

Middle East

The Middle East came to prominence in US foreign policy after the Second World War when the imperial powers of France and Great Britain found it increasingly hard to maintain their hegemony in the region. The war had weakened France and Great Britain, and the US stepped in and became the key external guarantor of order in the area. This new role for the US was underlined in 1956 by the Suez crisis whereby France and Great Britain, alongside Israel, invaded Egypt to reverse the nationalist Egyptian leader, President Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal that provided a crucial waterway for world shipping. As the crisis unfolded, the US demanded that the three powers end their invasion as the Eisenhower Administration feared the effects the invasion would have on US-Soviet relations, the perception of the US in its relations with the newly emergent Arab nationalist governments and a wider concern for stability in this crucial oil-rich region. The crisis was a humiliating blow for Great Britain and shattered its post-war pretensions for maintaining its Empire in the Middle East. The search for stability has been a constant feature of US foreign policy in the region ever since this period, and was heightened by the regions possession of most of the world's oil reserves. A 1958 National Security Council (NSC) report made clear that the US needed to be prepared 'when required, to come forward with formulas designed to reconcile vital Free World interests in the area's petroleum resources with the rising tide of nationalism in the area'. Ultimately, such dilemmas were to be met by the use of 'force ... as a last resort' to insure that 'the quantity of oil available from the Near East on reasonable terms is sufficient ... to meet Western Europe's requirements'.

To this end the US has sought to bolster a number of regimes in the Middle East in the post-war period, and followed what was called the 'Twin Pillar' strategy: the support for both Iran (prior to the 1979 revolution) and Saudi Arabia (which continues to this day) as regional hegemony and local proxies. Iran first came into the US's regional sphere of influence in the Middle East when the joint CIA-MI6 coup overthrew the democratically elected leader of Iran, Mohammad Mossadegh. A secular nationalist and democratic reformer, Mossadegh had sought to nationalize the Anglo Iranian Oil Corporation (AIOC), which had worried the British and American governments. After the coup, the US supported the dictatorship of the Shah of Iran, a close US friend and ally. Similarly, the US

also came to rely upon the state of Saudi Arabia as a regional proxy. This relationship was sealed in 1945 when the then President Roosevelt met the Saudi King, Abdul Aziz Al Saud on the US warship, the USS Quincy. Similar to the later US policy in relation to the Shah's Iran, Roosevelt committed the US to protect the Saudi monarchical dictatorship from both internal and external enemies and in return the Saudi's would provide stability of oil supply to international markets. As Dick Cheney, the then US Secretary of Defense, alluded to prior to the onset of the 1991 Gulf War, US-Saudi relations 'hark back' to when Roosevelt met King Aziz on the USS Quincy and 'affirmed at that time that the United States had a lasting and continuing interest in the security of the kingdom'.

In 1979, US interests in the Middle East suffered a major blow when the Shah's regime was overthrown by a radical Islamist movement led by the Ayatollah Khomeini. In the face of this calamitous loss of an important ally in the region the then President, Jimmy Carter, declared his now famous Carter Doctrine in 1980. Much like the Monroe Doctrine in relation to Latin America, the Carter Doctrine declared the Middle East to be a region of profound importance to US national interests and committed the US to militarily intervene in the Persian Gulf Region should the US's national security interests be threatened. The loss of Iran, which had been a major strategic force in the region, meant that the US lacked a power projection capacity in the region. The doctrine thus committed the US to military intervention and also began the build up of a Rapid Reaction Force for intervention should a major threat occur. It was this nascent strategic infrastructure that was called upon for the 1991 Gulf War. Similarly, the US also committed itself to preventing another major upheaval such as the revolution in Iran and sought to stabilise the kingdom of Saudi Arabia through increased arms sales.

After the Cold War ended, US interests in the region continued to be characterised by an intense desire for stability and US foreign policy makers sustained close economic and political relationships with regimes in the Middle East. Of particular importance was the continued relationship with Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom sits on top of twenty five percent of the world's oil reserves and because of this and its highly developed industrial infrastructure, possesses the capacity to swing oil prices up or down as needs dictate. This close relationship has come under increased strain as a result of the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq. Fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were Saudi citizens and for many years the Saudis have supported a hardline Islamic ideology that is virulently

anti-western. On the Saudi side, they fear that the US invasion of Iraq has emboldened hardline anti-Saudi Al Qaeda type groups in the region as well as removing Saddam Hussein who acted as a major bulwark against Iran, a rival of Saudi Arabia.

Popular uprisings against authoritative governments in several North African and Middle Eastern countries in 2010-11 brought new challenges to US foreign policy. The 'Arab Spring' overthrew authoritarian leaders in Egypt and Libya while the crisis persists in Syria. The US government responded to these crises with 'smart power', using both a limited military power and diplomatic manoeuvres to promote peace and democracy in the region. However, the Middle East still remains a difficult puzzle for the US since the Arab Spring brought further uncertainty and instability to the region. At the same time the nuclear ambitions of Iran and the Arab-Israeli conflict persist while Turkey and Israel, the key allies of the US, have never been so hostile to each other. The situation of Iraq after the withdrawal of the US troops is still uncertain as the violence, though diminished, continues and the threat of a split of the country into different independent bodies has become even more visible without US protection. Although Obama declared US unwillingness to 'fight the world's wars', the US might need to revisit this new stance since the Middle East is unlikely to achieve peace on its own in the near future.

Key dates

- 1956. Suez Crisis
- 1967. Six-Day War, Israel occupies Sinai, Golan heights, West Bank, and Gaza
- 1980-1989. Iran–Iraq War results in 1-1.25 million casualties, Iraq uses chemical weapons against Iran and rebel Kurds.
- 1982. Israel invades Lebanon
- 1987-1990. First Intifada
- 1991. The Gulf War
- 1993. Oslo Accords
- 1994. Civil war in Yemen

- 2000. Israeli troops leave Lebanon
- 2003. The 2003 Iraq War
- 2004-2010. Sa'dah insurgency in Yemen
- 2005. Syrian troops leave Lebanon as a result of the Cedar Revolution
- 2006. The 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict; Saddam Hussein executed for "crimes against humanity"
- 2010. Arab Spring starts.
- 2011. Osama Bin Laden is killed.
- 2011. Muammar Gaddafi of Libya is executed.

Web sites

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5. MidEast Web
<http://www.mideastweb.org/index.html>
6. Guardian 'Barack Obama's Middle East Speech' (19 May 2011)
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/middle-east-live/2011/may/19/barack-obama-middle-east-speech-live>
7. About.com Middle East issues
<http://middleeast.about.com/od/usmideastpolicy/tp/obama-middle-east.htm>

8. MERIA: Middle East Review of International Affairs (Clinton & Middle East)
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9. Brookings institute 'Bush's Middle East vision'
http://www.brookings.edu/articles/2003/spring_middleeast_gordon.aspx
10. Human Rights Watch (Guantanamo)
<http://www.hrw.org/legacy/english/docs/2004/01/09/usdom6917.htm>