

'A Certain Idea of Britain': British Cultural Diplomacy in the Middle East, 1945–57

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During the formative years of the Cold War, cultural diplomacy and 'national projection' came to occupy an important place in British policy towards the Middle East. The British Council and the official overseas information services sought to mobilise pro-democracy committees, education and exchange programmes, commercial magazine publishing and book distribution as well as the British film industry in a bid to bolster British prestige and facilitate the wider policymaking process. This article argues that many of these initiatives enjoyed significant success and that, rather than weak propaganda policy per se, it was ultimately a flawed conceptualisation of Arab nationalism and the nature of the Cold War in the Middle East that led to British failure in the 1950s.

Cultural Diplomacy and the Middle Eastern Cold War

In the aftermath of the 2003 occupation of Iraq, the United States government launched a number of cultural relations initiatives as part of its efforts to challenge the dominant strains of anti-Americanism in the Arab world. Amongst these have been *Hi*, a glossy 'lifestyle' magazine targeting young Arabs, and al-Hurra [the Free One], a US-funded satellite television station beaming news and information into homes across the Middle East. It is not the intention of this article to pass comment on the effectiveness of these projects (although early indications suggest that al-Hurra, in particular, is struggling to achieve credibility in a competitive Arabic television market). From an historical perspective, however, it is interesting to note a number of striking similarities between current American policies and the activities of British propagandists in the years immediately following the end of the Second World War. In the late 1940s, for example, British officials oversaw the affairs of the Ikhwan

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al-Hurriya [Brotherhood of Freedom], a mass membership society dedicated to propagating liberal democratic values in Egypt and, during the 1950s, published *Al Aalam* [The Globe], what might be regarded as a distant ancestor of *Hi* magazine, complete with film star features and centrefold pin-ups.

This article, by examining the nature of Britain's cultural relations programme in the Arab world, seeks to add a Middle Eastern dimension to the growing historical literature on public diplomacy and the role of 'culture' during the Cold War. As Scott Lucas has recently argued, the Cold War period represented the first major move in peacetime towards the development of a 'comprehensive state strategy' which 'incorporated culture into the campaign to defeat its adversary'.¹ Lucas is also quick to criticise international historians for their readiness to promote a limited US or superpower-centred analysis which fails to consider 'the cultural Cold War waged by governments based outside Washington and Moscow'.² Such observations provide one important justification for the study of the cultural dimension of British strategy and diplomacy in the Middle East in the early Cold War. As early as June 1946, Britain's Ambassador in Baghdad informed Ernest Bevin that with 'the Moslem religion no barrier to the spread of Communism in Iraq', no better substitute existed than 'the British ideal of moderation, toleration, social progress, and individual freedom'.³ A particular and historically specific interpretation of British identity, society and culture was in the process of being mobilised as a diplomatic weapon against the spread of Communism and Soviet influence in a region identified in July 1946 by Foreign Office Permanent Undersecretary, Orme Sargent, as being of 'vital importance' for the future of the British Commonwealth.⁴

Nevertheless, despite a revival of interest in propaganda, ideology and culture on the part of Cold War historians,⁵ the conduct of British propaganda and cultural diplomacy in the Middle East remains a relatively neglected field of research. Indeed, it was not long ago that Philip M. Taylor argued that even an issue as important as the relationship between overseas propaganda and the crisis of prestige suffered as a result of the 1956 Suez Crisis was an area that had yet to receive serious attention.⁶ A recent special edition of *Intelligence and National Security* dedicated to the theme of 'the cultural Cold War' quite deliberately limited itself to developments in Western Europe,⁷ and while there have been numerous excellent considerations of what Kenneth Osgood has termed 'the unconventional Cold War',⁸ most historians working in the field have focused upon the unfolding contest played out in the United States, the Soviet Union and Europe.⁹ The Middle East – despite J.M. Lee's assertion that it was the emergence of Arab nationalism that forced British policymakers in the 1950s grudgingly to accept cultural diplomacy as an important tool of overseas policy – has not featured heavily, if at all, in the majority of these accounts.¹⁰

Lee may well be correct in his assertion that it was the deteriorating British position in the face of Nasser's brand of pan-Arabism which led during the second half of the 1950s to a re-evaluation of the importance of cultural diplomacy as an arm of foreign policy, but it is also clear that Britain's cultural relations programmes had been growing in size and importance since the inter-war years.¹¹ The business

of 'national projection' took on fresh importance after 1945, largely because of the need to convince overseas opinion that a war-exhausted Britain would remain a major power in the post-war international order. It was this concern that lay at the heart of the Cairo British embassy's argument that 'our main information task is to proclaim that Britain is still strong and a Power ... whose friendship is well worth having'.¹² Furthermore, the onset of ideological conflict with the Soviet Union added a new sense of urgency to proceedings. In October 1946, a Foreign Office publicity directive declared that a central tenet of any bid to counter Soviet propaganda in the region should be the idea that Britain's 'democratic system of government, social services, organisation of industry and labour, administration of justice; in short, the British way of life offers the best example of orderly and rapid progress. Material on these subjects should be given the widest possible publicity'.¹³ By 1950 the Foreign Office had concluded that, while straightforward anti-Communist work remained important, 'the prevailing doctrine was that British propaganda should not be entirely negative, but that, as well as exposing the evils of the Soviet regime, we have to show that there is a better alternative and that Western democracy, with Britain in the lead, is pointing the way to it'.¹⁴

Even so, this distinction between 'negative' anti-Communist and 'positive' pro-British propaganda tended to break down in practice. A 1952 Ministry of Defence memorandum put the case that 'The activity variously called "presentation of the democratic case", "battle of ideas", "cold war", "ideological warfare", "propaganda" and "psychological warfare" (and sometimes "information and cultural activities" ...) is capable of being discussed in a negative or a positive aspect ... The two aspects cannot however be completely divorced'.¹⁵ Or, as Minister of State Anthony Nutting put it rather more succinctly, 'All our propaganda is planned against the background of the Soviet threat – no longer just "projecting Britain" for its own sake'.¹⁶ By the time that the Drogheda enquiry into the overseas information services reported in summer 1953, cultural diplomacy and national projection had become established as a major element of British propaganda in the Middle East and elsewhere.¹⁷

Cultural Stereotypes and National Character: The Politics of Education and Exchange

The conduct of British cultural diplomacy was by no means particular to the Cold War Middle East, but a number of factors did lend its conduct in the region a distinctive appearance. Not least of these was the climate of anti-imperialism in which British propagandists were called upon to operate, and the collection of cultural assumptions about the Arab world that many British officials brought to their work. At its crudest, this amounted to a straightforward racism which Glubb Pasha, legendary commander of the Transjordanian Arab Legion, identified as 'the survival of the Victorian contempt for "natives"'.¹⁸ Equally detrimental to the conduct of effective propaganda in the Middle East was the psychological legacy of the years of European dominance.

In 1954, Gordon Waterfield, head of the BBC's Eastern Services, touched upon this theme, citing Freya Stark's observation about the British community in Iraq:

'We don't go to their houses', Stark observed in *Beyond Euphrates* (1951), yet 'we ask them to be grateful for things like police and bridges; and they would probably much rather be without these latter and not feel inferior'.¹⁹

British officials in Cairo summed up the problems that could develop from prejudice and resentments of this kind in an expression of concern about the presence in the Middle East of what they termed 'the wrong type of Englishman'.

Examples occur of people arriving in Egypt finding themselves ... in a more privileged social position than would be the case in England, and this has sometimes 'gone to their heads' and has resulted in an attitude of superiority to the 'wogs' ... and a general display of bad manners which is quickly noted and resented by the Egyptians and the majority of the British community.²⁰

Such comments illustrate the extent to which images of 'Britishness' concerned diplomats in the region. Of particular interest was the notion of 'national character', not least because of a widespread belief that Arabs did not have any and would benefit disproportionately from contact with British individuals and institutions. Glubb was particularly prone to lengthy expositions along these lines, even suggesting that nationalist agitation was little more than a manifestation of immaturity. 'The Arabs', he wrote in a remarkably revealing passage,

show all the instability and emotionalism of the adolescent Slightings give rise to outbursts of temper and violent defiance. Like children they will sometimes be rude, and sometimes plunged in despair and self-depreciation. Like big schoolboys they glory in their new freedom, but when things go badly they like to feel that father is in the background, available to be appealed to and sure to be helpful. The wise parent will neither attempt continually to enforce his authority, nor will he disown his children in a fit of resentment, nor be deceived by their assumption of manly airs, into forgetting their real helplessness in the face of a hostile world. It is the parent's role to view indulgently the children's independent defiance, but always to be ready to receive them back, with sympathy and not with reproaches, when their over-exuberance has led them into some extravagant scrape.²¹

One means of addressing this supposed Arab character flaw, and one which dovetailed neatly with the cost-effective propaganda strategy of shaping the views of the masses through the influence of elites, was the funding of visits to Britain for leading Arab journalists. At the heart of such visits was the aim of impressing upon visitors a particular set of images of Britain and the British people. An example of this approach can be seen in the 1947 visit of a group of Syrian journalists who, upon returning from their British tour, published a series of articles in local newspapers, of which the following extract, describing the author's impression of the British people, is typical: 'Their most conspicuous characteristic is the gentleness of their behaviour ... such discipline, good behaviour and good manners which people show in their relations with each other can be found in no capital of the world except London. It is the special

characteristic of the British people.’²² The fact that the journalist made a point of contrasting the ‘finer and more cultured behaviour’ of the average Briton with that of the ‘arrogant and conceited’ Frenchman must have been particularly gratifying for the tour’s organisers.²³

Such accounts were by no means exceptional. British officials in Beirut described a successful 1947 visit to Britain by a Lebanese press delegation who had returned ‘full of praise about their experiences’, speaking and writing favourably about ‘the solid British character and British discipline’, ‘the British sense of humour’ and ‘the British people – their friendliness and hospitality’.²⁴ Another visit by Lebanese journalists in 1952 was deemed to have been similarly successful, with the British Ambassador noting that ‘I am sure these visits do a lot of good...I hope that it will be possible for a Lebanese delegation to visit the United Kingdom each year ... as the Lebanon is a nursery for journalists for the Arab world’.²⁵

Questions of national identity and character also informed Britain’s educational effort in the Middle East, and several officials regarded British Council schools as the most valuable arm of British cultural diplomacy in the region. Indeed, by the mid-1950s, Britain’s Ambassador in Beirut had convinced himself that the establishment of a British school in the Lebanon would be ‘the best single contribution we could make to the future of the Middle East’.²⁶ British Council staff themselves argued that the political value of their schools lay in the fact that ‘their character building reputation’ lent them a level of prestige which enabled them ‘to attract the children of important families and to build up understanding of Britain both by their impact upon the pupils and by their contact with the parents’.²⁷

Given its importance as the most powerful Arab state and a centre of Arab political and intellectual life, education projects in Egypt were at the heart of the British Council’s work. Racial and cultural assumptions certainly contributed to the priority afforded to Egypt since, as a British representative in Alexandria informed Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden in 1952, ‘The cultural and intellectual background of the Egyptian is so far removed from that of the Westerner, that it is only possible to influence him by starting from the very beginning and giving him the basis of a Western education’.²⁸ Egyptian parents, it was categorically stated, ‘realise that their own traditional form of culture fits them ill for a place in a highly competitive modern world... Consequently, any foreign school which opens its doors in Egypt will almost immediately find itself full, and obliged to turn pupils away’.²⁹ The value of university placements for Egyptian students was considered in similar terms, it being argued that ‘Egyptians seem particularly impressionable at the age at which they attend university and few of them fail to develop a sincere admiration and affection for Britain as a result’.³⁰

Some concerns were voiced about the potentially harmful influence of inappropriate British academic staff, and a 1947 report from the Cairo embassy warned that

A few of these people are not the right type to teach Egyptian youth. Many of the Egyptian professors . . . point out that the Egyptian idea of the Englishman is the 'sportsman, fond of exercise and pipe-smoking' and they are anxious that this should be the type of man whose influence should be impressed upon the Egyptian students. Their complaint, however, is that they sometimes get the Englishman with long hair and brilliant ties, who likes to talk about modern art and poetry in terms which are incomprehensible to the average Egyptian.³¹

Nevertheless, the faith of British officials that 'there is no doubt that education in a foreign school predisposes the former pupils to adopt an attitude of friendship towards the country whose culture they have absorbed' led them to mount a passionate defence of the educational programme, with officials concluding that it would be 'a disaster if the extent of our educational effort in this country was considerably reduced The accent should be on its extension rather than reduction'.³² It says much about the financial restrictions imposed by the Treasury upon Britain's cultural relations programme that on the eve of the Suez Crisis the British Council was still pressing for the increases in funding that would enable it to maintain its educational programme in Egypt at the desired level.³³

In Iraq, nursery and primary education formed the mainstay of British Council operations. In 1947 a visiting diplomat described the Council's nursery school in Baghdad as 'the most practical and successful piece of publicity work which I have seen so far in the Middle East', going on to describe how 'English and Iraqi children are as a matter of course invited to each other's birthday parties. I do not think it would be possible to exaggerate the excellent atmosphere of this school and the good which it must inevitably do in cementing Anglo-Iraqi good relations'.³⁴ By the mid-1950s, 82 children, the great majority Iraqi, were enrolled at the Ta'assissia Primary School in Baghdad. One impressed inspector observed that 'The education given is British in character, in that activity methods of all kinds are successfully used to develop the children's own initiative and interests and to wean them from over-reliance on bookishness and didacticism which characterises the Iraqi tradition of education'.³⁵ The value attached to this school can be gauged from a British Council minute which described the school as 'one of the Council's best investments in Iraq',³⁶ and plans to establish a complementary secondary school were well advanced by the time of the Suez Crisis.

As in Egypt, however, the British Council in Iraq felt itself to be hamstrung by financial restrictions. Ambassador Harold Beeley informed Eden in June 1952 that 'Funds and staff are the main limitations The British Council's inability to send a larger number of bursars to the United Kingdom and the inability of British Universities and technical institutions to take more than a handful is most unfortunate'. Beeley was particularly concerned that failure on Britain's part to invest in schemes of this kind would result in the growth of American influence at Britain's expense. If places for Iraqi students could not be found in Britain, he warned, large numbers would turn instead to the United States and 'come back with American ideas and tend to encourage the use of American equipment. This is bound to weaken our own position and that of British experts serving the Iraq Government'.³⁷

***Al Aalam* Magazine and the Arabic Publications Programme**

The responsibility for cultural diplomacy in the Middle East by no means rested solely with the British Council. A major initiative in the early 1950s was the launching of a *Picture Post*-style Arabic magazine published by the Central Office of Information (COI) in collaboration with the Foreign Office's information departments. *Al Aalam* [The Globe] was launched in June 1952 in order to 'provide an alternative to the extremely nationalist, trashy, but attractively produced pictorial magazines printed in Egypt, which, since the abolition of our own Arabic magazines after the war, have completely monopolised the field'.³⁸

Ostensibly, *Al Aalam* was a commercial venture which casual observers would regard as the product of a Beirut-based distribution company. In fact, at a price of just 6d an issue (significantly cheaper than its Egyptian competitors), the magazine was incapable of generating enough revenue from sales to meet its own production costs and was heavily subsidised. A Foreign Office Information Policy Department (IPD) minute described how

The major Oil Companies with interests in the Middle East are sufficiently interested to contribute nearly one-third of the cost of production of the magazine. This fact should on no account be divulged outside official circles as the Oil Companies are most anxious not to be associated publicly with the magazine. The remainder of the cost is being found from the Central Office of Information and HMSO votes.³⁹

British officials were nevertheless keen to maintain the magazine's commercial 'cover' for as long as possible. In May 1952, IPD's Kit Barclay wrote to Adam Watson, the Information Research Department's (IRD) liaison officer with the US propaganda and intelligence agencies in Washington. This link with IRD is instructive, for it connects Britain's Middle Eastern cultural diplomacy offensive to the semi-clandestine Foreign Office department which was established in 1948 and specifically charged with the task of taking the Cold War propaganda battle to the Soviet Union.⁴⁰ Barclay informed Watson that

We are anxious to conceal for as long as possible the official British connection with the magazine, although the fact that it is composed largely of material from British sources will quickly disclose its country of origin. We hope for some time to keep up the fiction that it is being published for the commercial distributors, Messrs. Farajalla of Beirut. We hope that the magazine will be established and popular before our enemies succeed in labelling it publicly as British propaganda.⁴¹

In 1957, a COI report described the editorial policy of the magazine as seeking to contribute to 'the promotion of conditions favourable to a stable and prosperous Middle East, ready to co-operate with her traditional friend Britain, and sufficiently healthy in the social and economic fields to withstand Communist penetration'.⁴²

The magazine, therefore, contained a blend of articles and features serving a range of propaganda functions. Initially, the need to attract as broad a readership as possible, particularly given the fact that the magazine was to be sold rather than distributed free of charge, meant that *Al Aalam* was high on entertainment value and low on

recognisably 'propagandistic' content. For this reason it had been decided that the first issues should include 'such standard features of large-scale publications as the "pin up", joke-drawings and articles on the cinema'.⁴³ In its first issue, therefore, with a cover adorned with the image of Joan Collins and a centre-spread featuring colour photographs of glamorous Iranian and Spanish models under the title 'Oriental and Western Charm', *Al Aalam* set out its stall in none too subtle terms. Alongside some more serious fare such as a feature on Nehru and a story on education in Kuwait, the magazine offered pages of cartoons, jokes, comic strips, film reviews, and a children's entertainment page featuring an adventure story and football skills.⁴⁴ British officials in Iraq were among those to respond favourably, remarking that the 'photographs... of attractive young women... were a feature which, if continued, should contribute greatly to [*Al Aalam's*] success'.⁴⁵

With diplomatic posts and oil company representatives pressing for more features on social, economic and political themes, however, the COI agreed to 'inject propaganda into the magazine earlier and faster than was at first envisaged'.⁴⁶ Links with IRD were maintained and a COI minute of December 1954 noted that 'every issue carries 2–3 items of an anti-Communist nature' drawn from IRD sources.⁴⁷ Perhaps the most consistent aspect of the magazine was the emphasis upon features designed to boost British prestige in the Arab world. In a progress report sent to British oil company representatives, Barclay pointed out that in the first six months of the magazine, 'useful features... from the propaganda point of view' included articles on NATO, the career of Lord Mountbatten, British support for social and economic development in the Middle East, the educational experiences of Arab rulers in British schools, the provision of British agricultural equipment to Middle Eastern farmers, the flourishing of the Islamic faith in Britain, and 'a series of short biographies of British scientists who have contributed to the wellbeing of mankind'.⁴⁸ Additional articles emphasising the productive relationship between Britain and the Arab world included 'Arabia in Britain' (describing the Arab community in Manchester), 'From Al Azhar to Cambridge' (in which the head of the London Islamic Centre compared his experiences at the leading British and Egyptian universities) and 'Exchanging Traditions' (which compared British and Middle Eastern industrial techniques).⁴⁹ The magazine, playing up the theme of friendship and mutual respect between the Western and Arab worlds, also featured stories about the impact of Islamic culture in Europe, archaeological discoveries in the Arab world, and the history of *Al Azhar*, 'the world's oldest university'. Not an issue went by, however, without a strong emphasis on British achievements. Articles on British engineering prowess, Britain's contribution to tropical medicine, the progressive nature of the British Commonwealth, and British military strength all featured regularly in the pages of *Al Aalam*.⁵⁰

After some initial criticism from some information officers who had grown fond of the BBC's *Arabic Listener*, which *Al Aalam* effectively replaced, the new magazine grew into a successful publishing enterprise. From a starting circulation at just under 28,000 at the end of 1952, it was regularly selling over 50,000 copies by 1956, with some issues registering as many as 80,000 sales.⁵¹ *Al Aalam* also impressed William Grant Parr,

the United States Information Agency's man in Damascus, who described it as a magazine that 'mixes message with local interest material in a very effective way ... [it] is very popular throughout the literate classes'.⁵² The COI's John Mcmillan, writing from Baghdad in March 1957, could barely contain his enthusiasm, claiming that

The slick, glamorous, sophisticated *Al Aalam* is nothing short of sensational. In fact, I can hardly give an adequate account of its impact ... In a pretty extensive personal sampling up and down the social scale here, from Cabinet Ministers to police, I have hardly found a single person who doesn't recall some feature of *Al Aalam* ... In short, it is currently the biggest thing in Arabic publications here. Most important, its discreet pro-British slant seems to produce no resentment; and indeed, so far as I can judge, is positively welcome to our well-wishers, of whom there are many ... even when they know that the magazine is a British 'plant'.⁵³

Even after the Suez Crisis, the COI claimed that 'outside Egypt, *Al Aalam* enjoys the highest sale of any magazine in the Arabic language'.⁵⁴ Perhaps the last word should go to the COI staff who, surveying letters sent by readers to the magazine, observed that 'One correspondent brings blushes to our hardened cheeks with the comment: "When I first saw [*Al Aalam*] I thought it might be just another organ of propaganda, but it turned out to be a publication of great cultural value".'⁵⁵

Al Aalam was by no means the only British propaganda publishing project in the Middle East, nor was it, with its oil company funding, the only example of cooperation between British business interests and the state. In the late 1940s, information officers cooperated closely with W.H. Smith & Son as part of a campaign to stimulate the British book trade in the Middle East. In January 1948, the Foreign Office's Middle East Information Department (MEID) reported that

W.H. Smith's representative, who arrived in Cairo in October, intends to start operations on the 1st February. These operations should in time extend to other Middle East countries than Egypt and discussions are now proceeding in Cairo about the possibility of Smiths handling the commercial distribution of British Council and HMSO material. It is to be hoped that the import of British books to the Middle East will now greatly improve.⁵⁶

Within a year, officials in Cairo were able to report that 'In the opinion of the Manager of W.H. Smith & Son, Cairo ... the British Book Trade in Egypt is flourishing.' Diplomats were particularly pleased that 'The trade appears to be quite unaffected by the vagaries of the political situation ... This is particularly apparent in the Universities, always in the forefront of political demonstrations, where about 90% of the textbooks used, except in the Faculty of Law, are British standard works.'⁵⁷

Oral Propaganda Networks and the Ikhwan al Hurriya

A more overtly ideological vehicle for the propagation of British values and ideas developed from the cultivation of the Cairo embassy's 'oral propaganda networks'. One network, known as the 'Landale Organisation' (after the founding member within

the embassy's Publicity Section) emerged in 1940 and was based upon the distribution of a regular bulletin, 'the Talking Point Letter', which provided commentaries on political, economic and social affairs. The Landale Organization, in the words of the head of the embassy's Publicity Section, provided the British in Egypt with a channel through which they could 'bring to intelligent readers an exposition of the British point of view more accurately set out than we can hope to get it in the press, and presentation of Britain's activity in world affairs such as the press would often ignore.'⁵⁸

Also in 1940, Freya Stark established the Ikhwan al Hurriya [Brotherhood of Freedom], which was eventually to take the concept of oral propaganda to new levels of effectiveness. The Ikhwan al Hurriya consisted of a network of committees, the membership of which was overwhelmingly Egyptian, meeting regularly to discuss social issues and current affairs. In early 1948, MEID's Val Riley (later to act as IRDs link with *Al Aalam* magazine) described the organisation in the following terms:

[It] has 50,000 members throughout the Delta, of which only three are British. These members meet in small committees to study and discuss the weekly bulletin which provides not only the factual account of world news, but presents also examples of the working of British Democracy.... The bulletin itself usually contains the explanation of some aspect of the British Democracy under the present Government which serves as a basis for discussion and explanation at committee meetings.⁵⁹

By June 1948, the organisation consisted of 5,105 committees with 52,863 members, further augmented by another 2,926 members in a complementary women's branch.⁶⁰ According to Stark, the key to the Ikhwan's success was that its propaganda was 'not only spread but conceived by the people of the country in which it was to act', a conclusion endorsed in 1948 by Ronald Fay, the organisation's British Director. Fay described how the Ikhwan's bulletin, 25,000 copies of which were sent out on a weekly basis, despite an outward appearance of being produced solely by Egyptians, 'in actual fact ... contains what we want it to contain.'⁶¹

The sheer scale of the organisation made it a valuable instrument of pro-British propaganda in Egypt, and the membership booklet for the organisation provides a neat summary of its key principles:

The Brotherhood works by personal contact and by word of mouth. It seeks to apply in its own activities the democratic principles which it exists to further. For this reason, these regulations emphasize a strong spirit of co-operation between brothers and not the machinery of the organization.

... The duties of members are:

- (a) To counter, orally, anti-democratic and anti-United Nations talk.
- (b) To awaken those of their countrymen who do not realize that, in order to take their proper position in the civilized world, they cannot remain indifferent to world affairs.
- (c) To make themselves fully acquainted with the ideals and principles of democracy and to disseminate these.⁶²

Stark's original idea had been to mobilise 'a really enthusiastic band of allies' in an ideological struggle against Britain's enemies but she also pointed out how the seemingly neutral dissemination of pro-democracy material acted as a cover for pro-British propaganda. 'To obtain a band of really useful cooperators,' she continued,

requires a cause which inspires enthusiasm. The cause of Britain cannot be expected to do so except among British subjects and among a very small number of others: it is not a good 'cry' in foreign countries. We have therefore chosen the name of the Brotherhood of Freedom, so that being out to support Freedom and Democracy we can take whatever local tinge appears to be most helpful, while, in effect, the results are exactly the same as would follow a purely pro-British gospel. The fact that Freedom and Democracy are rather hackneyed words in our ears should not blind us to their potency among less sophisticated people.⁶³

Between 1945 and 1951, the Ikhwan al Hurriya was, as Fay put it, 'chiefly concerned with carrying out a long term policy which I believed to be dear to the present Labour Government'.⁶⁴ Indeed, in its emphasis upon anti-Communism on the one hand and the positive projection of British social democracy on the other, the organisation came closer to Christopher Mayhew's original conception of the Information Research Department than the IRD itself.⁶⁵ An example of the manner in which social development material was combined with projection of Britain themes in Ikhwan bulletins can be found in a lengthy interview with the Egyptian Minister of Education published on the occasion of his visit to Britain in 1950. Entitled 'Egypt in England', the article portrayed the Minister as being 'overwhelmed by the customary hospitality of the people' and 'particularly impressed with the naturalness, freedom from affectation and the extreme simplicity of the life which gives the English home its individuality'.⁶⁶ The Minister also expressed his gratitude to 'a number of Government bodies and leading British personalities... for the great assistance I received, for the time they spent with me and for the wealth of social experience they placed before me.... I shall leave this country,' he concluded, 'with very pleasant recollections and with nothing but respect for those who run it with such profound knowledge, thorough organisation and idealism'.⁶⁷

British Feature Films in the Middle East

If the activities so far discussed were regarded by many as making a valuable contribution to British policy in the Middle East, the same cannot be said of the bid to mobilise Britain's feature film industry. For some years in the late 1940s officials worked with Alexander Korda's Eagle-Lion company in order to distribute and promote British films in the region but the campaign was handicapped by a number of factors. Foremost amongst these were the greater appeal of rival film industries and the unsuitability of many British films for Middle Eastern audiences. One Tehran cinema, which had placed an advance order for 15 Eagle-Lion films in 1945, showed only the first four (*Henry V*, *Blythe Spirit*, *I'll Be Your Sweetheart*, and *I Know Where I'm Going*)

before a marked absence of box office success led the proprietor to cancel the order.⁶⁸ In July 1947, officials in Iraq reported that of three British films shown in commercial Baghdad cinemas during the previous quarter, only one (*Carnival*) had enjoyed any success and that *Blythe Spirit* had been a conspicuous failure. A plan to show British films to invited audiences in the embassy's own cinema was adjudged to have been a failure as neither of the first two films shown (the 1945 Ealing productions *Johnny Frenchman* and *Pink String and Sealing Wax*) 'can be described as first-class or wholly suitable for the object in view'.⁶⁹

British distributors did not help their cause by failing to sub-title or dub their films into Arabic. When the extra effort was made, the results could be rewarding, as illustrated by the Baghdad Embassy's comment that 'We cannot emphasise too strongly that if these films are to be successfully commercialised in Iraq they must be sub-titled in Arabic... "Great Expectations" without sub-titles failed to attract audiences. Directly it was sub-titled it was a success'.⁷⁰ The unsuitability of British films for the tastes of Middle East audiences was an obstacle that neither information officers nor film industry representatives appeared capable of overcoming, and British films suffered in competition with Egypt and the United States. Furthermore, the dominance of Hollywood films concerned British officials and one 'humiliating film' caused particular anxiety. A 20th Century Fox drama about Japanese prisoner-of-war camps, *Three Came Home* (1950), was according to one British official, 'a most unfortunate film to show in the Middle or Far East.' The problem was the film's depiction of 'British and Americans bowing to Japanese sentries, our women being beaten up and raped, and Australian troops being shot down and so on.' 'It is true that it all comes right in the end,' one concerned diplomat reported, 'but apparently in a very wishy-washy fashion and there are no compensating shots of the Japanese being knocked about'.⁷¹

The lack of British film industry success in the Middle East can be gauged from statistics compiled by the Baghdad embassy in 1948. During the first quarter of the year, it reported the number of films shown in Baghdad's commercial cinemas according to their country of origin to be as follows:

American	66
Arabic [predominantly Egyptian]	46
Indian	2
French	1
Armenian	1
British	0

'The situation as regards British films is deplorable', they concluded, unsurprisingly.⁷²

The story was not, in all fairness, one of unmitigated disaster and a report from Beirut covering a similar period, while noting that 'During this quarter, only 6 British films were shown against 66 American, 41 Arabic (Egyptian), 21 French and 2 Russian',

also suggested that a foothold for British films had been established and remarked optimistically that

The old complaints such as 'British films are too slow' or 'They are made for British people only' have become noticeably fewer. These are now replaced by other remarks such as: 'When I hear that there is an English film on I go and see it without asking questions and if James Mason is it, I also take a friend'.⁷³

Ultimately, British studios were incapable of mounting a serious challenge to the dominant Egyptian and American film industries. In 1948, a meeting of information officers concluded that 'In the Middle East the cinema is regarded exclusively as a place of entertainment, not as a place of instruction. By and large, our films are considered dull and unimaginative.'⁷⁴ By 1955, when the idea of staging a British film festival at the annual Damascus Fair (something of a Cold War cultural battleground) was favourably received in principle, Foreign Office propagandists could think of only two films to show (*The Dam Busters* and *The Tales of Hoffman*) before ruefully conceding that 'The trouble is that the . . . [Syrians] . . . will not be interested in domestic comedy or drama, at which we excel, but in display, which is largely left to the American industry with its greater resources.'⁷⁵

Cultural Diplomacy, Propaganda and Policy Failure in the Middle East

The failure of the British film industry in the Middle East provides a warning against exaggerated claims regarding the effectiveness of British cultural diplomacy in the region. In the short term, while the Egyptian 'oral propaganda networks' did enable British officials to by-pass hostile or inaccessible media channels, one should be wary of overstating the influence of organisations such as the Ikhwan al-Hurriya. The crucial test came with the explosion of anti-British violence in Egypt in January 1952, when the Ikhwan proved utterly powerless and was disbanded in the face of the rising tide of anti-British feeling and accusations of treachery against its members. Nor, during the disturbances, were the alumni of British Council schools 'noticeable for open partisanship of Britain's cause', a disappointment explained by one official as 'the inevitable result of the spinelessness of the Egyptian character'.⁷⁶

Nevertheless, cultural relations initiatives were frequently spoken of in glowing terms by British representatives in the Arab world. An assessment of cultural diplomacy in Syria concluded that the efforts of the COI and the Foreign Office had successfully demonstrated to the 'impressionable' Syrian people: '(a) that the United Kingdom . . . has still a great say in world affairs, militarily, politically and commercially, and (b) that the civic spirit of the British people, a spirit which the Arabs know they lack, is something to be admired and aimed at.' So far as the work of the British Council was concerned, the Damascus embassy observed that

In the cultural field foreign influences were almost entirely French until the British Council began work here in 1945 . . . The work of the British Council has been to show the distinctive nature and the advantages of British cultural life and British

education. Its impact has been considerable and beneficial both to Syrians and to the interests of the United Kingdom... and this must have helped in the gradual improvement in the climate of opinion that we think has taken place since the height of anti-British feeling during the Palestine War.⁷⁷

From Baghdad, Harold Beeley reported that

Here it seems to me that the question is whether or not it is desirable to have in Iraq machinery which provides access to British ideas and ways of life, and to the British contribution to the arts and sciences. Though it is impossible to evaluate in precise terms the advantages derived by Her Majesty's Government from the existence of this machinery, I am personally convinced that it plays a distinctive and useful part in our effort to maintain and to strengthen the foundations of British influence in this country.⁷⁸

One of the most positive evaluations came from Beirut, where Ambassador Chapman Andrews concluded that

There is today general understanding... of the aims of Britain's foreign policy, of her Commonwealth and Colonial relations and support for her stand against Communism. There is also a general understanding of Britain's economic difficulties and widespread admiration for her democratic and social institutions. In newspaper columns, as in private conversations, Great Britain is constantly mentioned as the model (even when the model is regarded as unattainable in the conditions prevailing in the Lebanon). Such testimonials are seldom awarded to any other nation.⁷⁹

These assessments were all made in June 1952, just weeks before the Egyptian revolution brought Nasser's Free Officers to power, setting in train a course of events that would eventually culminate in the Suez Crisis, perhaps the low point of British prestige in the modern era. If, in this light, they seem rather naïve, then they are symptomatic of a more general weakness to which Western Cold War propaganda in the region was subject. Officials failed to reconcile the essential incompatibility between, on the one hand, an Arab nationalist movement committed to the politics of anti-colonialism, anti-Zionism and non-alignment and, on the other, the Western objective of incorporating the Arab states within an anti-Soviet, 'free world' alliance. Cultural diplomacy, overt information work, anti-Communist propaganda, all were part of a wider Cold War psychological strategy based upon a set of Manichaeian distinctions between Communist totalitarianism and enlightened Western democratic freedoms. This distinction, strikingly clear to Western leaders, was less immediately apparent in the Arab world, and failure to comprehend this led Western propagandists to strike consistently at the wrong targets. It was surely unrealistic to expect cultural diplomacy to bridge the political gulf that had opened up between the Arab nationalist movement and the Cold Warriors of Washington and Whitehall since, as Harold Beeley observed from Baghdad, 'It cannot be said that the work of the British Council has much effect in the political field where it cannot compete with the more violent and immediate impact of political and economic pressures. It needs a lengthy period of friendly relationship to secure significant results.'⁸⁰

The story of British diplomacy in the Middle East in the 1950s was essentially one of policy failure, and it seems unduly harsh to point the finger of blame at those responsible for the conduct of propaganda and cultural relations. One might plausibly argue that the apparently naïve estimates of the impact of British cultural diplomacy received in 1952 simply anticipated the conclusions of the Suez Crisis 'post-mortem'. In 1957 it was not to short-term political propaganda which Lord Hill's enquiry into the performance of the overseas information services turned as the type of activity most likely to restore Britain's tattered reputation in the Arab world. Insiders were mildly contemptuous of the cheap posturing of Cabinet figures such as R.A. Butler who sought to cast the overseas information services in the role of scapegoat for the Suez fiasco, and Douglas Dodds Parker's splendid observation that 'the Archangel Gabriel transmitting with Infinite Power on The Last Trump could not sell British co-operation with France and Israel to the Arab world' was perhaps the finest retort to criticisms of this kind.⁸¹ Instead, the Hill Committee looked to the British Council and the External Services of the BBC as providing the best means of re-establishing goodwill for Britain in the Middle East.⁸² The tragedy may lie in the fact that by 1957, after a decade of Treasury underfunding and with Britain now widely regarded as a junior partner to the United States rather than as an important power in the Middle East in its own right, the new commitment to building up the tools of British cultural diplomacy had come rather too late.

Notes

- [1] Scott Lucas, "'Total Culture" and the State-Private Network. A Commentary', in J.C.E. Gienow-Hecht and F. Schumacher (eds.), *Culture and International History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003), p.207.
- [2] Ibid. p.207.
- [3] The National Archive: Public Record Office, London [henceforward TNA: PRO]: FO 371/52459/E5857/5857/93, FO minute, 5 July 1946.
- [4] TNA: PRO: FO 371/52316/E6536/190/65, Orme Sargent minute for Secretary of State, 2 July 1946.
- [5] Among the most interesting recent additions to the literature on British Cold War propaganda have been: Paul Lashmar and James Oliver, *Britain's Secret Propaganda War 1948-77* (Stroud, Gloc.: Sutton, 1998); Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper* (London: Granta Books, 1999); Tony Shaw, *British Cinema and the Cold War. The State, Propaganda and Consensus* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001); Hugh Wilford, *The CIA, the British Left and the Cold War: Calling the Tune?* (London: Frank Cass, 2003); Richard Aldrich, 'Putting Culture into the Cold War: The Cultural Relations Department (CRD) and British Covert Information Warfare', *Intelligence and National Security*, 18, 2 (2003), pp.109–33. Of these, only Lashmar and Oliver deal explicitly with the conduct of British propaganda in the Middle East and although the best of the Suez Crisis monographs – Keith Kyle's *Suez* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1991) and Scott Lucas' *Divided We Stand* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991) – do touch upon aspects of propaganda policy, in-depth analyses have been decidedly thin on the ground. The major exceptions are Tony Shaw's *Eden, Suez and the Mass Media: Propaganda and Persuasion during the Suez Crisis* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), an account of the Eden government's publicity strategies at home and in the United States, and Gary Rawnsley's 'Overt and

- Covert: The Voice of Britain and Black Radio Broadcasting in the Suez Crisis, 1956', *Intelligence and National Security*, 11, 3 (1996) which provides a companion piece to the same author's *Radio Diplomacy and Propaganda: The BBC and VOA in International Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1996). Richard Aldrich's *The Hidden Hand* (London: John Murray, 2001) and Stephen Dorril's *MI6* (London: Fourth Estate, 2001) both provide fascinating insight into the relationship between intelligence and propaganda in the Middle East, but it is really only J.M. Lee's 'British Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War, 1946–61', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 9, 1 (1998), pp.112–34, that makes a case for the centrality of the Middle East in the shaping of Britain's post-war cultural relations programme.
- [6] Philip M. Taylor, *British Propaganda in the Twentieth Century. Selling Democracy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p.229.
- [7] Giles Scott-Smith and Hans Krabbendam, *Intelligence and National Security*, 18, 2 (2003), 'Special Issue on the Cultural Cold War in Western Europe, 1945–1960'.
- [8] Kenneth Osgood, 'Hearts and Minds. The Unconventional Cold War', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 4, 2 (2002), pp.85–107.
- [9] Important recent monographs and collections include: Roland Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Walter Hixson, *Parting the Curtain* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997); Scott Lucas, *Freedom's War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); Robert Haddow, *Pavilions of Plenty* (London and Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999); David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Gienow-Hecht and Frank Schumacher (eds.), *Culture and International History* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2003).
- [10] J.M. Lee, 'British Cultural Diplomacy'.
- [11] See Philip M. Taylor, *The Projection of Britain: British Overseas Publicity and Propaganda 1919–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
- [12] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1316/PG1161/12, Chancery, Cairo to IPD, 7 Oct. 1952.
- [13] TNA: PRO: FO 953/61/PME1499/G, Foreign Office minute, 'Russia in the Middle East, Publicity Directive', 17 Oct. 1946.
- [14] TNA: PRO: FO 953/932/PG1883/1, Warner to Houston-Boswall, 21 Jan. 1950.
- [15] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1216/P1011/4, Sir Maurice Dean to Nicholls, 28 Jan. 1952.
- [16] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1461/P1011/45, Nutting minute, 13 Nov. 1953.
- [17] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1459/P1011/2, Nicholls minute enclosing copy of the Drogheda Report, 6 Jan. 1954.
- [18] TNA: PRO: FO 371/52310/E769/96, Shaw to Hall, 18 Aug. 1945 enclosing memorandum by J.B. Glubb, 'The New Relationship', 1 July 1945.
- [19] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1563PB1041/1, Waterfield to Lambert, 21 Dec. 1954.
- [20] TNA: PRO: FO 953/49/PME283, Publicity Section (Cairo) to FO, (received) 28 Jan. 1947.
- [21] TNA: PRO: FO 371/52310/E769/96, Memorandum by J.B. Glubb, 'The New Relationship', 1 July 1945.
- [22] TNA: PRO: FO 953/54/PME/1581, Kirkpatrick to FO, 11 Apr 1947.
- [23] Ibid.
- [24] TNA: PRO: FO 953/54/PME1357, Press Officer (Beirut) to FO, 24 June 1947.
- [25] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1353/PG1884/4, Chapman Andrews to Nicholls, 24 Oct. 1952.
- [26] TNA: PRO: FO 1110/820/PR1088/3/G, Chapman Andrews to Grey, 2 May 1955.
- [27] TNA: PRO: BW 1/98, British Council memorandum, 'Suggestions for British Council Expansion in the Middle East 1956–59,' 1 Nov. 1956.
- [28] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1317/PG1162/1, Creswell to Eden, No. 152, 24 June 1952.
- [29] Ibid.
- [30] Ibid.

- [31] TNA: PRO: FO 953/49/PME283, Publicity Section (Cairo) to FO, (received) 28 Jan. 1947.
- [32] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1317/PG1162/1, Creswell to Eden, No. 152, 24 June 1952.
- [33] TNA: PRO: BW 1/98, British Council memorandum, 'Expansion in the Near and Middle East', 8 May 1956.
- [34] TNA: PRO: FO 953/58/PME1342, Wheeler to FO, 12 June 1947.
- [35] TNA: PRO: BW 39/11, 'Report of a Visit to Iraq by the Overseas Inspector, Education Division', Aug. 1954.
- [36] TNA: PRO: BW 39/11, Minute by the Controller, Overseas 'B' Department, British Council, 23 Feb. 1953.
- [37] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1346/PG1932/1, Beeley to Eden, No. 85, 26 June 1952.
- [38] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1241/P10485/58, COI memorandum, 'The Monthly Arabic Magazine', 7 Nov. 1952.
- [39] TNA: PRO: FO 953/P10485/1239, Barclay minute, 13 May 1952.
- [40] For further reading on the establishment of IRD, see R. Fletcher, 'British Propaganda since World War Two – A Case Study', *Media, Culture and Society*, 4, 2 (1982), pp.97–109, Paul Lashmar and James Oliver, *Britain's Secret Propaganda War* (Stroud, Gloc.: Sutton, 1998), Scott Lucas and C.J. Morris, 'A Very British Crusade, the Information Research Department and the Beginning of the Cold War' in R.J. Aldrich (ed.), *British Intelligence Strategy and the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.85–110, Christopher Mayhew, *A War of Words* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), Lyn Smith, 'Covert British Propaganda and the Information Research Department 1947–77', *Millennium*, 9, 1 (1980), pp.67–83, Hugh Wilford, 'The Information Research Department: Britain's secret Cold War weapon revealed', *Review of International Studies*, 24, 3 (1998), pp.353–369.
- [41] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1239/P10485/29, Barclay to Watson, 8 May 1952.
- [42] TNA: PRO: INF 12/734, COI memorandum, 'Al Aalam: 1952–1957', n.d.
- [43] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1241/P10485/47, Underwood to Barclay, 14 Aug. 1952.
- [44] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1240/P10485/39, Underwood to Barclay, 27 June 1952.
- [45] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1241/P10485/47, Underwood to Barclay, 14 Aug. 1952.
- [46] Ibid.
- [47] TNA: PRO: INF 12/231, Harrison minute, 7 Dec. 1954.
- [48] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1241/P10485/55, Barclay to Edwards, 15 July 1952.
- [49] TNA: PRO: INF 12/734, COI memo, *Al Aalam*, Appendix I, 'Principal contents of the past 12/18 issues of *Al Aalam*', 12 Aug. 1957.
- [50] Ibid.
- [51] TNA: PRO: INF 12/734, COI memorandum, 'Al Aalam: 1952–1957', undated.
- [52] United States National Archive: Md., RG 59, 511.8321/7-1653, Grant Parr to Department of State, 16 July 1953.
- [53] TNA: PRO: INF 12/734, COI memorandum, 'Al Aalam: 1952–1957', undated.
- [54] TNA: PRO: INF 12/734, COI memorandum, 'Al Aalam – The First Five Years Summary', Aug. 1957.
- [55] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1241/P10485/51, Underwood to Barclay, 19 Septss. 1952.
- [56] TNA: PRO: FO 953/392/PME142, MEID Monthly Report, 31 Jan. 1948.
- [57] TNA: PRO: FO 953/592/PME145/21, Haigh to MEID, 8 Feb. 1949.
- [58] TNA: PRO: FO 953/370/PME523/523, Haigh to Pollock, 10 June 1948.
- [59] TNA: PRO: FO 953/385/PME40, Riley to Scutt, 27 Feb. 1948.
- [60] TNA: PRO: FO 953/385/PME40, Gathorne-Hardy memorandum, 28 June 1948.
- [61] TNA: PRO: FO 953/382/PME507/30, Barclay memorandum, 'Note on the *Ikhwan al Hurriya*', 2 June 1948.
- [62] TNA: PRO: FO 371/63033/J4813, Bowker to FO, 4 Oct. 1947.
- [63] TNA: PRO: FO 953/382/PME507/30, Barclay memorandum, 2 June 1948.

- [64] TNA: PRO: FO 371/63033/J2166, Campbell to Bevin, No. 386, 7 May 1947, enclosing memorandum by R.W. Fay, 29 Apr. 1947.
- [65] According to Mayhew, IRD was initially envisaged as a body capable of providing a vigorous defence of British social democracy as well as an exposé of the failings of Soviet Communism (Mayhew, *A War of Words*, pp.121–22). Mayhew was later quoted, however, as having claimed that the ‘social democracy’ angle was little more than a front to make IRD more palatable to the Labour left (Lashmar and Oliver, *Britain’s Secret Propaganda War*, p.27).
- [66] TNA: PRO: FO 953/864/PG1163/24B, Enclosed *Ikhwan al-Hurriya* bulletins, No. 424, 28 Nov. 1950.
- [67] Ibid.
- [68] TNA: PRO: FO 953/63/PME177, Wheeler to FO, 10 July 1947.
- [69] TNA: PRO: FO 953/52/PME1483, Morrison to FO, 21 July 1947.
- [70] TNA: PRO: FO 953/594/PME496/14, Information Department (Baghdad) to FO, 25 July 1949.
- [71] TNA: PRO: FO 953/740/P10453/1, Samuel to Beaumont, 17 Apr 1950.
- [72] TNA: PRO: FO 953/373/PME412/193, Information Department (Baghdad) to FO, 22 Apr. 1948.
- [73] TNA: PRO: FO 953/376/PME397/175, Howes to Pollock, 22 Apr. 1948.
- [74] TNA: PRO: FO 953/395/PME358/254, Morrison to FO, 1 Apr. 1948.
- [75] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1553/P1041/38, Gallagher to Marett, 25 Oct. 1955.
- [76] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1317/PG1162/1, Creswell to Eden, No. 152, 24 June 1952.
- [77] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1377/PG1892/1, Samuel to Eden, No. 105, 26 June 1952.
- [78] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1346/PG1932/1, Beeley to Eden, No. 85, 26 June 1952.
- [79] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1351/PG1881/2, Chapman Andrews to Eden, No. 126, 12 June 1952.
- [80] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1346/PG1932/1, Beeley to Eden, No. 85, 26 June 1952.
- [81] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1714/P1011/3, Dodds Parker minute, 31 Dec. 1956.
- [82] TNA: PRO: FO 953/1719/P1011/113/G, White Paper on the Overseas Information Services, July 1957.