestine started when the Zionists were guaranteed to have Palestine as their “national home” in the Balfour declaration. The effects that Jewish immigration had on the Arab community was enormous. Arabs were frightened by the thought of losing their majority status to the Jews, and being dominated by them politically and economically. The Arabs would do anything to prevent this, even if they have to do it by force. In 1929, the Arab revolts continued and because of insufficient police and troops to quell the rioting; the riots get out of control. But at this point the British just wanted to keep the lid on it. They had greater concerns with Ghandi in India. Middle East was a secondary issue for the British because it was too far from the Russians (it was actually buffered by Turkey and Persia) to be taken over by and the French dominance in the mandates were already complete. The British had little to worry about, Middle East was safe from being conquered by another power. To keep the riots in control and keep people off the streets, the British reorganized the police and established a permanent garrison of two infantry battalions. They also publish their periodic report called “White Papers”. In the White Papers of 1930, the British call attention to the Arab concerns to reduce their anger. There was to be restrictions of land sales to Jews in the coming five years and limitation on Jewish immigration. This stopped the rioting for a while. In 1933, Hitler comes to power in Germany. Another important outside development that deeply affected the British Middle Eastern policy was Hitler’s anti-semitism, which caused a great increase in immigration of European Jews to Palestine. The persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany and the harsh economic situations in Poland and Romania and else where in Europe created a large scale immigration. The United States, Canada, Australia, Britain and other countries of the British Empire would not accept more than a trickle of Jewish immigrants. The relative ease of entry into Palestine, between 1933-36, attracted a lot of Jews. Hitler’s comming to power in 1933 is the start of the British lost of strength over the Middle East. “The Wilhelmstrasse document of the Hitler period show that neither he nor the German Foreign Office ever calculated that to push German Jews into Palestine was to embarrass and weaken Britain.” The persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany dramatically increased Jewish immigration. Over 37000 Jews immigrated to Palestine in 1933 and that number was raised to 45000 by 1934. The Arabs were extremely unhappy. Disorder and riots were on the rise again. Germany’s expolsion of Jews to purify its Reich caused the British to raise their quota from 1932 to 1935 and admitted over 60,000 Jews to Palestine. This was a relatively small number compared to the number of Jews that wanted to leave Germany, but a huge number in relation to the number of Arabs in Palestine. It was not long before the Arabs started to rebel and raise their voice against Britain and the Jewish community. “Hitler’s anti-Jewish policy struck at the British in the Middle East only by accident, it struck home because it found out their weakest point.” Hitler used this weak point in Britain and kept pushing on it. Hitler used this opportunity to not only clear it’s Reich from Jews and increase the tension between the Arabs and the British, but also to have a common ground with the Arabs and get them on his side. In fact following the Nazi electoral victory, on 31st March of 1933, Amin al-Husayni, a delegation of Palestinian Arabs, stated that ‘The Muslims inside and outside Palestine welcome the new Regime of Germany and hope for the extension of the Fascist, anti-democratic government system (staatsfuhrung) to other countries.” Hitler tried to influence the Arabs, giving them loans and having connections with them. This Arab-German relationship scared the British. Not only they might lose the control of the Suez Canal, and ultimately their connection with Asia and India, but also they might lose control of the newly found product called oil. Oil was found to be an essential product needed by all countries, and the areas that Britain controled in the Middle East, such as Iraq, were loaded with them. The German control over these oil fields meant a great increase in their already established power. British was just starting to get concerned about their situation in the Middle East. The British still had no control over the Arab rebels in Palestine, and was on the verge of losing the connection with the Arabs to the Germans. But even this was not enough to make the British take a big leap and try to repair the conflicts in the area. The British were too self-confident. They believed that the Arabs would not trade their relationship with the British by the Germans, and even if something drastic happens they can control it with their big army and many fleets in the area. The confidence in British power was changed in 1935. Mussolini had a great effect on the British power in middle east. The Italian conquest of Ethiopia in 1935-1936, caused a series of problems for the British strategists and policy makers in the Middle East. These problems not only embarrassed the British superiority, but also put Britain in a great danger of losing the valuable Suez Canal, and the loyalty of the Arabs. Mussolini’s attack on Ethiopia, or Abyssinia as it used to be called then, took British strategists completely by suprise. Although the British Mediterranean Fleet itself was supremely confident that it could defeat the Italian Fleet, the government’s strategy was to defend against Germany and Japan, with no plans for hostility with Italy. Of the three potential enemies, Italy was considered the least threat to the British. In 1935, a confidential British inter-departmental report on interest in East Africa concluded that there was no important British interest in Abyssinia. The report added that British empire can only be affected in a context of war with Italy. This train of thought continued through the start of the invasion of Italy. Three days after the attack of Mussolini, Amery told his Birmingham constituents that “I am not prepared to send a single Birmingham lad to his death for the sake of Abyssinia”. Even though the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, gave a speech of support to the League, it is all known to be a bluff to scare Mussolini. It was not until the Hoare-Laval plan of December 1935 that seriously awakened and worried the Baldwin Government. This plan partitioned Ethiopia with nineteenth-century ideology. Italy was to have part of Ethiopia, and the other part was to be turned into a “zone of economic expansion and settlement”. The Baldwin Government, which had won the election on a ticket of support for the League, blanched when it learned what its foreign minister had done. The public was angered not only because they were disgusted at the winning of an election by false pretenses, but also the return to secret negotiations and the sharing of Africa. The British dissatisfied because they had not done the right things, tried to put an end to the war with collective measures. Britain failed, and Mussolini demolished Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian war brought forth the fact that collective security is inefficient, and rearmament of individual states is necessary. This war caused the first serious rearmament effort by the British army. The transfer of two Italian divisions to Libya in September 1935 provoked the British, for the first time, to consider the possibility of an attack on Egypt by Italy. The Egyptian army of 10,000 was reinforced by 16,500 British soldier, some of which had to go to Palestine. Recent Italian gains threatened British oil supplies, threatened the safety of imperial communications through the Suez Canal to the east and especially to India, and also threatened the British possessions and protectorates in the region and especially Egypt. The Italian conquest gave rise to the doubts in the Middle East as to whether the British retained either the capacity or the determination to defend her positions in the region. The Italian conquest of Ethiopia, to the eyes of the Arabs and the Egyptian population, was a trial of strength between Great Britain and Italy, in which Britain had resulted in being in the worst position. At this time, Germany was not thought of as a big threat yet. In fact Germany gained a lot from Abyssinian war since it took all the attention of the world from Europe and gave Hitler the freedom to do what he pleased in Europe. Britain had already lost some of the prestige and power in its name when it was not able to keep the Italian forces off Abyssinia, but Hitler furthered that lost. On 7th of March 1936, Hitler reoccupied the Rhine land, an action that was against the Treaty of Versaille. But again, Britain nor France did anything about it. They decided not to enter a war with Germany basing their reasoning that it was not worth it and they were not fully rearmed to fight Germany and some of the forces that they had were located in Middle East and South Africa. This show of weakness that Great Britain reveals against the Germans further diminishes their prestige. The Italian invasion showed the Palestinian Arabs that British power was not unshakable. The time had come for the young generation, such as the groups ‘Black Hand’ and ‘The Sacred Holy War’, to try to get their independence from the British. This added to their accumulating disappointment in British policy on Jewish immigration caused the general strikes and disorders of 1936. The rioting turned intense on 19 April 1936. There was a general strike of unlimited duration for Arab nationalist demands commenced on 21 April. The demands were to stop mass Jewish immigration, curtail land sales to Jews, and for the establishment of an independent Palestine-Arab state. Sir Arthur Wauchope, who succeeded Sir John Chancellor in 1931 as the High Commissioner of Palestine and Trans-Jordan, rejected a policy of repressive action against the Arab Higher Committee and its leader the Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al Husseini. He feared that even more extremist nationalist would take their place, and this would completely ruin the ‘dual obligation’ it had to both communities. A build up of British army in the region was carried on, but the disturbances raged on unchecked. On July 7th, the High Commissioner warned that there would be further increases in the forces if necessary, and this meant an increase in land taxes. Wauchope’s policy was to appeal to the Arab leaders’ sense of responsibility and to avoid harsh measures against the rebellion. His forbearance was criticized sharply by the Jews, 70 Jews were murdered and several hundred were injured by the Arabs. The inability of Britain to control these rebels was slowly chewing on the British prestige. A powerful country such as Britain, with such mighty force could not stop these small rebels. The British had their reasons why they could not control these rebels. The first was the inability of the military to both protect the civil government and to reinforce the police, especially because of the fear that the Arab section of the police was unreliable. The second handicap was that the enemy was indistinguishable from the civilians, which meant restriction on the use of weapons. It was also very difficult to keep operations secret, and in the same token, reliable information about the enemy was hard to come by. But to the eyes of the world, Great Britain had failed to control this area and stop the rioters. On 2 September 1936, the British decided to apply a lot more force. Hopes of negotiation through Nuri Said, Foreign Minister of Iraq, had been completely frustrated and left the British no other choice. Palestine Emergency Force, an infantry division, was to be added to the force in Palestine, and the command was transferred to J. G. Dill. On 7 September the government announced that it was preparing to introduce martial law. Dill was determined to take control from the rebels and not just use the force as a passive defense. He believed that martial law should be “applied to the country as a whole”. Dill was convinced that the Arab leaders feared martial law since it would bring in military troops. Only thing that stood in the way of Dill was the approval of the High Commissioner. The High Commissioner did not give the Arab Higher Committee an ultimatum, he just allowed them to finish their strike on their own will. Dill lamented that “instead of British authority being re-established, the Higher Arab Committee was left very much in control of the Arab part of Palestine”. On 12 September 1937, Dill was replaced by Lieutenant-General A. P. Wavell as the new GOC. Wavell started a new set of ideas and actions. Wavell introduced military courts to the area. The courts were to conduct investigations with the help of the police, and sentence the subjects without any appeal. This comes up to be another failure by the British. In the six months there had been 1000 terrorists acts, including 55 politically-motivated killings, and 32 attempted assassinations. On 9 April 1938, Wavell was replaced by Lieutenant-General R. H. Haining. Haining strategy was to provide security for a road building program to improve access to the villages and consequently deny bases to the bands. The bands retaliated by sabotaging transportation and communications. By August 1938, rebellions intensified. The Arab force, which consisted on both foreign and Palestinian Arabs, increased in size. They attacked post offices, police stations, government offices, law courts and anything else that they believed would make things harder for the British. At the same time, the need for a larger number of British recruits arose because of the fears that the Arab police could not be trusted in the security force anymore. By this time, the British were sure that a war in Europe was inevitable. Hitler had forced Austria toward Anschluss, and had united the two German speaking countries by April of 1938. Germany tightened it’s relationship with the Japaneses. Germany was also to take over the Sudetenland, in Czechoslovakia, by force. In the Munich Conference, 29 September 1938, no one argued the over take of Sudetenland by the Germans. The French who had an alliance with the Czechs backed off, and so did the British and the Russians. It was not long before the Germans took over the whole country of Czechoslovakia. The British could not enter any war with the Germans because they did not have a good standing army to fight the Germans. They had started rearmemant much later than the Germans, and it was going to be a sure lose if they would have entered a war. This threat of Germany was too close to home and the British refused to send any forces to Middle East when their Island nation was in danger. The Arab’s uncontrollable rebellion continued and forced the British to drop the quota for Jewish immigration from 1936 to 1939. This was the period just before World War II, and the time that the Jewish immigrants were the most desperate. But since the Arabs were so weary with the Jews, it made them natural allies to Germany. Chamberlain had to do something to keep the Arabs on his side and keep them satisfied. Between the dissolution of these fruitless conferences and the outbreak of the second world war. By Hitler’s occupation of Prague and Mussolini’s take over of Albania, Neville Chamberlain realized that he had been duped and the British fastened their safety-belts. On 17 May 1939, to keep operations under control, they issued the next Palestine White Paper. This tried to fix the problem of numbers: it fixed an annual number of Jewish immigrants for five years, after which further increase was to be dependent upon Arabs. This act done by the British was not looked upon favorably by the British people. It caused humane people to look monstrously inhumane, but Britain had no other choice. Chamberlain had to keep the Arabs on his side by playing the numbers game; lowering the quota for immigration. The Jews believed that by the 1939 White Paper, the British in effect said : “It is in your interest to accept this until better times, for without it, we may both succumb to Hitler.” But this was also the first British attempt to comply to both parts of the Balfour Declaration – “the half which gave British blessing to a Jewish National home, and the half that said ‘it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.’” This way the British lubricated the way between the two opposite parties and kept them both at least somehow connected to Britain. This White Paper saved very few Jews from the gas chambers in Germany, but this was the first sign of British gesture of self-preservation which preceded the actual fight for survival. These acts secured the Arab compliance to Great Britain over World War II. Britain was forced to take the side of the Arabs toward the end of the 1930’s. Middle East was thought of as the center of all Great Britain’s empire; it was the Suez Canal that was considered the life line for the British-Indian trade. The British needed to have full control over this area and to do so they had to have full relationship with the Arab countries in the area. Britain had failed every new method to control the rebelions in Palestine, and had lost a lot of prestige due to Mussolini’s attack on Ethiopia in 1935, and the German invasion of Sudentenland, and Prague. It would not have been long before the German’s got the support of the Arabs. The only sure thing that Great Britain could do to satisfy the Arabs and keep them as followers of the British was to control Jewish immigration to Palestine. This was not thought of as inhumane, but it was the only thing to do. The control over Middle East and the ultimate existance of Britain was on the line, and it was not to be japordized for the extremely small population of Jews. If the White Papers of 1939 was not published, the Arabs might have gone to the German side, and provided the Germans not only bases on the Middle East to inhibit the British trade to Asia, but also to provid the Germans with oil. This could have meant a great defeat of the allies in World War II. Bibliography:Cohen, Michael J., and Kolisky, Martin. Britain and the Middle East in the 1930’s. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992. George, W. The Coming of the Italian-Ethiopian War. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967. Gibbs, N.H. Grand Strategy, Vol.1: Rearmament Policy. London: HMSO, 1976. Keylor, William R. The Twentieth-Century World: An International History. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. Monroe, Elizabeth. Britain’s Moment in the Middle East 1914-1971. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981. Porath, Yehoshua. The Palestinian Arab National Movement 1929-1939. 2 vols. New Jersey: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1977. Pratt, R. L. 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