GREAT POWERS AND THE MIDDLE EAST
AFTER WORLD WAR II (1945-1955)

Karol R. Sorby

Institute of Oriental and African Studies, Slovak Academy of Sciences,
Klemensova 19, 813 64 Bratislava, Slovakia

The "Eastern Question" has existed for centuries in one form or another ever since Britain, France and Russia first began to reach out to seek advantage or to protect national and imperial interests in the strategic areas of the Near and Middle East. Marked by occasional wars, large and small, and by the almost continuous exercise of diplomacy, the struggle has continued as empires have disappeared in war and revolution, societies have been transformed by technological and social change, and backward desert lands have been found to be resting on the world's greatest stores of oil. Three factors have largely determined the changing character of the Eastern Question: the efforts of Britain to preserve a world empire, the southward pressure of the great land mass of Russia, and the forces at work among the peoples of the Middle East itself. It was the impact of the Second World War on these three elements and on the interrelationship among them that set the scene for the new phase of the drama, which opened as the war came to an end and as America, for the first time, found itself directly involved.

One of the enduring features of the study of the Middle East has been the emphasis on the relations – religious, economic, social and political – between the outside world and the region itself. One particular aspect that has captured the interest of some scholars is the long, active role played by the great powers in the area. The modern history of the Middle East could not be understood without focusing on the decline and demise of the Ottoman Empire and the concurrent rise of hegemonic Western power. This distinctive political experience has had a considerable impact on the Middle Eastern political institutions, attitudes, and actions.[1]

The Middle East has long provided the gateway between Asia and Europe. During the 19th century, its strategic and economic value made it an area of

---

[1]Brown, Carl L.: International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game. London, I.B. Tauris, 1984, p. 3.

contentious international rivalry between Britain, France and Russia. This importance was enhanced by the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the discovery and development of vast oilfields in the 20th century. Foreign penetration vas aided by the weakness and political instability resulting from the slow decline of the Ottoman empire.[2] After the First World War it was mainly Great Britain that divided the region and kept most of its countries in semicolonial dependence.

The British supremacy in the Middle East, going back over a century and a half, had been aimed at securing the routes to India and the Far East and keeping the area out of the hands of any hostile great power. During that period of time Russia had been the most persistent of Britain's rivals in Asia. Throughout the 19th century Britain barred the way to Russian expansion toward the eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. The Soviet revolution did not change this basic pattern of rivalry; it only added a new ideological flavour to it. This Russian position differed from the British in this important respect: that while Britain was in the Middle East, especially after 1918, Russia remained outside it. What Russia strove for was to exchange these roles; hence her policy was a policy of change. Trying to penetrate the Middle East and to dislodge Britain (as well as France), Russia used diplomatic, military, economic, and ideological weapons according to the need of the moment. Her first attempts after the revolution were both diplomatic and ideological and the USSR put forward the slogan of liberation of the colonial and semicolonial peoples from the Western imperialist yoke.[3] Britain's rivalry with France in the area was almost uninterrupted. Moreover, twice in the 20th century Britain thwarted the armed efforts of Germany to seize the strategic Middle East as the key to world power. The means of policy changed with the passage of time but the objective of a stable Middle East, willing to cooperate or subject to control, remained constant.

The Middle East itself, after the Second World War, presented a very different picture from before. The most significant changes flowed neither from the experience of the military campaigns nor from the influence of the great political and moral issues of the world struggle. They were discernible in the spirit and temper of the people. It was the coming to fruition of a longer historical process marked above all by the rise of nationalism. The war had speeded up this process. The result of the Western imperial legacy and its continuous Middle Eastern involvement was that the Middle East has become "the most penetrated international relations subsystem in today's world".[4] This does not mean, however, that all local players must assume the status of mere pawns in international politics. On the contrary, to advance their own interests some local play-

[2]SMITH, Joseph: The Cold War, 1945-1965. Oxford, Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989, p. 71.

[3]LENCZOWSKI, George: Russia and the West in Iran, 1918-1948. New York, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1949, p. 6.

[4]BROWN, op. cit., pp. 4-5.

ers have exploited great power competition. This competition among great powers partly explains the inability of any one power to achieve mastery in the region.[5]

Since the victory at al-ʿAlamayn Great Britain had dominated virtually the whole Arab area with her armed forces and controlled economic life through the Middle East Supply Centre. The Italian colonies were in her hands. At the close of the Second World War the British were astride the Middle East, where their position looked stronger than ever. Britain had troops in almost every Near Eastern country, dominated some and had alliances with others. The task she faced was to convert this position into a lasting peace time preponderance.[6] British strategic motives for holding on to the area had been dictated by "vital interests" of the Empire such as maintaining of safe communications, keeping up commerce and first of all, controlling the oil resources.[7]

British strength seemed all the greater because Britain had manned the Middle Eastern fronts almost single-handed, and because the peoples in the region had bowed to the inevitable and been cooperative; only now and then had they disturbed British security behind the lines. British troops were everywhere and to all appearances could keep within bounds the local restiveness that had been increasing since the end of war. Great Britain appeared to be unchallenged and to enjoy the advantages that enable a great power to behave generously. Britain's objective in 1945 had been to defend the Middle East from external aggression and to consolidate its strength under her own leadership.[8]

The mood of the Middle East after World War II, however, showed marked variations. Nationalism was not at the same stage in all countries. In some areas where tribal loyalties were paramount or the peasantry remained inert the idea of self-conscious nationhood had little reality. In the Arab world the line was often far from clear between loyalty to an individual "nation" such as Egypt or Iraq and the wider loyalty to the pan-Arab idea. Meanwhile the now more powerful challenge of a vigorous Jewish nationalism (Zionism) in Palestine added new explosive elements. Nationalism thus presented for Western policy no single clear issue but a number of complex problems.[9]

The decline of Western influence after 1945 resulted in a radical transformation in the internal and external development of the Middle East, and in world politics. Most of the League of Nations mandates in the Middle East gradually

---

[5]HOLLINGWORTH, Clare: The Arabs and the West. London, Methuen and Co Ltd, 1952, pp. 19-20.

[6]YAPP, Malcolm E.: The Near East Snce the First World War. New York, Longman, 1991, p. 397.

[7]LEWIS, Bernard: The Middle East and the West. London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968, p. 127.

[8]LENCZOWSKI, George: The Middle East in World Affairs. New York, Cornell University Press, p. 521.

[9]CAMPBELL, John C.: Defense of the Middle East. Problems of American Policy. New York, Frederick A. Praeger, 1961, p. 17.

acquired the attributes of political sovereignty and became very jealous of their independence. The new leaders who seized the reins of power in the 1950s were much more responsive to indigenous and nationalist sentiment than to any philosophical creed.[10] They were determined to assert their interests and play an active role in regional and international affairs.

Nationalism in the Arab world took different forms. Here the Soviet threat was not a matter of real concern to the nationalists. The full force of their agitation was directed rather at the remnants of British and French rule and at the "Zionist invasion" of the Arab world. Although the Arab states in many ways were not yet modern nations, there was no question of their ability to apply continuing pressure to Western positions within their territories. The rising middle and professional classes constituted a force with which the European powers could not deal so easily as with the sheikhs, pashas and beys on whom their control had so largely rested in the past. The new leadership was in many ways an unknown quantity.

Though the mandate system was outdated, Britain had shown its adaptability in shifting to cooperation with "independent" Arab states; to this end it gave its blessing to the new League of Arab States and helped to ease the French out of Syria and Lebanon.[11] With this loss France ceased, for all practical purposes, to be a Middle Eastern power, although it continued to make much of its historic and cultural connections and deeply resented being excluded from Western councils when Middle Eastern affairs were considered.

The Labour victory in the British election of July 1945 seemed to increase the chances that the Arab East would achieve satisfaction of its main ambitions.[12] Except for the Palestinian Arabs, who were alarmed at known Labour leanings towards Zionism, everyone in Asia and Africa thought that a new spirit was bound to prevail in London, bringing new social policies and an end to coercion of the weak by the strong. These hopes were justified; Labour ministers were soon making statements about having "no desire to retain unwilling peoples" (Attlee) and wishing "to leave behind for ever the idea of one country dominating another" (Bevin).[13] The post-war Labour government gave every indication of its intention to hold on to Britain's traditional positions. This was evident in the sharpness of its reaction to Soviet attempts to get a foothold in the area and to American public statements and private actions with respect to

---

[10]WINDSOR, Philip: Superpowers and Client States: Perceptions and Interactions. In: Efrat, Moshe and Bercovitch, Jacob (eds.): Superpowers and Client States in the Middle East: The Imbalance of Influence. London and New York, Routledge, 1991, p. 37.

[11]TIBAWI, A.L.: A Modern History of Syria including Lebanon and Palestine. London, Macmillan, St. Martin's Press, 1969, p. 378.

[12]AL-BISHRĪ, Ṭāriq: Al-ḥaraka as-siyāsīya fī Miṣr, 1945-1952. (The Political Movement in Egypt), Cairo, Dār ash-Shurīq, 1983, p. 24.

[13]MONROE, Elizabeth: Britain's Moment in the Middle East. Baltimore, The J. Hopkins Press, 1963, p. 151.

Palestine, which threatened to alienate the Arabs from the West.[14] But British strength was apparent, not real, and these high hopes were soon frustrated.

Soviet policy in the Middle East has gone through a number of phases since the revolution of 1917. With the Allied victory over the Axis powers in Europe, Stalin embarked on a big gamble to seize a strategic position enabling the Soviet Union to dominate the whole Eastern hemisphere. The main thrust into Europe and into Eastern Asia were accompanied by a calculated offensive toward the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Military victories in the Balkans and the advent of communists to power in Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Albania brought Soviet power to the Adriatic and the borders of Greece. The very existence of an independent Greece was then menaced by communist rebellion supported from the Soviet bloc.[15]

In Britain the exchequer was empty and British economic and military resources were seriously overextended. Then came a body-blow – abrupt American cancellation of Lend-Lease at the end of the Japanese war. With no time to reorganize and no latitude for bargaining, the British cabinet was obliged to negotiate a loan from the USA on most stringent terms, including one virtually impossible condition, a promise of early return to sterling convertibility.[16] In charge of the negotiation was the new British foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin. Appearances were deceptive, for Britain's world position had undergone fundamental changes. The Middle East Supply Centre was given up. The British could no longer pay the costs of maintaining troops all along the routes of empire.

While Britain continued to think and act in terms of supremacy,[17] she realized that her ability to preserve it had shrunk considerably. The British government in spite of its intention to hold on to Britain's traditional positions, simply could not carry alone the burden of maintaining a position of strength in the Middle East. Barely eighteen months later she abruptly ackowledged her inability to defend Greece and Turkey and in 1947 she invited the United States to take over this burden. Greece was saved by British and later by American support. Britain's effort was concentrated on the Arab world; in the Northern Tier she dared not face the USSR, could not afford the cost of financial support to the states concerned and wished to slough off responsibility to the United States that she was ending economic aid to Turkey and Greece, a burden assumed in March 1947 by the USA under the "Truman doctrine".[18] Within a brief period a revolutionary change occurred: the United States began not only to share whith

---

[14]CAMPBELL, op. cit., p. 14.

[15]CAMPBELL, op. cit., p. 24.

[16]MONROE, op. cit., p. 152.

[17]The Economist, London, 17 January 1948, quoted in: LENCZOWSKI, The Middle East in World Affairs, p. 519.

[18]SPANIER, John: American Foreign Policy Since World War II. New York, Praeger, 1964, pp. 29-33.

Britain the defence of the Middle East, assuming as it did responsibility for its most vulnerable northern sector, but the American navy soon outstripped the Royal navy in its Mediterranean tonnage.

In the case of Palestine the British deposited the responsibility in the lap of the United Nations and in the following year they simply withdrew their forces and their administration, leaving the fate of Palestine to be settled by an Arab-Jewish war. This precipitous withdrawal of British power from positions long deemed vital was a measure of the unexpected weakness of Britain's postwar economy and also of the willingness of the Labour government to see the facts and accept their consequences. The West summarily turned down Soviet claims in the Mediterranean.[19] Thus the Soviets failed after World War II in their attempts to push forward into the Middle East by force and pressure. Their choice of means, moreover, had deliberately ruled out re-creation of the system of pacts and alliances which had once "neutralized" the border area in some degree and kept it free of potentially hostile bases. Now, though their own position in the Balkans was stronger, they had provoked the extension of Western military power and commitments right up to the frontiers of the Soviet Union through the American programs of military aid to Greece, Turkey and Iran and the adherence of Greece and Turkey to NATO.[20]

Despite the renunciation of "imperialist" aims and privileges, Soviet policy continued many of the traditional conceptions of Russian strategic interest held by the Tsarist regime, such as control of the Black Sea, egress for Russian naval power through the Straits, and spheres of influence in the Balkans and towards the Persian gulf. Soviet policy was dynamic and actively expansionist, however, in the sense of moving in with armed forces or taking an active hand in revolutions, only in extraordinary times – times of flux and general collapse, of war or the aftermath of war. Even then, Moscow's hand has often been stayed, and forces have been withdrawn from territory already taken over, when sufficient pressure was applied by other powers or when the immediate strategic or other gains were outweighed by larger objectives. The Soviet strategy of expansion in the Middle East was not to challenge directly the position of rival powers but rather to take advantage of their temporary weakness, lack of concern or disunity, and to avoid the risk of major armed conflict.[21]

Another source of disunity in the Atlantic Alliance was competition between the USA and Europe (i.e. Great Britain and France) in the Third World. Historically, the USA had shown little interest in the Middle East, but American offi-

---

[19]The Soviet government had indicated its desire to receive trusteeship for certain territories at the San Francisco Conference (1945), and a Soviet proposal for a specific trusteeship over Tripolitania was submitted at the Potsdam Conference (1945). In: KHADDURI, Majid: Modern Libya. A Study in Political Development. Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1963, p. 113.
[20]KIRK, George: The Middle East 1945-1950. London, Oxford University Press, 1954, p. 17.
[21]CAMPBELL, op. cit., p. 26.

cials were alarmed that British weakness could encourage Soviet expansion. Soviet diplomatic demands on Turkey to negotiate a defence treaty and the maintenance of Soviet troops in northern Iran were viewed with grave suspicion in the West.[22] On the other hand, the post-war years witnessed some notable examples, where the decline of British influence dramatically enhanced American opportunities in the oil industry. Moreover, the US government was quite willing to assist in the process, so that a good deal of the success of American businessmen was due to a timely deployment of diplomatic power and sometimes covert aid to friendly local leaders.[23]

It would be inaccurate, however, to see the history of the Third World as entirely the story of contending external forces. Third World leaders acted in response to internal pressure as well. The economically under-developed countries were hardly inert or passive, and rivalries among the imperial powers sometimes enabled local leaders to play one outsider against another. The outcome, however, was not necessarily greater autonomy for the Third World, but often only the replacement of one source of foreign hegemony by another.[24]

In the Arab Near East Bevin's policy called for a military confederacy under British leadership and a programme of economic development. The two were closely linked: the confederacy would provide protection (mainly against the alleged Soviet threat) and the development would benefit the people of the area. Bevin was insistent that he was proposing a partnership of mutual benefit between Britain and the people, not the old élite of the Near East, whom he dismissed as pashas. His hope was to reach agreement with moderate nationalists, isolating extremists of all kinds. He still considered the Middle Eastern countries as British dependencies and disregarded the true aspirations of its peoples.[25] To Britain the benefits would be first, the protection of her interests in the Near East, most notably oil; and second, the provision of a Near Eastern shield for the protection of Africa, the continent whose economic development was to be to Britain in the future the source of wealth that India had in the past.[26] Thus it was that the importance of the Near and Middle East to Britain was held to be unaffected by her prospective departure from India.

The key to the success of Bevin's policy was agreement with Egypt. By virtue of the leading role Egypt had assumed in the Arab League she was now preeminent in the Arab world. More especially, Egypt had the Suez Canal and the Canal Zone base, 500 square miles of military installations (including ten airfields) valued at £ 300 million.[27] Although British policy was conceived in re-

---

[22]ACHESON, Dean: Present at the Creation. London, Hamish Hamilton, 1970, p. 197.

[23]VADNEY, T.E.: The World Since 1945. London, The Penguin Books, 1992, p. 208.

[24]VADNEY, op. cit., p. 208.

[25]HOURANI, Albert: A History of the Arab Peoples. London, Faber and Faber, 1991, p. 357.

[26]YAPP, op. cit., p. 397.

[27]YAPP, op. cit., p. 397.

gional terms, which derived from the regional institutions established during the war, Bevin was persuaded to try to bring his regional military and economic organizations into being through bilateral negotiations, beginning with Egypt. In December 1945 Egypt called for the renegotiation of the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian treaty.[28] In reply Britain offered only minor concessions; the chiefs of staff insisted that continued British occupation of the Canal Zone was essential to the defence of the Near East. Riots in Egypt, however, convinced the British negotiators that Britain must evacuate Egypt and on 6 May 1946 the cabinet agreed. Subsequently, negotiations focused on the problems of the maintenance of the canal base and the conditions under which British forces could return in case of war. In October 1946 the negotiations (Ernest Bevin-Ismāʿīl Ṣidqī) collapsed not over Egypt alone but over the question of Egyptian sovereignty over the Sudan.[29]

The failure to reach agreement with Egypt was disastrous for the success of Bevin's plan for the Near East. Britain had made the concession because she believed that ultimately the base was useless if Egypt was hostile and therefore that the defence of the region must depend on agreement and Egyptian goodwill. But neither had been secured in 1946 and the effects of both the attempt and the failure had a powerful influence on negotiations in other parts of the region. Other states also demanded treaty revision and found it difficult to accept anything less than Egypt had been offered.[30]

Britain attempted to reach agreement with Iraq on a new treaty in late 1947. The 1930 treaty had provided for British control of the two bases of Ḥabbānīya and Shuʿayba and for British use of Iraqi facilities in time of war. There were those who argued that Britain could not hope to be allowed to keep the bases and should plan to evacuate them and move to Kuwait and Transjordan, but Bevin decided to try to retain use of the bases. Under the Treaty of Portsmouth[31] it was agreed that Britain should share the bases with Iraq under a similar arrangement to that proposed for Egypt. In January 1948 riots in Baghdad caused the Iraqi government to abandon the new treaty.[32]

The Arab League proved to be no docile instrument or willing partner of British policy. When it became apparent that Britain was not prepared to keep the promises given to the Arabs, issues such as Palestine and military bases, inevitably ranged the strongest forces of Arab nationalism against British inter-

[28]AR-RĀFIʿĪ, ʿAbdurrahmān: Fi aʿqāb aṭ-ṭawra al-miṣrīya. (After the Egyptian Revolution (of 1919). Vol III, Cairo, 1951, p. 179.

[29]BULLARD, Sir Reader: Britain and the Middle East. London, Hutchinson University Library, 1964, p. 146.

[30]YAPP, op. cit., p. 398.

[31]KHADDURI, Majid: Independent Iraq, 1932-1958. London, Oxford University Press, 1960, pp. 262-253.

[32]MARR, Phebe: The Modern History of Iraq. Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, 1985, p. 104.

ests.[33] The Arabs in general have not been worried about the Soviet menace, their thoughts were bent on one of two topics – how to get rid of the British troops that were contrary to their wishes still deployed in many of their countries, and how to reach a just settlement in Palestine. None of them – after so many years of occupation – could credit British reasons for postponing the withdraval of their troops from the region.[34] Egypt was the most restive of the Arab states and was made more so by the British Government's failure to quickly remove its troops out of the Nile Valley and into the Suez Canal zone prescribed in the 1936 treaty.[35]

There was a period, in 1946-1947, when the British made a thorough re-examination of their imperial strategy and when new concepts seemed to be gaining ground. This was caused by two factors, namely, the lessons of the Second World War and the upsurge of nationalism in Egypt and Iraq. The war experience pointed to the great vulnerability of the Suez Canal and the sea lanes in the Mediterranean. It was only with supreme effort and many losses that British naval convoys could reach Alexandria from Gibraltar or Malta. Troops and equipment for the Middle Eastern campaign had to be convoyed around Africa. On the other hand, political ferment in Egypt and Iraq led some strategists to suggest that the preservation of British bases in these countries was not worth the popular hostility they engendered. The British General Staff seems to have given serious consideration to the transfer of British bases and installations to East Africa, where in the comparative security of Kenya, Tanganyika, and Uganda one could establish a powerful military center, not too distant from the areas of potential trouble and free of the political excitement of the Arab countries.[36] This trend of thought found its reflection in Ernest Bevin's willingness to reduce Britain's military privileges when he discussed treaty revision with Egypt and Iraq in the postwar period. By 1948, however, these new concepts were definitely rejected, and Britain reverted to her old policy of maintaining military predominance in the Middle East.[37] This change was due to alleged renewed manifestations of Soviet imperialismus.

By comparison with the situation in Europe, conditions in the Arab East looked comfortable, and this is why, after the Second World War as after the first, Egyptian and other Arab claims to attention were fobbed off until more pressing matters had been dealt with. Prostration might merely have retarded a

---

[33]CAMPBELL, op. cit., p. 14.

[34]HEIKAL, Mohamed H.: Cutting the Lion's Tail. Suez through Egyptian Eyes. London, Andre Deutsch Ltd., 1986, p. 15.

[35]HUREWITZ, J.C.: Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East. A Documentary Record: 1914-1956. Volume II, New York, Princeton, New Jersey, 1956, pp. 203-211.

[36]LENCZOWSKI, op. cit., p. 518.

[37]HOSKINS, Halford L.: The Middle East. Problem Area in World Politics. New York, The Macmillan Company, 1954, p. 260.

new British deal for the Middle East. Another handicap – worry about the peace aims of Soviet Russia – blocked it altogether.[38] In fact, British policy in the Near and Middle East, based as it was on a network of treaty relationships with "independent" Arab states, in harmony with each other and with Great Britain, would have made these states satellites of Great Britain. This policy had already collapsed under the weight of adverse opinion in the Arab world before the Palestine war gave it its *coup de grâce*.[39]

Yet the Middle East still had a large place in British calculations. Some positions could be given up if that made it easier to hold on to others, especially if American power could fill the critical vacuums with no loss of overall Western strength in the area. The British Government still planned on keeping the leadership of a Western effort toward stabilization and, especially after the communist assault on Korea, toward an organized defence. Western strength was to rest partly on the new commitments of American power to Greece and Turkey; partly on the assumed cooperation or at least tolerance of Egypt and other Arab states; and partly on what remained of the old British imperial position: a combination of directly held strong points, special treaty arrangements, and long-established political influence. Britain held Cyprus and Aden as crown colonies. It exercised ultimate authority in a series of protectorates on the southern and eastern rim of the Arabian peninsula. It still held its major base at Suez and its control over the Sudan, though both had been formally challenged by Egypt. It had a special treaty relationship with Iraq, including provision for use of two important military bases, although the failure of the attempt to revise this treaty of alliance in 1948 raised doubts whether it could be extended beyond its termination date of 1957.[40] With Transjordan (later Jordan) Britain had a treaty of alliance, base rights, and a position of primary influence through its special role in the establishment, maintenance and command of Jordan's army, the Arab Legion.

World War II and its aftermath introduced the Soviet Union to political and strategic opportunities that all preceding attempts of the previous two decades had failed to secure. The Soviet Union was basically concerned with two developments; the internal and basically economic reconstruction of its own polity, and the post-war division of the world into spheres of influence where the main Soviet considerations revolved round the consolidation of power within Eastern Europe. Outside this sphere concern with national liberation movements had to be shelved for the time being; outside Eastern Europe, such movements had to be dependent on their own capabilities.[41]

---

[38]MONROE, op. cit., p. 153.

[39]MARLOWE, John: Arab Nationalism and British Imperialism. A Study in Power Politics. London, The Cresset Press, 1961, p. 60.

[40]BATATU, Hanna: The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq. A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Baᶜthists, and Free Officers. Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1978, p. 550.

In the Arab states the Soviet leaders relied more on tactics of propaganda, penetration and diplomatic maneuver, doing everything they could at small cost in this traditionally British sphere of influence to make life more difficult for the British and their Western partners. The Soviet role in the Palestine crisis of 1947-1948 is an example. Despite its anti-Zionist attitude the Soviet Government voted in the United Nations for partition in 1947 and quickly recognized Israel in 1948.[42] In so doing it made sure of the departure of British troops and authority from Palestine and of the perpetuation of a Jewish-Arab conflict which for the indefinite future would keep the Middle East in ferment. As Western policy hardened in Iran and Turkey, the Arab world offered the best opportunities for Moscow to break into the Middle East.

Britain's objective in 1945 had been to defend the Middle East from external aggression and to consolidate its strenth under her own leadership. She tried to achieve these objectives by backing up the Arab League, by supporting the scheme of north-Arabian unity, by keeping her military bases, and by relinguishing her rule in Palestine. But by 1949, that is immediately after the Arab-Israeli war, it became clear that few of these objectives were attained. Thanks to the USA the Arab core of the Middle East found a protective shield in the govenments and armies of Turkey and Greece. But behind this shield there was a picture of shocking disintegration. The Arab League broke down under the impact of the Palestinian war, Arab rivalries, and the Baghdad Pact. Moreover, from its inception it hampered rather than promoted Britain's interests in the area. Egypt and Iraq suffered acute fits of xenophobia, refusing to accept revised treaties with Britain and eventually getting rid of the British bases in their territories. The British-sponsored Greater Syria plan suffered a series of setbacks as the result of Egyptian hostility, dictatorships in Syria, and the general distrust of the Arab masses.[43] King ʿAbdullāh's alliance with Britain became one of the reasons for his isolation, and the traditional British-Hāshimite friendship has undergone a severe strain during the rule of his grandson, Ḥusayn. By the mid-fifties Saudi Arabia, a country formerly friendly to Britain, had definitely joined the anti-British camp, and her new king marked his hostility by quarreling over the eastern borderlands (the oasis of al-Būraymī). Israel, moreover, did not make a secret of her bitterness toward the nation that had started her twenty-five years earlier on the path to statehood.

The conclusion of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war had not led to a settlement of the points at issue. The war was ended with armistice agreements signed at

---

[41]BEHBEHANI, Hashim S.H.: The Soviet Union and Arab Nationalism, 1917-1966. London and New York, KPI, 1986, p. 88.

[42]SACHAR, Howard M.: Dějiny státu Izrael (History of the State of Israel). Prague, Regia, 1998, p. 270.

[43]LOUIS, William Roger: The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945-1951. Arab Nationalism, The United States, and Postwar Imperialism. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988, p. 351.

Rhodes in 1949 and it was intended that the armistice should be followed by a peace agreement negotiated under the auspices of the United Nations.[44] But the UN Conciliation Commission failed to produce a solution and conferences at Lausanne (1949), Geneva (1950) and Paris (1951) achieved no success. The two main points in dispute were the frontiers of Israel; whether they should be those indicated by the UN in 1947, those established by the armistices in 1949 or some compromise between those lines: and the future of the Palestinian refugees; whether they should be allowed to return to their homes, compensated or resettled. To these points of difference were added others arising from continued friction along the armistice lines and the Egyptian refusal to allow Israel to use the Suez Canal.[45] For the Arab states the problem of a settlement was complicated by the question of Arab Palestine, whether an Arab state should be established or whether the annexation of the West Bank to Jordan should be accepted.

Various approaches to a settlement by international action and regional contacts were tried and failed. Agreement between Jordan and Israel was near in 1950 but failed partly because of the reluctance of Israel to recognize Jordanian possession of the West Bank and partly because opposition within Jordan caused king ʿAbdullāh to abandon the project.[46] From 1952 until 1956 there were discussions of a settlement which linked Egypt and Israel and which received British and US support. In 1954-55 an elaborate plan was concocted involving a compromise on frontiers, an Egyptian-Jordanian corridor in the Negev, a free port for Jordan at Haifa, a non-aggression pact, the return of some refugees and the resettlement of others. The plan also failed partly because Israel suspected that she would be called upon to surrender much of the Negev and partly because Egypt seemingly lost interest.[47] Another approach towards agreement was the Johnston plan for the sharing of the Jordan waters. The plan began as a way of settling some 200,000 refugees on irrigated land in the Jordan valley but developed into a detailed scheme for a Jordan Valley Authority involving co-operation between Israel, Syria and Jordan. But in October 1955 the Arab League shelved the plan.[48]

During the same years there was increasing tension along the borders of Israel. On the Syrian frontier there was friction arising from the Israeli efforts to develop Arab and waste land in the demilitarized zones north of lake Tiberias and Syrian hostility to these efforts. There was shelling and counter shelling and

---

[44]WATERBURY, John: The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat. The Political economy of Two Regimes. New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1983, pp. 67-68.

[45]WINT, Guy and CALVOCORESSI, Peter: Middle East Crisis. Penguin Books, 1957, p. 69.

[46]HEIKAL, op. cit., p. 127.

[47]DAYAN, Moshe: Story of my Life. London, Sphere Books Ltd., 1978, p. 246.

[48]Documents on International Affairs, London, Oxford University Press for R.I.I.A., 1956, p. 261.

raids. On the Jordanian frontier there was trouble arising from the resentment felt by refugees at Israeli appropriation of their lands.[49] Guerrillas crossed the frontier and attacked Israeli posts and settlements. Israel retaliated, notably with the raid on the village of Qibya in October 1953 which left 50 dead and the village destroyed. But from 1954 the worst troubles arose on the frontier with Egyptian-controlled Gaza. On the Jordan frontier guerrilla raids had not had official support, although they may have been conducted with the connivance of officials. On the Gaza frontier from 1954, however, they were directed by Egypt and threatened the development of the Negev. On 28 February 1955 Israel launched a massive reprisal raid on Gaza in which 32 Egyptian soldiers were killed and on 31 august 1955 a further raid on Khān Jūnis which killed 36 Egyptians.[50] In general Israel gave more than she received. During the period 1954-56 Israel suffered rather more than 200 casualties a year from guerrilla activities while Arab casualties were more than twice as many.

An important element in the proposed new Near Eastern system was a satisfactory settlement of the Palestine problem. The problem of Palestine was political rather than strategic. The chiefs of staff claimed Palestine was of considerable strategic value as a shield to Egypt an even, in 1946-47, as a partial substitute for it, and looked to a treaty with an eventual Palestinian government to safeguard British bases in Palestine.[51] But to the chiefs of staff every place was valuable and they certainly never thought that Palestine could be a full substitute for Egypt. Securing Britain's strategic position in Palestine was of less moment than finding a solution which would not unduly antagonize other Arab states and so make the execution of of Bevin's Near Eastern plans more difficult, and which would also win US acquiescence. In 1945-46 Bevin tried to find a solution which the US would support and failed. He also failed to find a solution acceptable to the Jews and Arabs. Attlee explained it saying that: "There's no Arab vote in America but there's a very heavy Jewish vote and the Americans are always having elections."[52] By September 1947 Palestine was seen to be an economic and strategic liability and Britain's problem one of damage limitation. Therefore Britain decided to give up the mandate and refused to implement the UN recomendation of partition. In this way she vainly hoped that the Palestine denouement would not damage her relations with the Arab states and that she might save something from the wreckage if Jordan took over the territories assigned to the Arab state. It was quite late before she came to believe that other Arab states would fight in Palestine.

Britain's only success was with the tiny state of Transjordan. In March 1946, before the decision was taken to evacuate Egypt, Britain concluded a treaty with

---

[49]MANSFIELD, The Arabs. London, Penguin Books, 1992 (3rd ed.), p. 256.

[50]HOURANI, op. cit., p. 368.

[51]YAPP, op. cit., p. 399.

[52]LA FEBER, Walter: America, Russia and the Cold War. New York, Wiley, 1976, p. 79.

Transjordan which terminated the mandate and secured British military use of Transjordanian bases and facilities.[53] It was a treaty wery much on the 1930s model and it was quickly found unacceptable. In February 1948 it was replaced by a new treaty intended to give the appearance that Transjordan had some control over the British bases at Amman and Mafraq. To deal with Transjordan's external security a Joint Defence Board similar to those proposed for Egypt and Iraq was established.[54] Britain had secured from Jordan what she had failed to obtain from the other states.

At the time the dust had settled in Palestine in 1949 Britain's situation in the Near East still appeared to be strong. Her position in most of Palestine had gone but she still had treaties with Egypt, Iraq and Jordan and British forces and bases in all those countries; and her positions in the Sudan, southwest Arabia and the Gulf were intact. Indeed, when Bevin reviewed British policy in the Near East in July 1949, he was not ready to give up British imperialist schemes and therefore he saw no reason to make any major changes in it. He was not able to accept Arab aspirations to see their countries without British troops and fully independent. He wanted to replace the existing notorious bilateral agreements with the Middle Eastern countries by creating a regional security system which would enable Britain to continue in keeping the Arabs in unequal position.[55] He now believed that the United States should also be brought into the system and Britain, with United States' help, should preserve with the plan of regional economic development that had to secure the continuing of exploitation of the Middle Eastern countries.

In fact Britain's position had been seriously weakened by the failure to achieve a revised treaty arrangement in 1946-48. The old treaties had been undermined by the proposal to revise them and in 1951 Egypt denounced the 1936 treaty.[56] So the British position in all her bases had been weakened. Whatever was said in future years there was no real question of going back on the concessions made to Egypt in 1946; any future settlement would have to start from that point and the eventual agreement reached in 1954-55 for the evacuation of the Suez base did follow the 1946 lines. And in other bases the British position rested mainly on consent and the bases could hardly be held when consent was withdrawn or used if the purpose was unacceptable to the state concerned. In the 1930s Britain had successfully moved from a position where her influence was guaranteed by control, to one where her interests were secured by treaty; in the late 1940s she tried to move to a situation in which her influence rested on

---

[53]YAPP, op. cit., p. 399.

[54]LENCZOWSKI, op. cit., p. 376.

[55]KIMCHE, Jon: Seven Fallen Pillars. The Middle East, 1945-1952. London, Secker and Warburg, 1953, p. 313.

[56]AR-RĀFIʿĪ, ʿAbdurraḥmān: Muqaddimāt ṯawrat 23 yūliyū 1952. (Prologue to the 23 July revolution). Cairo, 1964, p. 17.

Arab goodwill and she failed.[57] In the 1950s she harvested the consequences of her unrealistic policy towards the Near and Middle East.

The mid-1950's witnessed a further evolution in British policy. Its principal feature was Britain's withdrawal from Suez and the Sudan and the shifting of emphasis to Iraq and the Persian Gulf. The transfer of her military base from the Canal Zone to Cyprus marked the virtual end of Britain's predominant position on the mainland southeast of the Mediterranean. Britain's role in shaping the Baghdad Pact as well as her renewed interest in the Persian Gulf, whose oil riches brought it again into a world prominence somewhat reminiscent of the situation in the beginning of the century. By this policy Britain seemed to divide the Middle East into western and eastern parts, with Jordan sitting astride the dividing line and gradually losing her character as a firm British stronghold.[58]

After the world political situation became more or less defined between the two major powers, the United States and the USSR, national liberation movements took two forms. The first was that of people's armed struggles, the most important examples of which were the Chinese and Vietnamese. In both the Soviet Union played a leading part in their support. The second form crystallized round the invited support of the Soviet Union which was characterized by an upheaval of national sentiments. Thus the World War granted the Soviet Union political and military opportunities to enter the world political scene with the widest available means. The bi-polar system of world politics dictated the political reality of two choices available to former colonies, socialism and imperialism.[59] These former colonies, moreover, had two objectives which needed to be carried out: the first task was to combat "imperialism" and terminate its existence in the colonies, the second was confined to local revolutionary agrarian changes. On the first point, the end of the 1940s witnessed new nationalist sentiments in Egypt, Iran and North Africa; in each the upsurge was directed against the British and the French.

When the State of Israel had come into being, Soviet attitude was basically favourable to Israel. When war broke out in May 1948, Pravda argued that "with all its sympathy for the national liberation of the Arab Peoples, the Soviet public cannot but condemn the aggression of the Arab States against the right of the Jewish people to create their own state in accordance with the decision of the UN General Assembly".[60] Once the Soviet Union had entered the Arab world through Israel, fears began to grow in the West, particularly in the USA and Britain, that communism was penetrating the whole of the Middle East. On the other hand, the theme of Anglo-American rivalry in the Middle East was expounded in the USSR. The area, rich in oil and natural resources, was essential

---

[57]YAPP, op. cit., p. 400.

[58]LENCZOWSKI, op. cit., p. 519.

[59]BEHBEHANI, op. cit., p. 88.

[60]The New York Times, 26 June 1948. Quoted in: BEHBEHANI, op. cit., p. 93.

to the designs of the Western Powers. The USSR criticized the neocolonial policies of the USA and Britain and claimed that while the Arab states were at a stage of ridding themselves of Western influence, the objective of Western powers was to "enslave" the Arab world by means of a political approach and by drawing these countries into various military pacts that one way or another were connected with the NATO alliance.[61]

The action of Soviet diplomatic missions was well coordinated with that of local communist parties. For some time, especially during the World War II, these parties enjoyed immunity from official molestation. In Iran the Tudeh Party grew in numbers and influence and so did the communist parties in Iraq and Egypt. This artificial truce did not last long, however, and in 1947-1949 stern measures were taken against the communists in Iran, Iraq, Egypt, and Syria. Early in 1947 Soviet pressure, through communist guerrillas, had become so dangerous in Greece that the president of the USA found it necessary to proclaim what amounted to a new doctrine in American foreign policy.[62]

The British were often criticized in certain circles of the West for their allegedly reactionary practices and for the backward structure of Middle Eastern society. But whenever they had direct responsibility for the administration of an area, they invariably gave it three things: first, greater internal and external security; second, sound finances, and third, good roads and communications. But it was the growing nationalism of the peoples in the Middle East that upset many British plans and that by 1949 posed the problem of whether or not the basic concepts and methods employed by Britain could stand the test of practice.

Although Soviet schemes against Greece, Turkey, and Iran had suffered setbacks as a result of Western countermeasures, Russia did not relent in her efforts to frustrate their defence plans and to exploit to the full the political difficulties arising between the West and the Arabs on account of the Palestinian question. The year 1955 witnessed a renewed Soviet offensive in the area – this time essentially diplomatic and psychological – aimed at penetrating the Arab East and nullifying Western benefits from the Baghdad Pact.[63] The acute manifestations of anti-Westernism in Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and – to some extent – Saudi Arabia seemed to indicate that Russia had made impressive gains over her Western rivals.

---

[61]Nóta vlády Sovětského svazu vládám Velké Británie, Spojených států, Francie a Turecka k návrhům na zřízení velitelství pro Střední východ. (Note of the Government of the USSR to the Governments of Great Britain, the USA, France and Turkey concerning the Proposals for establishment of Middle East Command). Moskva 28 January 1952. In: Dokumenty k otázce Blízkého a Středního východu. Praha, Ministerstvo zahraničních věcí, 1963, pp. 180–182. LENCZOWSKI, op. cit., p. 528.

[62]The Truman doctrine, 12 March 1947. In: HUREWITZ, op. cit., pp. 273-275.

[63]GOLAN, Galia: Soviet Policies in the Middle East from World War II to Gorbachev. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 47.

This was a sad record, and Britain's press and parliamentary circles did not conceal their disappointment. As early as 1949 a leading British periodical made an appeal for a re-examination of British policy and for a new approach toward the complex problems of the Middle East. Acknowledging Britain's inability to act alone in the defence of the area, it averred that "the physical resources that are required if the popular basis of non-communist governments in the Middle East is to be strenthened can only come, in the main, from the USA.... The new starting point of British interest in the Middle East must be a close Anglo-American understanding. No attempt to achieve such agreement was made in 1945, since understanding with America was not at that time the first objective of British policy in the Middle East. On the contrary there was an undercurrent of feeling in favour of excluding America from an area in which Britain had been dominant for the last eighty years. But the results have hardly been auspicious. The attempt, avoided in 1945, must be made today".[64] What was said in 1949 could certainly be applied, with even greater emphasis, to the situation in the mid-fifties.

In Iran where the British remained the most important outside power the situation deteriorated. In other countries of the Middle East the Americans were offering a "half-and-half" share of profits between themselves and the host governments.[65] In Iran the government did not even have the right to inspect the books of the British concession, by then renamed the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). Oil revenues were paid in pounds sterling, but the amount was fixed. Because oil prices rose about threefold between 1933 and the 1950s, Iranian revenues declined as a percentage of the total earnings. The net profits of the AIOC between 1945 and 1950 were almost three times the royalties paid to Iran. The inflation of the pound also hurt Iran's real income. Further, Iranians were not being trained for managerial or skilled positions in the oil fields.[66]

In the face of the rising anti-British agitation the terms of the 1933 oil agreement had to be changed, and the AIOC acknowleged this. Talks were opened with Teheran in 1947, and while the government concluded a new arrangement, it failed to satisfy the Iranian parliament (majlis). Consequently elections for a new assembly brought a coalition of nationalists to power, and in March 1951 the parliament voted in favour of nationalizing the oil industry. Massive demonstrations indicated widespread support for such action.[67] Then Muḥammad Muṣaddiq became prime minister, against the wishes of the Shah. During this

---

[64]The Economist, London, 16 July 1949. Quoted in: LENCZOWSKI, op. cit., p. 522.

[65]LONGRIGG, Stephen Hemsley: Oil in the Middle East. Its Discovery and Development. London, Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 161.

[66]VADNEY, op. cit., p. 212.

[67]SHWADRAN, Benjamin: The Middle East, Oil and the Great Powers 1959. New York, 1959, p. 107.

period the Tudeh party, declared illegal by a previous right-wing government, was permitted to operate openly. Muṣaddiq looked to the United States for support against Great Britain, but the Americans were suspicious of the prime minister as he was too friendly with the Tudeh, and repeatedly threatened to seek Soviet aid if Washington did not help.

Through the nationalization of the AIOC the British position in the Near and Middle East received one inevitable further blow. Although the British Government held a majority of the shares of the company it did not normally interfere in its ordinary commercial transactions among which were included the arrangements between the company and the Iranian government for the division of profits.[68] But when negotiations on that matter failed and the parliament voted to nationalize the company in March 1951 the government could not be indifferent. Apart from its stake in the company with its refinery at Abadan, the largest in the world, Britain needed Iranian oil. Also British prestige in the region was at stake. Therefore she seriously considered military intervention in 1951, either the occupation of southern Iran or of Abadan alone. In the end she rejected a military solution and adopted a legal and economic approach, hoping in this way to force Iran to accept a compromise. But the proposals, pronounced by the British Foreign Secretary to be "reasonable and fair" were held by Muṣaddiq to be a mere variation of former offers and unacceptable. Expressing common Persian political feeling he said, that "what the AIOC did formerly was sheer looting, not business".[69] When this approach failed she conspired with the United States to help to overthrow the Iranian government in 1953. But the eventual compromise reached over oil in 1954, although financially satisfactory, did not restore the former British position in Iran.

In the Western press Muṣaddiq was more and more portrayed as a wild fanatic and perhaps a communist, when in fact he came from among the wealthy landlord classes and was not interested in radical reform.[70] It thus seemed that real changes were in the offing, a fact which alarmed Britain in particular. The Shah and his prime minister repeatedly came into conflict. Thus, in 1953, when the Americans proposed a coup against Muṣaddiq, the Shah was receptive.[71] British intelligence was the first to suggest the idea, as a way of checking nationalization and protecting the UK stake in Iranian oil. In due course, however, the US Central Intelligence Agency took up the plan, but for very different reasons. Washington saw the struggle between Muṣaddiq and the Shah as an opportunity to undermine the British presence in Iran. The goal was to depose the prime minister and increase the power of the Shah at the expense of the trouble-

---

[68]YAPP, op. cit., p. 400.

[69]PERETZ, Don: The Middle East Today. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963, p. 429.

[70]LONGRIGG, Stephen Hemsley: Iraq 1900 to 1950. London, Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 170.

[71]LENCZOWSKI, op. cit., p. 202.

some parliament. In return, a grateful Shah would grant American companies a share of Iranian production.[72]

Before the coup the US had supported an AIOC-sponsored boycott of Iranian oil on world markets, and the loss of revenue hurt Muṣaddiq's government badly. By late 1952 and early 1953, therefore, the time to strike was opportune, because Iran was in financial distress. This might erode support for the fiery nationalists. Kermit Roosevelt of the CIA went to Iran and set the conspiracy in motion.[73] The plan was for the Shah to dismiss Muṣaddiq as prime minister, and to install General Fazlullah Zahedi, who had collaborated with the Nazis during the Second World War. But Muṣaddiq found out about the plot, with the result that the Shah fled first to Baghdad and then to Rome. Large anti-Shah demonstrations then followed, with the Tudeh in the vanguard, but the CIA was also secretly financing demonstrations against Muṣaddiq's government.[74] The prime minister quickly concluded that he was losing control of events and that further violence would only jeopardize his extremely precarious position. He therefore called out the army, but it was a pro-Shah stronghold. Moreover, calling out the army caused dissension between the prime minister and the Tudeh, and hurt their efforts to resist the CIA-Shah coup. Instead of restoring order, the army moved against the crowds of Tudeh members and other anti-Shah forces. Muṣaddiq was overthrown and jailed.[75] The coup had not gone exactly according to the plan, but the result was the same. It restored the Shah as the centre of power in Iran, and one now linked closely to the Americans who continued to nurture the growth of his power in the coming years. The restoration of the Shah's authority and the subordination of the parliament was the real point of the anti-Muṣaddiq coup.[76] Under Muṣaddiq, Britain's position in Iran, reached an all-time low, and it was only after tremendous exertions, in which other international elements were involved, that Britain was allowed to resume, in part only and under different legal dispensation, her role in the Iranian oil industry.

About a year later, in the summer of 1954, a new oil agreement was concluded. The nationalized Iranian oil company continued in existence, but henceforth it was to produce and market oil through a new international consortium. The old AIOC (renamed British Petroleum or BP) was to handle 40% of the business, while five large American companies each received an 8% share.[77] In other words, whereas the Americans before the crisis did not control the main stake, afterwards they had a share equal to that of the British. Moreover, a secret

---

[72]VADNEY, op. cit., p. 214.

[73]FISHER, Sydney Nettleton and OCHSENWALD, William: The Middle East. A History. Volume II, New York, 1997 (5th ed.), p. 511.

[74]KIMCHE, op. cit., p. 353.

[75]LENCZOWSKI, op. cit., p. 202.

[76]VADNEY, op. cit., p. 214.

[77]LENCZOWSKI, op. cit., p. 203.

accord among consortium members limited Iranian petroleum production, in order to control the Shah's revenues and keep him subservient to Western interests. The thorny oil dispute having been settled, Anglo-Iranian relations improved, and diplomatic relations were resumed in December 1954.[78]

For the Americans, sponsorship of the 1953 coup had paid off handsomely. It brought them a giant step closer to displacing the Great Britain as the dominant neo-colonial power in the country. In the meantime the Shah instituted what became one of the world's most repressive dictatorships, aided and abetted by the CIA. The United States placed access to Iranian oil and the need to keep Iran in the Western Bloc ahead of all other considerations, including fundamental human rights, and the result was to rebound against it in the future. And while the British were grateful for having survived the Muṣaddiq threat, they also knew that once again they had been pushed aside by American power. The blow dealt to British political influence in Iran proved fatal.[79] Clearly the pre-eminence of Britain as a global force was fading. And it was not just the overthrow of Muṣaddiq which showed this. The problem was that continued outside domination only postponed the day when Iran would explode in a fury of anti-Western and anti-American revolution. The Suez crisis of 1956 also served to drive the point home, but not before shattering the unity of the Western bloc.[80]

The decline of British power and influence in the Near East may be explained in various ways: that it was faulty British conception or execution of policy; that it was the competition of the new superpowers; that it was Britain's inability to prevail against the forces of nationalism; that it was a loss of British will. The British used many devices to maintain their imperial position in the Near and Middle East. Many officials and colonial agents, in both London and the Middle East, regarded the inhabitants in a prejudiced way as inferior.[81] In any case, the British by economic, financial, military, and ideological means fully intended to retain their dominant position in the Middle East.

The conception of British policy was criticized on the grounds that the regional approach was fundamentally mistaken because of the differences between the regional powers, that the economic content was beyond British powers, that the purposes were too vague, in particular that the economic development of Africa was a mirage, and, as the prime minister Clement Attlee, argued, that it should have been the UN and not Britain at the centre of the scheme. Attlee also argued that the whole strategic concept of bases was outdated by the atomic bomb. The execution of British policy was also criticized; the negotiators in Egypt were thought to have surrendered too much too quickly and the

---

[78]BULLARD, op. cit., p. 155.

[79]SHARABI, Hisham: Governments and Politics of the Middle East in the Twentieth Century. Princeton, D. Van Nostrand, Inc., 1962, p. 99.

[80]VADNEY, op. cit., p. 215.

[81]FISHER, op. cit., p. 721.

presentation of the Treaty of Portsmouth to have been badly handled.[82] British policy in Palestine suffered from continual divisions between the different departments of government. In the winter of 1947-48, three British departments were shedding responsibility for Palestine – the Colonial Office, the War Office, the Foreign Office – the last wanting to keep up the British position in theArab world.

The USSR and the USA were also blamed but unreasonably; the problem with the USSR was that it did very little in the Arab world and so made it more difficult for Britain to obtain acceptance for her arguments that the USSR constituted a major threat to the region. The main criticizm of the USA was that it declined to support British imperial ambitions and was a commercial competitor, that it favoured small nations and it did not underwrite the British solution in Palestine.[83] But if the USA did little to support Britain it did little to undermine the British position either.

Although the Soviet Union by this time was an "atomic power", defence of the Middle East was thought of in the West largely in the "conventional" terms of the recent war. Great Britain, despite the many blows to its old position of predominance in the Middle East, still held the key positions and facilities on which defence of the region would rest.[84] Above all, it still held at Suez, on the basis of the treaty of 1936, the great base considered indispensable for such defence by both British and American military men. But Egypt was not ready to compromise and the Wafd government unilaterally abrogated the treaty in October 1951.[85]

Nationalist opposition has been the preferred explanation for Britain's failure and not the stubborn idea of upholding the empire. In Egypt prime minister Ismāʿīl Ṣidqī was unable to obtain acceptance of his agreement with Bevin partly because of popular opposition and in Iraq even the pro-British regime was forced to abandon the Treaty of Portsmouth in the face of hostile demonstrations.[86] In Palestine the conflicting claims of Arab and Jewish nationalism made a peaceful solution impossible. When Britain decided against the use of force against Iran in 1951 she did so especially because she thought that its use would offend against the principles of the UN and world opinion, especially that of the USA. The same scruples prevented her acting more resolutely against Zionist terrorism in Palestine. It is reasonable to argue that as nationalism increased the cost of maintaining the British position in the Near East so loss of will reduced the price Britain was willing to pay for it.[87]

---

[82]YAPP, op. cit., p. 401.

[83]MONROE, op. cit., p. 169.

[84]CAMPBELL, op. cit., p. 39.

[85]VATIKIOTIS, P.J.: The History of Egypt. London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson,1985, (3rd ed.), p. 368.

[86]LONGRIGG, op. cit., p. 346.

[87]YAPP, op. cit., p. 402.

In the summer of 1951 the moment seemed opportune, to both Washington and London, for a new approach whereby the Suez base could be "international-ized" within the framework of a regional defence organization. Out of these considerations came the concept of an allied "Middle East Command". But this Western attempt to organize such a defence organization was seen as a means of preserving Western dominance in the area and using the Arab countries as pawns for Western purposes.[88]

The British and the Americans had failed in all their efforts to persuade Egypt to join in some sort of military partnership. Whether described as "mutu-al defence" or "regional defence" it had always come down to the same thing – committing Egypt (and other Arab countries if they followed the Egyptian ex-ample) to an unequal alliance which would certainly perpetuate the stationing of foreign troops on Egyptian soil and very likely involve Egypt in a war with the USSR.[89] The role of Egypt was crucial. Under the leadership of the Egyptian premier Jamāl ʿAbdunnāṣir, the country presented a model of revolutionary na-tionalism. One of his immediate aims was the restoration of full Egyptian sover-eignty over the Suez Canal zone. As he battled against foreign imperialism, Jamāl ʿAbdunnāṣir became a spokesman for Pan-Arab unity and a leading fig-ure in the Third World. Fearing the spread of further unrest in their colonies, Britain and France adopted a hostile attitude towards the Egyptian premier[90] The Eden government soon came to the absurd conclusion that every sign of hostility towards Britain in the Arab world was instigated and arranged by Jamāl ʿAbdunnāṣir. Anthony Eden enraged by the dismissal of General Glubb in Jor-dan openly expressed that he wanted the Egyptian premier destroyed.[91] There can be no doubt that the very special nature of British hatred for Jamāl ʿAbdunnāṣir, which went far beyond the feelings towards rebellious anti-colonial leaders in the British Empire was due to the ingrained British attitude towards the despised Egyptian people. Now there was a simple Egyptian army officer, with no connection with the country's old governing class, not only defying the traditional Western image of his fellow countrymen but challenging the whole concept that the Arab world was a subordinate part of the Western system.[92]

In the postwar period US interest in the Middle East expanded. Oil, Pales-tine, and the Soviet menace provided three avenues of approach. The spectacu-lar development of oil production in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, with American holdings in Bahrein, Iraq, and Egypt, brought home to American leaders the strategic importance of the region. The renewal of strife in Palestine placed be-fore the USA the necessity of defining its position, the necessity being made

[88]SPANIER, op. cit., p. 118.

[89]HEIKAL, op. cit., p. 52.

[90]SMITH, op. cit., p. 72.

[91]NUTTING, Anthony: No End of a Lesson. The Story of Suez. London, Constable, 1967, p. 69.

[92]MANSFIELD, op. cit., pp. 250-251.

more urgent by the transfer of Zionist leadership to American Jewry. And, last but not least, growing Soviet expansionism compelled Washington in 1947 to take a clear stand on its political and military commitments in the northern belt of the Middle East and thus to define a new frontier of American security. The Middle East began to be mentioned with increasing frequency in postwar statements on foreign policy made by the President or the Secretary of State.[93]

While the USA could claim a considerable measure of success in lining up on its side Greece, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan, that is, the countries of the Northern Tier of Middle East defence, it certainly had made a little headway in the Arab world. Here American policy was not free from baffling dilemmas. In the first place there was an incompatibility between the frequent declarations and deeds in favour of Israel, on the one hand, and the necessity of cultivating the good will of the Arabs, on the other. In fact, this incompatibility led to sudden shifts and contradictory moves. The White House, with an eye to internal politics, seemed to ignore the interests of Arab policy, while the Department of State was reputed to favour the Arabs as against Israel. These hesitations and fluctuations did nothing to increase American prestige. Indeed, much of the capital of good will, laboriously accumulated through decades of missionary and educational work, seemed to be wasted. As one observer phrased it: "The United States succeeded in four years to do what it took Britain thirty years, namely to antagonize the Middle East."[94] There was, of course, exaggeration in this remark, but no doubt it reflected the dangers inherent in a policy which refused to follow a consistent line.

By the mid-fifties it was time for the US government and the American public to take stock of their achievements and failures, to reflect, and to adjust their policy both to the needs of the moment and to the realities of the Middle Eastern scene. That area had lost none of its importance in recent years, and it had apparently received high priority in the strategy of Soviet and communist expansion. It was vital for the USA and its partners to defend the Middle East against possible aggression so as to keep it within the limits of the Western world. While it was relatively easy to agree on this objective, the implementation was certain to encounter serious obstacles. To maximize defence possibilities in this area it was necessary to obtain the military as well as the political co-operation of all countries. In the political area, it was imperative to obtain, on the one hand, true co-ordination of Western policies and, on the other, the friendship or, at least the friendly neutrality of the various states. It was in this sector that US policy had suffered its greatest defeats. The Middle East has been swept by a powerful wave of nationalism demanding freedom and equality and backing up these demands by struggle and sacrifice. Neither the French nor the British have been able to maintain control in this part of the world. One by one

---

[93]LENCZOWSKI, op. cit., p. 533.

[94]LENCZOWSKI, op. cit., p. 534.

the Middle Eastern countries have gained statehood and independence, and almost without exception, British and French withdrawals have lacked grace and dignity.

The United States and the Soviet Union replaced Great Britain and France as the new superpowers. As the result of their ideological differences, the international system polarized along East-West lines, with Washington leading the capitalist camp and Moscow the socialist camp. In their search for allies and alliances, the superpowers competed against each other to win the hearts and minds of the newly emancipated states. This rivalry, in turn, provided an opportunity for local states to manipulate the US-Soviet contest in pursuit of their regional agenda. The Middle East was sucked into the arena of superpowers' rivalry. Bipolarity on the international stage became reflected on regional politics.