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The Cold War in the Middle East

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OVERVIEW

This chapter attempts to examine the effects of the Cold War upon the states of the Middle East. Although clearly not so profoundly affected as other parts of the world in terms of loss of life and revolutionary upheaval, it is clear that the lack of democracy and the distorted political development in the Middle East is in great part a consequence of its involvement in the interstices of Soviet and American foreign policy. After a brief discussion of early manifestations of USSR/US rivalry in Greece, Turkey and Iran at the beginning of the Cold War, Iraq is used as a case study of the changing nature of the relations between a Middle Eastern state and both superpowers from the 1940s until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Considerable attention is devoted to the ways in which various Iraqi regimes were able to manipulate the two superpowers throughout the period. A final section attempts to assess the overall effects of the Cold War on the region as a whole.

Introduction

It seems something of a truism, but, apparently, a truism not universally accepted, that the Cold War had deep, lasting and traumatic effects upon the Middle East.

Thus, Halliday considers: 'For all its participation in a global process, and the inflaming of inter-state conflict, the Cold War itself had a limited impact on the Middle East; in many ways, and despite its proximity to the USSR, the Middle East was less affected than other parts of the Third World'. Specifically, there were no significant pro-Soviet revolutionary movements, and the casualties in the Arab-Israeli conflict between 1947 and 1989 (about 150,000 Arabs and 11,800 Israelis), were very much lower than those in wars elsewhere; compare the casualties in Korea (4 million) or Vietnam (2-3 million) (Halliday 1997: 16). However, apart from prolonging the region's *de facto* colonial status, it seems clear that the constant struggle for influence waged by the United States and the Soviet Union effectively polarised and/or anaesthetised political life in most Middle Eastern countries, encouraged the rise of military or military-backed regimes, and generally served to stunt or distort the growth of indigenous political institutions. In addition, the regional clients of the superpowers made generous contributions to the destabilisation of the region by attempting to involve their patrons in the various local conflicts in which they were engaged.

Of course, much the same might be said for many other regions of the non-Western world, and it is undeniable that a number of 'intrinsic' or specific factors, including the presence and development of oil in much of the Middle East, and the perceived need by the rest of the world for unfettered access to it, as well as complex local issues such as the Palestine conflict and the invention and growth of political Islam, all would have had, and of course did have, their separate and cumulative effects on the political and socioeconomic development of the region, Cold War or no Cold War. Thus the end of the Cold War has had virtually no impact on the Arab-Israeli conflict, at least not in the direction of facilitating a solution or settlement, which, it was sometimes alleged, was being prevented by superpower rivalry.

It is also not helpful to exaggerate the extent to which each superpower—especially the United States, whose influence was usually stronger since it had more and often better quality inducements to offer—was able to control the actions, or force the obedience, of its local clients. Thus, both the US and the Soviet Union were unable to prevent Israel and Egypt going to war in 1967 (Tibi 1998: 65); in 1980, Iraq did not inform the Soviet Union of its intention to invade Iran until the invasion had taken place (which resulted in an immediate stoppage of Soviet arms deliveries). As I have already suggested, the amount of manipulation exercised by such individuals as Gamal Abd al-Nasser, Hafiz al-Asad, Saddam Hussein and others should not be underestimated; the phenomenon of the tail wagging the dog is very much in evidence over these decades. It now seems very obvious (as historians can say with hindsight—presumably it was not so clear at the time) that local actors could and frequently did take advantage of superpower rivalry to play the US and the USSR off against each other for their own or their country's benefit. Particularly given this latter consideration, it is important not to subscribe, as many in the region do, to a culture of 'victimhood', the notion that peoples and governments are merely the playthings of immeasurably stronger international forces, a notion which, if accepted, denies any agency to local peoples, governments and states.¹

The Immediate Origins of the Cold War

It is not difficult to see why, or how, almost immediately after the Second World War, the struggle for control or influence over the Middle East became sharply contested between the United States and the Soviet Union. (While the example, and occasionally the influence, of China was certainly important in the Middle East, China's regional role is more significant in terms of the Sino-Soviet conflict than of the wider struggle between 'East' and 'West' being conducted by the Soviet Union and the United States.) Among many important areas of contention, or perhaps more accurately of anxiety, were, first, the desires of the superpowers to gain strategic advantage in the region, second, the fact that the region contained some two thirds of the world's oil reserves in a context where oil was becoming increasingly vital to the economy of the Western world, and third, the fact that, in a novel way which made it quite distinct from previous power struggles, the Cold War represented an *ideological conflict* between two very different political, social and economic systems. As Stalin observed to Tito and Djilas: 'This war [the Second World War] is not as in the past; whoever occupies a territory also imposes on it his own social system ...' (Kuniholm 1980: 117).

In terms of what might be called traditional strategic considerations, the former Soviet Union shared a common frontier with two Middle Eastern states, Turkey and Iran (or three, if Afghanistan is included), and in the case of Iran, a particularly long one. Given that more or less overt hostility between the two powers surfaced soon after, even sometimes before, the end of the Second World War, it did not take long for the Soviet Union to see itself facing actual or potential threats from its southern neighbours, while its southern neighbours were equally quick to see actual or potential threats from the north. At the risk of stating the obvious, an important difference in the situations of the two superpowers before the development of long range or intercontinental ballistic missiles in the 1960s, was that while an invasion of the Soviet Union could be launched, or threatened, from Iran or Turkey, the Soviet Union had no comparable access to the United States from the territory of any of the latter's neighbours. At the same time, while the United States would have to send troops half way across the world to assist its friends and allies in Iran or Turkey, it was rather easier for the Soviet Union to, for example, train and supply Greek guerrillas from Bulgaria and Yugoslavia (see the map in Kuniholm 1980: 403) or to support and or encourage potentially friendly autonomist movements in Iranian Azerbaijan and Kurdistan (Fawcett 1992; Sluglett 1986).

The conflicts in Azerbaijan, Kurdistan and Greece were among the earliest manifestations of Cold War activity in the Middle East, and were the result of the coincidence of a number of different factors. In Greece, for example, to simplify a complex reality, the communists had gained a fair sized following by the mid-1940s as a result of their leadership of the resistance to the German occupation after the Allied evacuation in April 1941. However, they were fiercely opposed to the American

plan of supporting the return of the exiled king, to which, to complicate matters further, the British were equally opposed. By the end of 1944 the Soviet Union was also becoming keenly interested in the situation in the Balkans; Bulgaria and Rumania were occupied by Soviet troops in September and October, at more or less the same moment that the Soviet Union was pressing Tehran for oil concessions in north-western Iran. Between the end of the war in Europe in May 1945 and early 1947 the Greek communists, like the Iranian 'autonomists' a little earlier, sought to capitalise on a combination of their own gathering strength, the Soviet connection and Britain's declared intention to withdraw its occupation forces.

Faced with this situation, of an armed leftist movement with powerful external support, coupled with the imminent prospect of British withdrawal—reflecting Britain's economic prostration after the war rather than a 'positive' political choice—(Louis 1984: 11–15) and with parallel (if not quite so alarming) developments in Turkey, the United States announced the Truman Doctrine, which promised American assistance specifically to both Greece and Turkey, in February/March 1947. Truman's speech has an oddly familiar ring:

One of the primary objectives of the foreign policy of the United States is the creation of conditions in which we and other nations will be able to work out a way of life free from coercion... We shall not realise our objectives, however, unless we are willing to help free peoples to maintain their free institutions and national integrity against *aggressive movements that seek to impose upon them totalitarian regimes* (my italics). This is no more than a frank recognition that totalitarian regimes imposed on free peoples, by direct or indirect aggression, undermine the foundations of internal peace and hence the security of the United States.²

The situation in northern Iran, which flared up at much the same time, was at least equally if not more complicated. Briefly, many Azeris and Kurds either sought autonomy for their area(s), or, more modestly, a genuine reform of the machinery of central government in Tehran, which would eventually trickle down to the provinces.³ Such aspirations had been encouraged by the course of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Jangali movement in neighbouring Gilan, on the southwestern shore of the Caspian, between 1915 and 1921, the short-lived Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran (Chaqueiri 1995; Kuniholm 1980: 132) and also, especially among the Iranian Kurds, by the more repressive aspects of some of Reza Shah's centralising policies in the 1920s and 1930s.

In August 1941, as a result of the change in the international constellation of forces after the German invasion of Russia, British and Soviet forces entered and occupied Iran. The British remained south of a line south of an imaginary line connecting Hamadan, Tehran and Mashad (roughly 35 degrees North), while Soviet forces occupied northern Iran, eventually controlling about one-sixth of the total land area, but, in Azerbaijan alone, about a quarter of the population of Iran. At least initially, neither of these incursions was rapturously received by the local populations. The two new allies were no strangers to the area, having interfered in Iran's internal affairs continuously and generally quite blatantly since the early nineteenth century.

However, on this occasion, perhaps not entirely to Britain's liking, a new political situation had come into being.

The nature of the alliance between the Western democracies and the USSR meant that the occupation of Iran ushered in a sudden flowering of political freedom, which not only benefitted organised political groups, especially the Tudeh Party, but also paved the way for the appearance of a relatively free press and the formation of labour unions and professional associations. However, Britain controlled the government in Tehran (Kuniholm 1980: 155); in addition, most of the government officials as well much of the wealthier element among the population quickly left the north for the British zone in the south when the Russians came (Fawcett 1990: 201–21). Initially things changed little when the United States entered the war after Pearl Harbor, but in time, British apprehensions of what might turn out to be the 'true nature' of Stalin's future policies were communicated to the Americans. The result of this, in December 1943, was the joint *Allied Declaration Regarding Iran* (signed by Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin), which guaranteed, *inter alia*, Iran's future sovereignty and territorial integrity (Kuniholm 1980: 167).

However, some two years later, a few months after the war ended, events in the north seemed to be proceeding somewhat at variance with the *Declaration*. While most Azeris and Kurds probably had not initially regarded the Soviet occupation as a possible means of freeing themselves from the control of Tehran, it seems that after four years of it, that is by the time of the provincial elections in November and December 1945, a number of politicians in both regions had decided that autonomy within Iran, with Soviet support, was both practicable and desirable. Accordingly, a Kurdish autonomous republic and an Azeri autonomous government were declared soon after the provincial elections, which looked, or were represented as looking, somewhat threatening from London, Washington and Tehran.

In spite of these apparently alarming developments, it soon became clear that there were great limitations on the Soviet Union's freedom of manoeuvre. In addition—and here is a theme which recurs over and over again—there were also clear limits to the risks the Soviet Union would take in any confrontation with the United States. In spite of threats and cajolery, it proved impossible for the Russians to wrest the oil concession that they wanted out of the Iranian *majlis* in 1944, and after a relatively brief bluster (they were supposed to have left by March 1946) Soviet troops were withdrawn by the middle of May 1946 (Louis 1984: 62). After this, the Soviet Union had virtually no leverage in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan, nor, indeed, in the rest of the country. The three Tudeh cabinet ministers (for health, education and trade and industry) who had been appointed to the government of Ahmad Qavam in August 1946 were dismissed by November. In December 1946, Iranian troops marched into Tabriz and Mahabad and the two autonomous entities came to an abrupt end.

It is not entirely clear what the Soviet Union's objectives were in Iran; it certainly wanted an oil concession in the areas around the Caspian, and a friendly local government on the other side of the border. No significant oil deposits have ever been found in northern Iran, although it is possible that the Soviet Union was angling for

a share of the AIOC concession further south. On the other hand, it seems far-fetched to imagine that the Soviet Union actually wanted, or thought it would be permitted, to annex northwestern Iran (Rubin 1981: 31). Given the political constellation in the region at the time, the Soviet Union's support for minorities in Iran probably raised warning flags for other governments with sizeable minority communities such as Iraq and Turkey, although both states were already so firmly anti-Soviet in outlook at the time that this probably only served to confirm already deeply held suspicions (Carrère d'Encausse 1975: 12). In many ways, these two sets of incidents, in Greece and Turkey and in Iran, were emblematic of later developments in the Cold War in the Middle East, in the sense that, on the one hand, the Soviet Union wanted to take whatever fairly limited measures it could to assure the safety of its frontiers, while the United States found itself equally obliged to defend 'free peoples' wherever it judged that their freedom was being threatened. I will return to the matter of these 'perceptions' later on. }

Oil in the Middle East

One obvious lesson of the Second World War was that the future oil needs of the West were going to be met increasingly from the oil production, and from the huge oil reserves, of the Arab world and Iran. In chronological order, Iran had been exporting oil since 1913, Iraq since 1928, Bahrain since 1932, Saudi Arabia since 1938, and Kuwait since 1946, although this had all been on a fairly limited scale. Demand had risen enormously in the course of the war, and oil rapidly became a major strategic factor in the region.⁴ By the mid to late 1940s, US oil companies controlled at least 42 per cent of Middle Eastern oil, as well as, of course, having majority interests in companies nearer home (in Mexico and Venezuela and in the US itself). In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, the Middle East became the principal source of oil for Western Europe and Japan, aided in time by new discoveries and exports from Algeria, Libya, Qatar and the Trucial States.⁵

The Soviet Union hardly participated here, importing only insignificant quantities of Middle Eastern crude (although, in a different context, Soviet technical assistance and sales guarantees were crucial preconditions for the nationalisation of Iraqi oil in 1972 (Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett 2001: 123–6, 145–8). While much was made, and still occasionally is made, of the potential damage to the world economy which could be effected by a potential hostile group of 'revolutionaries'—or more recently (and equally implausibly) 'terrorists'—gaining control of one or more Middle Eastern oilfields, the history of the last few decades has shown such fears to have been largely groundless. It cannot easily be assumed that the deterrent effect of strong links with the US has played a significant role. Thus, even the most eccentric or 'extreme' regimes which came to power in the region (in Libya in 1969, in Iran ten years later) did not take long to direct their oil exports towards the exactly same markets as those

favoured by their 'reactionary' or 'amoral' predecessors. Similarly, although it certainly caused a major price hike, the oil embargo which began in October 1973 had almost ceased to function by the spring of 1974 (Stork 1975: 210–56). Thus, to play the counter-factual card, if a group opposed to the Al Saud had come to power in the 1970s or 1980s, and seized the oil fields, it is difficult, given the monocultural nature of the Saudi economy, not to imagine that they would sooner or later have begun to sell their country's oil to their country's former customers.

Hence, it is difficult to pin point the true role played by oil during the Cold War. Like many other features of this period, it was something of a chimera, to be evoked in passionate discussions of American and European 'vital interests', or as an excuse for supporting this or that more or less undemocratic regime, but in reality it never functioned as a contentious issue between East and West. Even oil nationalisation, a heady rallying cry for countries eager to control their own economies, degenerated into a damp squib, given the despotic nature of most Middle Eastern governments. In the first place, the economic independence of individual states was a thing of the past by the 1970s, and secondly, much of the money so gained went into the pockets, not of the toiling masses of the country concerned, but into those of the more or less unscrupulous cliques in charge, whether in Iran, Iraq, Libya or Saudi Arabia. Only the first of these moves, the nationalisation of Iranian oil in May 1951, was carried out by a more or less democratically elected government, and it was of course frustrated by Britain's resolute refusal to countenance it.⁶

A Clash of Ideologies

The role played by the Soviet Union after its entry into the war on the Allied side in June 1941 was vital, probably decisive, in the Allies winning the struggle against the Axis. One consequence was that it quickly became necessary for Britain and its allies to present their new partner in a favourable light, partly to show their appreciation, and partly to rally support from the broad left and the labour movement throughout the world. In consequence, Middle Eastern Communist and leftist parties enjoyed a few years of relative freedom before being pushed firmly back into the closet (or the prison cells) in the late 1940s and 1950s. I have already mentioned some of the consequences of this in Greece and Iran in the 1940s, but this period of respite also allowed the Iraqi Communist Party to lead the clandestine opposition to the *ancien régime* in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and permitted Communists to rise to the leadership of almost all the principal labour unions (Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett 1983).

There can be no doubt that ideology played an important role in defining the nature of the competition between the two powers for the hearts and minds of Middle Eastern regimes, and, although in different ways, of Middle Eastern peoples. In 1945, with the exception of Afghanistan, Iran, (Saudi) Arabia, Turkey and

(North) Yemen, the whole of the Middle East and North Africa either had been, or was still, under various forms of British, French or Italian colonial control, at least since the end of the First World War. Even the territories just mentioned had been subjected to economic or other kinds of pressure by the European powers. Thus Iran, though never actually colonised, had been fought over by Britain and Russia for economic and strategic reasons well into the twentieth century. Initially, of course, with the process of decolonisation under way after 1945, both the United States and the Soviet Union (which was at pains to dissociate itself from its Tsarist past) could point to their clean hands, their lack of colonial-imperial involvement in the region.

In the context of the process of decolonisation in particular, there was a certain degree of ambiguity in the attitude of the United States, which took several episodes to resolve. Thus, the United States was very publicly opposed to Britain over Palestine and, over Iranian oil nationalisation, did little to discourage the Egyptian revolution in 1952, and in spite of having less than cordial relations with Abd al-Nasser after his decision to buy arms from the Soviet Union in 1955, showed itself both firm and single-minded in its opposition to the tripartite invasion of Egypt by Britain, France and Israel in November 1956. Of course, things gradually became less confusing as Britain's withdrawal from the region increased in momentum. Indeed, by January 1968 Dean Rusk described himself as 'profoundly dismayed' at the prospect of Britain's military withdrawal from Southeast Asia and the Middle East, which he considered 'a catastrophic loss to human society' [sic].⁷

In broad terms, the United States offered its own vision of modernity, initially that of a disinterested senior partner which could offer assistance, both in terms of goods and 'advice' to young nations struggling to become members of the 'free world', which was emerging after the devastation of the Second World War. 'Communism'—and this was long before the extent of the excesses of Stalinism was fully known—was represented as the incarnation of evil totalitarian forces, bent on world conquest, and in particular as inimical to the spirit of free enterprise, an activity considered on the western side of the Atlantic as one of the most vital expressions of the human spirit. On the other side of the ideological divide, the Soviet Union, parts of which were at least as backward as much of the Middle East in the 1940s and 1950s, offered an alternative vision, of an egalitarian society where class divisions had been, or were being, abolished, and where a benevolent state would look after the interests of its citizens from the cradle to the grave. Both visions of the world, and of the future, had their partisans and adherents in the Middle East. At this stage, of course, few people from the region had had the chance to study either system at first hand.

As has been noted in the context of Iran and Greece, it became apparent soon after the end of the Second World War that the depleted financial and military resources of Britain, and France would not permit them to resume the paramountcy that they had enjoyed in the region in the inter-war years, and that, in addition, something of a power vacuum would be created by their departure and indeed by any major reduction in their regional role. France's departure from Lebanon and Syria in 1945 and 1946 was both more or less final and fairly abrupt, although the decolonisation of

North Africa, particularly Algeria, was to take longer and to be extremely painful and costly. As far as Palestine was concerned, the Labour cabinet first wanted to cling on, and then, seeing it that it would get no support from the United States for the creation of a binational state, decided at the end of 1946 that it would make better sense to refer the matter to the United Nations (Louis 1986). Similarly, the increasingly anachronistic nature of Britain's position in Egypt (and a few years later, but in much the same way, in Iraq), the narrowness and isolation of the clique that supported the continuation of the British connection and the relentless forward march of nationalist or anti-colonial movements, meant that the question became when, rather than if, Britain would depart. Into the vacuum thus created stepped, in different ways and at different times, the United States and the Soviet Union.

Naturally, the role of ideology, and the relative appeal of the Soviet Union and the West, changed quite dramatically as the Cold War unfolded. In the first place, the two powers took some time to define their respective roles. For one thing, after the events in Greece and Iran which have just been described, the Soviet Union went into a period of relative isolation (not only, of course, in the Middle East), from which it only began to emerge after the death of Stalin in 1953. The only major exception to this was the Soviet Union's hasty recognition of Israel as an independent Jewish state in May 1948, on the well-known but still rather extraordinary grounds that Israel, founded on what the Soviet Union believed to be 'socialist principles', provided a last chance to destabilise the Middle East from within' (Carrère d'Encausse 1975: 14–15).

Throughout the Cold War, this action on the part of the Soviet Union always remained one of the choicest of the many big sticks which their local rivals were to use time and again to beat the Middle Eastern communist parties. Apart from this, and the episodes already discussed, Stalin's main concern, both before and after the Second World War, was the internal reconstruction of the Soviet state (the doctrine of 'socialism in one country'), and Soviet foreign policy was directed to that end. Given the situation in 1945, the subjugation of the states of Eastern Europe can be understood in terms of the pursuit of that goal. A further important factor, which became a serious challenge to much of the received thinking in the Soviet Union, was that even in the early 1950s, and even to the most diehard partisans of political correctness in Moscow, it was becoming uncomfortably clear that the imminence of the 'crisis of capitalism', on which a great deal of Soviet thinking had been predicated, was a product of wishful thinking in the Kremlin, and had very little foundation in fact.

In the late 1940s, the East/West conflict was symbolised by the Berlin blockade and the Korean War: after the early incidents which have been described, it was some time before the Middle East developed into an arena of conflict. In fact, Soviet interest in the Third World in general remained fairly subdued until the death of Stalin in March 1953, and its main concern outside its own borders was assuring the 'stability' of the states of Eastern Europe. For its part the United States was fairly active in organising the defence of the 'Free World', with the creation of NATO (of which Turkey became a member in 1952). In 1955 the United States created (though it did not join) the Baghdad Pact, which brought Britain and the so-called

'Northern Tier' states—Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Turkey—into an anti-Soviet alliance. The Soviet Union was somewhat slower to take action in the region, and in fact the formal embrace of the Warsaw Pact (May 1955) never extended beyond the Soviet Union's allies in Eastern Europe.

The relationships of the two great powers with the states of the Middle East were quite complex and nuanced in nature, and cannot simply be written off as an imperialist or neo-imperialist. They also changed markedly over time, especially as the limitations on the freedom of manoeuvre of the Soviet Union and the eastern European countries became increasingly apparent in the late 1970s and 1980s. To some extent they can be described as 'patron/client' relations (Osterhammel 1997: 115–17), with the peculiarity that the clients (in the Middle East and elsewhere in the third world) were able to switch patrons, and often to have more than one patron at once, in the case of both poor and rich countries—Egypt and Iraq, for instance.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Cold War in the Middle East was the speed with which the various Middle Eastern states acquired the ability to play one superpower off against another. This meant that relations were often competitive, especially in terms of the provision of goods and services. An obvious example here was the willingness of the Soviet Union to finance the Aswan Dam when the United States would no longer support the project because Egypt had bought or ordered arms from the Soviet Union. Bargaining over arms supplies was a major point of leverage, since the United States would not supply the kinds of arms to the Arab states that might enable them to defeat Israel. It took some time for it to become clear that the Soviet Union would not do so either, and those years of uncertainty marked the heyday of 'Arab-Soviet friendship'.

Elements of a Case Study: Iraq, the Soviet Union and the United States, 1945–90

Iraq's changing and complex relations with the superpowers offer an interesting example of the extent to which the Middle Eastern tail was so often able to wag the superpower dog. As has already been mentioned, the decision of the Soviet Union to join the Allied side in 1941 ushered in a brief but important period of political freedom for the left in both Iran and Iraq. However, since Iraq had defied Britain in the 'thirty days war' of April–May 1941, the liberalising effects of Soviet membership of the alliance did not become apparent until after Nuri al-Said's resignation from the premiership in June 1944. One of the major, if indirect, beneficiaries of this relaxation in the political climate was the Iraqi Communist Party, which had been founded in 1934. Although its numbers were small it was able to wield considerable influence, especially among workers in the modern industrial sector (Basra port, the Iraq Petroleum Company, the Iraqi railways) and among 'intellectuals'. Between late 1944 and the spring of 1946, sixteen labour unions, twelve of which were controlled by

the Communist Party, were given licences, as were a number of political parties. However, the enforced resignation of Tawfiq al-Suwaydi's ministry (as a result of pressure from the Regent and Nuri al-Said) at the end of May 1946 brought this brief period of political freedom to an end.

A number of British officials and some British ministers in London had come to realise that 'with the old gang in power this country cannot help to progress very far' (Quoted Louis 1984: 309). Nevertheless, there were limits to the amount of pressure which Britain, and behind it the United States, was prepared to bring to bear on Iraqi governments immediately after the war. Given his very close ties with Britain, the débâcle in Palestine was evidently a serious embarrassment for Nuri al-Said, especially since it came close on the heels of the hostile atmosphere created by the Iraqi government's botched attempt to renegotiate the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty at Portsmouth in January 1948. Yet, with a combination of ruthlessness and repression, and the rapid rise in oil revenues in the late 1940s and early 1950s (from ID 2.3 million in 1946 to 13.3 million in 1951 and 84.4 million in 1955), the *ancien régime* was able to put off what seemed to many observers as the inevitable for another ten years.

The Baghdad pact was effectively an eastward extension of NATO, representing an attempt on the part of the United States to create an anti-Soviet alliance of states bordering, or close to, the Soviet Union. At this stage the Soviet Union was slowly emerging out of the post-war isolation which Stalin (who died in March 1953) had imposed upon it, and was beginning to make its first cautious forays into the politics of the Middle East. Early in 1955, in the wake of an audacious Israeli raid on Gaza, Egypt had asked the United States for arms and had been rebuffed. In April–May 1955, Nasser, Sukarno and Tito formulated the doctrine of 'positive neutralism' (neither East nor West) at the Bandung conference. In September, Czechoslovakia, acting on behalf of the Soviet Union, announced that it would sell arms to Egypt (and later to Syria). This greatly enhanced the Soviet Union's image and popularity in both countries as well as in Iraq, although under the conditions then prevailing in Iraq listeners to eastern European radio stations faced the prospect of hefty fines or prison sentences if caught.

At this stage, the main objective of the Iraqi opposition (which was composed of a wide gamut of largely incompatible elements) was to become truly independent of Britain and to set up a national government. Although there was no mistaking the US hand behind the Baghdad pact, anti-American feeling in Iraq was probably secondary to anti-British feeling, since the British presence, British bases and the regime's obvious dependence on Britain were daily realities. Hostility to Britain increased with the tripartite invasion of Egypt in November 1956, an episode which transformed Nasser from an Egyptian to an Arab political figure with almost irresistible appeal. It is not clear how far Iraqis understood the extent to which United States intervention had been crucial in bringing the Suez crisis so swiftly to an end.⁸ Thus, while it, became increasingly obvious over the ensuing months that the United States was alarmed by the possible consequences for the rest of the region of Nasser's 'victory', it had not managed to damage its reputation irrevocably in the eyes of all anti-British Iraqis by the time of the Iraqi Revolution of July 1958.