

Operation Torch, Algiers 1942, and the Making of U.S. Middle East Policy

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](#), [Eliot Cohen \(/experts/eliot-cohen\)](#)

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Brief Analysis

On the seventy-fifth anniversary of American troops landing in North Africa, two scholars debate Operation Torch's lasting influence on U.S. policy in the region.

On November 7, Robert Satloff and Eliot Cohen addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Satloff is the Institute's executive director. Cohen is the Robert E. Osgood Professor at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies and director of its Philip Merrill Center for Strategic Studies. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

ROBERT SATLOFF

American foreign policy in the Middle East has been profoundly shaped by decisions made during and immediately following the Second World War. In 1945, President Roosevelt met with King Abdulaziz, founder of Saudi Arabia, and promised U.S. security assurance in exchange for the free flow of energy resources. In 1948, President Truman recognized the state of Israel, positioning the United States in the center of the Arab-Israel issue ever since. However, less well-known but equally significant was the impact of the U.S.-led invasion of North Africa in 1942 -- Operation Torch -- on future U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

On November 8, 1942, American and British forces invaded Vichy French-controlled North Africa in the first U.S.-led offensive operation in the European theatre. Although it was a hugely consequential military operation, Torch remains largely forgotten, primarily because our adversaries, the French, would soon become allies and because the operation had no lasting military impact on the region. Nevertheless, Torch had profound political influence on U.S. Middle East policy, in two respects.

First, U.S. leaders decided to discard their original plan of replacing local Vichy governors with nationalist but anti-fascist leaders, instead opting for a political arrangement with the Vichyites in exchange for unfettered access across North Africa. This choice laid the groundwork for an instrumentalist policy in the region whereby the United States preferred strategic bargains with local strongmen over the political and economic development of local peoples. That has essentially been the basis of U.S. Middle East policy ever since.

Second, in the immediate wake of Torch, U.S. political, diplomatic, and military leaders came face-to-face for the first time in the war with practical decisions about governing territory where Jews were subject to fascist persecution and even death. Specifically, U.S. leaders had to address the status of the hundreds of Jewish partisans who risked their lives to ease the Allied entry into Algiers; of the thousands of Jews in Vichy concentration camps; and of the tens of thousands of Algerian Jews who had been rendered stateless and with reduced civil rights by the imposition of Vichy laws.

Essentially, the decision adopted by the U.S. occupation forces was to see a zero-sum game between Jews and Arabs and not to interfere to assist the Jews, i.e., not to aid Jews in distress or restore Jewish rights even if such acts did not come at the expense of Arab rights or sensibilities. This zero-sum mindset -- which had no analytical basis -- was a pillar of U.S. policy for decades and likely exacerbated the complex relationship between Muslims and Jews, contributing to the emptying-out of Jewish populations and heritage from Arab countries, even those located far from the Palestine conflict.

ELIOT COHEN

While Dr. Satloff's research deserves applause for revealing a compelling historical episode, his interpretation of the record can be challenged in two respects. First, it is unlikely that Operation Torch was so influential in determining the region's future and U.S. foreign policy. History is a succession of events, none of which holds complete determinative power. It is a reductionist argument to suggest that decisions made during Torch had as much influence as is suggested.

Second, it is important to recognize that the brutally realistic and practical decisions made in the wake of Torch, the sort of decisions that look immoral in retrospect, were not uncommon during the war. The chief goal, one must recall, was to win the war -- everything else was secondary. So, in the Pacific theater for example, U.S. officials were willing to overlook the terrible atrocities of Japanese forces and instead transform the defeated Japanese military into an occupation force in order to maintain order in certain areas. In Germany, of course, de-Nazification policies were abandoned in order to allow local German officials to administer the country, often regardless of their Nazi past. The "Darlan Deal" with the local Vichy governor may have been an unpalatable expedient, but it was not unusual in the broader context of the war.

As for indifference to the plight of North African Jews, it is important to underscore how pervasive and commonplace anti-Semitism was in the U.S. armed forces, including at its highest levels. In this context, it is no surprise that U.S. military leaders were indifferent to the travails of Jewish communities in North Africa, preferring to appeal to the sensibilities of the much larger Arab population.

While Operation Torch was undoubtedly a significant milestone, the development of subsequent U.S. policy in the Middle East can be more comprehensively explained by America's pursuit of its interest in securing energy

resources, preventing the spread of communism, and protecting Israel.

This summary was prepared by Samuel Northrup. ❖

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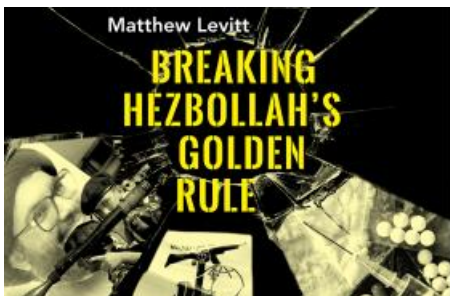
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