

Castles Made of Sand: A Century of Anglo-American Espionage and Intervention in the Middle East, by Andre Gerolymatos

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Stepping back one hundred years to grasp the factors, issues, and influences that helped shape the modern Middle East today seems worthwhile, even if the examination of cause and effect are murky at best. Here, the author takes great pains to establish the influential role of British intelligence during the period 1897 to 1927 and, subsequently, to examine the parallel efforts by American and British intelligence from the mid-1930s through the 1980s to design an externally imposed cultural identity that would somehow be compliant with long-term Western geopolitical aims. One major irony discussed includes a chronicle of efforts to shape a vast region that reflected a Western vision of pan-Arabism and pan-Islamic temperament that contained naive contradictions about reconciling the two visions. Worse, British leaders and intelligence officials grossly failed to consider the strategic objectives of seminal leaders such as Ibn Saud, as if only their own tactical maneuvers and stratagems mattered. For example, the author bypasses a key issue in much the same way as British intelligence belligerently and pridefully ignored the deep and material differences between patently Ottoman (Turkish) claims for leadership of the Muslim world when contrasted with those of the Sunni Arabs (Ibn Saud) and nascent Arab nationalism nested in today's Saudi Arabia. We are brought thusly to the doorstep of 2010.

Vague double-talking, abject betrayal, and deliberate obfuscation led to the strange events of 1917, wherein the Balfour Declaration committing Britain to the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine ran directly counter to pledges contained in the controversial Sykes-Picot agreement that contained numerous assurances of legitimate Muslim states while steering carefully clear of foundational support for unrestricted Arab nationalism. One ominous but pivotal outcome of this series of events, which carries major influence even

today, is the British and French agenda, at the end of World War I, to carve out and subdivide the eastern Ottoman Empire at the same time as Arab nationalism and militant Islam rose in prominence among Islamic leaders, intellectuals, and their imams. In the mid-1920s, a deeply divided Arab Bureau within the British government, along with its own Cairo Intelligence Department, the War Office, the India Office, the Colonial Office, and the Admiralty could only agree that Britain would be a midwife to a new series of Arab states, and chief among them a “keeper of the holy places” in Mecca and Medina led by Ibn Saud would be best to govern modern-day Saudi Arabia. This included a ridiculous inside battle between the Sharif of Mecca Hussein bin Ali and his manufactured rival Ibn Saud, sharpened by a divided British government, with Ibn Saud ultimately vanquishing Hussein as London stood by quietly launching Transjordan, Iraq, and Syria in an arrogantly colonial manner with no regard for regional impact.

Ultimately, the American level of influence in the region began auspiciously with the SOCAL (Standard Oil of California) agreement to begin oil drilling in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain in the 1933 to 1935 era with the consent of Ibn Saud. Here the vision of untapped oil reserves was rightly assessed as megastrategic by the American businesses involved. As a controversial corollary, the book reveals that in 1949 a coup engineered by the CIA led to the imposition of military rule in Syria, with Lebanon given as a “province” within the new Syrian state. Despite France’s gesture to grant Lebanon independence in 1926, Syria to this day regards Lebanon as a “lost province,” hence its single-minded desire to influence Lebanon’s government and direct its leaders. To add a measure of further intrigue, the book refers to British efforts to promote the Muslim Brotherhood’s influence in Damascus to offset Syria’s tilt toward Marxism and the Soviet orbit. In a competitive tennis match during the mid-1950s between American and British intelligence for pervasive influence in the Middle East, one also finds the story that American leverage was successful in establishing the Trans-Arabian pipeline routing oil from Saudi Arabia to Syria’s port of Tartus. Behind these strange efforts was the unrelenting fear among American and British intelligence that Syria would become a firm Soviet satellite. Capping this bizarre era, evidence emerges in the book that London and Washington in 1958 actually planned to trigger a coup inside Syria led by the Muslim Brotherhood and permitting the United States to invoke the Eisenhower Doctrine to invade Syria and stabilize it.

The book recalls 1966 and Egypt's fateful decision to hang Sayyid Qutb and thereby inadvertently infuse the Muslim Brotherhood with new zeal and fervor for eventual political control of Egypt and dominance over the pan-Islamic mind. Qutb was arguably the father of modern-day militant Islam, with his writings and ideas shaping ideology and religious studies from Morocco to Malaysia. Those who ignore the Brotherhood's zeal for cleansing Islam of all foreign elements and restoring its pristine nature as enacted at the time of the Prophet seem to forget that the unifying strategic goal is the establishment of a theocratic Islamic republic in every single Muslim nation. Nothing less will suffice or satisfy.

To another ironic degree, CIA support for the Brotherhood between 1949 and 1953 bubbled up as a deliberate antidote to the rise of Egyptian nationalism which, given Allen Dulles and John Foster Dulles's aversion to Gamal Abdel Nasser's presumed pro-Soviet posture, led to the bizarre intelligence theory that only a proactive Islam could be the magic bullet to thwart incipient Arab nationalism. Despite the painful episode of British warlike actions against a nascent Israel inside Palestine, the British steadfastly refused to acknowledge their pitiful intelligence failures. In an absurd example of American hubris copying British arrogance, the leading intelligence driver for the first decade after World War II was the ill-fated Anglo-American belief that more Islam was the perfect antidote to rising Arab nationalism. The antics, worldviews, and personalities of strong-willed intelligence types such as Frank Wisner and Kermit Roosevelt resulted not only in dangerously contradictory activities in a nascent CIA but also led indirectly to Nasser's 1952 coup to overthrow King Farouk.

Overall, the book provides many fascinating glimpses into the intelligence activities of Britain, the United States, the Israelis, the Turks, and Iranians during the period from 1952 to 1970, where many secret deals between the parties led to covert operations, including coups and assassinations that were in effect subcontracted to other intelligence services or among them in exchange for fuel and technology. Tragic events in 1982 and 1983 served to summarize the ugly conundrum the American intelligence services faced. At the behest of Saddam Hussein, by assassinating Israel's ambassador to London this would trigger the shifting of Iranian forces away from Iraq's borders and be used recklessly instead in the Beqaa Valley to help fight Israel through Tehran's Hezbollah proxies. In turn, Hezbollah suicide bombers killed 241 marines in Beirut in 1982, and the next year they captured Beirut CIA station chief William Buckley.

This soon ushered in a period best known as the era of “Charlie Wilson’s War,” where U.S. support for the mujahidin in Afghanistan made an illusory period of temporary triumph over the Soviets lead to an era of unmitigated Islamic terrorism against the West for its own sake. To what extent and to what degree our present struggle with terrorism owes its origins to the events covered by this book is a clever puzzle.

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