



United States Policy in the Middle East: A History of Challenges, Responses, and Failures

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US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: From American Missionaries to the Islamic State

edited by Geoffrey F. Gresh & Tugrul Keskin
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This book is a collection of articles written by various scholars, mostly American and Turkish or people of Turkish descent, and based on papers presented at an international conference held at the University of Istanbul in the spring of 2016. This background is evident both in the choice of the contributors and in the problematic structure of the book, which is edited by Geoffrey Gresh, a lecturer in security studies at the National Defense University in Washington, and Tugrul Keskin, a researcher at the Center for Turkish Studies and the Center for Global Studies at the University of Shanghai. One of the book's strengths is its interdisciplinary approach. The chapter authors are experts in a range of fields, including United States foreign policy, Middle East studies, history, sociology, political science, and international relations.

The book opens with the correct assertion that most of the political debate on US policy in

the Middle East lacks historical context, without which its policies in recent decades, and even today, cannot be understood. Correcting this lapse, the book aims to provide this context by reviewing the development of American policy in the region from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the Trump administration, and it seeks to explain the in-depth processes that have shaped policy in the current century. The collection deals with different variables that affect or upset regional stability, including historical challenges, regional alliances, rapid political change, and domestic politics. In some chapters, policy is also presented from the perspectives of the countries in the region, including Iran, Turkey, and Arab countries, and this is a welcome innovation.

The volume comprises four sections and sixteen chapters. The sections are: historical, cultural, and economic interests; the challenges of the Cold War; the balance of regional alliances; and rapid political changes and the spread of instability in the region. There are several structural ways to edit a collection of articles. The editors have chosen a mixed approach that combines chapters that analyze United States policy toward countries and cross-country thematic chapters. But the internal division between countries and the topics and between the different sections is unbalanced. The first section, which offers historical, cultural, and economic background is very short and includes only two chapters. The middle two sections have three to four chapters, while the last section dealing with developments since the 9/11 terrorist attacks is the largest and includes seven chapters. The book includes very few thematic chapters.

The general approach is historical and chronological. Each chapter begins with a historical context and analyzes the development of American policy until the beginning of the Trump administration. Many chapters deal with US relations with major countries in the Middle East, focusing on the key issue or issues that characterize these relations, including

Turkey (Chapter 1, which provides historical background on culture and religion, and Chapter 4, on relations with the United States following World War II); Saudi Arabia (Chapter 2, on the involvement of American tobacco companies in the 1980s and 1990s); Iraq (Chapter 5, on relations with the Hashemite government, 1954-1958, and Chapter 10, on the war after 9/11); Israel (Chapter 6, on the roots of the alliance with the United States); Qatar (Chapter 8, on partnership with the United States after the 1991 Gulf War); Egypt (Chapter 11, on attitudes toward the Muslim Brotherhood, and Chapter 12, on the Arab Spring: cultivating or stopping regime changes); Syria (Chapter 13, on the failed policy toward the civil war); and Iran (Chapter 14, on the positions of the hardline Islamic conservatives).

Some of the chapters span countries, focusing on a common element, such as those dealing with US relations with two countries (Chapter 7, Iran and Turkey in the Cold War) or with several countries (Chapter 9, on the Obama Doctrine and the Gulf Cooperation Council, the strategic and economic partnership between Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar). A few chapters deal with issues such as the role of ideology and geography in relations with Turkey (Chapter 3); the information warfare against a non-state actor (ISIS, Chapter 15), and imperial planning or political economy (Chapter 16, which is an introduction to Trump administration policy).

There are gaps in the quality of research and writing. Gersh's introduction (pp. 1-9) presents clearly the goals of the book, its questions, its structure of sections and chapters, challenges, difficulties, and dilemmas. Although the last chapter written by Keskin (pp. 282-291) deals with broad questions such as who shapes US foreign policy and what is the impact of the political economy, it is not a substitute for a chapter summarizing the important insights raised in the book, and the absence of such a chapter is regrettable. Most chapters have new—albeit few—insights. Nonetheless, as

a whole, the volume contributes to a better understanding of the development of American policy in the Middle East, especially in the current century. There is very little use of international relations theory. An exception is the chapter by Suleyman Elik (pp. 118-137) on US relations with Iran and Turkey from the Cold War to the present day, based on the theory of patron-client relationships and confrontation through a proxy.

It is actually the first section, which deals with cultural and economic aspects of American policy in the region, that is relatively weak. Indeed, as is argued, the first contact was civil rather than state, through missionaries, businesspeople, and private companies. The United States entered the region politically and diplomatically only at the end of World War II, mainly because of the outbreak of the Cold War and Britain's appeal to take on its regional obligations. The chapter on the activities of American tobacco companies in Saudi Arabia in the 1980s and 1990s (pp. 29-46) is interesting and unusual because the subject is largely untouched, but it is highly doubtful whether it adds to the understanding of the historical background of US policy. It would have been better, in addition to the two specific chapters, to write a broader and more general chapter on American civilian entry into the region.¹

The most interesting and creative chapters are those that deal with subjects beyond the states themselves. Without geopolitics, ideology, and religion it is hard to understand the processes and events in the region. The chapter by Nickolas Spencer (pp. 49-66) offers this type of background regarding US policy toward Turkey. The chapter by Hamad Albloshi (pp. 244-261), which presents the attitudes of the Iranian hardliners against the United States, is excellent, and provides background for understanding the struggle between the moderates and the radical conservatives (see also Kazemzadeh, 2008). The struggle is reflected, for example, in the issue of negotiations with the United States and other

powers over the 2015 nuclear deal (Rezaei, 2017). Kelly Gleason's chapter (pp. 262-281) on the failed struggle for the consciousness of the United States against ISIS is also an important addition. Russell Burgos' article (pp. 175-200) on the start of the war in Iraq in 2003 highlights the role of internal factors and especially the loss of bipartisanship; this in turn led the administration of President George W. Bush's decision to use force, which grew more entangled and is still not over. The book includes only one general map of the Middle East, and it would have been desirable to include additional maps wherever geopolitics and ideology played an important role in historical events.

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The chapter that may be of more interest to the Israeli reader is the one written by Jeremy Pressman (pp. 105-117) on US-Israel relations. The chapter focuses on the reasons that led to the alliance between the two countries and sustain it to this day. Pressman examines three such reasons: Israel as a strategic asset, the activity of lobbying groups, and shared interests and values. In fact, however, there are other reasons, such as a similar history of immigration, pioneering, frontier living, conquest of the wilderness, and supportive public opinion (Gilboa, 1987). The author reviews difficulties in all these reasons, a unique combination of factors that does not exist in the United States' relations with other allied countries, and which has created a "special relationship" with Israel. The United States is a superpower while Israel is a regional power, so there has not always been a perfect match between the strategic interests of the two countries. The chapter provides examples of adaptation such as American-sponsored cooperation between Israel and Jordan against Syria's military intervention in the war against the PLO uprising in September

1970. However, the chapter does not deal with the close cooperation against radical Islam and the particularly difficult dispute between Israel and the Obama administration over the nuclear deal reached with Iran in 2015, and these are blatant and regrettable absences. Pressman estimates that despite the erosion of democratic values in both the United States and Israel, the alliance will survive and be maintained in the future.

Recurring claims in the book's various chapters testify to an endemic difficulty in the United States to understand events in the region and the lack of good alternatives for dealing with difficult challenges such as authoritarian regimes, revolutions, war, and terrorism. At the same time, the prevailing lack of understanding on the other side, i.e., among the countries of the region, of the United States in general and of its foreign policy in particular, can be added to this. Since the beginning of the Obama administration, the United States has wanted to leave the region, or at least reduce its presence and activity in it, and this trend continued even during the Trump presidency. The main reasons for this were a combination of internal crises, such as the severe economic crisis of 2008, and the failed US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq (Gordon, 2020). However, dramatic events such as the Arab Spring (Inbar, 2013), the ISIS takeover of large areas of Syria and Iraq, and Iran's plan to develop and acquire nuclear weapons have in practice prevented the possibility of moving away from the region.

There are few good books on United States policy in the Middle East, and despite its limitations, this book joins the list. Overall, the method of presenting historical development and placing events in complex contexts works, but the parts dealing with contemporary situations are less convincing and lack historical perspective. There is neither a state nor a superpower that does not make mistakes in foreign policy. The question is whether policymakers draw lessons from failures and succeed in preventing them in the future. One

of the significant conclusions in the book is the United States' lack of ability to learn from its past failures in regard to its foreign policy in the Middle East (see also Mandelbaum, 2016). The book raises the objective difficulty in any attempt to use the recent past to analyze the present and the near future. The Middle East is a region that undergoes rapid, significant processes, which researchers sometimes find difficult to grasp and decipher. The normalization agreements that Israel signed in 2020 with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco are a paradigm shift of sorts that affects processes across the region and changes perceptions and insights of strategic, ideological, and religious processes. So is Iran's accelerated pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. A possible updated edition of the book will need to include these events and their impact on all occurrences in the area.

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Note

- 1 The book that best provides a broad historical background on the interest and involvement of the United States in the Middle East since its inception was written by Michael Oren (2019).

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The editorial board of the INSS journal *Strategic Assessment* invites authors to submit articles to be published in the journal's updated format. Proposals for special themed issues are also welcome.

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