

The Great War and the Middle East: A Strategic Study. By Rob Johnson. Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-19-968328-4. Note on transliteration. Maps. Illustrations.

Notes. Select bibliography. Index. Pp. xviii, 354. \$34.95.

Rob Johnson's nicely written, informed, and interesting study of the war in the Middle East from 1914-23 – so including its political aftermath – is at its heart a Clausewitzian study of how military operations interact with policy and strategy. Put simply, Johnson relates a nation's war aims to its overall resources that it has to achieve such things, with a particular focus on military violence as the major tool to achieve ends. That said, this is fundamentally a military and not a social or economic understanding of strategy. Nor is it simply an examination of soldiers maneuvering but shows how geography, the changing character of war, and local conditions all make real the operations on which strategy and policy depend, and vice versa. It is thus a 'study of war,' as Johnson puts it, that acknowledges that strategy is rarely predetermined but rubs up against war's friction and its chance qualities, pushing policy makers and armies in directions hitherto unknown. How they respond and adapt – their versatility, if you like – will help determine whether they succeed or fail. War thus becomes a protean, live culture, evolving into new forms, with high strategy tensing against operational realities. This methodology gives the book a new twist, if the subject matter has been the focus of many previous works on policy and war making in the Middle East; it also takes the war in the region as a whole, drawing together rather than keeping discrete the different campaigns from Gallipoli to the Caucasus to Palestine, Mesopotamia and Arabia. By taking the book's text into the post-war political deliberations up the Lausanne treaty in 1923, including fighting in central Asia and Afghanistan in 1919, Johnson satisfyingly ties up the relationship of war to politics. Along the way, Johnson genuflects to the

current war on terror with Islamic State, not least as the forces of radical Islam themselves say that they are tearing up the post-war colonial boundaries drawn up by the British and French in World War One – the infamous Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1915-16.

Having set up the strategic and policy superstructures for the major protagonists in the Middle East, Johnson takes the reader through the major campaigns in turn: Suez and Sinai, Palestine, Gallipoli, the Caucasus, Arabia, and Mesopotamia. Fierce and successful Ottoman resistance alongside the fury of modern, industrial firepower, leitmotifs in Johnson's analysis, made any decisive battle impossible, something that, of course, did not stop attempts to bring decision quickly, as at Gallipoli in 1915. Again, the British Army's dash up the River Tigris to Baghdad in 1915 that led to the disaster at the siege of Kut a year later exhibited the same hunger for a rapid ending to a campaign and maybe the war in the region. It never came, British victory eventually deriving from methodical advances built on good logistics, as in Palestine after 1916. This was still attritional war. Johnson's conclusions are not radically new but they are well put and thought provoking. Britain never wanted to dismember the Ottoman Empire but this became its policy through force of circumstance; machine-driven firepower not only showed the extent to which war had changed and made easy advances impossible but also how tactical adaptations now impinged on operational hopes; the real estate value of territory such as Palestine increased as the war unfolded; and the Ottoman Empire put up a remarkable fight. Johnson is also right to argue that the Sykes-Picot agreement was at heart a vague plan and not a firm clear statement of policy, a point made by Elie Kedourie, too, some years ago.

Johnson's polished volume may well avowedly be a strategic study but its operational detail shows that it is impossible to understand the higher reaches of any war without understanding the battlefield violence that will realize political goals. In this sense, the Great War in the Middle East encapsulates the idea of war as a political tool, but one in which as operations halter and change, politics adjusts (or should do so), while as war aims change back in the metropole this will supercharge particular operations and campaigns (such as in Arabia) that would seem to make political dreams real.

Matthew Hughes

Brunel University, London UK