

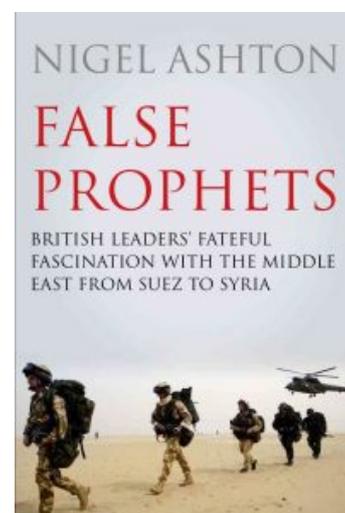
Book Review: False Prophets: British Leaders' Fateful Fascination with the Middle East from Suez to Syria by Nigel Ashton

In False Prophets: British Leaders' Fateful Fascination with the Middle East from Suez to Syria, Nigel Ashton offers a new history of how successive British governments have engaged with the Middle East and North Africa from the Suez Crisis to the Syrian Civil War. Geraint Hughes strongly recommends this comprehensive, authoritative and engaging account to readers interested in the history of British foreign policy and to specialists on the Middle East.

False Prophets: British Leaders' Fateful Fascination with the Middle East from Suez to Syria. Nigel Ashton. Atlantic Books. 2022.

In February 1978 the Undersecretary of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Middle East and North Africa), Michael Weir, vetted the memoirs of Selwyn Lloyd, the Foreign Secretary at the time of the 1956 Suez Crisis. This was a process he described as involving 'painful reading'. Weir was not upset about any breaches of official secrecy, but by the self-delusion Lloyd displayed describing one of the biggest debacles in post-war British foreign policy and his role in it: 'The impression I am left with is of an extended exercise in rationalisation by an old man who has learned nothing and forgotten quite a lot' (Ashton, 14). A reader of Nigel Ashton's new history of successive British governments and their engagement with the wider Middle East will wonder if Weir's verdict applied to more than just Lloyd.

[False Prophets](#) provides a comprehensive and authoritative overview of British foreign policy towards the Middle East and North Africa from the Suez Crisis to the Syrian Civil War, with specific reference to the roles played by successive Conservative and Labour Prime Ministers during this era. This was a period of both successful and failed military interventions, both open and clandestine diplomacy – most notably with fruitless interventions in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process – and covert action. It incorporated the Cold War, the end of empire and Britain's 'East of Suez' withdrawals, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the rise and fall of Muammar Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein in Libya and Iraq respectively, and the more recent 'war on terror' against al-Qaeda and ISIL. It is an impressive achievement to write a one-volume history of this timespan in international history, and also to draw together the threads that shaped (and at times distorted) British policy towards the region as a whole. From Ashton's analysis, the following factors were critical determinants.





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The first factor, not surprisingly, was the Middle East's global economic significance, not least with its oil supplies and also strategic chokepoints such as the Suez Canal, the Bad al Mandab Straits and the Straits of Hormuz. The second relates to regional threats, which at times assumed apocalyptic proportions in Whitehall – hence, for example, the then-Chancellor of the Exchequer Harold Macmillan's remark in early October 1956 that Egypt's '[Gamal Abdel] Nasser may well try to preach Holy War in the Middle East', whipping up 'the mob and the demagogues' in the process (38).

Similarly bleak images of existential threats to Britain and the West emerged with reference to both al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein after 9/11. However, as successive critics of the 'war on terror' would note, there was a stark difference between the mass casualty attacks in New York and Washington DC on 11 September 2001 and the threat levels posed by an Iraq that had never recovered from its catastrophic military defeat ten years earlier.

The third thread concerns the challenges the region's politics posed to the 'special relationship', with the US and UK often finding themselves at odds over their competing policies: most notably with Suez, but also over Oman in the late 1950s, Yemen in the early 1960s and the Arab-Israeli War of October 1973. A fourth – and often overlooked one – involved religion, as illustrated in the cases of two senior Labour politicians: the Foreign Secretary George Brown (1966-68) and the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Prime Minister Gordon Brown (1997-2010). Images of, and visits to, the Holy Land both had a profound effect on these two statesmen and influenced their own attempts at peace-making between Israel and Palestine (105-106; 332-33).

Ashton's study covers this subject authoritatively, and this reviewer expects that readers may well be rushing to read two chapters in particular: those on British Prime Ministers Anthony Eden (leader during the Suez Crisis) and Tony Blair. The latter chapter in particular covers its subject dispassionately but also clinically. While it dispenses with some of the received wisdoms about the Iraq War (notably the common belief that Blair lied to the British public to justify regime change), it is still quietly damning in its analysis of his hubristic policymaking and its consequences (274-331).

However, Ashton's chapters on the less well-known Prime Ministers are also illuminating. *False Prophets* covers forgotten episodes such as James Callaghan's cack-handed efforts to mediate between Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin (190-202), and also Sir Alec Douglas-Home's covert action against the Republican regime in Yemen and its Egyptian backers during his brief term in office (1963-64; pages 82-99). While the reviewer was aware of this aspect of Britain's hidden history, he was taken by Ashton's portrayal of Douglas-Home as a hard-line and ruthless prosecutor of the secret war against Nasser. Douglas-Home's self-deprecating manner and his outward displays of charm have given him the image of a likeable but somewhat hapless forgotten PM, but the image that emerges of him from *False Prophets* is that of a tougher and more uncompromising figure in recent British history.

False Prophet's benefits from Ashton's extensive experience of studying Britain's interactions with the Arab world in the post-war era. Above all, what emerges from it is a *long duree* perspective on the limitations of the UK's abilities to exert influence in the region. Long-term diplomatic engagement can blind Prime Ministers to realities on the ground, hence Margaret Thatcher's shock when King Hussein of Jordan aligned with Iraq during the Gulf Crisis of 1990-91 (231-33). Military interventionism could fail (in Suez in 1956, and catastrophically in Iraq from 2003-11), but it could also deliver short-term strategic effect if time-defined, if it had international backing and if the troops could be redeployed and brought home swiftly afterwards. Covert means of exerting influence could also 'work', whether this involved British support to Sultan Qaboos of Oman in the Dhofar War (147-48) or the clandestine liaison work by the SIS Station Chief in Amman, John Alan 'Bill' Speares, during the 'Black September' crisis in Jordan in September 1970 (151-57). Overall, however, British Prime Ministers have only had fleeting successes, and premiers that followed Eden also experienced career-defining failure from embroilment in Middle Eastern politics.

False Prophets is both an excellent work of scholarship, but also an engaging and well-written book that will hopefully get a wider readership beyond academia, as Ashton has an eye for a character sketch or a telling anecdote to enliven the text. It is strongly recommended for any readers interested in the history of British foreign policy and also for Middle Eastern specialists in general.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics and Political Science.
