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Edwin M. Wright

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## **U.S. STRATEGIC INVOLVEMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

A lecture delivered  
at the Naval War College  
on 30 November 1965

by

Dr. Edwin M. Wright

The Middle East is an undefinable area—the term being used in different ways by various groups. The cultural Middle East may be defined as the areas predominantly Muslim in faith—stretching from Morocco in the west to Indonesia in the east; from Nigeria in the south to Turkey in the north. This vast area is home to possibly 450 million peoples who have accepted the faith of Islam in its many interpretations. But for the purposes of this study, the term will be defined geographically as the region lying near to and between five large bodies of water: (1) the Caspian Sea, (2) the Persian Gulf, (3) the Red Sea, (4) the Aegean Sea, and (5) the Black Sea. For four thousand years, this region has been the theater of contending forces, sometimes like a magnet drawing in forces from the outside world and sometimes like an explosive bomb, emitting forces of violence that have made and changed world history. A list of the names of these conquering peoples indicates the complexity of patterns reflected in Middle Eastern society.

In its earliest phase, Sumerians, Akkadians and Egyptians fought over the terrain; then appear Hittites, Minoans, Hellenes, Medes and Persians, Macedonians, Romans, Gauls, Arabs, Tatars and Mongols from the Ural-Altai regions, Crusaders from western and northern Europe and in the last three centuries, there emerged fierce competition between Russians, the French, British and later Germans and Italians. And last of all—the interests and forces of the United States.

Why couldn't the United States stay out of this area? The answer lies in three phases of international life. We are involved because of (I) geography, (II) world economy and (III) certain cultural factors that can best be described in psychocultural terms. Each of these will be briefly summarized.

I. **Geography.** In the Middle East three countries border directly on what was called Russia and is now called the U.S.S.R. It is the only part of the world where independent nations directly confront Soviet military forces across boundary lines formed fairly recently as the result of Russian aggressive wars. South of these borders lie weakly defended areas which for the past two centuries have frequently been pushed back by Russian armies. The great thrust of Russian might against these southern areas dates to the early 18th century with the reorganization of Russia under Peter the Great. Then in 1756, a British concern, Abraham Darby and Son, discovered how to produce steel from coke. This gave an immense impetus to those states which had available iron ore in proximity to coal mines, an advantage which Russia and western Europe held over the Middle East, where steel had to be manufactured by the use of charcoal, thus greatly limiting production in arid treeless regions making costs prohibitive for mass use. Then, it was Catherine the Great, who seized power by the murder of her husband, Peter II, in 1762, who immediately put these advantages to use. Assuming the role of Caesaro-Papism inherited from the Byzantine rule, Catherine announced that Divine Manifest Destiny demanded of Holy Russia a crusade to destroy the evil of Infidel Muslim States. She then launched the Russian armies southward in the name of Christendom. Her lover's brother, Admiral Orlov destroyed the Ottoman fleet in the Black Sea (1778), and her land forces broke through the Danubian and Crimean Ottoman defenses and forced upon the latter the ignominious peace terms of the Treaty of Kuchik Kainarji (1774). Adding Ottoman loss of territory to the insult of loss of sovereignty over its Christian minorities, the Russian State had inserted in the Treaty the right of Russia to a sort of spiritual protection over the Greek Orthodox communities. A further symbol of conquest was added at the baptism of Catherine's grandson whom she named Constantine. It was made clear that this name was symbolic, for God had destined him to gather into the fold of Holy Russia all the areas ruled by Constantine the Great. This modest gesture included much of Europe and the Middle East. The Pope countered by making a concordat with France, which claimed equal interests over the Roman Catholic Uiate Churches. The Ottoman Empire had *de facto* lost control-

or sovereignty—internally and its doom was only a matter of time.

What saved the Ottoman and Iranian States from complete absorption in the "Third Rome" of Russia was the rivalry between Russia and other European States such as Austria, France and the British Empire over the spoils. Russian gains were partially nullified by counterbalancing interests, so each of the frequent advances of Russian armies ended in a European compromise—one such war occurring on an average of about every twenty years. The last of these Tzarist thrusts was into Iran in 1909 when angered by the development of a constitutional puppet monarchy in 1906, the Russians supported the autocratic puppet Muhammad Ali Qadjar, and invaded Iran in 1909 to settle down for a long stay. The Constitutional leaders were caught and hung on a prominent gallows in Tabriz. At this time, Russia claimed to be Christian. This was Holy Russia in operation.

In 1917, Holy Russia disappeared and Socialist Russia emerged. Thus the age-old justification of spiritual protection for Christians could no longer be invoked. But this in no way slowed down Soviet aggression. Three national states had emerged in the Caucasus during the Revolution of 1917-20. They are Azarbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. As soon as the Russian civil war was ended, Trotsky loosed his armies on this area. The recapture of Baku was celebrated with a massacre of tens of thousands of potential opposition leaders. Armenia then suffered a like fate and tens of thousands of the dominant Tashnak Party were murdered in prisons. Georgia collapsed. Socialist Russia then discovered a still better excuse for aggression. It claimed to be the protector of exploited humanity. The excuse of Christianity had limited usefulness, but this new justification gave the U.S.S.R. a universal justification for aggression anywhere. Formerly, Russia had been the enemy of revolutions; now it became the fomentor of revolutions and these were near at hand. The U.S.S.R. tried to infiltrate and capture Mustapha Kemal's movement in Turkey—and failed (1920-23). It supported abortive revolutions in Iran in the cases of Kuchik Khan in Gilan, Khiabani in Tahriz and later Lahouti, Chief of the Gendarmerie (1920-21). They all failed. The U.S.S.R. then had to await a more propitious moment which came in 1939 when it precipitated World War II by the pact with Hitler. Then in a generous mood in 1940, Stalin promised Nazi Germany all the supplies necessary to conquer Europe—and Africa—but reserved "the area lying south of the cities of Baku and Batum (in the

Caucasus) to the Persian Gulf as the center of the territorial aspirations of the Soviet Union." Again in Article 3 of the Secret Protocol, the U.S.S.R. broadened this phrase to, "The Soviet Union declares that its territorial aspirations center south of the national territory of the Soviet Union in the direction of the Indian Ocean." This includes Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Eastern Turkey.

There is a remarkable consistency in the behavioral patterns of Russian politicians from Peter and Catherine to Stalin and Khrushchev. The former two made Russia a Bicontinental Power—in Europe and Asia. Stalin raised Russia to a World Power. These Tzars were in reality atheists or agnostics and opportunists, ruthless, despising the masses, using any tactics to aggrandize the Russian State at the expense of its citizens and neighbors.

I have twice fallen under Russian rule, once as a boy in Tabriz in 1909 when the army of Holy Russia crushed the budding constitutional movement in a blood bath. I also was escorted out of Azarbaijau in 1942 by Soviet orders—although I was an officer in the U.S. Army at that time. Having lived in close proximity to Russians much of my life, I have developed the opinion that there is a pattern of political behavior which is distinctly Russian that has developed over centuries—created and conditioned by geography, by history, by political importations from Byzantine civilizations; intermixed with the heritage of Central Asia; and now undergoing profound changes because of the growth of technology. This interplay of many forces has produced a series of power-hungry tyrants, aggressive internally against any civic freedom and exploding in violence against their neighbors. Well-wishers explain this as a result of a deep sense of inferiority and insecurity. Less friendly critics see it as the expression of a bully—brutal towards citizens as well as neighbors. The small states along Russian borders see only the latter.

In World War II, western European States destroyed their capability to contain Russia. It looked to Stalin as though the road was open to the Indian Ocean. He demanded surrender by Turkey of its defense positions in Kars, Ardehan and Artvin as well as military control over the Straits. His agents set up a puppet state in Azarbaijan, Iran, and protected it with Russian troops (1944-46). Turkey and Iran had the will to survive but literally no hardware to support that will. The United States had to play the part of liue backer and close the "daylight" which Stalin thought he saw. It is still our position to close any holes and cooperate to supply the means for the survival of independent nations in the area.

II. **Economy.** As far as world trade of importance is concerned, the Middle East was of decreasing importance until unknown quantities of petroleum were discovered around 1908. The vastness of these petroleum resources is not yet clearly known. Discoveries in the offshore fields of the Persian Gulf continue to surprise the experts. Total figures are constantly being revised upward. In 1965, they were somewhere in the following magnitude. Iran was credited with a known reserve of 45 billion barrels, Iraq with somewhere near 25 billion, Kuwait with an unbelievable 65 billion, and Saudi Arabia with somewhere around 60 billion. Because of unique geological structures, the oil fields are large; the pressure within the domes is high, making pumping unnecessary; and production per well per day is phenomenal. Many wells average from 6,000-8,000 barrels per day. This lowers the actual production costs per unit. As a result the world is beating a path—of oil tankers—to the Persian Gulf. One well at Masjid-i-Suleiman in Iran known as "F7" produced, between 1911 and 1926, seven million tons of oil. In 1926, the old well was closed down and a new one drilled nearby—which is still producing at nearly that rate. The total profits to the producing companies and countries rises as the consumption of petroleum increases on a world-wide scale. This produces two trends.

First, the large movement of capital into the oil-producing states has generated unprecedented conditions within the structures of society and state. In antiquity, mass poverty was considered God's will. Poverty was praised as being "spiritual" and wealth was condemned as worldly and destructive—because there was so little wealth to distribute. Read the passages in the Prophets of Israel, the denunciations of wealth in the New Testament and similar doctrines in Islamic literature. But this is no longer relevant. No longer need poverty be the common lot, and the common man has well learned this slogan. There has developed as a result of this wealth, two kinds of states—the Haves and the Have Nots—or the Rich and the Poor. Iran, Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia along with Algeria and Libya are the Haves. (There are peripheral Shaykhdoms of equal wealth.) The rest are relative Have Nots, bedeviled with large population increases, inadequate resources and a clamoring, aroused public demand for increased distribution of jobs, services and benefits. Israel has had a large capital influx, not from oil but from other sources and so may be classified as a "Have" state. The two largest nations, Turkey and Egypt, have no oil for sale and find themselves frustrated by low exports and high imports, fomenting recurring crises of confidence as well as of other types. Every indication

points toward an increasing gulf between the rich and the poor in the next decade. Kuwait with a small population of about 450,000 boasts an annual oil income of over \$600 million—placing Kuwait nearer the American standard of living than any other country. It has already surpassed the United States in per capita income. In world terms the following table gives the picture of where the major proven crude oil reserves exist as of the year 1965:

	<u>Percent</u>
Sino-Soviet Bloc . . . . .	10
Middle East . . . . .	62
United States . . . . .	9.4
Venezuela . . . . .	5.6
Far East . . . . .	3
Other Countries . . . . .	<u>10</u>
	100

Secondly, the Common Market in western Europe is importing increasing quantities of oil from the Persian Gulf area in spite of discoveries in North Africa and some small quantities in Europe. Imports to western Europe are near 3 million barrels per day. This increased mobility in Europe is certain to have far-reaching effects not only on the economy but in culture, psychology and politics. Europeans traditionally have considered Arabs and Muslim as infidels and inferiors—a carryover from the Crusades. Now, the question arises whether an Arab Muslim who has billions of barrels of petroleum to sell can qualify as an infidel? Obviously, he must be a gentleman and scholar. This mutual interest in production, transportation and consumption of power in the whole Mediterranean area is bound to deeply influence the relationships between states—and the social conditions within states. This phenomenon is only a decade old. Oil can be used two ways—to calm troubled waters or to generate a holocaust that will leave behind only ashes. It was no accident that Stalin stipulated these oil lands as the center of the aspirations of the Soviet Union. Our interest is just the contrary. We desire that these exceedingly valuable resources remain in an open market for the mutual advantage of producer and consumer.

III. Cultural, Religious and Psychological Factors. Anyone studying the history of western Europe and the United States can trace back two mighty streams of cultural tradition which have been symbolized in two cities at either end of the eastern

Mediterranean. They are the cities of Jerusalem and Athens—the former being the mythological symbol of faith and the other the symbolical incarnation of reason and intellectual endeavor. (Athena's symbol was the owl.) These two cultural traditions flow together and separate out in endless and complicated patterns conditioning our behavior and world view.

But, in fact, Jerusalem as a symbol of the City of God (St. Augustine) is now known to be a very late copy of much older traditions. Archaeological discoveries in the past century inform us that there were holy cities with their temples which trace back beyond 3,000 B.C. Then the invention of writing made possible a continuous record of the drama of evolving civilizations with their cult-forms and practices. These explain much of our inheritance. A perusal of this great mass of information can lead either to hope—or despair. While much of this literature shows the evolution of man and society in civilizational growth, the greater part of this literature is the glorification of barbarian violence. The earliest art form of Egypt in its first dynasty portrays Pharaoh Namer dressed as the Bull of Heaven, wielding his upraised thunderbolt, beating out the brains of troglodytes—whose decapitated bodies lie in neat rows on the bank—or whose bodies are floating down the Nile. This theme is constantly repeated in Egyptian history. The Tigris Euphrates art is similar—the Moon God, Naram Sin, heaving spears through the bodies of his opponents, Assyrians skinning their impaled prisoners while alive, Hebrews killing every man, woman and child of the former inhabitants of Caanan, Achaeans revenging themselves on Trojans in a blood bath, Christians burning heretics and destroying infidels by the sword, Muslim armies conquering their neighbors in the name of God and obliterating their culture—on through the Crusades up to modern times. This glorification of barbarism comes to us as one of those strange survivals of ancestry worship—a phenomenon in all cultural traditions. Later generations saw their ancestors as demi-Gods and heroes—and deified their behavioral patterns. Once deified, these traditions became rigid, dogmatic, and unchangeable. They made the mind stagnant and, thereby, blocked social and intellectual growth. The societies inheriting these conditions were closed—afraid of spontaneity, xenophobic, suspicious, arrogant, and authoritarian. Any individualism or criticism was crushed (such as the Prophets in Israel), and each society thought of itself as living in External Unchanging Sameness. These systems are called by such names as the Culture—or Religion—of Sumer, Akkad, Babylon, Egyptian Pharaonic, the Hebrews, traditional medieval Christendom, and



Islam. According to Robert Tucker, Marx reinterpreted these dogmas in pseudopsychological terms, using the term Nature as "Ultimate Being" and then interpreting the Cosmic Drama in terms of Prometheus—thereby establishing a new dogmatic faith. All these faiths agree in a fundamental metaphysical myth. They give simple and clear intellectual expression to the mystical idea that all things come into being from a Perfect, Unchanging, Ungenerated Source (Ultimate Being as God or Nature, as one chooses), which imparts to things (Creation) something of its Being. Yet in creation only a distorted image of the original is to be seen (Plato's men in the cave). Thus, the Universe is Imperfect, created and subject to change—a condition of depravity or degeneracy being attributed to man as a part of Creation. Things or events have no meaning except as related to the Absolute Being. In these systems a second myth then appears, that of the paradigmatic society. Absolute Being in a desire to save depraved man, reveals something of His perfection to a particular community at a particular moment in history. As Henri Frankfort expresses it, each community assumed it was "the people of God X." Thus each society developed a dogma—that its god is the only True God and its laws reflect the divine will. This is called theocracy. The result has been the growth of communities who claim that they have an exclusive monopoly on divine truth. Anyone who disagrees must *ipso facto* be an enemy of God and therefore be punished or destroyed. Brought over into Europe during the Dark Ages, this fanaticism colored much in medieval literature and history—the Crusades, the Inquisition, the religious wars and an intense fear of intellectual adventure. It was during the 17th century in Europe that the revival of Hellenic thought called "the tyranny of Greece" and the new geographic discoveries and trade, undermined the closed mind that so tragically marked our own background, even in the United States. Athens as a Symbol was rediscovered and the intellectual adventure resumed.

The Middle East had not kept pace with Western or "modern" developments and was an area of intellectual stagnation and political absolutism—even up to my time. I can well recall the Constitutional Revolution in Iran, 1906-09. I passed through Turkey in May 1910 while the Young Turks were celebrating the first annual commemoration of the abdication of Abdul Hamid the Damned. Since then I have watched a whole series of revolutions—in Iran, in Egypt, and a third revolution in Turkey in 1960. Syria has had about 12 coup d'états in 20 years! In western Europe for some three centuries, there had developed an atmosphere encouraging new ideas, new experimentation and change. Alfred N. Whitehead puts this breakthrough in the year 1642, the year Galileo died and

Newton was born. As a result, the philosophers, scientists and politicians in the West developed a creative and critical method of research. Ideas, types of society, and tools have appeared in bewildering quality and quantity. They are analyzed, tested, and evaluated. Often most of them are soon discarded, but some elements withstand the criticism and enter the stream of Western thought.

The communities of the Middle East had little or no contact with this ferment—until the middle of the 19th century. It came with crushing force in the conquest of the Islamic World by outside imperial forces. States which had prided themselves on being theocratic suddenly found themselves inferior in all matters secular—technology, education, the professions, social health and political honesty. They were inundated with alien "isms," tools they cannot produce, concepts they cannot understand and problems which call for rapid solutions—with no analysis of their cause of interrelationships. They all share in a deep sense of insecurity, the panicky feeling that someone ought to do something at once, the paranoid fear that there is an infernal plot engineered by some mastermind (formerly the Devil—now called Imperialism). In this state of mind, enemies are ubiquitous, so there are trials for alleged traitors and plots to overthrow the state from within and demonic agents operating from across the borders. In this heated atmosphere of suspicion and fear, any "other culture" is looked at as hostile. Because of these conflicts, Turkey and Greece practically exchanged minorities in 1923. Where minorities have not been exchanged, violence erupts. One only needs to mention Arabs and Israelis, Greek-Orthodox Christians vs. Turkish Muslims in Cyprus, Kurds in Turkey, Iran or Iraq, conflicts between Shiah and Sunni sectarians in various areas, especially in Yemen where Zaydi and Shafi'i groups became embroiled in a fratricidal war (1963- ), or Hindus and Muslim in Kashmir. The Armenians were victims of such a struggle in the Muslim Ottoman Empire (1915-18). This list indicates how the ancient exclusive loyalties tend to delay the growth of national secular states with equal treatment for all citizens before the law.

Emerging as a nation in 1776 after two centuries of "rationalism," "enlightenment" and secularism, the United States did not develop national institutions until 1865—after the Civil War. The integration of our society still moves painfully forward. We should remember this as we watch the fury and confusion that has followed the breakup of the old Islamic concept of state and

society. Now new experiments are being tried in the painful process of modernization. Three states have adopted quite liberal working multiparty-forms of government—Turkey, Lebanon, and Israel. Turkey is the only one which has freed government from any support of religious cults—Tunisia, although having a one-party system, has moved far in that direction. A second grouping might be called the Reforming Monarchs. They are Afghanistan, Iran where the Shah has proclaimed a White Revolution, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Libya and Morocco. In these states, the Kings realize they must base their posture on accepting responsibility for social growth and economic development—completely new elements for a traditional ruler. Their survival depends on their success in these endeavors. A third group have called themselves the Revolutionary Socialists. These are the United Arab Republic, Syria, Iraq, Algeria, at one moment Sudan (1964), and recently Yemen. None of them have been able to give any clear definition of these terms, but if one judges by the bombastic speeches of their leaders, they are acting as midwives to a new world, the wave of the future in which a Utopia of perpetual dignity and prosperity will emerge for every citizen. These makers of a dream world have little time to realistically analyze the severe limitations which environment, resources, tradition, and social lag impose upon them. Their enthusiasm and blindness drives them to charge off in "all directions at once." Some of these adventures are somewhat ludicrous, yet at the same time disastrous, and result in the humpty-dumpty crash of the self-styled Hero (General Qasim in Iraq, Ben Bella in Algiers). They send delegates to various irresponsible conferences shouting "Liberation and Revolution" while they are neglecting agricultural necessities at home and are depending on "imperialistic" nations to supply their growing populations with the necessary food. Some of these excesses soon explode in their faces, like the so-called Congo Liberation Front in 1964. Others, like intervention in Yemen, are bloody and costly in every way.

There is not too much that the United States can do to bring some calm and stability to the area. This lies within the peoples and nations themselves. We can urge caution, try to discourage precipitated and violent action, and in some cases supply food-stuffs and other form of necessary help when asked. One of our earlier fears has somewhat subsided. There was a tendency to think Middle Easterners too naive to face the insidious penetration by Russian and Red Chinese propagandists. These latter have frequently overreached their grasp and made magnificent

blunders. Middle Eastern governments are learning how to get aid from Russia or China, but keep the latter's agents well bottled up in jail. This is not a new technique—it has been practiced for at least 4,000 years in the records available—and probably even before that.

What I have stressed is the interrelationship between strategy, economics, and cultural patterns in this region—as well as between the Middle East and the rest of the world. One could quote numerous useful phrases to illustrate this theme, "What happens in India affects everyone in Indiana and vice versa" (President Eisenhower), "We are passing from an age of national independence to an age of international interdependence" (Secretary Dulles), or as Mr. Walter Rostow has phrased it:

For Americans to play a constructive role in this exciting new phase of history requires of us a sympathetic knowledge of other people's history, of their perspectives, their fears and their ambitions more profound than any required of us in the past. . . . We must reach out and understand the minds of many peoples if this great job of architecture, in which we are engaged with our friends, is to be sound and stand the tests and strains of time.

## BIOGRAPHIC SKETCH

Dr. Edwin M. Wright's present position is with the Foreign Service Institute, Department of State.

Dr. Wright was born in Tabriz, Iran. He received an A.B. from Wooster College in 1918, an M.A. from Columbia University in 1930. He did graduate work at the School of Oriental Studies, American University, Cairo from 1943-45, and has been granted the honorary degree of Doctor of Humanities (L.H.D.).

Before coming to the Department of State, Dr. Wright was Principal of a Presbyterian Missionary High School in Iran from 1921-35; lecturer in History at Columbia University; Research Analyst in the Office of Strategic Services. He served as Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Army in the Near East from 1942-46.

In 1946, he was appointed Country Specialist in the Department of State. Since then he has served as Special Assistant for United Nations Affairs and Adviser of Intelligence to the Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern, South Asian and African Affairs. In May 1952 he assumed the position of Officer in Charge of Turkish Affairs, Bureau of Near Eastern, South Asian and African Affairs. In January 1955 he was assigned to the Foreign Service Institute as Special Assistant to the Chief. He has held his present position since 1957.

In July and August of 1948, Dr. Wright, working with the Division of International Broadcasting, assisted in the organization of Voice of America broadcasting to the Near East. He has lectured annually at the National War College, the Naval War College, and at the U.S. Military and Naval Academies. Dr. Wright also lectures on the Middle East in the School of Advanced International Studies of Johns Hopkins University. He has contributed articles to encyclopedias such as *Britannica* and *Americana*, and to several quarterlies and journals.