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**ANGLO-AMERICAN INTELLIGENCE CO-OPERATION
IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 1951-1957**

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DECLARATIONS

The word length of this dissertation is 14,644 words, including footnotes.

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STATEMENT 1

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Abstract

An overemphasis on the tensions between the United States and Britain in the Middle East in the 1950s tends to obscure the fact that there also existed a close collaboration between them on the intelligence level. The aim of this dissertation, therefore, is to analyse this co-operation and judge its significance for Anglo-American relations. It will be argued that the intelligence co-operation indicates that Suez was neither a breaking point for relations between Washington and London nor a watershed for Britain's power in the Middle East. The analysis of the joint covert action in Syria before and after Suez will support this argument. Intelligence co-operation, however, had further implications: It served as effective means to forestall Soviet penetration of the Middle East and to deal with anti-Western Arab nationalism. Furthermore, it actually allowed the United States to nurture its special relationship with Britain and to benefit from the latter's influence in the region without being associated with the latter's reputation as colonialist power. Britain and the United States had predominantly converging objectives with regard to the Middle East. Tensions, however, arose more over a disagreement over which methods should be used to achieve those objectives.

In Loving Memory of My Mother,

Rita Otto

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List of Abbreviations

AIOC	Anglo-Iranian Oil Company
BP	British Petroleum
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency [American]
DOS	Department of State [American]
FO	Foreign Office [British]
FRUS	<i>Foreign Relations of the United States</i>
MEDO	Middle East Defence Organisation
MI6	Secret Intelligence Service (also SIS) [British]
NIE	National Intelligence Estimate
NSC	National Security Council [American]
OSS	Office of Strategic Services [American]
PPS	Policy Planning Staff [American]
SIS	Secret Intelligence Service (also MI6) [British]
SNIE	Special National Intelligence Estimate [American]
SSNP	Syrian Social Nationalist Party
SWG	Syrian Working Group [Anglo-American]
UAR	United Arab Republic [Syro-Egyptian]

I. Introduction

The Middle Eastern theatre seemed to be one of intense Anglo-American rivalry in the 1950s, with the United States gradually taking over Britain's traditional role as dominant power. Yet despite these obvious tensions and conflicts, the United States and Britain had in fact a considerable amount of shared interests with regard to the Middle East which showed itself in a dimension that was invisible to the public eye: Before and after Suez, the American and British intelligence services were in fact planning to change the regime in Syria by means of a coup. This, however, was part of a common plan to weaken the Egyptian leader Gamal Nasser. Given this knowledge, the strong American opposition to the British invasion of Egypt, in collaboration with Israel and France, appears in a different light: Actually, Washington shared London's wish to see Nasser removed. They did not condemn the objective, but the means Britain used to achieve those ends because they undermined Anglo-American covert operations in both Egypt and Syria. Covert collaboration between the US and Britain, however, had a successful precedent: In 1953, the American and British intelligence services instigated a coup that removed the Iranian Prime Minister from power. This effectively ended the Iranian Oil Crisis, which - as would be the case with Suez three years later - had caused severe friction between London and Washington, at least on the public scene.

The aim of this dissertation, therefore, is to analyse the collaboration on the intelligence level and its implications for Anglo-American relations with regard to the Middle East. It will be argued that Britain tried to get the United States involved in the region, yet basically to ensure its own position. Washington did actually become more active, but it also developed an independent approach to Middle Eastern affairs. This, however, led to tensions with London that saw its Great Power status endangered. Yet despite

disagreements and tensions, Britain and the United States were closely collaborating, albeit covertly, to achieve common interests in the Middle East. The first joint covert action, the coup in Iran, helped to establish American influence in the region. Furthermore, it will be argued that, when taking covert co-operation into account, the Suez Crisis was neither a watershed for Anglo-American relations nor a breaking point for British power in the Middle East. The analysis of the joint planning of covert actions in Syria before and after Suez will serve to support this argument. The paper will also demonstrate that the intelligence co-operation and the employment of covert actions held benefits for the United States in two dimensions: Firstly, it was a low-risk means to prevent the Soviets from gaining influence in the Middle East and to deal with regimes that were dangerously anti-Western. Yet apart from that, it secondly allowed the United States to actually foster its relation with Britain and to benefit from the latter's influence in the region without being associated publicly with the latter's reputation as colonialist power.

The nature, quality and significance of Anglo-American relations have been subject to much scholarly debate. An evangelic school of thought considers the relations to be special for Britain and the United States share a common language, culture and institutions.¹ Scholars from a functionalist school of thought like Alex Danchev and David Reynolds agree that a special relationship had existed since 1940.² Indeed, the close co-operation established in important fields such as defence³ and nuclear technology⁴ distinguished Anglo-American

¹ H.C. Allen, *Great Britain and the United States* (London, 1955), George Ball, *The Discipline of Power* (London, 1968).

² C.J. Bartlett, *'The Special Relationship': A Political History of Anglo-American Relations since 1945* (London, 1992), John Baylis (ed.), *Anglo-American relations since 1939. The enduring alliance* (Manchester; New York, 1997), Alex Danchev, 'On Specialness', *International Affairs*, 72/4 (October, 1996), pp.737-50, Alan P. Dobson, *Anglo-American relations in the twentieth century*. (London and New York, 1995), David Reynolds, 'A 'Special Relationship'? America, Britain and the International Order since the Second World War', *International Affairs*, 62/1 (Winter 1985/6), pp.1-20, David Reynolds, 'Rethinking Anglo-American Relations', *International Affairs*, 65/1 (Winter, 1988-1989), pp.89-111.

³ John Baylis, *Anglo-American Defence relations 1939-1980: The Special Relationship* (London, 1981).

relations from ordinary partnerships. Yet they argue that common interests rather than shared values and sentiments were at the heart of this intimate alliance. Thus, Anglo-American relations “did not arise naturally from an existential sense of community”⁵, but were often characterised by friction and conflict. Functionalists consider Britain as the driving force of the special relationship, whereas they view the United States as more sceptical towards it. Reynolds goes as far as to claim that the notion of the ‘special relationship’ was a mere “device used by a declining power for trying to harness a rising power to serve its own ends”⁶.

A terminal approach promoted by John Dickie asserts that the fight against the common threat of communist expansion brought the United States and Britain closer together. Thus, with the end of the Cold War the principal *raison d'être* of the relationship ceased to exist.⁷ This dissertation will follow a functionalist interpretation, arguing that Anglo-American relations were not always harmonious, but indeed special with regard to intelligence co-operation.

The secret manoeuvres on the American side also reveal that Eisenhower’s policies had a much more complex nature than has previously been acknowledged. Traditionally, Eisenhower had been considered as passive President, leaving foreign policy to his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles.⁸ This view was challenged with the release of previously classified government papers and testimonies relating to his presidency. Based on this material, scholars like Stephen Ambrose asserted that Ike was not only ‘liked’, but that he was actually the main architect of American foreign policy and only *delegated* its

⁴ John Baylis, 'Exchanging Nuclear Secrets: Laying the Foundations of the Anglo-American Nuclear Relationship', *Diplomatic History*, 25/1 (2001), pp.33-61.

⁵ Danchev, 'On Specialness', p.739.

⁶ David Reynolds, 'A 'Special Relationship'? America, Britain and the International Order since the Second World War', *Ibid.*62/1 (Winter 1985/6), pp.1-20, p.2.

⁷ John Dickie, '*Special*' No More. *Anglo-American Relations: Rhetoric and Reality* (London, 1994).

⁸ Hermann Finer, *Dulles over Suez. The Theory and Practice of his Diplomacy* (London, 1964).

implementation to Dulles.⁹ Recent scholarship concurs that Eisenhower had been very active, indeed. Yet he was not as benign and as keen to promote peace as he had been portrayed. Rather, his foreign policy was more interventionist, with covert operations being a key tool in the Cold War.¹⁰

Although the American hand in the overthrow of the Iranian leader Mohammad Mossadeq was more or less an open secret from the beginning, an official account written in 1954 by Donald Wilber, one of the operation's chief planners, has been only disclosed by *The New York Times* in June 2000. The document revealed the last unknown details of American and British involvement and is now available online.¹¹ Unfortunately, any official documents on the Syrian Operation both on the British and American side remain classified to this date. Therefore, my dissertation will mainly be based on diaries and memoirs of the main participants of both events in Iran and Syria, as well as on a considerable amount of secondary literature that has been produced on the secret side of policy with regard to the Middle East. Additionally, the dissertation will benefit from a range of published documentary collections.

Before I will examine the two case studies of joint operations in Iran and Syria, it will first of all be necessary to give an overview of the theoretical framework of covert action as an element of intelligence and explain why covert action developed as an integral part of American strategy in the Cold War. Chapter three will discuss why covert action was applied in the Middle Eastern theatre and why Iran became the first target state. Chapter four will then give a detailed analysis of the joint operation in Syria.

⁹ Stephen Ambrose, *Eisenhower: The President* (New York, 1984), F. R. Burk, *Dwight D. Eisenhower: Hero and Politician* (Boston, 1986), B.D. Capitanichik, *The Eisenhower Presidency and American Foreign Policy* (London 1969), Robert A. Divine, *Eisenhower and the Cold War* (New York and Oxford, 1981).

¹⁰ Kevin O'Brien, 'Covert Action: The "Quiet Option" in International Statecraft', in Loch K. Johnson and James Wirtz (eds.), *Intelligence and National Security: The Secret World of Spies* (Oxford, 2008), p.24.

¹¹ Donald N. Wilber, *Overthrow of Premier Mossadeq of Iran: November 1952-August 1953* (Central Intelligence Agency, 1954), available at <<http://cryptome.org/cia-iran-all.htm>>, accessed 1 September 2008.

II. Covert Action

II.1. Covert action in the studies of intelligence

More than twenty years ago, intelligence has been described as the “missing dimension of most diplomatic history”¹. Since then, Intelligence Studies, a subfield of International Relations, developed steadily, greatly facilitated by the declassification of important documents on part of the United States and Britain in the 1980s, and, more recently, the former Soviet Union and the states of the former Eastern bloc. Analysing the features of intelligence and its implications for both the domestic policy-making process as well as inter-state relations contributed significantly to an enhanced understanding especially of the nature and the origins of the Cold War.² Yet while the pre-dominantly archive-based literature on the intelligence side of events has increased considerably, “[t]he specific subject of covert action as an element of intelligence”, as Elizabeth Anderson laments, “has suffered from a deficiency of serious study”³. Covert action, according to the Central Intelligence Agency’s own definition is “[a]n operation designed to influence governments, events, organizations, or persons in support of foreign policy in a manner that is not necessarily attributable to the sponsoring power”⁴. In general, four types of covert actions can be distinguished: propaganda, economic, political and paramilitary operations.⁵

Covert action, or ‘special political action’ as it is called in Britain, is primarily carried out by the intelligence services. As the National Security Council concluded in 1947, this is mainly due to practical reasons:

¹ Christopher Andrew and David Dilks (eds.), *The Missing Dimension: Governments and Intelligence Communities in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1984), p.1.

² Len Scott and Peter Jackson, 'The Study of Intelligence in Theory and Practice', *Intelligence and National Security*, 19/2 (2004), pp.139-69.

³ Elizabeth Anderson, 'The Security Dilemma and Covert Action: The Truman Years', *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, 11/4 (1998), pp.403-27, p.403.

⁴ CIA, *Consumer's Guide to Intelligence* (Washington DC, 1995), p.38, quoted in David F. Rudgers, 'The Origins of Covert Action', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35/2 (2000), pp.249.

⁵ Mark Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy* (Washington, 2003), pp.129-31.

“[T]he similarity of operational methods involved in covert psychological and intelligence activities and the need to ensure their secrecy and obviate costly duplication renders the Central Intelligence Agency the logical agency to conduct such operations.”⁶

The question whether covert action should be considered as part of intelligence, however, is subject to controversial academic debate. Although there is no consensus as to a definition of intelligence⁷, it has been argued by scholars like Michael Herman that its ultimate goal is to *inform* political leader and to reduce uncertainty.⁸ Peter Jackson, on the other hand, has argued that intelligence should be considered as “tool to *guide* policy” as much as a “tool for the *implementation* of policy”⁹. Thus, covert action forms an integral part of intelligence. It is in that sense that I will refer to covert action and intelligence in the coming chapters.

II.2. Covert action in the Cold War

The United States were latecomers in the intelligence business with the first independent intelligence agency, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), being established only after the shock of Pearl Harbor. The OSS was designed after the British model and developed a close cooperation with the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) during the war. In fact, the OSS benefited from the expertise of SIS¹⁰ which had been set up in 1909 and had since then comprised a section responsible for special operations.¹¹ OSS and SIS jointly engaged

⁶ *Foreign Relations of the United States (hereafter: FRUS) 1945-1950*, NSC memorandum, 17 December 1947, pp.649-51.

⁷ David Kahn, 'An Historical Theory of Intelligence', *Intelligence and National Security*, 16/3 (2001), pp.79-92.

⁸ Michael Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War* (Cambridge, 1996), pp.55-56.

⁹ Peter Jackson, 'Historical Reflections on the Uses and Limits of Intelligence', in Peter Jackson and Jennifer Siegel (eds.), *Intelligence and Statecraft: The Uses and Limits of Intelligence in International Society* (Westport, 2005), p.12.

¹⁰ SIS actually was the senior partner at the beginning of the Anglo-American intelligence alliance, see Stephen Dorril, *MI6. Fifty Years of Special Operations* (London, 2000), pp.49-57.

¹¹ Christopher Andrew, *Secret Service: the Making of the British Intelligence Community* (London, 1986).

in sabotage, espionage, covert action and subversion against the axis powers. However, the OSS was disbanded as soon as the guns fell silent.¹² Slowly acknowledging the potential Soviet threat, the United States created the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 1947. However, the first peace-time intelligence agency initially was limited to collecting and analysing intelligence.¹³

The Kremlin, by contrast, had plenty of experience with clandestine operations. The Committee for State Security, better known as KGB as it was called from 1954, and its predecessors had been operating at home and abroad for nearly thirty years.¹⁴ Yet George F. Kennan, the ‘father’ of the containment policy, recognised the need to supplement overt means to counter Soviet expansion like the Marshall Plan or the Truman Doctrine with covert ones. In his famous “Long Telegram” Kennan had argued that Moscow’s hostility towards the Western camp stemmed from nothing the West had done, but was a domestic necessity to justify the totalitarian regime.¹⁵ Therefore, it would be futile to employ traditional diplomatic means to achieve an understanding with Moscow. Military means, on the other hand, would be inappropriate. Yet something needed to be done to contain Soviet expansionism.¹⁶

Covert operations, as Loch K. Johnson puts it, became a valuable “‘third option’ between diplomacy and open warfare”¹⁷. Kennan himself wrote the directive that formally ordered

¹² Christopher Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only. Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush* (New York, 1995), pp.159-61.

¹³ National Security Act 1947 in Leary, William (ed.) *The Central Intelligence Agency. History and Documents*, (Alabama, 1984), p.129.

¹⁴ Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB. The Inside Story of its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev* (London, 1990), Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive II. The KGB and the World* (London, 2005).

¹⁵ Kennan to Secretary of State, 22 February 1946, *FRUS*, 1946, VI, 696-709.

¹⁶ George F. Kennan, 'The Sources of Soviet Conduct', *Foreign Affairs*, 25 (July 1947), pp.566-82.

¹⁷ Loch K. Johnson, *America's Secret Power: The CIA in a Democratic Society* (New York, 1989), p.17.

the CIA to engage in covert actions.¹⁸ Initially focussing on Europe to prevent communist subversion, the CIA began to expand its clandestine operations into the Third World with the onset of the Korean War.¹⁹

Covert interventions in the affairs of third countries to further the interests of the American government can doubtlessly be considered an aggressive act. However, this paper will not touch upon the historiographical debate whether American foreign policy in the early Cold War years was a defensive response to Soviet expansionist ambitions²⁰ or whether they went beyond pure containment and actually increased the insecurity of the USSR, which then had to respond.²¹ All interpretations, orthodox, revisionist and post-revisionist²², however, view the Cold War itself merely as a bi-polar conflict. Yet especially with regard to the Middle East, Odd Arne Westad's recent approach encompassing other paradigms like ideology, technology and the Third World as factors shaping the Cold War seems very promising for the understanding of the conflict.²³ While bearing these paradigms in mind, the following chapters will however concentrate on Anglo-American relations with regard to the Middle East, thus leaving out the issue of inter-Arab rivalry.

¹⁸ NSC 10/2, in *FRUS*, 1945-1950, pp.713ff.

¹⁹ Rudgers, 'Origins of Covert Action', pp.249-62.

²⁰ George Frost Kennan, *American diplomacy, 1900-1950* (London, 1952), Arthur Schlesinger Jr, 'Origins of the Cold War' *Foreign Affairs*, 46, October, 1967, pp. 22-52.

²¹ William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York, 1962).

²² The post-revisionist approach tried to generate a more balanced view, based on archival material from both the Western powers as well as the former Soviet Union. The leading post-revisionist, John Lewis Gaddis, however, tended to return to the traditional view and attributed the 'blame' for the origins of the Cold War to the Soviet Union. see John Lewis Gaddis, *We now know. Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford, 1997).

²³ Odd Arne Westad, 'The New International History of the Cold War: Three (Possible) Paradigms', *Diplomatic History*, 24/4 (Fall 2000), pp.551-65.

III. Iran 1953

III.1. Anglo-American interests in the Middle East

Britain had established its status as paramount power in the Middle East after the First World War. The region, linking Africa, Asia and Europe, formed an important nodal point for communications and transport. More importantly, the British economy increasingly depended on the region's rich oil reserves.¹ Considerably weakened by the Second World War, the United Kingdom faced serious problems to maintain its Great Power status. Particularly the loss of India in 1947 was a bitter pill to swallow and increased fears among Britain's elites that the United Kingdom might be reduced to a third-rate power. In the Middle East, however, Britain still held a dominant position. Thus, London determined the region to become the "new keep and stronghold"² of the Empire.

For the United States, the Middle East was a low priority before the Second World War. This, however, changed with the Iranian crisis in 1946, when Moscow refused to withdraw its troops from Iran as stipulated in the Yalta agreement. Furthermore, the Kremlin encouraged rebels to proclaim the Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan and Kurdish Republic in north-western Iran, which held rich oil reserves.³ Eventually, Stalin had to give in to international pressure and withdrew in March 1947. But in view of the perceived expansionist policies of the Soviet Union, the United States began to consider the Middle East to be "vital" for their own security.⁴ Especially in light of the communist victory in China and the onset of the Korean War, Iran became of significant strategic importance for the defence of the Middle East. If Iran fell under communist rule, the Soviet Union's

¹ Ovendale, *Transfer of Power*. p.4.

² Reynolds, "Special Relationship", p.6.

³ William J. Daugherty, 'Truman's Iranian Policy, 1945-1953: The Soviet Calculus', *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, 15/4 (2002), pp.580-93, Mark J. Gasiorowski, 'U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Iran During the Mussadiq Era', in David W. Lesch (ed.), *The Middle East and the United States. A Historical and Political Reassessment* (Boulder, Colorado, 2003), p.52.

⁴ NSC 5, FRUS, 1948, IV, p.2.

position in a global war would be significantly enhanced due to the access to Iran's oil and its geo-strategic location bordering Turkey, Iraq, the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁵ Yet despite having upgraded the status of the Middle East to "vital", the United States were reluctant to make any military commitments.⁶ In the event of war, the United Kingdom was considered to be solely responsible to defend the Middle East.

London, however, in view of its economic strains, was incapable of holding the region in a prolonged war without the help of the United States.⁷ Albeit being suspicious of "American commercial penetration into the Middle East"⁸, the Labour government under Clement Attlee recognised as early as October 1945 that US economic, military as well as political assistance would be indispensable for the UK in order to maintain its position, which was increasingly endangered by a rising tide of Arab nationalism. Therefore, London wanted an open celebration of the 'special relationship' to send a signal to the Arab nations that America would support Britain in any dispute.⁹

Washington, however, increasingly concerned about Soviet penetration of the Middle East, began to act more independently. This, however, caused stern tensions between London and Washington during the Oil Crisis in Iran. As will be demonstrated below, Britain and America had different priorities with regard to Iran, which led them to view the situation in the country in different ways. Nevertheless, their common effort to topple Mossadeq indicates that their aims were converging in general.

⁵ This is discussed especially in NSC 54, 21 July 1949 in *FRUS*, 1949, VI, pp.545-555.

⁶ The inconsistent American foreign policy towards the Middle East was mainly due to the schism between State and Defence Departments. While the former argued that the US should increase its support for the region so as not to lose it to communism, the latter feared an over-extension of American capabilities and argued to de-prioritise the region. see Steve Marsh, *Anglo-American Relations and Cold War Oil. Crisis in Iran* (London and New York, 2003), p.25.

⁷ Ritchie Owendale, *Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke, 1998), p.101.

⁸ CAB 128/1, CM 38 (45)6, 4 October 1945, reprinted in Hyam (ed.), *Labour and the End of Empire*, pp.2-4.

⁹ Marsh, *Crisis in Iran*, p.27.

III.2. *The Oil dispute*

At the end of the 1940s, public discontent began to arise in Iran over the unjust distribution of the profits of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). Dr. Mohammad Mossadeq, the most prominent nationalist politician, further heated up the debate about the oil industry by demanding its outright nationalisation. When he became Prime Minister in April 1951, he eventually passed a bill through the Majlis, the Iranian Parliament, nationalising AIOC.¹⁰ The British government, which owned 50 percent of the company,¹¹ were outraged by this decision. The AIOC refinery in Abadan, an offshore island in the Persian Gulf, was the “single largest overseas asset and a source of national pride”¹². Britain’s ailing economy was also in desperate need of the oil revenues. His Majesty’s Government was seriously contemplating to invade the Abadan Island to seize the refinery and the nearby oilfields.¹³

The United States, however, strongly opposed the use of force unless in a case of a communist revolution, a Soviet military attack or when necessary to protect the lives of British nationals.¹⁴ Washington feared that an unprovoked military intervention would constitute the perfect pretext for the Soviet Union to send troops to Azerbaijan and to sponsor a take-over by the Iranian communist party, the Tudeh. According to the Soviet-Iranian Friendship Treaty of 1921, the USSR was entitled to intervene in the event of an

¹⁰ The Shah approved Mossadeq’s Premiership on 29 April and the nationalisation bill on 1 May. see Gasiorowski, 'U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Iran', p.54.

¹¹ Steve Marsh argues that the lines between AIOC and the British government were rather blurred with the latter having more responsibility for the company’s performance during the oil crisis than had previously been acknowledged. see Marsh, *Crisis in Iran*, p.4.

¹² Wm. Roger Louis, 'Britain and the Overthrow of the Mosaddeq Government', in Mark J. Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne (eds.), *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (New York, 2004), p.129.

¹³ H.W. Brands, 'The Cairo-Teheran Connection in Anglo-American Rivalry in the Middle East, 1951-53', *The International History Review*, XI/3 (August, 1989), pp.434-56.

¹⁴ NSC 107/2 in *FRUS*, 1952-1954, X. pp.71-76, Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York, 1969), p.506.

attack on Iran by a third party.¹⁵ The British government, however, concluded that “[t]he risk of Russia occupying Northern Persia might be worth accepting provided that we retained full control of the Abadan refinery”¹⁶. In any case, it was considered unlikely that the Soviet Union would escalate the situation into a global war. American officials, by contrast, estimated that the situation might easily lead to a global confrontation with the USSR – a scenario that had to be avoided under all circumstances. Thus, they were shocked that their British counterparts would rather take this risk than lose control over the oil. Eventually, the British Prime Minister Clement Attlee gave in to American pressure and refrained from military action.

Anglo-American relations became increasingly strained during the oil dispute. London and Washington had divergent interpretations of what was actually happening in Iran, which, subsequently, led them to pursue different policies. The American National Security Council regarded an unprovoked military intervention by the USSR as “unlikely”, yet nevertheless warned that the latter “will continue to apply strong political and psychological pressures against Iran”¹⁷. Thus, a communist coup à la Czechoslovakia presented a real danger. For the United States, Dr. Mossadeq and his National Front seemed to be the ideal “bulwark” against communist subversion.¹⁸ He enjoyed a wide popularity in Iran and was known to distrust both the Tudeh and the USSR.¹⁹ Americans accused the British of failing to deal adequately with the irrevocable trend of nationalist movements, thus risking driving them into the hands of the Soviets.

¹⁵ Article 6 of Irano-Soviet Treaty of 1921 reprinted in *FRUS*, 1952-1954, X, p.889.

¹⁶ CAB 129/46, CP (51) 212, Cabinet Meeting on 20 July 1951, cited from: Ronald Hyam (ed.), *The Labour Government and the End of Empire, 1945-1951, Part I High Policy and Administration* (London, 1992), pp.91-93.

¹⁷ Study Prepared by the Staff of the National Security Council, undated, in *FRUS*, 1952-1954, X, pp.11-21.

¹⁸ Gasiorowski, 'U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Iran', p.55.

¹⁹ James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (New York, 1988), pp.53-57, Louis, 'Overthrow of Mosaddeq', p.128.

For London, however, Mossadeq was an anti-British fanatic rather than a nationalist. The British Ambassador Shepherd described him as “demagogue” and “lunatic”, who wept in public, pretended to faint during speeches in the Majlis and preferred to negotiate in pyjamas whilst sitting in bed.²⁰ In contrast to their American colleagues, British officials were convinced that Mossadeq’s downfall would not necessarily lead to a communist takeover²¹ and began to exert economic pressure on Iran. By September 1951, the United Kingdom had practically installed a blockade that prevented Iran from selling its oil on the world market.²²

Yet British officials were annoyed about “the extent to which Mossadeq was being aided in the oil dispute by a United States policy of ‘neutrality’”²³. Instead of firmly siding with its ally, the United States urged both Iran and Britain to settle their differences. In July 1951, President Truman sent special envoy W. Averell Harriman to Tehran to mediate an agreement.²⁴ Harriman’s team managed to persuade the Iranian Prime Minister to resume talks with Britain. However, Mossadeq reject the new proposal offered to him by the British negotiation mission under the leadership of Richard Stokes in August 1951.²⁵

In September 1951, when British workers were forced to leave the oilfields, the Attlee government again considered a military invasion.²⁶ Yet again, the US President strongly opposed such a step. Convinced that Mossadeq was “anxious to achieve an agreement”²⁷,

²⁰ Wm. Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945-1951: Arab Nationalism, The United States, and Postwar Imperialism* (Oxford, 1984), pp.652-62.

²¹ Anthony Eden, *Full Circle: The Memoirs of Sir Anthony Eden* (London, 1960), p.201.

²² For a detailed analysis of the economic dimension of the oil dispute see Mary Ann Heiss, 'The International Boycott of Iranian Oil and the Anti-Mosaddeq Coup of 1953', in Mark Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne (eds.), *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (New York, 2004).

²³ Eden, *Full Circle*, p.200.

²⁴ For the Harriman Mission, see *FRUS*, 1952-1954, X, pp. 92-152.

²⁵ Mark J. Gasiorowski, 'The 1953 Coup d'État in Iran', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 19/3 (August 1987), pp. 261-86, p.263.

²⁶ Attlee to Truman, Telegram dated 25 September, reprinted in *FRUS*, 1952-1954, X, pp.167-169; Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, p.510.

²⁷ Gasiorowski, '1953 Coup', p.264.

Truman insisted on the British to resume negotiations. In October, the issue was brought to the Security Council of the United Nations, where Mossadeq presented his case. During his stay in the United States, the Iranian Prime Minister met regularly with Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs George McGhee who tried to find a balanced compromise to the oil dispute.²⁸ Mossadeq also travelled to Washington where he was warmly welcomed by President Truman.²⁹

By this time, however, Anglo-American relations had severely suffered from the oil dispute. British politicians resented the lack of support of its ally³⁰ and judged that the United States was “excessively catastrophic in its appreciation of the Iranian situation”³¹. American officials, on the other hand, termed the British Iran policy a “disaster”³² and some even recommended a greater distance from Britain in Middle Eastern affairs.

The United States were eager to find a solution to the oil dispute as fast as possible because they feared that an economic breakdown of the country might eventually lead to a communist takeover. Washington recognised both Iran’s right to nationalise and Britain’s right for just compensation and sincerely believed that an agreement could be reached satisfying both parties. Yet the British and Iranian positions remained far apart. Although British officials publicly stated that the *principle* of nationalisation would be accepted provided compensation was paid,³³ they actually insisted on retaining control of the oil fields.³⁴ For it was considered to be “not possible to do business with him”³⁵ anyway, and

²⁸ For a full account of the negotiations talks see George McGhee, *Envoy to the Middle World. Adventures in Diplomacy* (New York, 1983), pp.388-404.

²⁹ Memorandum of Conversation between President Truman, Secretary of State Acheson and Mossadeq, Washington, 23 October 1951, in *FRUS*, 1952-1954, X, pp.241-244.

³⁰ Marsh, *Crisis in Iran*, p.67, Louis, *British Empire*, p.664.

³¹ Private conversation between British Ambassador Sir Roger Makins and Paul Nitze after meeting of US and UK officials on January 17, 1952, in *FRUS*, 1952-54, X, pp.327-8.

³² Grady to DOS, 27 August 1951, in *FRUS*, 1952-1954, X, p.149.

³³ CAB 128/20, CM 51(51)2, in Hyam (ed.), *Labour and the End of Empire*, pp.87-90.

³⁴ Therefore, the newly-elect Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden rejected the proposal prepared by McGhee and

convinced that Mossadeq's tenure in power would not last long, His Majesty's Government preferred to await a successor government which would be more willing to settle the matter. The Iranian Prime Minister, on the other hand, questioned the very basis for any compensation claims by arguing that the 1933 agreement was illegal and immoral.³⁶ Mossadeq's intransigence increasingly exasperated American officials. Secretary of State Dean Acheson lamented that "Mossadeq, too, was whirling like a dervish. One day he would appear to offer arbitration or compensation; the next, to withdraw his offer"³⁷.

During the following months, Mossadeq's behaviour became increasingly erratic and unpredictable. He started negotiations on the sale of oil with the USSR in early 1952 and began to call for Iran's neutrality in the Cold War.³⁸ In July 1952, he assumed near-dictatorial rights by appointing himself Minister of Defence, thus reducing the Shah's authority as commander in chief.³⁹

By then, American officials began to voice doubts about the mental stability of Mossadeq⁴⁰ and came to the conclusion that he was unwilling to end the oil dispute any time soon. Thus, Washington was gradually departing from its position as 'honest broker' and moved closer to the British view. In August 1952, President Truman and Prime Minister Churchill jointly presented another proposal to Mossadeq, which was yet again rejected a month later.⁴¹ In November, the National Security Council explicitly recommended that the United States should "[a]void unnecessarily sacrificing legitimate United Kingdom interests

Mossadeq, see Memorandum of Conversation, Paris, 4 November 1951, in *FRUS*, 1952-1954, X, pp.256-58.

³⁵ Professor Ann K.S. (Nancy) Lambton quoted in Dickie, *'Special' No More*, p.69.

³⁶ Louis, 'Overthrow of Mosaddeq', p.129.

³⁷ Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, p.679.

³⁸ Henderson to DOS, 19 January 1952, *FRUS*, 1952-1954, X, pp.334-335.

³⁹ Dorril, *MI6*, p.572, Marsh, *Crisis in Iran*, pp.114-16.

⁴⁰ Henderson to DOS, 28 July 1952, *FRUS*, 1952-1954, X, p.416-421.

⁴¹ For details on the proposal see *Ibid.*, pp.469-474.

or unnecessarily impairing United States-United Kingdom relations”⁴². In the following months, London and Washington began to co-operate even more closely and combined their efforts in a secret operation to end the oil dispute – by removing Prime Minister Mossadeq.

III.3. From Conflict to Collaboration: Operation AJAX

The United Kingdom launched a ‘special political action’ to unsettle Mossadeq as early as July 1951, only two months after the nationalisation bill became law in Iran. The plan was based on the analysis and recommendation of Professor Ann Lambton, a leading expert in contemporary Iranian affairs who enjoyed wide influence within the Foreign Office. Professor Lambton assured that there was a considerable part of the Iranian population which opposed Mossadeq’s nationalisation programme and “whose ideas of the Iranian national interest coincided with the British conception”⁴³. But in view of the prevailing anti-British sentiments that Dr. Mossadeq and his National Front had stirred up, it would have been futile for those Iranians to openly side with Britain. Therefore, they would need to collaborate secretly with Britain to bring about a change of government. Robert Zaehner, who was appointed by Foreign Secretary Herbert Morrison himself to orchestrate the overthrow of Mossadeq⁴⁴, began cultivating a large network of influential Iranians, with the Rashidian brothers being by far the most valuable collaborators.⁴⁵ According to Donald Wilber, the Rashidians held contacts “in such fields as the armed forces, the Majlis,

⁴² “United States Policy Regarding the Present Situation in Iran”, NSC 136/1, 20 November 1952, full text available online at: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB126/iran521120.pdf>.

⁴³ Louis, *British Empire*, p.659.

⁴⁴ Thus, the British Foreign Office was more closely entangled with SIS and covert operations than their American counterpart was with the CIA, see Louis, ‘Overthrow of Mosaddeq’, p.132.

⁴⁵ C.M. Woodhouse, *Something Ventured* (London, 1982), p.118.

religious leaders, the press, street gangs, politicians, and other influential figures”⁴⁶. After Mossadeq finally terminated diplomatic relations with Britain in October 1952, American assistance became essential for the success of the plot to unsettle the Iranian Prime Minister. Thus, Christopher ‘Monty’ Woodhouse, the Chief MI6 officer in Teheran, travelled to Washington in mid-November to present his plan and asked for American support:

“Not wishing to be accused of trying to use the Americans to pull British chestnuts out of the fire, I decided to emphasize the Communist threat to Iran rather than the need to recover control of the oil industry. I argued that even if a settlement of the oil dispute could be negotiated with [Mossadeq], which was doubtful, he was still incapable of resisting a *coup* by the Tudeh Part, if it were backed by Soviet support. Therefore he must be removed. [...] The plan which came with me to Washington was called, rather too obviously, Operation Boot”⁴⁷.

In fact, the United States had themselves been carrying out covert actions in Iran since the late 1940s. In addition to organising networks for guerrilla warfare in the event of war with the Soviet Union, cross-border espionage and subversion operations, the CIA had also launched a propaganda and political action operation code-named BEDAMN. However, the CIA efforts were not directed against Mossadeq, but to counter Soviet subversion and to reduce the influence of the Tudeh party.⁴⁸

By the end of 1952, however, Washington had lost all hope that Mossadeq would be an effective ‘bulwark’ against the communists. The National Security Council estimated in late November 1952 that a communist takeover is unlikely in the near future, but warned that “if present trends in Iran continue unchecked, Iran could be effectively lost to the free world in advance of an actual communist takeover of the Iranian Government. Failure to

⁴⁶ Wilber, *Overthrow*, p.7.

⁴⁷ Dorril, *MI6*, p.583, Woodhouse, *Something Ventured*, p.118.

⁴⁸ Gasiorowski, '1953 Coup', p.269.

arrest present trends in Iran involves a serious risk to the national security of the United States”⁴⁹. Particularly alarming was the fact that key allies had left Mossadeq’s coalition and were working against him. By mid-February 1953, Mossadeq was largely depended on the support of Tudeh. His continued refusal to settle the oil dispute would further deteriorate the economic situation in Iran and the US feared that the Tudeh party might take advantage of popular unrests.⁵⁰ Thus, during the summer and autumn of 1952, American officials began contemplating covert operations. NSC 136/1, which Truman approved on 20 November, called for “special political operations”⁵¹ in the event of an attempted or actual communist coup. The document explicitly states that “[e]ffective liaison with the United Kingdom should be maintained with respect to such operations”⁵².

The final decision for an Anglo-American operation to remove Mossadeq, however, was delayed due to the impending change of administration after Eisenhower won the presidential elections in November 1952. On 3 February 1953, two weeks after Ike’s inauguration, American and British officials decided to co-operate in the overthrow of the Mossadeq regime.⁵³ CIA and MI6 worked closely on the development of the plan, which was given its final approval by Eisenhower and the State Department on the one hand and the British Foreign Office on the other hand in mid-July 1953. Kermit ‘Kim’ Roosevelt, Chief of the CIA’s Near East and Africa Division, was appointed to lead Operation AJAX, as the former British operation Boot had been re-christened.⁵⁴

The most difficult part for Roosevelt proved to be convincing the Shah to participate in the coup. The original plan required him to sign royal decrees, so-called *firman*s; one dismissing

⁴⁹ NSC 136/1.

⁵⁰ Mark J. Gasiorowski, 'The 1953 Coup D'État Against Mosaddeq', in Mark J. Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne (eds.), *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (New York, 2004), pp.230-33.

⁵¹ NSC 136/1, p.4, Paragraph 5(c).

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Kermit Roosevelt, *Countercoup: The Struggle for the Control of Iran* (New York, 1979), pp.120-24.

⁵⁴ Wilber, *Overthrow*, pp.iv-vii.

Mossadeq and one appointing General Fazlollah Zahedi, whom the British and Americans had chosen to become Iran's new Prime Minister. The Shah finally signed the *firmans* on 15 August, but details of the plot were leaked to Mossadeq. The military official who was to deliver the royal decrees was arrested the same night. On 16 August, Mossadeq announced publicly that a coup against his government had been attempted. During the day, forces loyal to Mossadeq established control over the city and arrested leading army figures and other persons suspected of participating in the coup.⁵⁵

The Shah fled the country the same day - without informing the CIA. Operation AJAX seemed to have gone terribly wrong. For the next two days, Tehran was in chaos, with Tudeh mobs taking to the streets, tearing down the Shah's statues and demanding the end of his reign.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Roosevelt and his team, after the initial setback, began to improvise. It seems quite probable that the above-mentioned Tudeh demonstrations were originally organised by the CIA in order to provoke fears of a Communist revolution which, it was hoped, would trigger a counter-reaction by Iranians hostile to communism.⁵⁷ In any case, the CIA orchestrated the counter-demonstration against the Tudeh crowd, which by then had been joined by genuine party members.⁵⁸ The street fighting lasted for nine hours and caused over three hundred casualties. Eventually, Mossadeq surrendered after his troops were defeated by the pro-Shah mob.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp.44-50.

⁵⁶ Woodhouse, *Something Ventured*, pp.128-29.

⁵⁷ There is, however, no documentary evidence for this claim. Gasiorowski has obtained this information from interviews with several CIA officials involved in the coup, see Gasiorowski, '1953 Coup', p.275,fn.66.

⁵⁸ The crowds were led by members of exercise clubs. They had, according to Koch, probably been activated by the Rashidian brothers and were extremely effective in rallying the masses behind the Shah. see Scott A. Koch, "Zendeabad, Shah!" *The Intelligence Agency and the Fall of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq, August 1953* (Central Intelligence Agency, 1998), p.63.

⁵⁹ For a comprehensive account of the coup see Gasiorowski, 'Coup d'État Against Mosaddeq', Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men. An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (2003), Roosevelt, *Countercoup*, pp.169-85.

III.4. Outcome

The Shah returned the following day and was received by a cheering crowd. He promptly appointed Zahedi Prime Minister and the oil dispute was finally settled in late 1954. The nationalisation was reversed, but the monopoly of AIOC, subsequently renamed British Petroleum (BP), was not re-established either. Instead, an international petroleum consortium was set up in which American companies and BP each held a 40 percent share.⁶⁰

Washington's pressure on London during the oil crisis and the fact that its settlement opened the Iranian oil market to American companies led Without doubt, relations between London and Washington were difficult and tense during the oil crisis. Yet both powers were well aware of their interdependence not only in the Middle East, but as allies in the global Cold War. Secretary of State Dean Acheson reminded Secretary of Defence Robert Lovett, who had raised doubts about the necessity of Anglo-American relations, that "the United Kingdom is the most important element of strength in the Western alliance outside of the United States. [...] The objective of our policy must be to save Iran without unnecessarily damaging our relations with the United Kingdom"⁶¹.

As outlined above, Britain and America had different *priorities* with respect to Iran. Their interests in general, however, were astonishingly similar: Both acknowledged that the Soviets had to be prevented from gaining a foothold in Iran, that the access to oil had to be secured for the economic recovery of Western Europe and that it was necessary to protect the sanctity of contracts.⁶² Without a comparable degree of convergence, the intelligence co-

⁶⁰ Mary Ann Heiss, 'The United States, Great Britain, and the Creation of the Iranian Oil Consortium, 1953-4', *International History Review*, XVI/3 (August 1994), pp.511-35, J. Bamberg, *The History of the British Petroleum Company. Vol.2. The Anglo-Iranian Years* (Cambridge, 1994).

⁶¹ Acheson to Lovett, November 4, 1952, in *FRUS*, 1952-1954, X, pp.510-3.

⁶² Indeed, the Americans did not wish to see the Iranians set a precedent for the nationalisation of a foreign owned company without just compensation as this would have endangered their own assets in Latin America.

operation between Britain and the United States in the overthrow of Mossadeq would not have been conceivable. Although Operation AJAX itself was primarily executed by the CIA, the plan had been elaborated by British and American intelligence officials.⁶³ The CIA also greatly benefited from the network of agents that MI6 had previously established in Iran.⁶⁴

After Mossadeq's fall, Iran was safely integrated in the Western Orbit. Operation AJAX had been an effective means to end the oil dispute without risking to invoke the Soviet-Iranian Friendship treaty – the very model of a “third” option. The Shah told Roosevelt in private “I owe my throne to God, my people, my army – and to you”⁶⁵. Yet the actual impact of the covert action on the events in Iran is debatable. Barry Rubin claims that “[o]verthrowing [Mossadeq] had been like pushing on an already-opened door”⁶⁶. Indeed, the political climate in Iran was inherently unstable at this time. However, the internal history prepared by the CIA's history staff in 1998 claims that the fall of Mossadeq would not have been possible without outside help to the opposition groups.⁶⁷

There has, however, been considerable scholarly debate as to why the United States eventually decided to engage in this venture. Some have argued that the decision was primarily motivated by the close relationship between the Eisenhower administration and oil companies.⁶⁸ Others have stressed Eisenhower's more assertive policy to counter Soviet expansion. Since the decision to overthrow Mossadeq was reached shortly after Ike's inauguration, it seems that he was more willing to use covert operation than his

⁶³ For details of the planning see Wilber, *Overthrow*, pp.5-11.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Roosevelt, *Countercoup*, p.199.

⁶⁶ Barry Rubin, *Paved with Good Intentions. The American Experience in Iran* (New York and Oxford, 1980), p.89.

⁶⁷ Koch, "Zendeabad, Shah!", p.81.

⁶⁸ Joyce and Gabriel Kolko, *The Limits of Power: The World and the United States Foreign Policy, 1945-1954* (New York, 1972), pp.412-20.

predecessor.⁶⁹ However, when official documents from the period 1952 to 1954 became available, scholars identified more elements of continuation than of change between the two administrations with regard to Iran.⁷⁰

Britain, on the other hand, has been portrayed to have abused the notion of the special relationship in order to secure American support for its own imperial ends.⁷¹ With regard to covert action, however, the claim that London had 'tricked' Washington into the secret endeavour to topple Mossadeq seems rather doubtful. As outlined above, American officials began themselves to consider covert action long before Woodhouse asked for US assistance in early November.

With Operation AJAX, the United States had for the first time committed themselves to intervene in Middle Eastern affairs. Undeniably, they subsequently began to establish themselves as the major Western power in the region. Britain was increasingly pushed into the role of a junior partner – a process accompanied with tensions and conflicts. Nevertheless, United States did not intend to fully replace Britain in the Middle East. As will be seen in the coming chapter, Washington was more interested in power-sharing than hegemony.⁷² Co-operation on the intelligence level was part of the glue that kept Anglo-American relations together.

⁶⁹ Ambrose, *Eisenhower: The President*, Rubin, *Paved with Good Intentions. The American Experience in Iran*, Moyara De Moraes Ruehsen, 'Operation 'Ajax' Revisited: Iran, 1953', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 29/3 (July, 1993), pp.467-86.

⁷⁰ For a discussion about continuity and change see: Francis J. Gavin, 'Politics, Power, and U.S. Policy in Iran, 1950-1953', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 1/1 (Winter 1999), pp.56-89, Steve Marsh, 'Continuity and Change: Reinterpreting the Policies of the Truman and Eisenhower Administrations toward Iran, 1950-1954', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 7/3 (Summer 2005), pp.79-123.

⁷¹ Reynolds, "Special Relationship", p.2.

⁷² State Department Position Paper, 27 November 1953, "We seek neither the removal [n]or the replacement of British influence, but rather its strengthening by effective adjustment to present-day realities", quoted in Salim Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism. The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill and London, 2004), p.29.

IV. Syria 1956-1957

IV.1. Syria as target for covert action

The United States and Britain shared a common interest with regard to Syria: To prevent the country from falling under communist rule. Syria, which gained independence from France in 1945, hosted numerous left-wing political organisations and was thus considered as especially vulnerable to Soviet influence.¹

In March of the following year, the CIA helped orchestrating a military coup that brought Army Chief of Staff Husni Zaim to power.² Zaim, whom American officials considered to be a “‘Banana Republic’ dictator type” who “did not have the competence of a French corporal”³, nevertheless implemented a series of policies to their liking: He ended the border dispute with the NATO member Turkey, signed an armistice with Israel and indicated his willingness for peace talks in general. Equally important, he took strong actions against left-wing dissidents and approved a pipeline building project to pump oil from Saudi Arabia to the Mediterranean.⁴ Unfortunately, Zaim was overthrown and executed only five months after his accession to power. His successor was himself ousted from power by Colonel Adib Shishakli at the end of 1949.⁵

American officials perceived Shishakli, who had established a military dictatorship by the end of 1951, as “not pro-Western in a full sense”⁶. Nevertheless, he “has been fairly

¹ Douglas Little, 'Cold War and Covert Action: The United States and Syria, 1945-1958', *Middle East Journal*, 44/1 (Winter 1990), pp.51-75.

² The CIA official in charge Miles Copeland revealed the involvement of the CIA twenty years after the coup, see Miles Copeland, *The Game of Nations: The Amoral of Power Politics* (New York, 1969), pp.50-56. Although initially rejected as mere fiction, his statement was later confirmed by official records.

³ quoted in Little, 'Covert Action', p.55.

⁴ David W. Lesch, *Syria and the United States. Eisenhower's Cold War in the Middle East* (Boulder, Colorado, 1992), p.18.

⁵ Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria. A Study of Post-War Arab Politics 1945-1958* (London and New York, 1965), pp.141-43.

⁶ DOS Position Paper STA D-5, 5 May 1953, in FRUS, 1952-1954, IX, pp.1204-9.

cooperative with the US”⁷. On his tour through the Middle East in May 1953, John Foster Dulles met with the Syrian leader and gained the impression that Syria “is more aware of [the] Soviet threat”⁸ and, indeed, “offers some promise”⁹. Yet Shishakli was overthrown by Colonel Adnan Malki in early 1954. In the general elections held in September that year, the Ba’ath¹⁰ and other left wing parties emerged as clear victors, with Khalid Bakdash becoming the first freely elected Communist Party deputy in the Arab world.¹¹

When Malki was assassinated in April 1955 and Syria was caught in a wave of anti-Americanism, Washington considered it to be a “real danger that Syria will fall completely under left-wing control”¹². The augmentation of the Soviet diplomatic corps in Damascus and a trade agreement signed between Syria and the Soviet Union in November 1955 further alarmed officials in London and Washington.¹³ An unfriendly Syrian regime, they feared, might decide to manipulate the oil pipelines, thus depriving Western Europe of the desperately needed oil.

In a meeting in October 1955, Secretary of State Dulles warned British officials that Syria “was the nearest of all the Arab states to becoming a Soviet puppet”¹⁴. By the end of January 1956, Eisenhower and Foster Dulles discussed with Prime Minister Eden and Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd possible means to instigate a coup in Syria.¹⁵

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ J.F. Dulles to Eisenhower, tel. 17 May 1953, in Ibid., p. 89.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ The Ba’ath or Resurrection Party was an “ardently nationalistic group operating under a pan-Arab socialist doctrine”, see Lesch, *Syria and the US*, pp.2-3.

¹¹ Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, pp.182-85.

¹² Moose to J.F. Dulles, tel. May 7, 1955, *Foreign Relations, 1955-57*, XIII, pp. 525-28.

¹³ Anthony Gorst and W. Scott Lucas, 'The Other Collusion: Operation STRAGGLE and Anglo-American Intervention against Syria 1955-1956', *Intelligence and National Security*, 4/3 (July 1989), pp.576-95, p.580.

¹⁴ Memorandum of Conversation, 26 Oct. 1955, *FRUS 1955-57*, XIV, pp.650-56.

¹⁵ Douglas Little, 'Mission Impossible: The CIA and the Cult of Covert Action in the Middle East', *Diplomatic History*, 28/5 (November 2004), pp.663-701, p.675.

IV.2. *The Cairo-Damascus connection*

The decision of the United States and Britain to effect a regime change in Damascus, however, was inextricably linked to developments in Cairo. Yet with regard to Egypt, British and American views were all but converging.

The United States saw the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, who had seized power through a military coup in 1952,¹⁶ as “riding the crest of the wave of the future in the Middle East”¹⁷. In fact, the CIA helped Nasser to strengthen his position. By 1954, as Richard Aldrich observed, “the CIA was offering extensive intelligence support to Nasser’s internal security forces”¹⁸. The Eisenhower administration was convinced that it was possible to establish a good working-relationship with the Nasser regime. The close partnership with Britain, however, was increasingly considered detrimental to America’s standing among the Arab nations.¹⁹ Thus, Washington wanted to gain *bona fides* by ceasing to support its ally unconditionally in its dispute with Egypt over the evacuation of the Suez Canal base.

The British genuinely wanted to withdraw their troops, but were only willing to do so provided that Egypt would agree to place the Suez Canal under international control, to join a Middle Eastern defence organisation and to permit Britain the right to reactivate the base in case of an emergency.²⁰ Britain counted on American support in the negotiations,

¹⁶ CIA official Miles Copeland claims that he and Kim Roosevelt were involved in the overthrow of King Farouk of Egypt, see Miles Copeland, *The Game Player. Confessions of the CIA's original political operative* (London, 1989), pp.153-57.

¹⁷ Allen Dulles quoted in Kathleen Burk, *Old World, New World. The Story of Britain and America* (London, 2007), p.599.

¹⁸ Richard J. Aldrich, *The Hidden Hand: Britain, America and Cold War Secret Intelligence* (New York, 2001), p.476.

¹⁹ NIE 76, January 15, 1953; Memo of conversations, May 11 and 12, 1953, in *FRUS, 1952-4, IX*, pp.334-343, and pp.3-25.

²⁰ CAB 129/68, C(54)187, 3 June 1954, Cabinet memo by Selwyn Lloyd, in David Goldsworthy (ed.), *The Conservative Government and the End of Empire, 1951-1957, Part I: International Relations* (London, 1994), pp.126-28.

but Egypt announced on 15 March 1953 that it would not allow US representatives to participate in the talks. Churchill wanted Eisenhower to put pressure on the Egyptians, yet the latter refused to act “against the wishes of the Egyptian Government”²¹. In fact, American officials felt that “the basic reason [of the conflict] is the ‘rigid’ attitude of His Majesty’s Government”²². Anglo-American tensions reached a climax during the tripartite summit in Bermuda in December 1953. In what Eden judged an “unsatisfactory talk”²³, Dulles urged him to refrain from demanding any additional concessions from Cairo. In any case, the American Secretary of State informed him that “he did not see how US aid to Egypt could be delayed after 1 Jan[uary] 1954”²⁴. Eventually, the British successfully prevented the US from giving aid to Egypt, yet they deeply resented the manoeuvrings of their American colleagues, which, they felt, had considerably weakened their position in the negotiations. When Egypt signed the final agreement on 19 October 1954, it did so without a pledge to participate in the Middle Eastern Defence Organisation (MEDO).²⁵ In fact, Dulles had abandoned any hope that Egypt would join this Anglo-American model for regional defence when he toured the Middle East in May 1953.²⁶ Instead, he promoted to establish a defence system which would include countries of the “Northern Tier” – Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan and Iran – but exclude Egypt.²⁷

The US Chiefs of Staff still considered the defence of the Middle East to be a British responsibility. Other departments, however, lamented that British capabilities were “wholly

²¹ Eisenhower to Churchill, 19 March 1953, in Tore Tingvold Petersen, *The Middle East between the Great Powers* (New York, 2000), p.7.

²² FO 371/90135, no 167, 10 Aug 1951, telegram from Sir O Franks in John Kent (ed.), *Egypt and the Defence of the Middle East, Part II, 1949-1953* (London, 1998). pp.206-7.

²³ FO 371/102822, no 645, 15 Dec 1953 telegram from Eden, in Kent, *Defence of Middle East, Part III*, p.160.

²⁴ Achilles to DOS, 16 December 1953, in FRUS, 1952-1954, IX, pp.2174-5.

²⁵ DEFE 7/1011, Anglo-Egyptian agreement regarding Suez Canal base: text of final agreement, 19 Oct 1954, in John Kent (ed.), *Egypt and the Defence of the Middle East, Part III, 1949-1953* (London, 1998), pp.320-24.

²⁶ Memo of conversations, 11 and 12 May, 1953, in FRUS, 1952-1954, IX, pp. 3-25.

²⁷ NSC 5428, 23 July 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, IX, pp.525-536.

inadequate to defend the Middle East against Soviet aggression”²⁸. The National Security Council therefore recommended that “[t]he United States should be prepared to play a larger role in safeguarding Western interests in the area”²⁹. However, Washington still depended on Britain since the latter nonetheless dominated leading Arab countries like Iraq and Jordan.³⁰ In January 1953, a National Intelligence Estimate warned that “a too rapid abandonment of British positions would leave a military vacuum which the US would have difficulty in filling”³¹.

Britain, on the other hand, was fully aware of its declining capabilities. The Conservative Government tried to pass on the burden of defending the Middle East against Soviet aggression by arguing that the falls under the Truman doctrine and should therefore be primarily a US responsibility.³² Churchill, although considering it to be of “utmost importance to get America in”³³, did, however, not intent to abandon Britain’s position in the region. Instead, as David Lesch argues, the British aimed to “protect their specific interests in the Middle East under the cover of regional security”³⁴.

Britain and the United States thus depended on one another. Despite the worsening personal relationship between Dulles and Eden, and despite divergent appreciations of Nasser, Washington and London began to collaborate on a secret diplomatic effort to bring about a settlement of the Arab-Israeli dispute at the end of 1954. Washington feared that the ongoing conflict would further destabilise the Middle East which might “eventually [lead] to a situation in which regimes oriented toward the Soviet Union could come to

²⁸ PPS Memo, 21 May, 1952, in *FRUS*, 1952-1954, IX, p.233.

²⁹ NSC 129/1, 24 April 1952, in *Ibid.*, p.223.

³⁰ Scott Lucas, *Divided We Stand: Britain, the United States and the Suez Crisis* (London, 1991), p.33.

³¹ NIE 76, 15 January 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952-1954, IX, pp. 334-343.

³² PREM 11/208, 8 Nov 1951, minute by Lord Cherwell to Mr Churchill, in Goldsworthy (ed.), *Conservatives and the End of Empire, Part I*, p.110.

³³ Ovendale, *Anglo-American Relations*, pp.104-06.

³⁴ Lesch, *Syria and the US*, p.24,fn.25.

power”³⁵. The conflict between Arabs and Israelis had also implications for US defence plans for the region: Although the impetus for the establishment of a Northern Tier defence alliance came from the US, they abstained from joining the Baghdad Pact.³⁶ This agreement was signed between Britain, Iraq and Turkey in February 1955 as a first attempt to create such a defence system.³⁷ Due to America’s support for the creation of Israel and a strong Jewish lobby within the US, a settlement between Arabs and Israelis was a precondition for the United States to join any regional defence agreement.

The covert plan code-named ALPHA envisaged to persuade Israel to make territorial concessions to the Palestinians, which, in turn, should persuade the Arab states to recognise the state of Israel. Nasser, however, was considered of great importance to the success of the plan, since he seemed to be the only Arab leader powerful enough to induce other Arab states to join and adhere to a peace agreement with Israel.³⁸

Yet Nasser would flatly disappoint those hopes. Worse, he effectively began to work against the Baghdad Pact. As one of the founding fathers of the non-alignment movement, Nasser claimed that any externally imposed military pact would undermine the autonomy of Arab states.³⁹ In March 1955, Egypt, Syria and Saudi-Arabia signed an agreement to establish a joint Arab defence and economic co-operation, with the members obliging themselves not to join the Baghdad Pact.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Nasser purchased arms from the Soviet bloc in

³⁵ NSC 129/1, 24 April 1952, in FRUS 1952-1954, IX, p.223.

³⁶ Nigel John Ashton, 'The Hijacking of a Pact: the Formation of the Baghdad Pact and Anglo-American Tensions in the Middle East, 1955-1958', *Review of International Studies*, 19 (Spring, 1993), pp.123-37, Elie Podeh, 'The Perils of Ambiguity: The United States and the Baghdad Pact', in David W. Lesch (ed.), *The Middle East and the United States: A Historical and Political Reassessment* (Boulder, Colorado, 2003).

³⁷ Pakistan and Iran joined later that year.

³⁸ Ritchie Ovendale, *Britain, the United States and the Transfer of Power in the Middle East, 1945-1967* (London, 1996), pp.110-17.

³⁹ Fawaz Gerges, *The Superpowers and the Middle East: REgional and International Politics, 1955-1967* (Boulder, Colorado, 1994), pp.25-32. Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism*, p.38.

⁴⁰ Gorst and Lucas, 'Operation STRAGGLE', p.578, Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, p.223.

September the same year.⁴¹ Although deeply worried about those developments, at the beginning of 1956 London and Washington still considered Nasser's support vital for the success of ALPHA. By offering to finance the construction of the Aswan Dam, the United States tried to 'bribe' Nasser into co-operation.⁴²

Nasser happily accepted the offer, yet it did not deter him from challenging Western interests in the region. American officials complained that "Nasser proved to be a complete stumbling block"⁴³ with regard to project ALPHA, and primarily blamed him for its eventual failure in March. The British, on the other hand, were outraged when King Hussein of Jordan dismissed the British commander of the Arab Legion, Jordan's national army, General Sir John Bagot Glubb the same month. Anthony Eden, who had succeeded Churchill as Prime Minister in April the previous year, blamed Nasser to be responsible for this insult.⁴⁴

Thus, by March 1956 both the United States and Britain eventually concluded that it was impossible to work with Nasser and that he had to be weakened. Eden's Private Secretary Evelyn Shuckburgh noted in his diary on 8 March: "Today both we and the Americans really gave up hope of Nasser and began to look around for means of destroying him."⁴⁵ Yet, as Dulles had already told Eden and Selwyn Llyon during their meeting on 30 January, "if it should be decided to move against Nasser, it might be wise to consider Syria as well"⁴⁶.

⁴¹ Actually, Miles Copeland and Kim Roosevelt edited Nasser's public announcement of the deal. They convinced him to state that he purchased the arms from Czechoslovakia and not the USSR so as to reduce the 'shock' for the West, see Copeland, *Game of Nations*, pp.132-40, Lucas, *Divided We Stand*, pp.58-62.

⁴² Lucas, *Divided We Stand*, pp.69-85.

⁴³ Eisenhower diary entry, 13 March 1956, quoted in Scott Lucas and Alistair Morey, 'The Hidden 'Alliance': The CIA and MI6 Before and After Suez', *Intelligence and National Security*, 15/2 (2000), pp.95-120, p.102.

⁴⁴ Dorril, *MI6*, p.612, Lucas, *Divided We Stand*, p.94. Actually, Hussein merely responded to public demands to appoint a Jordanian as commander of the armed forces, but otherwise wished to "remain on the closest terms with Britain", see Anthony Nutting, *No End of a Lesson. The Story of Suez* (London, 1967), p.40.

⁴⁵ Evelyn Shuckburgh, *Descent to Suez: Diaries 1951-56* (London, 1986), p.345.

⁴⁶ Memorandum MC-1, January 30, FRUS 1955-1957, XIII, p.567.

IV.3. *Same ends, different means*

The project to destabilise Nasser, code-named Operation OMEGA, was authorised in an Anglo-American meeting at the White House on 28 March. Both London and Washington agreed that Nasser actually posed a threat to their interests in the Middle East. However, they disagreed on the extent of the danger and the measures to be employed to deal with this danger.⁴⁷

The United States had a flexible approach to OMEGA and envisaged to bring Nasser down gradually, thus leaving him the opportunity to return to co-operation with the Western powers at any time, albeit the chances seemed increasingly remote.⁴⁸ Eden, by contrast, had developed an actual anti-Nasser paranoia. After Glubb's dismissal, Eden shouted at the Minister of State in the Foreign Office, Anthony Nutting, in a telephone conversation that he wanted Nasser "destroyed"⁴⁹. When British and American intelligence officials met for the first time to discuss the execution of OMEGA on 31 March and 1 April 1956, the head of MI6 George Young argued that the "elimination of Nasser"⁵⁰ was necessary. As MI6 had learned from a source allegedly within Nasser's circle, the latter was aiming to form the "United Arab States", which would be led by Egypt and seek full support of the USSR.⁵¹ The CIA suspected that MI6 tried to manipulate them into an ill-conceived operation. Kim Roosevelt and the CIA station in Cairo still had excellent contacts to Nasser himself and they were sure that he intended none of this.⁵²

⁴⁷ Wm. Roger Louis, 'Dulles, Suez, and the British', in Richard H. Immerman (ed.), *John Foster Dulles and the Diplomacy of the Cold War* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1990), p.144.

⁴⁸ Lucas and Morey, 'Hidden Alliance', p.104, James R. Vaughan, *The Failure of American and British Propaganda in the Arab Middle East, 1945-57. Unconquerable Minds* (London, 2005), p.201.

⁴⁹ Nutting, *No End of Lesson*, p.34.

⁵⁰ Tom Bower, *The Perfect English Spy: Sir Dick White and the Secret War, 1935-90* (London, 1996), p.190.

⁵¹ An excerpt of these reports can be found in Peter G. Boyle (ed.), *The Eden-Eisenhower Correspondence 1955-57* (Chapel Hill & London, 2005), pp.123-25.

⁵² Dorril, *MI6*, p.614.

Despite these differences, the secret Anglo-American planning continued. The actual “catalyst”, however, was Syria:⁵³ Wilbur Eveland, a senior CIA official involved in the joint operation, concluded that in order to “forestall the SIS plan to eliminate the Egyptian president, the CIA had, apparently, compromised with an offer to consider joining in a Syrian coup.”⁵⁴

Although OMEGA mentioned to put “strong pressure on Syria”⁵⁵, the Planning Group initially rejected the British plan code-named STRAGGLE to effect “a complete change of government in Syria” in collaboration with Iraq and other British assets within the country.⁵⁶ Instead of a coup, it advocated the “gradual strengthening of Western-oriented groups in Syria with concurrent elimination of the leftist officer from the army”⁵⁷. Kermit Roosevelt had explicitly warned of the risks entailed in an Iraqi-British attempt to overthrow the Syrian government. The State Department’s staff paper, which John Foster Dulles eventually approved, however, did not contain any dissenting views regarding a regime change in Syria and thus gave green light to a coup.⁵⁸

In fact, Syria seemed to be on the verge of becoming a real Soviet Satellite: The Soviet Foreign Minister, Dmitri Shepilov, visited Damascus on 22 June 1956 and offered an arms deal similar to that the Egyptian government had secured the year before. In early July, Syria recognised Communist China.⁵⁹ Wilbur Eveland was sent to Damascus on 24 July to confer with Mikhail el-Lian, a right-wing Syrian politician and the primary CIA asset in the

⁵³ Lucas and Morey, 'Hidden Alliance'.

⁵⁴ Wilbur Crane Eveland, *Ropes of Sand. America's Failure in the Middle East* (London and New York, 1980), p.182.

⁵⁵ DDE, John Foster Dulles Papers, Subject Series, Box 5, File received from Mr. Herbert Hoover Jr's office (1), 'United States Policy in the Near East', 28 March 1956.

⁵⁶ CIA report of meeting with MI6 officials, 1 April 1956, in Scott Lucas (ed.), *Britain and Suez. The Lion's last Roar* (Manchester & New York, 1996), pp.38-39.

⁵⁷ Eveland, *Ropes of Sand*, p.192.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.195-200, Lucas and Morey, 'Hidden Alliance', p.105.

⁵⁹ Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, pp.258-59.

country.⁶⁰ El-Lian told him that he would need “half-million and at least thirty days” to accomplish the task.⁶¹ The planning, however, was disturbed by Nasser’s decision to nationalise the Suez Canal Company on 26 July 1956 in reaction to the withdrawal of the offer to finance the Aswan Dam on part of the United States and Britain.⁶² In September, the preparations for the Syrian coup were resumed. When the nationalisation of the Suez Canal was discussed at the United Nations from 6 to 14 October, Foreign Office and MI6 officials met with their American counterparts from the State Department and the CIA to plan further action against Syria. The target date for the execution of Operation STRAGGLE was set for 25 October.⁶³ Details of the plan, however, are unavailable to this date. Gorst and Lucas suggest that American and British agents had established contacts to the right-wing Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), desert tribes and conspirators within the army, who were instructed to instigate a pro-Western coup, possibly with Iraqi help.⁶⁴ On 18 October, el-Lian, the main contact to the executors of the coup, told Eveland that “his people weren’t quite ready” and that the date for the coup had been postponed to 29 October.⁶⁵ It is unclear to this date whether the British had deliberately set the date to coincide with the Israeli invasion of Egypt – which eventually led to the cancellation of the coup in Syria. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles discussed with his brother Allen Dulles, director of the CIA, the possibility of “re Straggl[ing] [sic]”⁶⁶ the next day. By then, however,

⁶⁰ Gorst and Lucas argue that Kermit and Archie Roosevelt had met with him on 1 July already. Apparently, the Roosevelts had been trying to “unify the right-wing political and military forces” for quite some time, see Gorst and Lucas, 'Operation STRAGGLE', p.588.

⁶¹ Eveland, *Ropes of Sand*, p.203.

⁶² After Nasser had recognised Communist China in May 1956 and thus appeared to align himself with the communist bloc, the Eisenhower Administration was actually under domestic pressure not to grant him a loan. The British fully endorsed this decision, see Louis, 'Dulles, Suez, and the British', p.146.

⁶³ Gorst and Lucas, 'Operation STRAGGLE', p.590, Lucas and Morey, 'Hidden Alliance', p.109.

⁶⁴ Gorst and Lucas, 'Operation STRAGGLE', p.590. For a more detailed account on the plan see Andrew Rathmell, *Secret War in the Middle East: The Covert Struggle for Syria, 1949-1961* (London and New York, 1995), pp.118-23.

⁶⁵ Gorst and Lucas, 'Operation STRAGGLE', p.590.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

the Syrian Intelligence Bureau had already uncovered the plot and began to break up the net of conspirators.⁶⁷

Britain's decision to secretly collaborate with Israel and France in a military coup against Nasser and the subsequent Suez War have been discussed at length elsewhere and shall not be repeated here.⁶⁸ The United States fiercely condemned this act of nineteenth century imperialism and even applied economic sanctions against Britain.⁶⁹ Anglo-American relations had reached a nadir, official communication was almost completely disrupted, with Eisenhower refusing to receive Eden in Washington later that month.⁷⁰

Communication, however, continued on the intelligence level. Lucas and Morey argue that the "CIA became the channel for communicating Washington's private position: the US would accept a *fait accompli* if the Suez Canal Zone was occupied quickly"⁷¹. In fact, the Americans also liked to see Nasser removed. Weeks before the invasion, Ike told his special counsel Bernhard Shanley - off the record of course: "I just can't understand why the British did not bump off Nasser. They have been doing it for years and then when faced with it they fumble [sic]"⁷².

Douglas Little argues that there is "strong evidence that John Foster Dulles did discuss plans for a pro-Western coup in Egypt with top U.K. officials"⁷³. On 20 September Dulles and Lloyd decided to set up "a very secret working party here to consider continuously economic

⁶⁷ Little, 'Covert Action', p.67.

⁶⁸ Steven Z. Freiburger, *Dawn over Suez: the Rise of American Power in The Middle East, 1953-1957* (Chicago, 1992), Keith Kyle, *Suez: Britain's End of Empire in the Middle East* (London, 2003), Keith Kyle, *Suez* (London, 1991), Lucas, *Divided We Stand*, Robert McNamara, *Britain, Nasser and the Balance of Power in the Middle East 1952-1967. From the Egyptian Revolution to the Six Day War* (London, 2003), Donald Neff, *Warriors at Suez: Eisenhower takes America into the Middle East* (Vermont, 1988), Jonathan Pearson, *Sir Anthony Eden and the Suez Crisis: Reluctant Gamble* (Basingstoke, 2003), Barry Turner, *Suez 1956: The Inside Story of the First Oil War* (London, 2006).

⁶⁹ Owendale, *Transfer of Power*, p.166.

⁷⁰ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Waging Peace, 1956-1961* (New York, 1969), pp.94-95.

⁷¹ Lucas and Morey, 'Hidden Alliance', p.110.

⁷² Eisenhower quoted in Piers Brendon, *Ike. His Life & Times* (New York, 1986), p.326.

⁷³ Little, 'Mission Impossible', p.680.

and political means of weakening and lessening the prestige of the regime of the regime of Colonel Nasser”⁷⁴. Eden claims in his memoirs that he and Dulles agreed that their governments “should work out alone and in the utmost secrecy a means of bringing Nasser down”⁷⁵. Earlier remarks by Dulles that “[a] way had to be found to make Nasser disgorge what he was attempting to swallow”⁷⁶ made Eden believe that the United States would, at least tacitly, support an intervention when all other means were exhausted.⁷⁷ However, he underestimated how unacceptable the use of force was to the Americans.⁷⁸ Furthermore, the British did not take into account that a military intervention with far reaching international implications only days before the American presidential election would in any case infuriate their allies.

The strong American condemnation, however, caught London by surprise, especially since Washington seemed to pursue a common aim. In mid-November, only a few days after the invasion, Foster Dulles asked Selwyn Lloyd – much to the annoyance and irritation of the latter: “Selwyn, why did you stop? Why didn’t you go through with it and get Nasser down?”⁷⁹

The United States and Britain, thus, shared the objective of weakening – or even removing – the Egyptian leader. However, grave misunderstandings arose about the means to achieve those ends and about the timing.

⁷⁴ Memorandum of Conversation, 21 September 1956, FRUS, 1955-1957, XVI, pp.549; Selwyn Lloyd, *Suez 1956* (London, 1978), pp.145-48.

⁷⁵ Eden quoted in Kyle, *Suez*, p.150.

⁷⁶ Eden, *Full Circle*, p.437, Lucas (ed.), *Britain and Suez*, p.52.

⁷⁷ Lucas, *Divided We Stand*, pp.153-264.

⁷⁸ In a meeting on 25 September, Dulles explicitly told Chancellor of the Exchequer, Harold Macmillan, that the United States would not tolerate the use of force as means to solve the problem. Macmillan, however, never passed these clear warnings on to the Cabinet, let alone the Prime Minister. Lucas (ed.), *Britain and Suez*, p.68.

⁷⁹ Lloyd, *Suez 1956*, p.219.

IV.4. Covert action again

The Suez Crisis was an enormous humiliation for Britain and eventually cost Eden his Premiership. It has had been interpreted as the 'lion's last roar'⁸⁰ or Britain's last battle.⁸¹ Despite attempts of a revisionist school of thought to downplay its significance⁸², the majority of scholars still consider Suez a 'watershed' for Britain's position in the Middle East.⁸³ The harsh reaction on part of the United States had been interpreted by historians on both sides of the Atlantic as effort to finally discredit Britain as Great Power in the region.⁸⁴ David Cameron Watt argued that the United States had deliberately tried to expunge the British presence in the Middle East.⁸⁵ Max Beloff even argues that the special relationship was nothing but a myth.⁸⁶

When taking Anglo-American covert collaboration into account, however, the picture is quite a different one: It shows that Britain continued to have a significant influence in the Middle East and that the United States, far from aiming to discredit its ally in the region, continued to co-operate closely with Britain. Without doubt, the announcement of the Eisenhower Doctrine marked America's arrival as dominant power in the Middle East. It offered American military aid to the states of the Middle East in defence against communist aggression.⁸⁷ The US now seemed to pursue an independent policy in the region in order to forestall Soviet encroachment. And it seemed that Anglo-American relations were only

⁸⁰ Cooper, C.L., *The Lion's last Roar: Suez, 1956* (New York, 1978).

⁸¹ Dooley, H.J. 'Great Britain's "Last Battle" in the Middle East: Notes on Cabinet Planning during the Suez Crisis of 1956', *International History Review*, xi/3 August 1989, pp.486-517.

⁸² Barnes, J. 'From Eden to Macmillan', in Hennessy P. and Seldon, A. (eds.), *Ruling Performance* (Oxford, 1987).

⁸³ Anthony Adamthwaite, 'Suez Revisited', *International Affairs*, 64/3 (1988), pp.449-64, p.463. Lucas, *Divided We Stand*, p.330.

⁸⁴ Freiburger, *Dawn over Suez*. John Charmley, *Churchill's Grand Alliance. The Anglo-American Special Relationship 1940-57* (London, 1995).

⁸⁵ David Cameron Watt, *Succeeding John Bull. America in Britain's Place 1900-1975* (Cambridge, 1984), p.127.

⁸⁶ Max Beloff, 'The Special Relationship: an Anglo-American Myth', in Martin Gilbert (ed.), *A Century of Conflict, 1850-1950. Essays for A.J.P. Taylor* (London, 1966).

⁸⁷ Nigel John Ashton, *Eisenhower, Macmillan and the Problem of Nasser: Anglo-American Relations and Arab Nationalism, 1955-59* (Basingstoke, 1996), pp.103-13.

slowly recovering. At a conference on 20 March 1957 at Bermuda, Eden's successor Harold Macmillan met with Eisenhower and eagerly tried to revive the close partnership their countries had enjoyed in the past. Bermuda did indeed signal a rapprochement between the British and American governments. Differences over Middle Eastern policy, however, remained unresolved. The United States aimed to focus on Saudi Arabia as new Arab leader in order to counter Nasser's influence. This, however, endangered British interests in the Gulf.⁸⁸

Yet while government officials were discussing different approaches to Middle Eastern problems, collaboration between CIA and MI6 was flourishing behind the scenes. The targets for joint covert operations were Egypt and Syria again. Both Wilbur Eveland and Miles Copeland claim that by July 1957, American and British intelligence officials were actively plotting the overthrow of Nasser in an operation called SIPONY.⁸⁹ Kermit's cousin, Archibald Roosevelt, who served as liaison officer between State Department and the CIA operators in Damascus, claimed that senior US government officials considered the "leftist coalition of forces supported by the Soviets [...] as a target legally authorized by statute for CIA political action"⁹⁰. Nasser, however, remained in power until his death in 1970, so obviously the operation never bore fruits.

In April and August 1957, the CIA also tried to instigate a coup in Syria, which, according to a Special Intelligence Estimate (SNIE), represented "an extremely promising target for Soviet efforts in [...] in the Arab world"⁹¹ after Suez. The Syrian Prime Minister Quwatly, fearing an attack of British, French and Israeli forces on Syria as well, had gone to Moscow

⁸⁸ For a detailed account on topics discussed at Bermuda see *FRUS*, 1955-1957, Vol. XII, pp.462-474.

⁸⁹ Copeland, *Game Player*, p.167, Eveland, *Ropes of Sand*, p.248. A further account of American plans to overthrow Nasser can be found in Burton Hersh, *The Old Boys. The American Elite and the Origins of the CIA* (New York, 1992), p.502,fn.32.

⁹⁰ Archie Roosevelt, *For Lust of Knowing: Memoirs of an Intelligence Officer* (Boston, 1988), pp.444.

⁹¹ SNIE 36.7-56, 16 November 1956, *FRUS* 1955-1957, XIII, p.602.

at the height of the Suez Crisis in order to seek help. In the aftermath of Suez and with the plot uncovered, pro-Soviet elements began to consolidate their power in Syria.⁹² In the course of 1957, the country seemed to drift further into the Soviet camp, with the Ba'ath Party being the most powerful party in both Cabinet and Parliament by January. Furthermore, Damascus openly rejected the Eisenhower Doctrine⁹³ and signed an agreement for economic and technical aid with the Soviet Union on 6 August 1957, thus consolidating Syrian-Soviet relations.⁹⁴

On 13 August, the Syrian intelligence branch uncovered the CIA plot code-named WAPPEN to overthrow the government.⁹⁵ Subsequently, American diplomats were expelled from the country.⁹⁶ The situation in Syria seemed on the verge of chaos. Especially after an alleged communist was appointed commander-in-chief, Syria's neighbours expressed their concerns of a possible communist take-over and asked Washington for help.⁹⁷

In the midst of the Syrian crisis⁹⁸ Washington actively sought the support of London. A vivid correspondence between Dulles and Macmillan developed in which the latter skilfully played up the danger of a communist coup in order to foster closer relations between the United States and Britain.⁹⁹ Frederick Bishop, Macmillan's Principal Private Secretary, was sent to Washington in early September to discuss further co-operation with regard to Syria.

⁹² Lesch, *Syria and the US*, pp.104-5.

⁹³ Moose to DOS, 11 January 1957 and Syrian Foreign Office Note, 29 July 1957, FRUS 1955-1957, XIII, pp. 609, 627.

⁹⁴ Lesch, *Syria and the US*, p.118.

⁹⁵ The plot, however, was badly planned and executed, see Eveland, *Ropes of Sand*, p.253, Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, pp.293-96.

⁹⁶ Rountree to Herter, 13 August 1957, FRUS 1955-1957, XIII, pp.632-3.

⁹⁷ Daily Top Secret Summary, 19 August 1957, FRUS 1955-1957, XIII, p.638. Rathmell, *Covert Struggle for Syria*, pp.140-43.

⁹⁸ For a full account of the Syrian Crisis see Philip Anderson, 'Summer Madness'. The Crisis in Syria, August-October 1957', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 22/1+2 (1995), pp.21-42.

⁹⁹ Actually, the Foreign Office did not consider the situation in Syria to represent a danger. Yet it 'synchronised' its assessments according to the American view, see Ivan Pearson, 'The Syrian Crisis of 1957, the Anglo-American 'special relationship', and the 1958 landings in Jordan and Lebanon', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 43/1 (2007), pp.45-64, p.52.

Following this visit, an Anglo-American Syrian Working Group (SWG) was established “where staff from the British Embassy could meet senior US officials from the State Department and CIA to exchange intelligence, review developments and make recommendations relating to the situation in Syria”¹⁰⁰. In fact, the British were now restraining the Americans, who were seriously contemplating to encourage a Turkish invasion of Syria and subsequently sending in the Sixth Fleet. The final report produced by the SWG on 18 September, however, ruled out this possibility as being too risky. Instead, it promoted the so-called ‘preferred plan’: Syrian tribes should be encouraged to stage fake border incidents which would serve as pretext for an invasion by Iraq, Jordan and possibly Lebanon. Additionally, unrest should be created within Syria that would eventually lead to the overthrow of the government.¹⁰¹ Interestingly, the plan, which was approved by high-ranking British and American leaders, also called for a “special effort [...] to eliminate certain key individuals”¹⁰² in Syria.

By early October, however, it seemed that the Arab states had second thoughts about the plan. The SWG then designed an alternative plan called ‘containment plus’, which resembled the previously planned Operation STRAGGLE. Its execution, however, was hampered by the landing of Egyptian troops in Syria on 13 October. After Damascus had called on the United Nations, claiming that Turkey began amassing troops at its border, Nasser had seized the opportunity to demonstrate Syro-Egyptian solidarity.¹⁰³ In February the next year, the United Arab Republic (UAR) was proclaimed, a federal union of Syrian and Egypt. Thus, the Syrian crisis ended rather unspectacularly. Damascus did not fall into Soviet hands, but Nasser was able to further consolidate his position as Arab leader – for

¹⁰⁰ Matthew Jones, ‘The ‘Preferred Plan’: The Anglo-American Working Group Report on Covert Action in Syria, 1957’, *Intelligence and National Security*, 19/3 (2004), pp.401-15, p.405.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* pp.405-9.

¹⁰² ‘Final Report of the Joint US-UK Working Group on Syria’, quoted in *Ibid.*, p.408.

¹⁰³ Pearson, ‘Syrian Crisis’, p.54.

both London and Washington at least the lesser of two evils.¹⁰⁴

The SWG, however, did not only focus on Syria but took general events in the Levant into account. In a paper produced in October 1957 it analysed the best means to respond to possible future coups in Jordan and Lebanon.¹⁰⁵ Following these recommendations, Britain and the United States began planning for a joint military action. Ivan Pearson argues that the military plan which had been developed in these joint sessions “bore a striking resemblance to the operation carried out in June 1958”, which would explain the swiftness of action taken at that time.¹⁰⁶

The SWG had offered an effective means for the United States and Britain to discuss problems and to find a common approach to solve them. In the following months, Jones argues, “the working group format became the favoured method for London and Washington of cementing their cooperation and policy coordination in a number of regional settings”¹⁰⁷. By early 1959, however, the working groups were abandoned for the United States and Britain were now co-ordinating their policies on the highest levels.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Ashton, *Eisenhower, Macmillan and Nasser*, p.131.

¹⁰⁵ ‘XIX US-UK Precautions Against Coups d’état in Jordan and Lebanon’, 10 October 1957, PRO PREM11/2523 as referred to in Pearson, ‘Syrian Crisis’, p.56.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Jones, ‘The ‘Preferred Plan’’, p.411.

¹⁰⁸ Matthew Jones, ‘Anglo-American Relations after Suez, the Rise and Decline of the Working Group Experiment, and the French Challenge to NATO, 1957-59’, *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 14/2 (March 2003), pp.49-79.

V. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that covert actions formed an integral part of the Anglo-American strategy for the Middle East. Covert operations, which concealed joint Anglo-American sponsorship, were considered as effective means to forestall Soviet penetration of the region without risking an all-out war. Furthermore, covert actions were also employed to deal with Arab nationalism when it endangered Western interests in the area.

The analysis of covert actions, however, has also revealed new insights of Anglo-American relations in the Middle East. Despite serious conflicts and apparent disagreements, the United States and Britain actually collaborated closely on the intelligence level. They were not motivated by sentiments, but by their own interests. Although London and Washington often differed in their approaches to Middle Eastern affairs and held different priorities, they nevertheless shared a sufficient degree of common interests in the region.

Initially, Britain tried to gain American support to uphold its own position. The United States were generally prepared to support Britain, particularly when they started to appreciate the strategic significance of the Middle East with the onset of the Cold War. Tensions, however, arose when Washington commenced to adopt a more independent policy in the Middle East vis-à-vis Britain. Haunted by the spectre of communism, the United States began to put pressure on Britain to find an amenable solution to the oil dispute with Iran.

Despite different appreciations of the developments in Iran, Britain and America actually agreed on basic issues: A Soviet inroad into Iran had to be prevented and access to the oil had to be secured. Admittedly, the priorities differed and London might have been more worried about its own oil revenues than Mossadeq's alleged communist affiliations. Nevertheless, a common basis existed that revealed itself in the joint planning for a covert

action to remove Mossadeq from power. Operation AJAX in Iran was the starting point for the secret Anglo-American co-operation in the Middle East.

Indeed, the intelligence co-operation can be considered as a manifestation of the special relationship. However, it was not only used by Britain in order to achieve own ends, as Reynolds asserted.¹ As has been demonstrated above, Britain did not manipulate the United States to participate in the covert endeavour to topple the Mossadeq regime, since the Truman administration had independently been contemplating a similar move in the summer of 1952. In fact, the United States benefited the most from the intelligence co-operation. By the time the oil dispute was finally settled, the United States had already begun to take a more active role in Middle Eastern affairs, particularly when government officials widely acknowledged Britain's inadequate capabilities to defend the region on its own. Nevertheless, the UK retained a significant degree of power in the region, which the United States were unable to replace. Yet America's attempts to upgrade its own status in the region were severely hampered by its association with British colonialism. Covert intelligence co-operation, therefore, enabled the US to overcome this dilemma: It actually allowed them to nurture the special relationship with the UK while simultaneously distancing themselves publicly from the latter so as not to be identified with its reputation as colonialist power.

Britain, by contrast, would have preferred a more open demonstration of the close alliance between London and Washington. The Conservative government, after winning the elections in 1951, tried more actively than their predecessors to get the United States involved in Middle Eastern affairs. Yet, as Prime Minister Eden complained to his predecessor, Winston Churchill:

¹ Reynolds, "Special Relationship".

“Although [the Americans] are willing to work closely with us in discussing common policies for the Middle East, it is difficult for them to admit publicly that they are doing so – especially in an election year ... Their unwillingness to let it be known that we are at one on this important issue diminishes the influence which each of us could exercise in the area.”²

The general willingness on part of the United States to see Nasser weakened – over even removed – and the drastic measures they envisaged for Syria inclined Eden to think that the US would support their efforts. As outlined above, Washington did not oppose Britain’s aim to remove Nasser. Douglas Little argues that “the nasty falling out between Britain and America during the Suez crisis stemmed at least in part from a misunderstanding about covert action”³. The United States envisaged bringing Nasser down gradually by means that would conceal its sponsorship. Britain, however, reckoned that military force would be acceptable when all other means to solve the crisis were exhausted.

After the Suez Crisis and the subsequent proclamation of the Eisenhower Doctrine, it appeared that the United States would henceforth pursue a unilateral policy with regard to the Middle East. Yet as has been argued above, Britain continued to play a decisive role in Middle Eastern affairs – through collaboration in covert operations. There is some evidence indicating that CIA and MI6 were planning the overthrow of Nasser only months after the Suez invasion. Be that as it may, official documents definitely prove that by August 1957, British and American officials were closely collaborating on a plan to change the government in Syria by means of covert action. Stephen Blackwell argued that “the crisis over Syria in 1957 [...] was the most significant factor in the re-building of the ‘special relationship’ after the Anglo-French invasion of Egypt”⁴.

² Eden to Churchill, 21 April 1956, quoted in Lucas, *Divided We Stand*, p.123.

³ Little, 'Mission Impossible', p.681.

⁴ BLACKWELL, STEPHEN, 'Britain, the United States and the Syrian crisis, 1957', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 11/3

The establishment of the joint Syrian Working Group was an important factor in cementing the close relationship between London and Washington. Its focus went beyond events in Syria, but took general developments in the Middle East into account. Britain, although more in a role of junior partner, nevertheless played an important part in Middle Eastern affairs.

It cannot be denied that the relations between London and Washington with regard to the Middle East were indeed characterised by tensions and conflict. The analysis of the secret dimension of intelligence co-operation, however, sheds a different light on Anglo-American relations in general and indicates that there was a considerable degree of collaboration and agreement. With regard to intelligence, the relations can indeed be considered special. Yet, as Dean Acheson put it, the unique relationship was not necessarily always an affectionate one.⁵

(2000), pp.139-58.

⁵ Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, p.387.

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