

Three Pawns in the “Great Game”

The Early CIA in the Middle East

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Hugh Wilford, *America's Great Game: The CIA's Secret Arabists and the Shaping of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

Middle East scholars have long been aware of the CIA's power and swagger in the region, yet their studies rarely mention the Agency beyond passing references, and the CIA's role in events is seldom the primary focus of academic works. There are several reasons for this lacuna, not the least of which are the methodological obstacles to studying secret activity.

Ever since its 1947 creation, the CIA has been a muscular arm of the executive branch. Presidents usually issue directives to the Agency in obscurity, with their contents revealed only to later generations. During the early Cold War, for example, CIA objectives conformed with George Kennan's secret, but now famous, Policy Planning Study 23 seeking “to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit [the United States] to maintain this position of [global economic] disparity,” a task requiring disregard for “vague and...unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of living standards and democratization.” Such documents provide insight into institutional strategies governing the collection and consumption of intelligence, and identify the structural forces shaping the lives of both those working in the Agency and those affected by its operations.

Hugh Wilford's *America's Great Game* reveals important new details concerning CIA activities in the Middle East during the early Cold War. Wilford focuses on the period spanning World War II and the failed 1957 CIA coup in Syria, following the careers of three bright Arabists, Miles Copeland and the cousins Archie Roosevelt and Kermit “Kim” Roosevelt, Jr. Illuminating as a treatment of these important figures, and impressive in its research, *America's Great Game* is a valuable service to historians of the modern Middle East and, indeed, of the CIA. Despite its virtues, however, Wilford's book fails to place the agents' exploits in the context of the strategies devised by the overseers of

America's secret policies. The personal motivations of these three adventuresome Arabists thus become a substitute for institutional motivations in what could have been a more nuanced study of the CIA in the post-war Middle East. The life histories of these men make for captivating reading, but Wilford's narrative renders them knights of Cold War imperial strategy, when generally they were pawns.

A Critical Moment

At the end of World War II, British and French influence in the Middle East was in decline. The short-lived Central Intelligence Group, and later the CIA, jockeyed to put the United States in position to exploit the post-colonial hopes for self-determination in the region. Wilford details the affection that Copeland and the two Roosevelts felt for Middle Eastern peoples, and provides new information on the CIA's early efforts to undercut domestic American support for Israel by covertly funding a pro-Arab alliance group, as well as to foil British and French attempts at retaining elements of colonial-era control. Yet these three talented operatives' work also undermined the development of nascent democratic movements, instigated coups, overturned election results and used other dishonorable means to undermine regional self-determination when that aim was at odds with US goals. *America's Great Game* relies upon documents newly declassified under the Freedom of Information Act, along with an assortment of personal papers and correspondence, to connect the public record with personal backstories.

The post-war decade was a critical moment for US Middle East policy—a time when Wilford's principals, albeit with self-interested motives, established friendships in Arab nations as old colonial claims faded. President Harry Truman's immediate recognition of Israel, however, dashed the initial hopes. As Wilford shows, Copeland's perception of advantage in aligning America with Arab nations and the Roosevelts'

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affinity for Arab culture made them akin not to two-dimensional Orientalists, but to T. E. Lawrence, the British Arabist rehabilitated by Scott Anderson's 2003 biography.

In Wilford's telling, the early CIA Arabists did not objectify Arabs, at least not too horribly. They sided with Arabs on strategic and at times personal levels even when US policies undermined Arab countries' pursuit of self-determination or non-alignment. Wilford argues that Archie Roosevelt and, to lesser degrees, his cousin Kim and Copeland, developed "a perspective based not so much on European Orientalism, with its relentless 'othering' of the colonial subject, as on a distinctively American tradition of more humane, interactive engagements with Arabs and Muslims." This orientation included strong sympathy with Arab nationalism. That these intelligent students of political gamesmanship sided with Arab objections to Israel should surprise no one. Aside from the injustices leading up to the establishment of the state of Israel, the price to America appeared huge to CIA operatives viewing regional alliances through a lens of self-serving cost-benefit analysis.

Gentleman Spies

Each of Wilford's principals drew on intelligence backgrounds developed during World War II as the foundation for later CIA work in the Middle East.

Archibald Roosevelt (Theodore Roosevelt's grandson) nurtured a love for Arabic and Arab culture during wartime and post-war adventures in North Africa, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon. He considered establishing a university career in Near East studies, but was drawn to the romance of spycraft and the freedom of living in post-war Lebanon. He used State Department cover to take the position of Central Intelligence Group station chief (1947), and then CIA station chief (1947–1949), in Beirut. In 1951–1953, he again used State Department cover as station chief in Istanbul. For the most part, however, his second marriage, to Lebanese-American Selwa Showker "Lucky" Roosevelt, required that he be stationed stateside. He took a CIA position with Voice of America and, in his later career, rotated among various jobs in Washington, with brief tours abroad. Archie preferred gathering or analyzing intelligence to covert operations or political machinations, so this transition suited him, even if he did miss the excitement of the field.

Kim Roosevelt (also Teddy's grandson and Archie's first cousin) spent part of the war in Cairo running a tangled mix of intelligence operations for civilian and military organizations including the State Department, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the US Army. He was later stationed in Italy. The war brought the Roosevelt cousins together in Cairo, where the complementary forces of adventurism and serious study of Arabic language and Arab culture shaped the two men in differing ways. After the war, Kim criticized plans to establish the state of Israel, publishing an important 1946

article, "The Arabs Live There, Too," in *Harper's*—which was widely read and helped to establish him as an ally of key Arab power brokers. He was involved in the Committee for Justice and Peace in the Holy Land and, later, the American Council for Judaism and the CIA front American Friends of the Middle East (AFME), all groups then opposed to establishment of the state of Israel, making no secret of his view that support for Zionism threatened the US national interest. In 1949 Kim became the CIA's chief of covert operations in the Middle East, putting him in the position of backing some nationalist movements and thwarting others. The CIA, for instance, implicitly approved of the 1952 Free Officers' revolt in Egypt. Just one year later, though, Kim helped to engineer Operation Ajax—deposing an elected premier, restoring British Petroleum control over Iranian oil and reinstalling the Shah, this time as an American client. As Wilford writes, "Kim first worked secretly to support the Arab world's leading nationalist—the Egyptian Gamal Abdel Nasser—and then personally led a covert operation to topple the region's other most prominent nationalist leader, Iran's Mohammed Mossadeq."

After his wartime military intelligence work in London, Miles Copeland returned to Washington, working on counterespionage projects at the Strategic Services Unit, one of three agencies that bridged the period between Truman's dismantling of the OSS at war's end and the 1947 establishment of the CIA. Copeland's unorthodoxy in intelligence seemed matched only by his uncharted brilliance. In 1947 he became CIA station chief in Damascus, working in tandem with Archie Roosevelt in Beirut. In concert with the CIA, Copeland orchestrated the March 1949 coup that brought Col. Husni al-Za'im to power in Syria, and established broad intelligence operations in that country. In 1953, when a position in a large international firm was adequate cover, Copeland moved with his family to Cairo as an employee of Booz, Allen and Hamilton. He settled into a comfortable villa in Maadi, allowing his wife Lorraine to develop an interest in archaeology—a field to which she would make significant contributions. The consummate player, Copeland befriended Nasser and used the CIA to funnel economic aid to Egypt and the colonel personally. Then Nasser went his own way, and the CIA considered darker options, including plans to assassinate the Egyptian president. Copeland's writings nonetheless depict a genuine relationship of mutual admiration with both parties having no illusions about the interests they served. Copeland was later reassigned to Beirut.

The Roosevelts hailed from the Groton-Harvard axis; Copeland was cut from rougher cloth. In the CIA, theirs was one world—a world of gentleman spies who met over martinis at the old Shepherd Hotel's Long Bar to run their local networks. Wilford brings an appropriately skeptical eye to the memoirs of his principals. He dissects Kim Roosevelt's claim to have almost singlehandedly masterminded the Iranian coup—concluding that archaeologist

Donald Wilber and others at the Agency also played major roles. And he carefully parses the exaggerations in the three entertaining versions of Copeland's memoir, though this gentleman spy's accounts appear to contain more embarrassing truth than embellishment.

Wilford contends that the early CIA Arabists were pro-Arab and pro-Islamic enough to influence the CIA's institutional behavior, and even to temper CIA operations in the Arab and Islamic world. But as shown by the ascendancy of Frank Wisner's Office of Policy Coordination, even the young CIA conceived of itself as something far more than an intelligence gathering and analysis outfit. Kim Roosevelt and Miles Copeland were so drawn to involvement in coups and other interventions that these aspects of their careers weaken Wilford's argument. In the end, Wilford's tales overstate the power of individuals while understating the agency of the Agency.

Agency of the Agency

America's Great Game would be better as a work of history had it included more documents and analysis describing the CIA's institutional outlook on colonialism, US economic hegemony and the democratic process in polities that could elect socialist leaders. Such archival evidence, as well as the studies of historians like Osama Khalil, Arthur Darling and Rhodi Jeffreys-Jones, helps a great deal in understanding the setting in which Copeland and the Roosevelts operated.

One such document is a confidential 1948 report, "The Breakup of the Colonial Empires and Its Implications for US Security." The report predicted that anti-colonial movements around the world would create "a series of new, nationalistic states in the Near and Far East." Its authors concluded that colonialism was a losing bet for Europe. "Attempts at forcible retention of critical colonial areas in the face of growing nationalist pressure may actually weaken rather than strengthen the colonial powers." The CIA understood that failure to capture the "good will" of nations achieving their independence would result in anti-American antagonism. As Wilford's Arabists likewise perceived, at this crucial post-war moment, the CIA could have positioned itself in solidarity with the liberation of peoples ruled and taxed without direct representation.

But, as the 1948 report shows, the CIA's prescriptions for US policy were rooted in concerns other than winning the "good will" of decolonized peoples. Rather than democracy and self-determination, the Agency was focused on resource extraction and the exigencies of the deepening Cold War.

The CIA worried, according to this document, that "this shift of the dependent areas from the orbit of the colonial powers not only weakens the probable European allies of the US but deprives the US itself of assured access to vital bases and raw materials in these areas in event of war." Stressing the economic impact of anti-colonial movements, the CIA

lamented that Western powers could no longer "rely on large areas of Asia and Africa as assured sources of raw materials, markets and military bases." And the overall Agency analysis instead framed the question at hand primarily as a proxy struggle between the US and the Soviet Union: "The gravest danger to the US is that friction engendered by these issues may drive the so-called colonial bloc into alignment with the USSR."

Wilford finds more State Department and presidential incompetence than CIA bungling in the Middle East; other historians may disagree. Archie Roosevelt, for example, played a role in Operation Straggle, a plan to install an anti-communist regime in Cairo that was aborted after Israel invaded Egypt just days before the coup was to begin. And the book's timeline closes with the CIA's botched efforts to corrupt Lebanon's 1957 elections, replete with personal delivery of "clandestine payments, including briefcases stuffed with Lebanese pounds" to the presidential palace of Camille Chamoun, who was supposed to ensure the victory of pro-Western candidates.

A Pro-Arab Front in America

The chapter of *America's Great Game* that has received the most publicity discusses the CIA's covert role in the establishment and funding of the AFME, a propaganda project designed to increase pro-Arab sympathies among the American public. The AFME was exposed as a CIA front over 45 years ago. Beginning in 1951, with the unwitting assistance of progressive American journalist Dorothy Thompson and others, the CIA sought to use the AFME to broaden domestic debates about Zionism, arguing that Palestinian rejection thereof was just. Wilford shows that this initial pro-Arab stance at the CIA came from a mixture of the pro-Arab feeling that germinated during wartime and calculations that US interests would be best served by alignment with the Arab and Muslim majorities of the oil-rich region.

Wilford unearths new evidence of the extent to which the AFME worked hand in glove with the CIA. He documents, for instance, that "the presence of AFME field offices in the Middle East provided CIA officers with non-embassy cover to carry out their espionage and covert action duties." He recounts the tale of an AFME representative setting up nighttime conferences with embassy CIA personnel in "the 'safe houses' that the station maintained." He discovers that AFME staff in Baghdad made weekly reports on open source intelligence and hid them "in a special bookcase with a secret compartment in its base."

Yet, even with these titillating new details, Wilford is reluctant to characterize the AFME as a tool of CIA propaganda. Because so many of the CIA's Arab experts "naturally shared the liberal political values of the citizens groups they were secretly subsidizing," Wilford argues that "the relationship between the CIA and the American Friends of the Middle

East was less like that of a patron and client than an alliance of partners united by a shared purpose and outlook.” He concedes that the AFME’s claim to represent private citizens, not government positions, was duplicitous. But because the people attracted to the AFME mostly already supported the Palestinian cause, Wilford tautologically concludes that the Agency merely partnered individuals with an organization sharing their beliefs. The AFME was not coercive, he says, because it attracted people who sided with the Palestinians.

But such “an alliance of partners united by a shared purpose and outlook” was always at the core of successful CIA fronts and successful CIA coups—as Wilford stresses that Kim Roosevelt understood. Such was the difference between Operation Ajax and the disaster at the Bay of Pigs in 1961. It is true that there were plenty of American private citizens backing the Palestinian cause before the AFME came into being, but to argue that CIA fronts were not coercive is to misunderstand the nature of CIA fronts and the threat they posed to democratic movements abroad, and the damage such illegal (under the CIA’s 1947 charter, which prohibited it from engaging in domestic actions) acts did to democracy at home.

After the 1956 Suez crisis, the CIA’s relationship with the AFME shifted in ways Wilford characterized as “a series of upheavals that would change its character forever, from that of a state-private alliance into something more akin to a simple tool of US foreign policy.” He downplays the idea that the AFME was an example of the “colonization of the private sphere by the official.” Yet such a description relies on unexamined notions that because individuals voluntarily joined this, or many other less politically progressive, covert front organizations, that minimal harm to domestic democratic process occurred. This theme also appears in Wilford’s previous book, *The Mighty Wurlitzer*, where his analysis likewise minimizes the perils posed by CIA fronts to America because these fronts often supported rather than created political movements.

Inherent Contradictions

Most of all, Wilford struggles to reconcile his depiction of the early CIA Arabists as fundamentally pro-Arab and pro-Muslim with the history of malicious acts by the CIA in the Middle East. Some of these discrepancies are accounted for by the difference between individual outlooks and the CIA’s organizational goals, but it is still hard to see how the cousins Roosevelt, for instance, could be sincere admirers of Arab and Islamic culture and at the same time help to stage coups in the region.

Wilford’s strength is his ability to give life to “America’s great game,” showing the cunning and derring-do of Arabists half-knowingly stumbling down the road to American hegemony. In a brilliant passage, he captures Copeland growing so frustrated with the Eisenhower administration’s Middle East policies that he resigned in 1957. Wilford observes, “Above all,

Miles, the game player supreme, was fed up with always being on the losing side, not least as it meant being teased by Nasser, with whom he was still in frequent, friendly contact. ‘The genius of you Americans,’ Nasser taunted him, ‘is that you never made clear-cut stupid moves, only complicated stupid moves.’ It was ‘a turning point in my life,’ Miles wrote later. ‘I thereafter adjusted my own personal game.’” If Copeland was an Arabist, Nasser the Americanist was twice his equal.

But Wilford’s strength is also his weakness. At times, Wilford’s CIA Arabists appear as free agents instead of functionaries in a covert bureaucracy under direct presidential oversight. It is almost as if the early CIA followed the whims of two Roosevelts and a Copeland, rather than the directives of the executive branch. There is little attention to the complicity of the National Security Council in the CIA’s failed coups in Syria or in Copeland and Roosevelt’s dealings with Nasser. The NSC 5412/2 Special Group, which directed CIA activities in the Middle East, and Cold War power brokers like the Dulles brothers play only minor background roles.

With the inauguration of President Dwight Eisenhower, the executive branch began to shift US global strategy to focus more narrowly on containment of the Soviet Union and communist ideas. With this shift, all three of Wilford’s star Arabists began to disengage from the “great game,” each in his own way. Of the three, Archie Roosevelt lasted the longest as a CIA employee—though with the passage of time he was increasingly ignored, rather like the China hands in Foggy Bottom who understood that conflating nationalism with communism was a mistake.

In the end, America wasted opportunities to build a new type of relationship between Arab nations and the West. Instead of replacing European colonial domination with something better, America tried to become the new boss. But even this obvious conclusion rankles observers who do not accept that America’s gamble on Israel was a costly move that weakened America’s regional clout, creating more difficulties than gains for American interests. In a *Wall Street Journal* review of *America’s Great Game*, Michael Doran, formerly of President George W. Bush’s State Department, dismisses that contention. Doran does not, however, supply a convincing counter-argument.

It is tempting to speculate about how the strands of US intelligence analysis favoring post-colonial independence might have developed in an alternate universe where Truman left the OSS intelligence and operations branches disarticulated into the State and War Departments. In the actually existing universe, however, intelligence and operations were conjoined, and Kennan’s Cold War game plan quietly guided US policy. CIA reports questioning the wisdom of aligning the US with colonial powers were overwritten by hegemonic Cold War desires—regardless of the intentions of the analysts who wrote the reports or the predilections of the agents who gathered the data. ■