

THE COLLAPSE OF BRITISH POWER: THE MIDDLE EAST, 1939-56

The Middle East lay at the heart of British imperial power.

And it couldn't be done without.

70% of the West's oil came from there by 1951.

For airfields, the area was strategically indispensable.

On paper, Britain had a deep hold there at war's end.

1. It dominated Jordan.
2. It had handpicked the leaders of Iraq and Iran
3. The shieks in the Persian Gulf did whatever Britain told them to.
4. Libya belonged to it under trusteeship
5. And Egypt was very much in England's thrall.

The Suez Canal zone complex of barracks, storehouses and airfields was British-run and commanded.

120 miles long, 30 miles wide, it was the largest military base in the world.

Backing all this Canal strength up were island garrisons and aerodromes and naval bases...

Malta

Cyprus
Haifa

Jordan

Iraq

Aden

the Persian Gulf

But the truth was, all of this power was increasingly fragile.

It was prey to the nationalist passions surging after the war.

The retreat from India only whetted the nationalists' appetites.

What did Bombay have that Baghdad didn't?

I. THE PROMISED LAND

A. AND WAS JERUSALEM BUILT HERE...

Palestine was the most vulnerable.

As we've seen, the war there began before the war everywhere else stopped.

As Allied soldiers reached the gates of Auschwitz and Dachau, the problems of Palestine got immeasurably worse.

The Holocaust gave an intensity to the need to resettle the Jews of Europe in the Holy Land –
and all the old quotas in the White Paper be hanged.

To many people in Britain and America, the sense of European responsibility for the genocide ...

not just in what Germans did, but in what Britain and America had failed to do ...

added to the sense that the Jewish people MUST have a national state all their own.

And to Zionists, the gas-chambers and ovens were arguments for what they had said all along.

How could any Jewish refugee, seeing what Europe had done to their kin, ever settle again among their murderers?

How could any Jew stay in Germany and feel safe?

But to the policy-makers in Whitehall, it was as if 1945 was just 1939, with different hem-lines.

They would not issue new permits for Jews to settle Palestine.

The White Paper stood, unscrapped.

A Palestinian state, federal and run by Arabs.

In it, a Jewish enclave, able to run itself.

The message came through loud and clear. And Jewish leaders' answer was clearer still:

A coordinated movement of moderates and radicals, to break down the British Mandate and force it to accept a Jewish state.

"X Command" would run the show, and the Stern Gang and Irgun would share seats there with all the moderate agencies.

And the money to fight? American money.

It wasn't all killing. In fact, X Command wanted as little killing as possible. A few headline-grabbing bomb blasts, but nothing to embarrass their friends overseas.

The big push was to get around the immigration authorities...

to smuggle in every Jew who wanted to live in Palestine.

to go to the refugee camps in Europe and convince the Jews waiting there behind barbed wire to go to Palestine instead.

to find escape routes east of the Iron Curtain for tens of thousands of Jews who knew that, when the Nazis did their work, they'd had lots of help from the Poles and Ukrainians

and White Russians and Romanians.

to buy ships to carry the immigrants in on, and to load the refugees on board quietly, from ports along the Mediterranean.¹

B. HOMICIDAL ZIONISM

It was a war of attrition, and a troublesome one.

On Hallowe'en, 1945, the Jewish revolt broke into the open.

That very night, it cut the Palestine railway network in 154 places.

It wrecked three locomotives and a whole train.

It sank three police patrol craft, used to stop ships smuggling in immigrants.

¹ William Jackson, **Withdrawal from Empire: A Military View**, 57-58.

And it tried to destroy an oil refinery in Haifa.²

Two weeks later, riots broke out in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

Soldiers fired into the crowds. Six rioters were killed, sixty wounded.

There weren't any more riots. But there were plenty of attacks...

on police stations and armories

on British air fields

on the railway system

Palestine became a police state.

For every penny spent on schools, the British spent seven on police.

The government could shut down any newspaper, censor any editorial, forbid any speech.

It could impose curfews any time it wanted.

It could declare any act a crime, and then punish people for having committed the crime when it was still legal.

It could pass laws secretly, tell nobody that they were on the books,

² William Jackson, **Withdrawal from Empire: A Military View**, 58.

and then arrest people for breaking them.³

Fat lot of good it did them!

British troops would fan out through the Jewish community.

And they'd run smack into a wall of silence.

They used mine detectors to look for buried piles of weapons.
But they gave up because it was pointless.

The mine detectors were always going off.

The soldiers would dig and dig ...

and come up with bags of scrap metal, buried
there just to throw them off the scent.⁴

Between 1945 and 1948, there were 100,000 British troops in Palestine.

³ Jorge Garcia-Granados, **The Birth of Israel: The Drama as I Saw It** (New York: Knopf, 1948), 121-23.

⁴ William Jackson, **Withdrawal from Empire: A Military View**, 60.

This cost a bundle. And England now couldn't afford a bundle any more.

England was needing to rely on America to pay off its loans.

And American opinion was strongly in favor of giving the Jews their own country, and throwing wide-open the doors to Jewish immigration to the Middle East.

It hadn't the money to keep its promise to Greece and Turkey to protect them.

America had to step in and do it instead.

But Greece and Turkey were essential to protecting the British navy's command of the eastern Mediterranean. Palestine wasn't.

From American Jewish groups came money and guns.

It was very much the same story as with the IRA in Ireland.

The Palestine Resistance Fund.

Zionists in the States had set up the Sonnenborn Institute.

It sent Jewish settlers medical supplies
and tractors
and plows and combines

But... funny thing – by the time those supplies got to Palestine,
they had turned into ships –
trucks
aircraft
weapons
ammunition.⁵

Scriptwriter Ben Hecht (on the Fund's committee):

There's a song in my heart every time I hear that a British

⁵ William Jackson, Withdrawal from Empire: A Military View, 57.

soldier has been killed.⁶

Then life must have been one long extempore of song.

X Command couldn't keep a leash on its parties for long.

One after the other, the militants went their own violent,
bloody way.

In 1946, Irgun escalated its war on the British soldiers...

Bombs
Drive-by shootings

including one bomb that blew up most of the King David Hotel
and 91 of the staff of the High Commission and Army
secretariat.

It had been hidden in seven milk-churns, in the café
on the ground floor.

Oh, they did warn people in the hotel before the bomb went

⁶ Ben Hecht, May 1947 open letter: "Every time you blow up a British arsenal or wreck a British jail, or send a British railroad sky high, or rob a British bank, or let go with your guns and bombs at the British betrayers and invaders of your homeland, the jews of America make a little holiday in their hearts." Louis, **The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945-1951**, 466.

off...

someone phoned in, two minutes ahead of time.

That was nowhere near time enough to evacuate.⁷

British executions led to kidnappings, reprisals, and hangings of British soldiers from trees in an olive grove.

And the worst of it was, it could have been much worse.

An awful lot of terrorist attacks didn't happen, because Jewish leaders were able to stop them.

They used their own defense-militia to foil Irgun....

and always, always, let the terrorists

⁷ William Jackson, **Withdrawal from Empire: A Military View**, 62; A. J. Sherman, **Mandate Days: British Lives in Palestine, 1918-1948** (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1998), 180-83.

get away.⁸

By the end of 1946, the British government was sick of the whole thing.

If it couldn't keep order with 100,000 troopers, order was beyond anyone's keeping.

It handed the whole problem over to the United Nations to solve.

The UN couldn't and wouldn't.

It offered a partition scheme.

Late in 1947, the Government announced that it would take all the troops out within seven months.

No plan for what was to come after.

⁸ One of the biggest Outrages That Didn't Happen was at Citrus House, in Tel-Aviv. Britain had its military and civil headquarters there. Irgun dug a 45-foot tunnel under the streets to below the building. Since it was right in the heart of town, many English – and many Jewish – civilians would certainly have been killed and wounded. It was Haganah, the Jewish defense militia, that uncovered the plot, and immediately moved it to cement up the entrance. One of them was killed when a booby-trap went off. Jorge Garcia-Granados, **The Birth of Israel: The Drama as I Saw It** (New York: Knopf, 1948), 118-19.

No arrangement to make an orderly transition.

That was an invitation to war between Arabs and Israelis over where the partition lines ought to run.

Ernie Bevin knew that perfectly well.

And all he had to do was do the numbers to know that the Jews would get the whipping that was coming to 'em.

Expect it? He was looking forward to it!

Sometimes the best revenge is giving somebody just what they want!

... but not this time.

But Irgun had most of the guns and nearly all the force.

Over 300,000 Arabs fled into neighboring states.

They formed an Arab Liberation Army, and there was a cluster of clashes with the British forces on the Syrian border and around Haifa.

In Haifa about one-fourth of the whole Arab population was driven

out.

C. MAKING ISRAEL

As soon as the British had left, the civil war became an international one.

The new state of Israel on one side

vs.

Egypt
Transjordan
Syria

What ended it wasn't that the Israelis had all the ground they wanted.

It was the fact that Britain finally drew the line.

Egypt was Britain's ally, by treaty.

The further into the Sinai the Israeli tanks rolled, the greater
the chance for war with Britain.

And this time it wouldn't be a guerrilla war in the streets, with
an invisible enemy stalking very visible targets.

Peace was small comfort to the British.

In the Israeli state they saw the one thing that would goad Arabs
everywhere against the West.

What's more, British officials were convinced that Israel
would be a Communist state in five years.

Hadn't the Soviet Union been their strongest backer?

Weren't their arms, their tanks, and their artillery bought
from Czechoslovakia and the Soviet bloc?

Weren't a lot of the Jews from behind the Iron Curtain?⁹

It didn't work that way, but the blow to the Empire was terrible all the same.

Britain didn't get the credit for resisting a Jewish state.

They got the blame for letting the Jews come there in the first place.

To be a British ally was to be a British stooge.

The king of Jordan, their trustiest friend in the region, was
assassinated.

Eventually, their other friend, the king of Iraq, would be
murdered, too, and his dynasty wiped out for keeps.

There was a second lesson, though, and it didn't just apply to the Middle East:

It was open season on the British Empire.
You could pull the lion's tail – and he'd roar and roar, but
he'd take it.

⁹ Louis, **The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945-1951**, 564-71.

Terrorism worked.

Violence worked.

The British hadn't the muscle or the nerve to overcome it;
and they hadn't the money to stick it out.

They wouldn't just compromise – they'd cut and run.

If Israel couldn't be kept, was there room for Libya, either?

What Britain had needed there was enough heft to have army and military
bases, to protect the Suez Canal.

Did one really need to have a colony for that?

In 1951, Libya was given its independence.

And two years later, a twenty-year treaty gave Britain the bases it
wanted.¹⁰

II. ANGLO-IRANIAN (TURM)OIL

A. AN AMERICAN LINE IN THE SAND

¹⁰ Louis, The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945-1951, 302-06.

Nationalism was the first story of what happened to Britain's Middle East empire.

The second was a growing American presence in the region.

Bit by bit, the United States was inheriting command all through the Middle East.

1. Truman Doctrine

2. NATO

Turkey had been pulled in the American orbit as a NATO partner.

US Air Force got air fields there.

And American missiles were put there, pointed at the
Soviet Union.

3. Saudi Arabia changes partners

Its oil companies had got special deals in Saudi Arabia.

Air fields were set up in Dhahran.

America had a big check book to give Middle Eastern princes foreign aid.

Britain couldn't come anywhere close.

B. Iran

Its great advantage was oil; and British interests pumped much of the oil.

Before World War II, just about a fifth of all Britain's oil came from the Persian Gulf – and Iran provided nearly all of it.

(Kuwait wouldn't start producing oil till 1946;
Bahrain had begun in 1934
Abu Dhabi after 1949)

For generations, Britain had treated Persia as a half-colony.

In World War I, Indian troops marched through the country.

In World War II, British troops occupied the southern part of Iran.
and deposed Reza Pahlavi to enthrone his son
Mohammed Reza Pahlavi.

In between, British forces had thrust a hand-picked general onto the Peacock Throne.

If there was a symbol of British imperialism, it was the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company.

... 3rd largest crude oil producer in the world – most of it from Iran.

It pumped out plenty, and kept the profits.

It hired English technicians and clerks – no Iranians allowed.

There was not a single Iranian on the board of directors –
and the Company meant to keep it that way.¹¹

Iran got 9 million pounds in royalties and 20% of the company's worldwide profits. No other oil producer offered such a good deal¹².

That was just a million more than the tax collector back home
in England got off company profits.

Anglo-Iranian made a 250 million pound profit in just five
years after the second World War

Large shares of the dividends went to the majority owner of
Anglo-Iranian: the British government.

Rumor had it that the British Navy got bargain rates when it

¹¹ Farhad Diba, Mohammed Mossadegh 101.

¹² Daniel Yergin, The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 453-54.

bought the oil.¹³

The truth was, the British government had a queasy feeling about the Anglo-Iranian. As the 51% owner, it provided a lot of the capital.

But it had very little say in running it.

And it knew perfectly well that anything the oil company did, the British government would get the blame for.¹⁴

But it also had a very patronizing view of Iranians in general.

When the Company worked out a slightly better deal, the British government explained it to the Shah and his Prime Minister by giving them a booklet about it...

called *A Child's Guide to the Agreement*.¹⁵

(Which is exactly what it was!)

Opulence like that didn't sit well with Iranians.

¹³ Daniel Yergin, **The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power** (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 451-52.

¹⁴ Daniel Yergin, **The Prize**, 453.

¹⁵ Farhad Diba, **Mohammed Mossadegh** 102.

In Teheran, the capital city, graft and corruption ran politics.

Lawmakers expected to be bribed, the same as you would expect a tip, if you were a waiter.

Out in the countryside Iran was an archipelago of clans and tribes.

They fought each other.

They fought the central government

And they had never liked the Shah ... nor his dad.

Big parts of Iran would have broken off and become their own countries, if they thought they could get away with it.¹⁶

And whether in city or in town, Iran was dirt-poor.¹⁷

Fabulous profits in a country like that look like witchcraft ...
or, more precisely, robbery.

England made a perfect scapegoat for everything gone wrong.

And Anglo-Iranian a perfect stand-in for England.

Officials friendly to Britain stood a good chance of being assassinated.

¹⁶ Nikki R. Keddie, **Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 120.

¹⁷ Daniel Yergin, **The Prize**, 451; Nikki R. Keddie, **Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 123-29.

The Shah had started modernization. But it hadn't got very far. As of 1950, there were only fifty three thousand people employed in Iranian industry. that was less than half of one percent of the population. You compare that with the British-owned oil industry in Iran at the same time: 67,000 people worked there. Or look at hand carpetmaking: 130,000 worked there. As of mid-century, you could not find a single Iranian city with modern water systems. Per capita use of electricity or cement was way below what Egypt had, or Turkey had – and they were way behind most developed nations.

British officials tried to nudge the Company into giving Iran a deal it couldn't refuse.

The Company gave chicken feed.

Oh, they improved the terms ... a little.

But the books and accounts of the Company were shut tight.
Iran couldn't see what profits the Company made – or
where the money was going.

There would be no more Iranians put in management jobs.

There would be no information given about where the oil was going
or who bought it.,

And Iran would not be allowed a bit of say in what price the oil
sold for, in Iran.

Now, there's something wrong if – over 16 years – the Company pays
60 million pounds in royalties and fees to Iran for the oil;
and pays 72 million pounds to the British government at home
in taxes alone!¹⁸

“Old Mossy”

¹⁸ Farhad Diba, Mohammed Mossadegh 104-05.

With the end of the war, Iranians looked around for someone who would give Iran back to its own people.

They found a savior in Dr. Mohammed Mossadeq, a frail old man eloquent and deeply hostile to England.

... and chairman of the oil committee in Parliament.

He was well schooled as a lawyer in Europe.

and the great-grandson of a Shah from the dynasty before

an aristocrat, a big landowner who owned an entire 150-family village.

He had gone to Versailles to plead for Iran's independence in 1919 – and into the Cabinet many times.

Also into jail many times –

Shahs didn't like him.¹⁹

By any standard of the Assads or Khomeinis, Muhammed Mossadegh looks like pretty harmless stuff.

He had the habit of doing business from his old iron bed.

(Dizzy spells, it was said)

His tear glands worked overtime, and he wept quite a lot –

¹⁹ The basic biography is Farhad Diba, Mohammed Mossadegh (London: Croom Helm, 1986).

He was a romantic aristocrat with a very strong rapport among the common people.

... and that best of talents, an ability to break any promise or repudiate anything he had said within less than five minutes.

... all things we could say about Winston Churchill just as easily.

But Churchill didn't pull a faint on big public occasions in the midst of a big speech.

(Sometimes a real faint – but often it was simply a stunt, and before he did it, he would wink at doctors who seemed likely to rush to attend to him)²⁰

A man like this, it was easy to write off as a nut-case.

Or to smell opium on his breath.

Or to figure that any argument would bounce off him like hail.

That was a mistake. Mossadeq had an odd style, but he was shrewd, talented, and no Communist stooge.

C. Nationalization

Britain could have done business with Mossadeq, and if Ernie Bevin had been around, maybe would have.

Bevin had a soft spot for nationalist revolutionaries in the Middle East.

²⁰ Daniel Yergin, **The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power** (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 456-57.

People who wanted to change an unjust system were
the kind of horses the Empire ought to back.

All it would take was a dollop of cynicism...

Let Mossadeq beat up on the British in every speech
he made –

That was smart politics, and any other kind, he
was sure to be kicked out and fast;

Iran was much more anti-British than he was.

But make deals with him privately.

And Mossadeq might just be open to a deal....

- such as one that let a Dutch company run the oil business
- and shut out every British technician from working there...
- but gave Britain a special discount deal on Iranian oil -

\$1.10 a barrel

(The Persian Gulf price was \$1.75 a barrel)

(Mossadeq actually agreed to such a compromise)²¹

Bevin's successor, Herbert Morrison, just didn't have a corkscrew mind,
and he wasn't much of a hand at foreign policy.

²¹ Homa Katouzian, **Musaddiq and the Struggle for Power in Iran** (London: I. B. Tauris & Co., 1990), 140. It was Anthony Eden who rejected it. He was, by then, Foreign Minister.

As Churchill complained, Bevin mispronounced the names of
other countries, but at least *he* knew where they were!

His view of empire was as thin as Kipling poetry.

Or as jingo-ish.

To brush up on what a good Foreign Secretary ought to do, he got
a biography of Lord Palmerston, and took weeks carrying
it wherever he went.

The way he saw it, a military strike-force was just what Iran needed.

– a nice lesson to “the Man in Pyjamas.”

– and a nice warning to Egypt to watch its step, too.

It never happened. Military strike-forces take ships.

And Britain had committed its ships to the Korean War.

Invade, and Mossadeq was sure to appeal to the UN.

He might even appeal to Joe Stalin – and then Soviet troops
would march into Iran.

Would that be some kinda improvement????

Besides, Clement Attlee had bigger fish to fry.

He wanted to prevent World War III.

At all costs, America must not use the Bomb on China.

In return for promising not to, the United States demanded that Britain not send the Marines to Abadan.

No, it was Iran that did the striking. It went after the biggest oil refinery in the world, Anglo-Iranian's, on the island of Abadan.

And it looked to Saudi Arabia, where the United States's Aramco had just given a far, far sweeter deal to the Arabs...

A fifty-fifty profit-sharing deal.

What were *they*, chopped liver?

Anglo-Iranian's top management hadn't been quick on the uptake.

Dean Acheson, our Secretary of State: "Never had so few lost so much so stupidly and so fast."

By the time they were willing to make an offer as good as Aramco's, it was too late.

Iran was seething with hatred for the Company.

The Prime Minister was shot and killed as a British stooge.

Three days later, the Minister of Education was shot and killed.²²

²² Daniel Yergin, **The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power** (New York: Simon & Schuster,

Mossadegh became the new Prime Minister.

Three days later, Anglo-Iranian was nationalized.²³

The governor of a province was sent to bring them the word.

When he got there, he sacrificed a sheep in front of
the building.

Mossadeq wasn't on hand, but his son in law was, to make a
speech declaring that colonialism was over and done
with – and to pull a faint all his own.²⁴

1991), 455.

²³ Daniel Yergin, **The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power** (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 454-55.

²⁴ Daniel Yergin, **The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power** (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 455-56.

Five months later, Anglo-Iranian picked up and left.

They took away their tennis rackets, fishing rods, and golf clubs.

They couldn't take their pets; so they destroyed most of them.

And as their ship pulled away, the British refugees broke out in
"Colonel Bogey"

... the *dirty* verses.²⁵

C. "A Splutter of Musketry" – but not Britain's

Britain couldn't send in troops, though Churchill panted for
"a splutter of musketry," as he put it.

But it could impose an embargo, and the embargo held.

Oil production worldwide had been 10.9 million barrels a day in 1950.

By 1953, it was 13 million barrels.

And Iran? It put out 666,000 barrels a day in 1950.
And only 20,000 barrels a day in 1952.²⁶

²⁵ Daniel Yergin, **The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power** (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 463.

²⁶ Yergin, **The Prize**, 464; Homa Katouzian, **Musaddiq and the Struggle for Power in Iran** (London: I. B. Tauris & Co., 1990), 144-45. The British navy had the muscle to make the embargo work. No other merchant marine was going to mess with HMShips in the Persian Gulf.

The argument for the embargo was that Iran's nationalization was illegal. Therefore, the oil that was being pumped still belonged to the Anglo-Iranian Company. But since the Anglo-Iranian wasn't allowed to sell it or get the profits, that oil was being sold illegally. The profits on selling it, necessarily, were STOLEN from the Company. Only if the sale of that oil had been authorized by the Anglo-Iranian, was the sale of that oil legal.

That wasn't the end of the story.

America had withheld its hand because it assumed that however bad Mossadeq was, Communism would be worse.

And besides, he couldn't last forever.

But as the months passed, Iran didn't seem to falter a bit.

Mossadeq got more and more popular.

He wasn't just baiting the Brits.

He was building up an economy that wasn't a hostage to oil prices

building irrigation dams

fostering sugar refineries and textile factories

building cement factories and dried-fruit processing plants.

Iran was exporting less oil; but it was exporting a lot more of everything else, and was importing a lot less.

When the Shah dismissed him, the mobs put him back in, with more powers than ever.

He started to cut the size of the army –

and cut the strings that tied it to the throne.

He also started looking over the Shah's list of expenses and

trying to trim *them*.

By early 1953, the crowds were shouting for a republic ...

and no more Shahs.²⁷

The louder the mobs shouted, the more the United States wondered whether
they'd backed the wrong horse after all.

Was it too late for military action?

The British sure didn't think so.

All through 1952, MI6 worked on a plot to use Iranian dissidents to overthrow
Mossadeq. Operation Boot, they called it.

England never did put in the Boot.

America took it over in early 1953 and called it "Ajax"
instead.

Everybody got code names.

The Shah was the "boy Scout."

Mossadeq was "the old bugger."

And the manager for the CIA, Kermit Roosevelt
(TR's grandson)

²⁷ Yergin, **The Prize**, 466; Nikki R. Keddie, **Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 135-38.

was “Mr. Scar on Right Forehead.”

The operation even had a theme song:

“Luck Be a Lady Tonight,” from *Guys & Dolls*.²⁸

The CIA arranged for an uprising that summer in Teheran.

CIA agents paid the bill.

²⁸ Daniel Yergin, *The Prize*, 468-69.

Out went Mossadeq.²⁹

In came the exiled Shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlevi

son of a former Cossack officer, who had been
put on the throne 30 years before
with British help.

Mossadeq's followers were beaten, blinded, mobbed and
killed.

One editor was tortured and then soaked in paraffin and
set on fire.

Students protesting at Teheran University were shot on the campus.

²⁹ The Shah put Mossadeq on trial, on the charge of rebellion against the constitution, by refusing to heed the dismissal notice sent to him by the Shah, and for inciting the people in an armed uprising. . (Mossadeq could defend himself by saying that the Shah's notice was delivered as part of a coup that he had been warned about in advance – and came to him at one in the morning at a time when three leading figures in the government had been kidnapped out of their homes; he could point out that the writing on the notice showed that it was a blank order, signed by the Shah, but completed while the Shah was absent; he could point out that the Shah had no constitutional powers to dismiss under the circumstances). He gave speeches in his own defense, strong and passionate ones. But the fix was in. He got three years in jail (the law forbade executing anyone over age 60 – which he was), and left it to spend the rest of his life under house arrest on his estate. Cancer of the throat and a bleeding ulcer finished him off at age 85, on March 5, 1967. There was deep mourning throughout Iran for him, but the government forbade his burial in any public cemetery. He was buried at his own home, in the dining room on the ground floor of the house. Homa Katouzian, Musaddiq and the Struggle for Power in Iran (London: I. B. Tauris & Co., 1990), 199-207, 251-52.

Six hundred top brass in the army were arrested and sixty were executed.³⁰

The Shah would hold firm with the West – but it wouldn't be the British Empire. He had American patrons, all the way up to his overthrow in 1979.

³⁰ Farhad Diba, Mohammed Mossadegh 190-92.

The new oil companies in Iran were American-run, not British-run.³¹

By then, the United States was Saudi Arabia's patron, too.

Britain was being edged out of the Middle East.

III. SUEZ

A. THE "GIPPIES" AND THE CANAL ZONE

Farouk was a slack excuse for a king.

Born to the purple, he had never had time to grow up – just out;
 he grew so immensely fat that when stretcher bearers
 picked him up after an auto accident, the stretchers broke,
 adding to the injuries on his royal person.

³¹ This sounds like a power play. It wasn't, really. Plainly, if Anglo-Iranian marched right back into Abadan, there'd be hell to pay all across Iran. All the fury against Britain would rise to a high pitch, and the Shah would be fatally compromised. British officials agreed on that. Besides, Anglo-Iranian – even though it wouldn't take the lead – would have a big share in the consortium of oil firms that went into Iran. It wouldn't lose out, not all that badly.

The sticking place was the American companies. You might think they'd leap at the opportunity. Instead, they had to be beaten over the head by the British government to put their hands into the cookie jar. Iran was full of political risks; who wanted to take it? There was more than enough oil in Saudi Arabia anyhow. Why invest in Iran, in oil that Aramco didn't need? What the State Department had to do was warn the companies: if you don't go in, Iran falls to communism. And if it falls, there goes Kuwait and Iraq, too. There goes Saudi Arabia. And even if the dominoes don't fall, the Soviet Union will have all that Iranian oil to use as they please. They don't have to use it. They can just dump it on world markets, and drop prices for crude oil through the basement – and bring you guys down with it. Interested NOW?

The oil companies were. In the end, the consortium had five American majors, each with 8% to start with; Shell had 14% – and Anglo-Iranian had 40%, which made it the biggest partner of all. Daniel Yergin, **The Prize**, 470-72.

His passion for pornography and women was real.
 He was close to impotent, and it took plenty to excite him.

He loved to hunt; once, told that he would never be content till he
 had shot a lion, he went to the zoo and shot both of them.

That didn't mean he wasn't a good shot. To prove it to one
 guest, he took aim out his window at the gardener –
 and bagged him on the first volley!

When he grew a little beard on his big, fat face, crowds shouted,
 "God shave the king!"

He was a kleptomaniac, and an obsessive collector.³²

Farouk fled with several whiskey cases full of gold bars.

He left behind him collections of curios and junk that would have made
 Citizen Kane envious...

old illuminated Korans
 a collection of playing cards, from the ancient to the Chinese
 including the first cards used in the first casino in
 Monaco and some from Mississippi gambling
 river-boats
 75 pairs of binoculars
 emeralds, rubies, diamonds, platinum brooches
 a thousand ties, many with five-inch high F's on them
 one hundred suits
 Piles of American comic books

³² Barrie St. Clair McBride, Farouk of Egypt (London: Robert Hale, 1967), 142.

Fishing flies in the form of plastic nudes
 Hundred of matchbox tops
 Tons of razor-blade packets
 lots of dirty postcards
 a world-class collection of porn literature
 and a series of photographs showing how elephants have sex.³³

B. NASSER

What made Nasser dangerous wasn't just what he did in Egypt.

He became the voice of a revolutionary nationalism ... an Arab nationalism, hostile to all western empires, anywhere in the Middle East.

And the worst offender happened to be the British.

C. ANTHONY'S INVASION

From one angle, Eden's notions made sense.

The Empire still had a strong hold in the Middle East.

It had bases in Malta, Libya, Cyprus, Aden, Iraq and the Persian Gulf.

³³ The lists go on and on. It took months just cataloguing the coin collection alone. But for a fuller selection, see Barrie St. Clair McBride, Farouk of Egypt (London: Robert Hale, 1967), 208-17.

Iraq's king was one of Britain's most reliable friends.
So was Jordan's.

Knit these together, show a little fortitude, and Britain could be the
bulwark of the international order in the Middle East.

So Eden set about making a NATO east of Suez – the Baghdad Pact.

Turkey
Pakistan
Iraq
Iran

But Eden wasn't just thinking of the Soviet threat.

He was thinking about Nasser.

Years before, as Foreign Secretary, he had striven against the
dictators, and been forced out by the appeasers.

It must never happen again.

And who was this in Egypt?

Another would-be conqueror?

A would-be Mussolini?

Going partway to give Hitler what he demanded had been disastrous.
There must be no such mistake with Nasser.

By the end of 1955, the two great fears had merged:

Nasser was another Mussolini.³⁴
But he was also the front-man for the Red menace.

He would conquer the Middle East, unite it under him,
and turn it over to the Soviet Union.

Or, more probably, he would take over the oil states like Iraq
Kuwait
Saudi Arabia

and the non-oil ones like Jordan and Libya.

Then the oil companies would be nationalized, the way the Canal
was about to be. The price of oil worldwide would shoot
through the roof. Europe's economies would take a tailspin
downward.

The key to it all was control of the Suez Canal.

If Nasser had that, he could let through the oil of his

³⁴ Eden compared him to Mussolini. It was Prime Minister Guy Mollet of France who compared him to Hitler. See Kyle, Suez, 554.

friends – and not of Britain and France.³⁵

It seemed to be working, too.

Syria was looking to Moscow for weapons.

Jordan was firing top ranking officers, because Radio Cairo accused them of being British puppets

Even in friendly outposts like Bahrain, mobs were hooting and threatening the Foreign Secretary.

Lose Jordan, and Britain would have an enemy, right across the flight path from its bases in Iraq.

What Britain needed was a chance to show ITS muscle.

It may have been behind a plot – that didn't come off – to overthrow the government of Syria.

It toyed with showing Jordan how good a friend it could be, by throwing all its power against Israel, destroying its air force, setting up a naval blockade, and landing commandos in the Holy Land.

Plans were worked out to assassinate Nasser, and three gunmen were sent to Cairo – all of whom lost their nerve at the last minute.

³⁵ Kyle, Suez, 554.

Nasser gave Eden the excuse he needed.

He had wanted an American loan to build the Aswan Dam.

The loan was refused.

So Nasser nationalized the Compagnie Universelle du Canal Maritime de Suez
the French company that had run the Canal since its start –

A canal, remember, that Britain held a large share in.

He seized the Canal, and declared that Egypt would run it to
suit itself, and use the profits for developing
the economy.

The Company would have lost its rights in 1968 anyhow.
It only had had a 99-year lease.

And unlike Anglo-Iranian Oil, the shareholders here were
promised full compensation for their losses.

Losing control of the Canal had a dangerous look.

Two-thirds of all the fuel supply for Western Europe came by
way of the Canal – 60 million tons of it.

14,666 ships passed through those locks every year – and
one third of them were British.

Britain's total oil reserves would last it six weeks; no more.³⁶

The Canal was still important to the Empire, though nowhere near as vital as a generation before.

Then, it had been needed, to protect India.

Now, Britain had no India to protect.

... but it was as plain a thumbing of the nose at Britain as anyone could have devised –

A plain statement of fact: that the Empire was no longer a power to be feared –

and that any two-bit dictator could kick sand in England's face.

As summer turned into autumn, it also became pretty clear that he could get away with it too.

The UN dithered and did nothing.

For Eden, it was another Munich. But this time, there'd be no Chamberlain to come crawling, begging "peace for our time."

³⁶ Robert Rhodes James, Anthony Eden: A Biography, 460.

In fact, Anthony Eden lost his head completely.

“I want him destroyed!” he screamed at one of his Ministers.

An invasion force was put together.

Landing craft and ships assembled at Malta.
Jet bombers of the RAF rendezvoused at Cyprus.

And convoys of army trucks, painted desert yellow, threaded south
through England to embark at the ports.

It was like the Boer War or the punitive expedition at Alexandria all over
again.

But, of course, it wasn't.

You couldn't go off to die for Empire in an age when Empire was
politically incorrect, worldwide.

The Commonwealth wasn't going to send troops.

In fact, if you told them what you were up to, most of them
would tell you to go home, take an aspirin, and act
your age.

And there'd be absolute hell to pay in the UN.

Eden needed a cover.

He concocted it with the French and the Israelis – who had their own reasons for worrying about Nasser.

France was mad because ... well, it was their Canal company.

They were fighting to hold onto Algeria.

Nationalists there hung on every word they got from Radio Cairo.

Take out Nasser, and you make saving your own empire just a little easier.

Israel feared the rising Arab nationalism that was broiling up countries all around them. But it had peeves against Nasser in particular.

He had closed the Canal to their shipping.

And they were edgy about the arrival of sophisticated new Soviet aircraft, with Russian and Czech pilots, to reinforce Egypt's military.

Air power is indispensable in desert countries.

Rommel could have told you that.

Deserts haven't got many hiding places – no protection from bombers and fighter-planes.

Lose control of the air, and you lose the war.

Israel was just starting to build up its air force.
France was supplying planes.

But air supremacy isn't built in a day.³⁷

Israel would go to war. Then Britain and France would intervene,

³⁷ Robert Rhodes James, Anthony Eden: A Biography, 443-r44.

supposedly to keep the peace.³⁸

If they were lucky, they would keep it so well that
there wouldn't be any Nasser left.

It started out perfectly, and went sour pell-mell.

The last thing Nasser had expected was an Israeli invasion.

His army fought well enough – when Israeli troops
actually hit them.

³⁸ And Britain could always say that it was doing this to protect
Jordan.

The longer Israel fought, the more temptation there'd be
for Jordan to come into the war on Egypt's side.
Jordan was tied to Britain by treaty.
If Jordan fought, of course Britain would have to help her.
Britain wouldn't want to have to fight Israel.

So, for its own sake, it would have to intervene and end
this war on the double.

Okay, okay, so it isn't a very good excuse. But countries don't need very good excuses, to do what they intend to
do anyhow.

But Israel's forces preferred to go AROUND them instead – and the Egyptians, finding themselves with the enemy behind as well as in front of them, just dissolved in a panic.

Immediately, Britain and France ordered both sides to withdraw and declared that if they didn't, it would send in troops to protect the Canal.

And then, without any declaration of war, sent in their bombers to hit air-fields and military targets --

“to separate the belligerents,” they explained.

But since they were only hitting Egyptian belligerents, apparently what they meant was to separate each belligerent into little tiny pieces?³⁹

The bombings worked wonders. By the end of the first day, British pilots had complete command of the air.

Russian and Czech pilots never went into action on Egypt's behalf. They got out of Egypt pronto, where they could save their own skins.

The Egyptian air force was wiped out before it could get off the airfields.

...260 planes in all.

³⁹Robert Rhodes James, **Anthony Eden: A Biography**, 539-40.

The one frustration the RAF had was, they had run out of things to bomb.

By the second day, they'd even bombed Radio Cairo off the air.

An invasion force landed in Egypt, supposedly to protect the Canal Zone.

Port Said fell to French and British troops.

Israeli troops occupied the east bank of the canal, France and Britain the west bank.

Total loss of life: about a thousand Egyptians
and less than a hundred of everybody else.

That was because Eden, as a gentleman, didn't want civilian casualties. So Cairo and Port Said and Alexandria were not bombed.

And that may have been his mistake.

Doing to them what Hitler did to Rotterdam would have likely brought Egypt to surrender.

But of course, Eden was not Hitler.

He wasn't even a Lord Palmerston.

By that time, the world was in an uproar.

Everybody was furious at Eden's government .

The Soviet Union threatened to rain down rockets on London.

The United States insisted on an immediate cease-fire.

Pakistan held a "Hate Britain" day.

Even the prime minister of Australia denounced the invasion.

Too late, the Government discovered that the real place where England's weakness showed wasn't on the streets of Port Said, but in the vaults of British banks.

Holders of sterling had been jumpy for months.

They had been taking millions out of their accounts in England, and turning it into gold and dollars.

The invasion made them rush to take out even more.

Without the sterling reserves, Britain couldn't keep the pound afloat as a major international currency.

The Government would need a loan from the International Monetary Fund.

The United States controlled the Fund. They wouldn't hand over a penny – not till the troops were out of Egypt.

Britain gave in. Already a sick man, his nerves shot, Eden was thrust out of the Prime Ministership into private life, never to return to power.

By the time the crisis settled down, Israel had been pushed back to its old borders.

It had gained nothing.

There were no concessions from Egypt, Jordan, or Syria to give it any right to exist.

There would be no steps to put the Canal into international control.

The Empire had been dealt a fatal blow.

– Nasser had won. His standing and prestige in the Arab world were greater than ever.

– in France, Britain's back down only proved what many of them suspected: that the Empire was a myth.

And that in the crunch, Britain would do what America said.

When Charles De Gaulle became president, he would respond, with those lessons in mind....

France must have its own independent nuclear deterrent.

It must leave NATO.

It must have a foreign policy in Europe based on French national interests, and no others.

England couldn't be relied on.

And because England was so bound to America, it must be kept out of the Common Market as long as possible.

