

The British Government, Arab Nationalism and the Iraqi Revolution of 1958

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On 14 July 1958, a group of young Iraqi officers under the leadership of General Abd al-Karim Qasim overthrew the government in Baghdad. From the British perspective, the Iraqi revolution marked the end of an era. Iraq was a former British mandate territory which had become part of Great Britain's informal empire in the Middle East after its formal independence in 1932. The Hashemite monarchy, installed by Great Britain in 1921, guaranteed the very close Anglo-Iraqi alliance. In 1955, both countries had joined the Baghdad Pact, a regional defence organization, which formed the cornerstone of Great Britain's military strategy in the Middle East. A special agreement between the two governments granted the Royal Air Force overflying and staging rights in Iraq. All of this changed, when the entire royal family and the anglophile political leader Nuri es-Said were killed in the July 1958 revolution and Qasim became president of the newly-proclaimed *Iraqi Republic*. Iraq withdrew from its membership in the Baghdad Pact and ended the special agreement with Great Britain in March 1959.

The 1958 revolution was not only a turning point for the bilateral relationship between Great Britain and Iraq, but also for British policy in the entire Middle East. This was due to the great impact that the events in Iraq had on the British perception of Arab nationalism. The idea of solidarity between all Arabic-speaking states, with the ultimate aim of their unification, had steadily gained followers since the beginning of the twentieth century and turned into a mass movement by the end of the Second World War. Due to the anti-imperialist ethos of the Arab nationalist movement, its growing success endangered the survival of Great Britain's informal empire in the region. During the 1950s and 1960s, the confrontation with Arab nationalism was the single most important continuity in British policy in the Middle East. The Iraqi revolution was a watershed in this struggle, because it led the British Government to a more nuanced view of, and a new policy towards, the Arab nationalist movement.

Until 1958, the British Government considered Gamal Abdel Nasser, the president of Egypt since 1952, to be not only the leader, but the very embodiment of Arab nationalist thought.

The terms ‘Nasserism’ and ‘Arab nationalism’ were frequently used synonymously in British Government papers to describe a policy directed at driving Great Britain out of the Middle East. Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was convinced that Nasser’s ultimate aim was to create an anti-British ‘Arab Empire’ in the region.^[1] During the months preceding the Iraqi revolution, several events in the Middle East seemed to confirm Macmillan’s suspicions. On 1 February 1958, Egypt and Syria had joined together in the *United Arab Republic*. In Lebanon, strikes and demonstrations began to destabilize the government of the pro-western President Chamille Chamoun. Macmillan believed that Nasser was the driving force behind these developments. He noted in his diary in May 1958:

‘a great crisis is blowing up in the Lebanon. Nasser is organizing an internal campaign there against President Chamoun and his regime. [...] the object is to force Lebanon to join in the Egyptian-Syrian combination. In other words, after Austria – the Sudeten Germans. Poland (in this case Iraq) will be the next to go.’^[2]

The conviction that all political unrest in the name of Arab nationalism must have been instigated and organized by Nasser defined the initial British reaction to the Iraqi revolution. When news of the coup in Baghdad reached London on the morning of 14 July 1958, the information that it had been carried out by a group of young nationalist officers was enough to convince the British Government of Nasser’s responsibility for it. Macmillan regarded Qasim to be nothing but a stooge of Nasser, determined to make Iraq join the United Arab Republic. The Prime Minister therefore felt that Great Britain had to react to the Iraqi revolution by provoking a ‘showdown’ with Nasser in the Middle East.^[3] He wanted to enlist the US Government for a joint large-scale military operation designed to put a stop to the spread of Arab nationalism under Nasser’s leadership in the entire region. This plan did not come to fruition because the US President Dwight D. Eisenhower refused to open ‘Pandora’s box’ and embark on an intervention without clearly-defined scope.^[4]

It soon became apparent that the British Government’s initial analysis of the 14 July coup had been entirely wrong. Qasim made it clear that he and his followers had acted on their own accord and that there were no plans to make Iraq join the United Arab Republic. In the months following the Iraqi revolution, the British Foreign Office, Treasury and Ministry of Defence conducted intense discussions about the consequences of the Iraqi revolution for Great Britain’s Middle East policy. They agreed that their previous strategy of trying to fight the spread of Arab nationalism at all costs was no longer a viable option. The Iraqi revolution had proven Arab nationalism to be a much more multi-faceted phenomenon than the British Government had thought. It had turned out that Nasserism and Arab nationalism were not at all the same thing. It was naïve to assume that containment of the former would lead to the decline of the latter. Above all, the British Government had to acknowledge that:

‘although Arab unity as an effective political concept, denoting the constitutional amalgamation of the Arab world, is a myth, Arab solidarity as a political force is a powerful reality – perhaps the dominating force in the Middle East today.’^[5]

^[1] Harold Macmillan, Diary entry, 15 March 1958, Bodleian Library, Oxford. The Macmillan Diaries have been edited and published by Peter Caterrall: *The Macmillan Diaries, Vol. II. Prime Minister and After, 1957-1966*, Palgrave Macmillan 2011.

[2] Macmillan, Diary entry, 13 May 1958, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

[3] Record of a telephone conversation between Harold Macmillan and Dwight D. Eisenhower at 22.30 GMT, 14 July 1958, British National Archives: PREM 11/2387.

[4] Ibid.

[5] 'Middle East Policy'. Memorandum by the Middle East Official Committee, O.M.E. (59) Revise, 8 January 1959, British National Archives: CAB 134/2343.

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