

MStudies, The International Relations of the Modern Middle East

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Lecture 8 The US and the Middle East

Framework: Why should the US be interested in the ME, and how did this interest develop?

Let's first look at a bit of history:

- The first state to recognize the newly independent United States of America in 1776 was **Morocco**.
- **The first real contact: TRADE 1803** – when the US tried to extend trade into the Mediterranean and encountered the fierce Corsairs of Tripoli. To deal with them, they either had to be bombarded into submission, or, paid a levy. The US refused to pay the levy and the USS Philadelphia was seized. As the US believed in the freedom of the Seas, it tried to organize an expedition from Alexandria to get back its ship, sending in the **Marines** to do the job. **Thus, the Marine Anthem:** ‘from the Halls of Montezuma to the sands of Tripoli.’ However, the Marines got stuck – and the US eventually was forced to pay for the ship.

- **(In effect, the US was able to avoid** such problems henceforth because of the British dominance of marine power, and its success in clearing both the Mediterranean, and the Persian Gulf, of piracy – a project that took years.)
 - **The second real contact: MISSIONARY EDUCATION. In the latter half of the 19th century,** American missionaries started to proselytize inside the Levant. This led to a major educational initiative, which produced the American University of Beirut, the American University of Cairo, the Roberts College in Istanbul (now Bobabachi University), and in Jerusalem, a missionary colony housed in what is today the best hotel in Jerusalem, the American Colony Hotel, ironically owned by Palestinians. Likewise, they established the American College in Tehran.
1. **The real start of US interest was of course, the oil industry.**
 - This began in the mid-20th century – the reason it was so late was because of the overwhelming dominance of the British in the Middle East.
 - In 1928, the **Red Line Agreement** was drawn up with the input of an Armenian oil man called Gulbenkian, which delineated British interests in the Ottoman territories. Everything inside the Red Line was left to the British – and was designed primarily to protect their rights within Iraqi territory, which they already knew contained oil. (This was of course in addition to British holdings in Iran). Anything outside the Line was left open to others.

- In 1933, Standard Oil obtained the concession in Saudi Arabia, which until then had not been thought to have any oil.
- 1938, oil production started in Saudi.

2. A parallel US interest in the Middle East was more general.

- **In the aftermath of Versailles**, Wilson's 14 Points stipulated that the states that were part of the Ottoman Empire should receive independence. But, as the US was not part of the League of Nations, the US had no part to play in the region during the mandate period. This however, fed American antagonism toward the colonial system.

3. The Second World War – changed everything.

- **In 1943, France was forced out of Syria and Lebanon.**
- **Britain** abandoned its mandate in Palestine
- **Meanwhile, the US** increasingly came to recognize the strategic importance of the Persian Gulf.
- **The growing clout of the US in the ME developed in the following way:**
- **A) Churchill signed the Atlantic Charter, which**, though he did not realize it at the time, made it a certainty that the British empire would be dissolved. Roosevelt, however, insisted on the clauses in which democracy and self-determination for the states of the world were emphasized, knowing full well the intentions and outcomes of the Charter.

- **B) Two crucial meetings indicated what American policy in the Middle East would be:**
- **i) The Casablanca Conference of 1943:** Roosevelt met the Sultan of Morocco in the town of Anfa, and promised to support the independence of Morocco after the War.
- **ii) The meeting on the Great Bitter Lake on the Suez Canal:** Where Roosevelt met Ibn Saud and guaranteed Saudi independence – in exchange for guaranteed oil trade.

4. Both issues represented the two main facets of American policy after the War:

- **The moral issue:** Anti-colonialism and independence, which led directly into support for Israel, and containing communism
- **The naked desire to control energy:** Delineated in a State Department Memo, dating as far back as 1945, it was boldly stated: “The Gulf represents the greatest asset in history and the greatest material prize’.

So we now see the elements of US policy, particularly as it approached the beginning of the Cold War:

- **The Middle East would be denied to everyone else, particularly the Gulf**
- **Support for Israel**
- **This was most clearly layed out in the Truman Doctrine – which stated US support for any state threatened by communism. The**

implications: a) The Mediterranean and the Gulf were guaranteed as American Lakes. **B)** US interests in the Saudi Kingdom were dominant.

Not everything was planned, of course, but the US was quick to exploit the opportunities that arose, to further these interests – and to ease out, or **replace the British** entirely in the Middle East. These opportunities included:

5. 1951 – the greatest opportunity of all, was the Iranian

nationalization of oil. Although until then, the British had been dominant in Iran, and the Anglo-Iranian Oil company its greatest foreign asset outside India, which was gaining at that time its independence, the British were unable to resolve the issue of Mohammad Mossadeq's takeover of the government and his nationalization of Iranian oil. **US help, and the CIA's eventual take-over of Operation Ajax,** which ousted Mossadeq and re-instated the Shah on his throne enabled the US to replace Britain as the primary power inside Iran.

6. 1956, The British mistake over the Suez Canal. As France, Britain and Israel moved into to re-take the Suez Canal after Nasser nationalized it, with the intent of ousting Nasser and thus removing a growing thorn, the US refused to support Britain, constituting one of the most tense moments in the post-War alignment of the two powers. **The outcome:** in the aftermath, the US surfaces as the dominant power in the Eastern Mediterranean.

7. **1957:** The Crisis over Lebanon. Because of the infiltration of Arab nationalism into the region, Lebanon's compromise led to the US – rather than Britain – offering support and protection.
8. **1960:** Crisis over the use of water from the River Jordan. In this instance, Israel wanted to divert the water along the spine of Israel in order to monopolize it for its own use. The US stepped in to arbitrate, and stopped an impending war. Thus, the US was able to dictate what should happen in the Middle East.
9. **1968, The US Formalizes the Dual Pillar Policy.** With the withdrawal of Britain from Aden, the dominance of outside powers in the Gulf for the first time in many decades waned. Nixon, in the wake of Vietnam, a time in which further US military adventurism was domestically viewed with concern, chose to rely on US allies, rather than inserting US power into the Gulf directly. The result was to empower the oil-rich states of Iran and Saudi Arabia to take on the job, ensuring they received the arms they asked for (and paid for) to do the job. It was, in fact, the only time in the modern period when local powers controlled the Gulf, a situation that would last until US marine power was brought into the Gulf during the Iran-Iraq War. 1971 withdrawal of UK from east of Suez.

The Second Dimension: Turning the Middle East into a surrogate arena for the Cold War . US primary goal – to contain communism, and its spread south.

10. The first confrontation began over the Suez War. As Britain, France and Israel made their move into Egypt, the Soviets invaded Hungary, hoping world attention was focused elsewhere. At the same time, the USSR threatened to attack Britain with missiles in retaliation for invading its ally, Egypt, in the ME. The US faced down the Soviet Union on both counts, forcing it to withdraw its intentions against Britain, and ensuring the invasion of Hungary did not widen into an extended takeover of adjacent territories.

11. A last attempt by Britain to exert influence in its previous mandate regions of the Middle East was in 1956, in the creation of the **Baghdad Pact** – a security organization modeled on NATO to contain the Soviet southern flank. It was a project in which the US was complicit. In 1958, however, this effort collapsed with the Iraq revolution and the institution of a radical pro-communist regime in Baghdad – which drew on the Soviet Union for support. This led to CENTO, which was influenced by the US.

12. The real destruction of British power in the Middle East came in 1967 with the **6-Day War**. This was not because the British tried to solve the crisis, but because it couldn't. On the other hand, Nixon became very involved in that war, confronting Moscow over the supply of its surrogates, Egypt and Syria, with armaments.

13. The **US policy toward Israel** as we know it today was created then. Up until that point, American support for Israel had been quite limited under

the Eisenhower and Kennedy Administrations. In 1967, Israel suddenly became a US obsession. The primary strategic relevance of Israel was to threaten the Soviet Union through its missile power, although it likewise served as a reliable US foothold in the Levant, and an example of democracy to point to in contrast with the Arab authoritarian regimes dominating that part of the Middle East.

Yet, for the US, too, 1967 was a threshold for its position and power in the Middle East.

+ **From 1967**, the US increasingly disadvantages itself in the region.

14. This begins in 1971-1973 with the emergence of the oil crisis. US

companies are nationalized throughout the region, including those in Libya, the Gulf. In effect, the oil rich nations seized control first of price, and then of the assets.

15. This culminates with the 1973 Oil Embargo, which was mounted by US

allies as much as its foes in protest against Western policy toward Israel. The US, along with Britain and Holland, are the main targets of the embargo. Oil flows out of the Persian Gulf only because the Shah of Iran chooses not to join the embargo and instead, support his alliance with the US, Israel, and Europe, particularly Holland.

16. 1979. The US under Carter loses Iran. In the Shah's place, the

Islamic Republic is established. The Iranian revolution is driven by anti-imperialism and a rabid nationalism that condemns the US as the

Great Satan, and adopts the slogan, 'Neither East nor West' as an alternative not only to alliance with one of the superpowers, but to the non-aligned movement. Equally, the revolution is characterized by the intent to export its vision of an Islamic community or ummah, into the region.

17. Also in 1979, the US, in its single-minded opposition to the Soviet

Union, makes an egregious and far-reaching error in Afghanistan. Having become increasingly committed to active confrontation against the Soviets, it supported the technique of terrorism. In effect, here we see the ideas that characterized the neo-con movement's foreign policy orientation taking root – that is, the projection of the national interest on a global scale. The hubris that characterizes American foreign policy begins then.

18. That means that we need to look at the Middle East in a slightly

different way. Up until the Carter administration, policy was predicated on the idea that direct intervention was neither possible, nor desirable. Thus Carter lost Iran. The Carter Doctrine, issued at Brzezinski's behest and in response to the Iran debacle and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, however, begins to introduce the idea that direct intervention is to be reconsidered. It declares the Persian Gulf a vital US national security interest and asserts US commitment to use 'any means necessary, including force' to secure that interest. The Pentagon creates the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, an embryonic instrument of military

intervention. It was also at Brzezinski's encouragement that Carter begins to support covert assistance to the Afghan mujaheddin. Then, there is the US-promoted creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981, designed to protect through association the littoral Arab states from Iranian revolutionary export, again reflects the idea that direct US intervention as a security strategy was part of modern US tradition.

19. When Reagan came to power, however, a new concept, that of direct intervention, gained currency. The Reagan Doctrine, issued hard on the heels of the Carter Doctrine, shifts into tougher language, promising that a threat to countries representing US interests would be considered a threat to the US – an expansion of material dimension on the Carter version. This had several implications:

20. In 1983, well into the Lebanon Civil War, having sent Marines to Beirut in the hopes of averting Lebanon's disintegration by separating the combatants, but misunderstanding the complexities of the situation, the mission ends in tragedy when a Shia suicide car bomber killed 241 Americans. As with the hostage crisis three years before in Iran, here was an event that horrified the US. To the policy of 'No more Irans' was now added, 'No more Beiruts'.

21. In 1984, four years into the Iran-Iraq war, in response to repeated confrontations between the Reagan administration and Iran, including the ambiguities of Iran-gate, relations were established with Iraq – a country that had previously been in the Soviet sphere of influence and,

since its withdrawal from the Baghdad Pact, an American enemy. Now, it was rehabilitated as a useful friend, and that famous picture was snapped of Secretary Rumsfeld shaking hands with Saddam Hossein.

22. In 1987, Reagan decided to intervene in the Iran-Iraq War by placing US marine protection around Kuwaiti tankers, what came to be known as the Tanker War. It was the first overt US military intervention in the region. As Andrew Bacevich notes in his upcoming book, *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War*, 'US naval forces assumed responsibility for escorting tankers across the Gulf, managing, among other things, to shoot down an Iranian commercial airliner, killing all 290 people on board.' This latter was a incident for which Iran never received reparations, and which earned a fatwa from Khomeini that predated by only a year the fatwa that was delivered against Salman Rushdie.

However, for the US, the Assumption was: that the US was confronting the greater evil - Soviet interests - by guaranteeing its own. Under Reagan, the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force matured into the US Central Command, and Reagan increased the flow of support to the Afghan mujaheddin, whom he compared to the Founding Fathers.

23. In each of these incidents, a door was opened in which US forces were introduced into the region. What Reagan did - was to draw the Middle east into a series of confrontations of the Cold War that involved communications, oil and Israel. In those areas, the US became integrated into the Middle East's problems.

24. In 1989, an enormous change took place with the end of the Cold

War. The US becomes the universal hegemon, and it enjoys a unipolar moment. This legitimizes direct US intervention as alliance patterns radically change. **The Post Cold War World demonstrates this in two**

respects: a) The Invasion of Kuwait. This is armed old-style

engagement. **b) the Middle East Peace Process under Bush Senior.**

Here the US is the sole interlocutor on both sides – a new-style form of engagement. **However, the outcome of the invasion of Kuwait:**

American military prowess brings no new world order to the Middle East.

The outcome of the Middle East Peace Process – despite the imagination of Baker and the clout of the US, the real change takes place through the Oslo Peace Accords, the behind-the-scenes work of smaller powers.

25. Clinton's approach destroys or ignores this. His concern is geo-

economics, not geo-politics, with the emphasis on US economic

domination. His instruments are the international economic institutions – the World Bank, the IMF – as well as the Washington Consensus. In this,

the Middle East role is: **a) A supplier of oil; b) supplier of**

communications that run from the US to China.

26. For the US, the only defect is the nature of the oil market, which it

couldn't, and can't, unilaterally control. Instead, it was still forced to rely on regional allies, such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Abu Dhabi.

Otherwise, it imposed its will on states in terms of economic and political development. Further, it was at this time that the US begins to see the EU

as a potential challenge whenever the Europeans don't cooperate. This was the beginning of the alienation with the EU, which the neocons under Bush Jr., would complete. Finally, the Clintonian policies become increasingly predicated on Manichaeism, that is, in seeing the US as an absolute good, and opponents as bad or evil – a policy orientation begun under Reagan, but which momentarily backtracked during Reagan's second term.

27. In the Middle East, the Clinton years experienced two great failures:

- a) that despite the sanctions, Saddam, after Kuwait, survives.** Saddam was meant to fall – instead, he became stronger, shearing away all the intermediary levels of power in Iraq, and concentrating authority and muscle in a tight Tikriti circle. Sanctions impoverish Iraq, sending it plummeting from one of the best educated, most modern societies in terms of healthcare and services, to one of the very worst in the Middle East. Meanwhile, US and British combat aircraft patrolled Iraq, and the US, to enforce Clinton's policy of 'Dual Containment' of both Iran and Iraq, expands CenCom by establishing permanent garrisons throughout the region. US forces rotate regularly through Saudi Arabia.
- b) the second failure was the inability to deal with al-Qaida,** post-1996, when it first formally appears. Periodic bombing and missile attacks against Sudan and Afghanistan do little to dent its capabilities.
- c) the Point:** despite being distracted by domestic issues, such as the Lewinski affair, the Clinton Administration still planned to intervene

both in Afghanistan, to get Bin Laden, and in Iraq, to topple Saddam. What it lacked was a good cause. The 1990s were a period of transition from the Cold War to a new state of affairs. What transpired was not hegemonic stability, nor a new world order because Clinton couldn't achieve it.

27. The real new world order, I argue, begins in 2001, the result of 9/11.

This was previewed in the Project for the New American Century, the brainchild of Richard Pearl, and presented to Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996 as blueprint of the Neocon agenda. The idea was: the Middle Eastern world should be remade on a democratic model to guarantee Israel; and, globalization as an economic model should be extended. This produced a new US agenda toward the Middle East. For the Neocons, 'it was important', as Paul Wolfowitz put it, 'to go for the jugular'. After 9/11, this meant a 'Global War on Terror' directed first at jihadists in Afghanistan, and Saddam in Iraq an obvious first piece in the projected domino effect that would bring a wave of democratic regimes, and hence, a new world order within the Middle East.

28. In the neo-Reaganite, Conservative agenda, the other dominant political thematic operative in the US at the time, assertive nationalism projected US national interest into the region as a way of confronting threat. **The irony:** was that both agendas saw Iraq as the key. Hence, their alliance in 2003 in promoting an attack on Iraq and the removal of Saddam. Both projects shared critical values: 1) they were both unilateralist, and hence, did not see the need for 'others' support,

because they knew they were morally in the right; 2) they were both imperialist, in that the projection of American democracy was understood as appropriate and necessary, whatever the local cost; and 3) both got trapped by traditional American views which eschew foreign entanglement and engagement – hence, the Bush administration’s lack of interest in nation-building either in Afghanistan or Iraq – a problem that plagues current debates on Afghanistan.

29. The failure of George W Bush’s ‘new era’ of warfare in Iraq, in which

‘shock and awe’, the use of high-tech precision weaponry to avoid civilian casualties, and a quick little war – all turned out to be a mirage, led to a complete reassessment of the necessities of war in Iraq, and later Afghanistan. This **meant that the moral approach of the US Project for the New American Century was no longer credible.** Though militarily still supreme, it is questionable whether the US can project politically the hegemonic power it has presumed to wield on all fronts since the end of the Cold War.

Today, US, practicing the legacy of Petraeus, is using the latter’s field manual FM 3-24, i focusing on hearts and minds, and attempting to gain the support of the population, not through the use of heavy technology this time, but by attempting to, among other things, ‘redress a crisis of popular confidence that springs from the weakness of institutions, the unpunished abuse of power by corrupt officials’, etc. Withdrawal of troops took place only after the emplacement of PM Maleki, increasingly

a dictatorial figure, and the autonomy of the Kurds. There is still no definitive oil law, and American investment in Iraq is considerably below China's, Brazil's, Turkey's or Iran's.

30. This is where **a)** the potential challenge from the BRICS (Brazil, India, China, and South Africa) becomes serious and **b) Russia's diminished role** but continuing interest in maintaining local hegemony finds continuing opportunity against the US, which it considers temporarily occupying its near-abroad. A growing local hegemon, like Iran, pushed by the US and the West, for example, now has options to look elsewhere for investment in its oil industry and support for its nuclear programme. In fact, the failure of the US policy toward Iran to deliver any gains consummate with US interests, combined with the breakdown in relations for over 30 years, has leant the EU a critical – if unsuccessful role in the nuclear negotiations, and continuing swing-power to Russia and China, diminishing US maneuverability. Indeed, though US troops are engaged in Afghanistan, Iran's importance to the process of conflict resolution in its immediate area has remained untapped. At the same time, Iran's relations with two critical groups the US likewise cannot engage with because it has labeled them terrorist – Hamas and Hezbollah – though contributing to the moniker, the Shia Crescent or Arc of Danger, can be viewed as a failure of US policy, in that it reduces US options in the Levant, while increasing Iran's influence over the Palestine –Israel issue.

- b)** Once Iran shifted away from being a member of Israel's periphery policy at the end of the Cold War, regional geostrategic rivalry has marked the relationship in which each has attempted to define the balance of power in the Middle East – and though couched in highly ideological language, has been distinguished by hard-headed tactics on both sides. Both have acted to ward off US policies in the region that could benefit the other, while using the Palestinian issue to garner support in their respective theatres of influence: Iran in the Arab world, Israel in the West. The standoff is exacerbated by Israel's hidden bomb, which fails to surface in any of the negotiations on Iran's bomb, making resolution of the latter unlikely until it does. As Trita Parsi argues, 'a negotiated resolution of this rivalry will significantly facilitate the resolution of other regional problems, rather than the other way around'.
- c)** The risk facing Obama, is that Israeli fears will determine US actions toward Iran in an increasingly volatile and nasty stand-off. Additionally, Obama's speech in Cairo, though hailed at the time as a break-through, failed to deliver results, leading to greater disappointment with US policy in the region. The support of the US toward the uprising in Egypt and Tunisia was delayed and lukewarm at best, and was not followed by support in Bahrain against its major ally, Saudi Arabia. A realist approach in US policy toward the region continues to characterize the US posture – with commitments to the GCC far outpacing commitments to democracy.

d) In regards to Iran's nuclear weaponization, there is a chorus in the US, of academics and political 'belligerati', including, for example, Christopher Lane and Michael Ignatieff, accepting a nuclear capable Iran as not only inevitable, but adequately containable by American and Israeli deterrence. It takes the larger view that Iran is a regional power with legitimate security concerns, which has nonetheless made an effort to remain within the NPT, and with more reason to develop turnkey capabilities on a par with Japan's and South Korea's than actual bombs, that is, enough to deter outside aggression, but not to exercise aggression itself. What is more, the manipulation of the NPT reports to paint Iran's intentions in a negative light are de-legitimizing the West's approach in Iran itself, leading to more than less popular support for its clerical dictatorship.

e) Indeed, a brief history of China's acquisition of the bomb may prove insightful at this juncture. When it began to develop weaponisation capability, the US and USSR were deeply concerned, and debate between them included plans to bomb China before it reached the final stage. Concern centred on similar issues raised in the Iran case: ability to reach sensitive targets (in that case, both the US and Soviet mainlands); regime aggressivity; reliability as a stable power to protect the weapons' use, and employing it only as a deterrent. China, it should be remembered was not at the time a member of the UN General Assembly, and Sino-Communism was viewed as a brazen abuser of human rights and a

dangerous ideological export. Nonetheless, China's position proved sufficiently intractable that the discussions between Moscow and Washington, in which Washington was by far the more anxious of the two to proceed with intervention, dragged on sufficiently that China had acquired the bomb before they'd agreed on a plan of action.

f) This may be what occurs in the case of Iran. Looking at it another way, even if a completely clean bill of health could be achieved, could Iran ever be trusted with enrichment if it remains classified as a 'rogue' state? Obama must either face the idea of sanctioning eventual military attack, or 'de-roguing' the enemy. Devising a strategic framework, and the language to go with it, that can weather the suspicion that infects every Iranian action and those of its anti-Israeli, or anti-American Middle East bedfellows, is a task that must take on the American post-hostage psyche as much as the Iranian. However, it's not a matter of liking what Iran does,' Trita Parsi recently observed. 'The important element is recognizing it as a player'. Iran's desperate need to be recognized as an important regional actor, for example, has encouraged its overt expression of power in the theatres occupied by Hezbollah and Hamas. Though these are very different types of groups, Iran's trumpeting of their causes has been in both cases as much an expression of its own frustration at being bypassed and ignored as its view that Israel should be contained. To engage Iran as a power player within a forum of Middle East decision-making, can have multiple effects on reducing tensions. It

can, for example, lead Iran to make a less overt grab for recognition in parts of the Middle East far from its own borders.

g) Instead, the growing crisis developing between Iran and the US (and its allies) is contributing to deterioration in relations inside the region under the rubric of the Second Arab Cold War. The GCC, e.g., is spending considerably greater sums on arms against Iran – a purely financial arrangement, as the states involved are unable to man the armaments themselves, and must rely on the US to instrumentalize their holdings. It is also developing into a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, fought over Iraq and Syria. In these arenas, the US is unable to leverage power, and can only act as a spoiler in the conduct of rhetorical threats and support for Turkey, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Until Washington can develop a language and policy approach that engages those powers with which it currently cannot dialogue, its role in the region will narrow, and contribute to volatility.

31. In sum, the outcome of the unipolar moment, at least in the Middle East, has been a reduction in US credibility and failure to reduce US vulnerabilities. Obama's problem: how to reconstruct credibility, and extend the hand in a substantive way, so that the fists of the Middle East can open. Hence, the importance of his policies toward Israel, Iran, and Afghanistan. And so far, despite the rhetoric for change, the policies remain similar to his predecessors'.