

# Naval War College Review

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Volume 2  
Number 2 February

Article 4

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1949

## The Near East

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### Recommended Citation

Kohn, Hans (1949) "The Near East," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 2 : No. 2 , Article 4.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol2/iss2/4>

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## **THE NEAR EAST**

A lecture delivered by  
*Professor Hans Kohn*  
at the Naval War College  
November 5, 1948

As you know from my lecture on Russia, I am convinced that we cannot approach any problem today except by seeing it in its historical perspective. It was exactly one hundred fifty years ago that the Near or Middle Eastern question was opened up for Western Europe. For we may say that before 1798 the Near and Middle East entered the attention of Europe or the Western world little, if at all. The Mediterranean, the Middle East, which had been the center of world politics and the center of world civilization until about 1450 of our era, disappeared entirely from our sight after that. It may be said that Columbus went to discover America, (which as you know he never intended to do) because of the very fact that the Mediterranean had been closed, the Near East had been obliterated, and with the Near East the two great Asiatic trade routes, the two trade routes from Europe to the Far East, one leading through Alexandria and the Red Sea, the second through Antioch and the Persian Gulf. These two trade routes, from antiquity until 1400 had been the most important commercial routes of history, those on which depended the importance of Italy. Both in antiquity and in the middle ages, the vitality and leadership of Italy, of Rome and later of Venice and Genoa, and the phenomenon of the Renaissance would have been impossible without Italy's geographic strategic position in relation to these two trade routes. In the 15th century the victory of the Turks closed these trade routes to Western mankind. With that

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Professor Kohn is Professor of History at Smith College. His lecture on "Russia" appeared in a previous issue of the "Information Service."

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moment began the decay of Italy, the decay of the Mediterranean and the rise of the Atlantic powers.

It was one hundred fifty years ago that the strategic genius of Napoleon reopened the Middle East and discovered what is in my mind the most important fact in the world situation today, namely: that the Middle East is the strategic hub of the Old World. Whoever controls the Middle East undoubtedly controls the Old World. General Bonaparte who, as you all know, was a Mediterranean, born in Corsica, was keenly aware of it. He was never a Frenchman by geographic loyalty; his only real loyalty belonged to the Mediterranean. He dreamt, as in our own time his small imitator Mussolini did, of the resurrection of the Mediterranean empire, not anymore for its own sake but as a key for the control of the world. In 1798, Bonaparte had the immensely daring conception, a conception similar to that of Alexander the Great, to land an expeditionary force in Egypt and to push on from Egypt through Syria, Iraq and Iran into India. He was fascinated by the idea which, since then, all world conquerors have had, whether it was Hitler, Mussolini or Stalin, to destroy the British Empire as the only bulwark standing between, on the one hand, the aspiration to world domination, and on the other hand, the world of liberty. He wished to deal the British Empire a deadly blow by going across the ancient land route to India. You know he pushed on from Egypt to Palestine and Haifa, as we call it today, and it was only because of the pestilence in camp and because of certain news coming from France that he had to call off his venture and return to France. From this moment two things remained. One is what I would call "the regeneration of Islam." Napoleon's administration in Egypt, though very short-lived, left deep traces. There was a man of energy, ruthlessness, strength. His name was Mohamed Ali, a simple soldier in the Turkish Army, an Albanian by birth. By his intelligence, and by his unscrupulous ruthlessness he made

himself governor or pasha of Egypt, then a Turkish province. As pasha he learned enough from French influence to wish to modernize Egypt, to create a modern army, even to begin a modern navy, to introduce modern economy. Islam was awakened from hundreds of years of lethargy, apathy and sleep. The present king of Egypt, Farouk is a descendant of the Mohamed Ali whom I have just mentioned.

But the second, and more important consideration for us is that Napoleon drew attention to the long forgotten trade routes and the strategic position of the Middle East and drew the attention of the British there, and from that moment on it has been British policy to make sure that the Middle East does not fall into the hands of any great military power and that the Middle East will be kept open. From 1798 until today, all British foreign policy and all British strategy has been dominated by the one conviction not to allow any great military power to establish itself in the Middle East. Today we have inherited the British task both politically and strategically. It is, in my opinion, our foremost consideration not to allow any great military power to claim exclusive control of the Middle East, because whoever holds the Middle East, holds Africa, Asia and Europe. This has been shown very clearly in the two wars which have been fought, since Napoleon, for world control.

The two wars fought for world control, World War I, and World War II, both had one of the decisive battlefields in the Near East. It was much less noticed in the United States, yet in World War I the Germans made a very determined effort, with the help of the Turks, to capture the Suez Canal and to drive the British out of the Middle East. At that time the attempt was made from the east, with the help of Turkey, to the Suez Canal. The British defeated the attempt and, in a counter-attack, occupied Jerusalem and later drove up to Syria. There is one im-

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portant point in this struggle in World War I against Germany and Turkey: the British tried to enlist the cooperation of the Arabs. The Turks were then the enemies of Britain and allied with Germany. The only people who could be organized against the Turks were the Arabs. The Arabs were the first great force in Islam, the first great conquering race of the Mohammedan religion. They had been obscured and dominated by the Turks, and the British now tried to reawaken their national pride, the memory of the centuries of Arab greatness. They were quite successfully supported in that indirectly by Americans since the most important educational institutions in the Arab world were the American institutions, especially the American University of Beirut in Lebanon, the greatest educational institution in the Near East. The American missionaries there tried to arouse an Arab awakening which had no connection with that provoked by the British. The American one had been more on the intellectual side, educational; the British one more on the military, political side. The British appealed above all to the Arab ruler, to the Arab sheik in Mecca, in the capital of Islam, in the foremost city of Mohammedan tradition, where a descendant of Mohammed himself, by the name of Hussein Ibn Ali was then the leading member of the aristocracy, or as the Arabs called it, the Sharif of Mecca. His son is Abdullah, King of Trans-Jordan at present, and from that fact we can understand both the long lasting British ties with Abdullah of Trans-Jordan and Abdullah's ambition to play a great role in the Arabic or Mohammedan world—for Abdullah is the only surviving son of Hussein of Mecca. It was a romantic Englishman, one of the strange figures with which the otherwise generally "dull" British stock is quite rich, this rather strange exotic figure, T. E. Lawrence, who went out to Arabia and started what he described as the "revolt in the desert." The British succeeded, with the help of the Arabs in defeating the Turks and the German attempt to dominate the Middle East.

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In World War II the Middle East was again a decisive battlefield. You gentlemen will remember as much as I do the fateful month of June 1940 when the German armies had triumphed all over Europe; when Hitler and Stalin were close friends and allies, when France lay crushed and when Italy had joined the war on the side of Germany to be in for the kill of the French and British empires; when Marshal Petain, certainly a soldier of some knowledge, expected that within three weeks Britain would fall. At that moment the question was for me, who knew the Middle East very well, not what would happen in the British Isles but what would happen in the Middle East, because if the Hitler-Mussolini combination had taken hold of the Middle East, then there was no doubt with me that Asia was lost to Hitler and the Japanese. Lost, I am entirely convinced, irrevocably for any foreseeable future. At that moment Mussolini entered the war, and at that time we did not know, though some of us suspected, that the famous Fascist army, navy, and air force did not exist really. We all were impressed by Mussolini. You remember his picture in the papers then, with open mouth, his jaw forward, declaring that "In the next war, Italian bayonets will decide the war and Italian airplanes will blacken the skies." It was in 1938 that he declared that to the Italian senate. You may remember that the air force impressed us when Balbo flew over with his fliers to Chicago, so much so that I think even today an avenue in Chicago is called Avenue Balbo. In any case, it impressed us tremendously. And now in June 1940 the British had 30,000 men along the Suez canal with about 500 second rate planes. The 30,000 men were mostly imperial colonial troops, Australians, with some Negroes from Africa, and others. Mussolini had 150,000 men of the best soldiers in Eritrea and the same number under the Duke of Aosta in Ethiopia. I was afraid then that the superior Italian air force and the two armies, could move in a pin-

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cer movement on Egypt and the Suez canal, liquidate the British situation there, and establish an impregnable situation for the Axis from Morocco to China. If that had happened, our landing in Africa would not have succeeded.

It was because of the unique luck and the courage of the British that the Italians, and later Rommel, were defeated. I am entirely convinced that, should a next war come, and I have good reasons to believe that it will not come if the West becomes really united and prepared, that the decisive spot will again be the Middle East. That is the reason why we must make sure, and are making sure I think successfully, that the Middle East does not fall into Russian hands. The Russians have tried to gain control of the Middle East since the days of Catherine the II, who conquered the Crimea, the North Shore of the Black Sea. Catherine hated her son, the future Czar Paul, but loved her grandchildren. *She* selected their names, not Paul, and she named her oldest grandchild Alexander, in memory of Alexander the Great who conquered Asia, and named her second son Constantine in memory of Constantine the First, who established Constantinople, Byzantium, as the seat of the world empire. From the days of Catherine II to the days of Stalin, the Middle East has been the prime ambition of the Russians. The British never tried to occupy or rule the Middle East. Primarily they wished to exclude Russia and Napoleon and the Germans. Our policy is the same. We are interested in excluding Russia, and so far we have done well. I can assure you from a close knowledge of the Middle East, where I lived for eight years, and from a study of the situation in the Middle East, that we have succeeded beyond anybody's expectations, with relatively small cost so far, in averting an imminent threat to the Middle East which two years ago seemed unavertable.

If we could achieve in China what we have done in the

Middle East, I think we could begin to feel much more secure than we do now.

Two years ago Greece was threatened from Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. Greece is important for us because the Greeks are the only sea-faring people in the Near and Middle East. Neither the Russians nor the Turks nor the Arabs nor the Persians are a sea-faring people. The Greeks are, by their history and by their whole geography. Their islands are strategic islands and Greece is destined to be the key to further Russian penetration. East of Greece is Turkey and two years ago the Russians put forward strong demands for a large part of Eastern Anatolia. There is a claim, which is not unfounded, that centuries ago Armenians lived there. But you can't turn the wheel of history back centuries, though many nationalists are trying it. Three Soviet professors proved to their own satisfaction and that of Mr. Stalin that northern Turkey, on the shore of the Black Sea, had once been Georgian territory that should be annexed to Soviet Georgia. Turkey would thus lose all Kurdistan, these commanding heights from which the road to the Persian Gulf lies open. Secondly the Russians claimed then the right to put their bases into the Dardanelles, which would have practically meant domination of Istanbul or Constantinople and of Turkey. The third important thing is that, two years ago a Soviet puppet government, backed by Soviet troops, was established in Iran, in Azerbaijan. This government was a threat to Turkey and to the Persian Gulf. That was the situation two years ago, and everybody was convinced that if Russian armed columns break through to the Persian Gulf, that means to our oil fields there, nothing could stop them.

Now two years have gone by. There is no actual threat whatsoever at present to Greece or Turkey or to Iran. The Soviet government in Azerbaijan has been liquidated. All Russian troops are out of Iran. No new demands for Turkish territory are voiced



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although the situation in Greece is rotten and will remain rotten, for the very simple reason that the Greek nation has never yet learned to work together without being at the brink of a civil war. In spite of that, no Russian or Yugoslav or Bulgarian soldier has transgressed into Greece; on the other hand the front of Stalin on the frontiers of Greece has been broken. Yugoslavia is today no longer an entirely dependable satellite of Russia, an astonishing change. Two years ago Greece was Russia's; today Stalin cannot be very certain of Tito's Yugoslavia. So I would say that, so far as I can see, the situation in the Middle East, with rather little expenditure, has been immensely strengthened.

That is important, not only for strategic reasons, but also for the oil. You all know about the British oil which exists in southwestern Persia. The concession in northern Iraq is one half British, one fourth American and one fourth French. By far the most important concession of all, those in Saudi Arabia, are entirely American. This oil is needed for three purposes. One is for the economic recovery of Europe under the Marshall plan. We can't send oil from the U. S. The Europeans have no oil; theirs comes from the Middle East. The Russians don't wish Europe to recover. They would like to cut up the Middle Eastern oil. Second, the British navy depends upon the Middle Eastern oil and the British navy is as much our interest as our navy is. And third, even our navy depends on Middle Eastern oil.

Now some people here in the United States tell you "Why should we worry about the profits of the Standard Oil Company?" I must tell you that they are right. We should not worry about the profits of the Standard Oil Company. But the whole question thus put, is pure demagoguery. We need the oil from the Middle East, irrespective of any profit or not, for our strategic survival. If people come and tell you that the State Department is following a certain policy in the Middle East because it is

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subservient to the oil interests, that is the barest nonsense! We must hold the Middle East for our survival—strategically, and because we need the oil, not for the profits for the Standard Oil Company. Our vital national interests are involved there.

That is one point, and the second point is that we cannot hold these regions without close cooperation with the native peoples. That is what the British learned. The British did not know it fifty years ago; the British learned that they cannot rely on India or Pakistan, on Arabia or Turkey, without the sympathy and cooperation of the native populations. These native populations, the Turk, Arab, Iranian or Persian, are today in a state of national awakening, of the awakening of political consciousness, in a feeling of immense pride which can be very easily hurt. They are not like the British or ourselves, so secure that they would not mind pin-pricks or anything like that. They are immensely jealous of their national position. And I am entirely convinced that we cannot hold these regions without the sympathy of the native populations on our side. The British enlisted the sympathy of the Arabs in World War II, especially of the two most important Arab rulers. One was Ibn Saud, the king of Saudi Arabia, a very strong personality, a man of unusual power as you probably know. King Ibn Saud is a man of about sixty-eight just now. King Ibn Saud began his life as a small sheikh. He was a small potentate leading fanatical Mohammedans called the Wahhabis. It was through their fanaticism and his genius of leadership that he conquered the whole of Arabia. For the first time since Mohammed, he united the whole of Arabia and brought peace and order there. Ibn Saud is undoubtedly a person of unusual strength, a commanding personality, who created in the desert, in the immense poverty of the nomadic tribes what was, for the first time, a progressive orderly government. The second man is King Abdullah of Trans-Jordan, the only

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surviving son of Hussein of Mecca. The British understood that they had to enlist the friendship of these two men, and it was due to their friendship that in World War II, in the most tragic situation in the Middle East, the Arabs did not cut the British communications. Though the Arab could have never waged open war, they could have been very damaging if they wanted to, but they stood loyally with Britain. Britain cannot forget that. Britain knows that her security and by her security, our security, depends on establishing friendship with the Arabs and with the Turks.

And now in the last few words I wish to talk about the Turks because there is nothing more astonishing and nothing more indicative of the future of the Middle East than the transformation of Turkey. Some of you may have been to Turkey before World War I. Some American ships sailing there remember the entirely oriental, backward, medieval country then ruled by a Sultan, a ruler who was at the same time the spiritual head of the state. Turkey was entirely ruled by Mohammedan medieval law. The women had to go veiled; polygamy existed; there was no modern social life whatsoever. After World War I, Turkey under a great military leader Mustafa Kemal (or as he was called later Kemal Ataturk) drove out the invading Greeks, and for the first time in one hundred fifty years Turkey became entirely independent from the intrigues and controls of foreign powers. Mustafa Kemal now began what I regard as the most successful process of modernization done anywhere in Asia. Much more successful than not only the other Asiatic peoples but also than the Communists, because Mustafa Kemal did it without any superfluous cruelty, without barbarizing the land. He tried to establish there something like a modern European nation and he has succeeded to an astonishing degree. Greece today is torn by internal dissension, Greece is not a nation. Persia is a backward country, certainly not a nation, and the Russians could cut through Persia

like a knife cuts through butter. Turkey is different; Turkey is an organic, integrated nation since Mustafa Kemal. It would be a tremendous task for the Russians to conquer Turkey, and they know it very well. The "secularization" of Turkey took her away from her ancient Mohammedan medieval order to be modernized and to be equipped as a modern nation. Think only of the position of the women; there is no polygamy in Turkey anymore. In Turkey today modern European law absolutely prevails. Women are no longer veiled; women can participate fully in all social and political life, a tremendous change in a few years time. I am convinced that in that direction all the Middle Eastern people will go. It will take much longer with the Arabs, or with the Persians. The Arabs are today disunited; still not a modern nation like the Turks but they are on the way to it and it is immensely important, as the British have understood, to help this development forward instead of trying to hinder it.

I am optimistic about the Middle East. Our position in the Middle East, or the British one, which is for all practical purposes one and the same, is strategically sound and can be and will be, in my opinion, politically sound, because we need the Middle East and ultimately the Middle East needs us, needs us not only for protection against Russia. The Middle East cannot enter by its own strength upon a sound policy of economic and social modernization—only American and British capital and American and British educational and technical help can provide the means. One hundred fifty years ago the Middle East was opened up. Since then it has formed a bridge between Europe, Asia and Africa. I'm convinced it is a strong bridge, one which can easily become a very important factor in the defense system of Western civilization and world peace.