US Foreign Policy in the Middle East

The roots of anti-Americanism

Kylie Baxter and
Shahram Akbarzadeh

US FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Over the last 60 years, Washington has been a major player in the politics of the Middle East. From Iran in the 1950s, to the Gulf War of 1991, to the devastation of contemporary Iraq, US policy has had a profound impact on the domestic affairs of the region. Anti-Americanism is a pervasive feature of modern Middle East public opinion. But, far from being intrinsic to 'Muslim political culture', scepticism of the US agenda is directly linked to the regional policies pursued by Washington.

By exploring critical points of regional crisis, Kylie Baxter and Shahram Akbarzadeh elaborate on the links between US policy and popular distrust of the United States. The book also examines the interconnected nature of events in this geo-strategically vital region. Accessible and easy to follow, this book is designed to provide a clear and concise overview of complex historical and political material. Key features include:

- maps illustrating key events and areas of discontent;
- text boxes on topics of interest related to the Arab–Israeli wars, Iranian politics, foreign interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the wars of the Persian Gulf, September 11 and the rise of Islamist movements; and
- further reading lists and a selection of suggested study questions at the end of each chapter.

US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The roots of anti-Americanism provides students and researchers insight into the popular discontent generated by decades of US policy in the Middle East.

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CONTENTS

▌MAPS

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Map 0.1 The Middle East. Reproduced with permission from the UN Cartographic Section.

Introduction

The United States of America occupies a central place in global politics. As the sole superpower, the United States is able to exert an unrivalled influence in the international system. Indeed, some social commentators believe that 'America affects, directly and indirectly, the lives of every individual, community and nation on the planet' (Sardar and Davies 2002: 58). As is the case with all great powers, this pervasive presence has triggered a range of responses, and states and leaders throughout the international system in part define themselves on the basis of their relationship to Washington. History demonstrates that a unipolar system often engenders concerns about the great power's use of its influence. Thus, Washington's rise as the global power-broker has led to a concurrent rise in anti-Americanism.

Anti-Americanism is a complex social and political mindset that permeates the political discourse of many parts of the global community. In recent decades, anti-Americanism has become most closely associated with the Muslim Middle East. The extensive research carried out by the Pew Research Center confirms that, whereas public perceptions of the US have been largely negative for decades, 'in recent years that broad dislike has taken on an aspect of outright fear' (Pew Research Center 2005). In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, it appeared to many Westerners that Middle Eastern anti-Americanism had entered a new and violent chapter. As social pundits rushed to ask 'why do they hate us?', more nuanced voices attempted to contextualize this violent explosion of anti-American sentiment within a long and complex history of US foreign

policy and intervention in the Middle East. In a political climate marked by fear and uncertainty this was not an easy task.

The United States has been a major force in Middle Eastern politics since the 1950s. Following the close of the Cold War, Washington emerged as the region's major power-broker, often as influential in local decision-making processes as the regional states themselves. In addition to its political influence, the United States displayed an increasing willingness to apply more traditional 'hard power' tools to further its regional agenda. US foreign policy is conceived and implemented in order to advance the national interest of the state. This is true of the foreign policy of every state in the international system. The difference lies in the special position the United States currently occupies in international relations. In the post-Cold War world, the United States is a hyperpower, essentially a state capable and prepared to exert its political or military will in a unilateral manner (Litwak 2002). In the unipolar world that emerged in the late twentieth century, Washington displayed a marked tendency to direct its power and influence toward the Middle East. This is a result of the region's geo-strategic importance, its energy reserves and its often unstable political climate. The constant presence of the United States – as a military force, political power and a controversial cultural icon – has engendered a range of regional responses. Anti-Americanism is one such response.

Anti-Americanism is often dismissed as envy, cultural disparity or, at worst, implacable hatred. Such essentialist interpretations deny the basic principles of cause and effect. The underpinnings of Middle Eastern anti-Americanism require exploration, contextualization and debate. In this respect, the months that followed September 11, 2001, are revealing. It was in late 2001 that Washington prepared to launch its 'war on terror', initially a military invasion of Afghanistan to oust the Taliban and eradicate the al-Qaeda organization. Despite the Bush administration's public assurances that the new military campaign was not a 'war against Islam' (Bush 2006), it quickly became clear that the battlefields would be exclusively in the Muslim Middle East. By 2003, the Middle Eastern focus of this conflict was acknowledged even within the American political discourse:

> . . . the "war on terrorism," which is, in truth, not a global war on all terrorist organizations – so far, the FARC in Colombia and the Irish Republican Army seemed to have escaped much attention from the Bush administration – but principally upon "Islamism," that violent political movement antipathetic to modernity and to the West, and especially to their expression through American power. The motivating core of this movement appears to be more "Arab" than "pan-Islamic," and often stems from the Saudi-funded spread of Wahhabism.
>
> (Donnelly 2003)

As is the case in all wars, it was the civilians of Afghanistan and Iraq who suffered as the 'war on terror' gained pace. The high civilian death toll associated with the prosecution of the military campaigns was seemingly dismissed by the administration and the US military establishment as 'collateral damage'. The repressive nature of the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan and the reality of Saddam Hussein's dictatorial rule in Iraq led many to question why civilians, oppressed under both leaderships, should be paying the price of the 'war on terror'. Since the events of 2001, international public opinion has swung dramatically against the Afghanistan military campaign, which was ostensibly started to capture the Saudi Arabian dissident Osama bin Laden. This public rejection peaked as the highly problematic nature of extending the war against transnational terrorism to the state of Iraq became ever more evident.

The underpinning logic of the Bush administration appeared to pivot on certain assumptions, the most damaging of which was an apparent determination to minimize the role of cause and effect in the ways in which the United States was viewed in the Middle East. In the first years of the twenty-first century, powerful voices in Washington and in the US media appeared to subscribe to the belief that Arab anti-American sentiment was driven by, or at least fed by, a fundamental dislike of America, its culture and its people. As David Khairallah, a member of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Board, pointed out in 2004, 'from reading and hearing the US media, you would think Arab anger towards the US is almost genetic' (quoted in Al-Arian 2004: 71) This essentialist mindset was already evident in the days following September 11, 2001, when President George W. Bush declared to the world at large that the time had come to make a choice: 'either you are with us or you are with the terrorists' (Bush 2001). This binary understanding of the world did not take into account the complex perspectives that many in the Middle East hold towards the United States, responses that are a result of historical experience and political realities. A rejection of the terrorism perpetrated on September 11 was evident throughout the region, demonstrated in spontaneous public displays such as candlelight vigils in Tehran (Garthwaite 2004: 279). However, despite a rejection of the tactics employed, in the Middle East the events of September 11 were placed within a broader historical and political context. This contextualization was not matched in the United States. As the Bush administration positioned the United States as the champion of 'freedom' in a battle between good and evil, an interpretation that glossed over decades of US oppression and intervention, critical voices began to emerge. These voices were empowered only as the chain of events triggered by the attacks on September 11 began to extract a much, much greater human cost in the Middle East.

As the global community has gained a sense of distance and perspective on the attacks of September 2001, and perhaps been somewhat immunized

against the initial horror through the blood-letting of Bali, Madrid, London, Afghanistan and Iraq, political space has emerged for new, more nuanced perspectives. External interventions and domestic realities both feed anti-American sentiment in the Middle East. Such perspectives have evolved as part of a broader response to the role of the United States as an external player and to the local conditions of political repression and intolerance of dissent. It is vital to note that even these internal or domestic structures are often linked to the historic role of the United States.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, Washington played a key role in maintaining the position of 'friendly' undemocratic regimes. Despite the rhetoric of generations of US leaders, democracy promotion in the Middle East is a dangerous undertaking for US interests. In the Cold War years socialism was a powerful force in the region, and in the unipolar world Islamic alternatives have proven popular. This willingness of many in the Middle East to express their preference for such alternatives through the ballot box has greatly complicated Washington's position. In the Cold War, Washington could not afford to risk its access to oil, its strategic hold on the Middle East or its position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union by endorsing democratic experiments. Consequently, Washington backed authoritarian leaders who were willing to commit to the US sphere of influence. This is a tradition that dates back to the stark example of Iran in the 1950s. As a result of this gap between Washington's rhetoric and the reality of its regional policy, dissent against local despots often developed an international angle, with popular opinion targeting Washington for its role in propping up existing regimes. This interplay of local factors and international trends provides the backdrop to modern anti-Americanism.

As this book demonstrates, the relationship between the United States and the Middle East has been one of dynamic change in the past century. Indeed, popular assumptions regarding the US role, and the Arab response,

BOX 0.1

The **Cold War** refers to the period between the end of the Second World War and the early 1990s, during which the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in a battle for regional and global influence. This conflict was marked by economic, ideological and military competition, brinkmanship and proxy wars. Cold War considerations influenced many conflicts during this period including the Korean War, the Vietnam War and the conflict in Afghanistan in the 1980s. It also contributed to numerous other tensions in the Middle East as the two superpowers armed and supported states within their sphere of influence. The Cold War drew to a close in the late 1980s and formally ended with the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991.

are challenged by even the briefest historical survey. Ussama Makdissi points out that the growth and prosperity of the United States in the nineteenth century and America's own revolutionary history encouraged many activists in the early twentieth-century Middle East to view the emergent world power as a natural ally and friend to the region's many nationalist movements.

> The influence of an idea of a benevolent America reached its apex among Arabs during and immediately after World War I. President Woodrow Wilson's proclamations on self-determination reinforced a notion among nationalist elites in the Arab world that the United States was different from the European powers.
>
> (Makdissi 2002: 544)

The hope that Washington would act as a champion for universal human rights and self-determination has echoed through the twentieth century. But this hope has rarely been fulfilled. The US support for self-determination has been belied by its involvement in Iran and its response to the political processes in Lebanon and the Occupied Territories. As this book explores, when contextualized in the history of the region, cultural or essentialist readings of the relationship between the United States and the Middle East are revealed as having scant relevance. The rise of Middle Eastern anti-Americanism may be more constructively understood as a defensive rejection of the hypocrisy in US rhetoric and action, and the ways in which America uses its unrivalled power to influence and intervene in other states.

This book places the current relationship between the Middle East and the United States within the historical context of the last century. In the early twentieth century the United States was not a major player in Middle Eastern politics, as an isolationist tendency was dominant in US foreign policy thinking. Yet it was within this colonial period that the state system that characterizes the modern Middle East was formed. Moreover, the early decades of the twentieth century offer an important insight into the ways in which Middle Easterners viewed and understood the 'West' and thus, by extension, came to see the United States. The mistaken belief that Washington would assist anti-colonial movements and champion Arab self-determination provided the genesis of the sense of betrayal that marked the mid-twentieth century. In this period, the inherently self-interested nature of US foreign policy began to collide with the altruistic political statements of the US leadership. It is this process that is the underlying focus of Chapter 1.

Chapter 2 explores the impact of the Zionist movement on the political geography of the Middle East. Not only did the establishment of Israel transform the region's map, it forever altered the political discourse

of the Arab world. The United States did not play a central role in the establishment of Israel. It was the dynamics of the international system and the efforts of the Zionist movement that produced the only state in the Middle East without a Muslim majority. Chapter 3 explains how the Cold War placed new pressures on the Middle East. As Israel became repeatedly embroiled in regional conflicts (in 1956, 1967, 1973, 1982 and 2006), Washington was drawn progressively closer to Tel Aviv. By the last Arab–Israeli war, in July 2006, Washington's regional role had degenerated into acting as little more than a cheerleader for Israeli policy. Washington's shift from potential champion of Arab self-determination to its position in July 2006 was dramatic. Chapters 2 and 3 outline how such a significant reorientation of the US role occurred.

Chapter 4 provides an introduction to Islamic politics. The major concepts of political Islam, or Islamism, are investigated in order to provide a context for the pivotal events of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. The Iranian Revolution was a vital turning point in the political history of the Middle East. It sparked a new, more assertive period of regional political organization, of which anti-Americanism became an intrinsic aspect. This focus on the Islamic Revolution in Iran in early 1979 is followed by the exploration in Chapter 5 of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which occurred later that year. Events in Afghanistan have played a central role in Islamic politics as a result of the murky relationship between the United States and the 'Arab-Afghan' movement. This was a movement of volunteers from the Middle East and beyond who entered Afghanistan to participate in militant resistance against Soviet occupation. The establishment of al-Qaeda and the 'globalizing' of a mindset of anti-Western confrontation were the key outcomes of this conflict.

Chapter 6 focuses on the geographic heartlands of the Middle East, the regions surrounding the Persian Gulf. The Iran–Iraq War of 1980–88 and the international conflict of 1991 are explored here. This eight-year conflict between two major Middle Eastern states saw the issues of national identity, religious sectarianism and international involvement assume new heights of importance. The United States emerged from the 1980s as the world's sole remaining superpower and the 1991 Gulf War is a reflection of this 'new world order'. The regional role of the United States in the post-Cold War world dominates Chapters 7 and 8. Chapter 7 tracks the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians, beginning with the hopes of the Oslo Accords and the period of US diplomacy in the 1990s. These hopes were submerged by the Palestinian Intifadas, increased acts of terrorism and the splintering of the Palestinian leadership in 2007. Chapter 8 explores US strategy in the 'war on terror', and the virtual destruction of the state of Iraq.

This book provides a contextualized insight into anti-Americanism in the Middle East by offering a chronological account of major flashpoints

in the region's history. Understanding the history of Washington's role in the Middle East enables a clear insight into why anti-Americanism was able to take hold in the Middle East.

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2 CHAPTER 2 Great Power Influences, Zionism and the Middle East

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Israeli Politics from Altalena to the Rabin Assassination
(New York: Free Press).

SUGGESTED STUDY QUESTIONS 1 What is 'Zionism', and what
role do religion and the ideology of nationalism play in
the Zionist paradigm? 2 To what extent do current foreign
policies of Western powers towards the Middle East appear
to be informed by an Orientalist mindset? 3 What has been
the historical impact of the Balfour Declaration on the
psychology of Palestinian leadership? 4 What role does
religion play in the dispute between Palestine and Israel?
5 How can the outbreak of conflict between Israel and the
Lebanese militia Hezbollah in 2006 be contextualized
within the long history of Arab-Israeli violence?

3 CHAPTER 3 Israel and the Arabs at War: Superpower Dimensions and the Israeli–US Alliance

SUGGESTED STUDY QUESTIONS 1 How did the Cold War impact upon Middle Eastern politics? 2 What was the influence of superpower involvement in the 1973 Arab– Israeli war? 3 What were the regional and international ramifications of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war? 4 What was the impact of the establishment of the state of Israel on inter-Arab relations? 5 What have been the primary sources of regional conflict in the Middle East?

4 CHAPTER 4 Islamism and the Iranian Revolution

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5 CHAPTER 5 Proxy War: The Superpowers in Afghanistan

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING Dupree, Louis (1973) Afghanistan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press). Emadi, Hafizullah (1990) State, Revolution, and Superpowers in Afghanistan (New York: Praeger). Hyman, Anthony (1982) Afghanistan under Soviet Domination, 1964-81 (London: Macmillan). Male, Beverley (1982) Afghanistan: A Reappraisal (London: Croom Helm). Marsden, Peter (2002) The Taliban: War and Religion in Afghanistan (London: Zed Books). Matinuddin, Kamal (1999) The Taliban Phenomenon: Afghanistan 1994-1997 (Karachi: Oxford University Press). Nojumi, Neamatollah (2002) The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilisation in Afghanistan (New York: Palgrave). Rashid, Ahmed (2001) Taliban: The Story of the Afghan Warlords: Including a New Foreword following the September 11 Terrorist Attacks of 2001 (London: Pan).

SUGGESTED STUDY QUESTIONS 1 What was the nature and impact of US involvement in Afghanistan during the era of Soviet occupation? 2 What has been the impact of US support for the Mujahideen during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan? 3 How was the conflict in Afghanistan indicative of the tensions of the Cold War? 4 What were the major outcomes of the US involvement in Afghanistan? 5 What role has the Afghan war played for stability in the Middle East?

6 CHAPTER 6 Wars in the Persian Gulf

SUGGESTED STUDY QUESTIONS 1 What was the rationale for, and impact of, superpower involvement in the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War? 2 What were the major outcomes of Operation Desert Storm? 3 In what ways can the 1991 Gulf War be considered a turning point in Middle Eastern politics? 4 Why did the United States leave Saddam Hussein in power after the 1991 conflict?

7 CHAPTER 7 Israel and Palestine: The Failure to Find Peace and the Role of the United States

SUGGESTED STUDY QUESTIONS 1 What were the major obstacles to attaining peace via the Oslo Accords? 2 What was the nature and impact of international involvement in the Oslo Accords? 3 What were the major obstacles to securing a lasting peace agreement at Camp David? 4 What was the nature and impact of international involvement at Camp David? 5 How have Middle Eastern states responded to the increasing role of the United States in the post-Cold War era?

8 CHAPTER 8 The Iraq 'Adventure' and Arab Perceptions of the Unites States

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SUGGESTED STUDY QUESTIONS 1 What do you understand to be the basis of Arab anti-Americanism? 2 How influential is anti-Americanism in the Middle East? 3 Has US policy in the Middle East advanced the US national interest? 4 Has the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 promoted the cause of democracy in the Middle East? 5 What have been the key themes of US

foreign policy in the Middle East in the second half of
the twentieth century?