

H-Diplo Roundtable review of **Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicut**. *The Paranoid Style in American Diplomacy: Oil and Arab Nationalism in Iraq*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021. ISBN: 9781503613829 (hardcover, \$85), 9781503627918 (paperback, \$26).

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Nearly two decades after the second US invasion and occupation of Iraq, the state and its diverse peoples remain poorly understood in the United States. Since the British invention of an Iraqi state after the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century, Iraq's political society has been defined by a struggle for sovereignty against imperial powers and exploitative enterprises that have sought to control the country's politics and formidable resources for their own benefit.¹ Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicut's book is an extremely valuable intervention that exposes the role of capitalist imperialism—much of it directed out of the US—in shaping the fate of Iraq's society and state long before the US repeatedly invaded and occupied the country.

The Paranoid Style in American Diplomacy relates the complex, decades-long story of the nationalization of the oil industry in Iraq. In doing so, the book makes key contributions to the study of three primary sets of actors: Western oil company officials, the Iraqi state-building class, and the US foreign policymakers. After a series of largely unproductive predecessors, the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) was formed in 1928 as a consortium that united British, French, American, Dutch, and Ottoman Armenian oil companies under the protective umbrella of the British colonial mandate for Iraq (12-16). The IPC was the sole legal entity permitted to extract and market oil from Iraq, and as with most oil concessions in the region, the Iraqi government had no power to determine how much oil the IPC should produce and when, locally arbitrate legal disputes, or to amend rates of taxation, among numerous other onerous restrictions (66-67). On top of this, the IPC consistently and substantially underpaid its export taxes to the government (78). As a variety of Iraqi patriots were to assert from its inception, the IPC concession represented a severe compromise of Iraqi sovereignty, one that was all the more egregious considering that by 1952 oil represented more than 60 percent of Iraqi government revenue (21).

As the subtitle succinctly announces, *The Paranoid Style* focuses on two interrelated themes: oil and Arab nationalism. The book joins a recent wave of studies on US-Arab relations and the international history of oil.² What distinguishes it from the pack is the author's passionately felt outrage at the whirlwind that “American Grandiose Strategy” (179-82) has

¹ Reeva S. Simon and Eleanor H. Tejirian, eds., *The Creation of Iraq, 1914–1921* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

² Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (London: Verso, 2009); Irene L. Gendzier, *Dying to Forget: Oil, Power, Palestine & the Foundations of US Policy in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Christopher R.W. Dietrich, *Oil Revolution: Anticolonial Elites, Sovereign Rights, and the Economic Culture of Decolonization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Victor McFarland, *Oil Powers: A History of the U.S.-Saudi Alliance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); David M. Wight, *Oil Money: Middle East Petrodollars and the Transformation of US Empire, 1967–1988* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021).

reaped in Iraqi and Arab society, as well as in the world more generally. Thoroughly documenting his claims, Wolfe-Hunnicuttt narrates how, in defense of private corporate interests, US policy in Iraq fostered the mass killing of its opponents, a succession of authoritarian coup regimes, and the continuous drain of superprofits into the coffers of Western oil companies. Yet the author powerfully underlines that none of these drastic measures employed by the US could prevent the full nationalization of the IPC in 1972—the very outcome the British and the US empires and the major international oil companies strove so hard to prevent.

In drawing this grim conclusion, Wolfe-Hunnicuttt takes conceptual inspiration from C. Wright Mills's invocation of "crackpot realism," Priya Satia's "covert empire" and "official conspiracy theories," and even J.R.R. Tolkien's paranoid vision of a "One Ring" that bestows its bearer with an unconscionable invisibility.³ Another methodological thread that runs through the book is an emphasis on social biography (137-8). Wolfe-Hunnicuttt's narrative is laced with a string of compelling mini-biographies of key personalities entangled in this international story. This method helps to make legible the networks of global connections and the high personal stakes involved. The book's source material is primarily culled from the archives of the US Department of State, presidential libraries, and the IPC itself. Wolfe-Hunnicuttt supplements these archival sources by engaging with some Iraqi memoirs in Arabic, as well as extensive original interviews with one of the main advocates of oil nationalization, Khair el-Din Haseeb.

Building on the work of Timothy Mitchell, Roger Stern, and Robert Vitalis, *The Paranoid Style* attacks the ideology and historiography of oil scarcity, which envisions oil as a sparse resource, access to which demands protection.⁴ Like these works, the book turns this policy narrative on its head by arguing that oil is in fact abundant and that oil companies spend a great amount of energy to prevent its production and distribution in order to drive up its price. Given the great efforts the IPC made throughout its life *not* to produce, the consortium is one of the best possible examples to illustrate this argument. In fact, decades of policy concern that nationalization might interrupt the supply of oil (to the "Free World") were proven to be little more than the self-serving propaganda of the oil majors: Iraqi oil exports doubled after nationalization, and Iraq was more than happy to sell oil to the US and its allies despite policy differences on other issues (213). Instead, in an effort to understand the drivers of imperial oil policy, *The Paranoid Style* places far more emphasis on business-state relations within the context of shifting geopolitical conjunctures. "The entirety of the oil order in the region," Wolfe-Hunnicuttt writes, "was organized around the effort to prevent the emergence of a free market in oil" (184).

To the book's great credit, Wolfe-Hunnicuttt reveals the US state as an arena of competition between conflicting business interests and their attendant strategic doctrines. The book powerfully leaves the reader with the impression that the vast machinery of the US state

³ C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit; or, There and Back Again* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1937).

⁴ Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2013); Roger J. Stern, "Oil Scarcity Ideology in US Foreign Policy, 1908–97," *Security Studies* 25, no. 2 (2016): 214–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2016.1171967>; Robert Vitalis, *Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security That Haunt U.S. Energy Policy* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2020).

serves private business interests, rather than the other way around. “The State Department,” Wolfe-Hunnicuttt argues, “never tired in its effort to save international capitalism from and for international capitalists” (145-6). However, this did not mean that the oil industry simply and directly dictated policy. Wolfe-Hunnicuttt shows that neither the various branches of the US state nor the oil industry were far from united in intent, methods, and worldview. Different factions of state were allied with—or were captured by—competing factions of capitalists. For instance, the interests of international oil majors with plentiful reserves spread across states—such as Exxon and BP—clashed with the interests of “crude short” firms that lacked adequate supplies or whose extraction area were relatively limited—such as the American independents like Sinclair, or France’s state-owned *Compagnie française des pétroles* (CFP) (155). Within the US government, the author demonstrates how the Department of State was closely associated with the interests of the oil majors (and the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs in particular, 74-75), while domestic independent firms captured the Department of the Interior. The antagonism between these sectors allowed the Iraqi government to make strategic alliances with the independents at key junctures in order to outflank the IPC (148-52).

The linking of competing material oil interests and subjective ideologies leads to revealing new perspectives on US policy and Arab nationalism. The rise of anticolonial Arab nationalist military revolutions in Egypt (1952) and Iraq (1958) forced a debate amongst US policymakers over the best strategy for achieving their objectives in the Arab world. To what extent could Arab demands for self-determination and sovereignty be tolerated? Could these demands best be contained by overt US opposition or by covert action? Should the US throw its support behind the pliant, monarchical, and conservative rivals of anticolonial nationalism or should it back nationalists who were more amenable to Western interests as an alternative to more radical socialist and Communist influences? The titular “paranoid style” refers precisely to the overpowering tendency in US diplomacy to view all attempts at resource and political sovereignty in the Third World as necessarily directed by the Soviet Union and Communism, and attendant, as a challenge to US power and Capitalism (43-44, 248 n69).⁵

The book provides important insights into the complex history of the Ba‘th Party in the Arab east, particularly the contested story of its relations with the US (with a few reservations to be discussed later). Chapter 5, “The Rise and Fall of the Ba‘th,” is a highly informative account of the Ba‘th’s February 1963 coup in Iraq, its first, which overthrew the independently-minded revolutionary regime of General ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim. Wolfe-Hunnicuttt masterfully sifts through the contradictory existing evidence to make a convincing case that the US covertly played a key role in the coup’s murderous execution.⁶ The Kennedy-era flirtation with anti-Communist Arab nationalism took particular interest in Ba‘thism in Iraq, a perspective perhaps best understood as a culmination of what historian William Appleman

⁵ The title is also a critical reappropriation of Richard Hofstadter’s “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.” As Wolfe-Hunnicuttt explains, Hofstadter’s essay focused on conspiracy theories at the margins of US politics, whereas Wolfe-Hunnicuttt is concerned with the far more consequential “official conspiracy theories” that emerge from the commanders of US power. See Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” *Harper’s*, November 1964.

⁶ As Wolfe-Hunnicuttt notes, this thesis was first systematically presented in Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq’s Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Ba‘thists, and Free Officers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 985–87.

Williams memorably dubbed the US policy of “imperial anticolonialism.”⁷ The Kennedy regime supported the Iraqi Ba‘th because 1) the party was fiercely anti-Communist and responsive to Euroamerican capital interests (130-1), 2) it could invest anticolonial legitimacy in the Iraqi state, contra the neocolonial British monarchy, and 3) it weakened the leadership of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser and his followers, the strongest coherent anticolonial force in the Arab world.

Throughout spring 1962, US embassy officers compiled lists of suspected members of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) and their sympathizers (115). Upon taking power in February 1963, Ba‘thist militiamen embarked on a very specific campaign of mass political assassination and detention, decimating the ICP, particularly its most active cadres.⁸ While direct evidence linking the two actions is unavailable, it is difficult to ignore the potential causal link. Given the rest of the evidence the author lays out—including the outright boasting of James Akins, one of the principal State Department political officers active in Iraq at that time, of US support for the coup (116-7)—the indications appear damning indeed.⁹ Importantly, Wolfe-Hunnicuttt shows how this anti-Communist mass killing was not an isolated incident, but fit a pattern and strategy developed over time, across the world.¹⁰ Because the Arab world is often exceptionalized and left out of broader narratives of US covert operations and support for counterrevolutionary mass murder during the Cold War, this contextualization is an important contribution.¹¹

The author shows how the Iraqi struggle for natural-resource sovereignty against foreign powers produced important moments of coordinated national action across social difference. Perversely, these promising episodes were usually cut short by US covert action that intervened repeatedly to advance the cause of pro-American Iraqi anti-Communists. To relate this history, Wolfe-Hunnicuttt uses his social biographical style to highlight trailblazing members of the Iraqi statebuilding class and their principled commitments to sovereign development for the benefit of the many. These include Sassoon Hasqail, Iraq’s first finance minister who was sidelined in the 1920s for daring to challenge the foreign oil concession (14-15). Ministers Adib al-Jadir and Tahir Yahya, as well as intellectuals such as ‘Abd al-Fattah Ibrahim are also given their due. Significantly, the author paints a rare sympathetic portrait of General ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim, the leader of the 1958 revolution and the first revolutionary regime. Much of the English literature does not know what to make of this

⁷ William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Delta, 1972), chap. 1.

⁸ Tareq Ismael estimates that “Over ten thousand individuals were detained, and between three thousand and five thousand were executed.” Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 107.

⁹ See also Weldon C. Matthews, “The Kennedy Administration, Counterinsurgency, and Iraq’s First Ba‘thist Regime,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43 (2011): 635–53, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743811000882>.

¹⁰ Notably, in the CIA’s 1954 overthrow of the democratically-elected president of Guatemala, Jacobo Arbenz. The technique surfaced again in Iraq, and once more, on a much grander scale in the 1965 overthrow of Indonesian president Sukarno and the suppression of the Indonesian Communist Party, in which an estimated half-million were killed.

¹¹ See, for instance, the otherwise informative Vincent Bevins, *The Jakarta Method: Washington’s Anticommunist Crusade & the Mass Murder Program That Shaped Our World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020); Walden Bello, *Counterrevolution: The Global Rise of the Far Right* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2019); Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan, 2007).

independent minded leader who refused to be beholden either to Nasser, the ICP, or the Ba‘th. Wolfe-Hunnicuttt reveals him to be a patriotic ascetic devoted to fashioning a sovereign, multiethnic republic geared towards serving the broad mass of the Iraqi people.¹² If Qasim’s incorruptibility and commitment to a pluralistic Iraqi society are convincing, his credentials as a republican committed to democratic representation and participation are less so.¹³ That being said, given the immense pressure from the US, IPC, the Ba‘th, the British, the Shah, Israel, the Kurdish movement, the Arab monarchies, and even Nasser, the possibility of orderly, effective, democratic revolutionary transformation was hardly more than an abstract idea. In Wolfe-Hunnicuttt’s estimation, Qasim was a pivotal figure who significantly advanced the cause of resource sovereignty and independent development in the Third World—one who came tantalizingly close to delivering a nationalized oil industry before he was overthrown and summarily executed by the Ba‘th in 1963.

But most importantly, Wolfe-Hunnicuttt powerfully introduces English readers to Khair el-Din Haseeb (1929–2021), one of the masterminds of the IPC nationalization project and a pillar of Arab national thought. Haseeb was born into a prosperous family that soon lost its wealth under the Hashemite monarchy. Yet Haseeb persevered and used his considerable intellectual gifts to advance, eventually earning a doctorate in statistics from the University of Cambridge and joining the Arab statebuilding class. Like so many others of his generation, Haseeb’s politics were steered towards Arab national liberation by the Algerian revolution and the 1956 British-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt. As Governor of the Central Bank of Iraq in 1964, Haseeb directed the nationalization of banking, insurance, and large industry (147). After the 1967 war, Prime Minister Tahir Yahya appointed Haseeb and al-Jadir to lead the board of the Iraqi National Oil Company (INOC). Under Haseeb and Jadir, INOC concluded pioneering agreements with France and the Soviet Union to develop the oilfields that lay dormant under the IPC control, as well as Iraqi national expertise, setting the stage for total nationalization of production. Their project was cut short after the 1968 Ba‘th coup, after which Haseeb was imprisoned and tortured for two years. He later fled to exile in Beirut, where he founded the Center for Arab Unity Studies in 1975, an influential publishing house and think tank dedicated to pan-Arab aspirations independent of any ruling regime.¹⁴ By resurrecting Haseeb’s career for English readers, Wolfe-Hunnicuttt does his legacy a great service and points toward the necessity of going beyond studying merely heads of state and members of cabinet in the shaping of Arab state policy.

Thanks to the protracted preparatory work of Haseeb and his comrades, Iraq was well prepared to sever the relations of dependency and reclaim sovereignty from colonial capitalist exploitation when the nationalization decree finally came in 1972. Another key contribution of *The Paranoid Style* is to reveal that the 1967 Arab oil embargo, which was prompted by

¹² Another recent, significant contribution on the Qasim era is Sara Pursley, *Familiar Futures: Time, Selfhood, and Sovereignty in Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

¹³ Charles Tripp notes that “Qasim refused to create any representative institutions or to hold parliamentary elections,” while Pursley reiterates that the success of the 1963 coup was also “enabled by the fact that Qasim’s regime had dismantled most of the popular organizations that might have defended it.” Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 3rd ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 155; Pursley, *Familiar Futures*, 8.

¹⁴ The activities and publications of the Center for Arab Unity Studies (CAUS) may be surveyed on their website at <https://caus.org.lb/en/homepage/>. In addition to an important and large and catalog of books, CAUS publishes two journals: *al-Mustaqbal al-‘Arabī* (*The Arab Future*) in Arabic, and *Contemporary Arab Affairs* (co-published with the University of California Press) in English.

Israel's preemptive colonial conquest, was not the failure many have assumed.¹⁵ Instead, it paved the ground for the Iraqi nationalization project by helping to divide European interests from the Anglo-American majors, while also discrediting US policy and the more conciliatory elements in Iraq (175-86). In this way, Wolfe-Hunnicuttt argues the Arab oil embargo worked to shift the foundations of the global oil order by creating the space for Iraq to strike new kinds of service contracts with the Soviet Union and France. Furthermore, the March 1973 final settlement for the nationalization of the IPC could not have come at a better time. The massive spike in the price of oil during and after the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War was collected by the Iraqi government, whose redistributive policies allowed nothing less than the creation of a sizeable, well-educated middle class in the country within the span of a few years (212-14). Unfortunately, this impressive moment of anticolonial social reconstruction was not allowed to last. The US, Israel, and the Shah's Iran instigated an ill-advised Kurdish rebellion that was designed to punish Iraq for its nationalization and realignment with the Soviet Union (218-20).¹⁶ This policy, followed by the war with revolutionary Iran, contributed greatly to ensuring that the only stable Iraqi government that could survive such an onslaught was a brittle garrison state led by a figure such as Saddam Hussein.

Weighed against these considerable strengths, there is very little to lament in this eye-opening monograph. Yet, perhaps a more substantial reckoning with Arabic newspapers, memoirs, and journals might have allowed the author to provide a more three-dimensional account of how the story described here affected and was shaped by a broader range of Iraqi society. One of the most suggestive contributions of the book is the author's willingness to view divisive social differences in the US (race) and Iraq (sectarian and national) in a common frame of reference. Yet as it stands, this point is more evocative than a sustained analytical thread. If nationalizing oil "was the material analog to a multicultural conception of Iraqi national identity" (226), a fuller account of Iraqi social mobilization across difference would be a most welcome avenue for further research. Finally, some Arabic materials cited by the author are incorrectly transliterated or translated, and there are certain misidentifications. For instance, it was the Beirut-based Palestinian economist Yusif Sayigh (1916–2014)—a future member of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Executive Committee and founder of the PLO Planning Center—who wrote the influential manifesto for sovereign Arab economic development *al-Khubz ma' al-Karama (Bread with Dignity)*, not the Iraqi poet, novelist, and playwright Yusif al-Sayigh (1933–2005) (271).¹⁷ It should be underlined, however, that these are very minor points that do not substantially affect the argument and narrative presented.

In sum, *The Paranoid Style in American Diplomacy* is an essential contribution that dismantles much of the received wisdom about the politics of oil and the global struggle for equitable development. Moreover, it invites further research that critically investigates the subsequent history of international interventions in Iraq and their intersections with private capital and state authoritarianism. The book deserves to be read by all students of US-Arab

¹⁵ For example Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 555–58; Guy Laron, *The Six-Day War: The Breaking of the Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 310.

¹⁶ Here, Wolfe-Hunnicuttt relies heavily on Roham Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The United States and Iran in the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), chap. 3.

¹⁷ On Yusif Sayigh's remarkable career, see Yusif A. Sayigh, *Yusif Sayigh: Arab Economist, Palestinian Patriot: A Fractured Life Story*, ed. Rosemary Sayigh (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2015).

relations, oil, Iraq, Middle East politics and state formation, covert operations, and the history of capitalism.

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