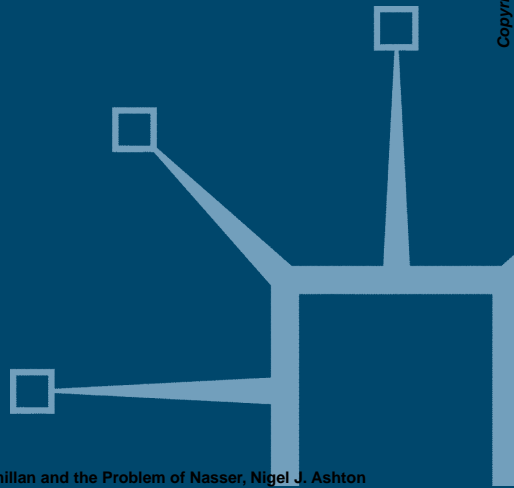


palgrave
macmillan

Eisenhower, Macmillan and the Problem of Nasser

Anglo-American Relations and Arab
Nationalism, 1955–59

Nigel John Ashton



EISENHOWER, MACMILLAN AND THE PROBLEM OF NASSER

STUDIES IN MILITARY AND STRATEGIC HISTORY

General Editor: Michael Dockrill, Reader in War Studies, King's College
London

Published titles include:

G. H. Bennett

BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY DURING THE CURZON PERIOD,
1919–24

David A. Charters

THE BRITISH ARMY AND JEWISH INSURGENCY IN PALESTINE,
1945–47

Paul Cornish

BRITISH MILITARY PLANNING FOR THE DEFENCE OF
GERMANY, 1945–50

Robert Frazier

ANGLO-AMERICAN RELATIONS WITH GREECE: The Coming of
the Cold War, 1942–47

Brian Holden Reid

J. F. C. FULLER: Military Thinker

Stewart Lone

JAPAN'S FIRST MODERN WAR: Army and Society in the Conflict
with China, 1894–95

Thomas R. Mockaitis

BRITISH COUNTERINSURGENCY, 1919–60

Roger Woodhouse

BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS FRANCE, 1945–51

Eisenhower, Macmillan and the Problem of Nasser

**Anglo-American Relations and Arab
Nationalism, 1955–59**

Nigel John Ashton

Lecturer

Department of History

University of Liverpool



in association with
KING'S COLLEGE LONDON



First published in Great Britain 1996 by
MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
 Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS
 and London
 Companies and representatives
 throughout the world

A catalogue record for this book is available
 from the British Library.

ISBN 0-333-64455-7



First published in the United States of America 1996 by
ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, INC.,
 Scholarly and Reference Division,
 175 Fifth Avenue,
 New York, N.Y. 10010

ISBN 0-312-16108-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
 Ashton, Nigel John.

Eisenhower, Macmillan and the problem of Nasser : Anglo-American
 relations and Arab nationalism, 1955-59 / Nigel John Ashton.

p. cm. — (Studies in military and strategic history)

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-312-16108-5

1. Arab countries—Foreign relations—United States. 2. United
 States—Foreign relations—Arab countries. 3. United States—
 —Foreign relations—1953-1961. 4. Arab countries—Foreign
 relations—Great Britain. 5. Great Britain—Foreign relations—Arab
 countries. 6. United States—Foreign relations—Great Britain.
 7. Great Britain—Foreign relations—United States. I. Title.
 II. Series.

DS63.2.U5A865 1996
 327.730174927—dc20

96-10395
 CIP

© Nigel John Ashton 1996

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of
 this publication may be made without written permission.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or
 transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with
 the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988,
 or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying
 issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 90 Tottenham Court
 Road, London W1P 9HE.

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this
 publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil
 claims for damages.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
 05 04 03 02 01 00 99 98 97 96

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
 Ipswich Book Co Ltd, Ipswich, Suffolk

For my parents
and Danielle

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	viii
1 Introduction	1
2 The Middle East in 1955	26
3 The Background to the Formation of the Baghdad Pact	37
4 March 1956 and the Break with Nasser	61
5 The Suez Crisis	81
6 The Eisenhower Doctrine	103
7 The Bermuda Conference and the April 1957 Crisis in Jordan	114
8 The Syrian Crisis and the October 1957 Talks	122
9 The Formation of the United Arab Republic	140
10 The Lebanese Crisis	150
11 The Iraqi Revolution	165
12 The Course and Conclusion of British and American Intervention	182
13 Post-Revolutionary Iraq and the Reassessment of American and British Strategy	190
14 Conclusions	208
15 Postscript: The Kuwaiti Crisis and the Break-up of the United Arab Republic	220
<i>Notes</i>	233
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	263
<i>Index</i>	271

Preface

This book is the product of my own work. It is not the result of any collaborative efforts with others. In writing it I have incurred a number of debts.

The first and by far the most important of these debts is to my former doctoral supervisor, Dr David Reynolds. His guidance, insight and encouragement assisted me at every stage of my original research work. In addition I would like to thank Dr Ian Clark, who not only offered valuable advice, but also, by coincidence, shared my time at the Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas. Thanks go also to Richard Langhorne, former Director of the Centre of International Studies in Cambridge. Dr David Dutton of the Department of History at the University of Liverpool generously read through my work and offered valuable suggestions as to how it might be improved. Others who cannot go without mention include HRH Prince Zeid bin Raad al-Hussein whose knowledge of the complexities of Middle Eastern history, politics and culture has helped to remedy my own deficiencies in these areas. His unfailing sense of humour also enlivened the task of graduate research.

I have worked in a number of archives during the course of my research, and must single out in particular the staff of the Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas, for their efficiency, helpfulness and knowledge of their material. In addition, however, I would also like to thank the staff of the Public Records Office, Kew, London, the United States National Archives, Washington, DC, the Library of Congress, Washington, DC, the Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton, New Jersey, and the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

Financial assistance for my research has been provided at various stages by the British Academy, Christ's College, Cambridge, the Eisenhower Foundation, the Kennedy Foundation, and the University of Liverpool. Without this generous support I would have been unable to conduct my archival visits.

Finally, my thanks go to my parents, without whose sacrifices in funding my earlier education this book could certainly not have been produced, and to Danielle.

1 Introduction

'We fully agree that [the] UK is and should be [a] world power, and the more powerful and the more worldly the better', commented Philip Jessup, a member of the American team which negotiated the Tripartite Declaration on the Middle East with Britain and France in 1950.¹ However, one could be forgiven for thinking, in view of the divergence in approach of the two powers to certain regional problems during the post-war years, that the Middle East was in fact one area to which this dictum did not apply. The paradox in Anglo-American relations in the Middle East is that while there were major disagreements over, for instance, the Palestine Mandate, Mossadegh's Iran, and the Suez Crisis, the two countries were capable, when it suited their respective interests, of cooperating remarkably closely in the region. The key to this paradox lies, as might be expected, in the question of interests, which, despite the nobler historical and ideological sentiments often attributed to it, lay at the heart of the Anglo-American relationship. The Middle East was no exception in this respect. The reason why it proved to be such fertile ground for conflict between the two powers was simply that their interests here often failed to coincide.

Discussions of Anglo-American relations in the Middle East during the later 1950s have, of course, been dominated by the Suez Crisis. Described variously as the 'lion's last roar',² the end of empire, and Great Britain's 'last battle' in the Middle East,³ Suez has exerted a strong teleological pull over the historiography of the British role in the region. Despite recent revisionist attempts to play down the significance of the crisis,⁴ due both to the fascination of the Suez drama itself, and the constraints of the 'thirty year rule', no detailed attempt has yet been made to set the crisis in context by exploring the subsequent course of Anglo-American relations in the Middle East. This account sets out, among other objectives, to achieve this goal.

Suez from the British perspective has often been regarded

as something of an aberration, even as a temporary loss of sanity on behalf of the British Cabinet and the Prime Minister in particular. Indeed, there is no better illustration of this sentiment than the amount of discussion which has been devoted to the state of the Anthony Eden's health during the crisis, and the likely impact on his judgement caused by the cocktail of drugs prescribed to him by his doctors.⁵ Although to someone of the present generation the sort of assumptions about Britain's place in the world, and the means by which it should be maintained, epitomized by Suez, appear extraordinary, to those in power in the later 1950s they were the foundations of foreign policy. Britain was a great power and should use all necessary means to secure her economic and political position should it appear to be challenged.

Donald Cameron Watt, in his enlightening discussion of Anglo-American relations throughout the twentieth century, has stressed the importance of historical generations in shaping the outlook of statesmen.⁶ All of the important members of Eden's cabinet had served their political apprenticeships during the inter-war years when, with both the United States and Soviet Union preoccupied with internal problems, Britain's role as a leading world power was unquestioned. The most significant political lesson which they had learned from this period was the danger of appeasing dictators, a lesson which they were to apply out of context during the Suez Crisis.

It follows then, that the attitudes which shaped the response of the government to the Suez Crisis did not disappear overnight. Rather, as this study will show, there was a surprising degree of continuity in British strategy both before and after Suez. Suez will emerge as an aberration only to the extent that Eden acted without ensuring at least American acquiescence. His successor, Harold Macmillan, while intent on pursuing the same strategy of defeating the Egyptian leader, Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, used different means and tried, admittedly with limited success, to carry the Americans with him. Continuity will emerge not just in British strategy, but also in Anglo-American relations in the Middle East during the period under review. What we will find in this respect is essentially a patchwork of conflict and cooperation governed by the overriding importance of interests. Where interests coincided, both before

and after Suez, cooperation could be very close. Where they diverged, conflict could be correspondingly bitter.

The importance of regionality in modifying analyses of the Anglo-American relationship should already be clear in other theatres from such examples as the conflict over policy towards Communist China, and towards South East Asia after Dien Bien Phu. While the two powers might have clear ideas of what interests they sought to protect in a particular region, events often overtook them. As will be seen, when added to the question of how best to secure oil supplies against the perceived Soviet threat, the rise of radical Arab nationalism personified by Nasser was to place great strains on the Anglo-American relationship in the Middle East in the 1950s.

Foreign policy in any part of the world cannot, of course, be divorced from the personalities of the men who shape and implement it. In this respect, there are clearly five characters who head the Anglo-American list of *dramatis personae*; Dwight D. Eisenhower, John Foster Dulles, Harold Macmillan, Anthony Eden, and Selwyn Lloyd. In fact, in view of the ground covered by this study, this list might be reduced even further to four and a half characters. Without seeking to belittle the role of Anthony Eden, much of the new ground covered here on the British side is in relation to the policies pursued under Harold Macmillan.

On the American side, the relationship between Dwight D. Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles, President and Secretary of State from January 1953 until Dulles's resignation and death split their partnership in 1959, has received a great deal of attention from historians. Contemporaries, including, it should be noted, informed representatives of the British Government, tended to take the view that the President was somewhat detached from the day-to-day conduct of foreign policy, leaving many important decisions to his Secretary of State.⁷ More recently, however, a great deal of literature has been devoted to rehabilitating the President as a shrewd political operator, who cultivated the impression of detachment while at the same time retaining a firm grip on the reins of power. The concept of a 'hidden-hand Presidency' has gained a great deal of currency.⁸

Eisenhower will emerge in this study as a man of strong

convictions, many of them bred by his time in the military, first as commander of the allied forces which liberated Western Europe in the Second World War, and latterly as Supreme Commander of NATO. Foremost among these convictions was the belief that communism should be opposed and if possible defeated. To achieve this, the 'free world', especially the countries of Western Europe, should be supported and a strong alliance of the democracies maintained. The United Nations should be promoted as the guardian of the international order, and encouragement should be given to the nations emerging from colonial rule to adopt democratic institutions and look to the United States for protection against the intrigues of 'international communism'. Whether one shared his ethical code or not, the strength of his own conviction could not be denied. What certainly can be said of the President is that when he felt any of these principal concerns to be involved, then he was very closely engaged with the formulation of policy. To this extent, the revisionists are right to stress his role behind the scenes directing the actions of the Secretary of State. However, it is important to note that Dulles, because of the closeness of the relationship he achieved with the President, was entrusted with a great deal of latitude in the interpretation and implementation of broad lines of policy agreed with Eisenhower.⁹

The only respect in which I would beg to diverge from what may be termed the revisionist synthesis on Eisenhower is in dissenting from Stephen Ambrose's view of the emphasis placed by the President on institutions of government as opposed to personalities.¹⁰ I have found that Eisenhower laid great stress on the qualities of individual leaders. So, he referred to his disappointment at having 'continually to downgrade' his estimate of Eden,¹¹ while in a meeting three days later he noted that 'he had always thought most highly of Macmillan'.¹² Perhaps the best example of this sentiment, however, was Eisenhower's extraordinary belief that King Saud of Saudi Arabia could be the man to divert the course of the whole Arab nationalist movement, and rival the leadership of Nasser. Again, here, his first question about Saud was 'what kind of a man is he?'¹³ This stress on the qualities of leadership may again perhaps be attributed to Eisenhower's military background.

If Eisenhower emerges as a relatively straightforward character, deceiving contemporaries only as to the degree of his involvement in policy making, the opposite can be said of John Foster Dulles. An owlish and meticulous man with a penchant for sharpening his own pencils and measuring distances on the globe with his handkerchief, Dulles had served his apprenticeship as an international lawyer. Latterly, he had been foreign policy adviser to Thomas Dewey, the defeated Republican candidate in the 1948 election. This, and his subsequent experience of the Truman Administration's policy of the 'containment' of Communism, had convinced him that a radical and more aggressive approach was needed to prevent the resources of the US being dissipated in a protracted global war of attrition with Communism. The US should be prepared to place a much greater reliance on the deterrent effect of its superior nuclear, as opposed to conventional, forces.

Dulles's puritanical character and his rhetorical contributions to the so-called 'New Look' foreign policy adopted by Eisenhower made him a controversial figure and the butt of many contemporary jokes. His boast that he had been three times to the brink of nuclear war coined not only the term 'brinkmanship' to describe his brand of nuclear diplomacy, but also the jibe at his character, 'three brinks, and he's brunk'. His call for an 'agonizing reappraisal' of US foreign policy inspired a cartoon in the *Saturday Review of Literature* depicting a jeweller's store window. In the bottom corner appeared the caption 'appraisals \$2; agonizing reappraisals \$5'.¹⁴ Finally, a night club singer, Carol Burnett, provoked fifty calls of complaint to the NBC television station, when she appeared on the network singing her satirical composition, 'I made a fool of myself over John Foster Dulles'.¹⁵ This jibe at Dulles' priggishness evidently did not strike a cord with all Americans.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Dulles's blend of self-righteousness and personal and political puritanism provoked a decidedly mixed response. His relationship with Eden was at best strained. Churchill could not abide him and famously dismissed him in three words, 'dull, duller, Dulles'. As Winthrop Aldrich, US Ambassador to Britain at the time of the Suez crisis later recollected, 'you have no idea, you couldn't have any idea, how much he was mistrusted by Winston Churchill,

and Winston Churchill's mistrust of Dulles permeated the whole Cabinet.¹⁶

What, then, were the principal foreign policy goals of this controversial Secretary of State? In fact, although one may lay out a similar list of concerns in his conduct of policy to those entertained by Eisenhower, with Dulles the defeat of Communism assumed such a primacy that it blinkered his outlook in many other respects. His view of Communism, founded on his reading of Stalin's 'Problems of Leninism', emphasized the twin threats which he believed it posed to the West. The Soviet Union was intent not only on direct national expansion into the states on its borders, but also on fostering social revolution throughout the world. US foreign policy must aim to thwart both designs.¹⁷ The US was in a unique position to take on this role, given something of the character of a moral crusade by Dulles, because of its economic and military strength. Not only this, however, but to Dulles's mind the US operated on a different moral plane in the conduct of its foreign policy. As he told foreign service personnel in April 1956, 'the United States is, I suppose, the only country in the world which has foreign policies which are not primarily designed for its own aggrandizement.'¹⁸

One source of confusion about Dulles's role as Secretary of State stemmed from the contemporary misinterpretation of his relationship with Eisenhower, which, as has been suggested, seems to have been shared to some extent by the British Government. So, during the Suez Crisis, for instance, it seems fair to conclude that Eden underestimated both the strength of Eisenhower's convictions and the degree of control he exerted over Dulles's manoeuvrings. Dulles's much publicised comment that the Egyptian leader, Nasser, should be made to 'disgorge' the Canal may well explain Eden's annotation of the words 'Foster advocated going in' on one of the President's many warnings about the inadvisability of using force to settle the dispute.¹⁹

What Dulles's statements appear to have illustrated is a method of action which seems to have recurred again and again in his conduct of foreign policy. Because of what may be termed his lawyer's instincts, the Secretary was often prepared to say one thing in public on one occasion and another in private at

a later date if this served to 'win the case' for him at that particular time. A good example of this was his anti-colonialist statements during the Senate hearings on the Eisenhower Doctrine early in 1957. At the same time as he and the President were manoeuvring to restore some form of cooperation, or at least consultation, with the British over Middle Eastern problems, Dulles was telling the senators: 'if I were an American boy going to fight in the Middle East I would rather not have a British and a Frenchman, one on my right hand, one on my left . . .'²⁰

In addition to these well-known examples, however, this study will present several new instances of Dulles acting in haste and repenting at leisure in circumstances which seem explicable only by reference both to his isolation from advisers in Washington, and to his own personal prejudices. A good example of the former circumstances at work will be provided by Dulles's initial reaction to the formation of the United Arab Republic of Egypt and Syria, news of which broke while he was attending a Baghdad Pact Council meeting in Ankara at the end of January 1958. Having first encouraged the Iraqi Government to take the initiative in devising some counterstroke to Nasser's coup, Dulles back-pedalled somewhat when, on his return to Washington, he was advised that the formation of the union had served to block Communist intrigues in Syria.

An example of the latter circumstances in action is provided by Dulles's statements in private during 1958 to the British about Nasser. Dulles had viewed the Egyptian leader with some distaste since well before the Suez crisis but, because of the primacy of the communist threat, had always been prepared to countenance the possibility of working with him if he could be shown to be opposing the designs of the Soviet Union. Still, the British consistently found it difficult to interpret his policy when on the one hand the US Administration pursued a pragmatic approach in public towards the Egyptian leader, while on the other Dulles compared him in private to Hitler.²¹ With Dulles, it seems appropriate to predict his actions by reference to what we may term a hierarchy of threats. Top of the list, and far outweighing any other threat, was that of Communism. Next came that of radical, neutralist, or anti-Western nationalism. Finally came imperialism and colonialism. While it is often

difficult to isolate these factors from one another we can normally safely predict his response by following his view of the likely gains for Communism in any situation.

On the British side, this study has little that is new to add to the many assessments already made of Anthony Eden's character and qualities as Prime Minister. Eden had been heir apparent to the premiership, occupying the position of Foreign Secretary throughout Churchill's long Indian summer as Prime Minister from 1951 until April 1955. The years in waiting undoubtedly embittered him to some extent, and perhaps inclined him all the more towards an autocratic form of premiership, and an impatience with those who failed to see his point of view. Perhaps, too, those years, which had witnessed conspicuous diplomatic successes for the Foreign Secretary, most notably in Indo-China and over German incorporation into NATO, had dimmed somewhat his sense of Britain's position in the world between the superpowers. This was all the more surprising since in 1952 Eden himself had been the author of a paper advising the shedding of overseas commitments, and the recognition of the strict limitations on British power.²² Whatever the explanation, Eden appears here as a man preoccupied with the importance of the Middle East to Britain, and increasingly incensed by the behaviour of the challenger to British power there, Nasser. As was suggested earlier, his experience in government in the inter-war years had ingrained what he believed to be the lessons of appeasement on his outlook. The false parallel between the actions of Hitler and Mussolini and those of Nasser was one which came to dominate his perceptions.

Harold Macmillan, too, was preoccupied with these lessons. The beginning of the period covered by this study saw his star in the ascendant. Having completed a successful term as Housing Minister in October 1954, Macmillan moved on briefly to Defence. On Eden's assumption of the premiership in April 1955 Macmillan was promoted again, this time to Eden's old job at the Foreign Office. Formative political appointments in his earlier career had included a spell as British Minister with the allied forces in North Africa during the war, where he had built up a close association with one General Dwight D. Eisenhower, soon to be a close colleague again.

Macmillan emerges here as every bit as complex a character as Eden himself. On the one hand, renowned as a great political showman, Macmillan was in fact an intensely private and insecure man prone to bouts of melancholy. These could strike in the midst of crises and leave him incapable of taking action. In terms of political instincts it seems fair to say that he was far more of a pragmatist than an idealist. Indeed, some have gone so far as to portray him as an unprincipled opportunist intent only on seeking and retaining power for himself.²³ His biographer, on the other hand, inclines to put a more charitable light on his career.²⁴ However, it must be admitted that this study unearths some startling examples of Macmillan's political recklessness. His pursuit of the defeat of Nasser in the Middle East was every bit as hot as that of his predecessor. The only difference between the two men in this respect was to prove to be that Macmillan saw the need at least to keep the Americans informed of British intentions. It was this which saved him from a situation which in some respects had the makings of another Suez when, in response to the revolution in Iraq in July 1958, he recklessly sent British paratroops into a precarious position in Jordan. More than this, the Iraqi crisis also reveals Macmillan taking the need to practise 'economy with the truth' to a new extreme which can only be termed 'austerity with the truth' in his explanations to Parliament of the circumstances surrounding the intervention.

Nevertheless, in spite of these serious strictures, Macmillan at least avoided overturning the Anglo-American boat in the Middle East as Eden had done. He also avoided humiliations of the scale of Suez and has been judged comparatively favourably because of the fortuitous success of such actions as that undertaken in Jordan. Although intent on exercising power, he did at least prove to be more prepared than his predecessor to entertain the opinions of others.

Macmillan's principal source of advice and information on foreign affairs was of course his Foreign Secretary, Selwyn Lloyd. Lloyd is in one sense an interesting political figure in that he held on to his post after the Suez crisis and thus spanned the premierships of both Eden and Macmillan. On the other hand, he can certainly not be described as a charismatic politician, or one who left a particular imprint on the office of Foreign

Secretary. It could perhaps be said not unfairly of him, in the words of T. S. Eliot, that he was 'not Prince Hamlet', but 'an attendant lord', 'deferential, glad to be of use, politic, cautious and meticulous'. His prominent characteristics were loyalty, industry and diligence, which overlaid a sense of personal insecurity. There was also an element of naivety in his nature typified by his first reaction when the Profumo affair broke: 'but he couldn't have had the time'.²⁵ Both Eden and Macmillan, who were previous holders of the office of Foreign Secretary, found it useful to have a steady rather than a flamboyant man at the Foreign Office. This is not to say that Lloyd was a mere cypher. On occasion he proposed important initiatives himself, including his suggestion to Macmillan in May 1959 that Britain should begin the process of restoring diplomatic relations with Nasser's Egypt.²⁶ However, unlike Macmillan under Eden, Lloyd was unlikely to attempt to plough his own furrow in foreign affairs behind the back of the Prime Minister. It seems fair to say that even as Foreign Secretary in the Macmillan years, he never quite lived down Nye Bevan's reference to him during the Suez crisis as the monkey to Eden's organ-grinder.

These then, were the characters, who were to direct the course of Anglo-American relations in the Middle East during the period under review. It is fair to say that their efforts to maintain Western influence in the region were to be dominated by relations with one indigenous personality, the Egyptian leader, Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser. However, before outlining his role, it is important to examine the legacy which British and American leaders inherited in the Middle East at the start of 1955, a legacy which had in fact done much to shape Nasser's own outlook.

It is clear that British interests in the Middle East in the years after the Second World War were dominated by the need to secure access to oil supplies. An important element in the economic vulnerability of the country in the post-war period was the American insistence on making progress towards the convertibility of sterling a condition of loans to bail out the British economy. These requirements had been made clear by the Bretton Woods agreement of 1944, which, despite British acquiescence, effectively represented the imposition of the

American vision for the future of the Western economy. However, the effect on Britain, when combined with the swift termination of Lend-Lease at the end of the war, was devastating. The defence of sterling as a major international reserve currency, an assumption unquestioned by British post-war planners, put a premium on the maintenance of sizeable dollar reserves. However, although a large loan was negotiated with the Truman Administration in 1946, the extent of Britain's overseas commitments, including the British zone in Germany, meant that it was spent at what could only be viewed as an alarming rate over the next two years. The abandonment of the British commitments to defend Greece and Turkey followed by the American espousal of the Truman Doctrine illustrated all too readily the impact of economic stringency on Britain's ability to maintain her role as a world power.

Of course, a way out of the dilemma would have been to abandon this attempt. However, one result of the wartime coalition government had been the development of a bipartisan consensus as to the need to maintain Britain's place at the high table of world politics. Ernest Bevin, the Foreign Secretary of the Labour Government during the years 1945–51, therefore set about finding ways of renewing the British Empire as an economic and political unit. On the one hand, he was helped by American recognition, embodied in the Marshall Plan, that the United States would have to help the Western European economies back on to their feet, even if only out of her own economic self-interest. On the other, he developed his own schemes for renewing the empire, at the heart of which were his plans to exploit the oil resources of the Middle East and develop the British colonies in Africa. 'In peace and in war', he stated, in a memorandum circulated to his cabinet colleagues, 'the Middle East is an area of cardinal importance to the UK, second only to the UK itself.'²⁷

The particular importance of the Persian Gulf to Britain in these years was that it was a source of extensive oil reserves comparatively close to Western Europe, which could be bought from British companies and paid for in sterling. In addition, oil sold on world markets was a significant source of revenue for Britain. Unlike the US which could still at this stage fulfil its own needs from indigenous resources, by the early 1950s

Britain had no real alternative to oil supplies drawn from the Persian Gulf area.²⁸ Whereas in 1938 only 19 per cent of Western Europe's oil supplies had come from the Middle East, by 1955, British Government figures showed that 90 per cent of supplies came from the area. This was an extraordinary expansion by any standards.²⁹ Thus from the point of view of the economic recovery of Britain and Western Europe, it seemed important to maintain the security of the Persian Gulf region, and access to its oil supplies.

In fact, as with many imperial commitments, Britain's involvement in the Gulf had originally grown up in a piecemeal fashion. The principal concern of the British in the early nineteenth century had been with the protection of the trade routes to India. Consequently, the earliest agreements with local rulers had concentrated first on securing the rights of the East India Company over its colonial rivals, and then on the suppression of piracy. Exclusive British political influence or 'protection' was not formalized until the end of the century. Contemporaneously, the notion of the Persian Gulf as a distinct political entity grew up as Curzon, the viceroy of India, identified the area as one which was vital to the interests of India and the British Empire.³⁰ During the inter-war years, the focus of British interests had begun to shift away from the protection of the trade routes to India, towards a competition with the United States to secure concessions for the exploitation of the oil reserves then being discovered in the region. This had started when the British Government had become a partner in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company as early as 1914, but was given added impetus by the First World War.

However, although the realization of the importance of oil to the military machine had begun to dawn in Washington, the natural reluctance of the US Government to become involved in what it regarded as primarily commercial squabbles, and the discovery of new reserves at home, meant that the issue diminished in importance during the 1920s. The Depression, and the glut in oil supplies which accompanied it, served only to further this trend. Thus, although Benjamin Shwadran argues that from the end of the First World War until the outbreak of the second 'a continuous struggle . . . [was] waged between the United States and Great Britain for the exploitation of the

oil resources of the Middle East',³¹ this struggle tended to take place more between companies than governments. Its net result was a series of victories for the American companies, which gained a quarter share in the Iraqi Petroleum Company, the entire concessions of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and one half of the Kuwait concession.

It was the Second World War that gave the greatest impetus to the American drive to secure a share in the oil resources of the Gulf region. The intention was to guard against the day when domestic supplies would no longer suffice. From Pearl Harbor until the defeat of Japan, nearly seven billion barrels of petroleum were produced for Allied use. Six billion came from the United States.³² As will be seen, this was to have a profound impact on US relations with oil-producing countries in the region, foremost among which was to be Saudi Arabia.

Returning to British interests in the region, however, it is important to note that conceptions of the defence of the area's oil supplies in the post-Second World War years did not concentrate specifically on the defence of the Gulf. Just as, in the previous century, the maintenance of British leverage over the Ottoman Empire had been conceived of in terms of the protection of the trade routes to India, so British policy in the Middle East in the post-war years was to be dictated by the need to secure oil transit as well as supply. The attempt to renegotiate the basis of the British presence in Egypt undertaken by Ernest Bevin during these years was a clear example of this strategy. The Suez Canal, on which Britain had built up a vast military base during the war years, was viewed as a vital imperial artery. As its importance as a route east to India waned, so its value as a route west for Gulf oil supplies rose. However, the resentment generated by six decades of British occupation of the country proved to be an insurmountable barrier to Bevin's attempts to negotiate some new treaty relationship guaranteeing British access to the base. Hatred of the British was such that, as Sidqi Pasha was to discover to his cost, any Egyptian leader who dealt with them was likely to see his position at home undermined. British conceptions of the defence of the region, and of the secure passage of oil supplies, therefore, were dominated by the need for Egypt in these years.³³

By contrast, the British were slow to recognize the strategic

importance of Iraq, one of the three areas mandated to them by the League of Nations under the post-First World War imperialist carve-up of the region organized at the San Remo Conference of 1920. British moves to grant independence to the country under the treaty of 1930 seem to have been dictated at least in part by a sense of bad conscience about the failure to honour wartime promises to her Arab allies. Certainly, they seem to have been made without any real sense of the importance of Iraq, both as a future oil-producing state, reserves having first been discovered in 1927, and as a possible protector of, or danger to, the Gulf.³⁴ Although Bevin attempted to renegotiate Britain's treaty relationship with the country after the war, with the intention of securing continued access to the Habbaniya airbase, his efforts foundered as a result of the resentment generated by the Palestine War. The true importance of Iraq as a pivot of the British position in the Middle East was, as will be seen, only to emerge in 1955. Then, in a remarkable strategic shift, occasioned by Britain's failure to achieve agreement with Egypt, and the contemporaneous signing of the Baghdad Pact, Britain was to make Iraq the focus of her efforts to protect the oil supplies of the region.

Of the other mandates granted to Britain at the San Remo Conference, no study of British strategy in the Middle East in the 1950s could begin without some reference to the ramifications of the collapse of British policy in Palestine. In one of his moments of despair during the winter of 1955, Evelyn Shuckburgh, Under Secretary at the Foreign Office with responsibility for Middle Eastern affairs, was driven to comment, 'how the Arabs hate us really . . . they will never forgive us Israel.'³⁵ While this placed the difficulty confronting Britain in maintaining influence over the Arab world from 1948 onwards at its starkest, no amount of special pleading by the British, even if justified, could mitigate the sense of bitterness and betrayal felt towards them by the great majority of the Arabs. The British Government was 'caught on the horns of an insoluble dilemma' in Palestine after the Second World War.³⁶ On the one hand it was unable to create the state sought by Zionists for fear of undermining its position in the Arab world. On the other, it could not close the door to the hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees seeking to flee Europe.

While the events in the mandate leading up to the war of 1948–9 are not directly relevant to this study, the collapse of the British attempt to maintain a middle way between the demands of the Zionists for a Jewish state, and the equally fervent opposition of the Arabs to what they regarded as an alien occupation of their lands, offered a portent of what was to come in several respects. Firstly, it underlined Britain's inability to operate in defiance of the wishes of the two emerging superpowers, America and the Soviet Union, who were somewhat incongruously allied, for widely diverging reasons, in opposition to the British policy in the mandate. Secondly, it introduced a permanent element of instability into the region, and created what the Arabs regarded as an internal threat which always overrode in importance the external danger from the Soviet Union, to which Britain tried to point in her subsequent attempts to organize the defence of the area. Put simply, Arab nationalists opposed to Britain could in future frustrate her policies, and vilify her allies in the eyes of the broad mass of Arabs, by pointing to the example of Palestine. The British betrayal here, they argued, was evidence that all British schemes were really intended to distract the Arabs' attention from their true enemy. Palestine eroded what trust there might have been left for Britain in the Arab world.

The Palestine War had also undermined somewhat Britain's position in Jordan, the third of her former mandates in the region. Although the British-officered Arab Legion had performed creditably, particularly in the first phase of the conflict, accusations were levelled that Britain had failed to supply it with sufficient quantities of arms and ammunition to enable it to conduct the war against the Jewish forces effectively. While the British treaty relationship with Jordan for defence purposes endured, and British officers maintained a high profile in the Arab Legion, British prestige here too had taken a serious blow during 1948–9.

The American role in the region up to the beginning of the Second World War had been very limited compared to that of Britain. Barring the competition between American and British oil companies for concessions between the wars, and the passing interest of the American Government in the wake of the First World War, the area had been one which had largely

been left to the British. Again though, as has been suggested, the demands for oil engendered by war drew the attention of the American Government to the region. The principal country in which this interest was manifested was Saudi Arabia, where the Arabian American Oil Company [ARAMCO] had earlier won the concession for the exploitation of the country's oil reserves. Governmental disinterest had been such before the war that it was only under intense pressure from the oil companies that the State Department had relented and allocated a permanent diplomatic representative to the court of King Ibn Saud in June 1939.³⁷

It was in the later years of the war, however, that American economic and military involvement in Saudi Arabia gathered pace. Firstly, in February 1943, Roosevelt informed Lend-Lease administrator Edward Stettinius that 'the defence of Saudi Arabia is vital to the defence of the United States' and ordered the extension of Lend-Lease aid to that country.³⁸ Then, in June 1943, the American Minister in Jeddah was instructed to inform his British counterpart that the Saudis would from now on be dealing directly with the US over arms sales, rather than going through the British as had formerly been the case. From this point onwards 'the idea of playing a role independent of the British had begun to gather momentum' in American minds.³⁹ Wartime rivalry between the two allies over Saudi Arabia reached a peak when, in October 1944, the American Minister learned that the British had been involved in the Saudi refusal to allow the US to build a military airfield at Dhahan. In the face of vigorous American protests, the British retreated, and in the late months of the war, the airstrip which was to become the nucleus of the Dhahan base was constructed. This gave the US, in addition to its substantial oil interests in the country, a strategic interest which, as will be seen, helped to influence its relations with Britain over policy in the region in the 1950s.

In addition to commercial and military links, a certain ideological bond was to develop between the United States and Saudi Arabia in the post-war years against the background of the outbreak of the cold war with the Soviet Union. While the Saudis were principally concerned with regional problems such as their rivalry with the Hashemites of Iraq and Jordan, there was

a certain community of interest between them and the Americans in respect of resisting Communist penetration of the Arab world. The classical Islamic view of international relations envisioned a bipolar world, made up of Dar al-Islam (territory under the Islamic, or God's law) and the Dar al-Harb (territory of war). Within the Dar al-Islam could be numbered not only Muslims, but all monotheists. These people, known as *Ahl al-Kitab*, the 'People of the Book' could include Christians and Jews. Although there were obvious limitations on this philosophy, especially in relation to the state of Israel, it could nevertheless be easily adapted to the world order during the period of cold war. It was not difficult to classify the areas under Communist control as Dar al-Harb, and thus to justify an alliance with the leader of the 'Free World', America, as an alliance of monotheists against unbelievers.⁴⁰

The other aspect of the US-Saudi relationship which was to have an impact on Anglo-American relations during the 1950s was the American support for Saudi territorial claims within the Arabian peninsula. During the 1950s, this support was principally to be concerned with the dispute over the Buraimi Oasis on the Saudi-Abu Dhabi-Omani borders. Although this issue will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, it should be noted here that the Saudis were prompted to press their claim in 1949 as a result of ARAMCO oil exploration in the vicinity of the oasis. Then, when, in April 1953, it was agreed to take the matter to international arbitration, the Saudis were aided in the preparation of their detailed case, known as the Saudi memorial, by ARAMCO officials. The suspicion of the British Government that ARAMCO was the unofficial arm of US policy in the region seemed to be confirmed by Eisenhower's comment during a discussion of Buraimi with Eden in January 1956, that 'we had to take account of world opinion. People in general were very ignorant about Muscat and Buraimi and tended to think that the whole Arabian peninsula belonged – or ought to belong – to King Saud.' Eden's record of the conversation contains the annotated comment 'what people'.⁴¹

The other specific interest of the US Government in the Middle East which also caused tension with the British in the post-war years lay in the creation and continued existence of the state of Israel. Anglo-American cooperation over Palestine

had of course proven to be 'the single most frustrating and elusive goal of the Labour Government in imperial and colonial affairs'.⁴² One important reason for this was the attitude of President Truman. Although the British were initially understanding about US election difficulties, this understanding was tempered by the belief that the President would eventually act on what they believed to be the obvious merits of the case, and bring British and American policies into line. The hoped-for convergence in approach never materialized, however, and Bevin in particular was left embittered at what he regarded as the sacrifice of vital Western security interests on the altar of US domestic politics.⁴³ In fact, it seems that Truman's view was conditioned not just by electoral considerations, but by a genuine belief that during the Palestine War the Jewish people were creating a state 'in a way perhaps comparable to the winning of the American West'.⁴⁴ It was not until January 1949 that anything like a breaking point appeared in Truman's tolerance for the expansion of Israel, brought on by Israeli strikes across the Egyptian frontier.

The British view of the likely future course of developments at the end of the Palestine War was decidedly pessimistic. Bevin described Israel as 'another China', and pointed towards the aid received from the Eastern bloc as evidence that the country might become a Soviet satellite state in the heart of the Middle East. The American view was much more positive, and saw the Israelis as potential regional allies, although they initially aimed at a neutral course between the two superpowers.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, both the British and the Americans, together with the French, were able to agree on the need to stabilize the Middle East in the short term after the negotiation of the armistices. The result was the Tripartite Declaration of 1950 which aimed to preserve the status quo in the region by the imposition of controls on arms supplies. However, the Declaration was little more than a stopgap measure, and failed to address the fundamental problem of why countries in the Middle East wanted to arm themselves.

A significant change in the American outlook on the region was, however, brought about by the election of Eisenhower to the presidency in January 1953. At much the same time as the Israelis were inclining towards a closer relationship with the

West, in the wake of the damage done to relations with the Soviet Union by the so-called 'Doctors Plot', Dulles was announcing that the US would pursue a policy of 'friendly impartiality' between Israel and the Arab states.⁴⁶ It would certainly be true to say that the new incumbent of the White House was far less pro-Zionist than his predecessor, an attitude mirrored by his Secretary of State.⁴⁷ Eisenhower, although not anti-Semitic, was 'uncomfortable with Jews'.⁴⁸ In addition, with the new Administration making the waging of the cold war in the region a priority, Arab sensitivities occupied a much higher place in their list of priorities than had previously been the case.⁴⁹

'Eisenhower . . . believed that the United States possessed a moral obligation to employ its power in order to contain international Communism . . .'⁵⁰ Although the Middle East was not, at the beginning of Eisenhower's first term as President, a region in which the Soviet Union was manifesting much of an interest, the philosophy of the Soviet threat embraced by Eisenhower maintained that the Soviets would be bound, sooner or later, to become involved in the area. It was of vital importance to the economies of Western Europe, the undermining of which was presumed to be a principal goal of Soviet strategy.

On the one hand, therefore, Eisenhower was prepared to bury the differences of the previous Administration with the British in order to seek a more effective community of effort to defend the region against the Soviets. This approach manifested itself particularly in Iran, where Eisenhower backed a CIA scheme, carried out in conjunction with the British, to overthrow the nationalist government of Mohammad Mossadegh, which had earlier challenged British control over Iranian oil production. Eisenhower's decision to act here was dominated by the belief that Mossadegh was backed by the Communists.⁵¹ On the other hand, however, the activities of the CIA in Egypt, which received strong backing from the new Administration, were not so welcome to the British. The agency's operations were dominated by the support given to Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, both before and after the coup which brought him and the junta of 'Free Officers' led initially by Mohammad Neguib to power. The basis of the US Administration's action was the perceived need for the US to develop what Miles

You have reached the end of the preview for this book / chapter.

You are viewing this book in preview mode, which allows selected pages to be viewed without a current Palgrave Connect subscription. Pages beyond this point are only available to subscribing institutions. If you would like access the full book for your institution please:

- Contact your librarian directly in order to request access, or;
- Use our Library Recommendation Form to recommend this book to your library
(<http://www.palgraveconnect.com/pc/connect/info/recommend.html>),
or;
- Use the 'Purchase' button above to buy a copy of the title from
<http://www.palgrave.com> or an approved 3rd party.

If you believe you should have subscriber access to the full book please check you are accessing Palgrave Connect from within your institution's network, or you may need to login via our Institution / Athens Login page: (<http://www.palgraveconnect.com/pc/nams/svc/institutelogin?target=/index.html>).

Please respect intellectual property rights

This material is copyright and its use is restricted by our standard site license terms and conditions (see http://www.palgraveconnect.com/pc/connect/info/terms_conditions.html). If you plan to copy, distribute or share in any format including, for the avoidance of doubt, posting on websites, you need the express prior permission of Palgrave Macmillan. To request permission please contact rights@palgrave.com.