When President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was on his way back to the United States after the Yalta Conference in 1945, he traveled on an American destroyer through the Suez Canal and met with Ibn Saud Abd Al Aziz, King of Saudi Arabia. It was a friendly meeting in the course of which the American president promised to coordinate his Middle East policy in general, and his Palestinian (Eretz Israel) policy in particular, with the Saudi monarch as the representative of the Muslim Middle East. The encounter between the two leaders at the time was the climax of a broad strategic process in which the United States began to be increasingly involved in the Middle East. It had begun in 1933 when the US received its first oil concessions in Saudi Arabia, continued in 1943 with the establishment of "Aramco," the Arabian American Oil Company and with the appointment of a resident American Ambassador in Jeddah early in 1944. Subsequently, the Middle East became a determining factor in US foreign policy as the application of the "Eisenhower Doctrine" in the Middle East soon demonstrated. [1]

As Salim Yaqub demonstrates, archival documents, both from the United States and the Middle East, reveal the impact of US interests in the area from the early Cold War period to the present day on the establishment of a political, economic and social reality in the Middle East. However, relatively few studies have attempted to integrate the historical narratives of this period originating in the US and Middle Eastern countries. This is surprising, since the contemporary crisis cannot be fully understood without analyzing the American political perspective on the region. As a historian of Zionist and Israeli history, I argue that it is crucial to fill this gap in research on the relationships between the Zionist movement, Israel and the United States before and after the state was established, especially given the close ties between the US, as a leading post-war power, and Israel. A discussion of the reasons for this gap is beyond the scope of this review. We can assume that these are complicated, ranging from misunderstanding Arabic to ideological issues.

Professor Yaqub’s detailed in-depth study helps to close this gap by providing a synopsis of American political activity in the Middle East. The book’s title, which points to both the American and the Middle Eastern arenas, reflects its importance and uniqueness, informing us about the
close reciprocal ties between the two geographically separated research areas, and exemplifies the importance of interdisciplinary studies, especially as regarding political history.

The detailed introduction and the first chapter of Professor Yakub's book trace the main outlines of American Middle East policy in the 1940s and 1950s. The introduction also shows the difficulties inherent in the American attitude toward emerging Arab nationalism, and critically reviews earlier research dealing with the political and national development of the Middle East and its political and social ties with the Western powers.

The next three chapters (23-117) deal with the birth of the Eisenhower Doctrine and its application in practice. The author stresses that the intense American involvement in the Middle East must be understood against the background of the failed British and French attempt to take control of the Suez Canal through the 1956 war, in which they collaborated with Israel. The failure of the two European world powers left a political vacuum that made American penetration possible, as the United States tried to preempt any move by the Soviet Union in that direction.

Eisenhower presented his plan (the Eisenhower Doctrine) to Congress on January 5, 1957. Yaqub details its main points: economic and military aid to Middle Eastern states that seek to defend themselves against Communist aggression. After significant opposition from the Democrats in Congress, the plan was adopted in March 1957. Significantly, while the plan bore the name of the President, the enormous contribution of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles emerged between the lines, as did his subsequent role in its implementation.

The next five chapters depict the immense difficulties involved in implementing the Doctrine. The writer notes that after a short period during which conservative American-supported regimes appeared to be gaining strength and stability, there was a sharp and significant reaction. The book describes opposition to America in Syria in July-December 1957, the US Army's entry into Lebanon and King Hussein's attempt to ensure his control over Jordan, the counter attack by Gamal Abdel Nasser, and the plan's ultimate failure at the end of the 1950s. Particularly interesting is Yaqub's description of Nasser's complex relationship with the Eisenhower administration. Attempts to improve relationships between the two countries were combined with the search for assurances that such improvement would not aggravate conservative Middle Eastern regimes that had qualms about Nasser, and particularly about the Egyptian-Syrian union (United Arab Republic) established in February 1958. This proved impossible, and the failure portended the general collapse of the Eisenhower Doctrine.

I wish to go into more detail in respect to two issues that Yaqub's book addresses. The first is the American contribution to the establishment of
Israel, and the relationship between the two countries in the 1950s. Throughout the book, this is presented as the salient reason for the developing tensions between the United States and so many Middle Eastern countries. One may question the accuracy of this view throughout the 1940s and 1950s. As Yaqub correctly notes, Israel was not important to the United States during that period. Moreover, the United States opposed the establishment of Israel and only chose to vote for it in the United Nations because internal pressures left it no choice. Nor did the US have a pro-Israel policy in the 1950s: the opposite is true. As the present study notes, the United States acted to assure Israel's withdrawal from conquered Sinai after the Suez war, and in the 1950s refrained from supplying Israel with arms. Intensive American-Israeli strategic ties developed only in the 1970s. Possibly, then, there is room to reexamine a prevailing theme in this book: the role that Israel played in creating tensions between the United States and progressive regimes in the Middle East.

The second issue is Israel's place in the East-West struggle following World War II. Despite the close ties between Israel, Britain and France in the 1950s that came to fruition during the Suez campaign of 1956 and made Israel a partner in this blatant imperialist move, there were other trains of thought within the Israeli Zionist establishment. Significant among these was the effort to maintain Israel's neutrality in the struggle between East and West and assure her integration within the Middle East as one of what would later be called the unaligned states. American Jews in key Zionist establishment roles held such views, which were of special concern to the most important Zionist leader, Reform rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, Chairman of the Emergency Committee and a director of the Jewish Agency, as well as his associates in the American Zionist leadership. [2] They endeavored to ensure that the state would be established within the framework of international arrangements by the United Nations, a reduction of the East-West conflict, and the advanced economic development planned for former colonial states. [3]

In a letter in The Free World, Emanuel Neumann of the Zionist Organization directorate in the 1930s, Silver's faithful political aide and personal friend, sets forth guidelines for the social and political order in the Middle East after the war. [4] His point of departure was the need to abandon moribund Western imperialism as a political and social system. He maintained that Western intervention in the Middle East should be economic, social and intellectual, rather than political. Regional development should be its purpose, along the lines of the Lowdermilk Plan, an American Zionist initiative for regional water development involving Israel and other Middle Eastern states. The plan called for a broad economic initiative for regional development to benefit both Arabs and Jews, and whose very existence would strengthen the Jewish state by integrating it into the Middle East reality.

I have introduced this case in point to show that integrating Israel into forces perceived as imperialist in the Middle East arena was by no means
unavoidable: it aroused sharp debate within the Zionist establishment, not only on the fringes of the movement.

Professor Selim Yaqub's study is elegantly written, replete with important details and fascinating events. Its comprehensive bibliography includes detailed archival references with an instructive key. Photographs and caricatures illustrate each chapter, and the absorbing conclusion sets forth the long-range implications of the Eisenhower Doctrine to the present day. In his epilogue, Yaqub emphasizes some of the most important conclusions of his research: "Ultimately, however, neither resurgent Islam nor anti-Arab prejudice should be seen as a cause of the basic conflict between U.S. policy and Arab opinion, though both phenomena magnify its effect" (274). Scholars, students and interested lay readers are sure to find that this book provides a valuable addition to works dealing with the interrelationships in American and Middle Eastern history.

Notes:


[3] Silver's views on the desirable post-war world order exceed the scope of this review. See his opposition to the Korean War in an open letter to President Harry Truman, 11 January 1950, Silver Archive 3/24. Separating the Eretz Israel issue from the East-West struggle was especially difficult, given the American government's increasing concern over Soviet penetration in the Middle East. See Gaddis Smith: The American Secretaries of State and their Diplomacy, Vol. 16, Dean Acheson, New York 1972, 33-35.


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