St Antony’s interest in Middle East studies arose very early in its life. In 1954 Sir Hamilton Gibb, professor of Arabic at Oxford, enquired whether the college would be able to attach to itself Frank Stoakes, on leave as political adviser to the Iraq Petroleum Company in Baghdad, who was anxious to obtain an academic post. Gibb required someone in the university to be interested in Arabic history apart from linguistic studies and Stoakes seemed a promising candidate. James Joll, the Subwarden, told Gibb that St Antony’s had for some time been considering appointing a research or official fellow in Middle East studies, and the college agreed to find the money for a fellowship. Other ideas floated at the time were that the college needed an economist, and perhaps the two posts could be amalgamated; if not, a fellow in Middle East studies should take priority over an economist.¹ Thanks to a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, Stoakes accepted, from October 1955, a research fellowship in Middle East studies at £800 a year.²

A plan was then mooted for the development of Middle East studies in the college:

The general intention of the College is to focus such an enterprise round a permanent seminar on Middle East affairs to be organized by a Director of Studies who would also be a fellow of the College. This appointment has already been made … The Director of Studies would require the appointment of not more than three Research Fellows in the early stages … , visiting specialists from other institutions at home and abroad. The College would regard the setting up of such a Middle East research group as a pilot experiment for which it would provide a physical base and staff [for] a
self-contained unit ... It is not proposed in this preliminary stage that St. Antony’s should be more than a convenient centre in this University for a pilot experiment in post-graduate research in this field. When a firm base has been established, the programme could be extended, in co-operation with interested parties, to include in particular increased facilities for research in the area itself, which is imperative for the effective study of the Middle East. This might well take the form of a small permanent base in that region on similar lines to the proposed group now to be set up in Oxford.

In 1957 the project was submitted to Shell and BP, who said they were jointly prepared to put up a lump sum of £7500 and an annual sum of the same amount for seven years under covenant for Middle East studies, provided that the balance of £2500 for the lump sum and the same amount annually was obtained from other firms. The two companies insisted on this proviso so that other firms should also be associated with the Middle East project. In any case, irrespective of whether or not the balance was obtained, Shell and BP were prepared to make a lump-sum grant of £5000 which the college would soon receive. When Deakin told the Governing Body that he was in touch with the Gulbenkian Trust and hoped to contact ICI, it was decided to go ahead with a project for a Middle East Studies Centre; the Bursar was authorized to make an offer, subject to survey, for a house at 137 Banbury Road which was on the market. Despite opposition from St Clare’s Hall, a tutorial college next to No. 137, the college obtained the house for £8500.

Deakin had an interview with the secretary of the Gulbenkian Trust before the end of October, and in May 1957 the college heard that it had been granted £4500. Frank Stoakes was appointed director of Middle East studies and elected to the Governing Body. The first part of the oil companies’ grant and Gulbenkian money was used to buy and furnish No. 137, which became the Middle East Centre. James Joll then raised the question of research fellowships for Middle East studies, which could be three in number. Elizabeth Monroe (Mrs Neame), fellow and Bursar of St Anne’s College and formerly of Chatham House and The Economist, who had worked in the League of Nations, would be a worthy recipient of one of these. Since she was a woman, for which the college statutes did not provide, she would have to be given a grant rather than a fellowship and could be described as a research associate. As regards the two other fellowships, two categories of person should be considered – experts in some field of Middle