The remarkable life of early-twentieth-century British adventurer Gertrude Bell has been well documented through her numerous travel books and biographies. Bell’s role as a grand strategist for the British government in the Middle East during World War I and the postwar period, however, is surprisingly understudied. This monograph offers insights into the role women play as grand strategists. It shows how Bell helped to devise Great Britain’s military strategy in the Middle East during World War I and its creation of the modern state of Iraq.

Studying Bell as both a military strategist and a grand strategist offers important insights into how she helped to devise British military strategy in the Middle East. These insights include Britain’s efforts to work through secret societies and saboteurs to undermine the Ottoman Empire during the war as part of the Arab Bureau and the country’s attempts to stabilize the region after the war through the creation of the modern state of Iraq.

As importantly, studying Bell offers a glimpse into how this extraordinary woman was able to become one of the principal architects of British strategy and the exceptional set of skills and perspectives she brought to these efforts. Bell’s education, firsthand knowledge of the region, fascination with archaeology, and, above all, her ability to make and maintain relationships with key individuals were invaluable tools for shaping and promoting British efforts at retaining influence as a great power in the postwar era as well as Britain’s aims to secure key resources for the empire, including military bases and oil.

Ultimately, Bell helped to shape British strategy in the region from 1915–26 because she was a woman, not in spite of it. She had access to both men and women within the local population, she used her social skills to connect and influence key actors in the region, and she brought decades of learning and firsthand experience traveling through the region and speaking with its people to inform and shape her grand strategy.

Additionally, Bell’s grand strategy offers important lessons for the challenges of creating peace and stability after war. Britain’s efforts at stability operations in Iraq following World War I demonstrate the inherent tensions in balancing an intervening country’s objectives and priorities with those the intervening country is trying to stabilize—especially, the challenges of creating transitional governments and including the population in stability operations.

Bell’s unique legacy offers insights into the roles women have played and continue to play as influencers of grand strategy in male-dominated contexts and the importance of including diverse perspectives in strategic thinking.