
On January 25, 1954, the British ambassador to Washington, Sir Roger Makins, wrote to the foreign secretary, Selwyn Lloyd: “There is on our side a very understandable impression,” he noted, “that the Americans are out to take our place in the Middle East. Their influence has greatly expanded there since the end of the Second World War, and they are firmly established as the paramount foreign influence in Turkey and Saudi Arabia. . . . Are the Americans consciously trying to substitute their influence for ours in the Middle East? And, even if this is not their conscious policy now, is it nevertheless the inevitable conclusion of the present trend of events?” In a few deftly penned sentences, Makins, formerly a deputy undersecretary in the Foreign Office with special responsibility for Middle Eastern questions, succinctly captured the anxiety within the British foreign policy–making establishment, as it struggled to secure Britain’s interests in the Persian Gulf and in Arabia and to define its diplomatic relationship with Washington during the early 1950s.

Makins’s questions required his colleagues in Whitehall to think carefully about British policies in the Middle East and to place their relationship with the Gulf emirates and client states in southwest Arabia into the larger framework of London’s transatlantic relationship with the United States. Subtle observers of British foreign policy recognized the need, also, to reflect on Britain’s bonds to both Europe and its far-flung commonwealth as they examined Britain’s policies in the Gulf region. Winston Churchill himself, returning to 10 Downing Street in October 1951, urged Britons to think of their nation as occupying the intersection of three adjoining circles from which they could exercise influence with their American cousins, their Western European allies, and their
commonwealth and imperial partners. British policy in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula is best understood within these interlocking contexts.

Anglo-American Tensions in the Middle East and Elsewhere

During the early 1950s, British policymakers felt extremely insecure about the strength of their position in the Middle East and Persian Gulf. The United States had replaced Britain as the principal patron and most important Western ally of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia during 1944 and 1945, while the Iranian crisis of 1951–1953 deprived Britain of its monopoly over the petroleum resources of that nation. Just as importantly, since 1945, British officials had been engaged in tortuous negotiations with Egypt over the disposition of the British military complex within the Suez Canal Zone. These negotiations, which impaired Britain’s efforts to assert its political interests in the Middle East and threatened Western access to the strategically vital air facilities within the Canal Zone, were further complicated by the 1952 nationalist revolution that brought Mohammed Naguib and, eventually, Gamal Abdel Nasser to power in Cairo. Nasser’s uncompromising opposition to Britain’s military presence in the Canal Zone and his determination to rid the Middle East of British political influence, coupled with his defiantly neutralist posture on Cold War issues, created challenges to British and American diplomacy in the Middle East, which frequently set the two transatlantic allies at odds.

Nasser was not the only factor complicating Anglo-American relations in the early 1950s, however. It was a time of political and economic flux for both nations domestically, and the new Conservative and Republican governments elected to office within 13 months of each other in London and Washington espoused very different philosophies of the Anglo-American diplomatic relationship.

When the Conservative Party returned to power in October 1951, Prime Minister Winston Churchill envisioned an important and active role for Britain on the world stage. Critical to Britain’s ability to play this role was its ability to enlist the economic and political support of the United States. Consequently, Churchill struggled to reestablish the close, personal relationship he had enjoyed during wartime with Franklin Roosevelt, but which had eroded somewhat in the postwar years. He was unsuccessful. Presidents Truman and Eisenhower politely—but firmly—rebuffed Churchill’s overtures. Eisenhower recounted, after seeing the aging prime minister in January 1953, that “Winston is trying to relive the days of World War II,” and that “he talks very animately about certain . . . international problems, especially Egypt and its future. But so far as I can see, he has developed an almost childlike faith that all of the answers are to be found merely in British-American partnership.”

Eisenhower did appreciate that Britain was a vitally important ally of the United States and by far the most powerful nation in Western Europe. Britain’s