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Youssef H. Aboul-Enein and Basil H. Aboul-Enein, *The Secret War for the Middle East: The Influence of Axis and Allied Intelligence Operations during World War II*. Annapolis: Naval Inst. Press, 2013. Pp. xxiii, 263. ISBN 978-1-61251-309-6.

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In the aftermath of US operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, historians and policy makers have made comparisons to the American experience in Vietnam (1955-1975) and the British Mandate in Iraq in the 1920s. The authors of *The Secret War for the Middle East* make a strong argument for considering another historical precedent: the Middle East in World War II. They recommend moving beyond the Western Desert Campaign to explore several lesser known engagements and behind the scenes intelligence operations. The British conducted military operations in Iraq to remove a pro-Axis government from power in spring 1941; in the fall of that year, there followed British-Free French operations in Vichy-controlled Syria and the Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran.

US Navy Cdr. Youssef Aboul-Enein (National Defense Univ.), author of two previous books,¹ and his co-author and brother, Basil Aboul-Enein (San Jacinto College), a former US Air Force captain, explain that their book arose from “an interest ... in explaining the origins of Arab Nationalist ideologies to men and women of the U.S. Armed Forces” (xv), especially those about to deploy to the Middle East. Their historical case studies are meant to spark discussion of “strategy, operations, tactics, and second- and third-order effects of previous policy and current decisions” (xv).

The book’s chapters—apart from the first, “Introduction,” and tenth, “Conclusion,” which sketch its larger analytical framework—are devoted each to a different country.² Their common purpose is to carefully study the history of the Middle East, in the conviction that “what occurred [there] ... during World War II will continue to shape perceptions of coalition forces operating in the region [and] to make America’s military planners better aware of the human terrain of the region” (xv-xvi).

The strength of this approach lies in the striking relevance of the featured, hitherto understudied historical episodes. For example, after describing the deliberations of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden concerning the implications of moving troops from more vital theaters of the war to Syria and Iraq in 1941, the authors observe that “This should remind us of General Eric Shinseki’s 2003 wise Congressional testimony in the lead-up to Operation Iraqi Freedom, in which he stressed that the problem would not be invading Iraq, but the stabilization of the country that [would] require a half million troops” (98).

Chapter 2 turns to the situation in Palestine to explore the gradual evolution of German attitudes toward Arab nationalism and the reasons why Germany became an appealing model to many Arab leaders. In the late 1930s, Germany steered clear of openly supporting Arab nationalists to avoid provoking Britain or interfering with Italian designs in the Eastern Mediterranean. Later, as Germany was drawn into the campaigns in North Africa, German officials expressed support for Arab nationalism and a shared sense of victimhood with the Arabs over the World War I peace settlement in order to undermine British influence in the region (7-12). Key figures like the grand mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini, and Iraqi prime minister Rashid Ali al-Gaylani helped forge close Arab ties with Germany (2). The authors use their examination of German propaganda in the Middle East early in World War II to show why present-day policy makers should study the history of earlier western engagement with Arab leaders. They note, for instance, that

1. *Militant Islamist Ideology: Understanding the Global Threat* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2010) and *Iraq in Turmoil: Historical Perspectives of Dr. Ali al-Wardi, from the Ottoman Empire to King Feisal* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2012).

2. Many of the chapters originated as lectures or articles in periodicals like the *Foreign Area Officer Association Journal* and the *US Army’s Infantry Journal*.

Hitler blurred the lines between European colonialism and the rise of benign American exceptionalism, and lumped or aggregated all democracies in one basket. The Middle East today engages in a similar practice of lumping French, British, and American experiences with secularism and democracy as one, or finding a new colonialist in the United States with such slogans as American imperialism.... Hitler's speeches demonstrated the failure of the Allies to anticipate a response in which he attempted to portray Fascism as equal to and even less hypocritical than Western democracies in areas of the world where Western democracies maintained the double standard of a colonial administration and a military presence. (12–13)

Chapter 5 looks at the development of Iraq's military in the interwar period, including its political role, and the 1941 British military campaign to remove the pro-Axis Iraqi government from power. This episode was marked by a lost German opportunity to undermine the British presence in the Middle East due partly to Hitler's preoccupation with the imminent invasion of the Soviet Union (78–81). The events in Iraq provided a stark reminder to Allied planners of the threat posed by the Vichy presence in Syria; chapter 4 examines Operation Exporter, the British-Free French invasion of Syria in June 1941. Chapter 5 discusses Iran's growing ties to Germany between the world wars and Allied actions in fall 1941 that led to a joint Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran for the duration of the war and opened the "Persian Corridor" to the transport of Lend-Lease supplies to the Soviet Union. All three of these operations successfully removed pro-Axis regimes, but at the cost of diverting significant resources from other theaters of the war at a crucial time. The debates of Britain's civilian and military leaders over allocation of military resources during this pivotal year make fascinating reading and place events in the Middle East in their larger global context.

Turkey, the Arabian peninsula, and Afghanistan, the subjects of chapters 6–8, all figured in the Allied-Axis struggle for influence in the Middle East. Turkey, "a classic case study in balance of power politics" (117), managed to remain officially neutral until it finally declared war on the Axis in February 1945. The authors compare this precarious balancing act to the Justice and Development Party's current careful navigation between western interests and those of Iran, Iraq, and Syria (125). In a short chapter on the Arabian Peninsula, the authors maintain that lack of coordination between the Axis powers vitiated their Arab policy (138). Elsewhere, Afghanistan remained neutral in World War II, but had significant potential as a site where the Germans might have disrupted the borderlands of India. The authors rely heavily here on the work of Milan Hauner,³ which they argue has special relevance as the deadline for the removal of US troops from Afghanistan draws near, because it "demonstrates the potency of low levels of investment in fighting proxy wars along the Afghan-Pakistan frontier" (156).

Egypt provides the last case study for the book and some of the most pertinent lessons for our own time. The authors take up the vexed question of whether the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty required Egypt to declare war on the Axis powers, observing that the ongoing debate surrounding the military provisions of the treaty "explains the inherent distrust Egyptians have for formal agreements between militaries and wariness of any agreements that grant special privileges to a foreign power or ally. Understanding this history is key to unlocking the tenor of any future negotiations with any Egyptian political entity in power" (161). They further maintain that, in Churchill's differences with Saleh Harb, Egypt's Minister of War, over Egypt declaring war, "you see the two sides talking over one another regarding the preservation of a British veiled or quasi-protectorate status over Egypt, and the need for full Egyptian self-determination" (172). They conclude by reflecting on what might be the greatest lesson to be learned from Allied operations in the Middle East: "When understanding the mind-set of FDR, Marshall and Eisenhower in late 1941 to mid-1942, is it any wonder one would be at least tempted to consider trading short-term gains (defeat of the Axis) for long-term problems such as the radicalization of politics and distrust of Western powers in the Middle East? Understanding this empathetically will allow us to better operate in the region, as the political landscape changes once again in light of the events of the Arab Spring" (181–82).

In extracting lessons for present-day military officers from these case studies, the authors concentrate on the early years of the war. This is understandable, since the tide of the war in the Middle East shifted in

3. *India in Axis Strategy: Germany, Japan, and Indian Nationalists in the Second World War* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981).

1943, but it also means they miss the chance to pursue the “rest of the story”—that is, what happened after the British occupied Iraq or the operations in Syria or the Anglo-Soviet takeover in Iran. Nor do they explore the challenges that occupation and postwar planning in the region presented to the Allies. Such matters might have been topics of further intriguing case studies.

A very welcome and exciting aspect of the book is the authors’ close attention to the thought of Arab historians, often overlooked in western literature. Chapter 3 on Iraq, for example, draws on the work of Iraqi military historians Akeel Naseeri and Mahmood al-Durrah on the 1941 Gaylani Revolt,⁴ a boon for monoglot Anglophone readers.

Those seeking a good general history of the Middle East during World War II will find this a most informative book. It is immensely helpful in filling in the larger regional context of the campaign in North Africa. Another plus is the series of maps clarifying just how the Middle East fit into the larger war. Professional historians looking for a meticulous archive-based analysis, however, will be disappointed by the book’s over-reliance on secondary literature. Area specialists may question the authors’ interpretation of the Arab nationalist movement and Egyptian political maneuvering. And, too, there are occasional errors of fact or interpretation.⁵ While the case-study methodology highlights the authors’ central themes, the origin of certain chapters as oral presentations at times makes it hard to follow the narrative line, particularly in the chapters on Iraq and Egypt.

These shortcomings aside, however, *The Secret War for the Middle East* is a timely study of an often overlooked period in Middle Eastern history. In part by introducing western readers to the interpretations of Arab historians, Youssef and Basil Aboul-Enein raise a wealth of important questions for both military leaders and the general public to ponder as the United States re-examines its role in the Middle East.

Perhaps the most important lesson to be learned is this: before undertaking war, it is vital to know the region, the area of operation, your nation’s place in it, and previous armies that have fought in the area In the long term, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Palestine would develop narratives of conspiracy and distrust fueled in part by the actions by the Axis and Allies in World War II. Situational awareness of the human terrain is a matter of life and death in any field of war; ignore it and your army will be wearing the label of other armies that have marched through the same terrain. (190)

History does indeed matter; knowing the history of the Middle East is vital for today’s policy makers.

4. Summarized and discussed in Appendix 2, “Lessons from the 1941 Anglo-Iraqi Revolt.”

5. E.g., the authors date Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi’s reign as 1941 to 1977, instead of 1979 (103). Egyptian Prime Minister Mustafa Nahas Pasha is described as both “anti-British” (164) and leader of an “Anglophile government” (172). And the characterization of Egyptian Prime Ministers Hassan Sabry and Hussein Sirri as “virulent anti-British leaders” (174) is at variance with traditional interpretations.