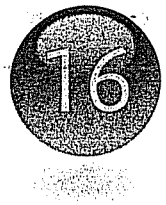

The United States in the Middle East

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Overview

This chapter reviews and analyses US foreign policy in the Middle East. It begins with a historical sketch of US involvement in the area, discussing the traditional US interests. It then describes the structure of Middle Eastern policymaking and its domestic political context, as well as Washington's response to new regional tensions and upheavals since the late 1970s. Next, there is a survey of new regional developments, including socio-economic trends, the 'watershed' year of 1979, the rise of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the emergence of a Shia regional coalition, the emergence of Al-Qaeda and the attacks of 11 September 2001 ('9/11') in the US, the US-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the Palestinian–Israeli impasse. The next section traces the evolution of US policy since 2000 in the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. The chapter concludes with a discussion of an 'Obama doctrine' and 'American decline' in the Middle East and the world.

Introduction

Until recently, the United States exercised enormous influence throughout the Middle East. In a region historically penetrated by competing Western powers, there were no serious challengers to US hegemony following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990. Nevertheless, today, US policymakers see the Middle East as the source of unprecedented threats to national security. This is because they believe it to be a breeding ground for terrorist movements that are able to strike against the US homeland, as well as US interests overseas. They also see traditional US allies in the Arab world as threatened by Iran and its allies.

In this chapter, we seek to explain this puzzle. We will do so, first, by presenting an historical sketch of the US involvement in the area. This narrative focuses initially on the traditional trio of US interests: anti-communism, oil, and Israel. The second section describes the structure of Middle Eastern policymaking, emphasizing both the instruments of policy and the effects of domestic politics on policy. In the third part, we discuss how new regional tensions and upheavals since the late 1970s have challenged US interests, and how US policy has sought to cope with them. Finally, we will compare and contrast how the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama have dealt with the growing volatility of the twenty-first-century Middle East.

The roots of US involvement

There was a time—very different from the present period—when the United States was popular and respected throughout the Middle East. That benign image began to dissipate around the period of the Second World War, when the US, as an emergent great power, became directly involved in a region that was itself undergoing great internal upheavals. Washington's concern about the Soviet Union, access to oil, and the project for a Jewish state in Palestine—concerns that clashed with the rising nationalism in the region—eroded the earlier positive image.

'The age of innocence'

The first US encounters with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) date back to the founding of the republic (Bryson 1977). Relations revolved mainly around trade and missionary activity. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as France, Britain, and Russia established an imperial presence in North Africa, Egypt, the Levant, Iran, and the periphery of the Arabian Peninsula, the US by contrast eschewed a colonial role in the Middle East. Indeed, in the aftermath of the First World War—that watershed event in which European countries replaced Ottoman Turkish administration in much of the Arab world—the Arabs indicated that if they could not have the independence that they most wanted, they would rather be governed by the US than by Britain or France. These were the findings of the King–Crane Commission, sent by President Wilson in 1919 to ascertain the wishes of 'the people' in the former Ottoman territories. Americans were seen to be good people, untainted by the selfishness and duplicity associated with the Europeans. As nationalist and religious movements reorganized to roll back European imperialism in the 1920s and 1930s, they spared the US from their anger.

Coming of age

The Second World War marked what US veteran 'Arabist' ambassador Raymond Hare called 'the great divide' in US relations with the Middle East, 'between our traditional national position of rejecting political responsibility in the Middle East and our postwar acceptance of responsibility on a global or great power basis' (Hare 1972). Three issues drove the US's new great power policies in the Middle East: communism, oil, and Israel.

Containing Soviet communism

In October 1947, as Hare (1993: 20) tells it, US and British officials met at the Pentagon to sketch out a geo-political blueprint for the Middle East in the light of the new threats of Soviet expansionism and communist ideology. Gone was the 'reverse Monroe doctrine' of the inter-war period in which the US left the Middle East to Britain (in contrast to President Monroe's insistence on keeping Britain out of Latin America in the nineteenth century). Already, President Truman had extended aid to Greece and Turkey to help those governments stave off communist or Soviet challenges. While still conceding to Britain 'primary responsibility' for the Middle East and the Mediterranean, Secretary of State Marshall was already contemplating an eventual leadership role for the US in the region.

A decade later, John C. Campbell from the Council on Foreign Relations published *Defense of the Middle East* (1958)—a revealing account of the concern with which the foreign-policy establishment viewed trends in the region. The fundamental problem was the threat to the security, even the survival, of the US in the face of the global Soviet challenge. As for the Middle East:

> The entrenchment of Soviet power in that strategic region would bring a decisive shift in the world balance, outflanking NATO. Soviet control of Middle Eastern oil could disrupt the economy of the free world. And the triumph of communism in the heart of the Islamic world could be the prelude to its triumph through Asia, Africa and Europe.
>
> (Campbell 1958: 4–5)

The study group asserted that the Arab–Israeli conflict:

> hangs like a poisonous cloud over the entire Middle East. ... Time has not solved the problem of the Arab refugees. Something must be done about it. ... The American commitment to Israel is to its continued independent existence, not to its existing boundaries or policies.
>
> (Campbell 1958: 351–2)

On the geo-strategic level, US policy sought to contain the Soviets in the Middle East through military alliances, as in Europe through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). But this approach largely failed, as the examples of the Middle East Command proposal and the Middle East Defense Organization in 1951–52 indicate (Bryson 1977: 179–81). Even the Baghdad Pact (1955) generated more animosity than security in the Arab world (see **Chapter 9**). Nor were looser political–economic umbrella projects—such as the Eisenhower doctrine (1957), under which Washington promised financial aid and security assistance to Middle Eastern governments requesting US protection from 'international communism'—any more successful. Lebanon was the only Arab state to take up the offer—a decision that brought more instability than security to that small country. Indeed, under Stalin's less doctrinaire successors, the Soviet Union and its satellites succeeded in leaping over the Baghdad Pact into the Arab heartland through its arms deals with Syria and Egypt of 1954–56. To these governments, the real geo-strategic threat was Israel, not the Soviet Union—and therein lay a real problem for US diplomacy. The US–Soviet 'game' was not being played exclusively on the geo-strategic level; it was also being played on the volatile ideological terrain of Middle Eastern domestic politics.

The waning of European imperialism in the Middle East after the Second World War coincided with a powerful current of national assertiveness in Iran and the Arab countries, which were rapidly modernizing. Ascension to great power status and close wartime cooperation with colonialist European allies had not extinguished US liberal idealism. Accordingly, there was great curiosity and not a little sympathy with the emergence of independent states in what came to be called the 'Third World'. With these trends in mind, leading US government officials had correctly prophesied that support for a Zionist state in Palestine would set the US at odds with the emerging Arab nationalist currents. They were equally right in predicting that the Soviet Union would try to associate itself with this trend in order to advance its own interests throughout the region. Regimes friendly to Washington would be weakened. Developments during the 1950s and 1960s revealed the extent of the problem: nationalist coups or upheavals took place in Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, North Yemen, South Yemen, the Sudan; Syria suffered major instability. Ongoing eruptions (1956, 1967, 1969–70) in the unsolved Arab–Israeli conflict did not help matters.

If the US response to all of this was often improvised and contradictory, the results were not altogether negative. American diplomats tried to avoid a head-on confrontation with nationalist forces; US efforts to deal with Nasser are a fascinating case in point. Even US presidents occasionally made a supportive gesture: for example, Dwight Eisenhower in the 1956 war, and John F. Kennedy, who, as a senator, had spoken positively on Algeria, and, as president, initiated a dialogue with Nasser and supported the republican revolution in Yemen. On the other hand, the US worked to suppress Iranian nationalism by organizing the overthrow of Prime Minister Muhammad Mussadiq's government in 1953, and it opposed the nationalist upheavals in Syria and Iraq. While Kennedy had some temporary doubts about supporting a 'traditional' regime in Saudi Arabia, he did not hesitate to support the Saudis when they were challenged by Nasser in the 1960s.

US diplomacy in the field, and the presence of respected American educational and development organizations somewhat blunted the US confrontation with Arab nationalism, but it could hardly eliminate it. The Palestine problem lay at the heart of the pan-Arab cause and US support for Israel was too massive to allow for healthy relationships with most Arab states, let alone with Arab public opinion. The Soviet Union therefore had a clear field to plough. But the Soviets had their own problems and weaknesses: communism and Arab nationalism did not mix well together, and the Soviets were often clumsy in their military and aid relationships. Nationalist Arab regimes complained about the low level and poor quality of Soviet support. Nevertheless, Soviet patronage enabled the nationalist, anti-Israel camp to pose a serious challenge to US interests in the region.

The enfeeblement of the Soviet Union vis-à-vis the US was increasingly evident from the 1970s even to Arab governments heavily dependent on Moscow for arms and diplomatic support. Following Israel's smashing victory over the Arabs in the 1967 Six-Day War, an Arab 'rejectionist bloc' emerged that, with Moscow's support, had refused US and international plans for a negotiated settlement that would require recognition of Israel. But gradually this bloc began to disintegrate, and with it the influence in Arab public opinion of the pan-Arab nationalist movement. Egypt's President Anwar Sadat was the first Arab leader to recognize Moscow's decline, and he drew the logical realpolitik conclusion by throwing out his Soviet military advisers and dramatically turning towards Washington in search of a negotiated solution to the Arab–Israeli conflict. Later, Iraq and Syria would engage in their

own, more-cautious flirtations with the US. By the time of the Soviet Union's collapse in 1990, the US was able to enlist the one-time rejectionist governments in Egypt and Syria in the international coalition to remove Iraq as a threat to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The US–Soviet Cold War in the Middle East was over, and the Arab nationalist camp (what was left of it) no longer had a superpower patron to constrain the US and Israel.

Oil

US commercial interest in Middle East oil pre-dates Hare's 'great divide'. US companies got their foot in the door of the Middle Eastern oil cartel with the Red Line Agreement of 1928. Under the Red Line Agreement, the major international oil companies—including now a US group—pledged in a 'self-denying' clause to share proportionally the future oil discoveries in the former Ottoman Turkish territories, including the Arabian Peninsula (except for Kuwait), Iraq, the Levant (except for Sinai), Cyprus, and Anatolia. A decade later in Saudi Arabia, having outmanoeuvred their British rivals in Saudi Arabia, a subsidiary of Standard of California made a stupendous find at 'Dammam No. 7', which, over the next forty-five years, was to produce more than 32 million barrels of oil. But oil did not acquire a strategic security dimension until the Second World War. Just as the British at the beginning of the century had seen the military and economic value of Middle Eastern oil, so too did the Americans—not only for prosecuting the Second World War, but also as a cheap supplement to declining US reserves and the West's oil-driven post-war economic development. With the price of Middle Eastern oil a mere US$2 per barrel up until 1971, it is hardly surprising that Western Europe and even the US would become dependent on it.

While European and Japanese dependency was well over two-thirds of total consumption, Americans in the 1970s found that half their oil was imported and half of those imports were from the Middle East. Given, then, the importance of a secure supply of cheap Middle Eastern oil, US policymakers determined that their main tasks were to exclude Soviet influence from the region and to prevent any internal force from nationalizing Western companies, restricting production, and/or raising prices and overturning established regimes. Clandestine involvement by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the British in a coup codenamed 'Operation Ajax', which returned the young shah to his throne in Iran in 1953, was an effective object lesson for would-be nationalist challengers (Bill 1988: 86–94). As for the US–Arab oil relationship, the Arabian-American Oil Company (ARAMCO), a consortium of US companies active in Saudi Arabia, had mounted a remarkably effective, indeed amicable, working relationship that has endured through to the first decade of the twenty-first century, weathering even the transfer to Saudi ownership.

In 1960, following an abrupt decision by the oil companies on a price cut, outraged governments of oil-producing states established the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). OPEC, inexperienced and weakened by internal rivalries, had little success in defending the price of oil during its first decade. But the situation was about to change. Growing world demand, the proliferation of small independent companies, and domestic nationalist pressures in several oil-producing countries set in motion the 'oil revolution' of the 1970s, which, by the end of the decade, had lifted the price to around US$35 per barrel. It also led to a shift in the balance of oil power from the companies to the producing countries, by breaking the cohesion of the producer cartel at a time when world oil demand was

growing. Libya, following Colonel Muammar al-Gaddafi's nationalist revolution in 1969, led the charge, followed by Iran. Then, during the 1973 Arab–Israeli War, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia did what Americans had thought was unthinkable: he imposed a partial boycott on the US and on European consumers. Suddenly, the Arabs had 'the oil weapon' and, stung by US emergency war aid to Israel, they had used it.

The shock in the US and Europe was palpable, and it lent urgency to Secretary of State Kissinger's mediation of the war. In the long term, it also led to a comprehensive new energy policy designed to blunt the oil weapon in the future through the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, a vast underground oil storage facility, and conservation measures. Thus, by the time of the second major price hike in 1979, which resulted from the Iranian revolution of 1979–80 and the Iraq–Iran War of 1980–88, the global oil market was far more stable. Moreover, Saudi Arabia was both able and willing to cushion these shocks. With the collapse of world oil prices in 1986, OPEC and non-OPEC producers alike lost their collective effectiveness, and the Arab 'oil weapon' basically disappeared. For US policymakers, the main oil problem now was ensuring that the new Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), formed in 1981, be 'protected' from regional (Iranian) or exogenous (Soviet) inroads. Fortunately for Washington, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein shared US concern over Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's regional system-challenging proclivities. Iraq provided the military shield, the GCC states the money, and the US the intelligence data to beat back the Iranian Islamist challenge. Just over two decades later, however, as oil prices spiked to well over US$100 per barrel, Arab and other oil exporters were gaining new leverage in regional and global affairs.

This was not to last. From US$125 per barrel of Brent crude in 2008, the price plummeted to around US$50 per barrel by 2014, and industry experts were forecasting a long era of low prices. Even more profound was the reemergence of the US as a major producer and possibly, again, an exporter of oil and gas thanks to the new technique of hydraulic fracturing (or 'fracking') of shale. With America approaching energy independence, the importance of Middle East oil as a national security interest began to diminish.

Israel

So firm—indeed, fervent—has US support for Israel become since 1967 that it is easy to forget how bitter the policy debate in the US was over Palestine in the 1940s and how evenly matched the antagonists. On the one side were the pro-Zionists in the domestic political arena; on the other, the executive branch officials concerned with the global and regional implications of a US-supported Jewish state. In a well-known article published in the *Middle East Journal* in 1948, Kermit Roosevelt, an American intelligence expert on the Middle East, described (and criticized) the Zionist lobbying effort, observing that 'almost all Americans with diplomatic, educational, missionary, or business experience in the Middle East protest fervently that support of political Zionism is directly contrary to our national interests, as well as to common justice' (Roosevelt 1948: 1).

But President Harry Truman, influenced by Zionist friends and desirous of Zionist political support in the 1948 election campaign, decided that the US would support the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Had he not taken that stand (and he himself wavered at one point), the Zionist enterprise in Palestine might have taken a weaker form and, indeed, might not have ultimately succeeded. It was not until 1967 that the executive branch

diplomatic and defence establishment, impressed with Israel's military prowess and Arab weakness, was finally persuaded that Israel might be something more than a burden on the national interest. Since then, the deeply committed supporters of Israel have managed not only to mobilize most of the American Jewish community, but have also helped win US public opinion, in general, to support Israel and its policies in the region almost without reservation. Perhaps the best evidence for the political clout of Israel's supporters is the size of the annual US aid package: upwards of US$3 billion.

Israel in the first two decades of the twenty-first century is not only an established part of the Middle Eastern landscape, but has also become a regional superpower: its gross national product is more than twice that of the largest Arab state, Egypt, and it has a world-class military establishment. Yet the naysayers of the 1940s were not entirely wrong in their assessment. Indeed, they were right in forecasting that the US relationship with the Arab world would deteriorate, that repeated wars and immense suffering would result from the creation of a Jewish state, and that the Soviets would take advantage of this rancour and instability. US political leadership was prepared to accept these costs and to insist that the Arabs accept them too. For US leaders, the costs were bearable, because they included neither loss of access to Arab oil, nor the complete loss of the Middle East to the Soviet Union. For that, they may thank the Arabs, who failed to respond collectively to the challenges facing them, and the Soviets, who proved incapable of sustaining their empire.

As midwife at the birth of Israel in 1948, the US faced the task of helping to arrange a settlement that would see it through infancy and ensure it a prosperous life. To that end, the US has, over the years, supported a variety of diplomatic initiatives and projects to normalize the new state's relations with its neighbours. But owing to the manner in which Israel had been established—basically by force of arms, which led to the displacement of some 750,000 Palestinians into neighbouring countries—these efforts were largely unsuccessful until 1978. Only then, at Camp David, did the US government finally make a significant dent in the problem.

The Camp David accord is a milestone (see **Chapter 12**)—one of two pivotal events for US policy in securing the 'normalization' of Israel in the Middle East; the other is the Madrid/Oslo peace process that began in September 1991 (see **Chapter 13**). But the road from Camp David to Madrid was bumpy, to say the least. The presidency of Ronald Reagan (1980–88) proved sterile with respect to the Middle East. Reagan's officials maintained a quixotic and unrealistic fixation on 'strategic consensus', by which they meant agreement between Israel and its Arab neighbours to cooperate in rolling back what they saw as Soviet inroads in the Middle East. Reagan's first Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, is widely believed to have given 'an amber light' for Israel's invasion of Lebanon, a bloody adventure that only intensified Israeli–Palestinian hostility. The Reagan administration also sought to resuscitate the perennial 'Jordanian option' as a solution to the Palestine problem, even though Jordan's King Hussein was no longer in a position to represent Palestinian nationalism. So ill-equipped were the Reaganites to understand, let alone to deal with, the Middle East that they allowed valuable years to go by during which the Arab–Israeli situation only worsened. This paralysis of policymaking set the stage for the Palestinian intifada, a mass uprising of young, stone-throwing Palestinians in the occupied territories, which began in December 1987 and refocused world attention on Palestinian national grievances as the heart of the Arab–Israeli conflict. As we shall see, however, the ongoing diplomatic impasse, coupled

with the rise of extremist trends both in Israel and among the Palestinians, would begin to fray the special relationship between the US and Israel.

Policymaking: structures and process

An examination of the internal workings of US Middle Eastern policy is essential for understanding why the US pursues policies that generally elicit hostility from people in the region and even exasperate traditional European allies. One key point emerges: Middle Eastern policy is decisively shaped by domestic US politics.

Unlike other major US foreign-policy issue areas, the Middle East is deeply embedded in US domestic politics. The process of Middle East policymaking involves interaction between the following key structures.

The White House

US presidents, as Quandt (1993) has observed, are by far the key actors in the shaping of Middle Eastern policy. They are driven by an awareness that what they do in the Middle East can have a significant positive or negative effect on their political future, because of the influence of the pro-Israel forces on the electoral process. They are also influenced by a panopoly of policy experts in the executive branch, and in the 'think tank' and academic communities, who shape their understanding of what is going on in the region and how this affects US security and economic interests.

The executive branch

The State Department is not the only organization in the vast executive branch of the US government that helps to shape Middle Eastern policy. It must compete with other bureaucracies, which often have divergent views. It must also contend with influential lobbies and elements in Congress, who see the State Department as 'anti-Israel'. The Defense Department has an important voice, especially present in the first decade of the twenty-first century, since the US military has a significant presence in almost every country in the region. The 'intelligence community' consists not only of the CIA, but also of several other similar organizations, such as the National Security Agency (NSA), which monitors electronic communications worldwide. Increasingly, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) plays an important role overseas, especially since the rise of transnational terrorist networks.

The legislative branch

Both houses of the US Congress—the Senate and the House of Representatives—play an important role in Middle Eastern policy formation. Each body has well-staffed committees on foreign relations, security issues, intelligence, and finance. These committees hold hearings on Middle Eastern policy issues, mobilizing the research arm of Congress, but also outside experts and lobbyists. Because the pro-Israel lobbies and the voting constituencies behind them exert such pervasive influence over members of Congress, who fear and respect the

influence that they exert in elections, Congress regularly authorizes massive US financial aid to Israel (at the time of writing, over US$3 billion annually) and occasionally passes resolutions that even the White House finds excessively pro-Israel. Congressmen generally go along with the policy advice disseminated by pro-Israel think tanks on other Middle Eastern issues, such as arms sales to Arab governments or criticism of the Palestinian leadership. It should also be noted, however, that Congress does offer a limited opportunity for opponents of US policies in the Middle East to be heard.

The political parties

In general, Middle Eastern policy issues have been considered 'above partisan politics', at least by the politicians. Indeed, there is a bipartisan consensus that Israel's security and prosperity is a fundamental US priority. Similarly, the importance of access to oil and (until the demise of the Soviet Union) the need to contain communist influence in the region has been shared by both Democrats and Republicans. That said, until recently the Democratic Party has been regarded as more pro-Israel than the Republicans. But in recent election campaigns, especially in 2012, the increasingly influential neo-conservative elements in the Republican Party actively sought to present their party as more pro-Israel than the Democrats. Other Middle East issues also stimulated partisan conflict. In the 2004 and 2008 presidential campaigns, for example, Democratic candidate Barack Obama accused President Bush of needlessly invading Iraq and failing to advance in the 'war on terrorism'.

The 'opinion-makers'

Within the policy community, several think tanks attempt to influence the Middle Eastern policy debates. Those debates are still heavily shaped by organizations with a pro-Israel and neo-conservative agenda: the Washington Institute on Near Eastern Policy, a spin-off from one of the key pro-Israel lobbies; the Heritage Foundation; the American Enterprise Institute; and the Hudson Institute. But there are others, such as the New America Foundation, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and the Middle East Institute, that eschew partisan positions. As for the news media, it is an exaggeration to assert, as some have done, that they are controlled by pro-Israel elements that dictate their coverage of the Middle East; if anything, news coverage in the US press has improved, in terms of reporting Arab as well as Israeli perspectives. On the editorial and opinion pages, however, anti-Arab and pro-Israeli commentary is abundant. On Middle Eastern issues not directly involving Israel, there is considerably greater diversity of opinion. Liberal and left-wing media outlets certainly exist, but their voices are relatively weak. It must be admitted that the American media in general have become weaker in their coverage of foreign news. On the positive side, however, the appearance of new media and information technologies in and on the Middle East—especially Al-Jazeera, and the reporting by PBS and NPR—has improved the coverage of Middle East issues in the US.

The lobbies

There is a consensus among observers of US politics (whatever their views on the Middle East) that the network of organizations that make up 'the Israel lobby' is one of the two or

three most powerful lobbies in Washington (Tivnan 1987). The American–Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) is perhaps the most visible of these groups, and it has decades of experience in influencing both Congress and the White House, but it is only the tip of an iceberg of state and local organizations with a well-deserved reputation for being able to channel money and votes in election campaigns. The Israel lobby is thought to have more influence with the Democrats than with the Republicans, although it assiduously cultivates both. Democratic candidates typically win a large majority of 'the Jewish vote'. American Jews, who number around 5.3 million, make up around 2 per cent of the adult population, are concentrated in key states, and are politically active in terms of campaign contributions and voter turnout. It is also important to note that support for Israel is not at all confined to Jewish Americans. Large numbers of Christians, especially the increasingly influential evangelicals and fundamentalists, also enthusiastically support the hawkish elements that dominate Israeli politics. Pro-Israel organizations also benefit from generous funding from wealthy businessmen such as Sheldon Adelson, the Koch brothers, and Haim Saban. Criticism of the Israel lobby has been considered by many US politicians and analysts to be a taboo subject, because of fears of accusations of anti-Semitism—but, in 2007, two respected political scientists without Middle Eastern ties, Stephen M. Walt and John J. Mearsheimer, published a strong critique of the lobby as detrimental to US foreign-policy interests (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007), sparking a furious, but enlightening, debate. Nevertheless, the candidates for president in 2008 all appeared before AIPAC's annual meeting pledging one-sided support for Israel's positions in the ongoing conflict. But AIPAC's monopoly of the pro-Israel camp was challenged in 2008 with the appearance of a new Jewish organization—J-Street. J-Street offered a liberal-centrist alternative to its hawkish rival. Although lacking the organizational and financial clout of AIPAC, J-Street gained the attention and respect of the Obama administration and the foreign policy community with its more flexible and conciliatory stance toward the Palestinians.

The other major lobbying force—less focused than the Israel lobby, but still influential—is the oil and business lobby. Big oil companies, and construction and financial firms with major Middle Eastern interests, are concerned that the US should be able to do business in the region. The business lobby is generally closer to the Republicans than the Democrats. To a certain extent, this pits them against the 'Israel lobby', but not always. One reason why is that the American defence and high-tech industries find in Israel a very good customer. In the Republican administration of Ronald Reagan, Secretary of State George Shultz, an executive of Bechtel Corporation (a construction company with strong interests in the Arab world), turned out to be strongly pro-Israel. Many Arabs praised the election of George W. Bush in 2000, because they thought that the Arab oil and business connections of his family and key officials (such as Vice President Dick Cheney) would lead to greater 'understanding' by Washington of Arab points of view—but this did not happen.

Given the apparent structural complexity of the decision-making process on Middle Eastern policy, and the amount of information and expert opinion that is theoretically available to decision-makers, an academic observer is struck by the narrow, uninformed, and ad hoc nature of some policy outcomes. The decision-making on Palestine–Israel seems not to comprehend the dysfunctional side effects of US policy. In the decision to invade Iraq, the administration's contentions about the danger of weapons of mass destruction and Iraqi collaboration with Al-Qaeda terrorists were largely incorrect. And its post-invasion policy

planning and implementation seem to have been utterly uninformed by any understanding of Iraq's history, culture, politics, or its place in the region. And as we shall see in the section entitled **'Obama's attempt to balance hard and soft power'**, President Obama was hamstrung by domestic pressures in his fruitless effort to break the Palestinian–Israeli impasse.

A region in flux

While the US was growing in power and its interests in the Middle East were deepening, the region itself was and, as the 2011 Arab uprisings reveal, still is in the process of far-reaching social, economic, and political upheavals. It has been experiencing rapid population growth, and suffering from uneven and sluggish economic development. Oil wealth is mainly concentrated in only a few small, thinly populated countries; it has not been successfully deployed to promote region-wide sustainable development. Moreover, the collapse of oil prices in the mid-1980s and then again in the early-2000s continues to generate socio-economic strains on governments. Poor educational systems and a growing pool of unemployed young people pose a constant challenge to largely inefficient, authoritarian regimes. The annual series of *Arab Human Development Reports* prepared by Arab social scientists since 2002 (UNDP 2003–12) highlight these issues, which constitute important underlying factors behind several emerging political challenges to the role of the US in the region.

1979: the beginning of an era of change

These challenges were dramatically illustrated in 1979. That year was marked by five landmark events: first, the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel; second, the takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, by Islamist militants; third, the Islamist revolution in Iran; fourth, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; and finally, the emergence of Saddam Hussein as the sole ruler of Iraq.

On the surface, the Egypt–Israel treaty of 26 March 1979 represented a positive development, with the US playing the crucial role in bringing it about, thanks to the diplomacy of President Carter in the Camp David meetings the previous year. Momentous as it was, this breakthrough failed to address the heart of the Arab–Israeli problem: the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Indeed, because the 'Palestinian dimension' had not been successfully dealt with at Camp David, new pressures began to build up: Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, trying to liquidate the Palestinian resistance. The Palestinians launched their first *intifada* in 1989; and Israel fought three wars in Gaza in 2008–09, 2012, and 2014. The US undertook two major new diplomatic initiatives: the Madrid conference under President George H. W. Bush in 1991 and the 'Oslo peace process' under President Bill Clinton in 1993. Unfortunately, both initiatives ultimately collapsed, and the ensuing brutal conflict between Israel and the Palestinians continues to erode US stature in the Arab and Islamic worlds.

But elsewhere in the region more ominous developments were occurring. On 20 November 1979, a well-organized group of Islamist radicals seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca—the holiest site in the Islamic world. It took three weeks for the Saudi authorities, reportedly with help from French commandos, to quell the rebellion. While the militants were executed immediately, the incident suggested that the Saudi regime—notwithstanding its

conservative Islamic credentials—was vulnerable to Islamist opposition. Around the same time, there was an uprising by Shia militants, perhaps inspired by the Iranian revolution, in Saudi Arabia's heavily Shia Eastern Province. It was also quickly put down. But these events presaged the emergence of a much more serious threat from other religious dissidents in the 1990s (Fandy 1999: 47ff). Shia protest, mostly from Saudis abroad, reappeared. More significantly, a small number of radical salafi clerics, both inside and outside the kingdom, began to agitate for reforms of what they saw as a regime corrupted by Western—especially US—influences. Among these activists was a young man from one of Saudi Arabia's most successful business families: Osama bin Laden.

Farther to the east, in Iran, there was another major challenge. Iran's pro-American leader, Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, was forced to leave Tehran in January 1979, and the Islamic revolution was fully under way a month later. The coming to power of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini undermined a 'pillar' of US security interests in the region dating back to the early 1950s. It also signalled the resurgence of 'Islamist politics' throughout the region. Decades of Iranian popular resentment at US intervention erupted, symbolized by the seizure of the US embassy on 4 November 1979 and the holding of US hostages for over a year. The hostage crisis traumatized American public opinion and contributed to the defeat of President Carter in 1980. It also reignited negative perceptions of Islam among Americans and of the US among Muslims. During the first phase of the Islamic revolution, from 1979 until Khomeini's death in 1989, the Iranian regime waged an ideological campaign against the traditional (and pro-American) oil monarchies on the Arab side of the Gulf. So, when Iraq's leader, Saddam Hussein, decided to attack Iran in 1980, he was able to count on financial support from the Arab Gulf regimes and military intelligence support from the United States. But the Iranian challenge extended well beyond the Gulf: Tehran also cultivated a strategic alliance with the Baathist regime in Syria, and helped to develop and support the Islamist militant organization Hezbollah in Lebanon, elements of which were responsible for the murder and kidnapping of Americans and other Westerners, and for the disastrous bombings of the US embassy and US marine barracks in Beirut. The Islamist leadership also continued to develop Iran's nuclear capability (a project begun under the Shah); this would eventually precipitate a regional crisis, with the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia (among others) vowing to utilize all necessary means to prevent Iran from attaining a military nuclear capability.

As if the 'fall' of Iran were not enough of a problem for Washington, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 triggered fears among some American strategists that the Soviets would use Afghanistan as a springboard for extending their influence into the Persian Gulf area and perhaps beyond. Such fears revealed ignorance of geography and topography, as well as of Soviet capabilities. To prevent a new Russian march towards warmer waters, the Carter administration warned that Washington regarded the Gulf (on the Arab side at least) as vital to US interests, and it also undertook an energetic effort, with the support of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, to roll back the Soviets in Afghanistan by mobilizing Islamist militants called mujahedin. Armed with US shoulder-launched Stinger missiles, the mujahedin were able to inflict severe damage on Soviet military helicopters and to entrap their ground forces in the rugged Afghan terrain. But the defeat of the Soviets, which led in part to the collapse of the Soviet Union itself, not only failed to bring security to Afghanistan and the Gulf area, but also left a chaotic 'failed state' of warring Islamist militias. Worse

still, with the battle against the Soviets won, many thousands of these militants, who had come from Arab and other Muslim states, left Afghanistan in a mood to promote puritanical Islamic reform by force of arms (including terrorism) through organizations such as the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

Finally, on 16 July 1979, Saddam Hussein consolidated his personal authority in Iraq upon the resignation of President Ahmad Hassan Al-Bakr, a decade after their Baath nationalist party had taken power in a military coup. At this juncture, Iraq was well placed to assume the leadership of the Arab world, especially since Egypt had been ostracized after President Anwar Sadat had signed the peace treaty with Israel without having achieved any gains for the Palestinians. Iraq's abundant oil revenues were actually used quite effectively to build the country's socio-economic infrastructure, as well as to support an ambitious military programme. Saddam Hussein's ambition and ignorance of political realities led him to go to war with Khomeini's Iran. In Washington, the Reagan administration (some of whose officials resurfaced in the administration of George W. Bush), attempting to play realpolitik, offered military intelligence assistance to Saddam in the hope of preventing an Iranian takeover of the vulnerable pro-Western Arab oil monarchies; it was also pleased that the war lasted a long time (from 1980 to 1988), giving Iraq a pyrrhic victory, and weakening both of these big and unfriendly Gulf countries. But Washington's satisfaction was short-lived, for in 1990 Iraq suddenly overran its small and oil-rich neighbour Kuwait. The administration of George H. W. Bush refused to countenance Saddam's takeover and US armed forces led an international coalition to expel the Iraqis from Kuwait. It was the first—but not the last—major US military action in the Arab world. Following Iraq's expulsion, for just over a decade Washington sought to maintain Gulf security through a strategy of 'dual containment' of both Iraq and Iran, with the emphasis on pervasive and debilitating sanctions against Iraq intended to diminish its military threat potential against its neighbours, and to eliminate its capabilities to produce or deploy weapons of mass destruction.

The emergence of Islamist transnational networks

The most important development toward the end of the twentieth century was militant political Islam, a force that challenged many of the states and the state system itself. With its hostility to America and the West in general and, in some cases, its readiness to utilize terrorist tactics, Washington came to see it as a national security threat. Its Islamic political discourse took two fairly distinct forms—Shi'ite and Sunni. The Shia-driven movement was inspired and supported by the revolutionary Iranian regime. It manifested itself most dramatically in Lebanon, which was in the throes of a civil war, in the form of the Amal movement and Hezbollah. Americans and other Westerners were taken hostage in Beirut, and some were killed. Groups affiliated with what would become Hezbollah twice bombed the US embassy and, in a suicide truck bombing, killed 241 US Marines on a peacekeeping mission in 1983. Other such incidents occurred outside Lebanon.

The other strand, marked by fundamentalist salafi and Wahhabi Sunni Islam, traced its lineage to the anti-colonial struggles between the two World Wars, but then was overshadowed by the relatively secular nationalist movements of the 1950s and 1960s. Inspired by radical offshoots from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, it resurfaced in Egypt and Syria in the 1970s; it was responsible for the assassination of Egypt's President Anwar Sadat in

1980, and a bloody confrontation with the Syrian regime of President Hafiz al-Asad in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Islamist organizations also began to play a major role in Palestinian politics: the Islamist Hamas party carried the 2006 elections and subsequently took over control of the Gaza Strip. In the 1990s, Islamist movements successfully mobilized large numbers of followers in many Arab countries, leading in some cases, such as Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt, to violent confrontations. The movement assumed a transnational aspect, in as much as its leading ideologues, such as the Sudanese activist Dr Hassan al-Turabi, sought to build a loose, broad-based front across the entire Arab world. All of these developments were deeply worrying to US officials, because of the anti-Israeli and anti-American tone of their discourse. By the early twenty-first century, groups such as Al-Qaeda, the Nusra Front, and the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) were implanting themselves in states throughout the region, and US policymakers were scrambling to contain or destroy them with advanced military technologies, notably drones.

The 1990s: Kuwait, the 'peace process', and militant Islamism

At the beginning of the 1990s, there were many reasons to suppose that the US had achieved much in the Middle East. Yet these successes were shadowed by negative after-effects. The Americans had played the leading role in defeating Soviet communism in Afghanistan. And then, of course, the Soviet Union itself had collapsed. But success in Afghanistan was achieved by utilizing the militant mujahedin Islamists. When many of these 'Arab Afghan' fighters returned home, they turned their attention to combating pro-American regimes.

In Iraq, Washington reacted quickly to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Immediately sensing a direct threat to its oil and security interests in the Gulf, the US determined that it had to go to war to evict the Iraqis. The war was quick, inexpensive, and relatively painless for the victors. President George H. W. Bush effectively mobilized an international coalition, including several Arab states, to liberate Kuwait, but he lacked an international mandate to occupy Iraq to bring down the Saddam Hussein regime. Instead, a decade-long sanctions regime was imposed, which wreaked devastating effects on the Iraqi civilian population without undermining the regime. Along with US support for Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories, the US-led sanctions on Iraq contributed to the growing hostility towards the US in Arab and Muslim public opinion. The US policy of 'dual containment' of Iraq and Iran seemed at best a palliative, not a cure, for Gulf insecurity. A small, but influential, group of hawkish officials, former officials, and policy analysts—later to be known as 'neo-conservatives'—fervently believed that Iraq under Saddam Hussein was so dangerous to US (and Israeli) interests that merely 'containing' him was insufficient. With the election of George W. Bush as president in 2000, this group would be catapulted into power.

In the Arab–Israeli theatre, President Clinton, elected in 1992, inherited a promising new peace process from his defeated predecessor. The mechanisms laid down by former Secretary of State James Baker, which led to the Madrid Conference in 1991, had brought together the conflicting parties and created an elaborate multi-track structure of negotiations. By the time that Clinton took office early in 1993, the initial momentum of Madrid had flagged, and the subsequent bilateral talks in Washington between Israel and its neighbours had got bogged down. But then Clinton received an even better gift from Israel and the PLO themselves: the secret negotiations in Oslo led to the breakthrough 'Declaration of

Principles', signed in September 1993 on the White House lawn, and the beginning of the Oslo peace process, which initially appeared to be the best hope ever for Arab–Israeli peace (see **Chapter 13**). However, Washington's failure at the highest levels to prod the parties into keeping to the Oslo timetable and its failure to stop new Israeli settlement construction finally led to the collapse of the Oslo process—ironically, at Camp David—in August 2000. And so the vision of a 'new Middle East' articulated by Israel's Shimon Peres (Peres and Naor 1993) never materialized.

Meanwhile, networked Islamist terrorism—exemplified by fundamentalist Sunnis such as Osama bin Laden—was gaining ground. In the 1990s, there were several terrorist attacks on US targets, including one on New York's World Trade Center in 1993. In the late 1990s, American personnel in Saudi Arabia and embassies in Africa were also targeted. Although increasingly aware of this serious new threat, the Clinton administration responded in a relatively ad hoc manner (Gerges 1999). After the bombing of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1996, President Clinton ordered limited military strikes in Afghanistan and on what turned out to be a legitimate pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum. Following the bombing of US military facilities in Saudi Arabia in 1998, administration officials became even more alarmed, but were unable to fashion an effective counter-terrorism strategy. And President Clinton made no military response at all to the bomb attack on the USS *Cole* in Aden harbour in October 2000, just a few months before the end of his term. To its credit, Washington undertook efforts to reassure the Islamic world that the US was not anti-Islamic. For example, American Muslim leaders were invited to the White House for the *iftar* (the fast-breaking meal) in the month of Ramadan. But such gestures were mainly symbolic and the American attitude towards rising political Islam remained ambivalent at best, if not hostile.

The encouraging developments of the early 1990s—the removal of the Soviet threat from Afghanistan; the expulsion of Saddam Hussein from Kuwait; the Oslo peace process; President George H. W. Bush's talk of a 'new world order'—had turned to ashes by the end of the decade. Tensions in the Persian Gulf between Iran and its Arab neighbours remained high; Saddam's Iraq was still dangerous and unpredictable in spite of punishing international sanctions; Afghanistan was in turmoil and Al-Qaeda was on the rise; the Palestinian–Israeli conflict was about to erupt again in violence. And beneath the surface, the region's social and economic problems, and growing popular disaffection with corrupt and incompetent governance, were eroding the apparent stability of authoritarian regimes. Despite its uncontested military presence in the region, the US found itself unable to exercise sufficient 'soft power' to impose a Pax Americana on this turbulent region.

US responses to twenty-first-century challenges

US politics took a sharp rightward swing with the election of Republican George W. Bush in 2000 for two consecutive terms, the first of which especially was characterized by a muscular response to a threat emanating from the Middle East: the trauma of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on US soil. The election of Democrat Barack Obama in 2008 began with an effort to repair the rift with the Muslim and Arab worlds, but by the end of 2012, observers had begun to note significant continuities with the policies of his predecessor.

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The George W. Bush era and the 'neo-conservative revolution'

The administration of President George W. Bush (2001–08) was marked by a dramatic escalation of tension and instability throughout the broader Middle East region. With the collapse of the Oslo peace process under President Clinton, the Palestinian–Israeli conflict erupted into violence once more; while Bush initially showed interest in restarting serious diplomacy, he in fact allowed the situation to fester. It was only in November 2007 that he and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice belatedly tried to restart negotiations by calling an international conference in Annapolis, Maryland—but lack of preparation and the approaching end of his presidency were among the factors that prevented much progress from being made.

The US response to the attacks of 9/11 was encapsulated in the term 'global war on terror'. Eschewing a law-enforcement strategy, the administration advanced a military approach, focusing initially on regime change in Afghanistan, where the Taliban rulers had given sanctuary and protection to Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda. Washington deployed its intelligence agencies to hunt down radical Islamist terrorists around the world, and established special prisons in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and elsewhere to detain 'enemy combatants' indefinitely, without charges or legal recourse. Next, the administration turned its attention to a long-time objective of the neo-conservatives: overthrowing Saddam Hussein. It justified its invasion by citing intelligence reports about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction that later proved to be false. Equally incorrect were the allegations that Saddam had been harbouring terrorists. What had been expected to be a quick military and political operation turned out to be a swamp. One consequence of the US's misadventure in Iraq was the strengthening of Iran's influence throughout the region, even though the administration viewed 'Iranian-sponsored terrorism' (Shia, exemplified by its support of Hezbollah in Lebanon), along with Al-Qaeda and related terrorist groups (Sunni), as an existential threat to the US and its Middle Eastern allies—Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, among others. As Bush's second term came to an end, even his supporters were conceding that the 'global war on terrorism' was far from over. And the manner in which Washington was prosecuting this 'war' was creating intense and widespread hostility toward the US throughout the Arab and Muslim world.

In less than two years after 9/11, the administration of George W. Bush had launched three wars: the war in Afghanistan, the larger 'war on (Islamist) terrorism', and the invasion and occupation of Iraq. The president believed that there was still another front in the new struggle: the terrorism practised by Palestinian Islamist organizations against Israel. To that end, he undertook to effect 'regime change' (as he had in Afghanistan and Iraq) among the Palestinians by trying to sideline President Yasser Arafat with a more 'moderate' Palestinian leadership but was thwarted when Hamas won the Palestinian election in 2006. While professing to be an 'honest broker' role in breaking the Palestinian–Israeli impasse with a diplomatic agenda called the 'Road Map', the president made it clear that the real problem was on the Palestinian side, not the Israeli.

With over 130,000 US troops occupying Iraq and the administration declaring 'a generational commitment to helping the people of the Middle East transform their region' (Rice 2003), it was obvious that the US had moved away from its traditional stance of upholding the regional status quo towards a proactive, interventionist policy. In what was widely hailed as a landmark speech, President Bush himself committed the US to the goal of actively

promoting liberal democracy and free-market economic reforms, not only in Iraq, but also throughout the region (Bush 2003). The 'neo-conservative' network of hawkish policymakers who had fashioned the new approach justified the US's new boldness as 'manifest destiny', on the one hand, and the ineluctable workings of realism in international politics, on the other. As the neo-conservative commentator Robert Kagan (2003: 85–8), wrote, it was a policy driven by two imperatives: security in the post-9/11 era, and an ideological sense of moral mission, the origins of which can be traced to the very beginnings of the American republic.

Thus the greater Middle East became the testing ground for the new US project, and within it the Arab world was 'ground zero': the source of what the US administration insisted was the new danger—Islamist terrorists, irrational and therefore undeterrable, possessed of low-tech portable weapons of mass destruction and therefore uncontainable, who could strike at the US heartland unless they were pre-emptively liquidated. The Middle East, and indeed the vaster Islamic world, was, in this view, a breeding ground for this terrorism. Not only must terrorist organizations be rooted out, but the 'swamp' in which they breed must be drained. The new task of US foreign policy was not only to conduct regime change by force if necessary, but also—through vigorous democracy promotion—to reshape the domestic environment of states whose educational systems, religious organizations, incompetent governments, and stagnant economies nurtured anti-American terrorism. It proved to be an impossible project.

Obama's attempt to balance hard and soft power

With the election of Barack Obama in 2008, the 'neo-conservative revolution' that had shaped his predecessor's foreign policies seemed to be over. Obama, facing a hostile, turbulent Middle East when he took office in January 2009, set out to reshape US policy in two contentious areas after the abrasive approach of his predecessor: the Palestinian–Israeli conflict and the US attitude toward the Islamic world.

He tried to revive the moribund Palestinian–Israeli 'peace process' by appointing former Senator George Mitchell as his special envoy and by calling bluntly for a halt in the expansion of Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian West Bank. He also called for new negotiations based on the 1967 borders. This effort, however, did not bear fruit. Mitchell's shuttling between Israeli and Palestinian leaders produced no breakthroughs, because neither party took his mission seriously. Mitchell was undercut by some of Obama's own officials, the Israel lobby and its friends in Congress who opposed the President's attempt at balance as 'anti-Israeli'. Then in May 2011, in a joint press conference with Obama, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu rudely criticized the president for his lack of understanding of Middle East realities, prompting a senior White House official to say: 'I can think of no other time when a president has been lectured to in the Oval Office' (Wilson 2012). But Obama turned the other cheek, and as the 2012 election campaign began, he backed away from his initial determination to settle the Palestinian–Israeli issue.

On the second issue, in a dramatic speech at Cairo University, President Obama extended the hand of friendship to the Muslim world in an effort to win back hostile Muslim and Arab public opinion: 'We seek a new beginning based on mutual interest and mutual respect and based on the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition', he said. But this gesture too proved ineffective. Two years after the speech, according to a poll

in six Arab countries (Arab-American Institute 2012), more than 75 per cent of respondents in Morocco, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia (and 41 per cent in the United Arab Emirates) stated that their expectations had not been met. Large majorities in each country indicated that 'US interference in the Arab world' and 'the continuing occupation of Palestinian lands' were the chief obstacles to peace and stability in the Middle East. Between 50 and 62 per cent of those polled stated that the killing of bin Laden made them less favourable toward the US. Only 10 per cent or fewer of those polled approved of Obama's policies—far lower than the approval ratings given to Sarkozy (France), Erdogan (Turkey), Ahmadinejad (Iran), or Abdullah bin Abdel Aziz (Saudi Arabia). And a Zogby poll in November 2014 found that almost eight out of ten respondents in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, and Turkey disagreed with statement that the US 'contributes to peace and stability in the region'.

A wartime president

The president then turned his attention to extracting US forces from the wars in Iraq, which he had criticized as 'a war of choice'; and Afghanistan, which he called 'a war of necessity'. Having campaigned on a promise to pull US forces out of Iraq (which, at the height of the war, numbered more than 150,000), he withdrew the last combat troops in 2010 and completed the final withdrawal in December 2011. But the war had cost the lives of some 4,500 US soldiers and over US$1 trillion, and the 'new' Iraq was deeply divided, unstable, and subject to Iranian influence. In the US's other war—Afghanistan—Obama took a different tack, ordering a 'surge' of 30,000 in US troop strength, bringing the total to more than 100,000, promising to start withdrawing them in 2011, and completing the withdrawal by 2014. But well into Obama's second term (2012–16), the Taliban were gaining ground, the Afghan government continued to flounder, and a substantial number of US military 'advisors' remained in the country.

As for the war against Islamist extremism, Obama, who had been criticized by the Republicans for being 'soft' on national security, actually intensified military action against the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and its offshoots in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen. On 2 May 2011, Obama authorized the US Special Forces attack that killed Osama bin Laden in his compound in Abbotabad, Pakistan—the crowning achievement for the US war on Al-Qaeda and one that would burnish the President's credentials as a strong leader. In the first three years of Obama's presidency, the US conducted at least 239 covert remotely piloted aircraft (better known as drone) strikes compared with the forty-four approved during George W. Bush's tenure. Despite public outcry over the targeting of American 'terrorist' citizens, the accidental killing in 2015 of an American hostage, and the 'collateral damage' inflicted on civilians, the Obama administration appeared determined to continue and even expand the use of drones. Some saw a certain irony in his having been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009.

Obama and Iran

As part of his plan to promote US 'engagement' with the Middle East Obama declared that he would reach out to Iran on the basis of mutual respect, despite the history of bitter relations dating back to 1979. But Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad rebuffed this overture.

Iran continued to provide support to Syria and the Lebanese Hezbollah organization, and to develop its nuclear programme, which it claimed was for peaceful purposes only. These activities were anathema to Israel especially, and they also resonated badly in the US and Saudi Arabia. However, when the Iranian regime crushed the 'green revolution' uprising surrounding the 2009 Iranian presidential election, the US administration basically stood aside. Instead, it resorted to a policy of increasingly severe economic sanctions and encouraged the European Union and other industrialized, oil-consuming countries to do the same. Unimpressed by Iran's commitment as a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (which neighbouring nuclear-armed Israel, Pakistan, and India have refused to sign), Washington and its allies remained deeply concerned that Iran was secretly developing a military nuclear capability. As continuing negotiations were proving unproductive, the possibility of an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities increased and, along with it, the likelihood that the US would be drawn in. Administration officials were aware of the negative consequences of US military action in yet another Middle Eastern Muslim country, given the experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. For a time the possibility of a new war in the Gulf, initiated by Israel with the likelihood of the US being drawn in, seemed real, but the election of Hassan Rouhani in 2013 cooled the situation, as the new President was far less bellicose than his predecessor. Negotiations over Iran's nuclear programme between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany had begun in 2006 but gained momentum in 2014. In a distinct break with the past, high level American and Iranian diplomats negotiated face-to-face in a business-like manner leading to a framework agreement in 2015. Were the negotiations to succeed, leading to curbs on the Iranian nuclear programme in exchange for the lifting of sanctions, the tantalizing prospect arose of a major diplomatic realignment in the region and the possibility of reduced tensions. But America's traditional allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia, viewed the process with alarm.

The United States and the 'Arab Spring'

Nothing could better illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of US Middle East policies than the Obama administration's reaction to the 'Arab Spring'—the series of uprisings that began late in 2010 and continue to reverberate throughout the region. There is no denying the 'epidemic effect' of this phenomenon and the commonalities of mass protest that toppled dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, challenged regimes in Bahrain and Syria, and panicked rulers in neighbouring states, to co-opt or pre-empt upheavals in their own countries. But, four years on, it was clear that the affected countries have different trajectories. A challenge for the Obama administration was to fashion a broadly consistent position on the challenges to Arab authoritarianism, while taking into account the particularities of each case.

On the rhetorical level, President Obama and then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asserted the classical US *idealist* stance: in principle, Washington supports transitions to democracy. On the *realist* level, however, prudence was the watchword. Having initially hesitated to abandon authoritarian allies in Tunisia and Egypt, the administration calculated that qualified support for the oppositions was the intelligent position to take. In Libya, despite the 'brother leader' Muammar al-Gaddafi's earlier abandonment of his military nuclear ambitions, there was no love lost; the question was how much support to give an

opposition movement that initially seemed destined to be liquidated by the dictator. Not wanting to plunge unilaterally into yet another military adventure, Obama elected to 'lead from behind' a NATO-led coalition, which used a Security Council Resolution calling for humanitarian protection of protesters to destroy the regime and its military forces. In chaotic Yemen, the administration was torn between the regime of President Ali Abdullah Salih, a willing and compliant ally in the war on Al-Qaeda terrorism, and a disaffected populace in which the opposition included elements considered neither democratic nor pro-American. Again, 'leading from behind' seemed the most prudent course—in this case, behind the multilateral efforts of the Arab GCC countries. But in Bahrain the Obama administration faced a dilemma. Nobody could doubt the massive popular antipathy to the regime of King Hamad bin Issa Al-Khalifa and the brutal reaction of his security forces to the protests. But here Obama punted. Under strong pressure from the rulers of Saudi Arabia, who chose to see the Bahrain uprising as a Shia–Iranian plot, the administration criticized the Bahrain rulers for their bad behaviour, but issued only pro forma protest against the Saudi intervention to try to crush the protests. Oil and strategic interests trumped democratic principles.

It was the Syrian uprising, however, that proved to be the biggest challenge. Initially, President Bashar al-Asad delusionally claimed that his regime would be immune from the Arab Spring because of its apparent fidelity to the Arab cause in Palestine. As it became obvious that popular discontent was widespread and deeply rooted, Bashar al-Asad's ill-advised response was to administer a 'shock and awe' dose of brutality in the hope of nipping the uprising in the bud—perhaps following the example of his father in the notorious crackdown in the city of Hama in 1982, in which at least 10,000 people were killed. Remarkably, however, the protests continued and deepened to the point at which the conflict became militarized. Syria was plunged into a civil war in which both the regime and the opposition attracted outside military assistance. As of 2015 over 200,000 Syrians had died and millions had become displaced in what was said to be the worst humanitarian catastrophe of the twenty-first century. For the Obama administration, Syria was seen both as a golden opportunity and a trap. Rarely were principle and interest more closely aligned. On the one hand, there was the prospect of bringing down a brutal dictatorship, giving democracy a chance, and delivering a body blow to Iran's regional influence, while strengthening the security of Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other friendly Sunni regimes. On the other hand, the Asad regime was politically cohesive at the elite level, and possessed of formidable military and security assets, while the opposition, initially at least, appeared poorly armed and deeply divided. Moreover, Washington was concerned about its potential Islamist character and the possibility of Al-Qaeda or other such groups taking power in a post-Asad period—which would hardly bode well for Israeli or US interests. Obama's advisers did not want to see the US drawn into problematic new military engagements in Syria and/or Iran, especially since there was little support for a multilateral approach along the lines of NATO's Libyan campaign. UN mediation was proving ineffectual. Moreover, Russia and China had blocked UN Security Council resolutions opening the way for military intervention. In 2012, President Obama—laying down a 'red line'—warned Syria that its use of chemical weapons would have serious consequences. In 2013 the Syrian regime unleashed a chemical weapons attack against an opposition stronghold in a Damascus neighbourhood, killing many civilians. But the Obama administration refused to state that

the 'red line' had been crossed, and instead of ordering a military response the President accepted a Russian proposal that Syria destroy its chemical weapons stocks. With the US reluctant to support the opposition forces robustly, the Asad regime gained strength and the opposition found itself increasingly dominated by Islamist extremist groups. By 2015 one of those groups, the so-called Islamic State (or ISIS), which had originated in chaotic Iraq, had occupied substantial territory in Syria as well as Iraq. In 2014 Obama had spoken dismissively of ISIS, but a year later he sought Congressional authorization to use military force against it.

There were at least three points of view about Obama's handling of the Arab Spring. From the left, there were those who faulted the administration for not being consistently on 'the right side of history'. They pointed to the initial reluctance to abandon Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt, to foot-dragging in Yemen (because of Washington's close anti-terrorism cooperation with Ali Abdullah Saleh), to pusillanimity in Bahrain (where Saudi pressure and US military relations trumped supporting the protesters), and to timidity in Libya and, especially, Syria. From the right, there was anger at insufficient support for traditional allies in Tunisia, Egypt, and Bahrain, and alarm about the possible rise of anti-American Islamism in the guise of the Arab Spring. From the relatively non-partisan 'realist centre', there was approval of Obama's 'nimble' Middle East policies, citing his nuanced approach to the complexities of the Arab Spring and other regional issues (Gause and Lustick 2012).

Conclusion

In reviewing some 200 years of US involvements in the Middle East, we observe the interplay of idealism and realism. Missionaries and educators tried to bring what they felt were the benefits of Christianity and Western enlightenment in the nineteenth century. President Wilson sought to advance 'self-determination'. In the period after the Second World War, US governments gave foreign economic assistance and, lately, have sought to promote democracy. With the rise of the US as a global power after the First World War, interests took priority over ideals: hence the emphasis on 'protecting' oil interests and Israel, and promoting 'friendly' regimes by means both overt and covert. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, some US commentators spoke of a Pax Americana over the Middle East, considering the US military's formidable presence throughout the region.

But a mere fifteen years later, America's influence seemed to have dramatically waned. If preserving regional stability was Washington's top priority, clearly its policies were not working. Four major Arab states—Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen—were falling apart. Islamist militant movements, fundamentally hostile to the US, were in the ascendency not just in those countries but throughout the region. Iran and its Arab allies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen were challenging the dominance of America's traditional Sunni allies—the Gulf states, Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon. US-sponsored diplomacy in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict had stalled, fuelling public anger toward America throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds. Long-time US partners—Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey—looked with dismay at what they saw as American irresoluteness.

An Obama doctrine?

President Obama clearly tried to rein in the foreign policy triumphalism of the previous administration. He did so mindful of the relative decline of the United States in the changing global balance of power. Having faced (and slowly overcome) the financial crisis of 2008, and having tried to deal with serious domestic problems such as budget deficits, inadequate health care, growing socio-economic inequality, and decaying infrastructure, the President was also aware of the robust rise of China in Asia. To that end, in 2011 Obama and his Secretary of State Hillary Clinton articulated what they called a 'rebalancing' (or 'pivot') of US attention toward Asia, with an eye to containing the expansion of Chinese power and influence. The reaction among America's Middle East allies was one of dismay. They feared that an America whose military assets were shrinking would have to contract its Middle East presence in order to bolster its presence in Asia. And in the Middle East itself they observed a reluctance on the part of Washington to involve itself. They remembered that Obama had come to power promising to extract the US military from Afghanistan and Iraq, and they puzzled at his 'leading from behind' in the Libyan uprising. Worse still, they faulted his failure to intervene actively on behalf of the opposition to the Bashar al-Asad regime. His meek acceptance of Israel's rejection of his call for an end to settlement expansion in the West Bank was seen as further evidence of American weakness. Most worrisome to them was the realization of a US (and other major powers) agreement with Iran over its nuclear programme, and the prospect that an Iran relieved of sanctions would seek to dominate the region.

President Obama, of course, rejected such criticism. In a lengthy interview with the *New York Times* in April 2015 (Thomas L. Friedman, 'Iran and the Obama Doctrine', *New York Times*, 5 April 2015) he said 'We will engage, but we preserve all our capabilities. ... at this point, the US's core interests in the region are not oil, are not territorial, our core interests are that everybody is living in peace, that it is orderly, that our allies are not being attacked, that children are not having barrel bombs dropped on them, that massive displacements aren't taking place.' If those were the objectives, they were far from being achieved as Obama neared the end of his presidency.

Key events

1919 King–Crane Commission, sent by President Wilson in 1919 to ascertain the wishes of former Ottoman peoples

1928 Red Line Agreement opens the Middle East to US oil companies

1947 Truman doctrine: promise of US aid to Greece and Turkey

1953 CIA coup to remove Iran's Prime Minister Mussadiq

1955 Baghdad Pact: pro-Western security alliance

1956 Suez crisis

1957 Eisenhower doctrine promises US support to Arab regimes

1967 Six-Day War

1973 Arab–Israeli War

1978 Camp David accord

1979 Egypt–Israel treaty

Iranian Revolution and subsequent hostage crisis provoke a major rupture in US–Iran relations

1991 Gulf War: US and allies expel Iraq from Kuwait

Madrid Conference initiates Arab–Israel peace talks

1993 'Declaration of Principles' on the White House lawn

2000 Oslo process collapses at Camp David summit

Election of George W. Bush

2001 Terrorist attacks of 9/11 against US targets

US initiates attacks against Taliban regime in Afghanistan

2002 President Bush delivers 'axis of evil' speech

2003 US invasion of Iraq begins

Publication of 'Road Map for an Israeli–Palestinian Peace'

2007 Annapolis Conference (Maryland): attempts to restart peace talks

2009 Obama's speech at Cairo University

2011 Tunisia's Ben Ali flees; Egypt's Hosni Mubarak resigns; Libya's Gaddafi is overthrown

Killing of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan by US Special Forces

2012 Yemen's Ali Abdullah Salih steps down

2013 Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood President Muhammad Mursi is ousted by the military

The Raba'a Square massacre of Muslim Brotherhood supporters in Cairo

2014 Abu-Bakr Al-Baghdadi, leader of ISIS, declares a new caliphate

ISIS captures Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city

President Obama authorizes air strikes against ISIS in Iraq and Syria

2015 Re-election of Benjamin Netanyahu as Israel's prime minister

Saudi Arabia carries out air attacks in Yemen against the Houthi movement

Iran and the P5+1 reach a framework agreement on Iran's nuclear programme

Further reading

Al-Sumait, Fahed, Lenze Nele, and Hudson, Michael C. (eds) (2015) *The Arab Uprisings: Catalysts, Dynamics and Trajectories* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield)
A collection of scholarly analyses of the 'Arab spring'.

Bill, J. A., Jr (1988) *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press)
A well-researched study of US-Iran relations from the Second World War until the Revolution.

Clinton, Hillary (2011) 'America's Pacific Century,' *Foreign Policy*, 11 October
The former Secretary of State articulates a US 'rebalancing' toward Asia.

Gerges, F. A. (2012) *Obama and the Middle East: The End of America's Moment?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan)
An evaluation of the decline of US hegemony.

Lesch, D. W. and Haas, Mark L. (eds) (2014) *The Middle East and the United States: History, Politics and Ideologies* (5th edn, updated, Boulder, CO: Westview Press)
Essay collection on different aspects of US policy from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century

Mann, J. (2004) *The Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Viking)
A solid account of the neo-conservative network.

McClellan, S. (2008) *What Happened: Inside the Bush White House and Washington's Culture of Deception* (New York: Public Affairs)
A former White House spokesman reveals his dismay at how the administration misled the public on Iraq.

Mearsheimer, J. J. and Walt, S. M. (2007) *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux)
A vigorously argued critique of the lobby's enormous influence on US Middle Eastern policy.

Nasr, Seyyed Vali Reza (2013) *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat* (New York: Doubleday)
A well-informed discussion of American decline in world politics.

Quandt, William B. (2005) *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict Since 1967* (revised edn, Berkeley: University of California Press)
The standard account of US policy toward the Palestine conflict.

Sanger, D. (2012) *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power* (New York: Crown)
An analysis of Obama's applications of 'hard power'.

Wright, L. (2006) *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf)
One of the best studies of Osama bin Laden and his movement.

Questions

1. What are America's core national interests in the Middle East today?
2. What challenges do the recent upheavals within the region pose for US policymakers?
3. What is the relation between US domestic politics and its Middle Eastern policies?
4. Is American influence declining in the Middle East and is this perhaps a good thing?
5. How would you account for the waning of American popularity in the Middle East?