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Abbreviations

AIPAC  American Israel Public Affairs Committee
BAPCO  Bahrain Petroleum Company
DOP    Declaration of Principles
EC     European Community
GCC    Gulf Cooperation Council
OAPEC  Organisation of Arab Petroleum-Exporting Countries
OIC    Organisation of the Islamic Conference
OIR    Office of Intelligence Research
OPEC   Organisation of Petroleum-Exporting Countries
PFLP   Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PLO    Palestine Liberation Organisation
UAE    United Arab Emirates
UNRWA  United Nations Relief and Works Agency
Acknowledgments

My wife, Rosemarie Said Zahlan, completed this work before she died on 10 May 2006, unexpectedly from the devastation that chemotherapy inflicts on the immune system. She did everything in her power to prepare her manuscript but alas she was unable to make it ready for publication. This task was left for me.

Rosemarie had a prodigious memory and could remember information for years. She thus did not commit to paper until she was ready to go to the printer. As a result her notes concerning acknowledgements were incomplete. Though we discussed at length our respective work I was not familiar with all her professional contacts and friends. So I apologise to those who may have discussed this subject with her but are not properly acknowledged and thanked.

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Antoine Zahlan
Beirut, January 2009
1 Introduction

The Arab world has been dominated by the question of Palestine since the early years of the twentieth century. Practically all political events of any significance have been related in one way or another to what is variously known as the Arab–Israeli dispute, the Middle East crisis, the Palestine–Israel problem and other appellations. During the first half of the century, the repercussions of the issue were confined largely to the greater Middle East and, to a much lesser extent, to Muslim India.

After the Second World War, however, the Palestine Question gradually shifted to occupy centre stage in international affairs. The creation of Israel in 1948, followed by the enforced exodus of Palestinians from their homes, resulted in what became known as ‘the refugee problem’. It also directly and indirectly resulted in cataclysmic internal upheavals in neighbouring Arab states, which were beginning to assume their independence from the crumbling British and French empires.

The 1952 revolution in Egypt is one case of note. It occurred in partial response to the 1948 Arab military defeats. Gamal Abdel Nasser and his fellow conspirators had fought together in the Egyptian army against the invading Zionists who sought to establish a state in Palestine. The frustration of the young Egyptian officers at the inherent weaknesses of their army and leadership drew them together. It was inevitable perhaps that they would focus on the many flaws and failings of their own government. This was the genesis of the movement leading to the July 1952 revolution, which overthrew the monarchy and established a socialist republic in its place.

Mohamed Heikal, a journalist and close confidant of Nasser, has estimated that no less than 112 revolutions, coups or attempted coups took place in the Arab world in the first twenty-three years after the creation of Israel—that is between 1948 and 1971.1 There have of course been many more since. With one military defeat after another, anger and frustration have inevitably led to further turmoil throughout the Arab world. The persistent US support of Israel in the face of international condemnation has deepened the anger and slowed down movement towards a civil society. Instead of embarking on modernisation after the end of colonialism, the Arab states have been severely restricted by military–political realities.
Reform has been stymied. This is not due to any shortage of human and financial resources; on the contrary, both are in place and can be compared favourably with those of many other developing and developed states.

Arab militarisation as a result of overpowering Israeli victories over the years has led to the polarisation of national resources, both human and financial, in the face what they have invariably regarded as a colonial settler state in their midst. This militarisation has grown after every Arab–Israeli war. Marked by military defeat, those states that are most vulnerable to attack have engaged in a futile arms race. During the Cold War, moreover, this carried the added dimension of political partisanship. This meant further complications in the international arena, and much greater costs in time, effort and expenditure. It is practically impossible to gauge the full extent of Arab military spending since 1948, but there is no question that it has been enormous.

In September 1964, President Lyndon Johnson sent John McCloy to Egypt to persuade Nasser to limit his purchase of missiles. Nasser told the US envoy that the problem in the Middle East had nothing to do with missiles: it was Palestine. Nothing could stop the arms race except a solution to the problem of Palestine and all that entailed. This is a theme that was to be repeated in different forms and variations, and that continues until the present day: the problem of Palestine remains at the root of Arab affairs and, by extension, of international affairs.

On the international level, there have been many attempts to solve and/or defuse the dispute. There have been peace plans, attempts to put together peace plans, attempts to organise peace talks, peace initiatives, etc. These have included the Rogers Plan, the Schultz peace initiative, the Nixon Plan, the Fahd Plan, the Venice Declaration, the Peace Process, the Road Map and many others. There have been bilateral talks, trilateral talks, multilateral talks—all to no avail.

A recent study by Bercovitch and Regan analysed the number and nature of ‘protracted conflicts’ around the world which they defined as enduring conflicts. The Arab–Israeli conflict was of course regarded as one of these. The authors calculated that there were no less than seventy-five conflict-management efforts between Egypt and Israel alone for the period 1948–79; twenty-four between Jordan and Israel for 1948–86; and thirty-eight between Syria and Israel for 1948–92. There have been many more since, particularly between Israel and the Palestinians, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), the Palestinian National Authority and the Palestine Authority.

The question of Palestine continues to dominate international affairs into the twenty-first century. In March 2003, on the eve of the US invasion of Iraq, President George W. Bush announced his plan to unveil the Road Map to Middle East peace. His secretary of state, Colin Powell, had led up to this announcement a few days earlier by underlining the president’s personal commitment to this policy. This cynical revival of yet another
Arab–Israeli peace plan at such a critical point in time was not lost on many. It was a not-too-subtle acknowledgement, made perhaps for the first time, of the strong links between events in Palestine and the Gulf.

By the end of 2005 the Road Map had been phased out of US policy, to be replaced by a new policy which almost totally disregards the Arab–Israeli conflict.

PALESTINE AND THE GULF

The Palestine question provides a useful starting point for this study, for it is indelibly intertwined with the US invasion of Iraq, particularly the run-up to hostilities. International outrage, expressed in massive anti-war demonstrations worldwide, decried the double standards of US foreign policy which ignored Israeli violations of UN resolutions, all the while relying on dubious evidence to try and prove Iraqi violations and thereby create a casus belli. Bush’s famous line that ‘this war is all about peace’ was an apt reference to the relationship.

This book is about the relationships between Palestine and the Gulf which have existed since the 1930s. They have ebbed and flowed, they have started and they have declined, they have criss-crossed barriers and events, and they have taken on different forms. There have been connections and there have been mutual influences. They have pervaded national, regional and international relationships. They have been bilateral and they have been multi-lateral. They have occurred in different guises and they have appeared and disappeared unexpectedly from the public arena.

Surprisingly, this network of links and relationships has remained largely unknown, for a variety of reasons which will be discussed in this book. It was rarely alluded to until just a few years ago. In 1999, it was rather tentatively brought up by Gary Sick of Columbia University as ‘the ghost at the table’ in an article in which he disclosed an ‘intriguing record’ of mutual influence between the two. Although the article was about the 1980s and 1990s, the relationship actually started in the 1930s. This was recognised by British statesmen well before the Second World War. When he was British secretary of foreign affairs in 1942, Anthony Eden famously admitted to his staff that Britain would never be able to formulate an identifiable and suitable Middle East policy so long as the problem of Palestine remained unsolved.

This book sets out to show that the presence at the table is not that of a ghostly figure; it is substantial, dominant and omnipresent. But it has long been ignored and/or denied.

In the early years, the linkage was recognised and acted on—first by Britain and then by the US government at the highest level. President Roosevelt promised King Abdel Aziz that the USA would make no decision on Palestine without full consultation with Arabs and Jews alike. He also assured
the king in his capacity as chief of the executive branch of the US government that he would take no action that might prove hostile to the Arab people. As late as 1957, in an effort to enlist the support of Saudi Arabia for his doctrine in the Middle East, President Eisenhower assured Crown Prince (later King) Faisal that the USA would always oppose any expansion by Israel at the expense of its neighbours.

Two well-known links between Palestine and the Gulf require little introduction. The first was established in 1948 by the arrival in the Gulf states of homeless Palestinians seeking jobs in public and private institutions; such institutions had been created since the late 1940s with the vast economic expansion that accompanied the discovery of oil. The different waves of Palestinians arriving in the Gulf generally corresponded with the successive crises they faced at home. Each upheaval created another wave of migration: first 1948, then 1967, then 1970, 1973 and 1976. With time, Palestinians established communities which grew in size and influence. Their presence constitutes a visible and dynamic link between Palestine and the Gulf.

The second link has been forged by the large financial donations made by the rulers, governments and citizens of the Gulf states to the social and economic welfare of Palestinians, whether at home or abroad. These donations began in the 1930s when the states were poor, and have grown through the years, as they have become increasingly wealthy. It is almost impossible to provide an accurate estimate of the extent of this financial support. But there is no doubt that it has been enormous, and has provided the main sustenance for a large proportion of Palestinian individuals, families, institutions and organisations at home and in the Diaspora.

There have been (and will continue to be) many other links and relationships between Palestine and the Gulf. This book seeks to discuss the most outstanding. It will analyse the strength of the relationships between them throughout the twentieth century and explore those that have remained largely unrecognised. Such relations include and transcend individuals; they extend to the organisational, socio-cultural, economic and political levels.

Networks and Linkages

The relationships between Palestine and Palestinians, on the one hand, and the people and governments of the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia, on the other, can be likened to networks with two focal points. The formation of this field of linkages emerges from the commonality of language, religion, culture, history and from the place of Jerusalem in Islam.

The relationships between the two populations are reciprocal, yet they are not symmetrical. This is natural, responding as it does to the needs and conditions of both sides of the relationship. Both parties have influenced each other in different ways. These differences constitute the asymmetry in the linkages.
A third factor has been superimposed onto this field of linkages. It is far more powerful than the other two, and differs from them both qualitatively and quantitatively. It activates the field and at the same time provides much of its dynamism, negative and positive. This is the role of the hegemonic superpower: Britain until 1948, and the USA thereafter.

Since the early twentieth century, and largely after the end of the First World War, there has been a long sequence of triangular interaction between the three which with time became a constant factor in Arab politics. This factor has also varied in time and place, but nevertheless has been present at most critical junctures of Arab and international politics.

In this triangular relationship, the influence of the superpower cannot be reciprocated by the other two. Its impact on the Palestine problem is overwhelming, yet the Palestinians can only bring an infinitesimal influence to bear on it. The Gulf states, by contrast, have greater leverage by dint of their vast oil reserves, their enormous financial assets and their vital geo-strategic location. At specific points in time, they have applied this leverage to promote a willingness, if nothing else, to tackle the problem. But the asymmetrical relationship between the three components of the triangle can be said to have resulted in paralysis; this has impeded significant progress in resolving a crisis that has become one of the most omnipresent and intractable in the world.

The operational aspects of this linkage are an important focus of this book. It will be shown that what happens in Palestine affects the Gulf states internally. It plays a role in the dynamics of their political apparatus. It then causes them to play a different role on the international stage.

**Formation of the Field of Linkages**

The exact moment of the creation of the field is difficult to pinpoint. Its genesis can doubtless be found in the 1917 Balfour Declaration, which contained the seeds of the conflict that was to form and shape the Palestine problem.

The field itself was first manifested during the 1930s when a variety of events concurred. These included the establishment of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932; the opening up of the Gulf region to oil companies in search of petroleum deposits and concessions; and the establishment of a British air route to India with landing and fuelling stations on the Arab coast of the Gulf.

These created a new dynamism in the Gulf region, which was enhanced by the establishment of improved communications of all kinds. Most outstanding was the introduction of the radio: it had a remarkable impact on people who were still lacking in education and who were isolated from the rest of the world by the immense power of British policies, as well as by geographical remoteness, poverty and the absence of all modern forms of communication. In 1936, radio broadcasts in Arabic began to be beamed to the coast of Arabia from Bari (Italy), followed shortly by Iraqi, German and
British radio stations. A network of roads was constructed, linking the region with hitherto inaccessible locations and gradually lifting its long isolation.

At around the same time, Britain established refuelling and landing stations on the Arab coasts of the Gulf for its civil and military aircraft. The arrival and departure of passengers, albeit only in transit, created another avenue of communications with the rest of the world. The new role of some Gulf ports as entrepôts was enhanced after the discovery of oil in Bahrain in 1931. The influx of foreign oil-company workers and executives contributed to an awareness of events beyond the shores of the Gulf.

In 1936, the Palestinians called a general strike to protest against rising Jewish immigration from Nazi Europe. They wanted the British mandatory government to stop sanctioning the arrival of the refugees, who were fast becoming a destabilising force in the country. The claims of these immigrants to Palestine naturally aroused fear among the Palestinians that they would ultimately be displaced by the foreigners. The general strike caused great hardship throughout the country as economic life ground to a halt. The introduction of British emergency regulations inevitably led to conflict.

News of events in Palestine reached the Gulf. There was for the first time an awareness of the many dangers facing the Palestinians. The Peel Commission report, published in 1937, recommended partition of the country. This recommendation shocked the Arab world and aroused great sympathy for the Palestinians, who now faced the possibility of losing half their country.

The response of the people and governments of the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia to the 1936–9 strike and the rebellion that followed marked the beginning of the relationship between these two sides of the triangle. These early beginnings have remained largely unknown for a variety of reasons. They will be reconstructed in this book from declassified US and British government archives as well as from publications, and from private interviews with protagonists and/or their descendants.

The most memorable example of linkage was the oil embargo following the October 1973 Arab–Israeli war. Led by Saudi Arabia, Algeria and the small Gulf states, it linked the withholding of oil sales with the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza and the West Bank. Arab oil-producing states were exasperated with US policy, and were particularly incensed when, in July 1973, the USA used its veto for the fifth time in UN history to block a Security Council resolution deploring the continuing Israeli occupation. The linkage was acknowledged worldwide as the boycott began to bite, causing inflation and recession. Western concessions to the Palestinians followed. The question of Palestine emerged the next year as an independent agenda item at the United Nations; for the first time the self-determination and human rights of the Palestinians, not only their status as refugees, were acknowledged. And the PLO gradually transmorphed from isolation to international recognition and diplomatic status.

In 1998, when the USA was preparing to launch a vast aerial bombardment of Iraq (‘Desert Fox’), anti-war demonstrations spread throughout
many countries in the Arab world and the West. One of the most memorable protests occurred at Ohio State University when Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, National Security Adviser Sandy Berger and Secretary of Defence William Cohen appeared on live TV in an effort to explain and promote government policy. They were clearly unprepared for the response awaiting them. They were visibly shaken by the heckling of the academic audience, which was angered by their own government’s double standards in militarily enforcing UN resolutions for Iraq, all the while condoning Israel’s flouting of many more such resolutions.

This Gulf–Palestine linkage during the months preceding Desert Fox was driven home on the military level. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and other Gulf states refused access to US forces in the face of the continued deterioration of the situation in Palestine. High-level visits by US officials to persuade these countries to provide access proved unsuccessful. It was not coincidental, therefore, that President Clinton visited Gaza in December 1998. There he addressed the Palestine National Council, opened the newly built airport and visited the town. It was the first ever visit of a US president, and as such earned wide media coverage.

With that out of the way, Clinton could then proceed to the business at hand: bombing Iraq. The day after he returned home, he ordered the bombing raid on Iraq. Gulf rulers could no longer object.

The role of right-wing think tanks and neo-cons in White House policy making since 11 September 2001 is well known. I have singled out a 1995 article by one of them, Zalmay Khalilzad, a former US ambassador to Iraq: ‘The United States and the Persian Gulf: preventing regional hegemony’. It emphasises the vital strategic importance of the Gulf to the USA, and promotes a policy to preclude the dominance of either Iraq or Iran, at the same time encouraging a balance of power between the two. It advocates strengthening US military ties with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, and proposes a long-term role for Israel as a partner with the GCC states in promoting Gulf security.

The perspective of Gulf–Palestine linkage inherent in this and similar publications and statements is predicated on the assumption that the Gulf states are not an integral part of the Arab world, and that their relationships with other Arab countries can be altered at will, shuffled and manipulated.

Neither the Gulf nor the problem of Palestine is contained by geographical boundaries, especially in the computer–satellite age. Palestine continues to evoke powerful sentiments. Satellite imagery has brought home the impact of the intifada and the dramatic realities of daily life under occupation; combined with the instant access to information provided by the internet, these pictures have deepened rather than diminished national, religious, cultural and social ties.

By disregarding this linkage, or denying its centrality, the USA has moved from one serious crisis to another. Anthony Eden’s admission about Middle Eastern policy has yet to resonate in the State Department.
Persistent policy decisions which view the Arab–Israeli situation as distinct and different from the Gulf expose the region to great danger and will invariably collapse.

**TWIN PILLARS: SAUDI ARABIA AND ISRAEL**

The buzz words of ‘dual containment’ towards Iraq and Iran throughout most of the 1990s could well have been applied to another aspect of US foreign relations. Likewise, an earlier term, ‘twin pillar’, the US policy in the Gulf during the 1970s—the pillars being Saudi Arabia and Iran—is more suitably applied to another doctrine, one that has been far more durable.

Ironically, both terms (‘dual containment’ and ‘twin pillar’) describe more accurately the most constant aspects of US policy towards the Near/Middle East since the Second World War. These are the twin-track relationships with Saudi Arabia and Israel. A brief survey of US policy in the Middle East and North Africa during the past six decades reveals immense fluctuations in US bilateral relations with the states and governments of the region; by contrast, its dealings with Israel and Saudi Arabia have been characterised by great consistency.

US–Egyptian relations since 1945, for example, fluctuated from the tentative warmth during the early years of the Free Officers to the anger and bitterness following the 1967 Arab–Israeli war, to the heady efforts of the Sadat years, and the sobering moments of the 1990s. US–Iraqi, US–Tunisian, US–Syrian, US–Libyan and other relationships have likewise varied enormously with the years and with the issues involved.

But the ‘twin pillars’ of US policy, Saudi Arabia and Israel, have been constant throughout the post-war period. The US–Saudi relationship was born after US oil companies first entered Saudi Arabia, and was given added depth by the personal friendship forged between King Abdel Aziz and President Roosevelt. This relationship has been one of the most constant aspects of US foreign policy in general, not only in the Middle East. It was acknowledged and strengthened after the 1957 visit to the USA of King Saud, and has steadily grown in substance, particularly after the 1967 Arab–Israeli war ushered in a period of decline for Egypt and Syria.

The US–Israeli relationship, tentative in the beginning, has also developed substantially since the 1960s. By the early twenty-first century it has become of paramount importance to both. Its security has become intertwined with that of the USA and it has evolved to become a vital element in US domestic politics. This has been recognised in elections, whether of governors, senators or congressional representatives; and more recently it has assumed an essential role in the selection and administration of academic funding.

The twin relationships with Saudi Arabia and Israel have dominated US post-war policy in the Middle East. The first has been based, very generally
Speaking, on economic considerations, the second on security. They have existed alongside one another for over fifty years. They have remained in parallel; the few times they have become conjoined were linked mostly with the conflict in Palestine. One example occurred in 1969–70, and was encapsulated in an intriguing episode recounted by John D. Rockefeller in his autobiography.

After the June 1967 war, and the rapid decline in US–Arab relations as a result of US support for Israel, Rockefeller, in his capacity as chairman of Chase Bank, wanted to spearhead the revival of these relations. He was encouraged by Eugene Black, former head of the World Bank and financial adviser to the Emir of Kuwait.

In late 1969, Rockefeller was approached by the Egyptian ambassador to the UN with an invitation to meet President Nasser, who was interested in re-establishing meaningful contacts with the USA. Rockefeller saw this as a potentially significant opening, but wanted his government’s approval before embarking on anything new. So he flew to Washington to see the national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, who had previously worked as an aide to Nelson Rockefeller. Kissinger encouraged him in the venture, and asked him to brief President Nixon after his return from Egypt.

Nasser welcomed Rockefeller warmly. His message was straightforward. He undertook to obtain recognition of Israel’s right to exist from all Arab countries if Israel implemented UN Resolution 242. Nasser said that the resolution, which called for Israeli withdrawal from land occupied in the 1967 war, would provide the general framework for a peace agreement. He also undertook to support minor border rectifications and the demilitarisation of the Golan Heights once the UN resolution was implemented.

Rockefeller then went on to Saudi Arabia where he met King Faisal. The king had inflexible opinions regarding US policy in the Arab world, and also wanted implementation of the UN resolution. This encouraged Rockefeller to press for a change in US policy when he returned home, with the Egyptian offer as a useful starting point.

He mentioned his observations to Kissinger, and a month later was invited to the White House for what he assumed would be a private meeting with Nixon and Kissinger. He was taken aback to discover the meeting was not private at all: senior oil executives, including the chairmen of Standard Oil, Mobil and Amoco, were present, together with others. It was inevitable, perhaps, that details of the meeting were then leaked to the press. Some newspapers shrilly decried the sinister role of oil and banking interests and saw them as instrumental in promoting a change in US policy to Israel.

The outrage in the press, radio and TV took Rockefeller totally by surprise. Long-established accounts at Chase were cancelled—anathema to any bank—and he was harangued in the press. He was attacked personally. Newsweek, for example, entitled its article about the incident ‘Rockefeller: blinded by oil?’ This violent reaction to his well-meaning attempt to promote a new departure led him to surmise that he had been deliberately set