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PAPER

The Roots of Realism and Idealism: US Engagement with the Middle East, 1918–1939

Richard W. Murphy | Jan 2015

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Abstract

The United States has often been accused of hypocrisy as it has struggled, as do all nations, with the challenge of balancing its values with its foreign policy interests. However, this accusation was rarely leveled in the Middle East during the years between the Versailles Treaty and the outbreak of World War II. Most in the region realized that U.S. interests in their area were limited, and generally viewed Washington's influence as benevolent.

During the interwar period, the U.S. rarely involved itself in the world beyond the western hemisphere. Washington generally deferred to British and French decision making in Iraq, the Levant and Palestine, operating under the mandatory authority awarded them by the League of Nations, and to the British as the dominant foreign power in Egypt.

In his 14 Points speech of 1918, President Woodrow Wilson called for territories freed from the Ottoman Empire to have "an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development." Wilson's position was contradicted by the policies of his wartime allies, Britain and France, and unsupported at home where isolationist sentiment prevailed.

During the 1930s, Washington did support the efforts of American oil companies to gain access to fields in the eastern Arab world that Britain had sought to monopolize. Otherwise Americans were preoccupied with the Great Depression at home and with President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs to revitalize the U.S. economy.

U.S. public opinion was concerned about the rise of communism and fascism, although most Americans were wary of getting embroiled in the growing European crisis. Meanwhile, many in the American Jewish community were suspicious of the Zionist movement to establish a Jewish state in the Middle East. The ranks of the Federal Government concerned with the Middle East included anti-Semites who opposed special arrangements to rescue European Jewry in the immediate pre-WWII period. However, the Holocaust swiftly transformed official and public attitudes toward the Jewish state.

President Roosevelt's meeting with Saudi King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud in 1945 introduced a new American focus on the Middle East and U.S. policy developed in sometimes

surprising ways. Flushed with its wartime victory and confident of its conflict solving abilities, America became more active in the Middle East. President Harry Truman overrode the objections of some of his closest advisors when he insisted that the U.S. take the lead in recognizing the newly independent state of Israel. President Dwight Eisenhower pushed Britain, France and Israel out of Suez in 1956.

After the Six Day War in 1967, Washington assumed leadership in the Arab-Israeli peace process and resisted European and UN efforts to play independent roles. With all this came a growing difficulty in reconciling American interests and its values, a development which Cold War competition with the Soviet Union both stimulated and constrained.

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After Versailles

When the interwar period began, the United States government was little engaged in the Arab World as reflected in the small number of its diplomatic staffing analyzing the area's development. In 1909, the territory overseen by the State Department's "Division of Near Eastern Affairs" (NEA) was vast and included Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy, Russia, Greece, Turkey (i.e. the Ottoman Empire), Persia, Egypt and the Balkan countries. By 1921, the Balkans were the only European territory remaining in the Division which continued to follow developments in Turkey, the former Ottoman territories in the Arab World, Persia, Egypt and African territories including Abyssinia and the German and Italian colonies. Throughout the period, NEA was also responsible for African territories beyond Egypt, including Abyssinia and the German and Italian colonies.²

Washington supported free trade and pushed Great Britain to allow American oil companies into the Arab world, which Britain had planned to restrict to its own companies. Otherwise, the United States government did not see major American political or economic interests in the area. During the interwar period it continued to fence off Latin America and the Caribbean under the century-old Monroe Doctrine, whose definition by then had expanded to justify American hegemony throughout the Western Hemisphere.³ There was no American commercial counterpart to the United Fruit Company in the Middle East whose fortunes in the Caribbean and Latin America were of such keen concern to Washington that it remained ready to commit military force, if needed, in the company's support.

American Cultural Ties

Starting in the early 19th century, a number of Biblically-inspired American travelers published accounts of their pilgrimages to the Holy Land. While noting its continued inspiration for believers and its elements of exoticism, most agreed with Mark Twain who wrote that "Palestine is desolate and unlovely Palestine is no more of this

2 Office of the State Department Historian, *The Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA)*, 1988.

3 Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 36.

workaday world. It is a hopeless, dreary, heart-broken land."⁴ Meanwhile, Middle Easterners tended to view America as a place to better their fortunes. For some in the Levant, emigration to the United States offered a refuge from the political pressures of the Ottoman Empire, giving them the chance to make a fresh start.

American missionary and educational initiatives have a long history in the Arab World. Before the First World War, there was only one institution of higher learning of American origin in the region: the American University of Beirut (AUB), then known as the Syrian Protestant College, which had been founded in 1866. In his 1939 book *The Arab Awakening*, Lebanese historian George Antonius credited AUB with having had a greater influence than any other institution on the Arab revival in its early stage "through diffusion of knowledge, of the impetus it gave to literature and science and of the achievements of its graduates..."⁵

The American University in Cairo (AUC) was established in 1919. During the interwar period, both AUB and AUC received financial support from private American sources beyond their income from tuition. Washington provided no direct financial assistance to them until after the Second World War.⁶ Both AUB and AUC conducted their courses in the English language and established a reputation for high quality, secular education. They were, and remain today, a singular success for the extension of American soft power.

From 1903 to 1920 the Syrian Protestant College was led by an extraordinary personality, Howard Bliss, who played a role at the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919. At the time of the Conference, Bliss was recognized as the most respected and influential single American working in the Middle East. Disturbed by reports of positions advocated at Versailles by Britain and France about their intentions to control the former Ottoman territories and by the Zionists' determination to establish a Jewish national homeland in Palestine, Bliss urged the formation of a commission of enquiry into the wishes of the residents of the Holy Land about their political future.

4 Peter Grose, *Israel in the Mind of America*, 27

5 George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*, 43.

6 In 1951 the State Department extended a minor amount of scholarship assistance to AUB. (1950-51 AUB Annual Report of Dr. Stephen Penrose.) AUC received a major one time financial boost in 1959 when Washington allocated it the "US-owned surplus Egyptian pounds resulting from American wheat sales to Egypt in the 1950's." (AUC website.)

This commission, named after its American leaders Henry C. King and Charles Crane, reported back that those whom they interviewed did not want any mandatory powers ruling over them, with the grace note that if there had to be a mandate they would prefer it be administered by the United States.

The King-Crane report was effectively the Arab nationalist answer to the 1917 Balfour Declaration, authored by British foreign secretary Arthur Balfour, which stated that "His Majesty's Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country."

In any case, the King-Crane commission's report made little impact when it was presented in Paris. British and French goals to achieve mandatory powers over the former Ottoman Empire Arab territories prevailed and President Wilson had already departed for home. The report itself was suppressed by the U.S. State Department for nearly three years.⁷

Wilson's Casual Diplomacy

President Wilson had publicly spoken of an identity of views between the United States and its principal wartime allies. However, as far as the Middle East was concerned, London and Paris had already made clear their own intentions toward much of the eastern Arab World in the postwar era. Their representatives had drawn up these plans in 1916 in the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement which Russia's new Bolshevik authorities, seeking to embarrass London and Paris, happily published in 1918.

Wilson's own views on the Middle East were mixed, even contradictory. Before the war's end and his own travel to the Versailles Conference, Wilson in a major address to a

7 Grose, 89.

joint session of the American Congress in January 1918, had set forth his policies to guide American foreign policy makers in the postwar era.⁸

In the first of his famous 14 Points, Wilson stated that peace should be established on the basis of “[o]pen covenants of peace, openly arrived at, after which there shall be no private international understandings of any kind, but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view.” Wilson contrasted American views with those of “Imperialists”, whom he identified as Germany and its allies.⁹

Point 12 in Wilson’s program set forth U.S. views of the future of the Middle East, stating: “ The Turkish portions of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development and the Dardanelles should be permanently opened as a free passage to the ships and commerce of all nations under international guarantees.” Although the Dardanelles remained open, Wilson’s vision of an “autonomous development” of several of the territories of the former Ottoman Empire, Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), Syria and Palestine was overruled by Britain and France.¹⁰

Wilson’s private actions did not support his public statements. By the time he traveled to Paris, he had already passed word to Balfour that he endorsed the Balfour Declaration. Balfour, in visiting Washington in 1917, had received assurance from Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis that Wilson would fully support a British protectorate in Palestine. This Wilson did almost casually, with consequences for decades to come.

8 Woodrow Wilson, Address to a Joint Session of Congress on the Conditions of Peace, January 8, 1918, The American Presidency Project.

9 “The only secrecy of counsel, the only lack of fearless frankness, the only failure to make definite statement of the objects of the war, lies with Germany and her Allies.”

10 Grose, 64-71. One of the curious footnotes to British diplomacy was that the Foreign Office, prior to issuance of the Balfour Declaration, had thought of advocating an American protectorate over Palestine. This ran totally counter to Wilson's thinking about the post war period.

Washington's Oil Policy

Throughout the inter-war period Washington continued to defer to Great Britain and France as the Mandatory Powers in Iraq, the Levant and Palestine, and to Britain's dominant role in Egypt. However, disputes soon arose over efforts by British and French oil companies to exclude their American competitors from the Middle East. U.S. administrations consistently worked to implement Point 3 in Wilson's 1918 program, which called for the removal of constraints on trade.

The First World War had jolted Britain, France and Germany into awareness of the significance of oil supplies to the successful prosecution of any major conflict. By 1914, they were increasingly dependent on American oil production. U.S. oil companies were producing a surplus over domestic needs and exported a quarter of their production.¹¹ The US government actively helped the war effort by encouraging a better integration of supply through the Inter-Allied Petroleum Conference, whose main players were Standard Oil of New Jersey and the British-Dutch company Royal Dutch Shell.

The Americans were unhappy about the 1920 San Remo agreement between Britain and France, which confined the exploitation and sale of Mesopotamian oil to British and French companies. U.S. Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover pressed the British government to open the field to American competition. Hoover left the detailed negotiations to the American companies. Ultimately, an American consortium was admitted to the Turkish Petroleum Company.¹²

The US Government next intervened to advance U.S. oil interests in the Middle East in 1931, when it helped Standard Oil of Southern California (Socal) to secure a concession in Bahrain. This was the first exclusively American oil concession in the Arab world. Although British authorities had lifted their objection to U.S. participation, London closely monitored Socal's operations to emphasize its policy of guaranteeing primacy for British oil companies.¹³ In Kuwait in 1933, the British Government, after considering protests by Gulf Oil, again decided in favor of admitting the Americans to avoid an "oil war".

11 Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power*, 178.

12 Yergin, 202.

13 Yergin, 283.

In Saudi Arabia, the potential British competitors, the Iraq Petroleum Company backed by Anglo-Persian, decided that they were not interested in spending the money to do business in the Kingdom. This allowed Socal a clear run for the initial concession, which it obtained from the Saudi Government in 1933. This first opening for the American oil industry in Saudi Arabia, which was to have profound consequences for later U.S. involvement in the Arabian Peninsula, was accomplished without U.S. government intervention.

Overall, Washington was notably indifferent to developments in Saudi Arabia during the 1930s. There was no American diplomatic relationship with the Kingdom until 1939 and no resident legation until 1942. In 1941 the American oil companies Socal and Texaco, operating jointly in the kingdom under the name of Casoc, suggested to President Roosevelt that Washington should provide some assistance to a cash-strapped Saudi government under an expanded interpretation of the Lend Lease program.

Roosevelt waved off the idea, instructing his staff to "tell the British that I hope they can take care of the King of Saudi Arabia. This is a little far afield for us."¹⁴ Only two years later, the United States entered World War II. Amid growing concerns about the need for increased and guaranteed supplies of oil for the U.S. military, Roosevelt rapidly reversed his view.

In 1943, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, with Roosevelt's blessing, proposed a buyout of Casoc's holdings in Saudi Arabia along the lines of the British Government's 51% holding in Anglo-Iranian. Ickes, in what became a recurrent theme in American politics, publicly warned that the U.S. was running out of oil and was bound to become a net importer, a shift in position with serious security implications for America. However, the idea that the U.S. government should go into the oil business appalled the companies directly concerned as well as the other major U.S. producers, forcing Ickes to withdraw his proposal at the end of that year.

In 1944 the major U.S. oil producers in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait proposed that Washington support a pipeline carrying Saudi and Kuwaiti oil to the Mediterranean. The proposal collapsed faced with the opposition from independent oil companies and American isolationists. Each of these parties objected to the pipeline for their own reasons, all variants on the theme that the government had no business running an oil

¹⁴ Yergin, 394

company. The Joint Chiefs of Staff had originally deemed the pipeline project “a matter of immediate military necessity” but they saw support for their position fade as the end of the war in Europe approached.¹⁵

At the end of World War II, American oil companies were poised to expand their operations rapidly throughout the world, notably in Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries. The Trans-Arabian pipeline (Tapline) was completed in 1950.

Ideological Conflicts

During the 1930s, mainstream political debate in the United States focused on the Great Depression and President Roosevelt's programs to revitalize the American economy. Americans have always proudly spoken of the “American Way” and have tended to distrust foreign ideologies, although the Socialist Party’s support of the labor movement won it respect from workers and liberal intellectuals.

Experts tracked the rise of international fascism and communism, but their appeal to the American public was limited. There was a mindset, a constant undercurrent of suspicion about “foreigners” and “immigrants” trying to drag the United States into other peoples' affairs. The alleged danger to the American way of life posed by the Anarchists had raised similar uneasiness in the 1920s. “Bolshevik” was a term of condemnation indiscriminately hurled at all such movements. And for most Americans, Zionism was just another distant foreign cause.

Zionism and the American Jewish Community

In his 1983 book *Israel in the Mind of America*, Peter Grose tracks attitudes on the role of the Zionist movement in the creation of Israel within the American Jewish community, the broader American public and the U.S. political leadership. From its earliest days, the Zionist movement had stimulated the energies, both pro and con, of some of the most dynamic personalities of American Jewry. With that said, Zionism was very much a niche cause in the United States during first decades of the 20th century.

¹⁵ Yergin, 398-399.

At the beginning of World War I, the American Jewish population of 2.5 million included no more than 20,000 Zionists.¹⁶

Leaders in America's German-Jewish establishment viewed Zionism as a threat to their goal of assimilating American Jewry into the broader society. Grose vividly describes what amounted to class warfare between the Jews of New York's upper West Side and those of the lower East Side. The lower East Siders were poor and the more recent immigrants to America, and the better-off Jewish establishment saw them as "vaguely unsavory". During the last years of the 19th century, an influx of Russian Jews had led prominent uptown Jewish New Yorkers to appeal to the White House, asking that the President protest Russia's forcing "groups of its people to seek refuge in another country." A few years later, some Jewish establishment leaders, by no means Zionists themselves, supported a solution that echoed the appeal of the Zionists: move "Rumanian" Jews to Palestine. Among other benefits, they argued, this would protect "us here against a class of immigrants we do not want."¹⁷

Zionism didn't just face opposition from upper class American Jews. Jewish Socialists attacked the Zionists as "bourgeois nationalists". The ultra-orthodox organization Agudath Israel, with its goal of strengthening orthodox institutions independent of Zionism, warned that Zionism was "the most formidable enemy that has ever arisen among the Jewish people."¹⁸

Meanwhile, many American Christian leaders argued that the Jews had a right and a destiny to live in Palestine and responded favorably to Zionism's appeal for a national home. A prominent Christian spokesman, William Blackstone, objected to Theodore Herzl's call for a Jewish state because Herzl had not stressed that settlement in Palestine was a sign of God's purpose. (Herzl had seemed indifferent to where the Jewish state would be established; it could be in Palestine, Argentina or elsewhere.)¹⁹

In the interwar years there was more investment and private American presence in Palestine than in any other Middle Eastern country except for the investment by oil

16 Grose, 51.

17 Grose, 33.

18 Grose, 72.

19 Grose, 37.

companies in Saudi Arabia. According to Grose, State Department experts at that time dismissed these statistics as artificial, "because it came from Jews who were only promoting their own narrow and parochial nationalistic aspirations."²⁰

During the 1920s and 1930s, an increased number of European Jews sought new lives in the United States. They faced resistance not only from some Jewish Americans who had arrived before the First World War but among other Americans who were isolationist and those who, concerned by the general economic distress in America, sought to slow down immigration overall. The Washington bureaucracy, including some experts at the State Department who were motivated by anti-Semitism, was unmoved by the gathering pressures on European Jews and prevailed upon President Roosevelt to deny any special status to Jews fleeing Hitler.²¹

All of this changed, and abruptly, with the news of the Holocaust. The Zionist argument that the Jews needed a home of their own quickly gained support among American Jews, even those who were not themselves moved to join the Zionist ranks, and in the broader American society. By the midterm election of 1944, the call for a Jewish commonwealth was featured in the campaigns of both political parties. By 1945 the political aspiration of Zionism had combined with knowledge of the plight of the surviving Jews in Europe to energize a serious lobby.²²

In a 1945 meeting, King Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia told President Roosevelt that he firmly rejected the idea of Jewish immigration to Palestine and any alienation of that territory from its inhabitants' control. Roosevelt had thought there could be a Jewish Palestine and Ibn Saud's presentation only convinced Roosevelt that that would take longer than he had thought. Roosevelt promised the King that he would decide nothing about the fate of Palestine without full consultations with Arabs and Jews and "would do nothing to assist the Jews against the Arabs and would make no move hostile to the Arab people." Three months later Roosevelt died.²³

20 Grose,100

21 Grose, 120-121.

22 Grose, 197

23 Grose 149-154

In 1947, President Harry Truman insisted that the United States be the first to support the partition of Palestine. Some of his most senior advisors, including Secretary of State George Marshall, opposed his position. Truman's position unquestionably was influenced by his judgment of domestic politics but just as certainly by his desire to lead those who were pledged to find a more secure future for Europe's Jews.

When voting time arrived on the 1947 UN General Assembly Resolution 181, the partition of Palestine, sharply conflicting views remained within the Administration on Zionism. Those who supported the resolution on its own merits, or out of guilt for not having done something more to stop the Holocaust, faced opposing arguments that American backing of Partition would threaten the security of America's oil supplies and turn Arabs against the U.S.

In 1917, critics had derided the Zionist movement as "Bolshevist inspired." Grose notes that 30 years later U.S. officials made a similarly subjective judgment as they analyzed the pros and cons of the proposed Jewish state. There was already anticipation of increased U.S.-Soviet competition in the Middle East, which played into Washington's internal debate on Palestine. The lobbying for votes on the Partition resolution was agitated and confused until the last minute when its passage ended the 30-year British mandate and fulfilled Balfour's promise of a Jewish homeland in Palestine recognized by the international community. In the following year there were similar tensions in the debate over whether to recognize the independence of Israel. Ultimately, the United States became the first state to extend *de facto* recognition.

Post War Optimism

Washington emerged from the Second World War confident of its ability to lead in the resolution of global problems. Buoyed by its wartime success in achieving the unconditional surrender of the Nazis and Japanese, the U.S. was ready to lead in planning and funding the reconstruction of Europe. Containment of the Soviet Union became the paramount driving force in American foreign policy for the next four decades. To this end Washington founded the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and actively supported the British-sponsored Baghdad Pact, an alliance between Pakistan, Iraq, Turkey and Iran that was later renamed the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO).

The U.S. also optimistically launched what it saw as a new era of relations between the United States and the Middle East. As Vice President Richard Nixon explained at the

time of the 1956 Suez crisis: "For the first time in history we have shown independence of Anglo-French policies toward Asia and Africa which seemed to us to reflect the colonial tradition."²⁴ However, most Middle Eastern nations did not share America's view that they faced a strategic threat from the Soviet Union and continued to see Washington as a "useful auxiliary" of European imperialism.²⁵

Having enthusiastically embraced the new Israeli state, Washington and American Jewish organizations generously funded its development. The American public was supportive, persuaded of the parallels between America's history and the challenges that Israel encountered in creating its state as well as by the new state's commitment to democracy and the rule of law. For their part, the Arab states bitterly opposed what they saw as yet another example of Western imperialism at work in the Middle East. Support for the Palestinian cause became the common plank in Arab state policies.

After the 1967 war and a brief, unsuccessful effort by United Nations envoy Gunnar Jarring to advance the Arab-Israeli peace process, Washington decided to take the lead, confident that it could persuade the Arab states to accept Israel as a legitimate Middle East nation. Towards that goal it steadily discouraged separate peace initiatives by European leaders and the United Nations. The Israelis welcomed the American approach, as offering Israel the best protection for its own interests, while the frontline Arab states came to criticize the process as "mere process with no peace".

After the wars of 1967 and 1973, America helped rebuild the Israeli military, which it saw as the only way to break the negotiating deadlock between all parties who would be "obliged to face the fundamental geo-political reality of the Middle East that Israel was too strong (or could be made too strong) to be defeated even by all of its neighbors combined..."²⁶ In effect, Washington saw the strengthening of Israel both as the way to counter Soviet pressures in the area and to achieve progress in peace making.

Washington was also convinced that it could resolve conflicts within the Arab world between conservative regimes such as Saudi Arabia, which tended to support like-

24 Kissinger, 546

25 Kissinger, 525.

26 Kissinger, 737.

minded counterparts in Jordan, and newer, more radical powers such as Nasserist Egypt, which asserted the leadership of revolutionary movements across the region. In 1963 President John F. Kennedy sent a special envoy, Ellsworth Bunker, to calm the growing hostility between Saudi Arabia and Egypt stemming from the Egyptian landing of troops in Yemen in support of the Yemeni revolutionary government. Bunker's mission was notably unsuccessful; Nasser was not inclined to listen and the Saudis were angered, believing that the Americans were not honoring Roosevelt's 1945 pledge of support.²⁷

In the postwar era, recurrent fears that American oil fields were running dry led Washington to applaud the efforts of American companies to develop the energy resources of the Middle East. In 1948 in Saudi Arabia, Standard of New Jersey and Socony Vacuum joined Socal and Texaco in the Arabian-American company, ARAMCO. The consortium cultivated close relations with the Saudi leadership and took a leading role in developing the kingdom's Eastern Province. This policy bore fruit when the wave of nationalizations of foreign oil companies in the Arab World started in Libya in 1970. The Saudis organized their takeover of Aramco gradually, and with notable generosity.

The gaps between American ideals and its Middle Eastern policies widened after the Second World War, making it a popular target for critics who accused it of hypocritical behavior. This came as surprise to many Americans who believed deeply in their country's wisdom and benevolence, expressed in the blanket term "American exceptionalism." When President Wilson expressed his vision of the postwar world in the 14 Points speech to Congress and then met with fellow leaders at Versailles, he was seeking to apply American domestic values to the world at large. He displayed a typically American fondness for rhetoric about a new world order. In the Middle East, his ideals were frustrated by Old World national ambitions and later by America's strongly isolationist sentiment in the interwar years.

Roosevelt and Truman used rhetoric similar to Wilson's in expressing their visions of a better world that would follow the Second World War. Soviet expansionism constrained Truman's foreign policy in the Middle East, but his vision of the need for American leadership in the region has remained a constant guideline for American policy makers ever since.

27 Writer's personal involvement during that period as US Embassy political officer in Jeddah.

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