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 the region was not so profoundly affected as other parts of the world in terms of loss of life or major revolutionary upheaval, it is clear that the lack of democracy and many decades of distorted political development in the Middle East are in great part a legacy of the region's involvement at 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 Fred 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.
>
> (Halliday 1997: 16)

Specifically, there were no significant pro-Soviet revolutionary movements and the overall casualties arising from 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). However, in addition to 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 polarized and/or anaesthetized 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. Recent scholarship also emphasizes the importance of seeing the period as part of the broader context of decolonization rather simply in the straightforward binaries US/Middle East versus USSR/Middle East (*International Journal of Middle East Studies* 2011: 317, 320; Laron, 2013). In addition, the regional clients of the superpowers made generous contributions to the destabilization 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 socio-economic development of the region, Cold War or no Cold War. Thus, although it helped to facilitate the once hopeful but by now largely defunct Oslo peace process (see Chapter 13), the end of the Cold War ultimately had little major impact on the Arab–Israeli conflict, at least not in the direction of bringing about a settlement, which, it was sometimes alleged, was being prevented by superpower rivalry. In much the same way, well before the end of the Cold War, the Iranian Revolution (although it included leftist forces) 'broke with the pattern that revolutionary insurgencies against the established order came mainly from the Marxist-inspired left' (Westad 2005: 288).

It is also important not to exaggerate the extent to which each superpower—especially the United States, whose influence was usually stronger, since it could offer more, and generally better quality, inducements—was able to control the actions, or force the obedience, of its local clients (Gaddis 2005: 128). 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 Soviet exasperation, expressed in the form of a temporary stoppage of arms deliveries). As already suggested, the amount of manipulation exercised by individuals such as Gamal Abd al-Nasser, Hafiz al-Asad, Saddam Hussein, and others should not be underestimated; the phenomenon of the 'tail wagging the dog' was very much in evidence over these decades. It now seems obvious (as historians can say with hindsight—although 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 that, 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, 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 at the time was 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 concern were, first, the desires of the superpowers to gain strategic advantage in the region given the departure, or imminent departure, of Britain and France, second, the fact that the region contained some two-thirds of the world's oil reserves in a context in which oil was becoming increasingly vital to the economy of the Western world, and, third, the fact that, in a novel way that 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 in the Middle East), 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 halfway across the world to assist its friends and allies in Iran or Turkey, it was rather easier for the Soviet Union, for example, to train and supply Greek guerrillas from Bulgaria and Yugoslavia (see the map in Kuniholm 1980: 403), or to support or encourage potentially friendly autonomist/separatist movements in Iranian Azerbaijan and Kurdistan (Sluglett 1986; Fawcett 1992).

The conflicts in Iran 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 almost equally strongly opposed. By the end of 1944, the Soviet Union was also becoming keenly interested in the situation in the Balkans; Bulgaria and Romania 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 capitalize on a combination of their own gathering strength, the Soviet connection, and Britain's declared intention to withdraw its occupation forces (Kalyvas 2006).

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 today (see **Box 3.1**).

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 sought either 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.[2] Such aspirations had been encouraged by the course of the Bolshevik Revolution, by the Jangali movement in neighbouring Gilan, on the south-western shore of the Caspian, between 1915 and 1921, by the short-lived Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran (Kuniholm 1980: 132; Chaqueiri 1995), and also, especially among the Iranian Kurds, by the more repressive aspects of some of Reza Shah's centralizing policies in the 1920s and 1930s.

Box 3.1 The Truman Doctrine

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. This was a fundamental issue in the war with Germany and Japan. Our victory was won over countries which sought to impose their will, and their way of life, upon other nations.

... We shall not realize our objectives, however, unless we are willing to help free peoples to maintain their free institutions and their national integrity against aggressive movements that seek to impose upon them totalitarian regimes. This is no more than a frank recognition that totalitarian regimes imposed on free peoples, by direct or indirect aggression, undermine the foundations of international peace and hence the security of the United States.

...

At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life. The choice is too often not a free one.

One way of life is based upon the will of the majority, and is distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression.

The second way of life is based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority. It relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio, fixed elections, and the suppression of personal freedoms.

I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.

I believe that we must assist free peoples to work out their own destinies in their own way.

(Full text in Kuniholm 1980: 434–9; also available online at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/trudoc.asp retrieved: July 2015)

In August 1941, as a result of the change in the international constellation of forces after the German invasion of Russia and because of Reza Shah's evidently pro-German leanings, British and Soviet forces entered and occupied Iran. The British remained south of an imaginary line connecting Hamadan, Tehran, and Mashhad (roughly 35° North), while Soviet forces occupied northern Iran, eventually controlling about a 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 (Sluglett 2014). However, on this occasion, perhaps not entirely to Britain's liking, a new political situation had come into being.

The nature of the wartime occupation of Iran and the forced abdication of Reza Shah ushered in a sudden flowering of political freedom, which not only benefited organized political groups, especially the communist 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 as many of the wealthier elements among the population, quickly left the north for the British zone in the south when the Russians came (Fawcett 1992: 201–21). Initially, things changed little when the United States entered the war after Pearl Harbor, but, in time, British (and Iranian) 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 had 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—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.

However, in spite of these 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 that recurs again and again throughout the Cold War—there were clear limits to the risks that the Soviet Union would take in any confrontation with the United States. In spite of threats and cajolery, it ultimately proved impossible for the Russians to wrest the oil concession that they wanted out of the Iranian majlis. 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, or 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 (Alvandi 2014; Fawcett 2014a).

It remains unclear what the Soviet Union's objectives were in Iran, although the opening of both Soviet and Azerbaijani archives have helped to expose both the nature and extent of Stalin's ambitions (Hasanli 2006). The USSR certainly sought 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 Anglo-Iranian Oil Company concession further south. It seems far-fetched to imagine that the Soviet Union actually wanted, or thought that it would be permitted, to annex north-western Iran permanently (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 must have served only 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 on the other the United States found itself equally obliged to defend 'free peoples' wherever it judged that their freedom was being threatened. We 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 all 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.[3] By the mid-to-late 1940s, US oil companies controlled at least 42 per cent of Middle Eastern oil, as well, of course, as having majority interests in companies nearer home (in Mexico and Venezuela, and in the US itself). Between the 1950s and 1970s, the Middle East gradually 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.[4]

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 nationalization of Iraqi oil in 1972 (Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett 2001: 123–6, 145–8). While much was made, and is still made occasionally, of the potential damage to the world economy that could be effected by a potential hostile group of 'revolutionaries'—or more recently (and almost equally implausibly) 'terrorists'—gaining control of one or more Middle Eastern oilfields, the history of the post-Cold War Middle East has shown such fears as 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 that came to power in the region (in Libya in 1969 and Iran in 1979) did not take long to direct their oil exports towards exactly the same markets as those favoured by their 'reactionary' or 'amoral' predecessors. Similarly,

although it certainly caused a major price hike, the oil embargo that 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 Āl Saud had come to power in the 1970s or 1980s and seized the oilfields, 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 its former customers.

Hence it is difficult to pinpoint 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 given that the Soviet Union had immense resources of its own, oil never really functioned as a contentious issue between East and West. Even oil nationalization, a heady rallying cry for countries eager to control their own economies, soon 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, in the second, much of the money so gained went not into the pockets of the toiling masses of the country concerned, but into those of the unscrupulous cliques in charge, whether in Iran, Iraq, Libya, or Saudi Arabia. Only the first of these moves, the nationalization 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.[5]

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. We have already mentioned some of the consequences of this in Greece and Iran in the 1940s, but this period of respite also put the Iraqi Communist Party in a better position 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 of 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 excepted territories had been subjected to economic or other kinds of pressure by the European powers. Thus Iran, although never actually colonized, 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 decolonization 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 decolonization 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 nationalization (during the Truman administration), 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 (Laron 2013). 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 South-East Asia and the Middle East, which he considered 'a catastrophic loss to human society [*sic*]'.[6]

In broad terms, the United States offered its own vision of modernity: initially that of a disinterested senior partner that could offer assistance, in terms of both goods and 'advice' to young nations struggling to become members of the 'free world' that 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. However, for many people in the region, the Soviet Union, parts of which were at least as underdeveloped as much of the Middle East in the 1940s and 1950s, offered an alternative vision: of an egalitarian society in which class divisions had been, or were being, abolished and in which 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 (Ismael 2008). 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. As Westad (2005: 86) comments, 'there is little doubt that it was the second war in Europe that destroyed both the will and the ability of European elites to keep their colonial possessions'. In addition, something of a power vacuum was going to 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 decolonization of North Africa, particularly Algeria, would take longer and would be extremely painful and costly. As far as Palestine was concerned, the Labour cabinet first wanted to cling on, and then, seeing 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 just described, the Soviet Union went into a period of relative isolation (not only, of course, in the Middle East), from which it began to emerge only 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 vis-à-vis Israel always remained one of the choicest of the many big sticks that 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 largely a product of wishful thinking in the Kremlin and had very little foundation in fact.

In the late 1940s, the East–West conflict was symbolized particularly by the Berlin blockade and the Korean War: after the early incidents already noted, it was some time before the Middle East developed into an arena of conflict. In fact, Soviet interest in the developing world in general remained fairly subdued until after 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 organizing the defence of the 'Free World', with the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (of which Turkey became a member in 1952). In 1955, the United States created (although it did not join) the Baghdad Pact, which brought Britain and the states of the so-called 'Northern Tier'—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 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 East 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 some of the clients (in the Middle East and elsewhere in the developing 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 example.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Cold War in the Middle East was the agility 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. But it took quite 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 liberalizing effects of the 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 realize that 'with the old gang in power this country cannot help to progress very far' (quoted in Louis 1984: 309). Nevertheless, there were limits to the amount of pressure that Britain, and behind it the United States, was prepared to bring to bear on Iraqi governments immediately after the war. Given Nuri al-Said's very close ties with Britain, the debacle in Palestine was evidently a serious embarrassment for him, 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 2.3 million Iraqi dinar, or ID, in 1946, to ID13.3 million in 1951, to ID84.4 million in 1955), the *ancien régime* was able to put off what seemed to many observers to be 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 that Stalin 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, evidently acting on behalf of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia 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 East 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 make Iraq 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 long-standing 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 that 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 US intervention had been crucial in bringing the Suez crisis so swiftly to an end.[7] 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', the US 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.

The Eisenhower administration's responses to Suez, the attempt to build up King Saud of Saudi Arabia as a counterweight to Nasser, and the pledge to come to the aid of nations threatened by 'international communism' (the Eisenhower Doctrine) had little immediate impact on Iraq (Kunz 2002). The Iraqi public's imagination had been much more excited by the announcement of the setting up of the United Arab Republic (UAR) of Egypt and Syria in February 1958 (Sluglett 2002). However, the declaration would set alarm bells ringing in Washington: the Iraq Petroleum Company's pipelines to the Mediterranean crossed Syria and, by the spring of 1958, the UAR was threatening Lebanon—or so the United States' friends in the Lebanese government were alleging (Kunz 2002: 88).

As has been shown elsewhere (Sluglett 2002), it is most unlikely that there was any direct involvement of either Egypt or the Soviet Union in the Iraqi Revolution of 1958. Of course, both countries welcomed the change of regime in Baghdad, especially early indications that the country would tilt in the direction of 'Arabism', or 'positive neutralism', or both. But, for all of his talk of Arab unity, Nasser was actually quite wary of extending his remit further across the Middle East. The UAR had been the Syrian Baath's idea rather than Nasser's, and the pressure for post-revolutionary Iraq to join the UAR came, again, from Arab nationalist groupings in Iraq, not from Cairo.

As for the Soviet Union, the notion gradually developed in the Kremlin and its think tanks in the late 1950s and early 1960s that national liberation movements that pursued the 'non-capitalist road' when they came to power could be considered worthy allies and partners. However desirable it might be that they should immediately choose the 'socialist road', few newly independent states either did so or showed any particular desire to do so—Cuba being the exception. This explains the complex and uncertain relations between the Soviet Union

and, say, Egypt, or Iraq, or Syria, throughout the Cold War. The military regimes that seized power in the Middle East in the 1950s and 1960s were nationalist and anti-imperialist, and sought, and generally achieved, independence for their countries, but they were not, however Western analysts might choose to portray them, socialist or communist. Indeed, for the most part they were highly suspicious of and hostile to socialism and communism, and of those who espoused such ideas locally (Ismael 2008; Sassoon 2014). At the same time, while the Soviet Union was keen to intervene in, and exert influence upon, regional conflicts, it would not do so to the extent of seriously endangering or threatening its generally status-quo-upholding relationship with the West. Soviet military planners also knew that, in the event of a military confrontation, they would not be equipped to challenge American superiority.

These limitations on Soviet power, and greater or lesser degrees of local understanding of them, explain much of the 'now hot, now cold' relationship between the Soviet Union and the Arab states. The West would not give the Arab states weapons that might result in them gaining military superiority; the Soviet Union would not either, but it did supply, generally on rather easy terms, the kind of bread-and-butter military hardware that the Arab states could roll out for their publics on Army Day or National Independence Day.[8] In brief, Iraq and the Soviet Union went through something of a honeymoon period for much of the first twenty years of the republic (until the late 1970s), especially after the (fairly early) souring of the Soviet–Egyptian relationship. Throughout the period, Iraqi public rhetoric was almost entirely anti-American (anti-imperialist) and anti-Zionist, while being full of praise for 'our Soviet and socialist friends'. Of course, the Soviet Union was obliged to swallow some fairly bitter pills along the way, including the massacre of much of the communist left in 1963, the Baath's crude national socialist demagoguery, and the abandonment of any pretence that it was following a 'non-capitalist road' after the late 1970s (Ismael 2008; Franzén 2011). There were some little triumphs, perhaps most notably the nationalization of Iraqi oil in 1972, which had been undertaken with generous (and widely acknowledged) technical assistance from the Soviet Union. Although oil nationalization was wildly popular in Iraq and added greatly to the cachet of the Baath government, lack of accountability meant that a large proportion of the proceeds of the nationalized oil went into the pockets of Saddam Hussein and his cronies, and was indeed a major factor in enabling them to stay in power for so long.

For the United States, obsessed by its crusade against communism, the overthrow of Qasim in February 1963 and the massacre of the left that followed were regarded as positive developments, akin to the overthrow of Musaddiq ten years earlier and the overthrow of Allende ten years later. While the Shah was alive, it was reckoned that he would be able to contain the Iraqi regime and act as the US policeman in the Gulf. Until the 1970s, Iraq could be written off as hopelessly 'socialist' and 'pro-Soviet', and as such was an object of fashionable concern and approval in some more short-sighted and forgetful European leftist circles (Farouk-Sluglett 1982). After the oil price rise that followed the Arab–Israeli War of 1973, Iraq's income from oil tripled within two years, and went up almost tenfold between 1973 and 1982. With the disappearance of Iran from the scene in 1979–80, Iraq became the second largest market in the Middle East, after Saudi Arabia, for European, American, and Japanese goods.

Finally, with the fall of the Shah and the rise of the Islamic Republic, the United States became very anxious to find another policeman to take the Shah's place. Thus, while initially cautious, it eventually threw its weight behind Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1980, probably thinking, along with Saddam Hussein, that the chaos within Iran would mean that the new

regime would fall with comparative ease. When it became clear that this was not going to happen, the United States supplied Iraq—either directly or through third countries—with the latest military technology and advanced weaponry, and either gave Iraq, or otherwise allowed it to receive, the means to manufacture chemical (and most probably biological) weapons (Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett 2001: 266–8), often in contravention of its own laws. Soviet–Iraqi relations had been under intense strain since 1978 (and GDR–Iraqi relations even more so: see Sassoon 2014), when the Baath had turned against the communists again, and Iraq was moving steadily closer to the United States. However, after Khomeini banned the Tudeh Party and cancelled a number of agreements with the Soviet Union, and especially after Iran began to gain footholds within Iraq in 1982–83, the Soviet Union shifted its support back to Iraq, although only for the duration of the war (Golan 1992: 47–53). Thus the Cold War came to an end with the Soviet Union having spent its final few years on the same side as the United States in the war between Iran and Iraq.

Conclusion

To return to a theme mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, let us discuss briefly some of the distortions that the Cold War created in the internal politics of the states of the Middle East. Although counterfactual history is thought to be a rather risqué activity for historians, it clearly has its uses in international relations and political science (Nye 1997: 42–5). Thus it is reasonable (if the speculation remains within the parameters of common sense) to speculate on how Middle Eastern history and politics might have developed if such-and-such had or had not happened, or if such-and-such an action had or had not been taken. This speculation, however, will form the subtext, rather than the main body, of what follows.

It is often alleged that democracy has no 'natural' roots in the Middle East, or more generally in the Islamic world, and hence that the growth of democratic institutions in such stony soil cannot and should not be expected. It is worth pointing out to such doubters, first, that Egypt, Tunisia, the Ottoman Empire, and Iran all had constitutions of a kind before 1914; second, that Western/Westminster democracy has no roots in Japan; and third, that such roots as there may have been in Weimar Germany or Italy were extirpated almost entirely by the excesses of the 1930s and 1940s. However shakily, all three countries (as well as Turkey and India in their own ways, while not exactly the obvious heirs) have maintained a fair semblance of democracy for some six decades. Whether this is natural or unnatural is rather beside the point.

In the geographical space between Western Morocco and Eastern Iran, only two countries, Turkey and Israel, have more-or-less recognizable parliamentary democracies in which the opposition can and has become the government on several occasions. Even here the record is less than spotless, given the number of military interventions in Turkish politics and the fact that at least a third of those whom Israel rules have virtually no say in most of the basic aspects of their governance.

It was not always so. In the inter-war and immediately post-war period, there were lively and contested parliamentary elections in Iran, Iraq, and Syria, and perhaps also in Egypt. Part of—perhaps most of—what killed this off in the 1950s was the pressure of the Cold War. Mostly founded in the 1930s, the Middle Eastern communist parties had fairly limited

connections with Moscow, which, as we have seen, did not have particularly strong ties with the region. Unfortunately, the nature of the East–West conflict meant that, for example, when the monarchy was restored in Iran after the overthrow of Musaddiq, or the United Arab Republic of Egypt and Syria was set up, or Qasim's regime was overthrown in Iraq, such events were followed by the round-up and imprisonment, torture, and (especially in Iraq in 1963) the execution of thousands of local communists and leftists and their suspected sympathizers.

If one looks at what the communists were actually advocating or at what they did achieve in the limited arenas in which they were able to take some brief charge, it was quite modest and restrained: the creation of trade unions; the fundamentals of compensated land reform; the nationalization of leading industries; free health and welfare programmes; and so on. In fact, with the exception of land reform, which was not on the agenda in Western Europe, these goals were prominent on the platforms of almost all Western European social democratic parties. In Britain, for example, mostly during the post-war Labour government between 1945 and 1951, the railways and the mines were nationalized, a national health service was put in place, there was a free educational system from elementary school to university, and so on.

In the Middle East, the communists and the left were increasingly persecuted and driven underground in the 1950s and 1960s. This group included, it is reasonably safe to say, most of the leading intellectuals of their day, those who could not be bought and/or co-opted by the regimes that came to power. Their influence on the cultural life of the region was paramount and lasting. For the most part, potentially leftist or left-leaning regimes were replaced by more or less vicious forms of national socialist dictatorship, or, in the case of Iran under the Shah, by an autocracy that became increasingly less benevolent as the years passed.[9] The US and British intelligence agencies were behind the coup that overthrew Mussadiq and restored the Shah in 1953; perhaps less well known is the fact that the CIA was involved in the coup that overthrew Qasim in Iraq in February 1963 and that it had also been in touch with members of the Baath party, most probably including Saddam Hussein, since the late 1950s, on the grounds that the party was both the 'force of the future' and virulently anti-communist (Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett 2001: 327, n. 3). Obviously, being a leftist in Egypt was somewhat less dangerous than being a leftist in Syria or Iran, and being a leftist in Syria or Iran was still less dangerous than being a leftist in Iraq. In any case, survival—or at least not being persecuted—was largely a matter of chance and connections.

Perhaps the most unfortunate general consequence of this pathological fear, or hatred, of local communists and leftists that the Cold War encouraged, even if it did not actually engender it, was that secular opposition was driven underground almost everywhere in the Middle East. In such circumstances, 'politics' either became extraordinarily dangerous or degenerated into sycophancy. Opposition to, or criticism of, the regime, or of the leader's policies, became tantamount to treason and could be punished as such (Makiya 1998; Sassoon 2012). As a consequence, what opposition there was drifted into the hands of religious organizations of various kinds, since, in Islamic countries, governments cannot ultimately close down the mosques.

This, then, seems to have been one of the more tragic consequences of the Cold War. The obsession with persecuting and reducing the influence of the left had two results: first, the maintenance in power of a series of unattractive, unrepresentative, and generally dictatorial

regimes of whatever political hue; and second, the rise of the religious right. In the case of the latter, we are now faced with uncontrollable forces that believe, or purport to believe, in place of more rational political programmes, that 'Islam is the only solution'. The Soviet Union has collapsed and the Cold War has come to end—but the scars that this conflict has left on the Middle East will not quickly go away.

Key events

1945–46	Autonomist movements in Iranian Azerbaijan and Kurdistan
1948	Israel recognized by the United States and the Soviet Union; 750,000 Palestinian refugees created
1952	Egyptian Revolution
1951–53	Iranian oil nationalization crisis
1954–55	Egypt and Syria purchase arms from the USSR via Czechoslovakia
1956	Suez Canal Crisis
1958	Iraqi Revolution
1963	Overthrow of Qasim regime in Iraq, masterminded by US Central Intelligence Agency
1967	Six-Day Arab–Israeli War: Israel gains control of Gaza, Golan Heights, West Bank, Sinai Peninsula
1968	Baath Party (nominally pro-Soviet) takes power in Iraq
1973	October (Ramadan) War between Israel, Egypt, and Syria
1974	Palestine Liberation Organization (nominally supported by Soviet Union) recognized as sole legitimate representative of the Palestinians
1975	Lebanese civil war
1978	Camp David accords: treaty between Egypt and Israel
1979	Fall of the Shah; installation of the Iranian Revolution
1980–88	War between Iran and Iraq
1981	Assassination of Sadat; smooth succession by Mubarak
1990	Iraq invades Kuwait

Further reading

Abrahamian, E. (1982) *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
In-depth study of the formation and activities of the Tudeh (Communist) Party of Iran.

Batatu, H. (1978) *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'thists and Free Officers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)

A study of the Iraqi Communist Party that charts the chequered and tragic progression of this organization for much of the Cold War.

Carrère d'Encausse, H. (1975) *La Politique Soviètique au Moyen Orient, 1955–1975* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques)
The clearest account of the beginnings of Soviet involvement in the Middle East after the death of Stalin.

Farouk-Sluglett, M. and Sluglett, P. (1983) 'Labor and National Liberation: The Trade Union Movement in Iraq, 1920–1958', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 5(2): 139–54
This article traces the linkages between the struggle for national independence and the activities of the Iraqi Communist Party.

Fawcett, L. (1992) *Iran and the Cold War: The Azerbaijan Crisis of 1946* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
A comprehensive account of attempts to form an independent Azeri government in northern Iran with Soviet assistance.

Franzén, J. (2011) *Red Star over Iraq: Iraqi Communism before Saddam* (London: Hurst)
Discusses the widespread influence of the Iraqi Communist Party in the second half of the twentieth century.

Ismael, T. (2008) *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
A thorough account of the influence of the Soviet Union, and particularly of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), on the leadership of the Iraqi Communist Party.

Kuniholm, B. (1980) *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey and Greece* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
See in particular the sections on Greece and Turkey.

Laron, G (2013) *Origins of the Suez Crisis: Postwar Development Diplomacy and the Struggle over Third World Industrialization, 1945–1956* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press)
A more Egypt-focused account of the crisis.

Louis, W. R. (1984) *The British Empire in the Middle East 1945–1951: Arab Nationalism, the United States and Postwar Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
The most authoritative account of the gradual replacement of Britain by the United States as the dominant power in the Middle East.

Louis, W. R. and Owen, R. (eds) (2002) *A Revolutionary Year: The Middle East in 1958* (London: I. B. Tauris/Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press)
The volume contains a number of useful essays on the various crises of 1958.

Nye, J. (1997) *Understanding International Conflicts* (New York: Longman)
Immensely helpful in trying to understand the wider ramifications of the Cold War.

Sayigh, Y. and Shlaim, A. (eds) (1997) *The Cold War and the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
The most comprehensive work on this period.

Questions

1. How was the Middle East drawn into the early Cold War?
2. Did the Cold War impede the process of democratization in the Middle East?
3. Which superpower best achieved its goals in the Middle East?

4. Were regional states superpower pawns or did they demonstrate independent agency? Give examples.
5. Why were communist parties relatively unsuccessful in the Middle East?

Notes

1. 'Only when we begin to allocate full agency to Arab governments can we allocate full agency to the populations; a deterministic worldview of a hegemonic United States or West has a disempowering effect, since it locates the source of all ills exclusively in the West' (Farouk-Sluglett 1994: 105). On 'victimhood', see Makiya (1993: 253–60).
2. It probably also reflected local disappointment at the fact that much of the promise of the Constitutional Revolution had not been fulfilled (Fawcett 1992: 12). See also Sluglett (2014).
3. 'It has been taken for granted ... that American interests must have actual physical control of, or at least assured access to, adequate and properly located sources of [oil] supply' (Herbert Feis, wartime economic adviser to the State Department, quoted in Stork 1975: 29).
4. In 1970, 6.8 per cent of OPEC crude oil went to North America, 55.8 per cent to Western Europe, and 21.3 per cent to the Far East. In 1990, 22.7 per cent went to North America, 34.9 per cent to Western Europe, and 30.7 per cent to the Far East. Relatively small amounts of OPEC crude, mostly from Iran and Iraq, went to the USSR and Eastern Europe: 0.2 per cent in 1970 and 2.3 per cent in 1990. Although Soviet oil production doubled between 1970 and 1990, it represented only about 0.6 per cent of world production in 1970 and 1.3 per cent in 1990 (OPEC 1991: Tables 25, 26; this source does not separate the Middle Eastern/North African members of OPEC from the non-Middle Eastern/North African members—Ecuador, Gabon, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Venezuela). In 1970 and 1990, oil exports from these countries accounted for 20.8 per cent and 23.3 per cent of the OPEC total, respectively (OPEC 1991: Table 23).
5. The incident caused a major, if temporary, rift in Anglo–American relations, since the United States had already accepted the principle of fifty–fifty profit-sharing between ARAMCO and the government of Saudi Arabia, and could not understand why Britain did not see that it would eventually have to bow to the inevitable and follow suit (see Louis 1988). In *The British Empire in the Middle East 1945–1951*, Louis (1984: 655) quotes George McGhee, the Assistant Secretary of State for the region, himself an independently wealthy oil man, as having 'left the British in no doubt whatever that he believed "Anglo-Persian" to be niggardly and short-sighted'.
6. Admittedly, this lament was uttered in the context of very considerable European hostility to US policy in Vietnam. Echoing the Blair government's support of the United States in 2002–03, the British government was one of the US's few unwavering supporters in the late 1960s (Louis and Owen 2002: 1–25).
7. In the sense of this comment by the associate dean of the Faculty of International Affairs at Columbia University at a conference in December 1968: '[The West] accepts the idea of full national self-determination in the Middle East, as elsewhere. The last doubt on that score was dissipated by the clear United States stand in the Suez crisis of 1956' (Mosely 1969: 227).
8. Thus Iraq spent US$12 billion on materiel between 1985 and 1989, of which US$7 billion worth was purchased from the Soviet Union. Iraq's second largest supplier was France, which received US$2 billion.
9. '... for every Iranian, including me, the great, paramount fact about the US government was that it had overthrown Mossadegh, helped to create a terrifying secret police, and, as we saw it, used its immense power to control our monarch for its own purposes, just as the British always had' (Farman Farmaian and Munker 1992: 349).