

History 3029 Transnational History: A New Perspective on the Past

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Instructor: Dr Birgit Schneider

Student: Jérôme PASQUIER

Book Review

Husain, Aiyaz. *Mapping the End of Empire: American and British Strategic Visions in the Postwar World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.

The year is 2017. On the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, Israel urges on the settlement of Jewish men and women in the nominally Palestinian western bank of the Jordan River, while the State of Palestine is recognised by 136 of the United Nations' 193 member states. Three thousand kilometres east, India and Pakistan maintain large amounts of troops and materiel in the high mountains and valleys of Jammu and Kashmir, guarding a line of actual control that neither side acknowledges as an international border. How did these two seemingly unrelated geopolitical situations come to be? Can they be linked together at all? In his first and so far only book *Mapping the End of Empire: American and British Strategic Visions in the Postwar World*, Aiyaz Husain offers a compelling account of how British and American diplomacy during and immediately after the Second World War irremediably shaped the global geopolitical landscape and institutional framework of the nascent post-war world. By carefully reconstructing both countries' policymakers' specific and often diverging worldview, Husain argues that the collective geographical "official minds"¹ which drove American and British foreign policy constitute a new and powerful lens through which the study of the post-war global order, of the nascent Cold War, and of mounting worldwide decolonisation struggles can and should be "interwoven in a single grand narrative of sweeping change."²

Maps are key to Husain's argument. However, whilst physical maps do play a part in the author's narrative, the crux of his thesis relies on what he calls the "mental maps"³ of policymakers, whether they are midlevel bureaucrats and diplomats or top decision-makers and military leaders. Although these mental maps are indeed related to the wide range of official cartography

¹ Aiyaz Husain, *Mapping the End of Empire: American and British Strategic Visions in the Postwar World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 8.

² *Ibid.*, 263.

³ *Ibid.*, 7.

produced by various British and American state departments, they differ in that they rest on assumptions made by the individual with regards to his or her way of seeing the world, which in turn influence his or her perception of geography and, consequently in the case of policymakers, of geopolitics and foreign policy conduct. As Husain puts it, these “cognitive representations of physical geography” can “frame how individuals conceive of spatial distance and landscapes,”⁴ in spite of variations which may arise from “blind spots, prejudices, and other differences in each individual’s conceptuali[s]ation.”⁵ Through the people who conceive of them, mental maps reside within government bureaucracies as “tacit knowledge,”⁶ and may be reflected in turn in the physical maps produced by these bureaucracies. Husain includes six maps in his work, produced by the US Army, the US State Department, and the CIA, which use specific vantage points and projection techniques revealing the geographical assumptions that lay in the minds of those who commissioned them. One pertinent example is the map titled “The Middle East.” Produced by the Information Branch of the US Army, it is centred on the Caucasus and north-western Iran, depicting



Map produced by the Information Branch of the US Army.
Source: Husain, *Mapping the End of Empire*, Figure 2.

a continuous landmass from the Bosphorus to Oman and western Pakistan. This arguably unorthodox choice of representation could be interpreted as conveying American perceptions of the region vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Indeed, the projection portrays the USSR as looming to the north

⁴ Ibid., 161.

⁵ Ibid., 162.

⁶ Ibid.

of a wide range of countries as seemingly disparate as Romania and Afghanistan. One could argue that the mental maps behind such cartography bore the mould of influential Sovietologist George Kennan, whose basic precept of “containment” of communism “would guide American foreign policy for the remainder of the century.”⁷ However, although Husain does provide some examples of maps on the one hand and information such as that about Kennan’s strategic thought on the other, he refrains from making links or references to the six maps he includes in his book. As such it is regrettable that these maps merely feature in his work without any analysis—let alone a specific date of publication—, especially considering the central role maps play in his argument. Nevertheless, foreign policy enacted as a bulwark against perceived communist expansion is one of the at times too implicit guiding threads Husain uses in his examples to link together seemingly unrelated post-war crises into a single narrative.

Husain’s account of how a new global order came into being in the immediate aftermath of World War II is centred on British and American foreign policy agendas, showing that their respective perceptions of geography are a lens crucial for understanding the rationale behind their policymakers’ motivations and decisions, the consequences of which have had a lasting, global impact. Three thematic segments guide his work: first, Anglo-American strategic thought and policy regarding crises in Palestine and Kashmir; second, their influence on shaping the institutional structure of the nascent United Nations as well as its (in)ability to intervene in the aforementioned crises; and third, the impacts of Anglo-American mental maps on their actions vis-à-vis French colonial presence in the Levant and Dutch colonial presence in the East Indies. His work is sustained by a broad range of published historical sources, which balance the use of exclusively British and American archival material, manuscript collections, and published document collections (including correspondence between state officials, minutes of diplomatic meetings, and declassified intelligence reports). Such reliance on these two countries’ archival sources undoubtedly impinged on his account of events, a point made regrettably acute in his segment on the United Nations.

Husain establishes a dichotomy between the prisms that framed British and American mental geography: London’s strategic thought and foreign policy reflected a trend towards “regionalism”⁸ in the minds of officials in Whitehall, as opposed to Washington’s newfound “globalism”⁹ championed by policymakers and strategists at Foggy Bottom and in the White House.

⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁹ Ibid.

Regionalism led a contracting British Empire, buckling under the weight of politico-military expenses it could no longer afford in the wake of the global conflict, to seek to safeguard key strategic points it would need in order to maintain vital maritime and aerial communication lines between the British Isles, India, and the Far East. This new state of affairs in which Britain believed its strategic interests would be maintained by gradually trading its “formal” empire for an “informal” one based on “a sea of friendly successor states”¹⁰ hinged on guaranteeing that these new states remained “friendly,” a caveat that would greatly impinge on London’s stance during the quasi-simultaneous crises of Palestine and Kashmir in 1947-1949. Moreover, Whitehall’s ambitions in the region were formatted by British perceptions of the Greater Middle East as one large “arc of crisis.”¹¹ They believed the global Islamic *ummah*’s calls for inter-Muslim solidarity meant British policy decisions in any part of the Muslim-populated areas stretching from the Bosphorus to the Indus “could have repercussions in the other, in a ripple effect felt throughout the Muslim populations that could serve the function of an electrical current transmitting the charge of unrest from one end of the region to the other.”¹² The perceived geographical, cultural, and political unity of the region would define London’s approach to the issue of Palestine and Kashmir, as well as impinge upon the part Britain played in shaping the UN and its post-war global order.

Conversely, globalism characterised the rise of the United States just as regionalism signalled Britain’s impending retreat. In the minds of officials in Washington—led by President Roosevelt’s vision of the post-war world and President Truman’s implementation of it—the post-1945 global order was to be one of nominally equal sovereign states among which peace was guaranteed through the policing of Great Powers, namely Britain, China, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States. Colonial empires no longer had a place in this new world, and their dismantling was deemed key to achieving, *de jure*, the Wilsonian right of self-determination, as well as, *de facto*, the opening of new markets to American economic and political influence. Indeed, Husain writes that globalism “suggested aspirations towards a worldwide Monroe Doctrine for a new era of American primacy.”¹³ But what exactly did non-imperialist American primacy imply? On this point Husain remains deceptively vague: whilst globalism would logically assume a broader scope than a mere regional one, the tenets of such a vision remain imprecise. Husain attributes this largely to the “inchoate American geographic perceptions of new and decidedly

¹⁰ Ibid., 47.

¹¹ Ibid., 59.

¹² Ibid., 183.

¹³ Ibid., 5.

global interests”¹⁴ which remained at large “rough” and “ill-defined.”¹⁵ Unfortunately, although Husain does seem to suggest that this vagueness left it generally permeable to the ideas of the likes of Kennan and his “containment” of communism, only his account of the events in Kashmir acknowledge it as a major influence guiding Washington’s hand.

By using the example of Palestine and the question of a Jewish state on the one hand, and that of the status of Jammu and Kashmir in the wake of the partition of India on the other, Husain illustrates how British regionalism and American globalism shaped the two countries’ diplomacy and strategic thought during these crises, and consequently how mental prisms impacted their outcome. In the case of Palestine, British regionalism mandated stability in the Muslim “arc of crisis,” leading its decision-makers to find a way of maintaining good relations with newly independent Arab states, such as Egypt and Transjordan, in the wake of calls for the partition of Palestine and the creation of a Jewish state. London being consequently unable to impose a solution compatible with Arab sensibilities, it sought to “spread the blame, first to the United States and then to the United Nations”¹⁶ for the fate of the Palestinians, as Fritz Bartel put it in his review of Husain’s work. On the other hand, Washington’s globalist standpoint of “strategic geography”¹⁷ favoured stability in Palestine due to its proximity to the oil-rich Arabian Peninsula, whose resources were crucial for the success of the Marshall Plan in Europe and for securing resources in the event of a global war against the Soviet Union. In parallel to these considerations, and contradictorily to the aforementioned aims of regional stability, the US administrations of Roosevelt and Truman were favourable to Zionist aims of increased Jewish migration to Palestine, an aim compatible with American plans for “relocating [Jewish] war refugees on a global scale.”¹⁸ Therein lies an inherent contradiction within Husain’s American globalism: the support expressed by Washington for Zionist ambitions seems to contradict the economic and security concerns for wider regional stability in the Middle East. Husain points out that, akin to Whitehall’s regionalist concerns, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff believed that provoking hostile Arab reaction “could endanger a wide range of US interests.”¹⁹ Thus, as Bartel astutely points out, the official maps of many Americans in Washington “sounded very much like their British ‘regionalist’

¹⁴ Ibid., 158.

¹⁵ Ibid., 265.

¹⁶ Fritz Bartel, Review of *Mapping the End of Empire: American and British Strategic Visions in the Post-war World*, by Aiyaz Husain, *H-Diplo* XVI, no. 26 (May 2015), https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/70740/h-diplo-roundtable-xvi-26-mapping-end-empire-american-and-british#_Toc420138797.

¹⁷ Husain, *Mapping the End of Empire*, 244.

¹⁸ Ibid., 245.

¹⁹ Ibid., 60.

counterparts.”²⁰ Globalism would therefore stem more from the mental maps of certain policy-makers in Washington, rather than reflect the thinking of state bureaucracy at large.

In the case of Kashmir, the tenets of regionalism and globalism appear more clear-cut, though this is largely due to the convergence between British and American strategic views on the matter. Promoting stability in the north-eastern corner of the “arc of crisis” pushed Britain to seek non-intervention in the crisis and third-party mediation, notably via the UN. As for American globalism, Husain returns here to the idea of containment of communism being the spearhead of US foreign policy in Kashmir, seeing the northern borderlands of Pakistan and Kashmir as a bulwark against “potential penetration of Soviet communism southward and eastward into the subcontinent and Southeast Asia,”²¹ a concern which forbade the deployment of American troops in the region for fear of prompting the Soviets to do the same. In this sense, the fact that a viable Pakistan with control of all of the subcontinent’s north-western border was “consonant with the imperatives of both American and British geographical visions”²² but limited by a common inability to intervene directly helped set the stage for a crisis that remains unsolved today.

The question of intervention in early post-war crises cannot escape mention of the newly created United Nations, an organisation whose very aims are to maintain international peace and broker agreements between feuding parties. Husain delves at length into the wartime origins of its institutional framework and the competing influence of the US and the UK in seeking to shape it. While the author’s argument that the organisation’s final shape—including the presence of a single, overarching, Security Council—is aligned with the United States’ globalist vision of the world, his failure to delve into the institutional proposals of other Allied powers somewhat contrasts with his minute account of Anglo-American negotiations, particularly when it comes to the Three- or Four-Power war conferences such as Cairo, Tehran, Dumbarton Oaks, and Yalta. As we have mentioned early on, Husain’s heavy reliance on British and American archival sources could be behind this paradox. Moreover, his argument that peacekeeping emerged as an ad hoc means of enforcing some measure of the UN’s *raison d’être* in spite of the Security Council’s “indeterminacy in the face of certain types of conflict” was the result of “asymmetry between the American and British conceptions of geography when it came to postcolonial issues”²³ is compelling, but does not reflect a more nuanced American approach to European colonial empires. Indeed,

²⁰ Bartel, Review of *Mapping the End of Empire*.

²¹ Husain, *Mapping the End of Empire*, 244.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 221.

the idea that globalism necessarily undermined them is somewhat simplistic. The argument holds true for Husain's example of France in the Levant, but does not reflect other instances where Washington supported colonial powers in the midst of wars of independence, such as in its support of Paris during the Indochina War of 1946-1954. The fact that the latter was waged against a communist force reinforces the idea that containment of communism was crucial in determining US foreign policy, a point Husain could have made to nuance his argument. Finally, in stark contrast with the author's lengthy exposition of the crafting process behind the creation of the Security Council, his references to the Great Powers that constitute it are convoluted: he alternatively mentions four²⁴ or five²⁵ members in the span of four pages, and at no point does he mention when or how Roosevelt's envisioned "Four Policemen" became the Five we have today. To add to the confusion, he states that the four permanent members of the Security Council, as conceived by the President, were "enlarged by one due to the inclusion of China,"²⁶ despite France being in fact the country not originally included in Roosevelt's conception of the UN organ.

How does one reconcile the focus on Britain and the United States with the book's aim of being a "work of international history?"²⁷ Husain gives clues throughout his narrative as to how the actions of only two countries at a specific time in history contributed to creating a global order that endures today. Indeed, the years immediately following the Second World War heralded a new balance of power characterised first and foremost by "the glaring disparity between the economic and military might of the United States and that of its European allies,"²⁸ which were "shattered, debt-ridden, and unable to project meaningful levels of military power to balance American influence as it filled post-war security vacuums."²⁹ This new geopolitical reality, combined with the now global ambitions of US policymakers, enabled Washington to "assert control over the basic structure of the international political system that had been subject to British domination."³⁰ Therefore, the unique circumstances of the early post-war years, combined with the attraction of the ideals enshrined in the Anglo-American Atlantic Charter of 1941, gave the two Anglophone powers a window for shaping a new global order. Husain writes, "American globalism thus knew no realistic bounds, no international competitors."³¹ However, although he refers

²⁴ Ibid., 172, 174.

²⁵ Ibid., 173, 176.

²⁶ Ibid., 203.

²⁷ Ibid., 7.

²⁸ Ibid., 1.

²⁹ Ibid., 211.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

to a consequent “impending withdrawal of those European powers from territories they controlled,”³² such propositions can be moderated by instances in which decolonisation was a much slower process, as in the case of France’s Sub-Saharan colonies or Dutch New Guinea. Moreover, the lasting impact that post-war British and American policies still have in specific crises today—namely Palestine and Kashmir—is in our view linked to the fact that Husain’s examples concern either former British colonial possessions or foreign colonies that were invaded and occupied by Britain in the course of the Second World War, such as Syria, Lebanon, and Indonesia. Therefore his conclusions, although logical and valid in these examples, cannot offer a holistic view of the matter. Whilst more wide-ranging perspectives on decolonisation are touched upon in the final chapter, particularly on how American globalism backed a “universal decolonisation”³³ that sought statehood for colonial entities regardless of their territorial, cultural, linguistic, religious, or ethnic coherence, they remain only helpful as broad guidelines to bear in mind when approaching specific topics.

With regards to Palestine and Kashmir, Husain also delves into the detail of nationalist movements related to both cases, namely those led by David Ben-Gurion and Chaim Weizmann for the creation of the State of Israel and Muhammad Ali Jinnah for the creation of a Muslim state of Pakistan. By successfully showing how these movements, and more particularly the actions of their leaders, impacted decision-makers in London and Washington and impinged upon their mental conceptions of the Middle East, Husain adds a valuable additional layer to his argument. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about his narrative of France’s withdrawal from the Levant and the Netherlands’ withdrawal from the East Indies. As rightfully pointed out by Benjamin Grob-Fitzgibbon, they “read as separate narratives”³⁴ and appear to have been handpicked to illustrate the impact of Anglo-American official minds beyond former British-ruled territories such as Palestine and Kashmir. As we have said, other cases may tell a different story. In a similar vein, Husain addressed the issue of “weak states” and “state failure” in his last chapter, citing as examples the “implosion” of Somalia or the “ethnic cleansing” in Kosovo.³⁵ He cites political scientist Robert Jackson in explaining that the endowment of sovereignty in what were often “territorial jurisdictions which were formed under colonial rule” though an “international legal

³² Ibid., 2.

³³ Ibid., 229.

³⁴ Benjamin Grob-Fitzgibbon, Review of *Mapping the End of Empire: American and British Strategic Visions in the Postwar World* by Aiyaz Husain, *H-Diplo* XVI, no. 26 (May 2015), https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/70740/h-diplo-roundtable-xvi-26-mapping-end-empire-american-and-british#_Toc420138799.

³⁵ Husain, *Mapping the End of Empire*, 257.

transaction³⁶ was neither conducive to establishing durable states nor a viable platform for forging national identities. Whilst this point is assuredly still relevant in a number of countries today, its link to colonialism (Kosovo?) and Anglo-American mental maps is unclear. The final segment thusly follows the path of Husain's examples of the Levant and the East Indies as being both interesting in their own right and worthy of further study, yet feeling like an appendix merely affixed to the main narrative.

The strength of Husain's "single grand narrative"³⁷ lies, instead, in his account of how British and American mental maps shaped the institutional framework of the United Nations. Not only does the UN-led global order still stand today, the organisation itself has impinged on most historical events, crises, and conflicts in the past seventy years, whether they be between states, within a single state, or even transcend the notion of the state, such as in the cases of famine relief or climate change. In spite of its failures and enduring limitations, the UN remains unrivalled today as an actor that has been assimilated by all as the central pillar of global politics. As such, Husain's work is most useful when it sheds light on how, almost paradoxically, two states' decision-makers' mental geography and specific national interests gained, through the shaping of a single organisation, global ramifications. It is thusly regrettable that his section on the United Nations is also the most methodologically flawed in an otherwise meticulous book.

In all, *Mapping the End of Empire* is a thought-provoking and valuable addition to the historiography of the immediate post-war years and their lasting impact on the world we know today. Through the perspective of Anglo-American mental prisms of regionalism and globalism, Husain shows that the geographical assumptions held by policymakers in specific countries endowed with an ability to act upon the world order can help explain the policy outcomes and compromises that arose in the face of crises of decolonisation. Husain's concept of mental maps and their effect on strategic thinking shed new light on the impetus behind the end of colonial empires and the establishment of a global institutional framework which still defines modern international politics. As such his work transcends the field of post-war history by offering insights in the realm of geopolitics, diplomacy, and even in the study of state-level decision-making processes. His work invites the reader to reconsider how policymakers' mental maps have affected or will define international relations in the decades since the advent of the United Nations.

³⁶ Ibid., 260.

³⁷ Ibid., 263.

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