

Policy of Deceit: Britain's Treachery Over Palestine Laid Bare

With lucid thinking and meticulous scholarship, historian Peter Shambrook's new book proves that Britain lied about its intentions concerning Palestine from the very start

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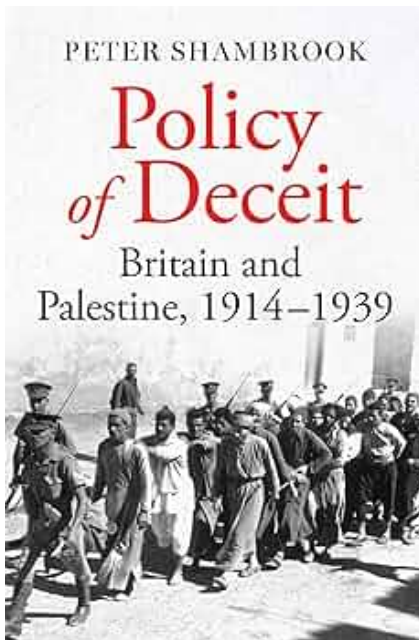
In April, [Israeli](#) security forces [brutally assaulted](#) Palestinian worshippers inside [Al-Aqsa Mosque](#) in [occupied](#) East Jerusalem.

In the aftermath of the attack, James Cleverly, [Britain's](#) foreign secretary, [called on](#) "all parties to respect the historic status quo arrangements at Jerusalem's holy sites and cease all provocative action".

Cleverly would have known that there had been only one aggressor at Al-Aqsa – Israel. He would also have known that the status quo agreement places responsibility for [internal security](#) at Al-Aqsa with [Jordan's King Abdullah II](#).

And that the status quo agreement [gives no role](#) to Israeli forces inside the Al-Aqsa compound. Yet Cleverly went ahead and cheerfully made his false statement.

A magnificent new book by Middle East historian Peter Shambrook places Cleverly's casual deceit in its tragic historical context.



In *Policy of Deceit, Britain and Palestine, 1914-1939*, Shambrook shows that cleverly's cynically misleading account of events inside Al-Aqsa – as well as countless other false and unbalanced statements by British officials – are part of a pattern of British dishonesty over [Palestine](#) that dates back more than a century.

In an admirable display of clear thinking and meticulous scholarship, Shambrook shows that Britain has lied about its intentions concerning Palestine from the start.

Britain and the Ottomans

At the heart of his forensic investigation is the deal struck between the British empire and the [Sharif of Mecca](#) after the outbreak of the First World War.

Britain was then the greatest power in the world but became fearful that she would lose overseas “possessions” after the Ottomans sided with Germany.

Matters turned desperate when, against most expectations, the Ottoman empire repulsed the British invasion of Turkey in 1915.

In the wake of this disaster, the British concluded that they had no choice but to strike a deal with [Hussein Ibn Ali](#), Sharif of Mecca, a member of the [Hashemite family](#) who could trace his lineage back 41 generations to the [Prophet Mohammed](#) – and was chief religious authority for Islam's holy shrines.

The deal was simple: the Sharif would lead an Arab revolt against the Ottomans. In return, Britain promised to grant an extensive Arab state after the Ottomans were defeated.

Sir Henry McMahon, high commissioner in Egypt, was given the task of entering into correspondence with the Sharif.

In this eye-opening book, Shambrook tells the story of the [Sharif/McMahon correspondence](#). This means entering a minefield, because the British state has never accepted that Palestine was included in the area promised to the Sharif.

The British position has been supported by serious scholars. Professor Isaiah Friedman, in [*Palestine: A Twice Promised Land?*](#) (published 23 years ago) buttressed the British government's position. So does Elie Kedourie's [*In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth*](#) (1976).

Shambrook, through research in private papers and public records, refutes both Kedourie and Friedman's findings, in the process dismantling the official account of events, concluding that the British government did indeed promise Palestine to the sharif.

What's more, he shows that the British lied about this from the start. Among the long list of British decision-makers who made misleading comments are David Lloyd George, [Arthur Balfour](#), George Curzon, Winston Churchill – and numerous Foreign Office officials.

Cynically Exploited

At the heart of the British deception was a wilful misinterpretation of the word "districts", which was rendered by the Arab word *wilayat* in the letters sent by McMahon to the sharif.

A very similar word – *vilayet* – was used by Turkish administrators. It had a subtly different meaning. This difference was cynically exploited by the Foreign Office to exclude all of Palestine from the area assigned to the sharif.

How this happened is a case study in British perfidy. In 1920 the Foreign Office invented an Ottoman "Vilayet of Damascus", the boundary of which stretched 300 miles south to the Gulf of Aqaba. No such province had ever existed.

Ottoman administrative districts were very precise geographically. The province included in the fictitious Vilayet invented by Britain was actually called – as any cursory look at an Ottoman map would have established – the Vilayet of Syria.

This essential fact was well-known, not just to the Ottomans but among all the great powers, and was clear as day on the detailed map used by British generals in the War Office back in London during their strategic planning to defeat the Ottomans.

Furthermore, Shambrook establishes that McMahon was not making an innocent mistake when he used the term *wilayat* in his correspondence. The Egyptian high commissioner knew perfectly what the word meant in Arabic, and what *vilayet* meant in Turkish. We can be certain of this because alongside *wilayat* he also used the term *vilayet* in the correct sense in other parts of the correspondence.

Had McMahon specified in his letter that he reserved the whole region to the west of the Vilayet of Syria, then indeed all of Palestine would have been excluded from the deal he struck with the sharif.

But he did not.

Broken Promise

Significantly, McMahon set out these facts in an explanatory letter despatched two days later to the Foreign Office. He told his masters back in London that he had excluded the northern coasts of Syria (modern-day Lebanon) from his offer to the sharif, which by no stretch of the imagination could include the Palestine region.

Shambrook goes on to prove that this was the accepted view of British military and diplomatic decision-makers right up to 1920. It was only then that the Foreign Office invented the Vilayet of Damascus. Even at this stage, the Foreign Office was clear there had been no ambiguity in the McMahon correspondence as far as Palestine was concerned.

But it needed to adjust to the new political reality of a Lloyd George government that was determined to implement a new pro-Zionist political machinery for Palestine.

Over the next 20 years the British government – on 24 separate occasions! – refused to publish the sharif/McMahon correspondence in the face of Arab and other demands.

The reason, as revealed in the records, is simple. Officials knew that it would be impossible to defend the broken promise to the sharif over Palestine in parliament.

This refusal, as Shambrook shows, soured Anglo-Arab relations throughout the inter-war period. Shambrook also shows that the only reason the British eventually published the correspondence in 1939 was to keep the Arab world close as another world war loomed.

No wonder that the great historian Arnold Toynbee, who was a Foreign Office official during the First World War, later wrote that

“Palestine was not excepted from the area in which the British government promised in 1915 to recognise and uphold Arab independence, and that the Balfour Declaration of 1917 was, therefore, incompatible with a previous commitment”.

Toynbee added that this deceit “is almost the worst crime of which a professional diplomatist is capable, for it compromises that country’s reputation for straight-dealing”.

Festering Wounds

Shambrook’s book is a major historical achievement. He has solved the mystery of the sharif/McMahon agreement. He has overturned the century-long British narrative that Palestine was excluded from the agreement with the sharif. He has also disposed of the notion, promoted by scholars from Albert Hourani to Martin Gilbert, that the truth about the agreement was mysterious or elusive.

More than that, he has shown that the sharif/McMahon correspondence may have contained greater legal weight than the famous promise to the global Jewish community two years later in the shape of the Balfour Declaration, which was a statement of intent and not (officially at any rate) an agreement between two parties.

We should remember today that the sharif fulfilled his part of the agreement, leading a revolt against Ottoman rule in the Hijaz.

The British did not.

The Palestinian people have been obliged to live with the consequences ever since.

Shambrook concludes his book with a call for Britain to acknowledge her broken promise.

“To heal the wounds of history anywhere requires acknowledgment of error and the willingness of all parties to be held to account for the policies they pursued,” he wrote.

“In the Middle East, where such wounds have festered for so long, a British government’s acknowledgment, however late in the day, of the truth concerning the pledge given by a predecessor to the sharif of Mecca in 1915 would surely be welcomed.”

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Peter Osborne won best commentary/blogging in both 2022 and 2017, and was also named freelancer of the year in 2016 at the Drum Online Media Awards for articles he wrote for Middle East Eye. He was also named as British Press Awards Columnist of the Year in 2013. He resigned as chief political columnist of the Daily Telegraph in 2015. His latest book is The Fate of Abraham: Why the West is Wrong about Islam, published in May by Simon & Schuster. His previous books include The Triumph of the Political Class, The Rise of Political Lying, Why the West is Wrong about Nuclear Iran and The Assault on Truth: Boris Johnson, Donald Trump and the Emergence of a New Moral Barbarism.

Featured image: Israel’s National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir visits Al-Aqsa, 3 January ([Social Media](#))

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