When the United States entered World War II, its information services reported, with a great deal of anxiety, that the Allies were losing the battle for Middle Eastern hearts and minds to the Germans. A September 29, 1942 Office of War Information memo titled “Iran-Propaganda Target” declared that “it is not surprising that from 80 to 90 percent of the population in Iran are said to be pro-German.” Polling revealed similarly disturbing numbers from other countries. The Office of Strategic Services and Office of War Information quickly recruited American social scientists and archeologists who had traveled on research expeditions to the Middle East during the 1930s. These scholars were charged with the task of convincing an entire region of widely disparate people that they should support the Allied cause. This paper examines the official memoranda and guidelines that dictated U.S. approaches towards the Middle East during and after the war. I look in particular at how different perceptions of Middle Easterners – some nuanced, some baldly racist – led to wildly different policy recommendations.

This presentation also seeks to deepen scholarly understanding of the process by which the United States came to view the Middle East as a region of strategic importance. As many scholars have pointed out, relationships between American and Middle Eastern interests multiplied greatly after the war. This paper will trace how postwar policy decisions had their antecedents in the wartime effort to define how best to persuade Middle Easterners to accede to the United States’s growing, but contested, role of benevolent supremacy.