

James Barr. *Lords of the Desert: The Battle between the United States and Great Britain for Supremacy in the Modern Middle East.* New York: Basic Books, 2018. vi + 454 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-05063-5.

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Most Americans and Brits take the special relationship between Britain and the United States for granted. There seems to be little difference, after all, between the interests, histories, and cultures of two nations who have, for the most part, upheld the liberal world order for nearly two centuries with their dominant, fossil fuel-powered navies. Britain joining America in the latter's Middle Eastern adventure into Iraq in 2003 further reinforced the view that the two countries have always been on the same page in the Middle East.

This view, however, is far from accurate, according to James Barr's newest history, *Lords of the Desert: The Battle between the United States and Great Britain for Supremacy in the Modern Middle East*. Barr seeks to set the record straight by arguing that Britain and the United States were "invariably competitors in the Middle East and often outright rivals" from the 1942 to 1971 (p. 2). Barr's thesis is fascinating and original. Scholars have previously identified points of contention between Britain and the United States in the Middle East, but these have been episodic or country or event-specific, for example the disputes over Buraimi and Suez, most famously.[1] No other work to my knowledge has argued so coherently that the two countries were constantly working against the other and, to take it a step further, that

the rivalry is the primary lens for understanding the politics of the region in the first half of the Cold War.

Lords of the Desert is in many ways a sequel to Barr's previous book, *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle that Shaped the Middle East* (2011), which argued that British-French rivalry in the region was far deeper than previously appreciated. By using the same lens here, Barr provides scholars with a new way to understand both countries' histories in the region and the consequences of their actions today. This story of rivalry, Barr maintains, has been largely suppressed by a common desire in London and Washington to maintain the façade of air tight alliance: "to this day the British government retains over a hundred-meters-worth of files about its ally that it would rather not declassify" (p. 2).

Barr aptly identifies oil as the primary source of this competition and says tension between London and Washington grew after the Second World War in parallel with growing US interest in Middle East oil supplies: "Once the Americans had realized the sheer scale of likely regional oil reserves, the speculative concession acquired by a U.S. company, the Arabian American Oil Company or Aramco, to hunt for oil in Saudi Arabia acquired a new, strategic significance" (p. 3). Indeed,

Saudi oil was a major interest for the Americans. Despite being the world's largest producer of oil, the United States became a net importer in the 1940s as domestic consumption rose dramatically. Meanwhile, Britain, Western Europe, and Japan required plentiful supplies to rebuild their war-torn economies. The British, of course, were the first dominant outside players in Middle East oil, gaining a 47.5 percent share in Iraq and 100 percent share in Iran before the Second World War, while the Americans had only a 23.75 percent share in Iraq and a 100 percent share in Saudi Arabia.[2]

Putting aside oil for the moment, *Lords of the Desert* is superbly written, highly engaging, and yields a trove of new anecdotes and insights from British and American policymakers, diplomats, and spies. Barr's use of the accounts of American spies Kermit Roosevelt and Miles Copeland as well as British spies Kim Philby and Wilfred Thesiger is particularly riveting, and the chapter on Thesiger working on behalf of the Iraq Petroleum Company in Abu Dhabi is page-turning.

Barr's account illuminates how Britain and the United States had completely different visions for the region. Whereas the former sought to build economic unions between Arab states headed by its erstwhile Hashemite clients in Jordan, Syria, and Iraq, the latter backed rival strongmen, most notably in Saudi Arabia. He demonstrates how the British used Lend-Lease to aid oil facilities in Iraq and Iran but not for the California Arabian Standard Oil Company (CASOC) in Saudi Arabia. I also strongly commend his treatment of Egypt in general; throughout the narrative, he yields new perspectives by drawing attention to how the Americans undermined British interests in the latter's most vital client. His treatment of Yemen in the 1960s is similarly insightful.

There are, however, two concerns with how the author treats oil. The first is common to all historians of the commodity: it is difficult to draw clear connections between it and politics. We

know oil-supply security drove the grand strategies of both Britain and the United States, but both powers rarely admitted it. The first time a US president publicly mentioned US interest in oil was Jimmy Carter's 1980 State of the Union address, which came after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian Revolution two years earlier, which prompted him to increase the US commitment of military personnel and resources to defending the Gulf.

Without drawing clear connections between oil and politics, the reader is forced to trust Barr that the leaders, diplomats, and spies he quotes are thinking about the former. For instance, Barr cites British prime minister Harold Macmillan's reluctance to act in Syria in 1957 due to concerns about disruptions of pipelines from Iraq and Saudi Arabia, "unless it precipitates a lasting solution" (p. 302). In this context, it is not clear that Macmillan's quote has any relevance to pipelines. Moreover, the British and American companies both turned to larger seaborne tankers to secure the flow of Middle Eastern oil to Europe, rather than protect pipelines subject to the vagaries of Arab politics.[3] The other argument, which again we do not see the evidence for, is that the United States acted with Britain to thwart Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mosaddeq because the Iranian politician threatened to "sell oil at a 50 percent discount" (p. 194). "Mosaddeq," he says, "might have hung on had he not threatened to flood the market with cheap oil, for the coup would not have happened without American support" (p. 208). Cheap oil, however, was not the problem; the British and Americans were not worried about price, even if the companies were. The concern was nationalization, which might ripple across the region. Mosaddeq, they knew, had a terrible hand to play. He had no outlets through which to sell Iranian oil—the British and American majors controlled the midstream and downstream—nor the technical capacity to pro-

duce oil. The two countries placed an embargo on Iran that laid plain this reality.[4]

We also know that the British wanted the Americans to bring their oil-producing capabilities and diplomatic muscle to the region as early as the 1920s. After first excluding the Americans from Iraq in the 1920 San Remo Agreement, the US Congress passed the Mineral Leasing Act of 1920, denying British companies access to concessions on oil-rich US public lands. By 1921, the British had given the Americans a 23.75 percent share in Iraq.[5] In 1934, the British Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC, today British Petroleum) and the US Gulf Oil, after competing to win the concession outright, became equal partners in the Kuwait Oil Company. Better for everyone if Kuwait could not play the two countries off one another.[6] These omissions are understandable, as they fall before the period under discussion, but there were also cases of deepening cooperation after the Second World War. In 1947, the Royal Dutch/Shell Group agreed to a ten-year contract to buy nearly a quarter of Gulf's Kuwaiti reserves. Then, later that year, the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey (Jersey and today Exxon) and the Standard Oil Company of New York (SOCONY, today Mobil) agreed to buy oil from the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (formerly APOC) for twenty years.[7]

The central thesis of Barr's work is that the Americans undid British power in the region through its actions on oil, specifically in giving in to Saudi demands for higher revenues: "Under pressure from the Saudis from the late 1940s onward, but knowing it could count on its own government's support, Aramco agreed to split its profits fifty-fifty with the Saudi government. Not only did this suddenly increase the money that the Saudis could spend to advance their own regional ambitions—which caused huge political instability—but it also set a precedent that the American company's British rivals refused to follow. That miscalculation triggered a series of

events, starting with Iran's nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company's assets in Iran, which first stripped Britain of that crucial imperial asset and prestige, and left the region's once-great and now-denuded power fighting increasingly desperately to cling on" (p. 6). This argument is not without merit, but begs the question of whether Britain would have hung on by continuing to give Iran such low profits from oil.

The problem, after all, was that there was too much oil on the world market and prices were low in the 1950s and 1960s, which meant frustrated oil monarchs. But Barr only laments the outcome of the Mosaddeq episode and glosses over the results, saying only: "Anglo-Iranian was joined by five American companies in a new consortium, which left the British company with a 40 percent stake. To avoid upsetting the arrangement in Saudi Arabia, the consortium split the profits with the Iranians fifty-fifty" (p. 208). Shell, he fails to mention, was given a 14 percent share, the French *La Compagnie Française des Pétroles* (today Total) 6 percent, and the American members of Aramco another 40 percent. The Iranian episode, it seems, reinforced the British and American partnership in oil, even if it poisoned relations with Iran in the future.[8] Moreover, could we not argue that fifty-fifty ensconced the major oil companies in the Middle East for over two decades thereafter by placating demands for more revenue in both Saudi Arabia and Iran, the two most important holdings?[9]

My oil-related critiques should not dissuade potential readers from Barr's narrative, which will be especially interesting to specialists or those already with a working knowledge of the Middle East from the early 1940s to early 1970s. Yet I would caution that the book is not an ideal starting point for nonspecialists, as his thesis should be considered alongside the other forces that shaped the region, including the Cold War, the Arab-Israeli conflict, nation-state formation, and pan-Arab nationalism.[10]

Barr's book is a good reminder that nations do not have friends, only common interests. In pursuit of these, they disagree, often vehemently and personally, but these differences rarely undermine grand strategy. Britain could never have maintained its holdings in the Middle East as long as it did without the Americans; likewise, the Americans would never have gained theirs without the trailblazing of the British. The rivalry between the two powers was still fought on the same side.

Notes

[1]. Nathan J. Citino, *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

[2]. Benjamin Shwadran, *The Middle East, Oil and the Great Powers* (New York: J. Wiley, 1973).

[3]. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960, Near East Region, Iraq, Iran, Arabian Peninsula* 12, no. 19 (June 30, 1958).

[4]. Mary Ann Heiss, *Empire and Nationhood: The United States, Great Britain, and Iranian Oil, 1950-1954* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

[5]. Michael Hogan, *Informal Entente: The Private Structure of Cooperation in Anglo-American Economic Diplomacy, 1918-1928* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1977).

[6]. Daniel Yergin, *The Prize* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 275-80.

[7]. Yergin, *The Prize*, 401-04.

[8]. Mostafa Elm, *Oil, Power, and Principle: Iran's Oil Nationalization and Its Aftermath* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 310-31

[9]. George Philip, *The Political Economy of International Oil* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 103-20.

[10]. Rashid Khalidi, *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009), for example.

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