

# **The Teaching of Middle East History**

## **In the Christian Schools of North America**

by Rev. Bassam Madany

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Since the fall of the Soviet Empire, the United States is perceived as the only remaining superpower. This burden has involved it in major and minor conflicts on three continents. In Operation Desert Storm for the liberation of Kuwait 500,000 men and women of the U.S. armed forces were transported to Saudi Arabia in the greatest airlift in history. Later on, the Somali tragedy brought the U.S. to the shores of East Africa where it played a major role in the attempt to end the starvation of thousands of Somalis. Since 1995, our brave men and women, together with their NATO allies, are working hard at bringing peace to strife-torn Bosnia.

What is quite revealing about these post-cold war military operations in far away lands is that Kuwait, Somalia and Bosnia (to a certain extent) are part and parcel of the Muslim world. These events point to the fact that throughout the nineties as well as in the early part of the twenty-first century, the world of Islam deserves our special attention. We must be prepared to face the challenges of this new state of affairs. Thus it becomes necessary that our educational institutions include courses on Islam and specifically on the Middle East in their curriculum. This is specially the case in our Christian Schools since, by their very nature, they offer a theistic worldview which allows the student to properly understand a major part of our world that has never jettisoned its own brand of theism. In other words, boys and girls, young men and women, who have a Christian commitment and who attend Christian institutions of education, are better equipped to understand Islam.

Having made these preliminary remarks, I would like to mention certain historical facts that indicate why Americans have been involved in the life of the peoples of the Middle East for a very long time. We need to rediscover this forgotten part of our history. As we delve into the subject, we face the singular fact that this relationship did not begin in a political or commercial way, but as a direct result of the foreign mission work of Congregationalist and Presbyterian denominations. According to a study of original documents covering a little more than a century, Joseph A. Grabill, author of *Protestant Diplomacy and the Near East*, demonstrates how missionary influence on American foreign policy in the area began in 1810 and ended in 1927!

At this point, I would like to add a personal note. My formative years were greatly influenced by the presence of American missionaries in Syria and Lebanon. I was born in Seleucia, the port city of Antioch. My father was the Presbyterian pastor and mission school principal in that town. He loved to regale us with accounts of the four years he spent as a conscript in the Ottoman (Turkish) army in World War I and the humanitarian role that was played by American missionaries. Even though the United States had entered the war against Germany and its allies, it did not declare war on the Ottomans. This was primarily due to the presence and work of American missionaries

throughout many regions of the Ottoman Empire and their well-received advice by the State Department.

As a result of the excellent reputation which American missionaries enjoyed and their concern for the minorities living within Ottoman territories, they were able to assist in relief work among Armenian and Nestorian refugees. Over a million people were massacred by the Ottoman Turks during the war. It is worth noting that American missionaries were involved in the diplomatic negotiations at the Paris Peace Conference that dealt with the future of the Ottoman Empire. James L. Barton, secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (representing Congregationalist churches) and his counterparts, representing the Presbyterian Foreign Mission Board, had direct access to president Woodrow Wilson, and his secretary of state, Robert Lansing. Mr. Wilson, son of a Presbyterian minister, and a former president of Princeton University, was an internationalist. He conceived the idea of a lasting peace through the organization of the League of Nations. He became the hero of the many nationalities living within the Middle East by promulgating the principle of self-determination. This gave hope to Armenians, Arabs and Kurds, that the end of the Ottoman rule would bring about independence. Unfortunately, due to the persistent opposition of the Republican senators under the leadership of Henry Cabot Lodge, the United States did not join the League of Nations. Furthermore, on account of the ill health of president Wilson and the secret treaties of the Allies regarding the Ottoman lands, the United States did not get officially involved in the final political settlements regarding the Ottoman provinces in the Middle East. France and Great Britain enlarged their empires by taking control of several territories in the area with the blessings of the League of Nations.

Growing up in Syria and Lebanon during the thirties and the forties, I was quite aware of the American presence. But this presence had been primarily missionary, philanthropic and educational. It had a direct impact upon the lives of the various ethnic groups living in the area. America was regarded as an impartial and beneficent nation. The word "American" elicited the feelings of gratitude among the common people and came to be synonymous with integrity, compassion and benevolence. Thus, prior to World War II, the United States had accumulated a great reserve of good will among the peoples of the Middle East thanks to the presence and work of American missionaries.

What happened then, that since the end World War I, one notices a deterioration in the special relationship between the United States and the nations of the Middle East? One of the factors which led to the loss of the good image that America had built over the years was the waning of the missionary influence over the foreign policy of the United States. As professor Grabill put it at the conclusion of his study:

"The influence of American Protestant missionaries on Asian nationalism and on United States diplomacy had declined after the First World War and non-ecclesiastical forces had become powerful. Higher education and philanthropy were no longer dominated by churchmen, and economic concerns challenged the hold by missionaries and educators on American relations with the Near East. The cold war pushed strategic aims of the United States government to a place of prominence."

How are we to describe this new phase of United States foreign policy toward the Middle East? After examining many sources, I have arrived at the conclusion that after the Wilsonian era, this policy became primarily reactive to the events rather than proceeding from a well-thought and balanced approach to the conditions and needs of the nations of the area. Having lost or downgraded the input of resident American missionaries, philanthropists and educationalists, the State Department embarked on a policy which was to be conditioned by new economic concerns, the cold war and the birth of the State of Israel, all subsumed under the theme of United States national interests.

In an historic meeting that took place during World War II between president Roosevelt and King Saud on an American destroyer in the Suez Canal, strong links were forged between the U.S.A. and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The oil that was discovered in eastern Arabia during the thirties, was not developed until the late forties. As oil consumption was increasing in the United States, American oil companies engaged in the exploitation of the gigantic oil reserves of the desert kingdom. One of the greatest projects undertaken by ARAMCO (Arabian American Oil Company) was the TAPLINE (Trans Arabian Pipeline). This engineering feat brought Saudi crude oil from the northeastern part of Arabia to a terminal on the Mediterranean between Sidon and Tyre in Lebanon. Thousands of Americans began arriving in Saudi Arabia to work with the various projects of ARAMCO. The heartland of Islam had never been peopled with so many non-Muslims in its entire fourteen hundred year history! This new state of affairs impacted not only the desert kingdom, but equally the United States. From now on, the oil rich Middle Eastern nations were to assume a very prominent place in the conduct of the foreign policy of America.

An equally important factor in the post-World War II U.S.-Middle Eastern relations, is the beginning of the cold war between the USSR and the U.S.A. and its Western allies. Stalin tried to force Turkey to give up two eastern provinces which he wanted them annexed to the USSR. He also came to the aid of Greek leftist insurgents who were bent on bringing Greece within the Soviet dominated lands of eastern Europe. Faced with this aggressive posture, and having forced the Soviet army to pull out of northern Iran, President Truman promulgated a doctrine that came to be known by his name. He drew a line in the sand, and made it known that no Soviet aggression will be tolerated in any Middle Eastern country. Working together with Western European allies, Mr. Truman fostered the organization of regional pacts that were meant to keep communism out of the Eastern Mediterranean, such as the Baghdad Pact and the Central Treaty Organization. From the inception of the cold war, until the fall of the Soviet Empire, it was the stated foreign policy of the United States to keep the Soviet Empire within the lands it had conquered or brought within its sphere of influence following the end of World War II.

This attempt to keep the Soviet Union outside the Middle East was very difficult since the newly independent states in the area adopted socialistic ideologies and became radically anti-American. Many Arabs felt betrayed by America as they concluded that it had lost its early idealism and fairness and became a powerful supporter of the Jewish State.

This brings us to the heart of our subject: the United States foreign policy towards the nations of the area since 1946. In all fairness, we must recognize that most of the problems of the area originally stemmed from the policies of European powers vis-a-vis the Ottoman Empire. After centuries of decline, the Ottoman Turks were about to lose all their territories in the Middle East. During World War I, the British and the French concluded secret treaties concerning the Arab territories of the empire. Added to that, the British made a solemn promise to the young Zionist movement, that they regarded with favor the birth of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. This was known as the Balfour Declaration of 1917. And in order to hasten the early demise of the Ottomans, the British promised independence to the Arabs should they join the Allies in their fight against the Turks.

These contradictory treaties, declarations and promises tied the hands of the United States administration which had hoped to bring about a new era at the conclusion of the Great War through its stated policy of self-determination for the peoples of the Middle East. As noted earlier, President Wilson's preoccupation with the founding of the League of Nations did not allow him to get actually involved in the final settlement of the future of the Ottoman territories of the area. Military might came to dictate a New World Order. Britain and France divided the spoils of the war with the former getting Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq, while France getting Syria and Lebanon.

It must be noted that while the impact of the American expatriate community in the area had been weakened, nevertheless American missionaries, educators and philanthropists continued to call for a fair and just U. S. policy towards the nations of the Middle East. Quite early, they saw the dangers that surrounded the implementation of the Balfour Declaration. They spoke and wrote about the subject with clarity and conviction. The Arab population of Palestine felt doubly betrayed. They had hoped for independence, but the British became their rulers with the blessing of the League of Nations. Then, they were expected to make room for Jewish immigrants from Europe. During the British presence in Palestine that lasted thirty years, Palestinian Arabs rose up several times in protest, but could not prevail against the might of the British Empire. Prior to the beginning of World War II, the British issued a White Paper that restricted the flow of Jewish immigration to Palestine. The problem was not solved, it simply remained dormant between 1939 and 1945.

Soon after the Allies defeated Nazi Germany, the world came to realize with horror the terrible things Hitler had done to the Jewish population of occupied Europe. As the news of the Holocaust spread throughout Europe and the Americas, a great sympathy arose on behalf of the remnant of the Jewish people assembled in various refugee camps in the liberated areas of Europe. The Jewish lobby in the United States worked hard on President Truman and convinced him to request the British Government to admit 100,000 Jewish refugees to Palestine whose Jewish population had climbed during the British Mandate from around 20,000 to 500,000 by 1945.

The successor to the League of Nations, the United Nations Organization sent a fact-finding delegation to Palestine to investigate the future of the land. Finally, a recommendation was made to the effect that there should be two states in Palestine: one Jewish and the other Arab. The Jewish Agency (which had been a semi-official organization looking after the welfare of Palestinian Jews) accepted the Partition Plan,

but the Arabs rejected it. They believed that they were not responsible for the disaster that had befallen the Jewish population of Europe. They were not prepared to offer Palestine as a solution to the homelessness of the Jews.

Americans with strong ties to Middle Eastern countries were very sympathetic to the Arab cause. They believed that justice would be violated should the Jewish problem be solved at the expense of the Arabs who had lived in Palestine for centuries. One of the most eloquent defenders of the Arab side was a former president of the American University of Beirut, Bayard Dodge. I quote from a recently published book by Robert D. Kaplan, *THE ARABISTS: The Romance of an American Elite*:

"In 1948, at the age of sixty, Bayard Dodge retired to Princeton, New Jersey. That April Dodge published an article in Reader's Digest about the Palestine crisis, entitled "Must There Be War in the Middle East?" This six-thousand-word article, while forgotten and obscure, is the definitive statement of American Arabists on the birth of Israel. Though he cautioned, "Not all Jews are Zionists and not all Zionists are extremists," for Dodge the Zionist movement was a tragedy of which little good could come. Dodge was not anti-Semitic. He chided his fellow Christians for behaving "in such a way" as to make the Jews sense of "homelessness ... more acute." Years and decades of strife would, Dodge knew, follow the birth of a Jewish state. As a result, wrote Dodge, "All the work done by our philanthropic nonprofit American agencies in the Arab world --- our Near East Foundation, our missions, our YMCA and YWCA, our Boston Jesuit College in Baghdad, our colleges in Cairo, Beirut, Damascus --- would be threatened with complete frustration and collapse. (P. 80) "

Nothing could stop the growing support for the Zionist cause in Palestine. While the Near East Affairs section of the State Department was not for the partition of the land, President Truman instructed the U.S. delegation at the UN to vote in favor of the Partition Plan. Since the British could no longer maintain law and order in Palestine, they declared that they would finish their evacuation of the Holy Land by May 15, 1948. That date signaled two other major events: the Declaration of Independence of Israel and the invasion of Palestine by several Arab armies.

It must be noted that while the U.S.A. voted for the Partition Plan, it was the USSR, through its proxy Czechoslovakia, which supplied arms to the nascent Jewish state. By mid-summer, the Haganah, which became the Israeli Defense Force (IDF), stopped the Arab armies and annexed new areas of Palestine. However, Egyptian forces did manage to occupy the Gaza strip while Transjordan took East Jerusalem as well as those areas known in the Bible as Judea and Samaria. Prince Abdullah annexed them to his eastern realm and became king of the new Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

The first Arab-Israeli war had a cataclysmic impact on the Arab nations of the Middle East. Having recently won their independence from foreign rule, they perceived the birth of the Jewish State as a new and worse type of colonialism. One result was the radicalization and militarization of the Arab world. First, the coup of 1949 in Syria followed by the 1952 coup in Egypt, and in the late fifties, the bloody coup which toppled the Iraqi monarchy. The latter event took place during a tumultuous atmosphere in the area complicated by the raging first Lebanese civil war. This brought the U.S. marines to Beirut. The most important event during the fifties was

the October 1956, war between Israel and Egypt. It brought the direct intervention of the U.S. A. President Eisenhower forced Israel to relinquish the Gaza Strip and the Sinai which the Israeli forces had conquered in a lightning campaign.

This policy of the U.S. president was welcomed by the Arabs as a sign of fairness and justice to their cause. For a relatively brief period, America did not look as one-sided in its relationship with the nations of the Middle East. By forcing an Israeli retreat from occupied areas, the U.S. administration began to reclaim some of the lost credit among the Arabs. Unfortunately, no lasting solution was found for the Palestinian refugees who were living under terrible conditions in camps within Gaza, the West Bank, Syria and Lebanon.

The ties between the hero of the Egyptian revolution and his Soviet friends were getting stronger. In April 1967, Colonel Nasser was informed by the USSR about an alleged Israeli plan to attack Syria. This led him to request the UN peace-keeping force in the Sinai to leave the buffer zone separating the Egyptian from the Israeli forces. For a period of three weeks, Nasser instructed his propaganda machine to go into high gear in denouncing Israel and threatening to throw every Zionist Jew into the Mediterranean. On June 6, the world awoke to the news that Israel had attacked Egypt and destroyed its entire air force in the early hours of that Monday morning. After a lightning thrust toward the Suez Canal, the IDF pushed the Jordanians out of East Jerusalem and conquered the entire West Bank. In the final three days of the war, the might of the Israeli Army was thrust against the Syrians ending with the occupation of the Golan Heights.

The third Arab-Israeli war turned out to be more traumatic than the war of 1948. This hazima or routing of the combined Arab armies by Israel was too much for the Arab psyche. The leaders of the Middle Eastern Arab countries rallied around colonel Nasser claiming that the U.S.A. and Britain were involved in this war effort in order to explain to their bewildered peoples the reason for that crushing defeat.

The UN issued Resolution No. 242 requesting Israel to relinquish all territories acquired by force and to allow the refugees to return to their homes. Israel refused. Six more years of tension, followed by the Yom Kippur War in October 1973. President Anwar Sadat was true to his promise to liberate the Sinai. By surprising the Israelis on their most holy day, he managed to destroy the Bar-Lev Line on the East Bank of the canal and to push the Israelis back. President Nixon came to the aid of the Israelis by authorizing a massive air lift of arms to Israel. The war ended with a stalemate. Thanks to the shuttle diplomacy of Henry Kissinger, Israel left the Sinai and a peace treaty was signed between Egypt and the Jewish state.

The rest belongs to contemporaneous history. There is no need to give a detailed chronology of the events of the eighties and the first half of the nineties. Sufficient to say that after the disastrous invasion of south Lebanon by the Israelis, the Shi'ites were radicalized. With help from Iran and with the tacit approval of Syria, the Shi'ite Hizbullah began to launch rocket attacks against northern Israel. This has continued into the present with some terrible consequences for the Lebanese.

On the positive side, the successive American administrations worked hard for some accommodation between Israel and the P. L. O. At present, Yasser Arafat controls the

Gaza Strip as well as several cities in the West Bank. The negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians reached a new milestone on September 28, 1995 with the signing of a new agreement promising more self-rule to the Arab population. The future is still fraught with many dangers due to the illegal presence of Jewish settlers in the West Bank. Furthermore, owing to the rise and spread of Islamic Fundamentalism, certain radical groups such as HAMAS (acronym for the Islamic Resistance Movement) are working for the destruction of any arrangement between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

In closing, I venture this hypothesis. Had the United States administration during the Nixon era acted as resolutely and courageously as in the Eisenhower days, by pushing for an Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, a lasting and workable peace might have resulted. With some alterations in the boundaries separating Israel from Arab territories within Palestine, a return to the status quo ante of June 1967, could have laid the foundations for a viable Palestinian Arab state and for a lasting peace with Israel.

While hoping against hope that a modus vivendi between Arabs and Israelis will become a reality, I cannot deny certain serious forebodings about the future. Radical Islam poses a great danger to the world order and especially to Israel. Suicide bombings within Israel are signs of the deep-seated malaise that festers among the Arabs of Palestine. Looking into the early decades of the twenty-first century, both Palestinians and Israelis must face the real challenges of dwindling water resources and a veritable population explosion among the Arabs. This calls for a serious reflection not only among those charged with charting U.S. foreign policy, but equally among Americans in general, and educators in particular. As Christian teachers, it is our responsibility to implant in the minds of the young generation the Biblical principles of justice, fairness and evenhandedness. Such principles ought to be guiding our foreign policy makers, both in the executive and legislative branches of our national government. It is only by holding firm to such ideals, that America will be able to play a positive and constructive role in the complex world of tomorrow.

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