

U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East

After World War I, France and Great Britain created “protectorates” such as Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. They ruled over these territories without annexing them. The rise of Arab nationalism overlapped with anti-colonialism after World War II and these territories gained independence. Religious divisions still existed between Shias and Sunnis, but many countries were ruled by secular nationalists not committed to imposing religious uniformity. In other words, religious differences were controlled due to powerful political leaders. Israel was created in 1947 in the British protectorate of Palestine. Tensions between Israel and surrounding countries arose immediately and the United States emerged as Israel’s strongest ally in the region. Thus, opposition to European colonialism translated into opposition to the United States once the U.S. replaced Great Britain and France as the “superpower of the West” after World War II. Anti-colonialism essentially evolved into anti-Americanism due to American support for Israel and other interventions in the region.

American involvement:

In the 1950s the United States intervened during the Suez Crisis on behalf of Egypt by preventing Great Britain, France, and Israel from taking over the Suez Canal. This event was the beginning of an alliance between the U.S. and Egypt. The United States also intervened within Iran to install a monarch who would be an ally of the U.S. The Iranian people were opposed to this monarch and ultimately overthrew him in 1979 and attacked and occupied the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. Diplomatic relations between Iran and the U.S. ceased to exist.

In the 1980s, the United States gave military assistance to radical Islamists in Afghanistan who were fighting the Soviet Union. The unsuccessful Soviet occupation of Afghanistan contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the radical Islamists were emboldened by their “defeat” of a European superpower and went on to become more powerful. The anti-Soviet militias in Afghanistan became the Taliban, while a smaller group of fighters became the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda.

Also during the 1980s, the United States gave military assistance to Saddam Hussein in Iraq to help him fight a war against Iran. The Iraq-Iran War lasted most of the decade and was extremely bloody. The war ended in stalemate. In 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait, which resulted in an American-led intervention known as Desert Storm, or the First Gulf War.

Throughout the 1990s the United States bombed Iraq and imposed harsh economic sanctions in order to contain Saddam Hussein’s perceived and real ambitions. Israel and Palestine continued to have military conflicts, and both Iran and Saudi Arabia sponsored different versions of radical Islam and terrorism in the region.

In 2001, Al-Qaeda successfully attacked the United States in New York City and Washington D.C. 15 of the 19 hijackers were from Saudi Arabia, but it was out of Afghanistan that Al-Qaeda operated. Thus, the United States invaded Afghanistan and toppled the Taliban government. Many members of Al-Qaeda crossed the border into Pakistan where the group’s leader Osama bin Laden was ultimately killed in 2011.

In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq and toppled the Hussein regime. Al-Qaeda then moved into Iraq to destabilize the country (Al-Qaeda was not in Iraq prior to the invasion), Iran provided financial support to other terrorists within Iraq to attack American soldiers, Shia and Sunni extremists began violently competing for power within the new Iraqi government, and an anti-American insurgency arose with the goal of driving out the United States entirely. A troop “surge” in 2007 brought relative stability to the country and allowed a new government to take hold. The United States withdrew troops in 2011 and the radical Sunni group ISIS began to conquer Iraqi territory and Syrian territory. The Iraqi government and

military has been unsuccessful in containing ISIS. The United States and Iran (Shia) are now “allies” in the fight against ISIS (a Sunni group), which has complicated the American alliance with Saudi Arabia (Sunni).

The U.S. invasion of Iraq was undertaken with the ultimate goal of “democratizing” the Middle East. Whether or not that can be done through military interventions, and whether or not that is something the United States should be doing, have been heated topics of debate. In 2010, a wave of protests and revolutions swept across the Middle East and North Africa in what is now referred to as the Arab Spring. The protests began in Tunisia and major uprisings spread to Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria. Smaller uprisings and protests emerged in about a dozen other countries. Egyptians overthrew their long-time president Hosni Mubarak. Civil war broke out in Libya as the people attempted to overthrow their leader Muammar Gaddafi. Syrians began protesting the government led by Bashar Assad. Needless to say, these events surprised the world and the United States had to quickly decide whether or not to support individual uprisings to topple unpopular leaders, possibly support existing leaders who we “needed” to accomplish our own foreign policy goals, or watch events unfold without U.S. intervention (obviously the U.S. cannot intervene in five or six uprisings simultaneously!). Ultimately, the U.S. supported the new democratically elected president of Egypt, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood named Mohamed Morsi. The U.S. conducted airstrikes with NATO to help topple Gaddafi from power in Libya, but radical Islamists have since gained enormous influence within the country now that Gaddafi is gone. Assad has violently crushed the uprising against his government, even using chemical weapons against his own people, and the Syrian civil war continues with ISIS now occupying part of the country.

The United States is currently leading a regional coalition to fight ISIS, which includes regional powers such as Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, as well as many other European powers. The United States is finding it difficult to intervene in the Syrian civil war because it opposes both ISIS and the Assad regime. The United States threatened to intervene militarily in the Syrian civil war if Assad used chemical weapons against his own people. Assad did so in 2013 and President Obama was prepared to begin bombing Syria. The U.S. Congress and much of the American public disapproved of the idea and ultimately Obama did not use force. One reason commentators speculate the United States did not act aggressively in Syria was to maintain relations with Iran, an ally of Assad, conducive to reaching a comprehensive nuclear agreement. Such an agreement was reached in 2015 by the United States, Iran, Germany, Great Britain, France, Russia, and China. The other reason that removing Assad from power is difficult is that Russia is an ally of Assad and ISIS may take over Syria if Assad is removed (similar to what happened in Libya with Gaddafi). Meanwhile, civilians are fleeing Syria for asylum in Europe which has created the largest refugee crisis since World War II.

Terrorist groups loosely affiliated with Al-Qaeda and ISIS continue to operate in other countries in the region, as well. Iran continues to finance terrorist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah that are a source of instability and violence within Palestine and Lebanon. Saudi Arabia, a staunch American ally, is arguably the main source of radical Islamic ideology throughout the region. Saudi Arabia promotes Wahhabism, a fundamentalist version of Islam shared by Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Some commentators argue that the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia must be reexamined if radical Islamic terrorism is to truly be contained. Sharp disagreements exist about who poses the most significant short-term and long-term threat to the United States and regional stability: Iran, ISIS, Saudi Arabia? And that’s just the Middle East!

The United States is currently conducting special operations raids, drone strikes, and air strikes in Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, and “Obama knows where else.” The War on Terror is primarily waged by the executive branch, independent of Congressional influence, and is done on a preemptive basis with questionable legality. Yet, the world is a dangerous place and many people argue that a powerful executive is best positioned to contain foreign threats.