

INSIGHT TURKEY

Walter Posch & Borut Grgic

Turkey and the EU: Strategic Implications for
Central Europe

Soner Çağaptay

Winning Turkey's Heart

Ali Tuysan

The Present and Future of Turkish-American
Relations: Ankara's Perspective

Interview

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The Role of Social Responsibility in Turkey's
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American and British Foreign Policy in the Middle East: A Comparison

Şener Aktürk*

The political-strategic, economic, and ideological dimensions of the American and British foreign policy towards the Middle East are worth examination. Egypt under Nasser, the Musaddiq era in Iran, the establishment of the state of Israel, and the interface between Zionism and the segments of the Christian Right are significant components of such an examination. Differences in American and British approaches to colonialism, Arab nationalism, Zionism, and Orientalism, are highlighted, while the conclusion stresses a number of shared goals in both American and British policy despite different means in their implementation.

Although the primary economic and strategic-political motivations of the United States and Britain in the Middle East did not differ significantly, the ideological manifestations of U.S. foreign policy, and the moral and religious factors that the U.S. took into consideration in its approach to the region, made the U.S. approach to the Middle East markedly different from that of the British.

According to most scholars, economic interests, especially “the greater objective of maintaining U.S. hegemony over the oil lanes,”¹ was one of the most important goals of U.S. foreign policy towards the Middle East, if not *the* most important one. Malik Muftu asserts that the need to keep oil rich countries under the American umbrella was sometimes the most important objective, sometimes only secondary to the Cold War directive of preventing Soviet influence in the region.² Melani McAlister also maintains that “two factors, the presence of oil and the claim to religious origins, have been particularly important to these American encounters in the Middle East].”³

In the realm of economic (oil) interests as such, there was very little, if any, difference between the British and the American policy. As James Bill makes clear, “there is little doubt that American and British shared the same goals in Iran in the 1940s...”⁴ Bill’s statement about Iran can be generalized to encompass the British and American approach to all Middle Eastern countries. Both Britain and the U.S. were striving to

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“ In the realm of economic (oil) interests as such, there was very little, if any, difference between the British and the American policy ”

gain a share or a monopoly if possible, of the oil resources in the Middle East. Since the crude pursuit of economic interests as such usually leads to competition among great powers, the U.S. and Britain, sharing the same economic motivations, were hence engaged in a fierce struggle for establishing economic hegemony in the region.

American oil companies' entry into the Iranian oil market infuriated the British, who maintained till then, a monopoly over the Iranian oil resources. After Standard Oil (1920-1), Sinclair Oil (1923), Seaboard Oil (1937), and Standard-Vacuum Oil (1940) rushed to Iran for oil concessions, the British foreign secretary

Earl Curzon “warned [the Iranian foreign minister] very strongly against any attempt to introduce the Standard Oil Company in Persia, assuring him that this would mean a competition which would be a source of certain trouble...and which the British Government would not be expected to regard with any favor.”⁵ As the correspondence between Churchill and Roosevelt demonstrates,⁶ Britain, as a “declining hegemon”, was behaving as such, in its attempt to formalize spheres of influence (Saudi Arabia to the U.S.; Iran to Britain) and to avoid competition with the U.S., a competition which Britain knew it would lose. U.S., on the other hand, was acting just as one expects a rising hegemon would, expanding its economic influence and presiding over the former hegemon's (Britain) decline.

In terms of its pursuit of oil concessions and crude economic interests as such, the American approach to the Middle East does not differ much from that of the British. During the Musaddiq era and the AIOC crisis, for example, “in exchange for American support in overthrowing the Musaddiq government, the British grudgingly permitted U.S. companies a 40 percent interest in Iranian oil.”⁷

Although concentrated around oil concessions, the economic aspect of American and British approach to the Middle East cannot be totally reduced to oil resources. The maintenance of colonial patterns of trade, and a colonial economic structure, whereby Middle East served as a source of raw materials and a market for finished manufactured products,⁸ also seems to be a common component of both British and American approach to the region.

American refusal to finance the Aswan Dam project in Egypt, which was a major developmental project for a Third World country such as Egypt, and the curious recommendations of the American economic advisors in Iran, are two exemplary cases.

“...the American engineering firm Morrison-Knudson made a survey and suggested a development program in August 1947. They put heavy emphasis on agricultural technology and little on industry. Raw cotton and wool production were to increase, but no new plants were planned to process them. Some Iranians, who felt that Iran's role as supplier of raw materials to the West and buyer of expensive finished goods was to be perpetuated, criticized the report.”⁹

Only months later, Overseas Consultants, Inc. (OCI) prepared another report, emphasizing technical improvements in agriculture, communications and transport and ignoring the potential benefits of land reform.¹⁰ “Regarding industry, OCI noted that plants were inefficient, overstaffed, over-centralized and technically backward... The government was told to get rid of industry.”¹¹ Iranian planners asserted that “the main dispute centered on Iran’s desire to industrialize much faster than OCI recommended.”¹² Accordingly, during Musaddiq’s term in office, government began four large textile mills, several dry-fruit processing plants, a cement factory, and sugar refining plants.¹³

British hostility to the indigenous industrial development in the Middle East was well known, and amply demonstrated, such as in the struggle between the ambitious industrial modernizer Muhammad Ali of Egypt and the British Empire in the early 19th century. Yet the United States also showed its unwillingness to see heavy industrialization in the Middle East, revealed in the reports of the American economic advisors cited above, and also in the adverse American reaction to the modernization projects of Nasser and Musaddiq.

The strategic-geopolitical considerations of Britain and the U.S. do not seem to be much different either. The classical British strategy in the region, also known as the Great Game, has always been to buttress cliental regimes in Turkey (Ottoman Empire), Iran and Afghanistan, in order to prevent Russia from threatening British assets in the Persian Gulf and in the Indian subcontinent. The so-called obsession with the Soviet threat, which so much dominated the American approach to the Middle East, is a simple adaptation of this traditional ‘Great Game,’ with the U.S. replacing Britain, and both Russia and the U.S. assuming ideologically charged roles.

In this context, the Truman doctrine seems to be the first step in rebuilding the formerly pro-British containment belt (against Russia), this time under U.S. auspices. Truman doctrine offered to “assist free peoples to work out their destinies in their own way,” but it was also designed ultimately to take over “British responsibilities for ensuring the survival of pro-Western governments around the world,” and especially in the Middle East.¹⁴ If the Truman doctrine emphasized buttressing pro-Western governments in Greece and Turkey, Eisenhower extended the containment belt in such a way as to include the rest of the Middle East, including Iran and stretching as far as Afghanistan.

Yet, the “U.S. goal was to support leaders in the Middle East who would keep their countries from falling under Soviet or British rule.”¹⁵ Hence, the U.S. was not only practicing the former British strategy in containing Russian menace, but it was also insuring that Britain, the centuries old practitioner and author of this strategy, would be excluded from exercising any influence over the Middle East, the centerpiece of this plan.

The Middle East had long been a stronghold of the British, a situation which the British further strengthened after WWI.¹⁶ “Now, the U.S. would now be taking over key aspects of that role as the military protector of friendly governments.”¹⁷ The relative ruthlessness

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ness and carelessness with which Musaddiq was overthrown can be partially explained by Iran's position as the centerpiece of the American containment belt. The Truman and Eisenhower doctrines, and the NSC-68,¹⁸ were all but elaborations of this same plan.

In sum, pursuit of economic hegemony (oil concessions and the maintenance of colonial patterns of trade) and strategic siege (containment) of Russia (Soviet or not) constitute common patterns in both the British and the American approaches to the Middle East. Ideological and religious components of their foreign policy, however, differ significantly and it is to those features that we will turn now.

The major ideological themes involved in American-Middle Eastern and British-Middle Eastern relations are colonialism and anti-colonialism, Zionism, Arab nationalism and Pan-Arabism, as well as British and American Orientalism, the latter of which might appropriately be called the ideology of “benevolent supremacy”, following Melani McAlister's terminology.¹⁹

Anti-colonialism emerged as a key component of American ideology in the Middle East, since “anticommunism united Europe and the United States, but anti-colonialism offered U.S. policymakers a unique opportunity to challenge European power.”²⁰ President Eisenhower, for example, “generally opposed signs of lingering Western colonialism because it generated anti-Western hostility.”²¹

In the quasi-religious narratives of Hollywood that McAlister concentrates on, Hebrew-Christian nationalism was pitted against the Roman Empire, and presented as superior to the old (Roman) order it will displace, in each case democratic people challenging both empire and slavery, making it suitable to imagine ‘America’ at the moment of European imperial decline.²² McAlister asserts that, in these movies, the decline-of-a-corrupt-empire theme invited an interpretation of “the people” as the formerly colonized peoples of the third world.²³ Within this context, Roman and Egyptian ‘oppressors’ were often played by British actors,²⁴ further clarifying the ideological message distinguishing between imperialistic nature of the European powers and the benevolent, democratic and freedom-loving nature of the Americans.

American refusal of empire, the Wilsonian right of ‘free peoples’ to choose their destinies, reiterated by Truman, and the consensual partnership between U.S. power and a subordinated third world nationalism, build up to the ideological construction that Melani McAlister calls “Benevolent Supremacy.”²⁵ The U.S. was somewhat engaged in a two front ideological warfare: On the one hand, the war against Soviet Union and the communist ideology that it represented, and on the other, the British and other European empires and the colonialist ideology that they represented.

The struggle against colonialism was also sanctioned by the domestic socio-political developments in the U.S. as well. Martin Luther King “saw the rise of anti-colonialism and the rise of civil rights not just as parallel sets of events but as a connected force, with the two movements influencing each other in direct ways.”²⁶ The necessity of portraying the U.S. as a champion of the decolonizing world abroad contributed to the dismantling of segregation at home, since “segregation... was viewed incompat-

ible with U.S. 'leadership' and alliance building in the decolonizing world."²⁷

Moreover, the U.S. used its own history and war of independence against the British Empire in establishing a link between the rising Third World countries and itself. But when Musaddiq, for example, remarked that his nationalization of the AIOC was similar to the Boston Tea Party in American Independence War, the parallels were deliberately overlooked. Despite anti-colonialist rhetoric, in some cases the U.S. acted in such a way as to protect the imperial possessions of its European allies (Iran, Indochina).

However, the U.S. was overall in favor of dismantling European colonial empires, for ideological and practical (to assert its own influence) reasons, and its anticolonial stance as such signaled a major difference between the American and British foreign policy.

Zionism was yet another key word from the bundle of ideas that the U.S. and Britain had to deal with in approaching the Middle East. Despite the Balfour Declaration, a British-endorsed document which promised a national homeland for the Jews in Palestine, the American Zionists aspired to have entire Palestine as a Jewish national homeland, and the U.S. administration did not, or did not want to, understand the nuance between the two claims and endorsed the latter claim as well, hence going much further than what the British (through the Balfour Declaration) promised to the Zionists.

As Menachem Begin began guerilla operations against British installations in Palestine²⁸ and Britain offended the Zionists by sending the *Exodus* away to Germany,²⁹ hence straining relations between Britain and the Zionist groups, the U.S. emerged as a paragon of the Zionist cause, despite the united opposition of the American foreign policy bureaucracy (State Department) to the full implementation of the Zionist program.³⁰ The Jewish refugees played a critical role in U.S. foreign policy.³¹ Conventional wisdom holds Truman to be pro-Zionist for domestic reasons.³² In sum, the ardent support that the U.S. gave to the Zionist cause and later to the State of Israel is markedly different from the cautious approval and support extended by Britain.

However, American support for Zionism is somewhat consistent with the anti-colonialist stance of the U.S., if we consider Zionism to be an anti-colonial nationalist insurgency, which it really was. On the other hand, the full implementation of the Zionist program would clearly violate the Wilsonian principle of self-determination³³ because it would displace hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and deny them the right of self-determination. The contradiction between Zionist objectives and the principle of self-determination was also pointed out by the King-Crane commission report in 1919,³⁴ just months before Wilson was paralyzed by a stroke, and yet such warnings do not seem to have diverted the U.S. foreign policy from its supportive course in relation to the Zionist program.

Arab nationalism and Pan-Arabism, two forms of anti-colonial insurgency, were also key issues in both the British and the American approach to the Middle East. As in the

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case of Zionism, the U.S. was mostly supportive of Arab nationalism as a form of anti-colonial movement aspiring to self-determination. According to Malik Muftu, U.S. policy on the Middle East consisted of safeguarding American interests by accommodating the populist pan-Arabism of Egyptian president Nasser.³⁵ The U.S. had to “adjust to the tide of Arab nationalism”³⁶ in the face of “Qasim’s [Iraqi military leader] coup and his growing association with the ICP [local communists].”³⁷ Muftu asserts in his review of Washington’s four-pronged policy that the U.S., although supportive of a populist and modern reformist Arab nationalism within the established borders of particular Arab states, was opposed to a revisionist pan-Arabism that would bring all the Middle Eastern oil resources under one Arab national authority, making U.S. and its oil-dependent Western allies vulnerable.³⁸

Therefore, according to Dulles, as long as Nasser practiced the benign form of populist, modernist and self-contained nationalism, Egypt was receiving Most Favored Nation (MFN) treatment from the U.S.³⁹ In sum, the U.S. attitude towards Arab nationalism was “to keep it in bounds” and this policy, according to Muftu, succeeded remarkably while maintaining American control over the oil fields and denying the region to the Soviets,⁴⁰ the two most important objectives of U.S. foreign policy in the region.

Britain, on the other hand, followed a course that is ideologically less consistent, and guided by more immediate, undisguised and crude self-interest. For example, although opposed to Arab nationalism (as an anti-colonial insurgency) in principle, the British gave limited support to the Iraqi Hashemites’ “dream of ruling a greater Arab homeland, simply because they viewed Iraq as the linchpin to their own regional ambitions and were therefore willing to support the extension of Hashemite influence.”⁴¹

The differences of opinion between the U.S. and Britain with regards to the appropriate way to cope with Arab nationalism were numerous and in some cases these differences remarkably surfaced. One such instance was during the Suez Crisis, when the British and the French, joined by Israel, decided to punish the Arab nationalist Nasser, by means of military intervention. The U.S. forced Britain to withdraw from the Suez; and Britain was utterly humiliated. Another similar but milder case of policy difference is the American and British attitude towards the Baghdad Pact, which was founded by Britain and some other pro-Western countries in the Middle East (Turkey, Iran, Iraq). Despite Britain’s insistence, the U.S. never joined this pact but supported it nonetheless.

Overall, American sympathy lay with a benign (modernist, populist, secular, pro-Western) form of Arab nationalism and wherever this form appeared, it was supported by the U.S.. Britain, as being a declining colonial power, was more suspicious of Arab nationalism, and more crudely pragmatic in its support or opposition of such movements.

Orientalism constitutes the last pillar of the ideological dimension of British and American approaches to the Middle East. Although Orientalism, as a particular discourse and a mode of thinking about the East, is much more important and pervasive than any other ideological frame that we have examined so far, I will mention some

important differences between classical (British) Orientalism and (American) post- or neo-Orientalism.

Although Kathleen Christison claims that “[t]he Orient in the 19th became the antithesis par excellence of modernity”,⁴² and although she further maintains that “in this Orientalist framework, Palestine’s Arabs were equated with ‘uncivilized’ American Indians” in the American mind,⁴³ Melani McAlister cogently challenges and discredits the view, which simply equates American perceptions of the Middle East with classical, European Orientalism. McAlister points out to two complications of the Orientalist paradigm in the U.S.: First, although the classical-European Orientalism depends on the depiction of “us” (Westerners) as a racially, ethnically and culturally homogenous entity, the American nation is clearly a nation characterized by domestic diversity and (sometimes problematic) racial distinctions.⁴⁴ Secondly, classical “[o]rientalism’s depiction of the West as masculine contradicts the American representation of the nation through the figure of the family and the emphasis on private life, both of which point to a universal subject of the nation-state who is not necessarily male, but can also be female.⁴⁵ Hence, from a classical-European Orientalist point of view, American approach to the Middle East, although retaining important features of Orientalism (savage-civilized dichotomy, etc.), can best be described as a post-Orientalist or neo-Orientalist approach.

The religious motivations behind the American approach will cast some more light to the distinct nature of this approach in contrast to the British approach. “Two factors, the presence of oil and the claim to religious origins, have been particularly important to these [American] encounters [with the Middle East].”⁴⁶ Why do religious factors feature such an important role in shaping American encounters in the region? “The rising tide of religious feeling in the U.S. in the 1950s and the rise in church attendance”⁴⁷ in general, and Dwight Moody’s “premillennialist dispensationalism” which places the Middle East and the reconstruction of the State of Israel at the center of an idiosyncratic interpretation of the Bible,⁴⁸ in particular, might have been influential in bringing this outcome. On the other hand, religious activity as such is not as high in Britain as it is in the U.S. Moreover, the themes of Christian conversion, marriage and consensual subordination provided a nice corollary to the idea of a “benevolent supremacy” that the U.S. had been seeking vis-à-vis the Middle Eastern countries. Benevolent supremacy was epitomized in the Roman Empire’s final success in claiming its citizens’ allegiance, after the Empire became Christian:

“a gentler and more powerful way’ of gaining the allegiance of Rome’s subjects... [Christian] Love is not the alternative to conquest but the alternative model of conquest. The freely chosen subordination of the good wife suggests the value of a ‘consent of love’ in reformulated imperial relations... Marriage is staged as an analogy for a refigured imperialism, a new kind of benevolent supremacy in world af-

“Two factors, the presence of oil and the claim to religious origins, have been particularly important to these [American] encounters [with the Middle East]”

fairs that links the new, nonimperial rulers [U.S.] with the peoples of the Middle East via a relationship of consensual an unequal union.”⁴⁹

The fact that the U.S. had the most extensive missionary network in the former Ottoman Empire and engaged in the most vigorous effort to convert Middle Eastern peoples to Protestant Christianity,⁵⁰ is demonstrative of the historic American effort to establish a “consensual but unequal” relationship with the Middle East through “moral superiority.” The Protestant missionaries and affiliated groups exerted enough influence, indeed, to bring to Congress for consideration, the issue of an American mandate over Syria and Armenia, and even a mandate over all the former Ottoman lands except British Mesopotamia.

“Benevolent supremacy” is actually a policy consistent with the economic and strategic (hegemony), ideological (anti-colonialist, pro-national self-determination), and religious (subordination through Christian conversion and American moral superiority) tenets of U.S. policy towards the Middle East.

In conclusion, although the economic (hegemony over the oil rich countries and the maintenance of colonial patterns of trade) and political-strategic (containment of the ‘Russian menace’) foundations of the British and American approach to the Middle East were very similar, the ideological components of the American approach (anti-colonialism, fervent pro-Zionism, pro-[Arab] nationalism, and neo-Orientalism) seriously contradicted with the ideological components of the British approach (colonialism, limited Zionism, against Arab nationalism, classical Orientalism) hence making the *discourse* and the *ideological means* of U.S. policy ‘distinctly American.’ Therefore, although what James Bill noted with regards to U.S. policy towards Iran might be a valid observation with regards to the American approach to the Middle East in general: “The central contradiction in America’s general goals...was that the United States had both real political and economic interests as well as a genuine commitment to democratic principles...U.S. officials spoke earnestly about the latter while developing policies based on the former.”⁵¹ In the final analysis, as Melani McAlister clearly asserted, “[i]t was the question of appropriate means that divided the U.S. and its European [British] allies.”⁵²

Endnotes:

1. Malik Muftu, ‘The United States and Nasserist Pan-Arabism’, in David W. Lesch (ed.), *The Middle East and the United States*, (Westview: Westview Press, 1996), p. 172.
2. *Ibid*, p. 172-4. On page 172 Muftu emphasizes oil lanes over Soviet influence; on the latter page, he asserts the American hegemony over the oil rich countries to be of secondary importance when compared with the foremost objective of preventing Soviet expansion.
3. Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), p. 1.
4. James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 42.
5. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations*, p. 27.
6. *Ibid*, p. 28.
7. *Ibid*, p. 80.

8. For a comprehensive overview of the colonial structure of the Middle Eastern political economy from the 19th century till the Great War, please refer to, Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy 1800-1914*, (New York: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 1993).
9. Nikki Keddie, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 130.
10. *Ibid*, p. 131.
11. *Ibid*, p. 131.
12. *Ibid*, p. 132.
13. *Ibid*, p. 136.
14. McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000*, p. 50.
15. *Ibid*, p. 49.
16. *Ibid*, p. 50.
17. *Ibid*, p. 50.
18. NSC-68 asserts that "[w]e must work with our allies and the former subject peoples to seek to create a world society based on the principle of consent." McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000*, p. 53.
19. McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000*, chapter 1: "Benevolent Supremacy."
20. *Ibid*, p. 47.
21. Kathleen Christison, *Perceptions of Palestine: Their Influence on U.S. Middle East Policy*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), p. 98.
22. McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000*, p. 61.
23. *Ibid*, p. 65.
24. *Ibid*, p. 70.
25. *Ibid*, p. 82.
26. *Ibid*, p. 70.
27. *Ibid*, p. 72.
28. Kathleen Christison, *Perceptions of Palestine: Their Influence on U.S. Middle East Policy*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), p. 21.
29. *Ibid*, p. 27.
30. *Ibid*, p. 18.
31. *Ibid*, p. 16.
32. *Ibid*, p. 16-7.
33. *Ibid*, p. 30.
34. *Ibid*, p. 32.
35. Malik Muftu, 'The United States and Nasserist Pan-Arabism', in David W. Lesch (ed.), *The Middle East and the United States*, (Westview: Westview Press, 1996), p. 167.
36. *Ibid*, p. 174.
37. *Ibid*, p. 173.
38. *Ibid*, p. 167-9.
39. *Ibid*, p. 169.
40. *Ibid*, p. 183.
41. *Ibid*, p. 169.
42. Kathleen Christison, *Perceptions of Palestine: Their Influence on U.S. Middle East Policy*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), p. 18.
43. *Ibid*, p. 19.
44. Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), p. 11.
45. *Ibid*, p. 12.
46. *Ibid*, p. 1.
47. *Ibid*, p. 43.
48. *Ibid*, p. 15.
49. *Ibid*, p. 78-9.
50. Christison, *Perceptions of Palestine: Their Influence on U.S. Middle East Policy*, p. 23.
51. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations*, Yale University Press, p. 49.
52. McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000*, p. 81.