

# **Emory Resources in Middle Eastern Studies**

## **20<sup>th</sup>-Century American Foreign Policy in the Middle East**

### **American Foreign Policy**

Foreign policy is the set of actions and attitudes that govern a state's interactions with other states. In the United States, numerous sources contribute to the creation of foreign policy. Most prominent among these, argue many political scientists, is the national interest. This broad term encompasses the survival, security, and power of the nation, which foreign-policy makers attempt to further. While no doubt important, the objective of the national interest is not the determinant of foreign policy. Powerful leaders and departments within a government also influence policy. After all, the phrase 'national interest' can be quite broad and vague. These individuals and groups can affect diplomatic relations by deciding where the national interest truly lies. However, one must not discount the role of domestic politics in the formation of foreign policy. Many of the government officials who determine foreign policy are beholden to the citizens of the United States through elections. Politicians may neglect the national interest in order to ensure another term in office by satisfying voters. In addition to these issues, numerous other factors shape the United States' policy towards other states.

Consequently, one cannot easily sum up American foreign policy towards the Middle East in a neat, concise fashion. Its approach to the region has taken different tones at different times, in response to changes in the international scene and shifts in the electorate at home. However, one can detect broad themes in the history of the United States' actions and attitudes towards the Middle East.

### **National Interests in the Middle East**

The United States had remained relatively aloof towards the Middle East until the end of the Second World War. After the war, however, the Middle East became the center of two strategic concerns of the United States. The first was petroleum. Oil was the essential commodity for the conduct of warfare and industry in the twentieth century. Before the World War II, only the European countries had taken an active role in the region, primarily to secure sources of oil. Blessed with internal sources of oil, the USA was generally indifferent to the petrol politics in the Middle East during this time. However, while these reserves were sufficient for American needs at the beginning of the twentieth century, the domestic demand for the substance just kept growing. In addition to its own needs, the United States also had its allies to consider. After 1945, it began to look to foreign sources of oil, and the Middle East was the number one source.

Yet petroleum was not the only concern of the United States in the post-war era. The end of the Second World War contained the seeds for the next global conflict: the Cold War. The forty-year rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union dominated both nations' policies on the Middle East. Both the USA and USSR were recruiting allies around the world for their ideological struggle. Bordering the Middle East, the Soviet Union sought socialist governments in the region to act as friendly

neighbors. The United States wanted Western-leaning governments in the Middle East as part of its grand strategy to contain the USSR. It even formed CENTO in the region, the Central Treaty Organization that complemented NATO and SEATO. Thus the Soviet Union would try to bring these states into its orbit while the United States would 'defend' the countries from Communist subversion. At stake was not only an ally, but a source of petroleum. Often the ideological fervor of the Cold War clouded the judgment of leaders on both sides. Regardless, the Middle East became a major arena for the superpower struggle.

### **The Good Neighbor**

For a time, Middle Eastern countries benefited from the competition between the United States and Soviet Union. The USA was willing to protect the physical integrity of the states from Soviet aggression. During the Second World War, Joseph Stalin had stationed troops in Iran to defend it from the Axis powers. In 1946, however, he refused to pull them out. When Iran went before the United Nations to protest the incursion, the United States backed them diplomatically. The American representative remained adamant, even when the Soviet leader threatened to withdraw the USSR from the Security Council. His bluff called, Stalin backed down and recalled the soldiers.

The Cold War also came in handy when states were bargaining with oil companies over an equitable distribution of profits. The State Department persuaded American businesses to meet the demands of the national leaders for more money. It did so in part to keep those governments on friendly terms with the West, but also to keep them stable and popular among their citizens. A problem in either area could lead to Communist influence. In both cases, the source of American altruism was clear. The United States was quite willing to assist the fledgling Middle Eastern states so long as the Soviet threat loomed.

### **The Iranian Coup**

The United States soon demonstrated that its benevolent protection was not altogether benevolent. The populist leader Mohammed Mossadegh became Prime Minister of Iran in 1951 on a nationalist, anti-colonialist ticket. He soon angered Great Britain by nationalizing the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, the Britain's primary source of petroleum. Threatened financially and humiliated internationally, the United Kingdom was determined to regain its Iranian oil holdings. Initially the United States resisted British attempt to enlist its assistance. One factor in its decision was the strong American anti-imperialist streak, which dated back to the creation of the country. Yet an even more compelling reason for their reluctance was the specter of Communism. While Mossadegh might be a firebrand with no love for the West, he was at least a strong leader. President Eisenhower viewed him as a bulwark against Soviet predations in the Middle East. He feared that any attempt to remove him from power could result in a Bolshevik Iran.

American support for Prime Minister Mossadegh faltered, however, as he signaled Communist leanings. The United States has never been particularly perceptive in distinguishing between leftist nationalism and International Communism. Citing the domino theory, American leaders feared that Iran's defection would create a Soviet bloc out of the entire Middle East. This was an unacceptable risk to President Eisenhower.

He indicated American willingness to cooperate in deposing Mossadegh. In his place, they would restore the Shah, the monarch of Iran. Fearful of the growing power of his popular rival, the Shah had fled his country shortly after Mossadegh came to power. In a combined effort of British, American, and Iranian Royalist forces, Operation AJAX overthrew the Prime Minister and returned the Shah to the throne. The covert action would have important consequences for the United States in the future. The Shah became a staunch American supporter, while the people of Iran learned that the USA supported self-determination and democracy only as long as these principles opposed Communism.

### **The Suez Canal Crisis**

The United States demonstrated its ambivalent response to the Middle East in another case of nationalization, this time acting in *defense* of Arab sovereignty. Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser came to power in Egypt in a coup in 1952. Unlike the conservative monarch he deposed, Nasser hoped to maintain neutrality in the Cold War. His other objective was the construction of a dam across the Nile, to provide electricity and irrigation for his country. Unfortunately for him, these two goals conflicted. After displaying his neutralist tendencies through recognition of Communist China and other diplomatic *faux pas*, the United States rescinded its offer to fund the Aswan Dam. In response, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, planning to use the income it generated to pay for dam. This action infuriated and terrified Great Britain. Great Britain conspired with France and Israel to retake the Suez Canal in an armed invasion. This plan came to fruition in 1956.

The United States was outraged at their brash action. The cause for anger was not the casual violation of Egyptian sovereignty, but the potential repercussions of such action. Much of the Middle Eastern population was already antagonistic toward its previous colonial overlords in Western Europe. A European-Israeli aggression could alienate the entire region. Additionally, it might provoke a Soviet response. Not even considering the possibility of a direct intervention on behalf of Egypt, the USSR could capitalize on the opportunity to make inroads with the Middle Eastern states. President Eisenhower demanded a cessation of hostilities. When the three powers refused to comply, he engaged in financial warfare, placing economic sanctions on France and Britain and threatening an oil embargo. With an already dwindling reserve of petrol (and a sagging British pound), the two European powers complied. Israel soon joined them in withdrawing from the canal zone. However, the damage was already done. Despite the USA's defense of Egyptian sovereignty, many Arabs associated the United States with the aggression of its allies and Israel. The crisis also boosted Nasser's popularity immensely, making him the undisputed spokesman for Arab nationalism. Just as Washington feared, he drifted closer to the Soviet bloc, accepting military advisors and funding for the Aswan Dam from the USSR.

### **The Iranian Revolution and Hostage Crisis**

The Shah of Iran, who was returned to his throne in the Anglo-American Operation AJAX, faced trouble again in the late 1970s. His country was ill-equipped for the huge influx of money following the rise in oil prices. The Shah's programs of modernization disrupted the traditional lives of his citizens and often alienated them.

Religious fundamentalism grew in popularity and fervor, stirred up by the polemics of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The human rights abuses perpetrated by the secret police further antagonized the Iranians. The Shah himself had cancer. Faced with rioting workers in the oil fields, the Shah fled his country to seek medical treatment in 1979, leaving a coalition government behind to rule in his name.

A revolutionary government, initially backed by Khomeini, soon overthrew this last vestige of the Shah's power. Shortly thereafter, the Ayatollah Khomeini deposed this new government to establish a theocratic state in Iran, with himself at its head. His accession to power was a huge set-back to American foreign policy in the Middle East. For many years, the Shah had served as one of the United States' staunchest allies in the region. American leaders hailed him as a modernizing reformer and a pillar of stability in the Middle East. They were happy to sell him billions of dollars worth of hi-tech weaponry to aid him in his bid for regional hegemony. Now, however, the Shah was a fugitive from the nation he once ruled and the virulently anti-Western Khomeini controlled Iran's armaments and oil.

The loss of a longtime Cold War ally was not the only casualty in the Iranian Revolution. Enraged at the USA's past complicity with the Shah and his admittance into a hospital in the United States, Iranians stormed the American Embassy in Tehran, taking its inhabitants hostage. For 444 days, the hostages languished in captivity, despite a poorly-executed rescue attempt on the part of the American government. Iran released them only after the Shah's death and President Jimmy Carter's electoral loss. The hostage crisis was less an attempt to extract some sort of ransom (although the demands were occasionally made) as a show of resistance to the United States, which had influenced Iran for many decades through the Shah. The hostage crisis demonstrated – to the USA, Iranian citizens, and the world – that the new Iranian government could not be pressured so easily.

## **Israel**

Jewish settlers founded the state of Israel in the former British mandate of Palestine in 1948. In an uncharacteristic show of solidarity, both the United States and the Soviet Union recognized the state shortly after its creation. The Arab states in the region almost immediately declared war on the fledgling state, but Israel succeeded not only in repulsing its enemies but actually gained more territory in the process. Ever since then, Israel and its neighbors have, for the most part, remained in a state of belligerence. Violence between them has emerged several times since then, in the Suez Canal Crisis of 1956, the Six Days' War of 1967, and the Yom Kippur War of 1973.

America's interest in Israel has been the result of both international and domestic politics. Policy-makers envisioned Israel as a pillar of stability in the region. It had already proven its military prowess. It also opposed the radical regimes of Iraq, Egypt, and Syria, which were no friends of the United States. For this reason, some politicians saw Israel as a buttress against possible Soviet influence in the Middle East. In addition to national interest, American government officials were responsive to the public. Both Jews and conservative Christians supported the protection and expansion of the Israeli homeland.

For these reasons and others, the United States maintained close ties with Israel, at times to the detriment of its relations with other Arab nations. Its support consisted of

weapons sale, foreign aid, diplomatic backing, and attempts at brokering a peace. Given the precariousness of the Cold War, the USA did not intervene militarily in any of Israel's conflicts. American efforts of mediating a peace settlement between Israel and other Arab states have had minimal success. Neither side has been particularly cooperative. The most monumental achievement was the Camp David Accords, negotiated under President Carter. While the settlement finally established peaceful relations between Egypt and Israel, it ignored the fate of the Palestinians, the inhabitants of the lands annexed by Israel. American presidents have tried to resolve this important issue without success, including the recent "Road Map to Peace" plan of President George W. Bush (Jr.). The question of a Palestinian state remains a point of contention between Israel and other Middle Eastern states. So long as the United States supports Israel and courts the favor of her Arab neighbors, this issue will influence American foreign policy as well.

### **The Persian Gulf War**

Many analysts hailed the end of the Cold War as the beginning of a new era of peace and security around the world. Yet within a year of the demise of that long-lasting struggle, a new conflict erupted in the Middle East. After having effectively defeated Iran in an eight-year long war, Iraq was poised to make a bid for regional hegemony. In 1990, its ruler Saddam Hussein ordered the invasion of neighboring Kuwait.

The United States protested the aggressive annexation of Kuwait. Part of this reaction no doubt derived from principle. The USA has long supported the role of international law and the inviolability of a nation's boundaries. In addition to ethical distaste, however, President George Bush (Sr.) perceived a clear threat to American interests. The annexation of Kuwait could greatly bolster Iraq's power. It would leave Hussein in control of approximately one-fifth of the world's oil supply. In addition to increasing his country's wealth, the enlarged oil reserves could also prove to be a potent weapon against the West, as demonstrated in the 1973 OPEC embargo. Furthermore, there was evidence that Hussein would not be content with just Kuwait. His army was in position to strike at Saudi Arabia. The conservative regime of Saudi Arabia had been a staunch American ally for decades, in addition to being an important source of petroleum. If Iraq seized Saudi Arabia, Hussein's grip on the oil market would tighten considerably. From there, he could conceivably continue to accumulate territory until he had established the Pan-Arab state that was the platform of his Ba'ath party.

The United States was unwilling to risk such an eventuality. It demanded the immediate withdrawal of Iraqi troops from all of Kuwait. Bush orchestrated an international coalition, including Russia, Europe, and much of the Middle East, to oppose Iraq. He also threatened Hussein with bombing and a military invasion if he did not comply. Hussein refused, however, hoping that the global coalition would not hold and that the international community would accept the Iraqi occupation as a *fait accompli*. He had miscalculated the resolve of the United States and its allies, however. In January of 1991, the coalition fulfilled its ultimatum with an allied air strike in Baghdad. The fighting that followed in Iraq was brief and ended in a quick Iraqi retreat. The First Persian Gulf War demonstrated that even after the Cold War, the United States still maintained an interest in the Middle East.

Key Terms:

**CENTO** – Central Treaty Organization; the American-Middle Eastern mutual defense treaty

**Containment** – the American policy of blocking the spread of Communism instead of engaging the Soviet Union militarily

**OPEC** – Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries; a collection of oil-producing states that tried to regulate the price and production of petroleum

**Domino Theory** – the belief that the fall of one country to Communism would lead to voluntary acceptance of Communism by other countries in the region

**Shah** – the title of the monarch of Iran

**Ayatollah** – the title of a high-ranking Shi'ite religious leader

**Multiple Choice Questions:**

1. Which of the following does *not* contribute to the creation of American foreign policy?

- a.) The national interest.
- b.) Individual leaders.
- c.) Departments within the US government.
- d.) The attitudes and views of voters.
- e.) None of the above.

2. Which of the following explains why the United States took a stronger interest in the Middle East after World War II?

- a.) The influx of Arab immigrants after WWII led policy-makers to focus on the Middle East.
- b.) Increased domestic demand for oil led policy-makers to seek foreign sources of petroleum.
- c.) Increased European interventions in the region led policy-makers to fear a return to colonialism.
- d.) The Cold War led policy-makers to seek Middle Eastern allies in the struggle against the Soviet Union.
- e.) Both B and D.

3. How did the United States react to the Soviet Union's incursion into Iran in 1946?

- a.) The USA did nothing for fear of sparking a major war.
- b.) The USA backed Iran diplomatically in the United Nations.
- c.) The USA deployed troops in Iran for its defense and to intimidate the USSR.
- d.) The USA invaded Iran to expel the Soviet soldiers.
- e.) Both C and D.

4. What act of Prime Minister Mossadegh angered the British government?

- a.) He nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1953.
- b.) He decreased the posted price of oil in 1960.

- c.) He established a Shi'ite theocracy in Iran in 1979.
- d.) He initiated the Iran-Iraq War in 1980.
- e.) Both C and D.

5. What was the goal of the 1954 Anglo-American Operation AJAX?

- a.) To restore the Shah to power.
- b.) To restore Saddam Hussein to power.
- c.) To restore Ayatollah Khomeini to power.
- d.) To restore Colonel Nasser to power.
- e.) None of the above.

6. Why did Colonel Nasser nationalize the Suez Canal?

- a.) He wanted to hurt the American economy.
- b.) He needed its revenues to fund a hydroelectric dam.
- c.) He was a Communist who supported state-ownership of major utilities.
- d.) He was a fundamentalist Muslim who hated the British.
- e.) Both A and C.

7. What state did *not* invade Egypt in the Suez Canal Crisis of 1956?

- a.) Great Britain
- b.) France
- c.) United States
- d.) Israel
- e.) Both C and D.

8. Which of the following is *not* a reason for American support of Israel

- a.) Policy-makers responded to Jewish voters in the USA.
- b.) Policy-makers responded to conservative Christian voters in the USA.
- c.) Policy-makers believed that Israel could be a strong Cold War ally.
- d.) Policy-makers believed that Israel could be a dependable source of oil.
- e.) Both B and C.

9. What form has American support for Israel taken?

- a.) The USA has sold weapons to Israel.
- b.) The USA has intervened militarily to defend Israel.
- c.) The USA has invaded countries that are hostile to Israel.
- d.) The USA has given Israel nuclear technology.
- e.) All of the above.

10. Which Iranian leader encouraged the seizure of hostages from the American Embassy?

- a.) the Shah
- d.) Colonel Nasser
- c.) Prime Minister Mossadegh
- d.) Ayatollah Khomeini
- e.) None of the above.

11. Which of the following was *not* a problem with the Shah's regime in 1979?
- His modernization programs disrupted traditional Iranian society.
  - His secular programs angered conservative religious leaders.
  - His anti-American rhetoric frustrated pro-Western intellectuals.
  - His human rights abuses alienated the public.
  - Both A and B.
12. Which of the following was a motive for Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990?
- Kuwait was selling large quantities of oil, thus lowering its market price.
  - Iraq had lent a great deal of money to Kuwait, which defaulted on its loan.
  - Kuwaiti drillers had tapped into a large oil reserve, which was claimed by Iraq.
  - Kuwait was refusing to sell oil to the petrol-starved Iraq.
  - Both A and C.
13. Why did the United States oppose the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991?
- The annexation would give the petrol-starved Iraq its first access to oil, making the country dangerously independent.
  - The annexation would give Saddam Hussein control over a large part of the oil market, granting him greater power over the global economy.
  - The annexation could possibly be followed by an invasion of Libya, an important American ally.
  - The annexation would violate the mutual defense treaty signed by the United States and Kuwait.
  - Both C and D.

**Timeline:**

- 1802 – Morocco recognizes American independence.
- 1800s – The US navy patrols the Barbary Coast and combats pirates.  
U.S. Protestant missionary activity in Middle East
- 1860 Druze-Maronite War in Lebanon leads to French intervention  
Beginning of immigration of Syrian, Lebanese Christians to the Americas  
Subsequent waves of immigration fueled by economic difficulties, agricultural failures
- 1866 Syrian Protestant College (American University in Beirut) founded
- 1918 Woodrow Wilson plays important role at the Paris Peace Conference following WWI. He proposes the 14 Points as the basis for future politics and diplomacy (including self-determination, no secret treaties);  
The King-Crane commission polls public opinion in Palestine
- 1941-45 – The Second World War
- 1946 – John F. Dulles supports Iran against the Soviet Union in the UN.
- 1947-1989 – The Cold War
- 1948 – Israel is founded.
- 1952 – Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser comes to power in Egypt.
- 1953 – Prime Minister Mossadegh nationalizes Anglo-Iranian Oil Company.

1954 – Anglo-American Operation AJAX deposes Mossadegh and restores the Shah to power.

1956 U.S. retracts offer to loan Egypt money to build the High Dam at Aswan

1956 – The Suez Canal Crisis U.S. and U.S.S.R. condemn the attack in U.N. U.S. helped enforce a withdrawal, and the Suez Canal was successfully nationalized by Egypt

1957 Eisenhower Doctrine--U.S. offers economic and military aid to any Middle Eastern nation trying to resist communist aggression, whether direct or indirect

1958 – US marines intervene in the Lebanese civil war.

1967 – The Six Days' War

1970 Soviet Arms buildup in Egypt

1972 Sadat orders Soviet advisers to leave Egypt

1973 – The Yom Kippur War. U.S. and U.S. S.R. impose ceasefire.  
OPEC oil boycott. Energy Crisis

1977 Sadat flies to Jerusalem

1978 Camp David--tentative treaty drafted

1979 Camp David treaty signed

1979 – The Iranian Revolution brings Ayatollah Khomeini to power,

1979-80 – The Iranian Hostage Crisis

1979-89 Soviet occupation of Afghanistan; U.S. supports Islamist groups fighting against the Soviets, in cooperation with Pakistani ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence)

1980-88 – The Iran-Iraq War

1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon

1983 U.S. brokers peace treaty between Israel and Lebanon

1983 Truck bombs in Beirut destroy U.S. Marine barracks

1984 American University of Beirut president Malcolm Kerr assassinated

1986 U.S. bombs Libya

1987 Iran-Contra affair

1987 U.S. citizens kidnapped in Lebanon

1990 – Iraq invades Kuwait.

1991 – A coalition led by the United States expels Iraqi troops from Kuwait.

1991-2003 U.S. enforces no-fly zones in Iraq, strict economic sanctions

1993 After secret Oslo negotiations, Israelis and Palestinians sign "Declaration of Principles" on White House Lawn

1994 U.S. seeks peace treaty between Syria and Israel

1998 Attacks on American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania; U.S. bombs pharmaceuticals factory in Sudan

2000 Attack on U.S.S. Cole off the coast of Yemen.

2001 Attacks on World Trade Centers, Pentagon;

2001- U.S. invasion of Afghanistan; support of Northern Alliance against Taliban

2003 – A coalition led by the United States attacks Iraq and deposes Saddam Hussein.

