

# Operation Torch and the Birth of American Middle East Policy, 75 Years On

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Articles & Testimony

**In a radical rethinking of the origins of U.S. Middle East policy, Robert Satloff suggests that two key ideas guiding Washington's actions in the region for the past three-quarters of a century were born in the bargain U.S. leaders made with Vichy French officers after Allied troops landed in North Africa during World War II.**

## "THE JEWS WILL HAVE TO WAIT"

**O**n November 8, 1942, a full year-and-a-half before the Allies invaded Normandy, about 110,000 American and British troops invaded North Africa. They had set out in more than 850 ships from U.S. and British ports, sailed for up to 4,500 miles through treacherous Atlantic waters teeming with Nazi U-boats, and, once at their destination, put ashore in three landing zones spread across more than 900 miles of coastline, from south of Casablanca to east of Algiers.

This was Operation Torch, America's first offensive operation in the European theater of war and, until Operation Overlord's Normandy landings, the greatest amphibious attack in history. Today, it is all but forgotten. And yet, aside from rivaling Overlord in terms of its enormity, complexity, and peril, Torch was also vastly consequential, for it helped to determine the future course and ultimately successful conclusion of the war. If that weren't significant enough, Torch also deserves to be remembered for the critical role it played in setting the terms of America's long-term relationship with the rulers and peoples of the Middle East.

Among those peoples not least are the Jews, whose role in this story is central in more ways than one.

## I. THE FORGOTTEN BATTLE OF WORLD WAR II

**B**oth politically and militarily, Torch was a huge gamble. Pressured to open a second front to relieve the strain of Hitler's push into the Soviet Union, President Franklin D. Roosevelt found himself caught between, on the one hand, the advice of his generals who urged an early and massive invasion of Nazi-held France and, on the other hand, the post-Dunkirk caution of Winston Churchill, who feared that his beleaguered nation was just one defeat away from collapse.

Siding with his British ally, FDR endorsed Churchill's alternative idea: a bold plan to circumvent continental Europe and begin the long march to Berlin by means of an invasion of the North African empire that was then held by Germany's collaborators, the Vichy French.

Through courage, cunning, and luck, the Torch invasion -- led, like the Normandy invasion nineteen months later, by General Dwight D. Eisenhower, then in his first battlefield command -- somehow achieved strategic surprise. Germans monitoring the Anglo-American armada were tricked into thinking the bulk of it was headed to Malta, and the invaders were ultimately able to overwhelm French defenses in just three days.

Still, it was no walk on the beach. Eleven-hundred allied troops were killed in the fighting, almost half as many as those who had died at Pearl Harbor and a quarter as many as those who would fall in the "other D-Day" attack in Normandy. But in the end, thanks to their sacrifice, American and British troops had a foothold on the southern shore of the Mediterranean, which they then expanded eastward into Tunisia, eventually crossing from there into Italy and proceeding north through what Churchill famously described as "the soft underbelly" of Europe.

Why, then, has Torch been the virtually unknown outlier of American wartime victories? In 1994, President Bill Clinton led a massive U.S. delegation to France to mark the 50th anniversary of the Normandy landings; two years earlier, Torch's golden anniversary merited neither a congressional resolution nor even a statement from President George H.W. Bush, the decorated World War II veteran then in the White House. This year, in a first-ever commemoration, Torch will be marked by a ceremony at the World War II memorial in Washington; after 75 years, there will be few Torch veterans left to appreciate the moment.

If officialdom has been indifferent to Torch, it has fared no better in popular culture. True, the most beloved film to emerge from the entire war may be the story of an American antihero's lonely fight for love and liberty in Vichy-held Casablanca, but not a single major motion picture has chronicled Torch's military exploits. (*Candlelight in Algeria*, starring James Mason as a pre-invasion British spy in Algiers, comes closest.) Richard Burton and Rock Hudson made British victories at Tobruk and El Alamein famous, but America's film archive has nothing equivalent to show for Torch's landings in Safi, Oran, or Sidi Ferruch -- to say nothing of a North African version of *Saving Private Ryan*. Whatever the reason for this relegation of America's first military encounter with an Arab land since the Barbary wars to a footnote in American popular memory, it is an afterthought that books like Rick Atkinson's 2002 *An Army at Dawn* have only begun to repair.

Torch deserves a more hallowed spot in our memory, and not only for the fact that it was a critical turning point in the war. Even less known, less recognized, and less appreciated is the influence Torch had on another story that, as I suggested at the outset, still resonates loudly today: namely, the making of American policy in the Middle East.

## **II. THE FORMING OF MODERN MIDDLE EAST POLICY**

**W**hen was modern U.S. Middle East policy formed? Two early landmark events may spring to mind.

The first was President Roosevelt's March 1945 meeting with King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, the founder of Saudi Arabia. Their conversation aboard the *USS Quincy*, then cruising in Egypt's Great Bitter Lake, laid the groundwork for the strategic bargain -- energy in exchange for security -- that for the past seven decades has been at the core of U.S. relations with the proprietors of the world's largest reservoir of oil.

The second was the May 1948 decision by another president, Harry Truman, to disregard the advice of George Marshall, a great war hero turned secretary of state, and extend U.S. diplomatic recognition to the newborn state of Israel. As the first country to do so, America, thanks to Truman, would forever be linked to the Zionist enterprise -- and to the broader dispute between Israel and the Arabs.

To be sure, other, later moments also deserve notice in this connection. Truman's vow to protect Turkey and Greece from Soviet expansion in 1947-1949 eventually put much of the Middle East under America's cold-war umbrella; Henry Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy in 1973-74 inaugurated America's focus on a "peace process" that has consumed presidential attention ever since then; George H.W. Bush's decision to lead an international coalition to reverse Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait triggered America's now quarter-century entanglement in Iraq. Still, to a great extent, the modern history of U.S. policy in the Middle East is a chronicle of presidential efforts to mitigate the conflicts and contradictions in America's relations with two very different allies -- Saudi Arabia and Israel -- and to find the magic balance between commitments made separately to Arabs and to Israelis.

So where does Torch fit into this history? A strong argument can be made that Torch gave birth to it, two-and-a-half years before FDR's visit with Ibn Saud and more than five years before Truman recognized Israel.

This is not because Torch had a lasting military impact on the region. It didn't. Other than a handful of temporary cold-war installations in Morocco, all of them shut down by the early 1960s, America's victory in North Africa did not lead to the establishment of naval bases, airfields, or long-term deployments. Two forgettable historical markers, one outside Casablanca and another near the Roman ruins of Cherchell, Algeria, constitute the sole residual evidence of the invasion. Nor does any cemetery serve as a final resting place for the American soldiers, sailors, and airmen who fell in either Morocco or Algeria; all of the bodies were either sent home or interred at a single battlefield gravesite in Tunisia.

Rather, Torch's lasting impact was political. In the hours immediately after the first U.S. troops came ashore outside Algiers, the capital of France's North African empire, two key decisions were made that would exercise a profound impact both on the war and on America's long-term role in the Middle East.

The first decision was to fight Vichy but then ultimately to embrace both Vichy's local leaders and key aspects of their policy. The origin of this story long predates Torch.

In June 1940, following France's battlefield collapse and its subsequent armistice with Nazi Germany, Marshal Philippe Petain set up a rump French state in the spa town of Vichy. Soon thereafter, FDR and Churchill became attracted to the idea of finding some Frenchman in uniform who could break the hold on the French officer corps of Petain, the elderly hero of Verdun, and "turn" the French military from collaborating with the Nazis to partnering again with the Allies.

Finding the right person was not easy. Charles de Gaulle, the haughty, charismatic general who led the Free French partisans from his London redoubt, was a non-starter, disparaged by many French officers still in service as an *arriviste* who had flouted the chain of command and fled the field of battle. (Later he would become positively reviled for giving cover to the British attack on the French fleet harbored at the Algerian port of Mers el-Kebir and for leading the failed French-on-French attack on Dakar.)

Over the next two years, Allied diplomats, officers, and spies, led by Robert Murphy, Roosevelt's personal emissary in North Africa, searched in vain for a candidate. One after another, they proved either too old, too timorous, or too deeply in the thrall of the Petain mystique. Eventually, the Allies settled on General Henri Giraud, a high-ranking army commander whose claim to fame was that he had twice, once in each world war, escaped from German prisoner-of-war camps. Because he was so widely hailed as an irrepressible French patriot and resourceful hero, a reluctant Petain had given him sanctuary.

As Torch evolved, the Allies planned to fly Giraud to Algiers, where his onetime deputy and loyal supporter General Charles Mast was serving as chief of staff of French troops, and to install him as commander of French forces in North Africa. But the self-aggrandizing Giraud had other ideas. He spent the anxious hours of the Torch landings on Gibraltar arguing with Eisenhower over his title and prerogatives. In essence, Giraud demanded that he be appointed commander of *all* Allied forces. With landing ships unloading tens of thousands of U.S. and British troops across the North African coast, being cooped up with Giraud in an underground bunker bickering over rank was, Ike would recall, "one of my most distressing interviews of the war."

By the next morning Giraud had rethought, but by then it was too late. Murphy, on the brink of having failed in the main mission entrusted to him by Roosevelt -- to prevent Vichy French commanders from ordering their men to fire on the troops coming ashore -- had found someone to save the day. By happenstance, Admiral Jean-Francois Darlan, Petain's own deputy and appointed heir, was in Algiers. Although a willing collaborator with the Germans, he was first and foremost an opportunist who had quickly recognized that the invasion might shift the balance of power in North Africa. He therefore proposed a deal: in exchange for recognition of his status as French high commissioner for North and West Africa and commander of all French land, sea, and air forces in the region, he would guarantee both a cessation of the already ongoing hostilities and unfettered Allied access through Morocco and Algeria to engage the Germans in Tunisia.

Murphy and Major General Mark Clark, Ike's deputy, accepted the deal, and the French defenders ultimately stood down. But what did this mean? With the explicit endorsement of American forces, fascist Vichyites would now retain power and authority in the region. To the extent that among Torch's original goals had been the *liberation* of North Africa, it had instead become, within hours of the landing, a narrow operation to ease the transit of Allied troops through North Africa.

The "Darlan Deal," as it was immediately dubbed by American editorialists, prompted a howl of protest. With the Democrats having suffered a drubbing in mid-term elections just five days before Torch, Roosevelt was forced to cauterize an additional political wound that was being portrayed as a tawdry bargain with one of Hitler's favorite Frenchmen. He duly issued a statement describing the arrangement as no more than a "temporary expedient" -- repeating the word "temporary" six times in nineteen sentences.

In the end, there was nothing temporary about it. On one level, the problem may have seemed magically to resolve itself when a young French monarchist assassinated Darlan six weeks later. But on a deeper level, the Americans had by then grown accustomed to working with a compliant partner who both delivered the promised strategic benefits and freed them of the need to get involved in messy local politics. When Giraud succeeded Darlan, finally achieving the status and recognition Eisenhower had offered him on Gibraltar, he slid easily into the same arrangement with the Americans: in essence, "You may pass through my lands but don't bother us along the way." A key aspect of American Middle East policy was thus born.

Torch had presented the Allies with their first opportunity to apply the principles of the 1941 Atlantic Charter, issued by the U.S. and Great Britain, to lands freed from Axis control. Those principles -- the core precepts of which FDR, in a pre-Torch message to the people of North Africa, had famously described as a "great jihad of freedom" -- included self-government and the freedom from want or fear: gifts later imparted with bountiful generosity to postwar Europe. But when the time came to apply them in liberated Arab lands, even through the very incremental step of transferring power from one set of French colonial officers to another, Washington balked and ultimately punted.

Of course, some might contend that, in contrast to Europe, these Arab lands were (and perhaps still are) unfertile soil for such ideas. All we can be certain of, however, is that when the U.S. was the uncontested power in Algiers and across North Africa, it decided not to put this question to the test. Instead, Torch became the first chapter in an instrumentalist strategy toward Arab lands -- prioritizing partnerships with friendly strongmen over the political and

economic development of their peoples -- that by and large has governed America's relationship with the region ever since.

### III. "THE JEWISH QUESTION" IN NORTH AFRICA

The second Torch decision pregnant with implications for the future revolved around the fact that immediately upon landing on the North African coast, American commanders came face to face with what in European circumstances was dubbed "the Jewish question."

By November 1942, many details of the Holocaust, as it would later be named, were already well known. During that same month, the State Department publicly confirmed reports of Nazi plans to annihilate the Jews of Europe. Just six weeks after Torch, twelve Allied governments issued a joint statement vowing retribution against those responsible for the extermination of Jews.

Though much less dire, the situation in North Africa was also known, certainly in the upper reaches of the U.S. government. A steady stream of diplomatic reports and journalistic accounts detailed the application of Vichy laws that had stripped Algerian Jews of French citizenship and, across all French-controlled territories, denied Jews the rights to live, work, and study freely.

More ominously, thousands of Jews had been dispatched to what the French themselves called "concentration" or "punishment" camps. The deportees ranged from Jewish soldiers who had been serving honorably in the Foreign Legion when Vichy took power, to Jewish refugees from Central or Eastern Europe driven by fear of the coming Nazi onslaught to seek refuge in France or its North African possessions. The camps, often deep in the Sahara, were remote sites of arduous forced labor where torture was common and death by hunger, thirst, exposure, and mistreatment a daily occurrence.

Until Torch, the misfortune facing the Jews in lands under fascist domination was, for the Roosevelt administration, a faraway problem, distressful to contemplate but distant from the battle front. Torch changed that equation. For the first time during the war, Torch's success put American troops in direct control of territory in which Jews faced government-ordained and -implemented persecution and possible death.

This reality made "the Jewish question" a pressing issue. Moreover, thanks to one remarkable but little-recognized fact, it became an immediate issue as well.

In the early morning hours of November 8, 1942, as U.S. and British forces waited anxiously on troop ships spread across the North African coast, 377 young men, led by a twenty-year-old medical student named Jose Aboulker, had fanned out across Algeria's capital city of Algiers to execute a daring mission that would help determine the fate of Torch.

Aboulker and other resistance leaders had established clandestine contact with the Americans, who promised to supply them with machine guns, grenades, and other weapons. Those promises had gone unfulfilled; but the conspirators were undeterred. Armed only with knives, pistols, and antiquated 19th-century rifles, they aimed at nothing less than to take over the city, arrest the local Vichy generals, admirals, and prefects in their beds, cut communications with the outside world, and immobilize thousands of French soldiers in their barracks.

Astonishingly, through gumption, guile, and guts, these ragtag volunteers succeeded. By 2:00 a.m. on the morning of the invasion, Algeria's capital was theirs. No less astonishingly, they then proceeded to hold it for an additional five critical hours, making it far easier for Allied troops to enter Algiers than had proved the case in the landing zones of Casablanca and Oran.

If mainstream histories of Torch mention this episode at all, they describe it briefly as but one in a line of heroic tales of French partisans. The official U.S. Army account of American military engagement in North Africa, for example,

records that "Algiers came under control of the irregulars of the French resistance at the time the landings began."

But that account and virtually all others miss a critical aspect of the story: not only Aboulker himself but fully 315 of those 377 resistance fighters in Algiers were Jews, motivated to fight precisely because, as Jews, they had been denied their rights as Frenchmen by Vichy France. At its core, then, theirs was a Jewish resistance movement.

Moreover, unlike other Jewish resistance movements during the war, theirs was inherently and organically bound up with the fate of America's own war effort. The risks taken by those Jews saved the lives of American soldiers and sailors, perhaps hundreds of them. Thanks to their herculean effort, Algiers was the only landing zone where Allied forces encountered little French opposition, in stark contrast to the relatively stiff defense put up by the Vichyites elsewhere along the North African front. As Leon Poliakov, a giant among French historians of the war, would later put it with only slight exaggeration, "the role of the small Aboulker group was decisive in the world war at a crucial moment."

Indeed. While the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and other Jewish resistance efforts may have been more significant politically and psychologically, especially in helping to refute the image of Jewish passivity, the Algiers resistance was the most consequential in helping to change the course of the war -- and, in the process, was the only Jewish resistance movement to save American lives.

## IV. BOWING TO EXPEDIENCY

**T**hat was how, from the moment Allied troops disembarked from their landing ships on North African soil, America's wartime leaders, from FDR and Eisenhower to Mark Clark and Robert Murphy -- respectively, Ike's military and political representatives in Algiers -- came face to face with "the Jewish question." Moreover, because of the Allies' decision to pivot from the original plan for new French leadership to a partnership with the existing Vichy regime, this question was no longer theoretical but, to the contrary, pressing and practical.

More specifically, it comprised three questions. First, what to do about the hundreds of Jewish conspirators whom the newly emboldened Vichyites viewed as traitors for having risked their lives to support the Allied invasion? Second, what to do about the thousands of Jews (and other anti-fascists) languishing in Vichy concentration camps? Third, what to do about the tens of thousands of other Jews who had been rendered stateless by Vichy's discriminatory laws?

Once again, the answer given by American officials in Algiers, and endorsed by higher-ups in Washington, was to bow to expediency. But this time there was a difference. Trucking with Jean-Francois Darlan had been a regrettable but defensible exigency of war, the price to pay for the swift transit of U.S. troops across Morocco and Algeria to fight Germans in Tunisia and expel them from the African continent. By contrast, the American response to "the Jewish question" was laden with deceit and duplicity.

Partnership with Darlan meant accepting, internalizing, and executing Vichy's warped advice on how to govern lands filled with both Muslims and Jews. The essence of that advice had been to do nothing to assist the latter even if doing something involved no cost to the former. Time and again, the basic position taken by the Americans -- led by Murphy, later lionized as one of the greatest American diplomats of the 20th century -- was that helping the Jews would have to wait.

Freeing Jews from concentration, punishment, or forced-labor camps became a slow, grinding process. In his November 17 statement on the post-Torch political setup, FDR had issued a "request" for "the liberation of all persons in Northern Africa who had been imprisoned because they opposed the efforts of the Nazis to dominate the world." But instead of simply freeing the prisoners, the Americans, acceding to the French, organized with the British a Joint Commission for Political Prisoners and Refugees that laboriously undertook to review the individual status of virtually every internee to determine whether, when, and under what conditions release might be granted.

Not until three months after Torch did U.S. Army Major Donald Q. Coster and British Army Major Kenneth Younger, along with French officers who only weeks earlier had pledged fealty to Petain, receive their orders to set out from Algiers to investigate the status of Jews, Spanish Republicans, and other anti-fascists interned at Vichy work camps in the vast desert expanse in southern Algeria and along the remote route of the Trans-Saharan railway. Theirs was the first Allied mission to glimpse camps where, as Younger wrote in his diary, "all the devices of Dachau and Buchenwald are in current use."

Another three months would then elapse before the committee finished its work -- meaning that it took twice as long *after* Torch to decide how to liberate Jews and others languishing in Vichy camps than it had to plan and execute the then-greatest amphibious assault in human history.

If the Allies were in no hurry to free prisoners, neither were they in a hurry to restore the civil rights stripped away by Vichy laws. Algerian Jews were unique in that, outside of Germany, they were the only Jews in the world rendered stateless by fascist edict. In the days after Torch, FDR himself promised to repair this injustice; in his November 17 declaration he specifically said: "I have asked for the abrogation of all laws and decrees inspired by Nazi governments or Nazi ideologies."

But it didn't take long for Vichy officials to whisper in the ears of Murphy and other American officials that any measures on behalf of the Jews -- including just rolling back the clock to the legal status quo ante -- would inflame the Arabs and thus in turn compel U.S. forces to divert energies and resources from fighting Germans into managing an unruly occupation.

A careful bureaucrat, Murphy seems to have appreciated the political delicacy of recommending a delay in the restoration of Jewish rights. He quickly appointed Major Paul "Piggy" Warburg, from the prominent New York banking family, as his "Jewish affairs adviser." In memos to Murphy, Warburg dutifully proposed that unofficial quotas on Jewish doctors, lawyers, and other professionals should stay in force "for [the Jews'] own good," and that full French citizenship should be restored to only a tiny percentage. (In his 1964 memoir, Murphy would return the favor by praising Warburg's "invaluable assistance.")

The result was that, for more than a year after Torch, virtually nothing was done to restore French citizenship to the vast majority of Algerian Jews. Only after de Gaulle took over the leadership of the French Committee of National Liberation in November 1943, fully displacing the Vichyites and others who had been America's partners, did the Jews finally regain their civil rights.

Nor did America even protect the courageous Jewish (and non-Jewish) partisans of the Algiers resistance from the threats of retribution issued by vengeful Vichy officials. Once the deal with Darlan was sealed, many of the fighters found themselves jailed by those whom, just hours earlier, they had immobilized on behalf of the invading forces.

A few years ago, I interviewed one of these fighters: a twinkly-eyed, ninety-one-year-old doctor named Paul Molkhou. Just nineteen at the time of Torch, he was one of the youngest members of the resistance. Molkhou recalled for me the chilling moment when, after the tide had turned and the Vichyites were back in charge, the highly placed official he had kept in custody during the Torch landings vowed to gain his vengeance: "I remember the image of the secretary-general of the Vichy government. He said to me 'You are a Gaullist terrorist; you will be judged and shot.'" In the event, spared the worst, Molkhou was jailed in Algiers' infamous Barbarossa prison along with a couple of dozen comrades.

Fortunately, not all Americans agreed with Murphy's policy. When, in the aftermath of Darlan's assassination, Giraud and the anti-Semitic proto-fascists around him took advantage of the chaos to be rid of the resistance leaders altogether, rounding them up and dispatching them to a remote desert site where they would be executed, last-minute intervention by agents of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), America's overseas clandestine intelligence

operation, saved their lives.

Indeed, on most of the issues related to Jews, the OSS's Algiers-based operatives held a different view from that of the State Department and argued for a more sympathetic policy. This may have owed something to their personal interactions with the conspirators in the Jewish resistance movement, or perhaps it was simply a reaction to the well-known tolerance for anti-Semitism in the foreign service at the time.

Murphy's chief antagonist here was a courageous idealist named W. Arthur Roseborough, a Rhodes scholar from Oregon and former legal secretary to the World Court who was then head of the OSS's strategic-intelligence desk in Algiers. A forgotten hero, Roseborough took seriously the principles of the Atlantic Charter, especially the principle of self-determination, and had the temerity to believe it deserved to be applied in North Africa no less than in other war zones -- *and* that America owed a debt of thanks to the fighters of the Algiers resistance. When its leaders were arrested and sent to concentration camps in the Sahara, he begged Murphy to arrange for their release, reportedly arguing that "American honor is at stake."

Murphy's reply, cited in the memoir of another OSS agent, neatly sums up the prevailing official attitude: "Art, old fellow, if you have nothing better to do in Africa than to worry about those Jews and Communists who helped us, why don't you just go home?"

Before long, that is precisely what happened: working behind the scenes, Murphy arranged for Roseborough to lose the confidence of his superiors, who forced him out of Algiers and out of the OSS. His successors got the message; most (though not all) kept quiet and toed the line. Thus, in one of the U.S. government's earliest and most portentous turf battles between State and Intelligence -- a battle fought in large part over attitudes toward Jews and "the Jewish question" -- did the venerable foreign service (established in 1789) handily triumph over the upstart OSS (established in 1942).

Still, it would be a mistake to claim there were no dissenters within the State Department itself. Some diplomats in Algiers hated the duplicity and double-dealing that characterized post-Torch policy toward Jews and other anti-Vichy partisans. Ridgway Knight, a key aide to Murphy who later became a three-time ambassador, wrote at the time that he was "sickened by the way we were neglecting our former associates"; in a memoir written 40 years later, he would characterize America's post-Torch deference to the Vichyites as "politically and morally shocking."

As against such lone internal dissenters, however, there were others, outside the State Department, who may have not used the coarse and venal words ascribed to Murphy but ultimately made their decisions on the same basis. In particular, the principle that no military assets should be diverted for the non-military objective of saving or protecting Jews -- later made famous in a November 1944 letter by Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy explaining why the War Department would not task U.S. bombers to target Auschwitz -- was born two years earlier in the wake of Torch.

Just five days after the landings, Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles asked George Marshall, then the Army chief of staff, to sign off on instructions to "make every effort that any elements whose sole crime consists in having aided the cause of the [Allies]...should not remain in jail" and that "those anti-Jewish measures which have been imposed as a result of Vichy's surrender to German pressure should be lifted." In reply, Marshall termed such instructions "inadvisable at this time" and went on to explain, in language uncannily similar to the words McCloy would use later: "As to the second and third measures suggested [i.e., regarding freeing Jewish and other anti-fascist prisoners and restoring Jewish civil rights], I am in thorough accord with their purpose and I am sure that General Eisenhower will take measures to alleviate the condition of the Free French and the Jews as soon as such action will not jeopardize pending military operations. However, the release of a large number of individuals who will undoubtedly constitute a disturbing element in a most difficult situation might involve the immobilization of large numbers of American

troops that are desperately needed elsewhere."

In the face of Marshall's strong opposition, Welles's instructions were changed to remove any sense of urgency.

## V. ARABS AND JEWS

What jumps out from Marshall's reply to Welles is the phrase describing Jews liberated from concentration camps as "undoubtedly...a disturbing element." Whom would they have disturbed?

In this connection, it is important to note that the zero-sum approach to U.S. relations between Muslims and Jews, born in the wake of Operation Torch, was *not* a product of the rise of Zionism or the fear of losing access to strategic oil resources. Nor was it a reaction to Arab rioting against Jewish empowerment in Palestine, or to threats by local Arab political or religious figures that their "masses" would erupt in outrage at government efforts to repair the injustices done to Jews. While Vichy certainly had its share of Arab collaborators, without whom it would have been impossible to govern, there were surprisingly few public declarations by local notables cheering Vichy's anti-Jewish policies.

To the contrary: there are multiple examples of Arab public figures who during this period sided with Jews, opposed anti-Jewish laws, and declared they would welcome restitution for Jewish loss of rights and property. For example, when Vichy abrogated the 1870 decree giving Algerian Jews the right to acquire French citizenship, returning them instead to the depressed legal status of Muslims, local Muslim leaders found in the Jews' misfortune little to gloat over: "This cannot be considered progress for the Algerian people," declared Messali Hadj, the jailed head of the nationalist Parti Populaire Algerien. "Reducing the rights of the Jews did not increase the rights of Muslims."

It seems instead that the zero-sum approach to Jews and Arabs, if not created by Vichy out of whole cloth, had at least been encouraged beyond all proportion by French (and especially French *colon*) prejudice, and then simply presented to the Americans as a gift. As Younger, the British officer who surveyed the Vichy concentration camps (and who would later serve as a Labor MP and deputy foreign secretary), wrote in his wartime diary: "I feel justified in considering that the alleged Arab question as propounded by the anti-Semites of Algiers is greatly exaggerated... [T]he fault lies with French anti-Semites rather than with the Arabs or even the German propagandists."

In his own memoir, Eisenhower offered a lengthy description of this phenomenon, explaining that the decision to appropriate French colonial policy toward Arabs and Jews was, in part, a way to counter rumors that he himself was Jewish:

"One complication in the Arab tangle was the age-old antagonism existing between the Arab and the Jew. Since the former outnumbered the latter by some forty to one in North Africa, it had become local policy to placate the Arab at the expense of the Jew; repressive laws had resulted and the Arab population regarded any suggestion for amelioration of such laws as the beginning of an effort to establish a Jewish government, with consequent persecution of themselves. Remembering that for years the uneducated population had been subjected to intensive Nazi propaganda calculated to fan these prejudices, it is easy to understand that the situation called for more caution and evolution than it did for precipitate action and possible revolution. The country was ridden, almost ruled, by rumor. One rumor was to the effect that I was a Jew, sent into the country by the Jew, Roosevelt, to grind down the Arabs and turn over North Africa to Jewish rule. The political staff was so concerned about this that they published material on me in newspapers and in special leaflets to establish evidence of my ancestry. Arab unrest, or even worse, open rebellion, would have set us back for months and lost us countless lives."

Roosevelt may have labeled the deal with Darlan a "temporary expedient," a decision so politically radioactive that it prompted him and Churchill to declare, for the first time, the wartime goal of "unconditional surrender" at their Casablanca conference just three weeks after Darlan's killing. But at least one aspect of America's partnership with the Vichyites in North Africa was not so temporary. The rationalizing myth at the heart of Vichy policy -- that Arabs

and Jews were mutual and mortal enemies, that any step toward the Jews would come at the expense of the Arabs, and that the best way to keep the mass of Arabs under control was to give them no cause for outrage at the progress of the Jews -- found a ready home in the welcoming environment of America's foreign-policy and national-security machinery.

Nor was that the only myth. A few years later, as the debate over Palestine heated up, a related if in some ways opposite idea would also find an audience among American foreign-policy makers. This was the notion that Arabs and Jews had lived together harmoniously and without discord in Muslim lands for hundreds of years, and that endorsing Zionist claims would disastrously upset this historical pattern of peaceful coexistence.

While it is undeniably true that Jews in Muslim lands never faced the massacres, atrocities, and degree of heinous persecution suffered by their coreligionists in Christendom, this angelic description of historical relations between the two groups is no less unhinged from reality. With rare exceptions, limited to certain moments and certain places, Jews were generally treated by Muslim rulers as *dhimmis*, tolerated as "people of the book" but subjected to numerous legal and social restrictions, special taxes, and, periodically, outbursts of murderous violence.

But nostalgia for "the golden age of Andalusia" -- an idyllic image originally promoted by 19th- and early 20th-century European students of Islam and later adopted by many political and diplomatic critics of Zionism -- made for a compelling talking point. As far as U.S. foreign policy was concerned, the details of the myth mattered little; what connected Algiers and later debates over Jewish refugee immigration to Palestine, the establishment of Israel, decisions to arm the Jewish state, and U.S. policy toward peace talks between Israel and Arab parties was the readiness of many to accept whatever myth would validate their opposition to Jewish rights and Jewish empowerment. In this sense, the roots of subsequent U.S. policies based on warding off anticipated Arab outrage can be traced all the way back to the "expedient" post-Torch decisions made in Algiers circa November 1942.

## VI. TORCH'S MOST ENDURING LEGACY

**T**aken together, these two decisions -- to instrumentalize the Middle East for the sake of larger U.S. security interests and to adopt a zero-sum approach toward U.S. relations with Arabs and Jews -- became a hallmark of U.S. policy in the region for decades.

To be sure, contrary approaches have had their powerful political advocates over the years and occasionally have even prevailed, beginning with Harry Truman's rebuff of Marshall on the issue of recognizing the state of Israel. Other examples include Alexander Haig's short-lived effort at "strategic consensus" in the early 1980s, which posited the common Arab-Israel fear of Soviet expansionism as a basis for a more enlightened U.S. regional policy. Today the U.S. may be in the midst of another such Arab-Israel convergence of interest -- this time, to counter an insurgent Iran. Whether it, too, is short-lived, only time will tell.

In the area of relations between Middle East rulers and ruled, George W. Bush's "forward strategy for freedom" in the early 2000s was another such alternative approach. Specifically, Bush sought to put an end to decades of American indifference toward the region's political architecture. As he memorably put it: "Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe because in the long run stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty."

Since then, the Arab Spring has come and gone, with violence and tumult in its wake. Two subsequent presidents -- one Democrat, one Republican -- have instead made a virtue of a return to the old policies.

Bush gave his speech decrying 60 years of American foreign policy fifteen years ago. Sixty years before that, America had just arrived in Algiers. Operation Torch gave rise to America's first experience wielding power in an Arab land, and early decisions in support of the approach decried by Bush have exercised a lasting impact on American foreign policy, with repercussions that continue to be felt to this day.

That, alas, is Torch's most enduring legacy, if one that is sure to go without notice on November 8 by the crowd cheering a handful of brave nonagenarian veterans at the National Mall on the 75th anniversary of the most underappreciated victory of World War II. For those veterans, however, and for that victory itself, both cheers and the nation's gratitude are long overdue.

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**<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/among-the-righteous-lost-stories-from-the-holocausts-long-reach-into-arab-l>**. ❖

Mosaic

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