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The United States and The Middle East and North Africa

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In the years following World War II, the United States viewed international relations as a polarity between Communist and non-Communist states. She carried this perspective with her to the Middle East and, as a result, intensified both the Arab-Israeli dispute and the contrast between the conservative monarchial Arab States and the populist socialist ones. In order to retrieve her position in the region, the United States must cease to regard the area as a scenario of the cold war and must promote there a fluid regional system with several poles of power. This course of action offers the prospect of undermining political extremism and providing a measure of security for the states in the area.

THE UNITED STATES

AND

THE MIDDLE EAST

AND

NORTH AFRICA

A lecture delivered to the Naval Command Course

at the Naval War College

by

Dr. Abdul A. Said

Captain Ulhricht, members of the faculty, gentlemen, I am honored to be here and be reunited with my old friend Fred Ulbriecht and my many other friends from the American University.

My presentation will focus upon the development and present directions of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa. While I come with no answers, I hope to formulate some of the important issues involved in U.S. strategy in the Middle East and North Africa.¹

A national strategy may be simply defined as a general plan for the accomplishment of national purpose by the employment of national resources. This definition denotes the three essential ingredients of any strategy: purpose (ends), resources (means), and plans (the relating of ends and means).² A national strategy thus requires: firstly, a

formulation of national purpose to serve as a constant criterion of choice; secondly, an overall estimate of the operational environment in which the state must act in the future; thirdly, the presence of an adequate capability for the accomplishment of each objective. A key element in strategic planning is the strategic concept—a composite formulation of national purpose, situational estimate, and practical principles that becomes the working doctrine of

¹A more elaborate treatment of U.S. security in the Middle East is found in Abdul A. Said, ed., *America's World Role in the 70's* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970).

²For more elaboration on the concept of strategy utilized here, see Charles O. Lelche, Jr., *The Cold War and After* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 21-25.

government in carrying out its foreign policy. It is in terms of the accepted strategic concept of a state that most objectives are selected and most courses of action carried out.

American diplomats have, in recent years, seen their best efforts reap a harvest of frustration and failure in the Middle East and North Africa. The distempers of American foreign policy in this area have been aggravated by recent developments, and these developments have created a set of entirely new conditions in the region. While American diplomatic, cultural, and commercial relations with the Middle East and North Africa can be traced to the early days of the Republic, it was not until the U.S. entry into World War II that Washington began to develop a national strategy regarding the region.

The United States has chosen to emphasize the element of protection and thus has committed itself to a strategy of defense in the middle East, striving primarily toward turning back threats to the position of power it enjoyed in the region. It is a strategy that seeks stability. Whatever means it chose to implement its policy in the area—the lend-lease legislation, the Truman and Eisenhower Doctrines, the admission of Turkey to NATO, the Baghdad/CENTO alliance, or bilateral defense agreements with selected states—the United States has consistently pursued a dual objective. It has sought to prevent incursions from hostile powers, Hitler's Germany and more recently the Soviet Union, and to defend the status quo by guaranteeing the territorial integrity of the states of the region. Of course, the United States has also sought to cultivate friendly relations with the individual states of the region, but this objective has not been given equal priority.

The United States embarked upon its Middle Eastern strategy with overwhelming advantages vis-a-vis its rival, the Soviet Union. Although neither

competitor was without political liabilities, the Soviet Union, whose threats and efforts at intimidation were of a fairly recent vintage, labored under greater disadvantages than the United States. U.S. success in thwarting Communist subversive efforts in Greece in 1947, its firm support to Turkey against Russian territorial demands in 1946, and its endeavors in rescuing Iran's rich northern provinces from the Red army occupation enhanced further the position of Washington in the Middle East and North Africa.

America's containment policy proved to be a deterrent to Russian expansionism in Turkey and Iran, but it was no guarantee for a continued Arab friendship in the face of Washington's support to Israel. The Arabs knew little and cared less about Russia's threat to Iran and Turkey or about the cost in human life which the Soviet Union paid in achieving a rapid industrialization of the country. The primary concern of the Arabs was not with communism or democracy, capitalism or socialism, but with Zionism. It was this transnational religious ideology that posed to them a serious threat.

That U.S. relations with the Arabs have slipped badly is evident in the fact that the American Government has no formal diplomatic ties with nearly half of their governments. Americans are the object of severe reproach because of their seeming partiality on the Arab-Israeli question, their provision of arms to Tel Aviv, and their declining aid levels for all but the favored few.

By contrast, the Soviet Union has made dramatic inroads in the Middle East and North Africa since 1955 and today maintains close ties with such states as the U.A.R., Syria, Algeria, Iraq, and Yemen. Moscow has successfully cultivated friendly relations with Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan, three Middle Eastern members of the Central Treaty Organization. It has become an arms purveyor for such peripheral areas as

Morocco, Sudan, and South Yemen. The Soviet entry into the arms market was in itself significant, but its significance is enhanced by Moscow's decision to maintain, on a permanent basis, a naval fleet in the Mediterranean. Not since the Franco-Russian alliance of the 1890's had the Russians given serious consideration to becoming a Mediterranean power, but within less than 15 years the Soviet Union assembled a formidable force and virtually checkmated the power of the American 6th Fleet.

From the midfifties to the present, the Soviet Union has committed itself to a strategy of attack, constantly seeking opportunities to capitalize on a dynamic environment. In the process it has given the Mideast a higher priority in relation to other foreign policy objectives.

Both the United States and the Soviet Union were pulled into the power vacuum created by the withdrawal of the colonial powers from the Middle East, and both feel compelled to pursue their self-determined interests in the region. But, in the light of the declining importance of the Suez Canal, neither set of interests is supported by vital necessities of foreign policy. The United States has chosen to pursue vaguely defined interests from Vietnam to Suez in much the same style as the colonial powers of the 19th century. The Suez Canal is America's lifeline to nowhere. Such behavior raises the question: Should today's great powers legitimately claim interest identical with the great power interests of the colonial era?

As in Southeast Asia and the Far East, Soviet Middle Eastern interests are manifested in a pattern of increasing response to the pressures of an expanding American influence in the area. Russian interests in the region also include the defense of her own national boundaries against any military action based in the Mideast. She is also in-

terested in the Persian Gulf oil reserves. Furthermore, the positive gains resulting from a spirited Soviet response to American initiatives are often of some value, however temporary. Nonetheless, the goals of Soviet policy in the Middle East are essentially limited.

In the classical balance of power system, strategic interests could only be achieved by the maintenance of local forces in being. Similar results are possible in today's world, dominated as it is by the superpowers, without the permanent presence of power. This concept takes on added significance in the Middle Eastern context. The issue is not whether we must consolidate U.S. perimeters of defense in an increasingly undelineated arena, but whether the overlapping of spheres of influence, by its very nature, will not create such a delineation. In the classical system, Napoleon's Egyptian campaign was intended to secure protection against other European powers, rather than expanding the perimeter of French influence. Conversely, in the present international system, U.S. strategic interests must be determined not by the presence of power, but by the power of influence.

In today's world, where it is possible for the superpowers to confront one another from within their own territories, it is increasingly difficult for them to justify their continued presence in such areas as the Middle East, where the presence of a great power is immediately taken to imply ambition rather than charity.

Traditionally, influence took the form of actual physical presence. At a time when defense technology was less advanced, it coincided with Soviet-American confrontations more directly than it does today; hence the Middle East was of immense strategic importance to the United States. Strategic bases were built in the region to allow for a variety of American attack routes on the Soviet Union and to protect

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ourselves from the medium-range Soviet bombers. Wherever we could, we attempted to establish strategically important bases; our presence was designed to counter Soviet power rather than exert local influence.

Despite the fact that the United States and the Soviet Union are able to conduct their strategic roles from within their own territories, both powers have chosen to export their confrontation in the Middle East. In so doing, they are vulnerable to the violent forces of the regional historical experience, including nationalism and revolution.

By June 1967 Washington and Moscow had inherited a cargo of woe in the Middle East and North Africa. They had also lost much of their ability to control events in the area and much of their eagerness to formulate all regional questions in cold war terms as well. Although the momentum imported by earlier decisions still carries both of them forward along familiar paths, their present talks about the Arab-Israeli dispute suggest that both are pessimistic about the prospects of salvaging much out of the region.

In the Middle East and North Africa are found an infinity of human, social, economic, and political variations. With all the conditions of conflict so dramatically evident, it should come as no surprise that the conceptual integrity of the strategies of both major powers has been seriously compromised as they have sought to prosecute the struggle in this region. The struggle has been neither ideological nor military-political. Instead, it has been an only partly successful attempt by both sides to capitalize on circumstances of local vacuums of power.

Early Soviet successes in the Middle East have come from its skill at capitalizing upon local conditions of unrest and potential revolution. The Soviet Union has also become haffled by the crosscurrents of the policies of the region. Obviously counting on local

Communist Parties to spearhead subversion while at the same time working for improved diplomatic relations with native regimes, Moscow appeared to be developing a double-pronged offensive in such states as Egypt and Iraq. But these regimes refused to play the game the Soviet way. They suppressed their indigenous Communist Parties and still maintained friendly relations with the U.S.S.R., accepting the aid she offered. The Sino-Soviet rift has also presented additional problems to the Soviets in the region.

No matter what turn the Soviet-American conflict took and no matter what level of threats and indirect action were reached by either or both sides, it seemed almost impossible to secure an outcome that would provide an unequivocal victory or defeat for either party. The dazzling complexity of Middle Eastern and North African politics produces ambiguous results. The United States, preferring a single dichotomy of Communists to fight against and anti-Communists with whom to be allies, found itself caught several times in artificially polarized situations. Washington often acted forcefully to destroy all alternatives except those of the extreme right and extreme left. Iraq in 1958 is only one such illustration.

In assessing U.S. security in the Middle East and North Africa, we must recognize that there are few positions as difficult as that of the United States in the decolonized areas, particularly in this part of the world. The fact that in 1778 the United States courted the regencies of Rabat and Tunis and the court of Fez and that it even went to the point of asking Louis XVI for his "bon offices" in bringing the United States closer to North Africa, or the fact that Morocco was one of the first units to recognize the independence of the United States has no significance in the contemporary international system. There are very few cultural or psychological ties linking the United States

with the region. Differing internal organizations, economic structures, customs, language, aspirations, beliefs, philosophy, and religion constitute major obstacles.

Despite the efforts of Roosevelt and Wilson to achieve self-determination for colonial states, American benevolence and humanitarianism have not resulted in predictable reactions of gratitude. Without entering into the details of a complex social analysis, it would be wise to recall a few fundamental facts about the Middle East before labeling the instability there as ingratitude or incomprehension.

The superior quality of the resource materials and technicians provided by the United States could have brought about a closer relationship with the recipient states assisted. Now, however, anti-Americanism is rampant. Resentment of the United States is aggravated by Communist propaganda perfectly adapted to logically simple minds. Imperialism and colonialism are favorite topics for discussion in a region where traditionally there have always been appreciative audiences and garrulous orators.

In the Middle East and North Africa the conditions of life, dictated by the scarcity of natural resources (or a lack of skill), have fostered a passion for "easy money" which is considered a blessing which one should not have the naivete to reject. This process, in the mind of the people of the region, can be traced to the naivete of the donor which is formulated in the following way: He who gives money inevitably has much more. His gift can be but a modest one in relationship to that which he really possesses. The giver's only intention is to buy at a low price a commodity whose value he feels the recipient does not know (hence he is ignorant). This is a charity which is insufficient and unappreciated. In the Middle East, a sub-continent ravaged by wars, invasions, schisms, the locusts, the south wind,

and tribal hatred, the disinterested gesture does not exist. A gift is a trap, an insult, or both.

The United States as well as the Soviet Union, being "equal partners in the game," have chosen to continue the competition using traditional, if not classical, methods of political gaming. In such a system, providing military assistance, military advisers, and the like, including at times rather sophisticated weaponry, replaces the traditional military chase and, in so doing, creates a political base which is equal to a center of military power in the traditional system.

In the Middle Eastern and North African context, democracy represents an attempt to organize progress while communism attempts to disorganize tradition. Both ideologies operate in an environment where change is viewed as detrimental since it challenges tradition. Economic and social advancement in the region is a slow process in which democracy, in its attempt to organize change and understand tradition, has merely permeated it. Communism has been appealing only when Soviet or Chinese seduction can be invoked to gain and consolidate one's position momentarily. Western democracy is not synonymous with modernization nor is communism synonymous with exploitation. The Middle Easterner finds his identity by comparing himself to East and West; concluding that he is different, he rejects both.

Similarly, democracy has had little lasting effect in the Middle East except to the extent that it has moved a United States driven by military imperatives to bestow economic favors on those countries which demonstrate accommodating attitudes. Tunisia and Morocco, for example, continue to receive American aid primarily because of their approval of the U.S. role in Vietnam and their moderate stand in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Algerian and Syrian radicalism and Tunisian and Moroccan moderation

characterize the only clear-cut successes of revolutionary communism and Western democracy in the entire area.

Today the American approach of containment and the guarantee of Israel and Arab territorial integrity is clearly counterproductive; it both perpetuates interregional tensions and accelerates regional hostilities. As a foreign policy style, anticommunism is particularly inappropriate to the Middle East. Beyond clan loyalties, no ideology—including Islam, pan-Arabism, or Arab socialism—has stimulated an enthusiastic, sustained popular response. Middle Eastern Communist Parties are notoriously weak in terms of real political power.

The American anti-Communist approach has resulted in a divided region with reactionary, monarchist, U.S.-supported client states in complex confrontation with revolutionary, populist, essentially nonaligned states which tend to gravitate toward the Soviet Union. Similarly, the American objective of guaranteed Israeli and Arab frontiers merely reinforces Israel's overwhelmingly centripetal isolation. It has allowed the Israelis the luxury of ignoring the several compelling reasons for them to adjust to the realities of their regional environment. The stubborn American commitment to Israel has, at the same time, provided Arab leadership with a scapegoat—Zionist-American imperialism—on which to blame all the ills of the Arab world.

Before discussing proposals for a new American security role in the Middle East and North Africa, it is necessary to recall that U.S. policy in the region is inherently limited by two considerations. Military intervention provides, at best, only a temporary and precarious base for the extension of national power. Nonmilitary policy options, including economic aid, technical assistance, and diplomatic pressure, provide no certain guarantees of American success in influencing local politics.

Recognizing these limitations upon

American foreign policy, what are the changing security requirements of the United States in the Middle East and North Africa? Politically the United States should attempt to encourage the inherent fluidity of the region. It should, however, also attempt to structure the shifts of political alignments by inducing Turkey and Iran to assume a more active role in regional politics. Third parties such as France, Yugoslavia, and other European states should be encouraged to participate in the exercise of this policy. The existence of such powers could offer the other states of the region alternative outlets for the external expression of sovereignties.

This political dimension of a positive American policy can be implemented only by considering the possibility that democracy can be counter to U.S. interests and communism counter to Soviet interests. This would allow us to support or oppose governments without regard for their domestic or external ideological commitments. By deemphasizing our identification with our client states, they would no longer be dependent upon our resources and would become more inward looking and viable. In short, the United States should support governments with the purpose of fracturing the transitional alignments which now exist in the region.

The United States should admit the inherently counterproductive effects of the Truman and Eisenhower Doctrines and CENTO, which have merely introduced cold war tensions and polarized the Middle East and North Africa into pro- or anti-Western camps. It should realize that the cost of American "military presence" on bases in Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Morocco has outweighed strategic American gains. Instead, the United States should concentrate on its ability to influence events from the Mediterranean. Naval power can replace land bases, a phenomenon which the Soviets are capably demonstrating. Because the Middle Eastern and North

African brand of revolutionary communism threatens to disorganize regional traditions, the United States should exploit the resulting social disruptions and political chaos with the assurance that the people and governments of the area will eventually incline toward the lesser of "their two evils."

The second dimension of a positive U.S. policy consists of Middle Eastern-American social and economic cooperation to affect revolution in the area. The United States should concentrate on what is satisfactory to it and not on what the region can expect from it. This concerted effort must rest on the elaboration of those areas of interest that are common to the states of the area and the United States. Generally speaking, these may be limited to questions of development of regional cooperation, trade agreements, and narrowing the widening gap between human needs and resources in the region.

This common effort should take a decidedly regional cast; it must not remain a part of cold war calculations. Rather, it must rest firmly on the identity of specifically Middle Eastern-North African and American interests. Extraregional cooperation should proceed on an *ad hoc* basis, and divergent interest and resultant policies should be tolerated.

What would this fluid regional system with several poles of power imply for the states of the Middle East and North Africa? The polarized camps of

reactionary, monarchist, anti-Communist states and of revolutionary, populist, socialist states would dissolve into nonideological alignments. The security of all states in the region would be increased by diminishing the possibility of hostile and rigid coalitions being formed against them; all would find increased safety in multiple centers of power competing with one another, perhaps along constructive channels.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

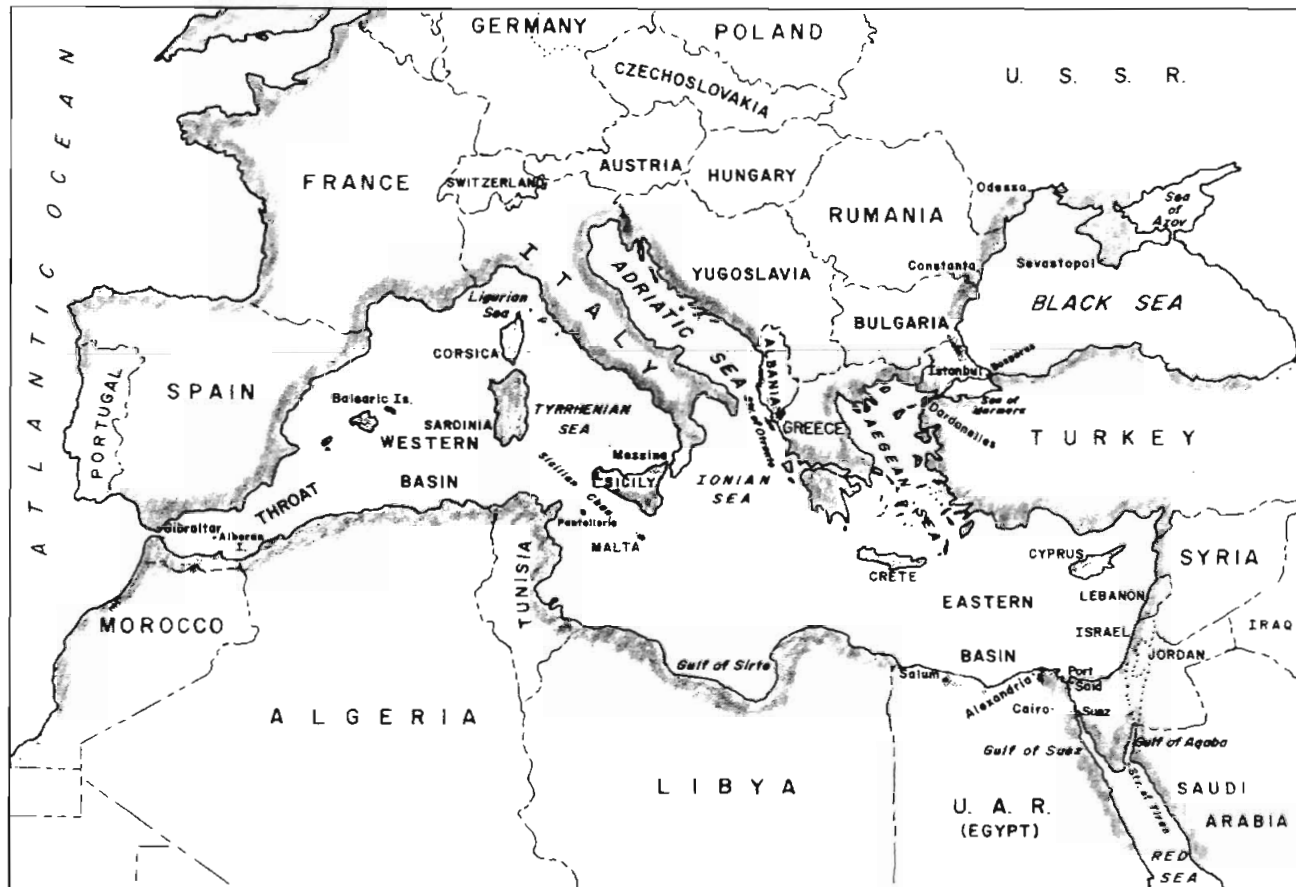


Dr. Abdul A. Said is well known for his scholarship on the Middle East. He has taken a B.S. degree from the University of Cairo, an M.A. degree from Johns Hopkins, and a Ph.D. from American University. He has served as a research analyst for the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, a consultant to the International Center (AID), Assistant Dean of the School of International Service at American University, and a consultant and lecturer to the Peace Corps. Dr. Said is serving presently as Professor of International Relations in the School of International Service at American University. He is also currently a consultant for the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and the Director of the Institute of the United States in World Affairs. Dr. Said is the author of numerous books and frequently contributes articles to professional periodicals and journals.

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We must seize the vision of a free and diverse world—and shape our policies to speed progress toward a flexible world order.

*John F. Kennedy, Berkeley, Calif.
23 March 1962*



MEDITERRANEAN SEA