

[Nigel J. Ashton](#)

Book review: Three kings: the rise of an American empire in the Middle East after World War II

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In *Three Kings*, Lloyd Gardner offers a clear, coherent and concise account of the development of United States policy in the Middle East in the two decades following the Second World War. Gardner's chronological starting point, and the event which gives rise to the title of the book, is the series of meetings held by President Roosevelt with King Farouk of Egypt, Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, and King Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia aboard the U.S.S Quincy, anchored in the Great Bitter Lake on the Suez Canal, in February 1945. In fact, of these three meetings, it is that with King Ibn Saud which looms by far the largest in Gardner's account. The Roosevelt-Ibn Saud meeting provides the peg on which to hang several of the important sub-themes of the volume, including Anglo-American relations, U.S. engagement with Arab leaders, the conflict between Arab nationalism and Zionism, and the role of U.S. oil interests in determining policy towards the region. So, Gardner records both Prime Minister Winston Churchill's fear that a plot was being laid to undermine British interests in the region and Roosevelt's comment to Ibn Saud that 'the English also work and sacrifice to bring freedom and prosperity to the world, but on the condition that it be brought by them and marked Made in Britain.' (pp. 20-1] He also notes Roosevelt's complete failure to convince Ibn Saud to soften his position regarding the Zionist quest for a homeland in Palestine. Finally, in respect of U.S. economic interests, he comments that 'oil did not come up during their tête-à-tête, but, of course, it was always there, underground if you will, during any conversation about the Middle East.' (p.21)

If the FDR-Ibn Saud meeting provides the chronological starting point for the book and permits the introduction of several of its sub-themes, it is the promulgation of the Truman Doctrine through President Harry S. Truman's pivotal speech to Congress on 12 March 1947 which lends the volume its central unifying theme. The President's request for a \$500 million appropriation to secure the northern flank of the Middle East through support to Greece and Turkey was for Gardner the first key step on the path which led to the institutionalization of a Pax Americana in the region. In Gardner's view, the Truman Doctrine was central in three respects: It 'was the essential rubric under which the United States projected its power globally after World War II', allowing the U.S. to cast its role in the region as part of a global ideological struggle which enabled massive and largely unquestioned military spending, and was thus 'the ideological foundation for the "imperial presidency"'. (p. 3) Second, although the Doctrine focused on the need to fend off the Soviet threat, it was understood by key policy-makers that the real issue was the shoring up of friendly governments in the region. Finally, the Doctrine furthered a process which involved U.S. maneuvers to replace Britain as the leading power in the Middle East. In the sum, then, the Truman Doctrine was a deception designed to cloak the pursuit of particular U.S. economic and political interests under the guise of a global ideological struggle against international communism.

In a slim volume such as this there is clearly insufficient scope for Gardner to cover all of the key developments in the region during the ensuing two decades. Instead, he focuses on a number of pivotal events: the Iranian oil crisis of 1951-3; the Egyptian revolution of 1952 and its aftermath; the Suez Crisis of 1956 and the subsequent promulgation of the

Eisenhower Doctrine in 1957; and policy towards Iraq in the aftermath of the 1958 revolution. While there is some brief discussion of the 1948-9 and 1967 Arab-Israeli wars, these receive considerably less attention than the Iranian oil crisis which is arguably the centerpiece of the book. This leads to one obvious criticism: it is considerably easier to advance an argument about the predominance of economic concerns in framing U.S. strategy in the region and a desire to displace the British if one focuses on the 1951-3 Iranian crisis than if one takes a broader view, in which the U.S. engagement in the Arab-Israeli conflict between 1948 and 1967 looms larger.

In fact, if one picks up each of these themes – the relationship with Britain and the Arab-Israeli conflict – one can make a convincing case to challenge Gardner's argument. In terms of relations with Britain, what seems rather more remarkable is the effort that successive U.S. administrations put into maintaining good relations with London over the region, and to bolstering and preserving, rather than displacing the British role. So, while wartime relations over Saudi Arabia were marked by periodic tensions caused by competing interests, whether over oil or air staging rights, the dominant refrain was one of attempting to find the means to reconcile U.S.-UK tensions. Over Iran, the Truman Administration certainly expressed considerable exasperation with the British approach, but the saga of Mossadegh's nationalization of the assets of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company ended when the U.S. picked up and cooperated in British plans for a covert operation to topple the Iranian Prime Minister in 1953. While the Eisenhower Administration opposed the Anglo-French-Israeli attack on Egypt in 1956, relations with London were mended with remarkable alacrity in the aftermath of the crisis. Moreover, the Eisenhower Doctrine, which is often presented as the central exhibit in the argument regarding the U.S. assumption of a hegemonic role in the region in the aftermath of the Suez crisis was in practice an ineffective, damp squib. As Salim Yaqub has shown in *Containing Arab Nationalism*, the Eisenhower Administration turned to London as early as the summer of 1957 for advice and assistance in confronting the putative threat of a communist takeover in Syria.

In terms of the Gulf which surely should have been the key focus for any economically-driven U.S. attempt to replace the British, the case is even more difficult to sustain. In the aftermath of the Iraqi revolution of July 1958, British attempts to engage the U.S. in joint planning for the defense of Kuwait were rebuffed. The Eisenhower Administration continued to see this as an area of British responsibility and did not want to commit U.S. forces to any contingency planning. In the summer of 1961, when the Iraqi leader Qasim threatened Kuwait in the wake of the termination of the British protectorate, it was Britain alone which committed substantial military forces to a pre-emptive operation to protect the emirate. While U.S. oil interests were clearly at stake, U.S. forces were nowhere to be seen. Moreover, as the decade advanced, and British economic problems became more pressing, the pleas from Washington to maintain the so called 'East of Suez' role became more intense. When the Wilson government announced the British departure from the Gulf by 1971 in the aftermath of the November 1967 devaluation of the Pound Sterling, both President Johnson and Secretary of State Dean Rusk reacted as though they had been deserted by an irreplaceable partner. Johnson wrote to Wilson that 'I cannot conceal from you my deep dismay upon learning this profoundly discouraging news... The structure of

peace-keeping will be shaken to its foundations. Our own capability and political will could be gravely weakened if we have to man the ramparts all alone.’¹ Secretary Rusk’s plea was even more direct and plaintive: ‘be Britain’ he urged British Foreign Secretary George Brown.²

Nor did the U.S. hasten to fill the power vacuum left in the Gulf by the British departure. Under Nixon, a push was made to build up a regional proxy in the shape of the Shah of Iran. But it was only in the wake of the Iranian Revolution and the subsequent Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that the U.S. finally developed its own military strategy for the defense of the Gulf in the shape of the Carter Doctrine. Even then, it would be another decade before the U.S. took on a British-style commitment for the defense of the region in the shape of the military intervention to reverse the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in 1991. Thus, far from striding out on the high road to the displacement of the British and the assertion of U.S. power in the Gulf from 1945 onwards, the U.S. was dragged reluctantly into a direct military commitment to a region which it had striven for decades to avoid.

If U.S. relations with Britain in the Middle East over the decades do not fit an economically-driven interpretation, this observation appears to be even more applicable to U.S. policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict. In a moment of private candor which would no doubt constitute electoral suicide if voiced in public in modern-day America, President Eisenhower commented to his advisers on 23 July 1958 that ‘except for Israel we could form a viable policy in the area.’³ The logic from any interest-driven perspective on U.S. policy in the region was impeccable. The U.S. needed good relations with the Arab oil producing and transit states to secure its oil interests. U.S. support for the state of Israel was sure to engender significant tensions in these relations and threaten U.S. oil interests as it did most strikingly in the aftermath of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. The U.S. commitment to Israel was not founded on any conception of U.S. economic interest. Rather it was driven by a combination of ideological and humanitarian impulses, coupled with domestic political calculations. Under Truman, it promoted incoherence in policy-making, with the State Department advancing the case for protecting U.S. interests in the Arab world only to be rebuffed by a president more attuned to the humanitarian, ideological and domestic political arguments for supporting Zionism advanced by his White House advisers.

During the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, which Gardner discusses on pp.207-8 and 215-20, the Johnson administration abandoned any serious attempt to resolve the crisis through even-handed diplomacy in favor of an approach which, between Mossad Chief Meir Amit’s conversations with DCI Richard Helms and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara on 1 June 1967 and the outbreak of war on 5 June, amounted to a ‘green light’ for the Israeli attack on Egypt. Johnson’s message to Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol on 3 June stating that ‘we

¹ Message, Johnson to Wilson, 11 January 1968, document 289, FRUS, 1964-68, Vol.XII.

² Memorandum of a conversation, 11 January 1968, document 288, FRUS, 1964-68, Vol.XII.

³ Memorandum of a conversation with the President, 23 July 1958, document 30, FRUS, 1958-60, XII.

have completely and fully exchanged views with General Amit', was the final confirmation the Israeli Cabinet needed that the president had received Amit's message about Israeli intentions.⁴ The short-lived attempt to impose an Arab oil boycott in the aftermath of the war was an early warning as to the damage that this perceived U.S. support for the Israel could do to U.S. economic interests.

U.S. attempts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict from 'Plan Alpha' developed in cooperation with the British during 1954-5 to the ill fated (ultimately British sponsored) UN Security Council resolution 242 of 22 November 1967 were driven both by a solicitude for Israel but also, decisively, by the global, ideological Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union which Gardner is inclined to view as a façade. The threat that the Soviets might exploit the close U.S. association with the imperial power, Britain, and the 'Zionist enemy', Israel, to secure much greater influence with the Arab states became actual with the Egyptian 'Czech' arms deal of 1955. Thereafter, the episodic U.S. engagement with the Egyptian leader Nasser was driven by the hope that he might become an 'independent ally', better placed, as Eisenhower put it, to oppose communism in the region than the U.S. itself. While the Arab-Israeli conflict remained unresolved, it tended to drive Arab nationalist regimes of whatever variety, whether Baathist in Iraq and Syria, or 'Nasserist' in the case of Egypt, into the arms of the Soviets.

In the conclusion to the book, Gardner does acknowledge the challenge to his interpretation posed by U.S. policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict: 'the rising American empire in the Middle East was never a smoothly operating set of policies. It was hampered most by the intractable problem of the ongoing Arab-Israeli crisis', he writes. (p. 223) But given the centrality of this problem in U.S. policy towards the region this is a significant difficulty for his interpretation.

In respect of sources, Gardner has done a good job in directing our attention back towards some of the earlier work done on U.S. policy in the region by the likes of Donald Neff (in *Warriors at Suez*) and Kennett Love (in *Suez: the Twice Fought War*). Love's work (and his private papers stored at the Seeley G. Mudd Library, Princeton) are well worth the investment of any researcher's time given the access he had to key players, especially Nasser. But it is disappointing, given the space which Gardner rightly devotes to the British role in the region, that apparently no British archival sources were consulted for the book. In terms of U.S. policy, considerable reliance is placed on the *FRUS* volumes. While these are an indispensable source, there are limitations on the picture they present. It would also have been useful if a bibliography had been appended to the book.

⁴ Letter, Johnson to Eshkol, 3 June 1968, Document 139, FRUS, 1964-68, XIX. The reference to Amit was inserted at the President's personal request before the letter was dispatched (see Harold Saunders' handwritten notes on the draft of the telegram, NSF, Memos to the President, Walt Rostow, Vol.30, LBJ Library). For the debate on the 'green light' see also William Quandt, 'Lyndon Johnson and the June 1967 War: What Color was the Light?', *Middle East Journal* 46:2 (1992).

In terms of understanding the emergence of the U.S. role in the Middle East against the backdrop of the waxing of the Cold War and the waning of British influence, Gardner might have considered the thesis propounded by William Roger Louis and Ronald Robinson in their seminal article 'The Imperialism of Decolonization'. According to Louis and Robinson, 'it ought to be a commonplace that the post-war British Empire was more than British and less than an imperium. As it survived, so it was transformed as part of the Anglo-American coalition... There was no conspiracy to take over the Empire. American influence expanded by imperial default and nationalist invitation.'⁵ For Louis and Robinson, the U.S. effectively bankrolled the British Empire for two decades in the hope that it might continue to act as a bulwark against communism. It was only as this bulwark crumbled that the U.S. was drawn reluctantly further and further into the Middle East.

In considering whether the 'road to Baghdad' began with FDR in 1945 I am reminded of the question of the origins of the English Civil War on which I cut my teeth as a history student. The teleological pull of this decisive event in the mid-seventeenth century led historians to look further and further back in history for its origins. Before we knew it, every minor dispute James I had with parliament over money four decades before the civil war even broke out in the reign of his son, Charles I, became part of the civil war's essential causation. Only if one ignores wrong turns, roads not taken, roads reluctantly taken and detours through the highways and byways can the 'road to Baghdad' begin on the U.S.S Quincy in February 1945.

⁵ Wm. Roger Louis and Ronald Robinson, 'The Imperialism of Decolonization', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 22/3, 1994.