

Marked Cards in the Middle East

a short history

Rob Recidivist

“Clemenceau, Lloyd George, Woodrow Wilson. Three old men shuffling the pack, dealing out the cards: The Rhineland, Danzig, the Polish Corridor, the Ruhr, self-determination of small nations, the Saar, League of Nations, mandates, the Mesopot, Freedom of the Seas, Trans-Jordania, Shantung, Fiume, and the Island of Yap: machinegun fire and arson, starvation, lice, cholera, typhus, oil was trumps.”

—John Dos Passos, *USA*

White men of the West, choosing the game, choosing the cards, stacking the deck. Raking in pot after pot, only they can deal. And should the suckers across the table get wise and try to change the game or the rules or decide to get up and walk, to look for another game, the table is flipped in sudden outrage, chairs fall back, cards scatter. The brace of pistols everyone knew was hidden under the table appears, loaded, cocked and pointed at the heads of the recalcitrant players. But these gunslingers don't scream or curse, they just calmly declare that no one can leave the table, that all other games are illegitimate and illegal; won't everyone just be reasonable and sit back down with the family of nations for another deal? If they would only play by the rules and keep on trying, maybe they'll win a hand or two, eventually (heh, heh).

The ecocidal war in the Middle East did not begin on January 16 with the American-led bombing, or on August 2 of last year with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. These were just the latest battles in a struggle for domination going back at least to the last century. Europe's colonial expansion started with the voyages of discovery and plunder of the 15th and 16th centuries. In southern and southeast Asia, the colonial system was firmly established by about 1800, in tropical Africa by about 1880. The occupation and exploitation of the region Europeans called the Middle East began later.

The Modern Era

Financial domination similar to that conducted today by the International Monetary Fund was well underway when in 1881, in Egypt, a group of ambitious army officers forced a spendthrift monarch to submit future budgets to a consultative assembly. Did the European powers applaud this move towards representative government (at least for the elites) in the image of their own? Not quite; fearing that an assertive nationalist regime in Cairo might repudiate the huge foreign debt that Egypt had incurred under its absolute rulers, in 1882 the British military began an occupation that though proclaimed “temporary,” was to last, in one form or another, until 1956.

Thus began the modern era of Western adventure in the region. Seeing which way the wind was blowing, Sheikh Mubarak of Kuwait signed a treaty of protection with Great Britain in 1899. A movement in Iran towards political reform culminated in 1906 in mass protests, strikes and a march on Teheran by nomadic tribes of the southern mountains. In response, Britain and tsarist Russia agreed in 1907 to divide Iran into spheres of influence. (The Allies of World War II would repeat this in the 1940s as zones of military occupation.)

It is important to remember that it was not yet oil but the need to guarantee the region's continued economic prostration before the bondholders of Paris and London that necessitated military intervention.

Oil Takes Over

Other Western machinations were then afoot that were to have a drastic impact on the region and the world. In 1883, the year after the British expeditionary force landed at Alexandria, a German engineer named Gottlieb Daimler constructed the first internal combustion engine. Over the next century, as Dankwart Rustow put it in *Oil and Turmoil* (Norton & Co., 1982), "Daimler's invention was to revolutionize all transport by land, sea and even air; shrink weeks of travel into hours; knit together the world's economies more tightly than ever before; and extend the sweep of wars clean around the globe...The already established European imperial presence in the Middle East would combine with discovery and exploitation of petroleum resources there of staggering magnitude to displace coal by oil as the industrial world's prime fuel." This in turn set the present stage for the global economy's nearly complete dependence on the price of oil and the flow of petrodollars.

Now oil indeed became trump, and no one had more high cards in the suit than the Middle East. Oil in marketable quantities was discovered in Egypt in 1909, Iran in 1913, Iraq in 1927, Saudi Arabia in 1936, and Kuwait in 1946.

It was very much on the minds of the victors of the First World War when mandates, the legal go-aheads to exploit, were dished out after that imperial turf fight. But there were indigenous challenges to be suppressed, first in Iraq and then in Syria and Palestine. Winston Churchill, whose words H.U.D. Secretary Jack Kemp recently invoked to open a war council of Bush's cabinet, argued for using chemical weapons against rebellious Arabs. "I do not understand this squeamishness about the use of gas," he wrote in 1919. "I am strongly in favor of using poisoned gas against uncivilized tribes." Churchill's desire to use mustard gas was frustrated by technological difficulties. But by 1920, the British army was using other types of gas shells, and the Royal Air Force was dropping bombs with delayed action fuses intended to terrify tribespeople and prevent crop cultivation. The full story can be found in David Omissi's history *Air Power and Colonial Control* (Manchester University Press, 1990).

Churchill's interest in securing British domination over the emerging oil reserves was due in part to his need to revive his own political career which had been badly damaged by his foolish 1915-16 Gallipoli campaign which led England to military disaster at the hands of the Turks.

The attraction of gas in suppressing "uncivilized tribes" was to maintain colonial control at a cheap cost, both financially and in lowering the number of soldiers needed. As Omissi writes, "The reduction of the [British] garrison, the elevation of Faisal (the British-installed puppet king in Baghdad), the payment of subsidies to Arab leaders and the purchase of French acquiescence were all aspects of a single strategy of indirect rule intended to reduce the costs of imperialism in Iraq. Its ultimate success depended on air control." For Arab and Kurdish people, the experience of Western planes bombing and strafing their homeland is not a new one.

Other Challenges

In another early challenge to the colonialist New World Order contrived out of the ashes of World War I, an assembly of Syrian nationalists enthusiastically named a king and declared a sovereign state in March 1920. By August, the mandated Western power, France, had surrounded Damascus and, by brief and fierce bombardment, ended the interlude of self-proclaimed independence.

Invoking their mandate over Syria, the French chose to set up a classic military, and later colonial, administration. They did their best to divide and conquer, encouraging friction between and emphasizing the religious and cultural differences of the Sunni-Muslim majority, the Shiite-Muslims of the northern coastal region, the Christian Arabs of Lebanon, and the Druze of the southern mountains. The British chose the "indirect" rule they had developed in other colonies: traditional local rulers were preserved in all their pomp and ceremony, but ruled with the "advice" of British agents under the "protection" of British military force. All of this helped

ensure another global war as fascist Germany and militarist Japan sought their own oil resources and empires in order to compete with the other imperial states on their own terms.

Lines In The Sand

The borders that make up most states of the Middle East are relatively recent in origin. Many were either created or significantly altered in a highly arbitrary fashion by dominant European powers. At the Uqair Conference in 1922, Britain established the boundaries for Iraq, Kuwait and Nejd (later Saudi Arabia). In order to prevent Iraq from growing too strong, Britain deliberately drew borders that excluded any Iraqi deep water access to the Persian Gulf. This exclusion was an important cause for both the Iran-Iraq war of 1980–88 and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait last year. Furthermore, as “independence” was granted to these new client states, the political systems set up to govern them owed more to the interests of the European powers, or to small groups of local “modernizers” who profited from European dominance, than they did to the wishes of the vast bulk of the people governed by them. These types of authoritarian regimes still dominate the region, either as gangsterdoms like that of Iraq’s Saddam Hussein and Syria’s Hafez el-Assad, or as family dictatorships like those in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Another by-product of the European legacy is the continuing oppression of the Palestinians and the Kurds. British and American support for Zionist aspirations was instrumental in creating Israel and hence the Palestinian refugee tragedy. Massive U.S. aid continues to prop up the Israeli economy and pays for repression of Palestinians in the occupied territories. Less is known in the West about the Kurds. When Britain was carving up the desert in the 1920s with its lines in the sand, the substantial Kurdish community was split up between Iran, Turkey and Iraq. Kurds thus have become an oppressed minority in all three states.

Concessions

The United States dealt itself into the lucrative game of Middle Eastern oil production in the early 1930s. The business of America has always been business, so it was fitting that oil companies led the way. In 1933, Standard Oil of California obtained the first American oil concession in Saudi Arabia. As Rustow puts it, an oil concession was part of the “typical pattern in the Middle East and other Third World regions...A Western company [was] given exclusive rights to prospect and produce oil throughout all or most of a country’s territory. A handsome initial payment induced the sultan/shah/emir to grant the concession; if oil was found and production started, the government was promised a royalty, literally a king’s fee, fixed either in gold or as a share of the sales price...Frequently, several Western oil companies would obtain a concession jointly, either to resolve existing political or commercial claims, or to reduce the risks in what were thought to be venturesome explorations.”

As a matter of course, joint ownership of a concession meant a single sales price to outsiders, in other words, a monopoly. Everyone involved made a bundle, except the vast majority of Arab and Persian people who had been living on top of all this oil for centuries.

The Kuwait concession of 1934 was shared between a British and an American company, and another Saudi Arabian concession in 1947 among four American companies. These were extremely profitable deals, even at a time when oil drilled in America still made up most of that on the world market. The superior quality of Persian Gulf oil and the fact that most Middle Eastern oil, once drilled, flowed freely under its own pressure and required no pumping, kept production costs at a fraction of those in other oil-producing regions.

Concurrent with the rising production and decreasing cost of Persian Gulf oil in the 1950s and 60s came a major expansion in world oil consumption. Between 1965 and 1974, U.S. consumption rose nearly 60%, and Japan’s over 200%. Consumption in Western Europe and other countries scrambling to industrialize rose steeply also. The die had been cast in the 1930s, and the post-World War II economic boom in the U.S. and later in Western Europe and Japan, was fueled by cheap oil.

World Control

Another lesson the empire learned well in this period, as the rest of the industrial world lay in ruins at America's feet, was that control of energy flow meant de facto control of the world's economies. As Noam Chomsky recently wrote, "The U.S. and Britain largely established the post-war settlement in the region. A major U.S. policy goal since has been to keep its incomparable energy resources, and the enormous profits reaped, under the control of the U.S., its corporations, and dependable allies and clients."

This Anglo-American privilege did not go without challenge. During British-Russian occupation of Iran during World War II, the Iranian parliament, on the motion of radical nationalist politician Mohammed Mossadegh, passed a law forbidding the government from negotiating, let alone signing, any new oil concessions without specific parliamentary approval.

After the war, Mossadegh campaigned to nationalize the existing oil concession, a 1920 agreement with British Petroleum (BP). An offer by BP for higher payments was rejected, Mossadegh's National Front swept into power on a high tide of popularity, and in September 1951, Iranian troops shut BP's British technicians out of the oil installations they had run for four decades.

This was unacceptable to Western interests, and set in motion a chain of events that culminated in the 1953 CIA-engineered overthrow of Mossadegh's government and the installation of the notorious Shah and his CIA/Israeli Mossad-trained SAVAK secret police. An interesting part of this sordid story, as Time magazine reported on February 4, 1991, is that one of the American advisors in Teheran who played a key role in the coup was former army general H. Norman Schwarzkopf, Sr., father of "Friendly Fire" Schwarzkopf, the commander of the military forces that have destroyed so much of the region.

One colonial brushfire quickly followed another; the overlords had to be constantly vigilant. In 1958 a nationalist coup in Iraq overthrew the British-created monarchy and fueled fears that the pan-Arab appeal launched by the new Hitler of that day, Gamel Abdel Nasser of Egypt, might spread to the critical oil states of the Gulf.

One reaction to the coup was the Sixth Fleet's landing a large expeditionary force of U.S. Marines in Lebanon the next day to prop up a friendly regime. Another was President Eisenhower's authorization to use nuclear weapons to, in his words, "prevent any unfriendly forces from moving into Kuwait." Kuwait was still under British control, and in response to the crisis, Britain considered granting nominal independence, but only if Kuwait agreed to Britain's "need, if things go wrong, ruthlessly to intervene, whoever has caused the trouble" (Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd). Lloyd stressed "the complete United States solidarity with us over the Gulf," including the need to "take firm action to maintain our position in Kuwait" and the similar resolution that Americans "agree that at all costs these oil fields must be kept in Western hands."

Six months prior to the Iraqi coup, Lloyd stated that "suitable arrangements for the investment of the surplus revenues of Kuwait" must be secured, a matter echoed today in the all important concern that capital as well as oil flow uninterruptedly from the Persian Gulf to the West.

Throughout the 1960s, the empire's attention was diverted somewhat by the military debacle in Southeast Asia, but this lapse ended with the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam in 1972, and the scare of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War and ensuing oil embargo. This opened a new phase in American manipulation of the region, one whose hallmark has been playing both sides (or all three or four) against the middle to ultimately further U.S. policy objectives. In the January 1991 issue of Harper's magazine, Christopher Hitchens dubbed it Mutual Assured Destabilization.

How Many Cards Would You Like?

In January 1976 the House Select Committee on Intelligence Activities completed a report, immediately suppressed, which stated that in 1972, the then national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, had met with the Shah of Iran who wanted U.S. assistance in destabilizing the Baathist regime of Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr in Baghdad.

In addition to being a traditional territorial rival, Iraq had sheltered the then-exiled Ayatollah Khomeini. Hitchens writes, "The Shah and Kissinger agreed that Iraq was upsetting the balance in the Gulf; a way to restore the balance was to send a signal by supporting the landless, luckless Kurds, then in revolt in northern Iraq.

Kissinger put the idea to President Nixon, who loved (and loves still) the game of nations and who had already decided to tilt toward Iran and build it into his most powerful regional friend, replete with arms purchased from U.S. manufacturers, not unlike Saudi Arabia today.”

Nixon authorized covert action and sent his former treasury secretary, Texas oilman John Connally, to Teheran to seal the deal. As the Pike Committee report states:

Documents in the Committee’s possession clearly show that the President, Dr. Kissinger, and the foreign head of state (the Shah) hoped that our clients (the Kurds) would not prevail. They preferred instead that the insurgents simply continue a level of hostilities sufficient to sap the resources of our ally’s neighboring country (Iraq). This policy was not imparted to our clients, who were encouraged to continue fighting.

Hitchens comments, “‘Not imparted?’ ‘Not imparted.’ to the desperate Kurdish villagers to whom Kissinger’s envoys came with outstretched hands and practiced grins. ‘Not imparted,’ either, to the American public or to Congress. ‘Imparted’ though, to the Shah and to Saddam Hussein (then the Baathist’s number two man), who met and signed a treaty temporarily ending their border dispute in 1975, thus restoring balance to the region.”

On the very same day this treaty was signed, the U.S. terminated all aid to the Kurds. The following day Saddam launched a search-and-destroy operation in Kurdistan that is still under way. This culminated in the 1988 chemical attack on Kurdish civilians in Halabja, a horror carefully ignored by Western governments as a possibly embarrassing impediment to proper “balance” in the Gulf.

And guess which oilman-politician became director of the CIA in January 1976 when the Kurdish covert operation was being scrapped, while the Kurds themselves were being mopped up by Saddam, and as the Pike Committee report was suppressed? Why, George Bush, the same man who now wants us to believe Saddam is suddenly “worse than Hitler.”

Contrived Destabilization

Four years later much had changed. The Shah had been deposed and Iran was in the throes of Islamic fundamentalist upheavals. The U.S. perceived its interests now lay with Iraq and Saddam, who had taken absolute power in Baghdad. Stansfield Turner, then head of the CIA, stated that the U.S. had prior knowledge of Iraq’s September 1980 invasion of Iran, and he advised President Carter accordingly.

Gary Sick, who then had responsibility for Gulf policy at the National Security Council, recalls, “After the hostages were taken in Teheran (in November 1979) there was a very strong view, especially from (national security advisor Zbigniew) Brzezinski, that in effect Iran should be punished from all sides. He made public statements to the effect that he would not mind an Iraqi move against Iran.” A Fall 1980 story in London’s *Financial Times* went further and reported that U.S. intelligence and satellite data, suggesting that Iranian forces would probably crumble if attacked, had been made available to Saddam through third-party Arab governments. “We didn’t think he’d take all of Khuzistan [the region on the Iranian side of the disputed border] in 1980,” Sick adds of Saddam.

The U.S., of course, did not want outright victory for either side. Hitchens again: “By switching ‘sides, and by supplying arms to both belligerents over the next decade, the U.S. national security establishment may have been acting consistently rather than inconsistently. A market for weaponry, the opening of avenues of influence, the creation of superpower dependency, the development of clientele among the national security forces of other nations and a veto on the emergence of any rival power—these were tempting prizes.” That tens of thousands of young Arabs and Persians were dying on the battlefields could quickly be forgotten in view of American geopolitical strategy.

All of this foreshadows the now infamous meeting between U.S. ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, and Saddam last July, when she stated, “We have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait...The instruction we had was that we should express no opinion on this issue, and that the issue is not associated with America.”

Simultaneously the U.S. was encouraging its allies, the Kuwaitis, whose tankers had recently flown American flags under U.S. military protection, to stand firm in their dealings with Iraq. Perhaps full Iraqi occupation was

anticipated as a good excuse for war, or perhaps, as Glaspie said in a post-invasion interview with the New York Times, "We never expected they would take all of Kuwait."

This recalls Gary Sick and his NSC colleagues who did not think Iraq would take all of Iran's Khuzistan region. It also brings to mind the consternation of Secretary of State Alexander Haig in 1982 when Israeli forces invading Lebanon went well beyond the agreed-upon southern portion of the country, all the way to Beirut. In the tilts and signals and secret dealings of realpolitik, as Hitchens states, "there is always the risk that those signaled will see nothing but green lights."

Today Westerners continue their sleight of hand management and bottom of the deck dealings in the region. Bush issues ultimatums and the media dutifully reports that he is "going the last mile for peace." It is no surprise that, in response to the present crisis, the states most driven towards war rather than diplomacy are the United States, Britain, France and the Gulf dictatorships. They are the main beneficiaries of the post-World War II settlement, and stand to lose the most in any political restructuring that would result from international negotiation.

Contrary to the rhetoric, there is no moral principle at work in this American-led invasion, just continued long standing Western interest in Persian Gulf oil and capital. It's more cost-effective to destabilize (or "maintain balance" in U.S. parlance) by letting others fight, or by using the IMF or the CIA, but sometimes sending in the Marines is the only way.

The machinegun fire and arson Dos Passos wrote of have scorched the region. Bomb destruction in Iraq has left the water contaminated. Now comes the starvation, lice, cholera and typhus; for the empire's victims, the new world order is very much like the old.

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