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**“Britain’s Empire of oil:
The history of its exploration and exploitation and its impact on the global Middle East”**

A- Introduction

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed a major energy transition, the shift from coal to oil, and the dawn of a new energy regime in the world. Oil products became increasingly essential for military-industrial transformation, with the development of the internal combustion engine. Access to oilfields became imperative for European imperial states and this desire for oil concessions made the Middle East a new object of interventionism and a new site of imperial competitions between Britain, France, Italy, the Netherlands and the USA. This project argues that British state and business interests were at the forefront of this new coercive interventionism in the Middle East which I term ‘oil imperialism’: how oil competition fostered new bids for domination over space and people in the region. For Britain, these dynamics amounted to a new experience of empire, with a rising generation of imperialists identifying oil companies as their best agents for a revised, intensive and profitable form of ‘informal’ empire, and seeing the Middle East as vast untapped realm for exploitation, notably of mineral resources, and with petroleum products in the vanguard. However, British ‘oil imperialism’ had unprecedented spatial, social and environmental consequences, which this project explores. Advanced with new technologies of violence, British oil imperialism shaped Middle East borders, created new labour forces, transformed landscapes, polluted sensitive environments and enforced the settlement of nomadic tribes.

B- State of the art

Existing scholarship on the development of the modern Middle East mainly centres on (i) the collapse of the Ottoman empire during the First World War¹, and (ii) the expansion into this vacuum of British and French interests through the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 (which established Western spheres of influence in this area) and the creation of the French and British mandates (Palestine, Iraq, Syria and Transjordan)². Meanwhile, there also exists a

¹ Rogan, E., *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East*, London, 2015.

² Sluglett, P., and Méouchy N., (eds.), *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives*, Leiden, 2004.

historiography which identifies a paradox of British imperial reinforcement in the interwar Middle East at a time of supposed wider British imperial decline³. This literature, indeed, identifies the region as a laboratory for new forms of empire⁴.

This body of scholarship has remained surprisingly detached from that produced by a parallel field of study, namely the topic of Middle East oil exploitation in the early twentieth century. One overarching aim of this project is to bring these two scholarly fields into fruitful dialogue. Work on the region's oil history has itself been notably fragmentary. Arguably, more expansive studies have been given to the question of the role of oil in subsequent decolonisation of the Middle East⁵ than to oil's prior role within Western imperial ventures there. Moreover, such studies as exist on the latter question tend to focus on case studies of particular imperial ventures and individual sub-regions or states, thereby losing sight of larger diachronic and transnational perspectives. Another shortcoming feature of this historiography has been an intermixing with hagiography, with much of the relevant work originating in company-sponsored 'official' histories⁶. Even where this literature on the history of Middle Eastern oil businesses attempts to study the whole region⁷, it still tends to treat the topic as merely contemporaneous to the recasting of Middle Eastern borders.

The specific case of British involvement in Middle Eastern oil, which has received a series of historical studies, reflects many of these pitfalls. Early work on the topic⁸ offered useful exploratory discussions of the close collaborations between formal agents of empire and oil companies. However, this early scholarship is marred by a tendency towards description: often, the approach adopted is panegyric, taking at face value the claims of the various British actors involved, and replicating their celebratory narratives — with the early oil business in the Middle East represented as a successful product of sophisticated British modernising endeavours. A second wave of scholarship investigated more explicitly how the government in London used British-directed companies as its proxy agents. According to this scholarship, the primary motivation for these British efforts was grand strategy — securing an unlimited supply of cheap oil for the Royal Navy⁹. Yet this approach too may be critiqued as offering an overly-reductive account of the impact of oil considerations upon the already complex calculus at play in Britain's longstanding involvements in the Middle East (a topic on which the applicant's prize-winning first book provides a major new account¹⁰).

A final and fundamental flaw in the existing scholarly literature is its fragmentary nature: above all, almost no attention has been paid to the decisive case of British oil ventures in Persia/Iran. Only in the light of this key case could a full picture be made of British — and Western — engagement with Middle Eastern oil. Attempts have been made to sketch the contours of a comparative — or cooperative — history of British and American engagement in respect of the Middle Eastern oil, for example in the case of interwar Iraq¹¹, arguing that

³ Darwin, J., *Britain, Egypt, and the Middle East. Imperial Policy in the Aftermath of War, 1918-1922*, New York, 1981.

⁴ Arsan, A., and Schayegh, C., (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates*, Abingdon, 2015.

⁵ Dietrich, C., *Oil Revolution: Anti-Colonial Elites, Sovereign Rights, and the Economic Culture of Decolonization*, Cambridge, 2017.

⁶ Ferrier, R. W., *The History of the British Petroleum Company*, vol.1 'The developing years, 1901-1932', Cambridge, 1982; Bamberg, J. H., *The History of the British Petroleum Company*, vol.2 'The Anglo-Iranian Years, 1928-1954', Cambridge, 1994; Stegner, W., *Discovery! The Search for Arabian Oil*, Beirut, 1971; Roche, F., *Total Fina Elf, Une Major Française*, Paris, 2003.

⁷ Yergin, D., *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power*, London, 1991.

⁸ Longrigg, S., *Oil in the Middle East: Its Discovery and Development*, Oxford, 1954.

⁹ Kent, M., *Moguls and Mandarins: Oil, Imperialism and the Middle East in British Foreign Policy, 1900-1940*, London, 1993.

¹⁰ Crouzet, G., *Genèses du Moyen-Orient. Le Golfe Persique à l'âge des impérialismes (c.1800-c.1914)*, Ceyzérieux, 2015.

¹¹ Stivers, W., *Supremacy and Oil Iraq: Turkey, and the Anglo-American World Order, 1918-1930*, Ithaca, 1982.

the British–American oil business collaborations during the later interwar period were a marker of waning British ability to conduct an independent imperial policy. Yet the findings of such studies may be doubted, given the lack of basic studies on the full dimensions of British engagement with Middle Eastern oil. Ultimately, this study will enable the kind of transnational attention to the question of Western oil imperialism in the early twentieth-century Middle East which has, to date, been impossible. By linking work on the specific field of oil history with the larger field of studies of the making of the modern Middle East will it be possible to address the larger conjunctures for the region at this period (noted at the outset here), which are usually treated in isolation from the question of oil.

C- Research themes

1- ‘Oil imperialism’: a trans-imperial oil moment.

This project argues that oil exploration/exploitation offers a key causal framework in which to situate the reshaping of borders and related imperial entanglements. The approach adopted here eschews the conventional focus on given sub-regions of the Middle East, maintaining for a global view of the wider region in order to reveal the larger imperial power-politics at play. Accordingly, this project contributes to a transnational or ‘connected’ imperial history. Specifically, it is posited here that this global view reveals a new form of coercive interventionism, which this project terms ‘oil imperialism’. This term, coined during the period under study with reference to Soviet oil dynamics¹², has been employed in varied subsequent iterations. Here this term is used to characterize how oil competition fostered new bids for domination over space and people in the early twentieth-century Middle East, and how this was a key element, above all, in a refashioned British imperialism. At this juncture, oil products became militarily and industrially vital for imperial states. Desire for oil concessions made the Middle East a new site of interventionism, with specific focus on its previously ignored hinterlands (i.e. desert areas, swamplands, and mountainous regions)¹³. New means of coercion over people and space were framed, paradoxically at a time when ‘humanitarianism’ and ‘development ideology’ became discursively important.

2-Britain in the Middle East: a renewed political economy of empire.

British state and business interests were central to these developments. In particular, British interests encompassed the whole of the region, rather than just one fraction of it (as was the case of other imperial powers). Nevertheless, these other imperial actors will also be discussed comparatively in this project: indeed, the rich scholarship on the somewhat later case of American–Saudi oil agreements¹⁴ offers useful conceptual links with the present project. Ultimately, this project argues, a transnational, or ‘trans-imperial’, approach is a most fruitful in approaching this topic, for oil involved imperial cooperation as well as rivalry: oil agreements — and the networks of pipelines involved, traversing the Middle East — gave a kind of structural unity to a region which was in terms of its political structures a mosaic of variegated territories.

¹² Fischer, L., *Oil Imperialism: The International Struggle for Petroleum*, New York, 1926.

¹³ Fletcher, R., *British Imperialism and ‘The Tribal Question’: Desert Administration and Nomadic Societies in the Middle East, 1919–1936*, Oxford, 2015.

¹⁴ Jones, T. C., *Desert Kingdom: How Oil and Water Forged Modern Saudi Arabia*, Harvard, 2010; Vitalis, R., *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier*, Stanford, 2007.

2a- The business of empire: oil companies as imperial instruments. Imperial-oil and oil-imperialism involved government and business actors.

Much existing historiography suggests oil operations developed more by business accident than by government design. But this project contends that these ostensibly separate interest groups had significant intertwining and collaboration. Specifically, it is argued here that oil ventures did not rely on laissez faire policies, but rather saw firm government-led interventionism. Thus, oil's key role in British military–imperial policies was evident during early concession negotiations, notably in Persia in 1901, when British diplomats and business worked hand-in-glove; and it was placed on a formal footing by a 1911 agreement with the Anglo-Persian Oil Company which saw a majority of APOC shares pass to government hands.

2b- New imperial ideologies, 'development' and modernization.

This project further argues that, for Britain, these dynamics amounted to a new experience of empire, with a rising generation of imperialists identifying oil companies as their best agents for a revised, intensive and profitable form of 'informal' empire. The various regions of the Middle East were seen as a vast untapped realm for exploration and exploitation, notably of mineral resources, and with petroleum products in the vanguard. This project posits that oil was at least as important a leitmotif of British engagement with the interwar Middle East as were the Mandates. Indeed, oil speculations both motivated Britain's interest in securing Mandates and were a way of paying lip service to Mandate structures of 'development'.

3- 'Oil empire' from below: societal and environmental consequences; subaltern resistance.

This project seeks to establish how oil ventures took shape as an imperial policy not only in London but also on the ground. Therefore, this project also examines local actors, through case studies of policies of co-option or coercion of native elites and populations: (i) the sheiks of the northern Gulf (e.g. Kuwait, Bahrain); (ii) the marsh Arabs (Iraq); and (iii) the Bakhtiari tribe (Persia). Imperial policymakers sought to transform native populations into imperial subjects: while this was a longstanding concern in British colonial administration, in this context it was advanced with new technologies of violence. Social transformations were accompanied by environmental ones, with the human and imagined geographies of the terrain at stake being radically reshaped around the requirements of the oil business, notably the settlement of tribal groups.

C- Future plans of research

For this research and thanks to the grant of the History project and the support of the Institute for New Economic Thinking, research was undertaken:

-In the British Petroleum archives, which are housed on Warwick Campus. The research was focused on the collections related to the beginning of oil exploration and exploitation in the Bakhtiari country in South-West Persia. This enabled me to explore the rich material related to my first case study: the Bakhtiari and the impact of British oil imperialism on their territory, from 1905 to the early 1930s. Work was also undertaken on the Abadan Refinery and on the early "labour policy" of the Anglo-Persian oil Company" in the 1920s.

-In the India Office Records, at the British Library. The research focused on collections related to the Bakhtiari and to the history of the Abadan refinery during the First World War.

-In the Churchill archives (Cambridge). I explored the files related to Churchill's interest in d'Arcy's venture, in oil products and technological progress. I also researched the history of Churchill's financial participation in the Anglo-Persian Company and his role as an advocate for British state financial participation in the Company.

-In the TOTAL archives in France (La Défense, Paris). I particularly looked at the materials related to the Iraq-Mediterranean pipeline and Franco-British rivalry and cooperation in this project. I also explored the material related to the creation of the Compagnie Française des Pétroles and to French oil exploration in Iraq.

-In the Hoover Institution Archives (Stanford University, California). The research focused on the personal papers of various American men involved in oil exploration and exploitation in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf in the early 1920s (Arthur A. Cervi, Philip C. McConnell and Harry Roscoe Snyder papers).

- In the special collections of the Charles E. Young Library, at the University of California Los Angeles. I worked on the Isabella Bird's photographic collection, which is an invaluable source on the Bakhtiari before the age of oil.

I am now working on two articles projects on topics related to British Oil imperialism in the Middle East.

(i) A more conceptual piece, intended for a wider audience, describing the term 'oil imperialism'

(ii) A more specialist piece on Franco-British imperial cooperation and rivalries in the 1930s over the Iraq-Mediterranean pipeline.

(iii) The larger output of this project, completed over the second year, will be a book, *Crude Empire: British Oil Imperialism and the Making of the Modern Middle East, 1901–1935* (target publisher: Oxford University Press).

I have also a side project which is to set a virtual (online) exhibition will present a selection from the Middle East photograph series composed by the British traveller Isabella Bird in the early 1900s, depicting society in Persia on the eve of the 'oil revolution'.

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