

56. Toward a Sensible U.S. Policy in the Middle East

Policymakers should

- De-emphasize U.S. alliances in the Middle East, especially with Saudi Arabia and Israel;
- reduce the U.S. role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process;
- recognize that the Gulf States cannot effectively use the “oil weapon” against the American economy; and
- shape a sensible U.S. policy toward the Middle East that does not inflame anti-American sentiments.

America’s approach toward the Middle East has been characterized by considerable continuity since the beginning of the Cold War. Successive U.S. administrations have used largely the same guidelines to define U.S. national security interests in the Middle East, namely: maintaining an American political and military presence in the region, encouraging democracy and respect for human rights, promoting the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, ensuring access to Middle Eastern oil, containing any aspiring hostile hegemonic powers, and limiting the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Washington has tried to achieve that complex set of goals primarily through a network of informal security alliances—with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. The United States has also poured vast sums of money into the region to promote economic development. Cooperative relations with corrupt dictatorial regimes, whose policies run contrary to American values in terms of religious freedom, women’s rights, and freedom of the press, have been maintained with one goal in mind—advancing America’s interests in the region.

Redefining American Security Alliances in the Middle East

For decades Washington has maintained a “special relationship” with both Saudi Arabia and Israel. The relationship with the Saudis was sealed when King Abdul Ibn Saud, the founder of the Saudi Kingdom, shook hands with President Franklin D. Roosevelt aboard a U.S. destroyer 60 years ago. The special relationship with Israel started when President Harry Truman became the first world leader to recognize the new Jewish state in 1948. The cost of maintaining both alliances has steadily increased over the years.

Countries in the Middle East receive a disproportionate share of U.S. aid. Since 1949, according to the Congressional Research Service, Israel has received more foreign aid than any other country, a total of \$91 billion. But several other countries in the region, including Egypt, Jordan, and now Iraq, are awarded hundreds of millions of dollars annually from U.S. taxpayers (Table 56.1).

The costs of U.S. policy in the Middle East are not confined to foreign aid, however. Economists have calculated that the deployment of the U.S. military to safeguard oil supplies from Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Persian Gulf—particularly since the first Gulf War—costs the United States between \$30 billion and \$60 billion a year. That figure does not

Table 56.1
Top 10 Recipients of U.S. Foreign Aid in FY 2004

| | Total U.S. Aid (millions of dollars) | Population Mid-2004 (in millions) | Average U.S. Aid per Capita (in U.S. dollars) |
|-------------|---|--------------------------------------|---|
| Iraq | 18,440 | 25.90 | 711.97 |
| Israel | 2,620 | 6.80 | 385.29 |
| Egypt | 1,870 | 73.40 | 25.48 |
| Afghanistan | 1,770 | 28.50 | 62.11 |
| Colombia | 570 | 45.30 | 12.58 |
| Jordan | 560 | 5.60 | 100.00 |
| Pakistan | 390 | 159.20 | 2.45 |
| Liberia | 210 | 3.50 | 60.00 |
| Peru | 170 | 27.50 | 6.18 |
| Ethiopia | 160 | 72.40 | 2.21 |

SOURCES: Curt Tarnoff and Larry Nowels, “Foreign Aid: an Introductory Overview of U.S. Programs and Policy,” Congressional Research Service Report for Congress updated April 15, 2004; and Population Reference Bureau, “2004 World Population Data Sheet.”

take into consideration the costs of the war against Iraq and the continuing occupation of that country. And no statistic can capture the high costs America is paying in the form of anti-American sentiments among Arabs and Muslims because of Washington's support for Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Resentment of U.S. Policies Leading to Terrorism

America's allies have not helped it to attain its goals in the region. To the contrary, at present, the American position in the region is weaker than it has been in more than 50 years, even though Washington maintains troops throughout the Middle East and, as of this writing, has de facto control over Iraq. The Bush administration has argued that raging anti-Americanism in the Muslim world stems from extremists' hatred of core American and Western values. In reality, it has little to do with cultural incompatibility. Anti-American sentiments are a reaction to America's abrasive policies, including the presence of large military contingents in the Middle East. In the spring of 2002, Zogby International surveyed residents of five Arab nations (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon), three non-Arab Islamic countries (Iran, Pakistan, and Indonesia), and two others (France and Venezuela) for comparison purposes. The poll showed that many Muslims are favorably inclined toward America's democracy and freedom, with the numbers especially high in Kuwait (58 percent). Muslim nationals also think highly of U.S.-made products, particularly American technology, science, films, and TV. However, when asked whether they approve of U.S. government policy toward the Palestinians, only a small fraction (9 percent of Pakistanis and just 1 percent of Kuwaitis) said yes. "In essence, they don't hate us; they don't hate what we are about," pollster John Zogby told the *Christian Science Monitor*. Even though the president said that they hate our way of life and our democratic values, "at least in this first poll in the region, we did not find that was the case."

The stationing of U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia after the first Gulf War is known to have stirred such deep hostility that Osama bin Laden made it the initial focal point in his campaign to recruit Muslims from around the globe to attack Americans.

The relationship between Riyadh and Washington has never been easy, but relations have further deteriorated in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001. The Saudis have had to deal with Americans' reaction to the fact that 15 of the 19 hijackers in the Al Qaeda attacks of September 11 were Saudi citizens. Meanwhile, Saudi money has been

used to spread the puritanical Sunni Wahhabi ideology, the official creed of the Saudi state, through mosques around the world. An opinion poll conducted by *Time* magazine and CNN in September 2003 found that 72 percent of Americans did not trust Saudi Arabia as an ally in the war on terrorism.

Despite that overwhelming popular sentiment, the Bush administration continues to maintain a “special relationship” with Riyadh, as demonstrated, among other things, by the decision of the White House to withhold from the public parts of a congressional inquiry into 9/11. Lawmakers who had seen the report implied that the deleted portions listed prominent Saudis under investigation for possible terrorist links. While members of Congress from both parties remain suspicious of the cozy relationship between Washington and Riyadh, there has been no substantial change in the strategic relationship between the two states.

Unfortunately, the move by the Bush administration to end the deployment of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia in August 2003 was not part of an American strategy to disengage from Saudi Arabia but rather a way to relieve some of the political pressure on the Saudi royal family. Ending a military deployment that dated to the first Gulf War—and that has served as one of Osama bin Laden’s chief rallying cries—was a wise decision, but it did not reflect a fundamental change in the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

The House of Saud, which has ruled the Desert Kingdom since the country’s founding in 1932, faces an unprecedented threat to its survival. It is caught between criticism from the United States—the kingdom’s traditional ally, now feeling betrayed by Saudi Arabia’s sponsorship of Wahhabism, a virulently anti-Western strain of Islamism that has become a catalyst for terrorism—and the pressures of a conservative religious establishment on which the regime has long relied for its legitimacy. But those threats to the regime are unlikely to usher in a new age of *Glasnost* in Saudi Arabia. With the survival of the regime at stake, the members of the royal family may well put personal rivalries aside and adopt a policy of attempting to both co-opt and repress dissenters. The collapse of the royal family would most likely give rise to a more radical Islamic regime, one based on an alliance between military and radical religious leaders. Facing a threat of a military coup, the Saudis might preempt such a move by selecting to rule the country a member of the dynasty who would be acceptable to religious leaders.

As long as Washington continues to cling to the assumption that it must maintain its military supremacy in the Persian Gulf, it will not be

able to resolve the dilemmas it is currently facing in the Middle East. The alliance with the ruling Arab regimes and the U.S. military presence in the region will continue to foster anti-Americanism and may force the United States into more costly military engagements. Such pressures might prompt a further strengthening of ties with theocracies like Saudi Arabia.

Forced Democratization Not a Panacea

An effort to accelerate “democratization” would likely fail in the near term and could pose a very serious threat to U.S. security in the medium to long term. Observations about the absence of factors supporting genuine, liberal-democratic reform, and of the risks posed to American interests by democratic impulses throughout the Middle East, are affirmed by a classified State Department report released to the media. According to press accounts, the report, prepared by the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research, noted that “Middle East societies are riven by political, economic and social problems that are likely to undermine stability regardless of the nature of any externally influenced or spontaneous, indigenous change.” George Downs and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita of New York University observed from their research that no country has “an enviable record of creating democracy” through the use of force. They warned, “There’s no guarantee that free, fair, open elections . . . will produce governments that back fundamental American policies.”

In short, given the virulent anti-American sentiments in Saudi Arabia and throughout the Middle East, a government that represented the wishes of the Saudi people could well choose to support Al Qaeda or other anti-American terrorist groups that seek our destruction. Accordingly, U.S. policies should not be predicated on the installation of a liberal democratic government in Saudi Arabia or elsewhere in the Middle East. The United States should focus on the policies adopted by the governments in question.

Redefining the American Role in the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process

In the summer of 2002 the Bush administration endorsed the Roadmap for Peace in the Middle East, a plan that foresees the comprehensive settlement of the Israel-Palestinian conflict by 2005 under the auspices of the so-called Quartet that includes the United States, the European Union, the United Nations, and Russia. The Roadmap is supposed to correct the errors of the failed Oslo process by providing a detailed set of performance

criteria that will result in an end to Palestinian violence, Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories, and creation of an independent Palestinian state.

Although Israel immediately expressed reservations about the plan, it was seen as reasonably successful in its early stage—the Palestinians named Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) their prime minister, and terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians temporarily ebbed. However, Abbas stepped down in September 2003, and a wave of new attacks effectively put an end to the plan, even as the Bush administration continued to pay it lip service. In August 2004 Israel expanded its settlements in the West Bank, contradicting implicit commitments it had made under the framework of the Roadmap. The Bush administration's refusal to criticize the Israeli settlement plan was widely interpreted as a *de facto* endorsement of the policy.

Americans who continue to push for a peace settlement according to the Roadmap plan should recognize that the pro-peace factions in both Israeli and Palestinian societies are small and weak; many Palestinians and Israelis are still ready to pay a high price in blood in what they regard as a fight for survival. A settlement can be possible only when the majority of Israelis and Palestinians recognize that their interests would be best served by negotiation and peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Many Israelis and Palestinians are interested in keeping the United States entangled in the conflict. Few seem prepared to solve the conflict regionally. However, the U.S. government does not have to sustain the same level of involvement in the conflict that it maintained during the Cold War. First of all, no Arab regime can present a serious threat to Israel, whose military is unchallenged in the Middle East. Considerable American military aid to Israel might have been justified in the context of the Cold War, but it is unnecessary and even harmful under present conditions. Meanwhile, direct U.S. involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict does not advance American national interests. Washington should reject demands to internationalize the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, which implicitly assume that the United States should and would be responsible for resolving the dispute and paying the costs involved.

The war, with its national, ethnic, and religious dimensions, is clearly a human tragedy, but—like the conflicts between Hutus and Tutsis in Burundi, persistent civil wars in Burma and Laos, disputes between Indians and Pakistanis over Kashmir, or even continued hostility between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland—it must be solved by the groups

involved. The United States can and should express diplomatic support for the peaceful resolution of such conflicts and for the creation of strong civil societies, but we must be aware of the limits of our influence. And policymakers must remain focused on direct threats to the United States, the American people, or American vital interests.

U.S. policymakers should withdraw financial assistance to the Palestinians and phase out aid to Israel. The latter step would create an incentive for Israel to reform its economy, which has become far too dependent upon financial support from the United States. Removing that support would also encourage Israel to integrate itself politically and economically into the region. The United States should encourage diplomatic efforts on the regional level to promote the Middle East peace process. The way to localize and gradually resolve the conflict is not through direct U.S. involvement but through depriving both sides of international support.

Instead of complaining about the failure of the United States to make peace in the Middle East, and warning Americans of the dire consequences of a low diplomatic profile, the Arab states should recognize that it is in their national interests and that of the long-term stability of the region to do something to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a regional context. With its geographic proximity to the Middle East, its dependence on Middle Eastern energy resources, and the large number of Arab immigrants living in major European countries, the European Union also has a clear stake in a more peaceful Middle East. U.S. policymakers should encourage the EU to take a more active role in the region.

Middle Eastern Oil and U.S. Interests

Continuing support for American policies in the Middle East, even in the face of the obvious risks and dubious benefits, stems from the erroneous belief that American military involvement in the Middle East protects U.S. access to “cheap” oil. Many Americans are willing to pay the cost of the U.S. military presence in the Middle East on the assumption that the oil resources in the Persian Gulf would be shut off if American troops were removed from the region. But the Gulf States have no other significant sources of revenue; they would risk economic suicide if they were to withhold oil from world markets. And once the oil reaches the market, there is no practical way to somehow punish American consumers. In short, the so-called oil weapon is a dud.

A different economic argument holds that the U.S. presence in the Middle East prevents terrorist attacks against oil infrastructure. It is cer-

tainly true that disruptions of supply anywhere in the world raise prices everywhere in the world and thus all consuming countries have an interest in preventing terrorist attacks on oil infrastructure. But the producing countries themselves also have a strong incentive to prevent supply disruptions because such disruptions reduce their income. And a permanent U.S. presence in the oil-producing regions seems to create as much insecurity as security, if not more. During the Cold War, the U.S. policy of actively safeguarding a strategic resource may have made sense in terms of maintaining the unity of the noncommunist alliance under American leadership. At present, however, that policy is badly outdated.

Changing Long-Term Strategy in the Middle East

The United States should recognize that its interests would be best served by reconsidering its Cold War-era strategy in the Middle East. Crafting long-term alliances with the “friendly” regimes there and elsewhere in the world, without regard to the long-term cost and while turning a blind eye to the nature of those regimes, was a defensible strategy in the framework of the Cold War. However, in the 21st century Washington finds itself trapped in an intellectual and political quagmire in the Middle East. On the one hand, Washington aims to preserve existing alliances with authoritarian Arab regimes, including those in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, even though maintaining “political friendship” with the House of Saud and Mubarak is completely inconsistent with American ideals, including concern for human rights and the rule of law. On the other hand, Washington’s staunch support for Israel, combined with Israel’s assertive policies in the Middle East, provokes disapproval within Arab states and ignites anti-American sentiments in the region and throughout the world. Both components of U.S. policy in the Middle East are morally dubious, and neither advances the national security interests of the United States. Indeed, they reinforce the negative image of America in the Middle East, potentially increasing incentives for terrorism.

A responsible policy in the Middle East, consistent with American security interests in the region, should be based on de-emphasizing U.S. alliances, especially those with Saudi Arabia and Israel, to meet the realities of the present day. Also, it should include a change in popular perceptions of U.S. dependence on Middle Eastern oil and of the necessity of U.S. leadership in the negotiations to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Reshaping U.S. policy in the Middle East would enhance American security and help change the perception that U.S. policies are guided by

double standards. Maintaining a frail balance among all of Washington's commitments in the Middle East is becoming ever more costly, dangerous, and unnecessary. To sustain a U.S. military and political presence in the Middle East, ordinary Americans are constantly paying a price in dollars and reduced security both for American service personnel abroad and for American civilians at home. A change in policies is long overdue.

Suggested Readings

- Bandow, Doug. "Befriending Saudi Princes: A High Price for a Dubious Alliance." Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 428, March 20, 2002.
- . "Settlements Pose Fundamental Threat to Democracy in Israel." Cato Institute Daily Commentary, December 19, 2003.
- Fromkin, David. *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*. New York: Owl Books, 2001.
- Hadar, Leon. "Mending the U.S.-European Rift over the Middle East." Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 485, August 20, 2003.
- . *Sandstorm: American Blindness in the Middle East*. New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2005.
- Preble, Christopher. "After Victory: Toward a New Military Posture in the Persian Gulf." Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 477, June 10, 2003.

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