

H-France Review Vol. 7 (July 2007), No. 85

David Styan, *France and Iraq: Oil, Arms and French Policy Making in the Middle East*. London and New York: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2006. xii + 234 pp. Table, endnotes, bibliography, and index. \$69.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 1-84511-045-5.

Review by Michael Creswell, Florida State University.

One day historians will gaze back on the present-era and try to explain how a great Western power squandered its good will in the Middle East and became deeply unpopular. They will also attempt to explain how this same country, within a few short years, successfully restored its prestige in the region. That country is France, and fortunately one scholar has already taken up the task.

In *France and Iraq: Oil, Arms and French Policy Making in the Middle East*, David Styan, a Lecturer in Politics at Birkbeck, University of London, traces France's relations with Iraq and the wider Middle East from the end of the First World War until 2005. He argues that despite great personnel changes in its bureaucracy, Fifth Republic France's policy toward Iraq and the Middle East has displayed remarkable continuity. Launched in 1958, the same year that the Fifth Republic began, that policy has centered on access to oil, commercial relations, and France's international role. Although stymied by the Algerian War (1954-1962), this long term course of action has enabled France to reach these goals and to establish friendly relations in the region. It also helps to explain France's opposition to the United States' drive to oust Saddam Hussein from power.

Styan begins with a detailed background on France's initial involvement in the Middle East until the 1930s. France's stake in Iraqi oil and its close ties with the Iraqi regime lay in the wake of the First World War. The winners of the Great War seized the defeated powers' colonies, renamed them "mandates," and awarded them to the victors to administer. The disintegration of the Ottoman Empire gave Britain and France control over territory that would include what would eventually become the Kingdom of Iraq. In anticipation of the Ottoman Empire's demise, however, Britain and France had already secretly concluded the Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916 that outlined the two countries' respective spheres of influence in the Middle East.[1]

Post-war Anglo-French talks resulted in France gaining a share in the Turkish Petroleum Company (TPC), an Anglo-German dominated entity formed in 1912. This share, awarded to France as compensation for damages caused by Germany during the First World War, led to the creation of the *Compagnie Française des Pétrole* (CFP) in 1924. The CFP, which became TOTAL in 1954 [2], laid the foundation for the French oil industry and France's relationship with Iraq (pp. 9, 21). France's heavy dependence on foreign-controlled oil, a point underscored during the First World War, made the country keen to ensure steady access to oil in the future.[2]

Franco-Israeli relations also play a key role in the book. For France, the relationship with the new Jewish state held great importance given public views toward French Jews and thanks to the efforts of well-heeled lobbying organizations. Over time, France became a key supplier of arms to Israel. By the early 1950s, the combination of Cold War politics entering the Middle East and the rise of Algerian nationalism created an unusually tight bond between the two countries, based more on personal diplomacy than official governmental mechanisms.

However, these close relations concerned many officials in the French foreign ministry, who realized the potential repercussions on France's Arab policy. Officials in the Quai d'Orsay feared that the Arab states' antipathy for Israel might also be directed at France. These worries were fueled by France's joint military operations against Egypt during the 1956 Suez Crisis, which infuriated Arab nationalists. France's standing in the Middle East, already low, declined even further.

France's image in the Middle East received its biggest blow as a result of the Algerian War. This conflict eventually evicted France's Fourth Republic (1946-1958), ushered in the return to power of Charles de Gaulle and saw the creation of the Fifth Republic. By the end of the war, France's reputation in the Middle East had hit bottom.

To his credit, de Gaulle chose not to write off the Middle East. He envisioned the region playing a role in a more expansive French foreign policy agenda. Beyond access to oil or commercial markets, both of which remained important, the Middle East was a place that would enable France to exert greater influence on global politics. Rejecting the bi-polar nature of the Cold War, de Gaulle sought to refashion French policy toward the Middle East, a region that was increasingly a battleground between East and West. This grand design of de Gaulle, which embodied his broader ambitions in the region, would receive a lift thanks to his response to the 1967 Arab-Israeli War (p. 52).

De Gaulle cagily used the 1967 War as an opportunity to consolidate his comprehensive Middle East strategy. In short, French policy took an "Arab tilt," as France "normalized" relations with both Israel and the Arab states. This meant Israel no longer received special treatment and that the Arab states were no longer snubbed. In fact, de Gaulle criticized Israel for its actions in the weeks leading up to the 1967 War. He also declared an arms embargo on both parties just days before the war began. But given the past decade of French arms sales to Tel Aviv, the embargo hit Israel the hardest. This shift in policy paid dividends, as many Arab leaders, like Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, praised France for its stand before and during the 1967 War. (pp. 35-36, 64).

Another outcome of the 1967 War was French arms sales to the Arab states. Israel's stunning military victory demonstrated to them the inadequacy of Soviet-supplied arms and that they needed to look elsewhere. In addition to being well positioned to provide these arms, France's willingness to provide credit free of any political stipulations, in contrast to Moscow and Washington, made Paris an especially attractive partner. This desire for a partner was mutual, as many in France's military and aeronautical industries sought greater diversification than relying primarily on the Israeli market.

Styan argues that de Gaulle's shift was driven by more than a desire to secure oil or commercial markets. Rather, the overriding goal was to implement a global policy intended to raise France's international stature and influence by offering itself to the countries of the Middle East an alternative to the Soviet Union and the United States.

In addition to adopting a general policy toward the Middle East, France had also fashioned a specific policy toward Iraq. Although close Franco-Iraqi ties were motivated by bi-lateral considerations, other factors lifted these relations out of the bi-lateral realm. First, the 1978 Iranian Revolution complicated matters because France gave refuge to fleeing Iranians. Second, Israel destroyed Iraq's French-designed nuclear reactor in 1981 [3]. Third, the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) increased Baghdad's need for weapons, which in turn placed Iraq in greater debt to France and earned Paris the enmity of Teheran (p. 129).

François Mitterrand, who served as president of France from 1981 to 1995, inherited from his predecessor, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, complex relations with the Middle East. This complexity flowed from Iraq's growing debts to France and growing instability in Lebanon. He responded by adopting a foreign policy toward the region based on personal ties (p. 131).

The Arab states initially viewed a Mitterrand presidency as inauspicious because he was seen as a friend of Israel and because he had strongly criticized French arms sales to the Middle East. Arab leaders worried, because they depended on these arms and the attendant French technical expertise. However, he quickly moved to assure them that France's foreign and economic policy toward the Middle East would remain unchanged (pp. 136-137).

Although Iraq, Saudi Arabia and other Arab states demanded that France aid Iraq to rebuild its nuclear facility[4], President Mitterrand balked. Ironically, the Iran-Iraq War required Baghdad to obtain more conventional weapons that Mitterrand was glad to provide, thus sparing him from having to agree to help rebuild Iraq's nuclear site (p. 139). But while relations to Iran deteriorated, France's relations with Arab countries improved because it was helping Iraq (p. 141).

By the late 1980s, Iraq's resources had been severely drained by its war with Iran. Baghdad's inability to satisfy its debts to Paris placed Franco-Iraq relations on the backburner. At the same time, France sought to improve relations with Iran. Then there came France's participation in the First Gulf War (1991) as a member of a military coalition that soundly defeated Iraq.

One result of the First Gulf War was to force changes on the French military. By 1996, pro-Iraq political networks in France--primarily oil companies and their supporters--had revived, leading the country to oppose sanction against Iraq. The same factors that led Mitterrand to participate in the First Gulf War--protecting France's world status by upholding sovereignty and the values of the UN--also led Mitterrand's successor, Jacques Chirac (1995-2007) to oppose going to war against Iraq in 2002 (p. 172).

Mitterrand was ambivalent about going to war in 1991. He sowed confusion among France's Western and Middle Eastern allies by employing multiple lines of communication (pp. 176-177). Nonetheless, France participated in the war that drove Iraqi forces from Kuwait, hence damaging Franco-Iraqi relations. After the Gulf War, three broad groups in France--professional diplomats, private interest groups, and commercial lobbies--sought to influence French policy toward Iraq. Chirac also became skeptical of the fairness of UN sanctions against Iraq, as they caused much misery among the Iraqi people (pp. 182-183).

The harm imposed by the UN-sponsored sanctions against post-Gulf War Iraq received great attention in France. From 1998 on, French opposition to sanctions grew and cut across party lines (p. 187). Moreover, by the end of the 1990s, French commercial giants had reopened offices in Baghdad. According to Styan, France's main role was to "maximize its share of the post-war sanctions" market (p. 185).

It is in this context that President Chirac rejected the use of unilateral or preemptive military force against Iraq. He also opposed any "automatic" link between uncovering Iraqi deceit in hiding forbidden weapons and military invasion. Instead, Chirac would support the use of force only if endorsed by the UN. Chirac was thus willing to support the use of force against Iraq, but only if certain conditions were met.

Curiously, Styan makes no mention of the corruption surrounding the UN Oil-for-Food Program in which some French officials and institutions were implicated. He is silent as to the allegations that illegal diversions of money from the program may have affected French decision making.[5]

Unfortunately, Styan's presentation of this important account is slightly amiss. The story is complex, and he could have done more to make it less so. For example, the book is dense with information, often forcing the reader to revisit passages in order to keep Styan's arguments straight. There is also a fair amount of repetition, as Styan often foreshadows his points, then sketches these same points out a few

pages later, only to repeat these points elsewhere in the book.

The scholarly tools of the book could also stand improvement. For one thing, the text is lightly footnoted. Paragraphs filled with names and dates and facts stream by without a single citation. And on many occasions the author inserts items in the text without introducing them properly. For example, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George suddenly appears as “Lloyd George.” Only in the next paragraph is he identified as the prime minister, and even then his first name is omitted (p. 18). Styan treats other items and individuals in similar fashion.

The four-and-one-half page index presents another concern. It is relatively bare bones, listing nouns and proper names but little beyond that. Greater detail would have aided readers tremendously by helping them easily locate specific actions and events. As it stands, readers are forced to engage in considerable page turning to find what they want.

Of equal concern are the index’s many errors and omissions. The list is extensive. Cilicia, a Turkish region north of Cyprus and now known as Çukurova, is mentioned more than once in the text (pp. 19-20) but is neither identified nor included in the index. The Iraq National Oil Company pops up on page 80, even though the index mistakenly indicates that it first appears on page 76. ENI appears on page 82, but is not listed in the Index. The same is true of IPC, which shows up on page 84, but not in the index. OECD, which is mentioned without explanation on page 98, does not figure in either the list of abbreviations or in the index. CBI arises on page 184, but neither in the index or list of acronyms. Finally, the book is marred by numerous typographical errors. The strains from transforming a doctoral dissertation to a published manuscript are marked. A stronger editorial hand was surely needed to ensure a smoother transition.

The sources on which Styan relies for the book are fairly extensive, drawing upon articles, books, press accounts, and interviews he conducted with those who participated in some of the events he covers in the book. He does not, however, employ any archival sources, though diplomatic documents available in the archives of France’s Foreign Ministry extend until the late 1970s. The use of these documents could have enabled him to provide a more authoritative account.

Despite these flaws, Styan’s book deserves a wide readership. The information offered should at least dispel some misperceptions about French policy toward Iraq. It is unfortunate that the book was not published years ago. Perhaps others could have learned from France how to develop a coherent long-term policy toward Iraq in particular and the Middle East as a whole. [6]

NOTES

[1] Much of the present-day border of Iraq and Syria results from the Skyes-Picot Agreement.

[2] France had come within months of running out of fuel in late 1917, a key year in the First World War.

[3] TOTAL is a French-owned oil company whose current revenues place it among the top four oil companies in the world.

[4] Osirak was a French-designed 40 MW light-water nuclear materials testing reactor located near Baghdad. In order to prevent Iraq from using the facility to develop nuclear weapons, Israel disabled the

site during a June 7, 1981 air attack. The United States leveled Osirak during the First Gulf War.

[5] Charles Pasqua, a Gaullist politician whose career has been tainted by numerous allegations of corruption, was accused of receiving kickbacks from Iraq during the Oil-for-Food Program. The New York branch of the Banque Nationale de Paris-Paribas, a powerful French bank that administered the program, was cited by the US House Committee on International Relations for irregular business practices in its handling of the program.

[6] Styan writes that it is widely acknowledged that France's scholars of the Middle East hold greater prestige than their counterparts in Britain and the United States. He also notes that France has also largely escaped the retribution of terrorists. Ironically, however, France's skillful foreign policy toward the Middle East has not been equaled in its domestic policy toward its Arab population.

Michael Creswell Florida State University mcreswel@mailers.fsu.edu

Copyright © 2007 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 7 (July 2007), No. 85

ISSN 1553-9172