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# The Origins of the Eisenhower Doctrine

The US, Britain and Nasser's Egypt,  
1953–57

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*To Elsie*

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As customary, I take sole responsibility for the views and any shortcomings of the analysis expressed in the book.

RT

# Introduction

This book explores the relationship between the United States and Egypt from 1953 to 1957. In the 1950s, the Middle East saw a unique interplay among policies, commitments, and conflicts, including American Cold War strategies, local pressures for self-determination, Soviet plans for expansion, the remnants of British colonialism and the apparently intractable Arab–Israeli conflict. All of these elements played a role in the United States’ policy as it sought to secure the support of nationalist forces in the region in its struggle against the Soviet Union.

The American policy toward the Middle East must be viewed in the context of Cold War rivalry, in which the Eisenhower administration sought to incorporate the Arab world in its global alliance network. In pursuit of this aim, the American policy-makers recognized the potency of regional nationalism and the importance of Egypt in determining the direction of Arab politics. Accordingly, the Eisenhower administration sought to guide the Egyptian regime along lines conducive to its Cold War objectives.

However, the focal point of Egypt’s policy was domination of the Middle East through lessening the impact of outside powers. To achieve its aspirations, Cairo sought to exploit the Arab nationalist sentiments that pervaded the region. By the 1950s, Egypt’s historical leadership of the Arab world allowed Gamal Abdul Nasser to effectively claim Arab nationalism and utilize it as an instrument of Egypt’s area hegemony. Thus, while the American policy-makers hoped to employ Egypt’s influence as a barrier to Soviet subversion, Cairo sought to eliminate external influences and mobilize Arab resources behind its drive for regional leadership. The inherent conflict between a super-power focused on curbing Soviet moves and a local regime preoccupied with regional challenges eventually caused a breakdown in US–Egyptian relations.

The other facet of this study is assessment of Anglo-American relations and the role that Britain played in the Eisenhower administration’s conception of Middle East security. Much of the literature on Anglo-American relations in this period is constructed through the prism of the Suez Crisis, and professes an American determination to replace the problematic British establishment. This study suggests that

an administration fixated on the requirements of the Cold War saw much merit in retaining the British presence in the Middle East. The Eisenhower administration hoped to employ both the nationalists' credibility and the residual British influence as a means of advancing its Cold War agenda.

The story of the United States' approach to the Middle East is in need of reinterpretation, as existing studies have failed to address the remaining ambiguities surrounding key issues. The declassification rules greatly hindered the work of previous researchers, as most historical accounts published before the 1990s were based on memoirs, reminiscences, and fragmentary documentary evidence. The few notable books published recently attempt to advance the scholarship in this field. The following studies merit a more detailed analysis. Peter Hahn is in the forefront of this movement with his incisive study, *The United States, Great Britain, and Egypt, 1945–1956*. The strength of Hahn's book is his discussion of the Western powers' approach to the Middle East through the signing of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1954. Regrettably, Hahn does not spend much time on the evolution of the Baghdad Pact, and the Alpha Plan, designed to settle the Arab–Israeli conflict, is given limited attention. Moreover, given the time-frame of his work, Hahn obviously does not provide an in-depth examination of the origins and implications of the Eisenhower Doctrine, a doctrine which became the basis of the United States' participation in the Arab Cold War and, in particular, its attempt to realign Arab politics in favor of the conservative states. Diane Kunz's study, *The Economic Diplomacy of the Suez Crisis*, is a very cogent analysis of the efficacy of economic sanctions and the role that financial considerations played in determining Anglo-American policy during the crucial months of the Suez Crisis. However, her study does not deal systematically with the development of US policy, particularly Eisenhower's view of regional nationalism. Finally, Steven Freiberger's book, *Dawn over Suez: the Rise of American Power in the Middle East, 1953–1957*, is a controversial study that focuses closely on Anglo-American relations. For Freiberger, the United States spent the 1950s plotting to oust Britain from the Middle East. Accordingly, the Suez Crisis is seen as the culmination of America's efforts to supplant Britain as the major outside power. This thesis is not altogether convincing, since Freiberger disregards much evidence suggesting that the United States viewed the British establishment in the Middle East as critical to containment of the Soviet Union.

A number of other studies have illuminated various aspects of the Western approach to the Arab world. W. Scott Lucas's book, *Divided*

*We Stand: Britain, the US and the Suez Crisis* and Keith Kyle's *Suez*, are cogent studies that are indispensable to comprehending Britain's intriguing diplomacy during the Suez War. In the meantime, America's relations with Syria are beginning to command attention. David Lesch's well-researched book, *Syria and the United States: Eisenhower's Cold War in the Middle East* is particularly notable in this regard. Although all of these studies have contributed to our understanding of the development of the Cold War in the Middle East, they have not offered an effective response to the central question of why, despite a relatively sophisticated understanding of the decolonization movement, the Eisenhower administration ultimately failed to develop constructive relations with the nationalist Egyptian regime.

This book utilizes the most recently declassified American and British documents to re-evaluate US policy toward the Nasserist regime. In order to fully comprehend this important period of the Cold War in the Middle East, it starts with the Eisenhower administration's understanding of the new forces of nationalism. Did Eisenhower and Dulles appreciate the nationalists' aspirations and historical struggle? To what extent did the United States attempt to craft a policy that was compatible with Egypt's objectives? Was the conceptual foundation of US policy well thought out and cognizant of postwar shifts in the regional temperament? What was the relationship between the administration's global and regional priorities? Were US tactics suitable for implementation of its strategy?

One of the enduring characteristics of most studies on US relations with the Third World is to assume an instinctive American hostility to post-colonial nationalism. This study departs from this genre and offers a more nuanced interpretation. The problem was not the United States' perception of national liberation movements as inspired by the Kremlin, but its insistence that the new nationalist representatives embrace America's containment dogma. The essence of US difficulty in the Third World was its quest to superimpose its globalist priorities on states with different sets of internal and regional concerns.

This pattern is particularly evident in US–Egyptian relations from 1953 to 1956. The Eisenhower administration recognized the reality of regional nationalism and Egypt's ability to mould Arab public opinion. Accordingly, the US sought to advance the containment doctrine by exerting influence over the nationalist Egyptian regime. This policy entailed offering certain concessions to Egypt and dealing with two issues that preoccupied Cairo: the Anglo-Egyptian disagreement over the Suez base and the Arab–Israeli conflict. The Anglo-Egyptian Treaty

of 1954 was the apex of US–Egyptian relations as the two powers cooperated in reaching an accord that was beneficial to all the parties involved. However, following the agreement, the aims of the two powers diverged. The American policy-makers were ready to resolve the perplexing Arab–Israeli dispute. In the meantime, the departure of British forces from the Suez base triggered a more assertive Egyptian foreign policy that militated against making peace with Israel. Obviously, Nasser’s determination to mobilize the nationalist forces behind Egypt’s quest to free the Middle East from Western manipulation, made him an ill-suited agent for US strategy.

The importance of the early phase of the Eisenhower administration’s approach to Egypt is that it allows us to redefine some of our assumptions. This period reveals that even at a time of intense Cold War rivalry, the American policy was capable of pragmatism and nuanced judgements. In this sense, we notice that the pre-eminent historian of Eisenhower’s presidency, Richard Immerman, was mistaken in his assertion that the administration ‘simply confused nationalism with Communism’.<sup>1</sup> This theme has been similarly accepted by area specialists. William Stivers claims that Eisenhower’s determination to stabilize the Middle East led him to oppose the nationalist forces.<sup>2</sup> Robert Stookey contends that the ‘United States lacked a sufficient appreciation of the differences (in fact, the incompatibility) of Communism with Arab nationalism and neutralism.’ Stookey goes on to stress that the administration acted ‘on the assumption that Nasser’s Egypt was controlled by international communism.’<sup>3</sup> Although in the aftermath of the break with Egypt, the administration did perceive Cairo’s policy of ‘positive neutralism’, as congruent with Soviet interests, the early period of flexibility ought not to be obscured from the historical record. The more comprehensive assessment offered in this book enhances our understanding of the complex nature of the US approach toward the Middle East and the overall relationship between America’s rigid anti-Communist rhetoric and its more subtle geopolitical calculations.

The second important contribution of this study is to explore the critical Omega Plan. By March 1956, the Eisenhower administration’s disenchantment with Nasser led to the launching of the Omega program. This book employs many State Department, National Security, CIA, and Foreign Office documents to fully delineate the plan and its various stages and dimensions. Once Nasser proved obdurate in coming to terms with Israel, the United States and Britain undertook a concerted covert operation to coerce and isolate Egypt. Thus, March 1956

is an important date in the annals of US relations with the Middle East, since the Americans finally abandoned the hope of using Egypt as a vehicle for realizing their Cold War objectives. The Omega initiative was to be gradual – a series of economic and political measures to weaken Cairo's economy and erode its standing in the Arab world. In its final stages, however, the program did stipulate the possibility of Nasser's overthrow along the lines of Operation Ajax which dislodged Iran's Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq from power in 1953. However, it would be too facile to suggest that Omega was merely a program directed against the uncooperative Egyptian regime, since it provided the foundation for marginalization of all radical forces in the Arab world. Operation Straggle directed against Syria and similar operations targeting other leftist forces were undertaken under the auspices of Omega. The Omega program provided a platform for the US attempt to undermine regimes that obstructed its containment vision.

Accordingly, this study departs from the Suez-centered works that dominate the field. The Suez Crisis is often presented as the watershed event that defined America's approach to the postwar Middle East. Given the conception of Omega, Suez must be reduced to its proper dimension: a sideshow that disrupted Eisenhower's policy of covertly undermining Nasser and his radical allies. Throughout the crisis, the administration attempted to use Omega as a means of dissuading Britain from employment of force. By October 1956, both Washington and London agreed that Nasser was hindering the cause of the West, but the question that separated them was how best to deal with the recalcitrant colonel. In this context, the Suez Crisis can be viewed neither as the apogee of US–Egyptian relations nor as a momentous occasion leading to an entirely different American posture in the Middle East.

The next objective of this study is to elevate the significance of the Eisenhower Doctrine. In the historical reconstruction of events, the doctrine has been overshadowed by the Suez Crisis and often relegated to a mere footnote. The Eisenhower Doctrine was in essence the public enunciation of the Omega Plan, in which the Americans would attempt to utilize all the available resources to prevent the ascension of the radical forces in the Middle East. The available record allows us to suggest that the Eisenhower Doctrine signified an important shift in US policy in two respects. First, it would provide the basis for the rehabilitation of Britain and resumption of close Anglo-American cooperation. Accordingly, this study departs from the conventional view, which claims that in the aftermath of the Suez Crisis, the United States

sought to displace the tarnished British establishment. Far from seeking to supplant Britain, Eisenhower hoped to restore British power and employ it against Egypt. The second aspect of the doctrine was its attempt to actively bolster the conservative Arab regimes as the foundation of America's influence in the Middle East. The United States would now be a participant in the Arab Cold War, a development that only exacerbated inter-Arab tensions and further destabilized the region. From this point onward, successive American administrations would display a suspicion of revolutionary Arab states and retain a close alliance with the conservative monarchies. This is indeed the most enduring legacy of the Eisenhower Doctrine. Gone were the initial days of pragmatism as American policy in the Middle East was reduced to a rigid support of regimes that often resisted progressive reforms.

Given the importance of Egypt in US calculations, this book also assesses the role that Cairo played in the Arab arena and the impact of the inter-regional conflicts on US policy. One of the shortcomings of many works of diplomatic history is their propensity to treat the local actors as passive pawns reacting to superpower initiatives. This book utilizes the existing area studies literature to delineate the objectives of Egypt and reveal the dynamism of Arab politics in the 1950s.

In order to grasp the complexity of the postwar Middle East, this study will address the following set of questions. What were the specific facets of Arab nationalism and how successful was Egypt in influencing this movement? What were the aims of the Free Officers and what was their conception of the future of the Middle East? How did Cairo perceive the Cold War struggle and the role of the Arab world in the global arena? What were the primary threats and challenges that the Egyptian regime sought to address? How did the Arab–Israeli conflict and Egyptian–Iraqi rivalry affect Cairo's approach to the United States? Was the incompatibility between American and Egyptian objectives inevitable or could a more creative diplomacy have overcome the differences?

The starting point of the analysis will be an examination of the dimensions of Arab nationalism. During the postwar period the decline of European colonialism led to the emergence of an assertive nationalist movement that sought to mobilize a population sharing common characteristics, such as language and culture, into a powerful political entity capable of resisting foreign domination. The quest to achieve collective liberation led the nationalists to oppose not only great power interference but also the traditionalist regimes that were aligned with

the Western powers. The postwar era saw a substantial nationalist challenge to the political order that originated in the mandatory period.

In the 1950s, Egypt sought to establish its regional leadership by identifying its external policy with the aspirations of the revolutionary forces. Thus, the Nasserist regime embraced non-alignment and led the nationalists' opposition to the conservative monarchial states. Egypt's foreign policy orientation would therefore prove incompatible with the US attempt to incorporate the Arab world into its global alliance network. In essence, the Middle East featured two powers that sought to redirect regional politics, the United States and Egypt. After all the tactical and pragmatic adjustments, these conflicting aspirations eventually surfaced and set the two powers against each other. In the end, the Eisenhower administration's globalist priorities could not be easily reconciled with the direction of Egyptian pan-Arabism.

The next objective of this study is the examination of the impact of Anglo-American relations on the United States' attempt to exert influence over Egypt. The first question that must be addressed is to what extent did the United States seek to pursue an independent policy? Did the administration perceive the existing British presence as a hindrance to its pursuit of progressive allies or as a bulwark of Western resistance to Soviet advances? Did the Eisenhower administration attempt to harmonize Anglo-Egyptian difficulties or did it actively take sides? In what manner did the NATO alliance and the traditional Atlantic ties influence the approach of the US to the Middle East?

The nature of Anglo-American relations has proven a tempting target for those who argue that the United States sought to establish its regional dominance by evicting Britain. As already mentioned, this perspective is most systematically advanced by Steven Freiberger. However, Freiberger is not alone in this view; he is joined by Ayesha Jalal, who has seen in the US pre-Suez policy an attempt to deflate Whitehall's influence. Jalal focuses closely on Eisenhower's Northern Tier defense conception that eventually evolved into the Baghdad Pact. For Jalal, 'the pact was yet another US move to drive them [the British] out of an established sphere of influence'.<sup>4</sup> The problem with this perspective is that it does not correspond to the course of events. Jalal simply fails to account for the fact that after the signing of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1954, the British, and not the Americans, became the most ardent supporters of the pact and its expansion. If the Baghdad Pact was an American device to displace Britain, it seems odd that it would become the centerpiece of Whitehall's regional strategy. Both Freiberger and Jalal are correct in the sense that prior to the Suez

Crisis, Anglo-American relations were not always smooth since the two powers at times diverged on critical issues. Where their thesis goes astray, however, is in their perception that the Eisenhower administration was prone to dispense with the still useful British establishment in the Middle East, and in the process, strain the NATO alliance. The important contribution that Freiberger and Jalal have made is to propound the notion that various pre-Suez initiatives were important in defining Anglo-American relations. Through such an examination, they have compelled us to broaden the canvas and analyze the underlying trends that shaped US–UK relations in the 1950s.

The next theme that looms large in the historiography is the notion that the United States exploited the Suez Crisis to replace Britain as the leading external power in the Middle East. This idea has been particularly advanced by British historians. Donald Cameron Watt has noticed ‘the willingness to use American political superiority in a manner untrammelled and uninhibited by any feeling of respect for, loyalty to, obligation to, and community with, the colonial powers’.<sup>5</sup> Hugh Thomas has pointed to the ‘barely concealed rivalry between Britain and the USA, who, with no traditional interests, thought chiefly of commerce with Arab nationalism with which they believed, owing to their own long-lost colonial past, they could get on terms’.<sup>6</sup> The Suez Crisis was a traumatic experience for Britain, and the subsequent British historical accounts naturally reflect this sense of anguish. The more intriguing aspect of the historiography is how this theme has permeated the work of American historians writing decades after the crisis. Diane Kunz has argued that ‘In the Middle East Britain traditionally had a significant interest as yet unmatched by corresponding American commitment. The Suez crisis indelibly altered the picture.’<sup>7</sup> H.W. Brands has similarly embraced this perception, suggesting that in the aftermath of the Suez débâcle, the Americans perceived that it was time to assume the role of pre-eminent outside power in the Arab world.<sup>8</sup> The problem with such overemphasis on the Suez Crisis is that it neglects the important role that the Eisenhower Doctrine played in America’s attempt to reintegrate Britain back into the regional political order.

The most recently declassified documentary evidence allows us to approach the issue of Anglo-American relations with greater certainty of determining the facts and arriving at a different interpretation. This study advances the notion that the Eisenhower administration at no point sought the removal of the British presence. The Americans appreciated the important role that Britain played in the global containment effort and the necessity of maintaining NATO solidarity. In the Middle

East, an administration fixated on the requirements of the Cold War saw much merit in retaining the British installations. Thus, the United States engaged in the delicate balancing act of sustaining the presence of an imperial power, while seeking to guide nationalist forces that were deeply averse to perpetuating Britain's influence. In order to achieve its objective, the administration hoped to induce Whitehall to undertake the necessary reforms and adjust to the new realities.

This task was not always easy, since the British policy-makers had their own objectives, which at times conflicted with US perceptions. On occasion, Britain would embark on unilateral measures which made the execution of US policy difficult. Although the Suez invasion is the most dramatic example of this tendency, on occasion, the two powers differed on other important issues, such as the scope of the Baghdad Pact. This study argues that despite the fact that Britain at times complicated America's policy, the overall convergence of interests propelled the administration toward retaining its alliance with the United Kingdom. One of the objectives of this work is to remove the focus from the Suez Crisis and suggest that a more relevant indicator of the US approach to Britain is the Eisenhower Doctrine, which reflected the administration's appreciation of the British establishment as an important source of stability in a turbulent Middle East.

The final issue that this study addresses is the role of Israel in the Eisenhower administration's regional conception. Historians tend to see Eisenhower as breaking away from the path of the Truman administration in terms of catering to the Zionist forces. A Republican president who had won a landslide electoral victory was not particularly obligated to the traditionally democratic Jewish vote. Thus, Eisenhower would pursue a more impartial and balanced policy focusing on national interests as opposed to the agenda of a domestic lobbying group. This position has been most effectively articulated by Steven Spiegel who claims that 'Eisenhower was the one president after Israel's establishment who confronted Jerusalem and demanded changes in Israeli policy. In this approach, he pursued the very policy toward Israel long favored by advocates of improved Arab ties.'<sup>9</sup> Isaac Alteras has similarly claimed that the 'US policy of "friendly impartiality" in essence required a certain distance in Israeli relations. The United States did not wish to be seen by Arab states as Israel's ally and protector.'<sup>10</sup> Nadav Safran has also noted that 'a greater American involvement in the heartland of the Middle East in the context of a developing Cold War with the Soviet Union compelled the United States to give more weight to Arab sensitivity and correspondingly limit the extent

of the support it could give Israel'.<sup>11</sup> Once more, the Suez Crisis is unveiled as an indication of Eisenhower's inclination to take punitive action against an ally despite its powerful domestic supporters.

The Eisenhower administration recognized that the Western role in the creation of the Zionist state was a source of much disenchantment in the Middle East. The continued Arab–Israeli conflict destabilized the region and provided the Soviet Union with an invaluable avenue for extension of its influence in the area. Accordingly, the Eisenhower administration ranked resolution of the Arab–Israeli dispute high on its agenda, conceiving the Alpha peace plan as a design to deal with Palestinian refugees and territorial issues. However, Israel's intransigence as well as domestic political factors prevented the administration from devising a peace accord that had any reasonable chance of success. Although the Alpha Plan became the centerpiece of American policy in the Middle East, the administration's inability to coax concessions from Israel doomed the plan to failure. Beyond Alpha, the Eisenhower administration was cognizant of Israeli concerns in formulating a variety of its regional initiatives, ranging from the Baghdad Pact to military and economic assistance programs. In this study, we stress that the Eisenhower administration was susceptible to domestic political calculations and the perception of Israel as a strategic ally that could potentially temper the designs of the radical Arab regimes.

The historical division presented in this book can be justified on a number of grounds. First, one of the purposes of this study is to emphasize the importance of the Eisenhower Doctrine in terms of defining the US approach to the Middle East. The Eisenhower administration came to power determined to influence the nationalist Egyptian regime in directions conducive to the implementation of the containment policy. By 1957, the enunciation of the Eisenhower Doctrine signified America's alignment with the conservative forces and its determination to marginalize the radical regimes. In the period from 1953 to 1957, a series of events such as the Czech arms deal, the Baghdad Pact, the Alpha and Omega plans and the Suez War, contributed to the transformation of America's policy from a pragmatic search for nationalist allies to a reliance on traditionalist regimes.

The second important feature of this time-frame is that it was only after 1953, that the Soviet Union and Nasserist Egypt began to play an active role in the Arab realm. Subsequent to Stalin's death in 1953, the Soviet Union embarked on a more aggressive policy in the Third World and paid closer attention to the national liberation movements. In the meantime, Colonel Gamal Abdul Nasser consolidated his domestic

power-base in 1953, and began to assert a dominant role for Egypt in the Arab state system. The intrusion of the Soviet Union and the polarization of the Middle East along conservative and radical lines confronted the Eisenhower administration with challenges qualitatively different from those confronted by its predecessor. Accordingly, an examination of the precedent established by Eisenhower can assist us in better understanding some of the problems that continue to plague America's policy in the Middle East.

This study will attempt to address all these complicated themes by starting with an analysis of the Cold War and how the requirements of the global confrontation with the Soviet Union defined US policy toward the Middle East. In the first chapter we also examine the rise of Egypt and its quest to establish its area hegemony by influencing the Arab nationalist movement. Under the leadership of Colonel Nasser, Cairo was dedicated to removal of all external powers as a prelude to greater Arab unity under Egyptian auspices. Chapter 2 examines American diplomacy in Anglo-Egyptian negotiations over the fate of the Suez military installations. This proved to be the high point of US-Egyptian relations, since following the signing of the treaty, all relevant powers embarked on differing agendas. In the next two chapters, we will discuss the development of the Alpha Plan and the extraordinary series of events that propelled the United States into a policy of antagonism toward Cairo. Having set the stage, we turn to the Omega program, designed to isolate and reduce Egypt's regional influence. The release of the Omega records allows a greater understanding of the ingredients of this plan and its significance. Subsequently, we will turn to the Suez Crisis. The Suez War has been covered in a great many books, and it is not our intention here to retell the story already familiar to students of the Middle East. The aim of this chapter is to establish the importance of Omega in the administration's planning, since the Americans sought to utilize the lure of Omega to dissuade Britain from precipitate action. In Chapter 7, we turn to the Eisenhower Doctrine and deal with the question of whether this public alignment with the conservative Arab powers was the inevitable culmination of policies that the United States had pursued since 1953. In the concluding chapter, we give an overview of Eisenhower's policy and the underlying continuity of American assumptions.