

ELIE KEDOURIE MEMORIAL LECTURE

## Harold Macmillan and the Middle East Crisis of 1958

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ELIE KEDOURIE'S ANALYSIS of Britain and the Middle East was always based on meticulous and detailed research. But the distinction of his work lay in his critical and sustained examination of assumptions and calculations, and in his belief that British ministers and officials must be held accountable for their decisions. He was fully aware that the evidence could be read in different ways. Elie Kedourie's own assumption was that nothing was inevitable. My lecture this afternoon draws inspiration from his idea that the British in the aftermath of the Suez Crisis had choices, and that the consequences of initial decisions would be determined in part by further choices or decisions. In this process individuals and individual style played a major part. In the case of Harold Macmillan it is possible to view his ideas in 1956 as an alternative to those pursued by Anthony Eden, the Prime Minister, and to study the way in which Macmillan attempted in 1958 not to repeat Eden's mistakes. My comments are based in part on the Macmillan Diaries, which are not yet in the public domain though they along with Macmillan's other papers have been deposited in the Bodleian.<sup>1</sup> I should also at the outset mention that I had an ulterior motive

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Alistair Horne for allowing me to read the copies of the Macmillan Diaries in his possession. His biography, *Harold Macmillan, 1894–1956* (London, 1988) and *Harold Macmillan, 1957–1986* (London, 1989) remains the point of departure for a study of the Macmillan years. See also Richard Lamb, *The Macmillan Years 1957–1963: The*

for the choice of the topic which goes beyond Elie Kedourie and the Middle East. Along with other historians, I am engaged in the *Oxford History of the British Empire*. My own assignment is the dissolution of the Empire and I have been curious what I could learn about the larger subject by studying the crisis of 1958 in the Middle East. The crisis itself may be defined, from the British perspective, as Harold Macmillan's final confrontation with Nasser.

The current or prevailing historical judgement on Macmillan, especially among younger historians, is hostile. Sometimes this relates to his connections with the aristocracy and his Edwardian style, which gave the misleading impression of physical lassitude and intellectual laziness—misleading because Macmillan was exacting in all he did and demonstrated an intellectual mastery of the issues on which one would have perhaps to go back to A. J. Balfour to find the equivalent. Sometimes the hostility relates to his part in the Suez Crisis and the suspicion that Macmillan led a conspiracy to overthrow Eden. It is also connected with what is believed to be the lost opportunity to join the European Community in the late 1950s before de Gaulle had the chance to veto British entry. There is substance to the latter charge, though it could be levelled to a lesser extent as well against the leaders of the Labour Government at the end of the war: Attlee, Bevin, and Cripps. The sting in the indictment against Macmillan is not so much that he failed to guide Britain into Europe but that he turned to the United States in what is now thought to have been a rather hollow 'Special Relationship', and that he maintained Britain's pretence as a nuclear power, thus crippling the British economy. As to the charge that Macmillan was a conspirator, my judgement on the basis of reading various sets of private papers—those of Lord Salisbury and R. A. Butler as well as the Macmillan Diaries—is that this interpretation misses the essence of Macmillan as a political figure. Macmillan was a political adventurer who took extraordinary risks, but he also was usually politically adept. He has a lot to be held accountable for without the element of conspiracy, of which he was no more guilty than most of his colleagues.

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Emerging Truth (London, 1995), which surveys archival sources not accessible to Horne at the time; and John Turner, *Macmillan* (London, 1994), which is especially useful on economic questions. Macmillan's own autobiographical account is *Riding the Storm, 1956–1959* (London, 1971). For recent assessments of Macmillan and issues of the Middle East, see Richard Aldous and Sabine Lee, *Harold Macmillan and Britain's World Role* (London, 1996); and Nigel John Ashton, *Eisenhower, Macmillan and the Problem of Nasser* (London, 1977).

The Middle East Crisis of 1958 was profoundly different from that of 1956. It had different origins and it was different in its nature, but it held the potential to become as severe. The Iraqi revolution of July 1958 was a watershed in the history of the Middle East and the region's relations with the West. It represented the overthrow of the old social and landed order and the virtual end of the British Empire in the Middle East, even though the British presence continued in Aden and the Gulf. In another sense the crisis marked the rise to the ascendancy of the United States as a Middle Eastern power in place of Britain. Two years earlier during the Suez Crisis, the British had attempted along with the French and with the help of the Israelis to restore European hegemony in the Middle East, only to be blocked by the United States. I shall briefly comment on the Suez Crisis in relation to the set of events in Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq which triggered a similar confrontation with the leader of Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser, in 1958. The events of 1958 in a sense can be considered as a rerun of Suez, but with obvious and important differences.<sup>2</sup>

The two crises are intertwined and I would like to remind you of Macmillan's part in the Suez Crisis and how this is connected with the set of events in 1958. During the Suez Crisis Macmillan was Chancellor of the Exchequer. At the outset he took a more fire-eating stand than Eden himself. Macmillan took the lead in urging the overthrow of Nasser. He was the first to suggest to Eden that Israel should be brought into the alliance against Egypt. 'All history', Macmillan wrote, 'shows that Statesmen of any character will seize a chance like this and the Jews have character. They are bound to do something. Surely what matters is that what they should do is to help us and not hinder us.'<sup>3</sup> It is ironic that Eden's response to this suggestion was one of shock. Nor did it increase his confidence in Macmillan's judgement. Macmillan on his own initiative went ahead to discuss with Churchill, now in retirement, the possibility of an alliance with Israel. From Eden's point of view this was intolerable. He had his own plans to win Churchill's support during

<sup>2</sup> The best works generally on the 1958 crisis remain Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War 1958–1964* (London, 1965); and Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Politics, 1945–1958* (London, 1965); see also especially Irene L. Gendzier, *Notes from the Minefield: United States Intervention in Lebanon and the Middle East, 1945–1958* (New York, 1997); Ritchie Owendale, 'Great Britain and the Anglo-American Invasion of Jordan and Lebanon in 1958', *International History Review*, 16 (1994), 284–303; and Lawrence Tal, 'Britain and the Jordan Crisis of 1958', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 31 (January 1995), 39–57.

<sup>3</sup> Horne, *Macmillan, 1894–1956*, p. 401.

the Suez Crisis, and for Macmillan to meddle in the overall strategy by soliciting Churchill's views, which would have great symbolic significance, was a breach of confidence. Eden on one occasion wrote angrily that it was none of Macmillan's business. In any event it was an error of judgement on Macmillan's part. Macmillan now found the Prime Minister irascibly disposed towards him. '[T]his strangely sensitive man', Macmillan wrote, '... thought that I was conspiring with C. against him.'<sup>4</sup> There was no love lost between Eden and Macmillan: each disliked and distrusted the other.

One wonders how Macmillan himself might have managed the Suez Crisis. He had bold ideas and was not inhibited by conventional concepts, as his Israeli plan indicates. He thought clearly and he delegated authority. He was daring to the point of recklessness, perhaps in retrospect a vital characteristic in such a venture as the Suez expedition. Macmillan's large ideas as well as his capacity to change direction are breath-taking. He was fascinated by the nature of the game down to the last throw of the dice.<sup>5</sup> He is the one person in 1956 whose boldness and flashes of insight might conceivably have enabled him to achieve a settlement satisfactory to Britain. Could Macmillan have co-ordinated the invasion with the Israelis as well as the French, moving quickly to achieve the objectives in Egypt before American and international pressures had time to build up? It is of course an unanswerable question, but it can be tested by his response to the crisis in 1958.

Macmillan was the single member of the Cabinet in 1956 who attempted to look beyond the crisis to see what might be the result of Nasser's fall. He preferred to regard it as a regional rather than as an Egyptian problem. Again there is significance for the crisis two years later. In a paper written for the Treasury in 1956, 'The Economic Consequences of Colonel Nasser', he concluded that without oil, Britain would be lost.<sup>6</sup> This was the short term problem. Over the long haul, he speculated in a letter written to the Prime Minister, a permanent arrangement would have to be made with the oil producing states of the Middle East. He proposed no less than a post-Nasser era in which a general conference, presumably with Egyptian participation, would agree to a broad plan for the economic development of the Middle East and would arrive at an equitable settlement of boundary disputes,

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 404–5.

<sup>5</sup> This is a prevailing theme in Keith Kyle, *Suez* (London, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Horne, *Macmillan, 1894–1956*, p. 411.

including those of Israel. One way or another, the United States would be brought in to guarantee the arrangements and probably to pay for them. By contrast Eden seems to have devoted little if any thought at all to the prospect of a post-Nasser order.

Macmillan in 1956 believed emphatically that there was no alternative to defeating Nasser. 'If not, we would rot away.'<sup>7</sup> These were apocalyptic thoughts. From the beginning he had given the impression, far more than any other member of the Cabinet, of 'bellicosity . . . beyond all description' and of 'wanting to tear Nasser's scalp off with his own fingernails'.<sup>8</sup> Macmillan, however, misjudged the probable reaction of the American President, Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles. In a visit to Washington in September 1956 he had a long conversation with Eisenhower, during which the subject of Suez was not directly discussed. Macmillan, however, concluded that the Americans wished the British well, that the United States for a variety of reasons would not participate in an armed expedition against Egypt, and that secretly the Americans hoped that the British would succeed in their quest to topple Nasser. In the celebrated, indeed famous, reassurance that he gave to his colleagues in September, Macmillan proclaimed: 'I know Ike. He will lie doggo!'<sup>9</sup>

In the critical discussions leading up to the British and French invasion of Egypt in November 1956, members of the Cabinet discussed whether the invasion might 'do lasting damage' to Anglo-American relations. The minutes do not mention Macmillan's assessment that the Americans would acquiesce, but his earlier advice must have helped to reassure some ministers who believed that the Americans would tacitly support the strike against Egypt while for their own reasons they would refrain from being publicly associated with the move.

Macmillan now reversed himself. When Selwyn Lloyd, the Foreign Secretary, warned of an Arab oil embargo against Europe, Macmillan, as has been established from various accounts, threw his hands up in the air and said, 'Oil sanctions. That finishes it'. At the next stage, the day of the Anglo-French invasion, 6 November, Macmillan at this critical time reported that the reserves of sterling had been depleted by £100 million in the first week of November. This was a gross exaggeration

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 410.

<sup>8</sup> Brendan Bracken to Lord Beaverbrook, 22 November 1956, Beaverbrook Papers (House of Lords Record Office).

<sup>9</sup> Kyle, *Suez*, p. 258.

(the real figure was £31.7 million), but in any event he conveyed his point that the run on the pound could spell disaster.<sup>10</sup> Macmillan now panicked. He believed that the time had come to quit. He had been influenced by the resignation of his Economic Secretary at the Treasury, Sir Edward Boyle, whose ethical as well as economic arguments had impressed him. Macmillan joined those who wished to halt the operation. 'First in, first out', was the phrase later used to describe his turnabout.

How can Macmillan's reversal be explained? First, it is clear that Macmillan was capable of colossal misjudgement based on perception rather than careful thought, as is evident from his mistaken impression of Eisenhower. Secondly, his ability to change his mind and reverse course reveals a highly strung and emotional temperament which swung from one extreme to the other, even as he managed to keep an unflappable exterior, to use the phrase which is historically associated with him. Macmillan was anything but unflappable. To keep his anxieties under control he would often collapse in bed and read novels and biography. During the Suez Crisis he read a novel by Jane Austin. During the crisis of 1958, for what it is worth, he read a biography of Palmerston.

Macmillan thus made two basic misjudgements during the Suez Crisis, one concerning Eisenhower, the other concerning sterling. As Chancellor of the Exchequer he certainly should have been prepared for the economic consequences of the invasion. He was not, and he greatly exaggerated the figures that he gave to his colleagues in the Cabinet. I do not, however, read this as sinister intent. I read it as a consequence of Macmillan's melodramatic temperament whereby he was apt to exaggerate his point and to choose inflated statistics or figures to prove his case. But there has been yet another charge beyond that of misjudgement and of failure as Chancellor of the Exchequer to prepare for the crisis. This is the accusation that together with R. A. Butler he conspired towards Eden's overthrow and managed to get himself ensconced as Prime Minister at Eden's and eventually at Butler's expense. This is a problem connected with the 1958 crisis because Eisenhower was centrally involved in it. In late 1956 after Eden's health had collapsed and he was recuperating in Jamaica, Eisenhower conducted discussions with certain people in the British Government and gave the impression that he would not favour the continuation of Eden as Prime Minister.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 464.

Eisenhower would now never again trust Eden. Macmillan took one of the initiatives in opening the talks. The others were Butler, who was the Lord Privy Seal (regarded by most as the apparent heir to Eden), and Lord Salisbury, the Lord President of the Council. They collectively carried on secret conversations with Eisenhower even before Eden departed for Jamaica.

There are all the elements of a conspiracy here, but as Elie Kedourie might have observed, the evidence is ambiguous and difficult, all the more because Macmillan destroyed his diary for the critical months of the Suez Crisis.<sup>11</sup> It is my sense that it was the sterling crisis, and not intrigue which motivated Macmillan in his effort to open discussions with the Americans, though the American Ambassador remarked that a move might be afoot within the Cabinet to remove Eden. Eisenhower made it clear that Winthrop Aldrich, the Ambassador, should never talk to Macmillan without Butler being present and vice versa. Eisenhower did not want the rumour to get about that he favoured one over the other. When Eden returned and decided to resign for reasons of continuing ill-health, the choice came down to Macmillan versus Butler. Macmillan emerged as the Prime Minister. Again, was there a conspiracy, with the American President at its centre? Did Eisenhower come dangerously close to intervening in British politics (one of his motives being that he did not want to deal any longer with Anthony Eden)? The evidence is more clear on the American than on the British side.<sup>12</sup> Eisenhower was careful to keep his distance but he needed to keep open channels of communication to resolve the Suez Crisis. Macmillan merely proved himself more politically agile in the struggle for succession, though he left the impression, which has tarnished his historical reputation, that he was devious as well as cunning, and not entirely to be trusted.

The circumstances of Macmillan's becoming Prime Minister had a direct bearing on the crisis of 1958 because Eisenhower, though he claimed impartiality, was clearly pleased. They had got on well during the war, when Macmillan had been Minister of State in the Mediterranean, and they would continue to get on well as they reshaped the special relationship between the United States and Britain. In 1957

<sup>11</sup> The case for the conspiracy is argued by W. Scott Lucas, *Divided We Stand: Britain, the US and the Suez Crisis* (London, 1991), ch. 27.

<sup>12</sup> See Cole C. Kingseed, *Eisenhower and the Suez Crisis of 1956* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1995), pp. 140–1.

Macmillan made it clear that his priority was to restore good relations. In a series of meetings at Bermuda and elsewhere after he became Prime Minister, he was able to do this. Macmillan formed the judgement that Eisenhower prevailed in large decisions. He was a strong executive, in Macmillan's words, half king, half prime minister. He seemed to be a lonely figure without real confidants, though we know from American records that Eisenhower and Dulles shared common goals and discussed all matters easily and equally. It was true, as Macmillan surmised, that Eisenhower was a strong President who made his own decisions and that Dulles was always careful never to move beyond the bounds of Eisenhower's directives. Dulles was unpopular, legalistic, and argumentative, though he too had a side to him in private that was easy-going and congenial. If Eisenhower made the basic decisions, it was Dulles who implemented them and gave sustained attention to issues in a way that the President could not.

Dulles was both indefatigably persistent and determined not to let the situation in the Middle East deteriorate into what he called a power vacuum which might allow an expansion of Soviet influence. He was wary of American financial commitments but he believed that the United States now had to play a much larger part in the Middle East in the aftermath of Suez. For that reason Macmillan believed that the mantle of Anthony Eden had now fallen on Dulles. It was Dulles who had to take the initiative in trying to come to terms with Gamal Abdel Nasser and the forces of Arab nationalism. Dulles was not temperamentally equipped to find middle ground with nationalists such as Nasser who wished to remain neutral. 'Neutral' to Dulles conveyed a quality of *naïveté*, of ignorance of Communist methods, and of the danger of supping with the devil even with a long spoon. Nevertheless, from 1957 onwards one can detect in Dulles more flexibility and more patience with his allies, less rigidity and less doctrinaire views about Middle Eastern nationalists. In 1957–8 Dulles seems to have grown with the job. By the end of 1957 Macmillan recorded in his diary that Dulles now seemed to be aware that the 'Maginot Line' of NATO and other paper alliances would not in themselves provide a lasting answer to a changing and complicated world, not least in the Middle East. Eisenhower and Dulles, in Macmillan's view, by late 1957 'are now completely converted—too late—and wish devoutly that they had let us go on and finish off Nasser'.<sup>13</sup> We know from American documentary

<sup>13</sup> Macmillan Diary, 19 December 1957.

records that it is true that Eisenhower was perplexed at the way the British had abruptly ended the 1956 military operation, but we know too that he was obsessed with the idea that any future intervention in the Middle East in concert with the British would be regarded as the equivalent to the Anglo-French combination in 1956.

At the same time that Macmillan attempted to restore good relations with the United States, he also attempted to move closer to Germany and France. This was the period of the consolidation of the European Community of the Six, and the Free Trade Area of Britain and the Scandinavian and other countries known as 'the Seven'. Macmillan in 1957–8 was still committed to the Empire and Commonwealth though in these matters he proved to be capable of adjusting his views. He was a supreme pragmatist and especially in colonial affairs he was an agnostic. This is the key to his outlook as he presided over the dissolution of the British Empire. Ultimately he did not believe that the colonies were worth the cost or the trouble involved in retaining them in circumstances of colonial war—he was very conscious of the French problems in Algeria—and he hoped that the colonies could be converted into an informal relationship whereby Britain would continue both to benefit economically and to have defence links.

In 1958 he saw much more eye to eye on these matters with Adenauer than with de Gaulle. There are many entries in Macmillan's diaries about discussions with Adenauer on the problems of the Sixes and Sevens, on the problem of France and the United States, and on Adenauer as a man of stature who believed in a personal devil. No one could have lived under Hitler, Adenauer told him, without believing in the devil, especially since Adenauer's prison cell was immediately above a Nazi torture chamber. These sort of intimate conversations Macmillan did not have with de Gaulle. Nor did Macmillan have much hope that de Gaulle, when he returned to power in 1958, would be able to extricate France from Algeria. De Gaulle's success in Algeria and in the creation of an effective Franco-German axis in the European Community were the two major developments at this time which affected Britain adversely. It would be entirely unfair to blame Macmillan for things which others did not foresee. He was in fact representative of the view that Britain's future still lay with the Commonwealth and especially with the United States, but for his American proclivities he has in retrospect been severely criticised.

The year 1957 was the year that Britain exploded a hydrogen bomb at Christmas Island in the Pacific. The significance, Macmillan wrote in

his diary, was that Britain was now truly a nuclear power along with the United States and the Soviet Union. De Gaulle of course drew the opposite conclusion: that Britain had only managed to become a nuclear power because of the Anglo-Saxon special relationship and therefore had cast her lot with the United States rather than with Europe, the same conclusion he had drawn from Suez. As a run-up to the crisis of 1958, it is important to bear in mind that nuclear testing and technology were at the forefront of everyone's mind. In October 1957 the Russians launched the space satellite Sputnik, which in Macmillan's mind caused the Americans to become unnerved and certainly less cocksure of themselves. It also meant that the Americans were now more disposed to co-operate with the British, even in the realm of nuclear weapons and of getting rid of the McMahon Act, which prohibited the sharing of nuclear information with other powers. 'It's a great comfort', Macmillan wrote in his diary in September 1957, 'to be working so closely and with such complete confidence with the Americans.'<sup>14</sup> On the British side, Macmillan detected a different reaction to the launch of Sputnik. The Queen made a speech saying that the Russians had launched a satellite 'with a little dawg in it'. The British public were far more exercised about the fate of the little dog than about the significance of the satellite and the Americans possibly losing their lead in technology, in space, and in the battle for the rest of the world.

In 1958 Macmillan continued to be concerned throughout the crisis in the Middle East with the question of the H-bomb, with a possible summit conference with the Russians, with the problems of the British economy, and above all with certain other regional problems which always appeared on what Macmillan called his 'worry list'. These included Cyprus, Malta, Yemen, and Syria in the Middle East itself, all of which were related to the general crisis, but beyond that Indonesia, where Sukarno was dealing with a Communist revolt in Sumatra, and Hong Kong where there was tension between the textile industries of the colony and Lancashire. These were all serious crises in themselves. Lord Salisbury, for example, resigned in early 1957 over the issue of Cyprus, and Alan Lennox Boyd, the Colonial Secretary, threatened to resign over the issue of Hong Kong. Yet the Middle East Crisis in 1958 did not become as all-consuming as the Suez Crisis had been two years earlier. Such was the magnitude of Suez that everything paled in comparison except in the last stage when the Hungarian revolution

<sup>14</sup> Macmillan Diary, 26 September, 1957.

began to seize headlines along with those of Suez. This then is a question: why did the crisis of 1958 not become a general crisis? The same elements of conflict were there and then some. Lebanon in the spring of 1958 at first appeared to be in danger of a Nasserite takeover; then in July came the Iraqi revolution, which proved to be not just another Middle Eastern coup but a major social and economic revolution. Was Nasser behind it? The decision had to be made whether or not to send in American and British troops to shore up Lebanon and Jordan lest they be swept up in the revolution and thus fall to Nasser. Yet there was no internal division in Britain as there had been in the case of Suez, nor was there a falling out of Britain and the United States. Above all the crisis in 1958 did not end in economic disaster. Macmillan of course played only a part in this but it is nevertheless remarkable that he, unlike Eden in similar circumstances, emerged unscathed. How did he manage to preside over what amounted to a series of crises without being consumed by confrontation with Nasser?

There were three chronological parts to the crisis of 1958 which I shall deal with in relation to the three geographical components: Lebanon in the spring of 1958 before the Iraqi revolution of July; Jordan in the aftermath of the Iraqi revolution; and the problem of Kuwait, which represents the dimension of oil.<sup>15</sup> I am not here dealing with the revolution itself, except to say that it was not anticipated by the British Government or by the British Ambassador in Iraq (though it was at lower levels in the Baghdad Embassy). Nor was there at any time any plan or any intention by the British to reoccupy Iraq. It was recognised at the time as a gigantic upheaval which had suddenly and permanently changed the landscape of the Middle East. What was not at all clear was whether Nasser in some way might have been responsible for the Iraqi revolution and intended to reshape Iraq as a sort of Egyptian satellite, and whether or not he was at the bottom of the trouble which had broken out in May in Lebanon.

What of Nasser? One might have thought that one of the lessons of Suez was that Nasser was neither a Hitler nor a Mussolini and that European analogies were misleading. But Macmillan continued to refer to Nasser as the Hitler of the Middle East and to Lebanon as Czechoslovakia. His political vocabulary was replete with phrases from the 1930s, not least 'appeasement' and 'dictators'. On that point he was

<sup>15</sup> On Kuwait and the crisis see Mustafa M. Alani, *Operation Vantage: British Military Intervention in Kuwait 1961* (Old Woking, 1990), ch. 2.

unrepentant. His underlying assumption was that Nasser, like Hitler, aimed at expansion and that he had to be confronted and made to desist, by force if necessary. Macmillan believed that Nasser was not merely a dictator of the 1930s vintage but that he was to some extent mentally unbalanced and thus, like Hitler, prone to unpredictable, irrational behaviour. Macmillan wrote in his diary before the Iraqi revolution in May 1958:

A great crisis is blowing up in the Lebanon. Nasser is organising an internal campaign there against President Chamoun and his regime. This is partly Communist and partly Arab Nationalist.

Russian arms are being introduced from Syria and the object is to force Lebanon to join the Egyptian-Syrian combination. In other words, after Austria—the Sudeten Germans.<sup>16</sup>

Macmillan was writing before the Iraqi revolution. He concluded that ‘Poland (in this case Iraq) will be the next to go’. He added that ‘Fortunately the Americans have learned a lot since Suez’.

It is important to place Macmillan’s ideas within the spectrum of British thought. One school held that Nasser did not fully control his own destiny because he had sold his political fortune if not his Arab soul to the Soviet Union. This was a view upheld by Sir William Hayter, who had recently been Ambassador in Moscow. In this estimate Nasser might be reckless, and perhaps even irrational, but any assessment of him had to take into account a certain amount of Russian control over his actions—even though he had suppressed Communism in Egypt and banned the Communist Party.

Another strain of British thought held that Nasser was not a Hitler or a stooge of the Russians but first and foremost an Arab nationalist who used the Soviet Union to achieve his own goals. This was a view upheld by Harold Beeley at the Foreign Office. He had long been a student of Egyptian nationalism and later became Ambassador in Cairo. In Beeley’s view Nasser was essentially opportunistic and by no means in control of Arab nationalism, even though in the eyes of his followers he symbolised it. Beeley’s Nasser was no demon but neither was he benevolently disposed towards Britain. He was hostile to British interests, especially those in oil. Nevertheless, it might be possible to avoid confrontation.

These interpretations were not necessarily contradictory, but it is useful to bear in mind that Beeley’s, not Macmillan’s, was closest to the

<sup>16</sup> Macmillan Diary, 13 May 1958.

historical reality. Nasser was essentially an Arab nationalist who used Russian and other external aid for what he believed to be Egypt's benefit. He was a charismatic orator whose rhetoric on Arab unity inspired his followers and caused Western observers to draw conclusions about his ambitions. His aims were not modest; but neither were they especially coherent. As later reports were to make clear, he was as baffled and frustrated by the course of events in 1958 as were the British and Americans.

The Lebanon Crisis took place against the background of the union between Egypt and Syria in January 1958. Though Iraq and Jordan had responded with a union establishing a federal link between their two states, it appeared as if Nasser or Nasserism, the ascendant Arab ideology, was on the march and that Lebanon would be the next victim. Arab nationalism sweeping the Middle East and aligned or backed by the Soviet Union was a real fear in Western circles in 1958. In early May there were strikes and violence in Beirut and other parts of Lebanon. The President of Lebanon, Camille Chamoun, was pro-Western, but the British and Americans did not believe that he was strong enough to hold his own against internal troubles and external aggression backed by Nasser.

In the wake of Suez the British could not take the initiative. It would now be up to the Americans, an ironic twist to the situation in 1956 when the Americans of course had protested against British and French intervention. The crisis, however, now differed in one very important respect. In 1956 the British and French had invaded Egypt in an act of war, if not in defiance of the UN Charter then at least setting it aside. This time the Americans, and the British, would be invited by the legally constituted Lebanese Government. Nevertheless the risks were substantial. Once in, how would the troops get out? The British Cabinet decided that unless troops went in the Lebanese Government would be overthrown and Lebanon would be taken over by Egypt. The British decided in favour of intervention, but only with a relatively small force in support of the Americans. Macmillan skilfully handled this stage of the crisis, conferring with John Foster Dulles every step of the way and keeping his colleagues fully informed. Lebanon was by no means his only preoccupation. In mid-May 1958 an impending railway strike engaged much of his attention and he also nervously watched the rise in the cost of potatoes and tomatoes as an index to politically unacceptable inflation. He observed mounting tension in France over the problem of Algeria. In colonial affairs both Cyprus and Malta needed

careful supervision. Placing Lebanon in the context of his other overseas preoccupations, he wrote in mid-May 1958:

Lebanon still holds. Our forces are in readiness, in case the request for help comes. Malta is quieter—for the moment. Cyprus may boil over again at any moment . . . France is in a turmoil—no one knows whether it will lead to the collapse or the revival of the 4th Republic. The only solid thing we have to rely on is the Anglo-American co-operation, which is closer and more complete than ever before.<sup>17</sup>

Troops were placed on alert. If the Lebanon crisis had come to a head, some 3,000 American and 2,000 British troops would have been deployed. British plans rested on the assumption that Nasser planned to annex Lebanon come what may, though he might play for time, letting the Lebanon crisis peter out and acting later when the Americans and British had lost interest or were preoccupied elsewhere. This was in fact what seemed to be happening, but then on 14 July 1958 news reached London and Washington that a revolution had broken out in Baghdad.

There is nothing like a revolution to concentrate the mind. After two months of deliberating about Lebanon, the British and American Governments now acted at once in response to the news that a group of young army officers in Baghdad led by Brigadier Abdul Karim Qasim had overthrown the monarchy and the Government of Nuri Pasha es Said. Though at first the situation was obscure, it soon became clear that members of the royal family had been executed and that Nuri had been killed while attempting to escape. President Chamoun in Lebanon immediately requested the landing of troops. The British, however, were now deflected to more urgent and more important matters: they needed to protect their clients' regimes in Jordan and Kuwait.

On the American side the ideas or apprehensions of Eisenhower and Dulles were apocalyptic. Dulles said that unless the United States supported Lebanon, 'we will suffer the decline and indeed the elimination of our influence—from Indonesia to Morocco'. Eisenhower shared those thoughts: 'we must act, or get out of the Middle East entirely'. Macmillan believed that the final showdown with Nasser had now come. His response, however, was radically different from Eisenhower's. Macmillan wanted to create an Anglo-American task force which would deal with the Middle East as a region. His initial ideas are remarkably similar to his response to the beginning of Suez—all or nothing. Only by a joint despatch of troops in Lebanon and Jordan could

<sup>17</sup> Macmillan Diary, 16 May 1958.

the Middle East be saved from revolution and resulting Communist takeovers. Eisenhower rejected Macmillan's grand scheme out of hand. It did not help matters when Eisenhower learned that Selwyn Lloyd, the Foreign Secretary, had allegedly remarked that the British wanted to involve the United States in a joint military operation to demonstrate that Britain 'had been right over Suez and America wrong'.<sup>18</sup> Macmillan said to Eisenhower over the telephone in characteristically emotional and tense language: 'I feel only this, my dear friend. . . . [I]t is likely that the trouble will destroy the oil fields and the pipelines and all the rest of it, and will blaze right through . . . [W]e are in it together.'<sup>19</sup> He put forward the argument for dealing with the region as a whole in as sweeping and as encompassing a manner as possible. What he learned from Eisenhower, however, was that the United States would proceed step by step in consultation with Congress and as far as possible move forward in concert with the United Nations.

The Americans now moved into Lebanon; the British, into Jordan. There was a rationale to the separate moves. The US Government, in particular Dulles and Eisenhower, still did not want to be viewed publicly as acting with the British who had been aggressors at the time of Suez. The crisis created by the Iraqi revolution gave them the opportunity to intervene at the invitation of the Lebanese Government and without the British—or the French. Neither the Americans nor the British wanted to be associated with the French, above all because of the growing crisis in Algeria. Unilateral intervention by invitation from the two respective Governments of Lebanon and Jordan was a way of telling the French politely that they were not invited but that the British and Americans would keep them informed.

The British moved into Jordan initially with the strength of 2,000 men. A major problem arose immediately: no one had bothered to get Israeli permission for the overflight. The British and Israelis were not on the best of terms, and this was a major blunder. David Ben Gurion, who emerges from the crisis as one of the most consistent of the statesmen involved, had remarked earlier: 'The Lebanon was basically a democracy and would survive as such; Jordan was only the King and one bullet would finish him'—and the Jordan state.<sup>20</sup> Ben Gurion now

<sup>18</sup> Lamb, *The Macmillan Years*, p. 3. Lloyd denied that he had made the comment, though it would not have been out of character.

<sup>19</sup> Record of conversation, Top Secret, 14 July 1958, PREM 11/2387.

<sup>20</sup> As related in Sir Francis Rundall to Foreign Office, 19 July 1958, FO 371/134284. Reference to FO and PREM records refer to documents at the Public Record Office, London.

not unnaturally feared Russian intervention. Only after strenuous pressure from Washington did the Israelis grant permission for the British to overfly Israel on the mission to Jordan. For Macmillan it was an operation fraught with danger: 'no port, no heavy arms, and no real mobility'.<sup>21</sup> One of the greatest dangers was that the Soviet Union would regard Britain's reoccupation of Jordan as a step towards launching a counter-revolutionary attack against Iraq. It took great skill on the part of the American and British Governments to placate both the Israelis and the Russians, assuring them that the aim was not to reverse the revolution but to stabilise the regimes in Lebanon and Jordan.

Macmillan went through a stage of what can only be called extreme jitters. 'Sickening anxiety', he called it. 'God grant that we can avoid a disaster.'<sup>22</sup> It was at this time that he collapsed into bed and read the biography of Palmerston by Philip Guedalla. 'The style is irritating—almost unbearable', Macmillan wrote in his diary:

But there are some good things in it. So much of the problems of 1850s resembled those of 1950s. The Russians, anyway, have not changed much—grasping, lying, taking everything they can, and only responding to physical pressure. Nor have the French changed much. De Gaulle is the Prince President. It is not so much the duplicity, as the vanity of the French which is so alarming.<sup>23</sup>

What worried Macmillan was the logistics of the British position in Jordan. 'Our force is too small for any real conflict—if, for instance, the Jordanian army deserts the King. Its only use is to strengthen the hand of the Government and provide an element of stability. The danger is that it might be overwhelmed.'<sup>24</sup> The British were entirely dependent on American transport planes for fuel and supplies. Macmillan was by no means the only one anxious about the outcome. John Foster Dulles had been sceptical from the outset about the British expedition in Jordan and feared that the United States would suffer the backlash of Arab sentiment. The Arabs would now view the Americans as well as the British of making another run on the Suez model and attempting to reassert Western hegemony.

Macmillan had to accept that the Americans would attempt to limit

<sup>21</sup> Macmillan to Eisenhower, 18 July 1958, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960: Lebanon and Jordan* (United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1992), XI, p. 329.

<sup>22</sup> Macmillan Diary, 17 July and 1 August 1958.

<sup>23</sup> Macmillan Diary, 3 August 1958.

<sup>24</sup> Macmillan Diary, 1 August 1958.

the crisis to Lebanon, and, as far as possible, move forward in concert with the United Nations. He therefore tried to devise a course in harmony not merely with the United States but with the United Nations, where British motives were generally suspect. But this involved more than political manipulation in the General Assembly. Macmillan operated on different assumptions from Dag Hammarskjöld, the Secretary-General of the United Nations. What is surprising about Macmillan is perhaps not so much that he got it wrong about Nasser but that he got it disastrously wrong about Hammarskjöld. In 1958 the United Nations became a force in its own right in the Middle East and elsewhere, but Macmillan continued to regard UN politics as an extension of national politics and Hammarskjöld as an ineffectual yet irritating figure. Hammarskjöld emerges as a major participant in the 1958 crisis, much more prominently than most historians have previously allowed. Macmillan's response to him reveals much about Macmillan himself, and about the part that the United Nations would play not only in the Middle East but also eventually in Africa during the Congo Crisis in 1960 and subsequently.

The United Nations was little more than a decade old in 1958. It still commanded respect in a way that today is scarcely imaginable, in part because of the prestige of the Secretary-General, who in one sense took a minimalist attitude towards UN functions. If the United Nations were to survive, it had constantly to be on guard against taking on more than it could manage. Hammarskjöld strenuously resisted plans for converting the United Nations into a world police force or for taking on countries as permanent wards. In another sense Hammarskjöld saw the potential of the United Nations as an independent institution which might achieve peaceful solutions to international problems in a way that would complement or surpass the efforts of individual states, large or small, which were each locked in narrow visions of self-interest. Hammarskjöld worked relentlessly towards UN goals with creativity and resourcefulness. By careful calculation the United Nations might play a critical part in solving not merely the problem of Lebanon but even the more intractable problems of the Middle East. In Lebanon for example the United Nations might establish a permanent observation team. In Jordan it was a UN 'presence' which eventually facilitated the British withdrawal.

In all his affairs, Hammarskjöld held that absolute impartiality was essential. He embodied that attribute, although against the British his temper sometimes flared. Indeed, the British were perhaps the exception to his reputation for impartiality. He wrote to Selwyn Lloyd, the Foreign Secretary, about the Suez Crisis two years later but still in

incisive language which conveyed moral condemnation: 'The straight line often looks crooked to those who have departed from it.'<sup>25</sup> He could of course have been writing as well about Macmillan. Hammarskjöld had a suspicious frame of mind and a certain intellectual and ethical condescension which won him enemies, especially among those with equally strong personalities. An official on whom Macmillan relied, Sir Pierson Dixon, the British Ambassador at the United Nations, was only one of several to come into collision with Hammarskjöld. In his attempt to remain unbiased towards all parties, Hammarskjöld acquired among British officials a reputation, in Dixon's phrase, for having a 'notorious penchant for the Egyptians'.<sup>26</sup> Regarding Hammarskjöld as hopelessly predisposed towards the Egyptians, Macmillan did not until relatively late in the game recognise that the aims of the United Nations and of Britain might be compatible, and that Hammarskjöld had a creative part to play.

Contrary to the predominant view held in British and American circles that Egypt or the United Arab Republic had inspired the insurrection in Lebanon, Hammarskjöld reckoned that Nasser had been wary of Lebanese politicians using him to their own advantage. Hammarskjöld held that Nasser had been drawn in reluctantly and feared great power involvement. Contrary to Western assumptions, according to Hammarskjöld, Nasser suspected that the Syrians were using him to promote their own aims. Hammarskjöld believed that the aims of the other Western powers and those of Egypt were not as irreconcilable as the British thought. If foreign influences were curtailed, and if the Lebanese were left more or less alone in their own 'goldfish bowl', they would devise their own solution.<sup>27</sup> On the exotic Lebanese goldfish bowl stirred by foreign hands, Hammarskjöld and Macmillan could both agree.

Where they disagreed was the extent of possible Soviet influence and intervention. Five days after the outbreak of the revolution in Iraq, Nikita Khrushchev wrote to Eisenhower protesting against the 'armed intervention' by the United States in Lebanon and by Britain in Jordan. The Soviet records on Egypt in the 1950s are unfortunately still closed, though scholars until recently have been able to get access to files on many other subjects in Moscow. But we know from Egyptian records

<sup>25</sup> Hammarskjöld to Lloyd, Secret, 10 July 1958, PREM 11/2387.

<sup>26</sup> Dixon to Lloyd, Top Secret, 19 June 1958, PREM 11/2387.

<sup>27</sup> Many of these aspects of Hammarskjöld's thoughts are related in a conversation with Cabot Lodge, 26 June 1958, *Foreign Relations, 1958-1960*, XI, pp. 175-80.

what Khrushchev said to Nasser: the Americans seemed to be acting irrationally and ‘frankly, we are not ready for a confrontation. We are not ready for World War III’. Khrushchev said that if Egypt were attacked, Nasser would have to brave the storm. There was no other course because ‘Dulles could blow the whole world to pieces’.<sup>28</sup> To prevent a conflagration in the Middle East, Khrushchev proposed a conference to be attended by the heads of government of the Soviet Union, the United States, Britain, France, and India. They would work out a solution to the Middle East Crisis. Khrushchev also suggested that Hammarskjöld participate. Khrushchev in many ways had more use for the Secretary-General than did Macmillan.

Macmillan devised a reasoned course of action in response to what he believed to be Khrushchev’s purpose. Assuming that Khrushchev would act rationally—as always, as with Nasser, a large assumption in the British view—the British, correctly, did not think that the Soviet Union intended to go to war over Lebanon or Jordan, but that Khrushchev intended to make it clear that the Western powers must not embark on a counter-revolutionary invasion of Iraq. As the crisis approached its height in late July 1958, Macmillan gradually became convinced that there should be a United Nations solution.<sup>29</sup> This became his governing idea. He saw eye to eye with Hammarskjöld that Jordan, not Lebanon, was the heart of the problem. According to a record of a meeting with Dixon in New York, Hammarskjöld ‘viewed our [British] presence in Jordan in a quite different light from the American presence in Lebanon’. The situation in Jordan was incomparably more serious. Dixon at the United Nations reported to Macmillan:

[Hammarskjöld] . . . sees that a collapse in Jordan, bringing it within Nasser’s sphere of influence would at once create an acute problem for the Israeli Government and would probably lead them to occupy the West Bank, with incalculable consequences for the peace of the area.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Brian Urquhart, *Hammarskjöld* (New York, 1984 edn.), p. 278.

<sup>29</sup> See e.g. memorandum of conversation at British Embassy, 19 July 1958, *Foreign Relations, 1958–1960*, XI, pp. 340–3.

<sup>30</sup> Dixon to Foreign Office, Secret, 21 July 1958, PREM 11/2388. In a conversation between Macmillan, Dulles, and others, Dulles commented: ‘The disintegration of Jordan would lead probably to the Israelis seizing the West Bank and this in turn would mean an Arab/Israel war with a very dangerous chain reaction in the international field. It was possible that Khrushchev could be made aware of the dangers of such an upheaval and might agree to co-operate to prevent it. This, of course, was presupposing that Khrushchev was motivated by reason. But there were grave dangers that both Khrushchev and Nasser were inclined to act spontaneously without any rational approach.’ Record of meeting, 27 July 1958, PREM 11/2388.

Macmillan pondered various solutions. These were complicated, including Nasser's proposal for the division of Lebanon along the lines of Vietnam or Korea, though how Lebanon might in practice be divided seemed a rather scholastic point. Another proposal concerned the possible division of Jordan. Might the West Bank go to the United Arab Republic but with the pre-1948 state of Transjordan remaining independent? Would the Israelis allow the West Bank to be taken over by Egypt? Would a truncated Jordan, in other words the Transjordan of the pre-1948 era before the incorporation of the West Bank, be economically viable? These were puzzling questions. According to the Levant Department of the Foreign Office:

Transjordan would be politically more viable, and economically no more unviable, than the present Jordan—and cheaper to maintain. But what on earth would the West Bank do—except fall into Israeli hands?<sup>31</sup>

Other proposals included a neutralised Lebanon as a ward of the United Nations. Jordan might also be neutralised along the lines of Austria, and Kuwait might be guaranteed independence as a Switzerland of the Middle East.

The point of those frantic plans, some more realistic than others, was that the solutions would be found through the United Nations. Even so, Macmillan at first espoused only a half-hearted championing of the United Nations, with the transparent aim of acquiring support or at least the acquiescence of the international community that the British had so sorely lacked during the Suez Crisis. There was also the aim of using the United Nations as an instrument for protracting the negotiations, letting the participants blow off hot air and exhaust themselves. This was the tactic that John Foster Dulles had used in 1956 when he had attempted to let the crisis peter out through tedious negotiations. Macmillan wrote that it appeared unlikely that Nasser would take any 'desperate action' or that the new government in Iraq would precipitate a further crisis. The danger could be a coup in Jordan or a move against the Western interests in the Gulf.<sup>32</sup> Step by step Macmillan moved in the direction of fuller support of the United Nations to further British aims of stabilising Jordan and Lebanon and using the mechanism of the United Nations to allow British and American withdrawal. Macmillan had a lot to thank Hammarskjöld for in 1958.

The problem at the end of the crisis was to be sure that Khrushchev

<sup>31</sup> Minute by Robert Tesh (Levant Department), 7 August 1958, FO 371/133826.

<sup>32</sup> Macmillan to Dulles 27 July 1958, *Foreign Relations, 1958–1960*, XI, p. 405.

did not misunderstand the intent of Britain and the United States. They would not intervene in Iraq, but they would defend at virtually any cost their access to the oil in the Gulf. From beginning to end, the British aimed above all to preserve their position in the Gulf: they found to their great relief that the Americans agreed that this point had transcendent priority. After the outbreak of the revolution in Iraq, Selwyn Lloyd had flown to Washington. He reported jubilantly to Macmillan:

One of the most reassuring features of my talks here has been the complete United States solidarity with us over the Gulf. They are assuming that we will take firm action to maintain our position in Kuwait. They themselves are disposed to act with similar resolution in relation to the Aramco oilfields in the area of Dhahran. They assume that we will also hold Bahrain and Qatar, come what may . . . They agree that at all costs these oilfields must be kept in Western hands.<sup>33</sup>

Eisenhower himself wrote to Macmillan that, beyond Lebanon and Jordan, 'we must also, and this seems to me even more important, see that the Persian Gulf area stays within the Western orbit. The Kuwait-Dhahran-Abadan areas become extremely important . . .'.<sup>34</sup> Dulles entirely agreed: 'The thing we want to preserve is that Persian Gulf position . . .'.<sup>35</sup> With the oil of the Gulf remaining in Western hands, the loss of Iraq could be taken less tragically. Lloyd stated the problem at its most basic essential when he wrote of his agreement with Dulles: 'he was quite definite that the Gulf was the essential area, and that so long as we could hold it and its oil resources, the loss of Iraq was not intolerable.'<sup>36</sup> So it ended on a philosophical note. It could have been worse. British and American oil interests in the Gulf and Saudi Arabia were not challenged, Iraq continued for the time being to sell oil to the West, and the United Nations facilitated the departure of American and British troops from Lebanon and Jordan.

Apart from his case of the jitters, which was characteristic, Macmillan handled the Middle East Crisis of 1958 with panache and skill. He consciously avoided what he believed to be Eden's mistakes in 1956. He stayed in step with the Americans and he kept his officials as well as ministers informed at every stage. He weighed the evidence, he debated it, but he did not interfere in departmental affairs after

<sup>33</sup> Lloyd to Macmillan, Secret, 20 July 1958, FO 371/132776.

<sup>34</sup> Eisenhower to Macmillan, 18 July 1958, *Foreign Relations, 1958-1960*, XI, p. 330.

<sup>35</sup> Record of telephone conversation between Dulles and Eisenhower, 19 July 1958, *ibid.*, p. 332.

<sup>36</sup> Lloyd to Foreign Office, Secret, 20 July 1958, PREM, 11/2388.

decisions had been taken. Again and again one is struck with the contrast with Eden. Yet one is struck also with the similarity. Both reasoned by analogy, both believed that Nasser represented the equivalent of a European dictator, that Iraq seemed to be a latter-day Czechoslovakia. Critics today have little sympathy with analogical reasoning and false comparisons, but it was entirely understandable that Eden and Macmillan would try to learn lessons from the great events of their age and would reason on the basis of their own experience. The difference between the two was that Macmillan had a much more agile and questioning mind. He questioned his own assumptions, he exaggerated his figures and facts, and he presented his case in public as often as not with Edwardian melodrama. In a sense the crisis of 1958 was a microcosm of the much larger and complex problem of the dissolution of the British Empire, in which Macmillan demonstrated the same characteristics.