The United States & the Middle East

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Prior to WWII, private citizens and non-governmental groups from the U.S. seem to have had more interest in the Middle East than the government itself. Thus, for instance, American missionaries went to the region to save souls and built some humanitarian and educational institutions. The Syrian Protestant College established in 1866 is a good example of that missionary work. The college is today the American University in Beirut.
As to the governmental involvement in the Middle East prior to WWII, only a few events can be mentioned:

1. During the First Barbary War or Tripolitan war of 1801-1805, president Thomas Jefferson sent a naval expedition to the shores of Tripoli (modern Libya) after a local warlord attacked American merchant vessels in an attempt to extort more protection money from the U.S.

Burning of the frigate Philadelphia in the harbor of Tripoli, February 16, 1804, by Edward Moran, painted 1897, depicts a naval action of the First Barbary War.
2. President Abraham Lincoln (1809-65) sent a brace of pistols as a gift to ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jazairi (1808-1883), for protecting a Christian minority during the sectarian riots in 1860 in Damascus. ‘Abd al-Qadir was the founder of modern Algeria, Sufi, and leader of its struggle against the French. By 1837 through battles and treaties, he had established his rule over most of Algeria's interior, leaving the French in control of some port cities. He organized a true state, imposing equal taxes and suppressing the privileges of the warlike tribes. He fortified the interior towns, opened arsenals and workshops, and expanded education. The French overpowered his forces and arrested him by 1846. Upon his parole in 1853, he chose a life of exile, eventually settling in Damascus. Revered for his exemplary life and ideals, in 1860 he showed himself to be a model of decency and probity when, at great risk to his own safety, he sheltered thousands of Christians during a Druze uprising. He died respected by both French and Algerians (and by many others throughout the world), and he remains the Algerian national hero.
3. President Abraham Lincoln (1809-65) also signed a treaty of commerce and navigation with the Ottoman Empire at the time when much of the world was unsure that there would be United States for much longer.

4. President Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919) intervened when a Moroccan bandit named Ahmad al-Rasuli kidnapped an American businessman, Ion Pericardis, (in 1903?). The bandit informed the U.S. consul to Algeria that if he does not receive the $70,000 ransom, the captive will be dead. Having heard about this incident, Roosevelt stormed “Pericardis alive or Rasuli dead” gaining popularity among the citizens. The Morrocan government paid the ransom and Pericardis was set free.

5. As mentioned earlier, president Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) was highly popular in the Middle East, especially among Syrian Arabs, for his idea of the right of every people to self-determination.

6. During and immediately after WWI, U.S. presidents and Congress deplored the Armenian massacre and supported Zionism.
In 1954, the National Security Council sent to President Eisenhower a report entitled "U.S. Objectives and Policies with Respect to the Near East." The "Objectives" read as follows:

- a) Availability to the U.S. and its allies of resources, the strategic position, and the passage rights of the area and the denial of such resources and strategic positions to the Soviet bloc.

- b) Stable, viable, friendly governments in the area capable of withstanding communist-inspired subversion from within and willing to resist communist aggression.

- c) Settlement of major issues between the Arab states and Israel as a foundation for establishing peace and order in the area.

- d) Reversal of anti-American trends of Arab opinion.

- e) Prevention of the extension of Soviet influence in the area.
f) Wider recognition in the free world of the legitimate aspiration of the countries in the area to be recognized as, and have the status of, sovereign states; and wider recognition by such countries of their responsibility toward the area and toward the free world generally.
U.S. policies toward the Middle East in the end of the Cold War

In April 1981, two years after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Peter Constable, deputy assistant secretary of state for Near East and South Asian affairs in the administration of Ronald Reagan, provided to the Congress the following picture of the U.S. “Policies toward the Middle East and Persian Gulf region,”

a) Security of friends assuring the security and availability of resources and protecting vital transportation and communication routes.

b) Prevent the three threats:
1. the Soviet direct and indirect expansion,
2. regional disputes and conflicts that jeopardized the regional stability and provided fertile opportunities for external (Soviet) exploitation,
3. destabilizing effects of political change, social development and economic growth that bring false hope and instability.

Between 1954 and 1981 and continuing through the end of the cold war, with minor changes in the margins, most of American policies toward the Middle East remained as described by Peter Constable and the National Security Council.
Six Objectives that guided the U.S. Middle Eastern Policy from WWII until 1990’s

1. To prevent the expansion of Soviet influence into the region,
2. To assure the Western access to oil,
3. To preserve the independence and territorial integrity of the state of Israel,
4. To ensure the peaceful resolution of conflicts and the maintenance of regional balance of power,
5. To ensure the political stability in the region,
6. To protect the sea lanes, lines of communications, and the like, connecting the U.S. and Europe with Asia.
Objective 1: Prevention of the Soviet expansion into the Middle East

- Prevention of the Soviet expansion in the Middle East was the primary goal of the U.S. policy in the Middle East during the Cold War era.

- As distinguished from the Leninist Soviet Union that was not interested in imperialism, the Stalinist soviets were interested in spreading their ideas in the Middle East and elsewhere.

- The first cold war conflict between the U.S. and Russia was actually related to the Russian refusal to leave the northern Iranian territories after WWII (1946).

- Under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev (1953-1964), the Soviets tried to exploit the Middle Eastern resentments of imperialism, as well as the ideas of Third Worldism in order to spread their influence in the region. Thus, from 1955 on, the Soviet Union looked for allies in the Middle East including the revolutionary republics: Egypt, Syria, and Iraq.
Objective 2 : Assuring the Western Access to Oil

- The second major objective of the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East was to assure the Western access to oil. There are two reasons for this - economic and strategic.

- In the economic sense, until 1958 and its recession, the U.S. was not addicted to Middle eastern oil. Actually, in the 1950’s the international oil market was so over-saturated with oil that president Eisenhower imposed import quotas to protect oil companies from falling prices. However, from the 1958 recession until the oil crisis of 1973, the U.S. was importing more than 1/3 of its oil from the Middle East. Currently, the U.S. imports about a 1/5 of its oil from the Middle East (and about a 1/5 from North Africa.)

- However, though *oil was not an immediate economic concern* for the U.S. economy in the beginning of the Cold War, *it was a strategic concern*. The U.S. sustained the recovery of the European and Japanese economies with cheap Middle Eastern oil. The U.S. saw the economic recovery in these regions as essential in avoiding social revolutions, i.e. communist revolutions.

- Europe still gets 1/3 of its oil from the Middle East and and Japan gets close to 80%.
Objective 3: Peaceful resolution of conflicts and the maintenance of regional balance of power

- The third goal of the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East during the Cold War was to ensure the peaceful resolution of conflicts and the maintenance of regional balance of power.

- The main fear was that the Arab-Israeli conflict could polarize the region. Therefore, the U.S. government tried to establish, first of all, the balance of power between Israel and the neighboring Arab states. By doing so, the U.S. government once again tried avoiding the Soviet involvement in the problem.

- Thus, during president Harry Truman (1884-1972) administration, the U.S. and its allies agreed to coordinate arms sales to Israel and surrounding Arab states to make sure neither side would have clear advantage. After that policy broke down, the U.S. policy makers made sure that the peace is kept by keeping Israel at least as strong as the sum total of its potential adversaries.

- Additionally, the U.S. policy makers also sought to establish a balance of power in the Gulf. As a result, the U.S. supported Saddam Hussain’s Iraq during the Iraq-Iran war (1980-88). Some three years after this war, the U.S. led a coalition against Iraq in the Gulf war (1990-91).
Objective 4 : Political stability of the Region

✦ The fourth objective of the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East was the political stability of the region.

✦ To achieve this goal, the U.S. administration promoted stable, pro-Western states in the region. Policy makers believed if the states of the region were strong and if they fulfilled the aspirations of their peoples (anti-imperialism, nationalism, and economic development), they and their populations would resist Soviet blandishments. Therefore, the U.S. officials supported the “modernizing” military officers who took power in the military coup d’état.

✦ The U.S. also supported the economic development of the states in the region, both as a contributor of foreign assistance and an advocate in international economic institutions such as the World Bank.

✦ The Johnston plan (sharing the Jordan river water between Israel, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria), as well as the Aswan High Dam Project, both initially supported by the U.S.A., eventually turned to be unsuccessful and so due to the political reasons.
The Johnston Plan fell apart for the Jordanian government was not willing to swap water with Israel for economic support.

The Aswan High Dam Project lost the U.S. financial support after Naser recognized the “Red” China. Additionally, Naser planned to import weapons from Czechoslovakia. In any case, Naser attempted to make up to shortfall by nationalizing the Suez Canal.

The U.S. also supported Naser in 1952 during the coup d’état. Later the U.S. opposed Naser’s pan-Arab nationalism and his support for the Iraqi coup d’état in 1958.

During the 1970’s and international crisis, the U.S. reviewed its own policy of the economic development in the Middle East and started proposing that economic and political stability can only be achieved through the liberalization of their economies and through private initiative.
Objective 5 : Preservation of the Independence and Territorial Integrity of Israel

- The 5th goal of the U.S. policy in the Middle East during the Cold War was the preservation of the independence and territorial integrity of the state of Israel.

- President Truman did not recognize Israel automatically in 1948. He was afraid that the partition of Palestine could lead to a bloodshed that would divert the U.S. attention and troops away from Europe. His administration also feared that the U.S. recognition of Israel could sever the U.S. relations with the Arab states and jeopardize European and Japanese economic recovery. Secretary of State George Marshall was also against the recognition.

- Eight years later, in 1956, president Eisenhower was so outraged by the Israeli participation in the Suez conspiracy that he threatened economic retaliation if Israel did not withdraw from Egypt.

- It was not until John F. Kennedy (1953-60 in office) that the American president used the word “ally” when referring to Israel.
According to Gelvin, there are three kinds of factors - ideological, strategic, and domestic - that have contributed to the American-Israeli alliance:

1. In terms of ideology, the Israelis have presented their case well in the U.S. portraying Israel as the sole democracy and repository of American values in the region.

2. In terms of strategy, U.S. policy makers have often times viewed Israel as a proxy in the fight against the Soviet influence in the region.

3. In terms of domestic politics, presidents and congressmen have attempted to garner Jewish - and most recently Christian evangelical - votes by portraying themselves as supporters of Israel.

This does not mean that the American-Israeli relationship has been trouble free or that the U.S. has agreed with Israel across the board on such issues as boarders, Israeli settlement policies in the occupied territories, approaches to ending the Arab-Israeli conflict, or the status of Jerusalem. Some U.S. diplomats and politicians actually strongly disagree that Israel is at all a true “democracy and repository of American values in the region.” (Maybe, in 60’s, we can talk about segregation, as the common “value.”)
Objective 6: Protection of Water Ways and Communications

- The final goal of the U.S. policy in the Middle East during the Cold War was the protection of the sea lanes, lines of communication and the like connecting the U.S. and Europe with Asia.

- The Middle East by itself is geographically so positioned that it is worth fighting for by any power with global pretensions.

- The most important water way in the region is the Suez Canal.
Strategies for the implementation of the objectives

- Though the U.S. government faithfully advocated the six objectives throughout the Cold War era, the U.S. policy appears inconsistent due to the varied approaches that the government used to achieve the goals.

- The two main strategies of the containment of the Soviet influence in the region: the *peripheral containment* and *strong-point containment*.

- The idea of *peripheral containment* means circling the Soviet Union with an unbroken string of pro-American states liked together through a system of alliances.

- Thus, the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization** (NATO) was born in 1949.

- In 1955 the British organized the **“Baghdad Pact”** made up of Britain, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan. The pact was a failure, because Egypt made influence on Iraq. In 1958, after the Iraqi officers deposed the monarchy, Iraq stepped out of the pact. The remaining states made a **Central Treaty Organization** (CENTO.) Both, the Baghdad Pact and CENTO proved to be ineffective in preventing the spread of the Soviet influence.
Strategies for the implementation of the objectives (cont.)

- Strong-point containment means establishing a few “fortress allies” in various regions. The U.S. selected these “fortress allies” based on their economy or military or government apparatus.

- During the 70’s the U.S. came to depend on Israel in the Western Middle East to prevent the Soviets from using their Syrian ally to spread their influence. In the Eastern Middle East, the U.S. used Iran (and to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia) to prevent the Soviets from using Iraq in the same way.

Bell: “How to Save Israel in spite of Herself”

• In order to contain the Soviet influence in the area on one side and to save Israel’s independence and territorial integrity on the other, during the cold war the U.S. policy makers started regarding Israel as a “strategic asset” (the phrase coined during the Reagan administration.)

• Other policy advisers, for instance, George Bell wrote in 1977 that Israel’s security depends on settlement of the Arab-Israeli dispute and good relations with its neighbors. Bell believed that Israel intransigence not only prolongs the atmosphere of hostility, but also undermines the governments of the moderate neighbors, such as Jordan, which have nothing to show for their moderation. Therefore, if the U.S. truly has Israel’s best interests at heart, it should adopt more “evenhanded approach” and drag Israel to the bargaining table to negotiate a fair peace. Needless to say, successive Israeli governments and their supporters in the U.S. have had problems with Bell’s approach.
Nixon Doctrine

- According to the Nixon Doctrine of 1969, the U.S. would give support to regional powers engaged in the fight against international communism without itself deploying forces.
- This was also the opinion of the president Lyndon Johnson (1963-69) who preceded president Richard Nixon (1969-1974.)
- When around this time OPEC increased the oil prices, the U.S. government did not mind, for they believed that that would enable the Gulf countries, particularly Iran, to buy the weapons from the U.S. that will enable them to block Soviet and Iraqi ambitions in the Gulf.
Camp David Peace Accord

- President Jimmy Carter helps Israel and Egypt achieve the peace through the Camp David Peace Accord in 1978. However, as a consequence Egypt is expelled from the Arab League and Iraq overtakes the role as the dominant force in the Arab world. Many perceive this as inconsistent result of the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. But, that is not an end of the questionable results of this policy.
- Also, some scholars believe that Iraq invaded Iran in 1980 to consolidate its position in the region.
- Some scholar believe that Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 as a result of the Camp David.
- Camp David brought peace to Egypt and Israel, but the solution of the glowing Palestinian question remained unresolved. Some scholars believe that Israel imposed its own solution on the Palestinians.
- A great many scholars also ascribe the assassination of Anwar Sadat to the Camp David Peace agreement.
- How successful was it, the question remains.
Perceived Inconsistencies

- According to Gelvin, the U.S. Middle Eastern policies have often been mistakenly understood as inconsistent. The reasons for such perceptions are due to the fact that:
  - 1. the government used two strategies - the *peripheral containment* and *strong-point containment*,
  - 2. policy planners attempted to *achieve one objective at the expense of the others* (Nixon, Vietnam, Oil Prices, Weapons for Iran)
  - 3. there is *the law of unexpected results* (the case of Camp David)
  - 4. the U.S. simply was not able to implement many of its objectives though it was widely perceived as a superpower.
Successfulness of the U.S. policies

✦ According to William Quandt, a former National Security Council member, the U.S. Middle Eastern policy was more successful than the U.S. foreign policy in many other parts of the world.

✦ According to him, during the whole Cold War era, only about 500 Americans lost their lives in service to their country in the Middle East. Almost a half of that number were American marines killed in a single incident in Beirut in 1983.

✦ On the other side, between 1965-1975 more than 50,000 American troops lost their lives in Southeast Asia.

✦ The U.S. was very successful in five of its objective, except in ending the regional conflicts.

✦ All of this was done in the Middle East for some 150-200 billion dollars over 40 years.

✦ On the other side, in terms of current value, the futile Vietnam war (1955-1975) was as twice as expensive.
Lack of Success on the U.S. side

- According to Gelvin, *Quandt* does not ignore the U.S. share of disasters in the Middle East. Here belong:
  - 1. The U.S. inability to foresee or deal with the Iranian Revolution;
  - 2. The narrowly averted nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union that occurred at the end of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war;
  - 3. The U.S. support for appalling regimes;
  - 4. The U.S. weapons have been used against the civil population in Lebanon in 1982, in the Palestinian occupied territories, and elsewhere to this very day;
  - 6. The U.S. economic policies often created more hardship than relief in the Middle East;
  - Otherwise the U.S. policy in the Middle East was “successful,” Gelvin believes.