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## Part of Imperial Communications: British-Governed Radio in the Middle East, 1934–1949

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## **Part of Imperial Communications: British-Governed Radio in the Middle East, 1934–1949**

### **Comments**

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### **Publication Statement**

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## **“Part of Imperial Communications”: British-Governed Radio in the Middle East, 1934-49**

### **Abstract**

From 1934 to 1941, three British-governed radio stations were established in the Middle East: Egyptian State Broadcasting (ESB) in Cairo (1934), the Palestine Broadcasting Service (PBS) in Jerusalem (1936), and the Near East Broadcasting Service (NEBS) in Jaffa (1941). These three stations were modeled on the BBC and run as colonial or imperial stations – but they were also considered national stations. As a result, they operated as hybrid entities with overlapping and sometimes conflicting mandates.

Through three case studies – a contentious hire at the ESB, the PBS’ “Jerusalem Direct News Service”, and the NEBS’ Islamic broadcasts –, this article charts the evolving relationship between Great Britain and its Arab-world radio stations. Examining these three stations in tandem tension between national and regional broadcasting mandates, as well as the challenge that managing each station raised for British officials in the UK and in-country. It moves away from a focus on the disembodied spheres of ideology and propaganda, and toward the messy administrative decisions that reflected British officials’ on-the-ground efforts to navigate the administrative control and programming decisions in the perplexing world of semi-independent radio broadcasting stations in the Middle East. It closes by noting that while UK-based British officials saw these three stations as operating under the aegis of British governance and on the model of the BBC, the ESB and the PBS, in particular, reflected and projected not a British imperial identity but an Egyptian and a Palestinian nationalist one.

### **Keywords**

Radio, Middle East, Palestine, Egypt, Great Britain, nationalism

From 1934 to 1941, three major British-governed radio stations were established in the Middle East: the Egyptian State Broadcasting service (ESB), which began broadcasting from Cairo in 1934, the Palestine Broadcasting Service (PBS), which began broadcasting from Jerusalem in 1936, and the Near East Broadcasting Service (NEBS), which began broadcasting from Jaffa in 1941. These three stations shared a common administrative heritage, being modelled on the BBC and run according to British notions of good governance and fiscal responsibility; they also shared a political context in which British officials played a principal if at times ambiguous role in governing their respective territories.<sup>1</sup> In some cases, this heritage was transmitted directly

from Britain, in the form of BBC personnel seconded to help run these stations in their early years, like R.A. (“Tony”) Rendall, Stephen Fry, and Crawford McNair. In other cases, the stations shared in-country British station administrators like Rex Keating, who served as Assistant Director of both the ESB and the PBS, and Ralph Poston, who served as PBS Controller and later NEBS Director.

Examining these three stations in tandem highlights both their shared British heritage and the disjuncture between local administrators’ (and listeners’) perceptions of their station and those of the British officials involved with the Foreign or Colonial Office. Using one case study for each station – the hiring of Lutfi Bey as Director of Arabic Programming at the Egyptian State Broadcasting Service, the Palestine Broadcasting Service’s “Jerusalem Direct News Service”, and the broadcasting of khutba-s or Friday prayer (jum`a) sermons on the Near East Broadcasting Service –, this article highlights the tension between national and regional broadcasting mandates, as well as the challenge that managing each station raised for British officials in the UK and in-country. It connects with recent scholarship on British empire and on British radio broadcasting, engaging with questions of imperial power and impact. In particular, by shifting the focus from Britain to its territories, it puts into question whether these stations, unlike the BBC’s overseas broadcasting, served as effective “tools of empire”, as Simon Potter aptly terms them (Potter *Broadcasting Empire*).

### **Methodology and Approach**

This study draws from scholarship in three related areas: British governance in Palestine during the late Mandate period, British propaganda and other efforts to mold the future of Palestine and

the story of British withdrawal, and British broadcasting in and to the Arab world from the 1930s through the 1950s. Until the late 2000s, most academic studies of mandate Palestine tended to focus either on the Yishuv or the Arab Palestinian communities. British government officials and offices generally played an obstructionist, and secondary, role. The emergent arena of British-focused Mandate Palestine studies has allowed scholars to shift and to complicate the history of the Mandate era. One of these early studies is Naomi Shepherd's characterization of British governance in Palestine as "ploughing sand" – a project of strategic interest and moral import but with too much complexity and too many challenges to succeed – which underpins this study's recognition of the internal differences that characterized this governance, whether differences between the various government offices, or between officials themselves (Shepherd *Ploughing Sand*). More recently, the collected studies in Rory Miller's *Britain, Palestine, and Empire: The Mandate Years* bring to life issues such as the British mandate government's need to manage League of Nations expectations regarding its governance, British assumptions about Palestine's rural economy and their political consequences, and the tendency among some British officials and the public to see Palestine through the lens of Ireland – all of which counter assumptions among the Yishuv and Arab Palestinian leadership of the day that the British mandate government made its decisions entirely based on the situation in Palestine (Miller *Britain Palestine and Empire*).

The study of British propaganda efforts regarding Palestine has developed as a distinct but subsidiary area of study – one in which most scholars have come, rather quickly, to the same conclusion: that British propaganda regarding its governmental and military efforts in Palestine, particularly after World War II, were an utter failure. Whether addressing British citizens at

home, Yishuv or Arab Palestinians in Palestine, or others – particularly American political figures and the voting public – abroad, British propaganda was singularly unsuccessful. As a result, scholars like Kate Utting have focused instead on the contemporary lessons to be learned from what she terms British COIN failure – arguing that in Palestine Britain’s political goal was impossible to translate “into a meaningful outcome and set of activities on the ground” (Utting 56) because it required compromises from the key players in Palestine that none would accept (Utting “Strategic Information Campaign”). Susan Carruthers, author of the classic mid-1990s study that linked British counter-insurgency efforts in Palestine to later ones in Malaysia, Kenya, and Cyprus, (*Carruthers Winning Hearts and Minds*), similarly noted that the absence of one clear, comprehensible plan for post-British Palestine left the British government defaulting from an offensive position regarding propaganda to a defensive one by late 1945 (Carruthers 49) – responding to accusations of police atrocities and anti-democratic Emergency laws, rather than establishing narratives of their own. While instructive, these studies tend to focus primarily on print media as the targets of government propaganda and the source of public opinion, and tend to address radio broadcasting only in terms of BBC English and Arabic broadcasts. Yet a brief survey of the Palestine newspapers in the 1940s, as well as government archives, indicates the importance of the Palestine Broadcasting Service, whose broadcasting house in Jerusalem and transmitting station in Ramallah were so routinely attacked by insurgents that Arab Legion troops were permanently stationed there in 1946.

The PBS and its cousin stations, operated around the British-controlled Middle East, were significant local and national institutions. Yet they were also British institutions, under at least partial British control. Scholarship on British radio broadcasting in the Arab world, however, has

primarily focused on British radio broadcasting *to* the Arab world – starting with Asa Briggs’ and Peter Partner’s classic histories of the British Broadcasting Service and the BBC Arabic Service, respectively (Asa Briggs *History of British Broadcasting in the United Kingdom* Volume 2 and Peter Partner *Arab Voices*). More recently, James Vaughan has been the most active and most prolific scholar working on British mid-century radio broadcasting to the Middle East, as part of his broader interest in propaganda.<sup>ii</sup> Yet his focus remains squarely on the BBC and on the 1950s, since, he argues, “The use of radio as an instrument of propaganda in the Middle East reached new levels of importance” in the mid 1950s (Vaughan “Propaganda by Proxy”, 157). Yet when it came to British and American efforts to influence independent Arab-world stations into providing favorable coverage, he concludes, the results were not “anything more than resounding failure (Vaughan “Propaganda by Proxy”, 170). What was the situation in the previous two decades, when the United States was not yet involved in regional broadcasting and Great Britain was navigating the difficult path of partial station control?

This study enfleshes what has more often been a disembodied debate about ideology as expressed through government propaganda. It moves away from a focus on propaganda, understood as everything from favorable spin on a recent event to government news briefs to elected officials’ speeches in Parliament to censorship, and toward the messy administrative decisions about whom to hire, what degree of direct authority to exercise, and what ancillary, non-news material to include in radio programming intended to attract listeners and hold their interest through the news broadcast. In other words, while appreciating Carruthers’ interest in examining British government attempts to influence public opinion through independent newspapers in the United Kingdom and United States, this study addresses British officials’ on-

the-ground efforts to navigate the administrative control and programming decisions in the perplexing world of semi-independent radio broadcasting stations in the Middle East.

As a result, this study privileges government memos and comments found in the Foreign and Colonial Office files of the National Archives in Great Britain, in order to examine how British government officials stationed in the United Kingdom, as well as their BBC colleagues, understood and attempted to act with respect to the three stations broadcasting in the Middle East during the interwar period over which Britain had some control. This means, consequently, that voices of those officials stationed in Egypt and Palestine come through only in the form of memos; their perspective might be better expressed by examining extant documents in the Egyptian National and Israel State Archives. Similarly, the perspectives of people on the ground might be addressed by including news articles and editorials from the local press: *Falastin*, *al-Difa`*, *The Palestine Post* and *Haboker* in Palestine, and *al-Ahram* in Egypt. Those perspectives, while historically valuable and deserving of their own studies, were not – based on the evidence left in the archival record – the primary influencers of British official decision-making regarding Middle East-based radio broadcasting.

Similarly, because this study focuses on British government officials, it does not address audience response to the programming or perceived identity of the three radio stations, except as information about audience response available to or accessed by those officials. As scholars from Asa Briggs and Peter Partner on have noted, audience research understood as a scientific process engaging substantial numbers of listeners “was impossible” due to the absence of any polling organizations or infrastructure in the region (Partner, 63-64). Hence when officials referenced



audience interest or lack thereof, they tended to do so in an impressionistic sense even when on the ground. As for officials stationed outside the United Kingdom, they generally relied upon the reports of in-country consular or embassy officials, or upon those of visiting scholars and officials. These reports usually included analyses based on informal discussions with locals – as with John Heyworth-Dunne’s report on the relative popularity of the Egyptian and Palestine radio stations vis-à-vis Radio Bari’s, made after his travels in the region in late 1937 (FO 395 557 Heyworth-Dunne report, 1/20/38). While often rich in textural detail, these reports offered neither statistically significant data nor a scientific approach; Heyworth-Dunne seems to have drawn his insights entirely from conversations with elite Palestinians met during embassy and other functions. In consequence, this study acknowledges the role played by such reports – see the 1947 survey administered by regional information officers below, for example – but remains focused on what officials understood of audience interest and reaction rather than on what audiences in Egypt, Palestine, and elsewhere in the region actually thought about the stations and their programming.

The three stations examined here were not the BBC – and yet in their staffing and their structure they reveal its influence. This article argues that the impact of empire was felt for these stations and their listeners at the level of structure and organization – and that this impact was profound. When it came to station programming – to the content broadcast by these stations to their listeners – the impact was much less. Unlike BBC and BBC Empire programming, the music, talks, news, and other programming broadcast from Cairo, Jerusalem, and Jaffa reflected and projected not a British identity but an Egyptian, Palestinian, or Arab nationalist one. How did

station administrators, Foreign and Colonial Office bureaucrats, and local elites understand this relationship?

By considering the interplay between the British government and the Marconi company, the confusion produced for broadcasters by various departmental priorities, and the friction produced by the varying degrees of British jurisdiction over each station, this article highlights the internal variegation of Britain's world in the Middle East. In this process, it joins a broader scholarly trend: an effort to rethink the impact of British imperialism by emphasizing the internal variegation in both 'Great Britain' and 'the empire', which replaces overarching statements with detailed studies of particular influences, from individual groups, at specific times and places.<sup>iii</sup> Yet it differs from these studies by focusing not on Britain but on the worlds Britain governed - highlighting their specificity and arguing that just as 'British experiences' of empire must be pluralized and examined as a set of diverse case studies, so must those of the people on the ground in places like Palestine and Egypt. This article focuses not on broadcasts from London or Daventry - from Britain to the Middle East - but on broadcasting within British-controlled Middle Eastern territories, to national audiences and to audiences around the region. In doing so, it highlights the degree to which these stations and these broadcasts were not simply "part of" British imperial communications, but an indication of the multiple and diverse relationships that prevailed on the ground.

### **Egypt: Nationalism and Hiring Power**

The Egyptian State Broadcasting service began broadcasts on May 31, 1934. As in many parts of the world, the creation of the ESB reflected a governmental attempt to harness and control the

power of broadcast media. Numerous amateur stations appeared throughout Egypt in the 1920s – by some accounts, over 100. The number declined in the late 1920s, a decline attributed in part to waning interest in amateur radio and in part to the absence of a viable economic model to underwrite the cost of operating stations that could consistently draw listeners. In 1931, the Egyptian government officially banned private stations and in 1932 it negotiated a ten-year, renewable contract with the Marconi Company to build and operate a state-owned, national broadcasting service, under the governance of Egypt’s Ministry of Communication (Boyd, *Egyptian Radio*, 3-4).<sup>iv</sup> In 1933, Egypt agreed to the International Broadcasting Union’s Lucerne Plan, which allocated frequencies for what it termed the “European zone”, and signed the European Broadcasting Convention; both aimed to minimize interference between stations broadcasting on or near the same frequency (*Documents de la conférence européenne*).<sup>v</sup> By spring 1934, the station was ready to begin broadcasts. Instead, it encountered its first crisis.

The crisis stemmed in part from – and was exacerbated by – Egypt’s semi-colonized status. Britain had governed Egypt since 1882, when it sent in a military force to support Egypt’s Khedive Tawfiq against the nationalist revolt being led by Colonel Ahmed Urabi, who Britain feared would establish a republic and absolve Egypt of responsibility for the massive debts that Tawfiq’s father, Isma`il, had incurred. In 1914, Britain formalized this relationship by declaring Egypt a protectorate; in 1922, it declared Egypt a monarchy and sovereign state. However, Britain retained control over Egypt’s defence and foreign policy, as well as an ambiguous degree of control over its communications. Hence the establishment of the Egyptian State Broadcasting service might best be understood as a joint project, serving British interests but amenable to the

Egyptian government as well, and further involving the corporate interests of the Marconi Company – itself closely connected to and often contracted by the British government.

While Egypt's Minister of Communication, Ibrahim Fahmy Karim Pasha, was an Egyptian national, the station's first Deputy Director-General was Robert A. Furness (later Sir Robert), who had previously served as "Oriental Secretary" to Egypt's High Commissioner; the Marconi Company's general manager was Cecil Campbell (later Sir Cecil). Almost immediately, the lines of authority became tangled. In early April, the Marconi Company protested to the British Residence in Cairo – the local voice of Britain's Foreign Office. It asked for the Residence to intervene with Minister Fahmy Pasha, who was claiming the right to veto the Marconi Company's plan to hire Mohammed Lutfi al-Sayyid Bey as Director of Arabic Programming.<sup>vi</sup> Like Fahmy Pasha, Lutfi Bey was a member of the country's socio-economic elite. Unlike Fahmy Pasha, who served in numerous ministerial positions, Lutfi Bey was considered an opposition figure – a Wafdist who supported Egyptian nationalism.

Lutfi Bey had not been Marconi's first choice for programming director. The company had first approached Taha Hussein and then Sheikh Ali Abdel Raziq, a religious scholar known for his advocacy of a kind of Islamic secularism; in both cases, the station's programming board, composed of other eminent Egyptians, rejected them. Yet in neither case had their selection become a matter of ministerial intervention. Hence R.A. Furness, a career civil servant assigned to the new radio station, reported around April 10, 1934 his "surprise and indignation" at the Minister's "impertinent" request, which suggested that Lutfi Bey held "hostile" views. Minister Fahmy Pasha first insisted that Lutfi Bey not be hired but subsequently asked that, if the station

insisted on hiring him, that it “preclude him from contact ... with the public” (FO 141/425/1 Confidential Memo n.d.). Further, he requested that Lutfi’s title should not indicate that he would have any connection to programming. In response, Furness proposed in a memo to the British Residency in Cairo that Lutfi Bey be named “Personal Assistant to the Deputy Director General”, “Director of Personnel”, or another title along similar lines (FO 141/425/1 Furness Note for Residency, 4.30.34). While these proposed titles varied in prestige, none tied Lutfi Bey to station programming or broadcasts.

At one level, the issue of Lutfi Bey’s hiring was a mere contractual dispute: Fahmy Pasha understood the Egyptian government’s 1932 contract with the Marconi Company to include veto power over potential Egyptian hires, whether articulated explicitly or implicitly. The Marconi agents and British civil servants who worked at the ESB as station administrators disagreed. At another level, however, this minor incident (the archives do not show evidence of disputes over any other ESB hires) exposed the overlapping jurisdictions and competing sets of assumptions over whose station the ESB was. Fahmy Pasha’s position represented not only the view that the station belonged ultimately to Egypt – a country officially sovereign since the end of World War I –, but also indicated the importance that the Egyptian government gave to the station’s Arabic programming.

Furness and the other British figures associated with the station, however, interpreted the issue as a matter of state and of British prestige. As a result, they quickly turned to the Residency – the official seat of Britain’s Egyptian presence and historical home of its High Commissioner, which governed British foreign policy and other issues –, sending memos, notes, and recommendations.

What had begun as a minor disagreement over the hiring over one employee began to grow in importance as it dragged on without resolution. Two weeks after Fahmy Pasha's initial protest, Furness advised against capitulating, even for the sake of smoothing things over with the Egyptians. "It is extremely undesirable that we should admit expressly, and not much less so that we should admit by implication," he wrote, "a right of the Egyptian government to interfere in matters of program staff." (FO 141/425/1 Furness Note for Residency, 4.30.34) While Furness appears to have defended Lutfi Bey in part because he considered the charges (of being "an anti-Government politician and an atheist") specious (ibid), his frequent use of the words "interfere" or "interference" indicated the main issue. Beyond the issues of Lutfi Bey's qualifications and of the interpretation of the 1932 contract lay the issue of ownership: to whom did the ESB belong?

The issue of Lutfi Bey's appointment continued into May. Cecil Campbell, Marconi's General Manager in Egypt and later a member of the British intelligence as well as the head of the British Chamber of Commerce in Egypt, sent a letter to the British residency, which at that time was led by Sir Ronald I. Campbell (Vitalis). (The memo does not indicate whether the two men were related.) In it, he described the "intention behind the Broadcasting (and other wireless) arrangements" that the British Residency had negotiated in 1932 with the Egyptian government. These arrangements, he explained, were intended "as a means of maintaining ... British political control and safe-guarding British commercial interests" – a goal now threatened by what Campbell termed the Egyptian government's "attitude" (FO 141/425/1 Campbell memo 5.8.34). In the enclosed memorandum, Campbell emphasized that the British government's view of radio broadcasting was that "wireless formed part of Imperial communications". As a result, it was essential that Britain have "complete" control of all wireless services in Egypt, whether directly

or through a British corporation, like the Marconi Company (FO 141/425/1 Campbell memorandum n.d.).<sup>vii</sup>

As a result, Campbell's memorandum argued, staffing was a crucial issue. "For appointments to those important posts which had to be filled by Egyptians, viz. the senior posts on the program side, persons should be selected whose loyalty to the Marconi Company could be counted upon." What made Lutfi Bey trustworthy? Furness had argued that Lutfi Bey was a pious Muslim who taught his children the Qur'an each morning (FO 141/425/1 Confidential Memo, n.d.) and was "versed in the Islamic cultural tradition and in the modern world" ((FO 141/425/1 Furness Note for Residency, 4.30.34). Campbell's memo noted that Lutfi Bey had been educated at Oxford, was "at home with English ideas and methods", independent-minded and independently wealthy. As a result, he would be able to resist the pressures of outside influences, governmental and private. If the British government and Marconi were to capitulate on his hiring, it would set a bad precedent, and leave the station's operation vulnerable to the whims of government favour: removing qualified administrators when they fell from political grace and installing unqualified ones who had the government's ear (FO 141/425/1 Campbell memorandum n.d.).

Complaints about the politicization of Egyptian government positions were not unfounded. Yet the issue dragged on into the summer, drawing a growing number of interested participants - from the British Residency, the Foreign Office Staff, and Marconi Company executives. It became increasingly clear that while insisting that the matter of Lutfi Bey's appointment was "merely" a legal issue between Marconi and the Egyptian government, the British government in Egypt and in the United Kingdom cared less about the particulars of the station itself than about

British control of wireless communications in general. In other words, the British government throughout this issue displayed no concern with the content of the Arabic programming – other than that the ESB provide support for a second service broadcasting from Alexandria. None of the memos expressed concern over what the ESB might broadcast, in terms of news or entertainment, under Lutfi Bey or any other Controller of Arabic Programs. Its imperial concerns operated at a macro level: at the level of physical control of the means of wireless broadcasting rather than the mid- to micro-level of the actual Egyptian station, its personnel, and the programming that it might put on air. It was the general fact of British control, as expressed at a ministerial level, rather than the expression of this control in the daily broadcasts available to Egyptian listeners, that most concerned British officials.

### **Palestine Broadcasting Service: Mandate Limitations and Regional News**

While the British government in Egypt in 1934 was little concerned with programming and with station-level operations, it would become much more so by the mid late 1930s. This shift in concern is perhaps best illustrated by the “Jerusalem Direct News Service”, a supplemental daily news broadcast that began airing on the Palestine Broadcasting station in 1937, and continued until the maturation of BBC Arabic news broadcasts in mid 1938. Unlike the regular PBS news broadcasts, the “direct” news was funded by the Foreign Office and focused on news of interest around the region. To ensure that it reached as many listeners as possible, the Foreign Office also made available additional and more powerful relay stations. Why was the British government suddenly so interested in Arab-world news broadcasts? Its interests changed as British-Italian relations soured after 1935, and its concern over Arabic-language programming increased after



Italy began operating an Arabic-language broadcasting station from Bari, a coastal town located where the ‘heel’ of the Italian boot met its ‘sole’.<sup>viii</sup>

On August 6, 1937, the Colonial Office’s Under-Secretary of State wrote to the Palestine High Commissioner, proposing to use PBS Arabic news broadcasts to attract listeners around the region. The PBS and Bari both broadcast on medium wave, so listeners with medium-wave sets would be able to easily switch from Bari to Jerusalem. (Medium-wave sets were less expensive and considered by government officials more popular than short-wave sets among Middle Eastern radio listeners.) Yet the PBS had been on air for just over a year; Egyptian State Broadcasting had been broadcasting for three years and had attracted a larger audience, including listeners from outside Egypt. However, the situation had changed in Egypt since 1934. Rather than asserting its total control over Egyptian wireless, the Colonial Office worried that using the ESB for British goals would anger Egyptian authorities. However, the Under-Secretary noted that the use of the Jerusalem station for these broadcasts could only be a temporary solution. For the Colonial Office, the ultimate goal and the only permanent solution would be Arabic language news broadcasts from British territory (CO 323/1496/19 Under-Secretary to High Commissioner, 8.6.37). Broadcasting from Britain would allow greater latitude in the topics covered and the degree of “British view” that broadcasters could express with their editorial tone and choice of stories.

Several additional Colonial Office memoranda followed, laying out three key elements of the planned news broadcasts. First, the memoranda focused on news broadcasting, rather than entertainment, believing that good news coverage would be the best way to win listeners. An

August 28, 1937 memo on the “Special Arabic Broadcast News Service” argued: “The idea ... is to attract the Arab listening world to the Jerusalem program [by] virtue of its outstanding Arab news service and of its general and political interest.” The memo envisioned two primary audiences: an educated, urban intelligentsia and the less sophisticated “fellahin and village folk”. It believed that they hungered for detailed reportage on events occurring in the region. Listeners *would* tune in to the PBS if it offered fast, accurate, and comprehensive broadcasts covering news that mattered to them. This would be a double victory for the British government. First, it would keep listeners from being exposed to Bari’s anti-British propaganda. Second, it would encourage listeners to develop a positive view of Britain and its role in the Middle East (CO 323/1496/20 Special Arabic Broadcast News Service memo, 8.28.37).<sup>ix</sup>

Yet using the PBS for this additional news service raised several concerns for British officials. Under the terms of the League of Nations mandate, Britain was not supposed to utilize its Palestine or Palestinian assets to further its own interests. Using the PBS to broadcast pro-British news broadcasts, some feared, might raise the League’s ire. A Foreign Office memo cited a British official stationed in Palestine, who cautioned: “any items that were definitely counter-propaganda in the sense of being obviously designed to give the lie to Italy could not ... be broadcast from a mandated territory” but should come from London (CO 323/1496/19 R.A. Leeper to R.V. Vernon, 4.1.37).<sup>x</sup> Another memo suggested that using the PBS for British propaganda “may be open to objection on the grounds that it was at variance with the spirit of the Mandate.” As a result, officials briefly considered the possibility of building a new station on Cyprus (FO 141/645/3, C. F. A. Warner to O. A. Scott, 8.17.37).<sup>xi</sup>

In any case, the Permanent Mandates Commission seems not to have minded – and in a way, it didn't matter. The PBS broadcasts, overseen by the new “Jerusalem Liaison Office”, began operations in September 1937 (CO 323/1496/19 R.A. Leeper to G.T. Havard, 10.6.37).<sup>xiii</sup> Four months later, in January 1938, the new BBC Arabic broadcasting service went on the air. While the BBC Arabic had a difficult start – its broadcasts were criticized by listeners for their ugly Arabic, by British officials for covering inflammatory stories, and generally for choosing short-wave rather than medium-wave transmitters – it did find an audience, and was able to operate with a much broader mandate than the Jerusalem news broadcasts could.

The Jerusalem broadcasts were a sign that the British “family” of radio stations broadcasting in or to the Middle East was growing fairly rapidly through the mid 1930s, which both complicated and also enriched the ways in which British officials could conceive of territory - whether actual British territory or simply the territory that Britain, through radio broadcasts, could access. They also indicated that British officials were feeling their way through a host of issues that arose with each station, particularly around questions of soft power and sovereignty. Just as radio broadcasting introduced powerful but complex new ways of communicating in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, so did new forms of governance like the mandate system. Managing the different requirements of each could be difficult; as a result, Britain's decision to treat the PBS broadcasts as a temporary expedience and to turn to Daventry's Arabic service as the permanent solution might be best understood as an attempt in some way to blend the power of radio broadcasting with the uncomplicated sovereignty of the nineteenth century.

### **Al Sharq Al Adna: A Mandate for Propaganda**

In 1941, the British broadcasting family expanded further: Al-Sharq al-Adna, the Near East Broadcasting Station, began broadcasting from Jaffa. Funded by the Foreign Office, the NEBS were the only non-state British Empire broadcasting station in the Middle East during this time. While not officially acknowledged by the British government, it in effect bridged the gap between the PBS and the BBC Arabic service. Liberated from both the concern over Palestinian sensitivities and the BBC approach of ‘educate and elevate’, al-Sharq al-Adna focused on attracting Arab listeners with the best entertainment money could buy – bringing well-known musical stars from around the region – advocating Arab viewpoints, and espousing a much more explicitly pro-British view. By almost all accounts, the station soon attracted a sizeable audience – perhaps all the more so because of the tight wartime censorship imposed on other regional stations.

Yet by 1947, the Foreign Office feared that al-Sharq al-Adna was losing its touch, in part due to security restrictions on station personnel’s movements. In July 1947, A.J.C. Pollock, Director of the Foreign Office’s Middle East Information Department, sent a set of questions to the British Information Officers stationed around the region, from Cyrenaica in the West, Khartoum and Asmara in the South, and Teheran and Jeddah in the East. He asked these officers to assess the current “value” of al-Sharq al-Adna, including whether its popularity had “fallen off” in the preceding six months and whether the material broadcast was still useful for the Foreign Office’s publicity services (FO 953/60 Pollock to Information Officers, 7.15.47). (These questions were of particular urgency, because Britain’s relationship with Egyptian State Broadcasting had soured considerably in the 13 years since the station’s founding).

“Since the ESB was Egyptianized,” the Cairo official wrote, “Sharq el Adna has been our only medium of reaching the Arabic-speaking Middle East listener on a local or parochial issue.

When British Marconi managers were in charge of ESB it was comparatively easy to get across a line that was objective, but we find it too partisan and xenophobic to be of any material use to us now.” Any dropping off, he suggested, was due less to the station than to a general decline of interest in world news since the end of the war (FO 953/60 Kinross to Pollock, 8.8.47).<sup>xiii</sup> While the official in Sudan wrote that the “popular” classes did not tune in to al-Sharq al-Adna, he noted: “the station has an important audience here among the educated classes, who listen to it regularly and enjoy its news and talks.” As for its value, he suggested that “it may play a valuable role if it can retain the interest of our intelligentsia against the ESB.” (FO 953/60 unnamed to Pollock, 8.11.47). In Transjordan, the official there noted, al-Sharq al-Adna was considered the least biased station. “[Listeners] consider politically that it represents Arab opinion fairly. [The] PBS is suspected of Jewish partisanship and Cairo of obvious propaganda solely in the interests of Egypt.” (FO 953/60 Amman Chancery to Pollock, 8.30.47)

While these comments – as the officials themselves noted – reflected qualitative impressions rather than quantitative surveys, they highlight the degree to which the picture of British broadcasting in the Middle East had shifted in the 13 years since the ESB was established. While Egypt and Palestine remained within Britain’s sphere of influence, these officials’ comments make clear that Britain was no longer able to control Egypt’s wireless, nor even to massage the regional reputation of the PBS. Instead, Great Britain’s broadcasting empire was disappearing. Within a year, al-Sharq al-Adna too would be in danger, jeopardized by the end of the British mandate. As the PBS split into a Jordanian station in Ramallah and the Israel Broadcasting

Authority in Jerusalem, al-Sharq al-Adna relocated to Cyprus, where it continued to broadcast until the 1956 War, when it was renamed the Voice of Britain (Boyd, “Sharq al-Adna”).<sup>xiv</sup>

### **Conclusion: a New Relationality**

The history of each of these three radio stations is rich and complex, and deserves fuller treatment than offered here. In closing, however, this article turns to focus on the issue of empire and how it might help both explicate the connections between these three Arab-world stations. For employees of and listeners to the ESB, the PBS, and the NEBS / al-Sharq al-Adna, their connection to empire was very much a matter of perspective. In other words, for the Palestine Broadcasting Service and Egyptian State Broadcasting in particular, the connections to empire were much less apparent on the ground in Palestine and Egypt than they were in the United Kingdom. People in Palestine and Egypt may have criticized the station’s broadcasts and seen in them views that they attributed to the Mandate government or the Residency. Yet they do not appear to have seen those two stations – much less al-Sharq al-Adna – as connected to or reflecting in any meaningful way the British Empire. They saw the influence of British officials working in-country, but not necessarily those often-vexed officials stationed back in Britain.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the locals who formed part of the British-umbrella stations of the regions – the Palestinians and Egyptians who served as administrators, announcers, engineers, musicians, etc. – had a vested interest in focusing on the national. The interwar decades were the era par excellence of national radio, and it appears that the stakes were even higher for those establishing a national radio station in a nation-state still legally considered a colony or mandate territory. In the 1930s, having a radio station seems to have been taken as a key sign that a particular territory

was moving toward sovereignty – by the League of Nations and local citizens alike.<sup>xv</sup> More concretely, these stations served as key nodes for nation building, particularly at the cultural level. While government authorities tightly controlled the stories and text of news broadcasts, station broadcasters had freer rein over what music to play, which intellectuals to invite to deliver talks on air, and even what register of Arabic to use. They used all these choices to help shape the national identity that they hoped to see take root.

Officials at both stations were keenly aware that they drew listeners from around the region – from beyond their national borders. Yet when they highlighted this audience – as `Ajaj Noueihed, head of the PBS' Arabic Section in the early 1940s, did with respect to women's broadcasts – they did so generally to support a broader argument: that their national station was broadcasting a nationally-inflected modernity to listeners around the region. Their primary focus was on the radio station as a functioning symbol of national sovereignty, and on the ways in which broadcast programming could support their efforts to construct a national identity. As a result, they saw regional listeners as a sign of the national strength of their station – as a sign that, as in the case of the PBS, Palestinian women were models of authentic modernity for the entire region.<sup>xvi</sup> With limited in-country experience and with only reports from consular and embassy personnel, or visiting bureaucrats, to guide them, the Britain-based officials seem to have focused more on the degree of control they could exercise over the three radio stations operating in British-governed territory in the interwar Middle East, than on radio stations' importance for independent nation-states in this era. While operating under the aegis of British governance and on the model of the BBC, the ESB and the PBS, in particular, reflected and projected not a British imperial identity but an Egyptian and a Palestinian nationalist one.

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<sup>i</sup> A radio station was also established in Iraq during this period, broadcasting from Mosul. It was a much smaller enterprise, operating on a small budget and experiencing major transmission issues resulting from Iraq's more challenging geography. Consequently, it broadcast only intermittently and never achieved the broad-based listening audience that the three stations addressed here enjoyed. The French government, which governed Lebanon and Syria as mandate territories, helped establish radio stations in Beirut and Damascus, but those fall outside the scope of this article.

<sup>ii</sup> See James Vaughn, *The Failure of American and British Propaganda in the Arab Middle East, 1945-1957: Unconquerable Minds* (Houndsmills / New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

<sup>iii</sup> Two important recent studies, which make similar but distinct arguments about the meaning and impact of empire on British citizens and culture, see Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) and Andrew Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back? The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2004).

<sup>iv</sup> Boyd suggests that the Egyptian government only involved itself in radio broadcasting starting in 1931; however, the British National Archives hold copies of a concession granted to Marconi in the late 1920s to build and operate the Egyptian broadcasting service – which built upon smaller concessions that Marconi obtained for Egypt starting in 1923.

<sup>v</sup> The European Broadcasting Convention, which included the Lucerne Plan, was signed into law at Lucerne on June 19, 1933.

<sup>vi</sup> The Foreign Office documents held in the British National Archives refer to him as “Mohammed Said Lutfi Bey”, but there is no one of this name among the eminent Egyptians of the period. Arabic names often suffered in transcription to English, and were transcribed inconsistently by government officials.

<sup>vii</sup> Although Guglielmo Marconi was born in Italy of an Italian father, his mother was Irish and he filed patents for his wireless telegraphy in Britain. In 1897, he established his Wireless Telegraph and Signal Company, later known as the Marconi Company, in Great Britain. In 1929, Marconi's company was merged with another to form Cable and Wireless, a corporate entity with monopoly control over all telecommunications in the British Empire and a board appointed by the British government. In the mid-1930s, however, company stationery still included the Marconi name, and Campbell and others still referred to it as the Marconi Company, as well as by its formal name.

<sup>viii</sup> For a more detailed account of British and Italian contestations over Radio Bari, see Callum MacDonald, “Radio Bari: Italian Wireless Propaganda in the Middle East and British Countermeasures, 1934-1938”, *Middle Eastern Studies* 13 (2), 1977, 195-207.

<sup>ix</sup> Government officials consistently referred to these broadcasts as a “special” news broadcast, distinguishing them from regular news programming on the region's existing stations.

<sup>x</sup> An undated memo from the same Colonial Office file, “Broadcasting in Foreign Languages”, stated that the Committee on Arabic Broadcasting had decided against a Cyprus station on similar grounds: “Perhaps, however, the most powerful argument which decided the Committee in favour of Daventry is that while it is one thing for the metropolitan country to broadcast in

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foreign languages it is a vastly different matter to set up a powerful broadcasting station in a small island colony for broadcasts in a language which is not spoken in that colony; no other country has at present so far done this and the Post Office were very strongly of the opinion that for us to do so would be a blatant violation of all the accepted canons of international broadcast etiquette and decency. There are, on the other hand, numerous precedents for broadcasting in foreign languages from the metropolitan territory.”

<sup>xi</sup> Warner was the Under-Secretary of the Foreign Office’s Information Department and served from their home office in London, while Scott was in Baghdad. Their disparate locations is a reminder that these discussions encompassed the entire Arabic-speaking Middle East.

<sup>xii</sup> Reginald Leeper was a career Foreign Service official who in the mid 1930s worked in the News Department and later served as head of political intelligence. He is today perhaps best known as the founder of the British Council. Havard served as Consul General in Beirut, Lebanon, for the Colonial Office, from 1934 until 1941.

<sup>xiii</sup> David Balfour, Lord Kinross, served as an information officer, while Pollock, a military officer, headed the Middle East Section of the Foreign Office’s Information Department during World War II.

<sup>xiv</sup> Boyd does not appear to read Arabic and in his research was consequently unable to identify when al-Sharq al-Adna began broadcasting. While station files were still embargoed by the National Archives as recently as 2006, the station’s establishment was covered in the Arabic-language Palestinian press. Daily program guides were published in *Falastin* and other newspapers as soon as the station began broadcasting.

<sup>xv</sup> I discuss the use of radio stations as signs of sovereignty more fully in my forthcoming *This is Jerusalem Calling: State Radio in Mandate Palestine* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013).

<sup>xvi</sup> I discuss the use of women broadcasters and talks aimed at women listeners more fully in my forthcoming chapter “Broadcasting a Nationalist Modernity”, in *Jerusalem Interrupted: Modernity and Colonial Transformation*, edited by Lena Jayyusi (Interlink, 2013).