

# US Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East in the 1950s

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SAMUEL BOYD, APR 2 2016

### **To what extent did policies pursued in the 1950's signal the importance of the Middle East to the United States of America?**

I will begin with a brief recognition of the International environment at the start of 1950's. I will take note of Britain's position in particular, as their role is central to US policies pursued in the Middle East in the 1950's. Firstly, I will look at the Iranian coup of 1953, drawing on the Communist motivation and the Anglo-American relationship to demonstrate the extent to which this policy signalled the importance of the Middle East to the US. Next I will bring my reader up to date with events in the region, before taking up the Eisenhower Doctrine and in particular the military intervention in Lebanon. Finally, I will examine Eisenhower's approach in particular, making reference to his personal beliefs and how this affected his reaction to unfolding events and the heightened sense of importance this implies he placed on the Middle East. I will conclude by again noting Eisenhower's particular approach and the significance of this, before reaffirming that policies pursued in the 1950's signalled a great importance of the Middle East to the US.

The NSC-68 and the onset of the Korean War in 1950 defined the global nature of containment policy. While NATO offered a powerful resource in the European theatre, the implications of a global containment policy highlighted the Middle East to the US (Marsh, 2003 pp.34). In 1950, State Department officials McGhee and Nitze argued that the Western orientation of the Middle East must be strengthened to prevent losing the region to Communism (Marsh, 2003 pp.24). Confirming that an air of heightened importance was being expressed towards the region. After all, Middle Eastern oil reserves were vital to West Europe's post-war economic recovery and military rearmament. And for this very reason, it was imperative to deny these oil reserves from Soviet encroachment (Marsh, 2003 pp.25).

Britain, had an established presence in the Middle East wielding considerable influence. The Middle East then offered a perfect opportunity for UK-US cooperation founded on common objectives and mutual dependence (Marsh, 2003 pp.26). In January 1952 following discussions with Churchill, Truman announced a joint statement on the Middle East. 'We have found a complete identity of aims between us in this part of the world' (1952, Joint statement Truman Churchill). By the time Eisenhower assumed the Presidency in January 1953, the Anglo-Iranian oil dispute had been brewing for several years. Opposition to the British position among Iranian Nationalists had been building in momentum since 1949, after the 1948 report published by AIOC showed the Iranian government had received only \$37.8 million in royalties, while the British government had received \$79 million in taxes (Ovendale, 1992 pp.65). The US had been engaged in an extensive diplomatic effort at the request of both parties throughout the dispute. As the Ambassador to Iran; Henderson, reminded Mosaddegh in January 1953 amid further rejection of proposals, 'officials of the US Government had had long and laborious negotiations with British Government; enormous amount of effort had been made by many people in direction (of) settlement' (Foreign Relations, 291. 1953). Yet the strategic and economic significance of Iran meant that as the situation deteriorated, the risk of a 'Communist seizure of power' (Progress report, 1953 NSC 136/1) grew ever heavier on the minds of the administration.

In July 1953, Eisenhower authorized an operation to overthrow Mosaddegh and 'install a pro-western government in Iran' through 'legal or quasi legal means' (Top Secret Policy Draft, July 1953). Official documents show that the desire to 'bring to power a government...which would vigorously prosecute the dangerously strong communist party' (Secret Summary, post-coup) was at the heart of considerations. A security document of the 10<sup>th</sup> September 1953 labelled 'Anti-Tudeh Activities', reports on the progress of exactly that. 'Arrested 412 members...arrested members to

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be banished... Ministers agreed upon ousting Tudeh members from Government Ministries' (Security Information, 1953). Thus the Iranian coup provides a strong example of the importance the US placed on ensuring a Western orientated anti-communist government in Iran. A policy which seemed to pay off 5 years later when the rest of the region was in crisis, albeit not so much 26 years later when the regime fell and the US lost their key strategic stronghold in the region. Furthermore the Iranian coup offers an interesting account of the importance the US attributed to Britain in regards to Middle Eastern affairs in the early 1950s. The US's somewhat reluctant stance to commit to the Middle East in this period was met with significant British intent to retain its commitments in the region, despite a limited capacity to do so without US support. Their economy in particular, would have suffered immensely from the loss of Iranian oil (Marsh, 2003, pp.30). The Iranian coup thus came after much encouragement from the British, and in collaboration with the British, highlighting the willingness of Washington to take a secondary role and avoid formal commitment to the region in this period (Kunz, 2002 pp.81). A US memorandum on Near Eastern Affairs in 1955 reiterated this position. 'The US recognizes Britain's special position in Iraq and Jordan...and Sheikdoms of the Arabian Peninsula...and continues to support and coordinate our operations with them' (1955, Near East Development). In effect, although the US undoubtedly recognized the importance of the Middle East, they strove to minimise commitment to the region alluding to an air of caution within considerations. The Iranian coup perhaps illustrates this in itself, a low cost, minimal commitment covert operation.

The 1956 'Suez Crisis' however dealt a severe blow to the prestige and influence of Britain and France in the region, leaving an emboldened Nasser who (it was thought) with Soviet support would move to fill the power vacuum (Kunz, 2002 pp.81). A frightening prospect in the wake of the 'subjection of Hungary to armed naked force'. Evidence that 'Soviet promises have sunk to a new low...and the Middle East...would today be prized more than ever by International Communism'. Thus came the Eisenhower doctrine, as it quickly became known. The Eisenhower Doctrine's purpose was to authorize the administration to 'Cooperate with any nation in... Middle East in the development of economic strength... military assistance... include... armed forces... to secure and protect territorial integrity and political independence... against overt armed aggression... by International Communism' (Eisenhower Doctrine, to Congress 5<sup>th</sup> July 1957). Congress passed the resolution on the 7<sup>th</sup> March authorizing \$200 million in support of the policy (Hahn, 2006 pp.40). To summarize, the Eisenhower Doctrine represented a recognition of the declining power of the British and French in the region (Hahn, 2006 pp.38). It signalled to a great extent the importance of the Middle East to the US, as it openly accepted a responsibility and commitment towards the protection of interests in the region. In effect, the horror of the Suez-Sinai war had persuaded Eisenhower that the backseat approach had been a poor and unreliable policy (Kunz, 2002 pp.81). Despite this, as I will illustrate, this did not alter his cautionary approach towards the region.

Across 1957 as the governments of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia; the traditional Conservative regimes allied with the West, sought Eisenhower's out stretched hand, tensions in an increasingly isolated Syria grew (Rathmell, 1995 pp.125). On February 1<sup>st</sup> 1958 Syria and Egypt united as the United Arab Republic (U.A.R) under Nasser's leadership. This proved to be only the first event of many in which was to become a turbulent year of Middle Eastern affairs in relation to the US's position. This was particularly significant however as since the debacle in 1956, Nasser had become the undisputed champion of Arab nationalism and resistance. And now he alone controlled the Suez Canal and the oil pipelines of the IPC that ran through Syria from Iraq (Kunz, 2002 pp.92). Prime Minister Macmillan in a letter to Eisenhower on 14<sup>th</sup> July amid the growing crisis in the region, stated that as a consequence of intervention, 'all the pipelines through Syria will be cut' (Foreign Relations 132. 1958). Thus demonstrating a genuine concern for the power Nasser had attained in a region so vitally important.

The months following the creation of the U.A.R saw an already unstable Lebanon become increasingly unstable and by the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 1958, a Special National Intelligence Estimate stated that 'the position of President Chamoun has substantially deteriorated...and Lebanon is in a state of civil war' (Foreign Relations, 77. 1958). On the 17<sup>th</sup> of June, Chamoun made a formal request for 'friendly military intervention' (Foreign Relations, 88. 1958). Initially Eisenhower stalled, cautious to commit to an operation he felt might inflame Arab nationalism and harm overall US objectives in the region. Learning of the Iraqi coup on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July however, it became a matter of 'whether we go in or not the result will be very bad within the Middle Eastern area' (Foreign Affairs, 127. 1958). In the event, a contingent landed in Beirut with orders to occupy key strategic sites, the situation stabilized and the force was withdrawn by October (Hahn, 2006 pp.45). This is a clear demonstration of the great importance the US placed in maintaining a Western

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status quo in Lebanon amid the crisis spreading across the Middle East. It is also a valuable insight in to the importance of which the Eisenhower administration, in particular, placed on applying a cautionary and sensitive approach to the region. The caution applied to Lebanon which resulted in a swift and successful intervention, convinced Nasser the US had no intention to dethrone him. This led to an increasing détente between Nasser's government and the Eisenhower administration (Kunz, 2002 pp.99). This must have been a welcomed response to his policy considering Eisenhower had once stated, 'the basic reason for our Mid-East troubles is Nasser's capture of Arab loyalty and enthusiasm throughout the region' (Kunz, 2002 pp.96).

On this note one may look to Eisenhower's approach to Israel. He acknowledged the backwards stance of supporting Israel while seeking to court Arab nations and sought to limit involvement. He went as far to say if it were him in office when Israel declared their independence, he may not have been so hasty to recognize them (Kunz, 2002 pp.94). This awareness of the importance of Middle Eastern public opinion to the success of US policies in the region, was typified on a number of occasions. The condemnation of Suez-Sinai crisis, the reaction to the Iraqi coup; whereby despite the economic risks and British encouragement, Eisenhower opted against any form of intervention. And to his delight, the new regime promised to honour all of IPC's existing contracts (Kunz, 2002 pp.96). A personal letter written by Eisenhower characterizes his position on their problem in the region. 'Our own history as well as our sense of justice impel us to support peoples to achieve their own legitimate nationalistic aspirations. I think we have failed to make this clearly apparent to our Arab friends (Personal, July 31 1958). 'An adjustment with nationalist forces in the Middle East' was in order 'before it was too late' (NSC, July 24 1958). By the end of the 1950's the Eisenhower administration sought to accommodate Arab-nationalism in recognition of the importance of the region to the US. To his credit, Eisenhower demonstrated a manner of caution and sensitivity when applying policies to the region, sadly a manner to which Eisenhower's successors did not (Yaqub, 2004 pp.588).

In conclusion, policies pursued in the 1950's provide evidence to demonstrate the great importance the US placed on the Middle East in this period. The Iranian coup shows while seeking to avoid formal commitment to the region, the US in partnership with the UK overthrew a democratically elected Prime Minister. Thus demonstrating the huge importance the US placed on a Western orientated Iran. As the decade wore on however and the UK's power wavered, the Eisenhower Doctrine signalled a formal responsibility for the protection of interests in the Middle East. This heightening the sense of the importance Washington placed on the region, although it was applied with the utmost care. The intervention in Lebanon was characteristically cautious of Eisenhower's approach, something that may be similarly noted with the Iranian coup. Eisenhower showed great caution in his application of policy, displaying a level of understanding that only the greatest feeling of importance towards the region could explain.

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Date Written: December 2015*