



School of History & International Relations  
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Master of Arts in International Relations

**THE RISE AND DEMISE OF THE US INVOLVEMENT IN THE  
MIDDLE EAST: WHY DID THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION  
DISENGAGE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST?**

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## Synopsis

This thesis examines some seven decades of the US involvement in the Middle East, since the end the Second World War till the end of Obama presidency. By viewing fundamental US strategic interests in the region, like securing access to and the flow of energy resources, defending the security of the state of Israel, and fighting terrorism, this thesis provides an understanding of why the Middle East invariably occupies a unique place in US strategic calculations, despite a constantly changing global and regional geopolitical landscape. The thesis articulates how the Obama Administration shifted US Middle Eastern foreign policy, and reduced the US engagement with the region, suggesting a range of factors and variables that contributed in this transformation. This thesis opines that the transformation of the US policy toward the Middle East under Obama resulted from the eruption of the Arab Spring, and the relative decline of the Middle Eastern oil strategic significance on the one hand, and Obama's presidential doctrine and the need to prioritise the Asia-Pacific region, on the other hand. The thesis articulates how the Obama Administration shifted US Middle Eastern foreign policy, and reduced the US engagement with the region, suggesting a range of factors and variables that contributed in this transformation. This thesis opines that the transformation of the US policy toward the Middle East under Obama resulted from the eruption of the Arab Spring, and the relative decline of the Middle Eastern oil strategic significance on the one hand, and Obama's presidential doctrine and the need to prioritise the Asia-Pacific region, on the other hand.

## Disclaimer:

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

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Signature of the candidate: \_\_\_\_\_

Date

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## **Introduction**

The Middle East region occupies an important place in world politics. It is seen invariably as presenting both an international opportunity and challenge. While the region's economic and strategic potential render it indispensable for 'outside' global powers, its chronic instability and political upheavals regularly presents a major challenge to be dealt with. A considerable volume of literature dealing with superpower strategies toward the Middle East has been produced, much of which relates to US security policy and strategy, given its status as a superpower and protracted involvement in the Middle East. This thesis relies on analysis of Foreign Policy and Grand Strategy, both subfields of International Relations literature. The aim of the thesis is to provide a comprehensive account of US involvement in the region over the course of seven decades and to put into perspective the evolution of US strategies and approaches employed since the Second World War. The thesis seeks to highlight the US strategic interests in the Middle East which, those interests that rendered security and stability of the region a paramount for the United States and prompted the US protracted engagement in the Middle East. Also, the thesis pinpoints significant transformations of Middle Eastern foreign policy during the Obama Administration (2009-2016), identifying the factors and variables accounting for the change.

### **Thesis questions**

The thesis addresses two related questions:

How did US Middle Eastern foreign and security policy shift during the Obama Administration?

Why did the Obama Administration disengage from the Middle East, reducing military, political and diplomatic commitments?

## **Thesis Hypothesis:**

US foreign policy in the Middle East during the Obama Administration veered away from policies employed by its predecessors by embarking on a gradual disengagement from its historical military and diplomatic commitments.

## **Methodology:**

A review of existing academic literature is used throughout this study to identify perspectives and interpretations, and major debates.

## **Main sources of evidence and method in use:**

The key sources of evidence are peer-reviewed journals and articles, and official governmental documents such as the national security strategy of the United States of America, statements, interviews and speeches.

## **Thesis structure:**

This thesis is structured as follows:

The **first chapter** discusses how the Middle East is delineated as a geographical region and identifies the major US strategic imperatives.

**Chapter two** provides a chronological overview of US involvement in the Middle East, identifying strategies and approaches used after WW2 to safeguard interests against changing threats.

The **third chapter** probes the changes foreign policy towards the Middle East during the Obama Administration, along with elements of continuity.

The **fourth and last chapter** addresses the factors leading the Obama Administration to veer US Middle Eastern foreign policy away from the approach pursued by its immediate predecessor.

# Chapter One

## US AND THE MIDDLE EAST AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR: WHAT IS THE MIDDLE EAST AND WHAT ARE THE US STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES IN THIS REGION

### 1.1. Introduction

While US interest in the Middle East can be traced to the beginning of the twentieth century, the aftermath of the World War II (WW2) ushered in a new era of involvement that continued for decades. The United States activities during the early decades of the twentieth century were, to a great extent, confined to cultural, educational, and commercial realms.<sup>1</sup> This was mainly because much of the region was either occupied directly, or within spheres of influence created by the two dominant European powers, Britain and France, in the wake of the Great War and collapse of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the United States chose, during that era, to distance itself from European competition and to underpin its position as a hegemon power within the western hemisphere, before broadening its global outlook.

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<sup>1</sup> The first forms of these activities took the shape of missionary works and diplomatic missions, and not long after the discovery of oil in commercial quantities in the region, American oil companies rushed to gain concessions to explore and produce oil. See, John A.DeNovo, ‘*American interests and policies in the Middle East 1900-1939*’, The University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1963, p. 383, and Yakub Halabi, ‘*US Foreign Policy in the Middle East : From Crises to Change*’, Abingdon, Oxon, GB: Routledge, 2009, p. 29. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 28 January 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Britain and France influence in the region's affairs had drastically receded after the Suez Canal crisis in 1956. See F Halldiday, *The Middle East in international relations: Power, politics and ideology*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 95.

The post-second world war era was a watershed for US diplomacy in the Middle East, and globally. The decline of the European powers' influence and onset of the Cold War compelled the United States to step up its involvement in this region.<sup>3</sup> This chapter highlights two main issues pertaining to the international relations of the Middle East. First, it discusses why defining and determining decisive borders to the Middle East has been a contentious issue among scholars and officials. Secondly, it establishes why the Middle East was strategically significant for the US by exploring its Middle Eastern interests since the Second World War.

## 1.2. What is the Middle East: the elusive definition and amorphous boundaries

Naming and delineation of any geographical region is usually the result of the political and strategic discourses of external powers rather than emanating from historical and geopolitical realities, or indigenous perspectives of the peoples of these regions.<sup>4</sup> As a result, it is hardly surprising that there is invariably controversy and ambiguity over the terminology and content of almost every geopolitical representation.

The Middle East region is no exception. Despite the wide use of the term in media and political discourse, there is no consent among the scholars and state officials about what

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<sup>3</sup> The vacuum of power in the region brought about by the retreat of the European powers was seen as a liability that could not be tolerated, considering the context of the cold war, since it is providing the Soviets with an opportunity to expand their influence and their presence in the Middle East. The perceived threat led to the declaration of "Eisenhower Doctrine" in 1957, which intended to preclude the Soviets from having a prominent position in the region. See, Jeffrey h. Michaels, "Dysfunctional Doctrines? Eisenhower, Carter and U.S. Military Intervention in the Middle East", *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 126 No. 3, 2011, p. 471, <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/doi/10.1002/j.1538-165X.2011.tb00709.x/full>>, retrieved 1 February 2017.

<sup>4</sup> World regions are more of social constructs that are discursively constructed rather being naturally existing. See Karen Culcasi, "Constructing and naturalizing the Middle East", *Geographical Review*, Vol. 100, No. 4, October 2010, p. 283, <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/doi/10.1111/j.1931-0846.2010.00059.x/abstract>>, retrieved 2 February 2017, and Pinar Bilgin, 'Inventing Middle East? The Making of Regions through Security Discourses', *The Fourth Nordic Conference on Middle Eastern Studies*, Oslo, August 1998, p. 23, [https://www.academia.edu/605117/1998\\_Inventing\\_Middle\\_Easts\\_The\\_Making\\_of\\_Regions\\_through\\_Security\\_Discourses\\_in\\_THE\\_MIDDLE\\_EAST\\_IN\\_A\\_GLOBALIZED\\_WORLD](https://www.academia.edu/605117/1998_Inventing_Middle_Easts_The_Making_of_Regions_through_Security_Discourses_in_THE_MIDDLE_EAST_IN_A_GLOBALIZED_WORLD)>, retrieved 2 February 2017.

defines the Middle East or its borders. Every scholar of the Middle East encounters methodological difficulties.<sup>5</sup>

The emergence of the Middle East as a political term can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century, though it is still debatable who first coined the term. While it is widely acknowledged that the American naval officer and historian Alfred Thayer Mahan was the first to use the term in an article published in 1902, the Middle East concept had appeared in earlier writings, namely in the British General Tomas Edward Gordon's article "*The Problems of the Middle East*", which was published two years before.<sup>6</sup> Regardless, neither Mahan nor Gordon delineated the geographical extent of the area they designated as the Middle East.<sup>7</sup>

Since its inception and throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the term Middle East gradually superseded the earlier Near East. The latter was used mainly to describe the territories ruled by the Ottoman Empire. The concept of the Middle East during this era reflected the British vision of the region, which rested on the necessity of securing the sea and land routes to India and, later, to new territories Britain conquered after the First World War.<sup>8</sup> The British Middle East was a vague description of an ambiguous region of Asia between the Mediterranean and Indian oceans.<sup>9</sup> The British-centric concept of the Middle East only declined after WW2, along with British influence in the region.

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<sup>5</sup> Fawaz Gerges, "The study of Middle East international relations: A critique", *British Journal of the Middle East Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 1991, pp. 208, [http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/stable/196040?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/stable/196040?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents), retrieved 2 February 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Even though he used the term of the Middle East in his writings, Tomas Edward Gordon did not ascribe it to himself, which indicates that the term might have been used before that time by other writers. See Pinar Bilgin, 'Inventing Middle East?' p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Mahan's Middle East was the region between the Suez to Singapore. See, Osman Nuri Ozal, "where is the Middle East? The definition and classification problem of the Middle East regional system in international relations", *Turkish Journal of Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2011, p. 8 <[http://www.tau.edu.tr/img/files/where\\_is\\_the\\_middle\\_east2012\\_onozalp.pdf](http://www.tau.edu.tr/img/files/where_is_the_middle_east2012_onozalp.pdf)>, retrieved 10 February 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Pinar Bilgin, 'Inventing Middle East?' p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> Karen Culcasi, "Constructing and naturalizing the Middle East", p. 585.

The term Middle East became commonplace in international relations after WW2, yet without consensus about its geographical borders.<sup>10</sup> The diffusion of the term, whether within public discourse or in the academic realm, triggered persistent debate and quests to more accurately define and delimit this region. Official circles in the United States in the early fifties, for example, experienced difficulties introducing an agreed delineation of the region.<sup>11</sup> After the announcement of the Eisenhower Doctrine in 1957, which stipulated provision of military and economic aid to the countries of the Middle East to help them stand against the Soviet Union, Congress demanded an explanation of what was meant by the Middle East.<sup>12</sup> US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, defined the Middle East as "the area laying between and including Libya on the west and Pakistan to the east and Turkey on the north and the Arabian peninsula to the south, plus the Sudan and Ethiopia".<sup>13</sup> He added that the term Middle East and Near East are identical. Despite this clarification, obfuscation relating to the term Middle East persisted.<sup>14</sup>

Attempts were made by scholars, historians and specialists to define and map the region's borders. Despite numerous characterisations, they can be subsumed under two main categories. The first category tends to divide states into different sub-regional groups. Raymond Hinnebusch, for instance, sees the Middle East as comprising Arab countries at its core, with a 'periphery' encompassing Iran, Turkey, and Israel.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Hudson divides

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<sup>10</sup> Fawaz Gerges, p. 210.

<sup>11</sup> Roderic H. Davison, "Where is the Middle East", *The Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 4, June 1960, p. 665, <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/1960-07-01/where-middle-east>>, retrieved 14 February 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 665.

<sup>13</sup> Roderic H. Davison, P. 665.

<sup>14</sup> Only a year after Dulles provided his vision about the Middle East, the US State of Department not only provided a different definition of the region that excludes several states included in the previous description, but also Continued to deal with the region's affairs via the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, whose bailiwick covers an area that differs from the previous presented definitions of the Middle East. For further details see, Karen Culcasi, p. 586, and Roderic H. Davison, P. 665.

<sup>15</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, '*the international politics of the Middle East*', Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2003, p. 1.

the region into three partial systems: the Arab East, North Africa, and the Gulf Region.<sup>16</sup> Notably, after the end of the Cold War, definitions in this second category tended to add Central Asia as a subregion of the Middle East.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike the first category, the second delimitation deals with an extended swathe of land. According to the political lexicon of the Near East, Middle East is "the area between Morocco in the west and Pakistan in the east".<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the American political scientist J. C. Hurewitz defined the region as extending from Morocco to Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup> Drawing on an extensive examination of large numbers of definitions, maps and delineations, Karen Culcasi observed that while there are a few countries that constantly present in every characterization, the inclusion of other countries varies, as illustrated in *Figure 1*<sup>20</sup>.

The Middle East's definitional dilemma can be attributed to several causes. First, the Middle East as a concept and vision is imposed from without by great powers, mostly western. Seen as an artificial Eurocentric abstraction, the term was dismissed by states and peoples in the region, who possess their own perceptions and understanding.<sup>21</sup> Second, the region lacks commonalities. There is not one criterion or even a set of criteria that gives the region a unique character. The region encompasses largely diverse nations and populations with different orientations and aspirations who respond to different loyalties.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Hudson, Michael D., 1976. "The Middle East." In *World Politics*, edited by James Rosenau, p. 483, New York: Free Press, cited in Osman Nuri Ozal, "where is the Middle East?", p.10.

<sup>17</sup> The inclusion of the Central Asian countries within the Middle East borders after the end of the cold war and the inclusion of Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks is reflection how the characterization of the Middle East is determined according to outside powers visions. Osman Nuri Ozal, p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Steinbach, Udo (edit)"Political Lexicon Middle East", Munich, Beck, 1979, cited in Osman Nuri Ozal, "where is the Middle East?", p.10.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 10

<sup>20</sup> Karen Culcasi, "Constructing and naturalizing the Middle East", p. 589.

<sup>21</sup> Many Arab theorists vehemently dismiss the Middle East concept altogether and substitute it with an Arab regional subsystem, suggesting that the latter represents genuine historical and geographical realities, like the common linguistic, cultural, and social properties. See, Fawaz Gerges, p. 210. For another outlook of the regional system like the Islamic Middle East and the Mediterranean Middle East, See Pinar Bilgin, "Whose 'Middle East'? Geopolitical Inventions and Practices of Security", *International Relations*, Vol.18, No.1, 2004 pp. 24-27.< <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0047117804041739>>, retrieved 15 February 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Nikki R. Kellie, "is there a Middle East", pp. 255-257.

In short, the concept and extent of the Middle East as a geopolitical entity are a reflection of the super powers' strategic interests, and thus it invariably shifts first in parallel with the security conceptions and needs of these powers and then with the challenges and opportunities emanating from the region.

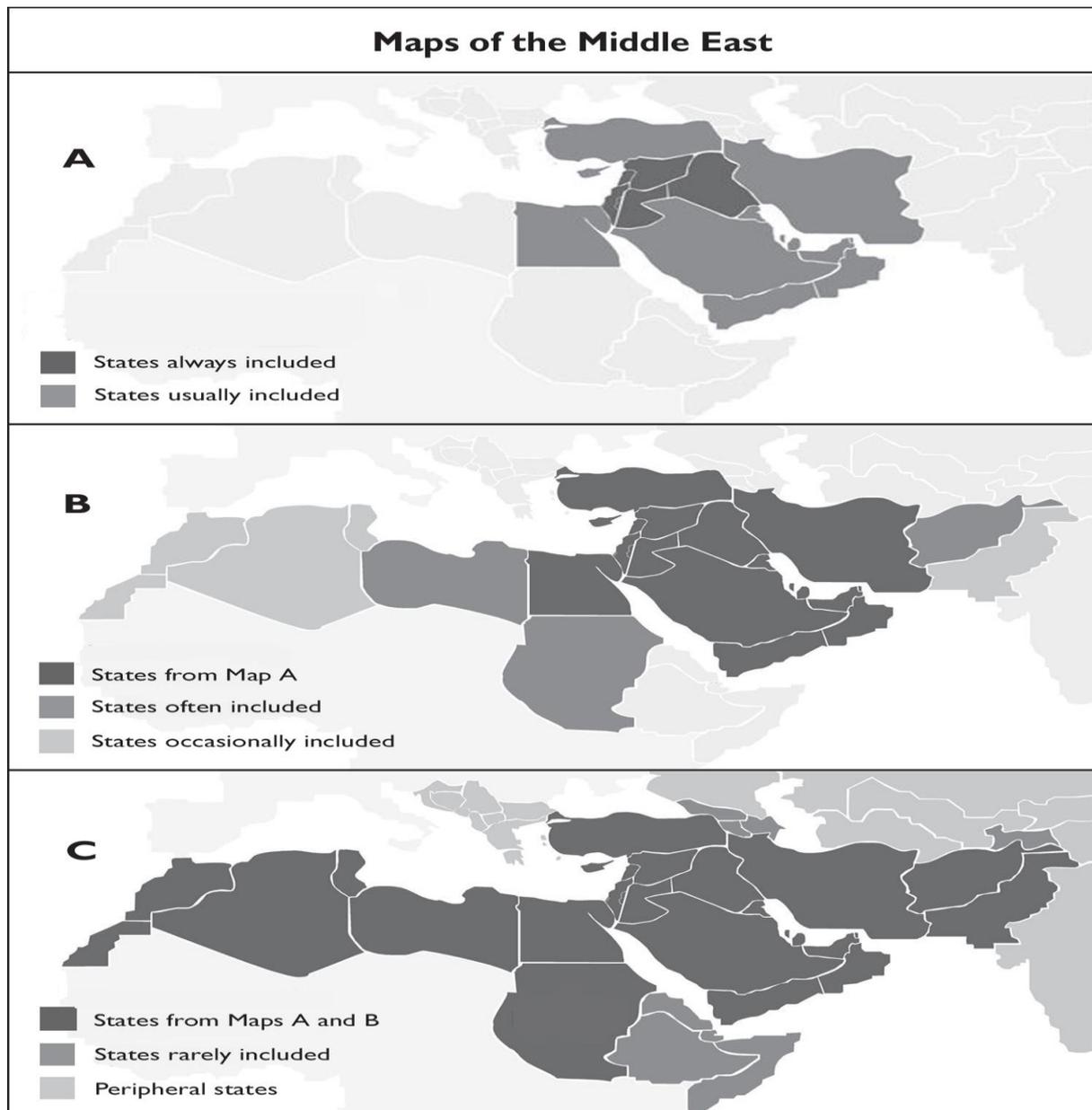


Figure 1: Three different maps showing countries in terms of the frequency of including them within the Middle East region. Adapted from ' Karen Culcasi, "Constructing and naturalizing the Middle East", *Geographical Review*, Vol. 100, No. 4, October 2010, p. 290, <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/doi/10.1111/j.1931-0846.2010.00059.x/abstract>>, retrieved 2 February 2017.

### 1.3. The Middle East strategic importance and the US core interests in the region.

The Middle East is endowed with a wide array of historical, geographic, and economic characteristics that boost its strategic importance to outside powers. Historically, the region is the birthplace of three of the major world religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which gives it a certain spiritual value among their followers around the world.<sup>23</sup> Further, the region enjoys a unique strategic location, as a crossroad and communications hub connecting the 'old world' continents.<sup>24</sup> The region also comprises and overlooks extremely significant waterways and straits, such as the Strait of Hormuz, Bab al Mandab, and the Suez Canal, through which a great deal of the world's energy resources pass.<sup>25</sup>

US interests and objectives in the Middle East since the end of WW2, while dynamic and varying over time, are consistent in certain respects. Secure energy oil flows to the west and advancement of Israel's security were at the top of the policy agenda for decades. Objectives such as precluding the Soviet Union from establishing a firm foothold, which dictated the United States foreign policy in the region during the cold war, were rendered obsolete with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Other goals rose as priorities, such as fighting terrorism and promoting democracy after the 9/11 attacks.

Below we will discuss the US's vital strategic interests and imperatives that sustained engagement and which consecutive Administrations were keen to secure and advance.

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<sup>23</sup> Hanson W. Baldwin, "Strategy of the Middle East", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 35, No. 4, p. 656.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 656.

<sup>25</sup> Kett, Irving, "Strategic challenges confronting U.S. interests and policies in the 21st century Middle East" *The Officer*, Vol. 80, No. 5 (06, 2004), p. 40, <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/docview/214107941?accountid=10910>,>, retrieved 20 February 2017.

### 1.3.1. Oil: the access and the flow

Ensuring the free flow of oil is not only one of the most constant but also one of the most important US interest in the Middle East. The Middle East oil fields comprise the largest known petroleum deposits, with an estimated 64% of reserves.<sup>26</sup> Along with its abundance, oil is accessible and easy to extract, significantly reducing the marginal cost of production.<sup>27</sup> After the Second World War US leaders, strategists, and foreign policy planners often enunciated the strategic significance of access to the region's oil.<sup>28</sup> However, contrary to conventional wisdom, the US was never heavily dependent on Middle East oil for domestic consumption. Most of its imports did not come from the Middle East, but rather mainly from Canada and South America. The US was itself a major producer.<sup>29</sup>

If the US did not rely on the oil imports from the Middle East, why was it so keen to ensure constant access to and availability of the region's oil? Why was the US willing to employ all conceivable means, including military measures, to counter any tangible or perceived threat that might disrupt supplies?<sup>30</sup> Two propositions have been put forward to illustrate why the Middle Eastern oil was considered a vital interest for the United States.

The first argument suggests that because oil was the lifeblood of the industrialized economies, its availability was indispensable for the stability of the west. Oil was critical to

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<sup>26</sup> Yakub Halabi, *"US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: From Crises to Change"*, p. 29.

<sup>27</sup> See, Noam Chomsky, *'Perilous Power: The Middle East and U.S. Foreign Policy'*, Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2007, p.53, and Yakub Halabi, p. 30.

<sup>28</sup> In 1945 the State Department described the oil of the Gulf region as "a stupendous source of strategic power and one of the greatest "material" prizes in world history". See, Noam Chomsky, "After the Cold War: U. S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East", *Cultural Critique*, no. 19, 1991, p. 18, < [www.jstor.org/stable/1354305](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1354305)>, retrieved 5 March 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Noam Chomsky, *'Perilous Power: The Middle East and U.S. Foreign Policy'*, p. 54

<sup>30</sup> The US measures to secure the western oil interests in the region have ranged from carrying out covert operations, as in 1953 when the CIA, along with British intelligence, toppled Iran's Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh, whose government nationalized the western concessions in the country, to overt using of military forces, like in the expulsion of Iraq out of Kuwait in 1991.

the economies of Japan and Europe, with which the US was heavily entangled strategically.<sup>31</sup> Any disruption to flows of this strategic commodity would have had grave consequences for the stability of the west which, by extension, would have affected the US itself.<sup>32</sup> In other words, as the US economy was dependent on the overall health of the international economy, it asserted the necessity of protecting and maintaining constant access to Middle Eastern oil.<sup>33</sup>

The second argument purports that controlling oil resources is essential for guaranteeing US global hegemony. According to this argument, the US, from the early stages of the Cold War, realised maintenance of hegemony required not only containment of adversaries but also dampening potential economic rivals.<sup>34</sup> Potential rivals were the major industrial nations of Europe, and Japan, which depended heavily on Middle Eastern oil.<sup>35</sup> Thus, US control over oil supplies provided it with “critical leverage” over other industrial economies, in a way that stripped the latter’s ability to adopt and form independent policies incompatible with US interests.<sup>36</sup> In short, US control of oil enabled it to keep its allies in line and deprive its foes of the opportunity to access a vital strategic commodity.<sup>37</sup>

### 1.3.2. Israel

The establishment of the state of Israel came at a time when the Middle East was rapidly gaining a special position in US strategic calculations. Though among a few states to recognize the new state after its declaration, the US did not grant it full and unconditional support. The tension between the nascent state and its Arab neighbours was seen as a

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<sup>31</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, "The One True U.S. Strategic Interest in the Middle East: Energy", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2001, p. 119 <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/doi/10.1111/1475-4967.00011/epdf> >, retrieved 5 March 2017.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 119.

<sup>33</sup> Cordesman, p. 119

<sup>34</sup> Noam Chomsky, "After the Cold War: U. S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East", p. 18.

<sup>35</sup> Noam Chomsky, “ *Perilous Power: The Middle East and U.S. Foreign Policy*”, p. 54

<sup>36</sup> Upon the invasion of Iraq, the former US national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski stated that controlling the oil upon which industrial societies rely for survival will provide the United States with a geopolitical control over all sorts of decisions. Chomsky, *Perilous Power*., pp. 54-55.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 56-67.

strategic liability for the US.<sup>38</sup> It could neither distance itself from Israel nor ignore its interests in Arab states. On the one hand, complete alliance with Israel would push the Arabs further into the Soviet orbit while, on the other hand, the US was compelled to pursue policies more favourable to Israel's interests because images of Holocaust were still resonating. The US Jewish Lobby was a powerful political constituency.<sup>39</sup>

Throughout the 1950s the United States tried to reconcile these two imperatives by pursuing an even-handed policy. The US refrained officially from selling arms to either side, fearing that providing weaponry would precipitate war between the Arabs and Israel.<sup>40</sup> Even when Israel, along with Britain and France, attacked Egypt in 1956 and ended up occupying Egyptian territories, the United States stood fiercely against it, even threatening to impose economic sanctions on Israel if the latter did not withdraw from Egypt.<sup>41</sup>

During the 1960s, Israel gradually came to be seen as a necessary and valuable US ally in the Middle East. It was confronting what was seen by the US as radical nationalist Arab states, namely Egypt and Syria, whose closet ally was the Soviet Union.<sup>42</sup> In so doing, Israel played an instrumental role in preventing further Soviet penetration into the region. The decisive defeat Israel inflicted upon Egypt and Syria in the Six-day war in 1967 confirmed to the US that Israel was a 'strategic asset' which served its interests.<sup>43</sup> Israel drove the Arab

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<sup>38</sup>William B. Quandt 'America and the Middle East: A Fifty-Year Overview', In *Diplomacy in the Middle East: The International Relations of Regional and Outside Powers*'. Ed, Brown, L, (London: I.B.Tauris, 2003). P. 61, ProQuest ebrary.

<sup>39</sup> See, Yakub Halabi, "US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: From Crises to Change", p. 43.

<sup>40</sup>The United States, along with France and Britain, announced in May 1950 the Tripartite Declaration, which stipulated on regulating the arms sales for the belligerent countries in the region in order to avoid an arms race. This system, however, virtually collapsed when Egypt concluded the Czech arms deal with the Soviet Union in 1955. See, Yakub Halabi, "US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: From Crises to Change", p. 43.

<sup>41</sup> D. Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002, p.78.

<sup>42</sup> The pan Arabism nationalism, which was inspired by the politics and the charisma of the former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, was seen as a threat to Saudi Arabia, and thus a potential threat to the flow of oil from the region.

<sup>43</sup> In the aftermath of 1967 war, the US, and public opinion tilted in favor of Israel drastically. All sort of reservations in regards to establishing a strategic partnership between the two states had disappeared. See, F

states, which were unable to recover the territories occupied by Israel, to rely on the US, enabling it to restore its influence which had diminished relatively during the heyday of the pan-Arabism movement which gained momentum throughout the Arab world during the late fifties and early sixties<sup>44</sup>

Thenceforth, US economic and military support for Israel increased to unprecedented levels, becoming the largest recipient of military and economic aid since 1971, receiving around US\$3b annually in direct foreign assistance.<sup>45</sup> In addition, Israel was granted access to advanced military technology, and intelligence denied other close allies such as NATO. Israel gained constant, uncritical diplomatic support, whether when negotiating peace with its neighbours, or via vetoing any critical United Nation Security Council Resolutions.<sup>46</sup>

Many studies discuss the unique US-Israel relationship, trying to pinpoint the underlying reasons sustaining it, despite persistent changes, whether in the US Administration or geopolitical landscape. Among several accounts trying to explain the mainspring behind this unique U.S- Israel relation, two sets of arguments stand out.

The first set attributes the relationship to the dynamics of US domestic politics.<sup>47</sup> The Jewish lobby' constituency, which is generally sympathetic to Israel, plays an influential role in electoral politics. Thus, Presidential and Congressional candidates use rhetoric, and

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Halliday, *"The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology"*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 116.

<sup>44</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, *'The international politics of the Middle East'*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>45</sup> Unlike the other recipients of the US aid who get their money in installments, Israel gets the entire money at the beginning of each fiscal year. Besides, there are no strings attached regarding the purpose for which this money is used or the place in which is spent. See, Jeremy M. Sharp, 'U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel', *Congressional Research Service*, December 22, 2016, <<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33222.pdf>>, retrieved 12 March 2017. John J. Mearsheimer, Stephen M. Walt, "The Israel lobby and U.S foreign policy", *MIDDLE EAST POLICY*, Vol. 13, No. 3, Fall 2006, p. 31, <<http://mearsheimer.uchicago.edu/pdfs/IsraelLobby.pdf>>, retrieved 12 March 2017.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31

<sup>47</sup> William B. Quandt "America and the Middle East: A Fifty-Year Overview", p. 61.

support policies that, if elected, favour Israel's interests in the Middle East.<sup>48</sup> The other channel to influence US foreign policy and orient it in a direction favouring Israel is the 'Israel lobby.' It has considerable political influence in the executive and legislative branches of the U.S government, in addition to an ability to form supportive public discourse for Israel through media, academia, and think tanks.<sup>49</sup>

The second argument posits that Israel's significance emanates from the instrumental regional role that it plays. Advocates of this proposition see global and regional geopolitical considerations and the common interests determining U.S support for Israel, rather than domestic variables such as the Israeli lobby.<sup>50</sup> During the Cold War, when the US was in need of capable and reliable allies to safeguard its interests in the Middle East, Israel fitted the bill.<sup>51</sup> Likewise, after the 9/11 attacks in 2001, Israel presented itself as standing at the forefront of the global war on terror.<sup>52</sup>

### 1.3.3. Terrorism and counterterrorism

Although it was only after the 9/11 attacks that the Middle East became the centre of a US global war on terrorism, concerns about terror activities targeting U.S interests in the region date much earlier. In the 1970s, US planes were among those hijacked by Palestinian organizations in an attempt to dissuade western countries from supporting Israel. The deployment of US forces to Lebanon during the 1980s civil war exposed not only U.S troops but also diplomatic missions to deadly attacks by the different factions.<sup>53</sup> In the wake of the

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<sup>48</sup> Douglas Little, 'American Orientalism', p. 78.

<sup>49</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, Stephen M. Walt, 'The Israel lobby and U.S foreign policy', pp. 41-50.

<sup>50</sup> Douglas Little, p. 78

<sup>51</sup> The US generous support to its allies during the cold war was not confined to Israel solely, as comparatively the same amount of support had been provided to Iran during the Shah, in addition to the support was provided to Saudi Arabia. See, Noam Chomsky, "after the cold war", pp. 22-25.

<sup>52</sup> John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, p. 31.

<sup>53</sup> A series of attacks waged against U.S interests in Lebanon in 1983 like the killing of the U.S ambassador, the bombing the U.S embassy, and of U.S marines barrack. See, Joe Barnes and Andrew Bowen, "Rethinking U.S. Strategy in the Middle East", *Baker Institute for Public Policy*, June 2015, p. 8, <<http://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/rethinking-us-strategy-middle-east/>>, retrieved 10 March 2017.

Gulf War in 1991, Al-Qaida started targeting US interests in the Middle East and around the world.<sup>54</sup>

Al-Qaida's string of attacks culminated in the in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001. Their scale was unprecedented in the US, changing perceptions of the threat that terrorist groups posed.<sup>55</sup> In effect, counterterrorism in the Middle East and globally became a strategic priority for US national security under President Bush, as we will discuss in the next chapter.

The Bush administration's understanding of the underlying causes of terrorism determined its approaches to the challenge. The lack of democracy and support of authoritarian regimes for terrorist groups were thought to be among the reasons behind the spread of the threat. Therefore, the US global war on terror, which was anchored mainly in the Middle East, took two tracks; first, military measures were used to attack, eliminate, and dismantle terrorist originations; secondly, regime change was adopted to counter authoritarian polices ideologies which, presumably, helped create a nurturing environment for terrorism to thrive.<sup>56</sup>

Commencing in Afghanistan in late 2001, and continuing in Iraq in 2003, the US's global campaign against terrorism proved costly and yielded meagre results. Despite the quick removal of Saddam's regime a democratic regime that would set an inspiring example for the region was not installed, turning swiftly into a civil war and chaos. The US predicament

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<sup>54</sup>Among the attacks targeted American interests during that period were bombing Al- Khobar tower in 1996, bombing the U.S embassies in Kayena and Tanzania, and the bombing of the USS Cole destroyer in Yemen's Aden harbor in 2000.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>56</sup>In fact, even before the war in Iraq, authoritarian governments, such as the governments of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, and Algeria have become more valued owing to their essentiality for the implementation of the U.S counter-terror measures. See, Daniel Byman and Sara Bjerg Moller, "The United States and the Middle East: Interests, Risks, and Costs", in '*Sustainable Security: Rethinking American National Security Strategy*', edit Jeremi Suri et al, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 21, <<https://goo.gl/CL0Ufj>>, retrieved 16 March 2017. And Joe Barnes & Andrew Bowen, "Rethinking U.S. Strategy in the Middle East", p. 9.

made a priority the restoration of stability, forcing the Bush administration to cooperate with authoritarian regimes.<sup>57</sup> The very regimes whose oppressive polices were supposedly driving people into violence and terrorism.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, neither was democracy promoted nor did terrorist organizations lose their ability to recruit jihadists.

Prioritizing counterterrorism as a critical US interest in the Middle East had not enjoyed the same level of consent among strategists and foreign policy planners as it had in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. The case against prioritising counterterrorism was predicated on several points.<sup>59</sup> First, the likelihood of the US homeland being attacked by a terrorist group stationed in the Middle East had diminished. Second, more direct US involvement in fighting terrorism in the region will play into the hands of jihadist and used as a pretext to attack US interests. Finally, the human and material costs of a prolonged war on terror outweighed the benefits of revenging the 9/11 attacks.<sup>60</sup>

#### 1.3.4. Non-proliferation

As a part of a broader global non-proliferation strategy, the US sought to prevent the spread of the nuclear weapons in the Middle East. It feared that their acquisition by either side of the Arab-Israeli conflict would result in a nuclear arm race, and might turn into a nuclear confrontation in which the US could not remain neutral.<sup>61</sup> Both the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations were concerned about Israel's nuclear ambitions. President Kennedy tried to dissuade Israel from continuing its endeavour to produce nuclear weapons via

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<sup>57</sup> The whole notion of spreading democracy throughout the Middle East forcibly as an antidote to terrorism was gradually sidelined during the last days of Bush tenure, and totally abandoned when Obama assumed power; however, the Arab spring eruption gave a new, albeit short-lived, momentum to the democracy promotion agenda. See, Daniel Byman and Sara Bjerg Moller, "The United States and the Middle East: Interests, Risks, and Costs", p. 18.

<sup>58</sup> Joe Barnes, "Rethinking U.S. Strategy in the Middle East", p. 10.

<sup>59</sup> Byman & Moller, "The United States and the Middle East", p. 24.

<sup>60</sup> Around 6000 American soldiers perished in the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, comparing to 3000 victims who died as a result of 9/11 attacks. See, Byman & Moller, "The United States and the Middle East", p. 24.

<sup>61</sup> The United States wanted to eschew a scenario in which the Soviet Union might have stationed nuclear warheads in one of the Arab countries if Israel managed to acquire nuclear weapons. See, Yakub Halabi, "US Foreign Policy in the Middle East", pp. 47-48.

providing Israel with sophisticated conventional weapons in a bid to ensure its military superiority, yet Israel persisted in pursuing its quest.<sup>62</sup>

By the 1960s, Israel, the only country in the region that has not signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty,<sup>63</sup> was the first de facto nuclear state in the Middle East, though it neither confirmed nor denied its acquisition of nuclear warheads.<sup>64</sup> The US, however, did not consider Israel's nuclear arsenal as a threat, deeming Israel to be a rational actor that would not use its nuclear weapons.<sup>65</sup>

Until the US invasion in 2003, Iraq was the centre of efforts to counter nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. Iraq's purported nuclear ambitions were used by the United States as a pretext to justify the invasion and war in 2003.<sup>66</sup> Another state in the region that had a nuclear program was Libya. Afraid of a potential U.S military action against his regime, former President Qaddafi abandoned the program in December 2003.<sup>67</sup> After 2002, the chief U.S fear pertaining to nuclear proliferation in the region resided with Iran's nuclear weapons program.<sup>68</sup>

The fear of Iran possessing a nuclear arsenal arose because it was seen as hostile to both Israel and the US, threatening the former's very existence,<sup>69</sup> and emboldening it to seek a dominant role in the Middle East. Iran supported several groups and proxies around the region to expand influence and destabilize adversaries, most of which were US allies.<sup>70</sup> Iran's

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<sup>62</sup>See, William B. Quandt 'America and the Middle East: A Fifty-Year Overview', p. 64, and Yakub Halabi, p. 47.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 268.

<sup>64</sup>James A. Russell, "Nuclear reductions and stability in the Middle East", *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2013, p. 268.< <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2013.799830>>, retrieved 17 March 2017.

<sup>65</sup> Byman & Moller, "The United States and the Middle East", p. 13.

<sup>66</sup> Joe Barnes, "Rethinking U.S. Strategy in the Middle East", p. 11.

<sup>67</sup> James A. Russell, p. 262.

<sup>68</sup> Joe Barnes, p. 11.

<sup>69</sup> Joe Barnes, "Rethinking U.S. Strategy in the Middle East", p. 12

<sup>70</sup> This assumption is anchored in what nuclear deterrence theorists call the "Stability-Instability paradox", which rests on the idea that the acquisition of nuclear weapons whereas makes leaders more cautious in their willingness to go to war, it encourages them to engage small-scale aggression, knowing that the nuclear

activities provoked its foes to forge counter-alliances, believing that if Iran acquired nuclear weapons, the efforts to counter it through amassing conventional military capabilities would be rendered futile.<sup>71</sup>

The United States sought to prevent the emergence of a hostile nuclear hegemon in the Middle East. The emergence of such power would considerably upset the regional balance of power and might threaten oil security, one of the US's core interests.<sup>72</sup> Further, U.S concerns about its allies' security, especially Israel, explain its unequivocal goal to prevent what the US deemed as hostile regimes from possessing nuclear capabilities. The 9/11 attacks deepened US concerns regarding nuclear proliferation in the region, as a new possibility arose, the possibility of handing over WMD, including nuclear warheads, to terrorist originations in order to attack the U.S homeland or its allies.<sup>73</sup>

Finally, it is worth mentioning that whereas not all non-proliferation efforts in the region were pursued or imposed from without, all were related to the dynamics of the balance of power. Several states pioneered by Egypt promoted a WMD-free region. This quest was aimed in part at highlighting the status of Israel as the only country in the region possessing a nuclear arsenal.<sup>74</sup>

## 1.4. Conclusion

The Middle East as a region is defined and takes shape through the eyes of outside powers. The great powers always had high stakes there. To the US, the Middle East was significant strategically. Comprising vast reserves of oil meant the region was important to industrial nations, and thus the stability of the world economy. Additionally, the

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deterrent gives them impunity from being retaliated against. See, Byman & Moller, "The United States and the Middle East", p. 13.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 12

<sup>74</sup> James A. Russell, p. 268.

establishment of the state of Israel furthered US involvement in the region. Israel was seen as one of the US's closest allies and its security paramount after 9/11, U.S involvement deepened, as counterterrorism become a priority. Finally, because it might have serious effects on the balance of power and thus the security of U.S allies, it maintained a strong desire to prevent further nuclear proliferation. In the next chapter, we will view the evolution of the US involvement in the Middle East after the Second World War until the end of Bush's presidency, and highlight the transformation of the US strategies and approaches employed during this period.

## Chapter Two:

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: A HALF-CENTURY OF THE US INVOLVEMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST.

#### 2.1. Introduction:

Given its strategic significance, as illustrated in the first chapter, the Middle East occupied a distinctive position within US foreign policy. From the early years of the Cold War, the US was keen on maintaining and advancing what it regarded as vital national interests across the region. Despite an ever-changing geopolitical landscape, globally and regionally, US involvement and commitments to the security of the Middle East was a reoccurring theme. While strategic objectives and interests, such as the free flow of oil, the survival of Israel, and the stability of the region, were well-defined and firmly established, perspective on the source and nature of threats and challenges changed. This chapter highlights three distinct periods of US involvement in the Middle East, spanning from the end of the Second World War to the end of the President George W. Bush's tenure. The chapter analyses how changes in the nature and source of challenges were reflected invariably in the adoption of new strategies and approaches to advance US interests. The chapter argues that US engagement, while a constant theme since the end of the Second World War, increased steadily, reaching its zenith during George W. Bush's Presidency.

## 2.2. Shifting US Strategies in the Middle East

Since the early days of its involvement in the Middle East, US strategies and approaches have shifted constantly. They were subjected to changes in the sources and nature of threats and challenges to core interests. Below we review three distinctive periods in US engagement highlighting the accompanying strategies.

### 2.2.1. The US and the Middle East during the cold war era: keeping the Soviet hands off the region.

Throughout most of the second half of the twentieth century, US policy toward the Middle East was dictated by a broader Cold War strategy. The overriding goal was minimising the presence and influence of the Soviet Union.<sup>75</sup> However, during the early stages of the Cold War the US did not take the lead in securing its interest across the Middle East. Rather, it relied on the former colonial powers, Britain and France, which retained much of their traditional regional political and economic clout.<sup>76</sup>

US strategy to contain Soviet expansionism was twofold. First, the US endorsed and supported initiatives and attempts to sway key Middle Eastern states to join a pro-western alliance network.<sup>77</sup> Projects like the Middle East Command (MEC), the Middle East Defence Organization (MEDO) and Baghdad Pact were part of a quest to establish a Western-oriented

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<sup>75</sup> Ronny Modigs, *United States foreign policy in the Middle East after the Cold War*, Master thesis, the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Kansas, 2003, pp. 7-8, <[www.dtic.mil/get-tr-doc/pdf?AD=ada416614](http://www.dtic.mil/get-tr-doc/pdf?AD=ada416614)>, retrieved 1 May 2017.

<sup>76</sup> Roby C. Barrett, *Greater Middle East and the Cold War, The: US Foreign Policy Under Eisenhower and Kennedy*, London: I.B.Tauris, 2007, p. 4.

<sup>77</sup> Roby C. Barrett, p. 1.

defence alliance modeled on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to serve as a buffer against possible Soviet penetration.<sup>78</sup>

The second component of US strategy was emphasis on the significance of economic aid to provide stability and to gravitate states towards the US sphere of influence.<sup>79</sup> Fixation on the importance of the economic aid, which surged during the Eisenhower Administration, was predicated on economic development playing a role in undermining Soviet influence;<sup>80</sup> that is, economic development generates political and social stability, and thus the region would be less susceptible to Soviet influence.<sup>81</sup> US assistance programs, however, were not limited to economic aid, including military support and security commitments to assist any state or group of states.<sup>82</sup>

Along with the goal of containing the Soviet Union, securing the free flow of oil and the survival of Israel stood out as crucial US interests during the Cold War. Oil's significance

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<sup>78</sup> The idea of establishing the Middle East Command (MEC) was introduced by the US, UK, France, and Turkey in 1951, yet it did not come into being because of Egypt's rejection to participate. The very same plan was reintroduced in 1953 under the rubric of "the Middle East Defence Organization" (MEDO) and it met the same fate of the former plan, as the new regime in Egypt, which assumed power after the 1952 coup d'état, declined to join the organization, having deemed as a conduit through which colonial domination over the region would be restored. The short-lived Baghdad Pact, concluded in 1955, was born out of the idea of linking the "Northern Tier" of the Middle East, the line of countries that formed a border between the U.S.S.R. and the Middle East. The Pact that comprised Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Iraq and Britain, virtually ceased to exist after Iraq's departure from the Pact in 1959, although it continued to operate until 1979 under the name of the "Central Treaty Organization" (CENTO). More about the initiatives to forge a pro-Western defence alliance in the Middle East during the early 1950s, and the reasons behind their failure See, Central Intelligence Agency, "Prospects for an inclusive Middle East Defence Organization", 17 March 1952, p. 1 <[https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC\\_0001356471.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0001356471.pdf)> retrieved 3 May 2017; Roby C. Barrett, "Greater Middle East and the Cold War, The : US Foreign Policy Under Eisenhower and Kennedy", p. 11; Ara Sanjian, "The Formulation of the Baghdad Pact", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 2, Apr 1997, p. 226, <<https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/docview/203251298?accountid=10910>>, retrieved 3 May 2017, and Michael Cohen, "Strategy and Politics in the Middle East, 1954-1960 : Defending the Northern Tier. (Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor and Francis, 2005), p. 74. To expand

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 315.

<sup>80</sup> Roby C. Barrett, p. 315.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 315.

<sup>82</sup> The Eisenhower administration pledged to dispense \$200 million in economic and military aid and to commit armed forces to defend any country seeking assistance against international communism. See, Peter L. Hahn, "Securing the Middle East: The Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957", *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1, Mar 2006, p. 40, <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/doi/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2006.00285.x/epdf>>, retrieved 6 May 2017.

for the industrialised economies required precluding the Soviet Union at all costs.<sup>83</sup> Israel proved to be strategically important in checking and confronting US adversaries such as Egypt and Syria, whose close relationships and alliances with the Soviet Union could have turned them into a springboard from which to expand its influence.<sup>84</sup>

Because of US preoccupation with the Vietnam War, and waning British influence in the Middle East, the United States opted to safeguard its interests by relying on regional allies.<sup>85</sup> Accordingly, a “twin pillar policy” was introduced in 1970 by the Nixon Administration.<sup>86</sup> This policy rested upon increasing military support for both the Shah of Iran and Saudi Arabia to help stabilise and maintain the U.S interests in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf.<sup>87</sup> Egypt, under Anwar Al-Sadat who came to power in 1970, was moving closer to the US orbit and thereby became a regional power upon which the US depended.<sup>88</sup>

Yet, the series of events during the late 1970s and 1980s, such as the Iranian Revolution, Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the Iran-Iraq war changed US strategy, stepping up the US involvement by moving to play a more direct role in security arrangements.<sup>89</sup> An “over the horizon” strategy was put into effect, whereby the US did not station large troop numbers in the region, nor involve itself extensively in complex local

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<sup>83</sup> Alex Edwards, *Dual Containment" Policy in the Persian Gulf: The USA, Iran, and Iraq, 1991-2000* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan) 2014, p. 18.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, p. 18.

<sup>85</sup> Majid Behestani, and Mehdi Hedayati Shahidani, “Twin Pillars Policy: Engagement of US-Iran Foreign Affairs during the Last Two Decades of Pahlavi Dynasty”, *Asian Social Science*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2015, p. 29, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ass.v11n2p20>>, retrieved 6 May 2017.

<sup>86</sup> Marc W. Jasper, *"Security assistance in the Persian Gulf and the roots of the Nixon Doctrine"*, Master thesis, Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School, 1997, p. 38, <<https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/8949/securityassistan00jasp.pdf?sequence=1>>, retrieved 9 May 2017.

<sup>87</sup> See, David O. Smith, "The post-war Gulf: Return to twin pillars", *Strategic Studies Institute*, Summer, 1991, p. 51, <<http://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/parameters/Articles/1991/1991%20smith.pdf>>, retrieved 9 May 2017

<sup>88</sup> Naseer H. Aruri, ‘*Dishonest broker: The U.S role in Israel and Palestine*’, (South End Press: Cambridge, 2003), p. 23.

<sup>89</sup> About the circumstances that prompted the United States to alter its foreign policy in the Middle East and to shore up its engagement in the region during the 1980s, See, F. Gregory Gause III, "The Illogic of Dual Containment", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 2, March/April 1994, p. 59.

political dynamics.<sup>90</sup> This strategy, adopted by both the Carter and Regan Administrations, was based on a military and political element.<sup>91</sup> The military element consisted of stationing rapid deployment forces in areas close enough to the region for deterrence and deployment in the event of a crisis.<sup>92</sup> The political element was based on limiting US involvement in day to day politics.<sup>93</sup>

### 2.2.2. The U.S involvement in the region after the end of the Cold War: confronting the rogue states via assuming direct security responsibilities

Although US-Soviet geopolitical competition during the Cold War era amplified the Middle East's strategic significance and was a decisive factor in shaping the trajectory of US foreign policy across the region, its strategic importance did not taper off with the end of the Cold War. Indeed, securing a free-flow of Middle Eastern oil at reasonable prices remained a critical US interest.<sup>94</sup> However, from the US perspective, new threats to the region's energy sources and to the region's stability had risen requiring a response.<sup>95</sup>

Throughout the 1990s, the fear that hostile regional powers, such as Iraq or Iran, aspired to dominate the region, acquire weapons of mass destruction, and upset the oil flow from the

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<sup>90</sup> Eugene Gholz and Daryl G. Press, "Oil and U.S. National Security in the Persian Gulf: An "Over-the-Horizon" Strategy", presented at America and the World, a Tobin Project Conference at Airlie, 14-16 November 2008, pp. 1-2, <<http://www.comw.org/wordpress/dsr/oil-and-u-s-national-security-in-the-persian-gulf-an-%E2%80%9Cover-the-horizon%E2%80%9D-strategy-gholz-press>>, retrieved 12 May 2017.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, p.2

<sup>92</sup> A direct U.S military involvement in the region was manifested in the failed hostage rescue mission in Iran in 1980, and the large naval deployment in 1987-88 to protect the Kuwaiti and Saudi shipping. See, F. Gregory Gause III, "The Illogic of Dual Containment", p. 59.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, pp. 2-3.

<sup>94</sup> F. Gregory Gause III, "The Illogic of Dual Containment", p. 58.

<sup>95</sup> Martin Indyk, the special assistant to President Clinton for Near East and South Asian affair, laid out the foundations of the challenges that the United States would be encountering across the Middle East region during the Post-Cold War era, and the feasible strategies should be employed to tackle these challenges. The new challenges, Indyk posited, emanated from having hostile regimes, precisely Iraq and Iran, threatening the U.S allies in the region and stymie the realization of a comprehensive peace deal between the Arabs and Israel. Thus both countries need to be contained and isolated. See, Martin Indyk, "The Clinton Administration's Approach to the Middle East", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 1993, <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-clinton-administrations-approach-to-the-middle-east>>, retrieved 14 May 2017.

region superseded the Soviet threat.<sup>96</sup> Threats to US interests posed by these powers could not be dealt with by employing the approaches and strategies used during the 1980s,<sup>97</sup> which rested on balancing states against each other. The 'over the horizon' military presence proved ineffective in deterring Iraq from invading Kuwait in 1990.<sup>98</sup>

US strategy during the post-Cold War era focused on keeping what it deemed as the region's 'rogue' states from threatening other oil producers, namely the Gulf monarchies.<sup>99</sup> To realise this objective, the US not only ramped up its military and diplomatic presence but also executed a new strategy of containment aimed at simultaneously pushing back both Iran and Iraq.<sup>100</sup> The new strategy, presented in 1993, was known as the "dual containment" strategy. It revolved around containing and isolating Iraq and Iran politically, economically and militarily so that neither would emerge as the dominant regional power, thereby threatening US interests and its allies.<sup>101</sup> The US became the underwriter of the security of the Gulf States against threats posed by its stronger neighbors.<sup>102</sup>

US political and diplomatic involvement surged proportionally with increases in its military involvement. From the early 1990s, the US embarked on nurturing peace

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<sup>96</sup> Anthony Lake, "Confronting Backlash States", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 2, Mar. - Apr., 1994, <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/1994-03-01/confronting-backlash-states>>, retrieved 14 May 2017.

<sup>97</sup> F. Gregory Gause III, "The Illogic of Dual Containment", p. 57.

<sup>98</sup> Anthony Lake, "Confronting Backlash States", 1994.

<sup>99</sup> Toby Craig Jones, "America, oil, and war in the Middle East", *Journal of American History*, Volume 99, Issue 1, 1 June 2012, p. 216, <<https://doi-org.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/10.1093/jahist/jas045>>, retrieved 20 May 2017.

<sup>100</sup> Chin-Kuei Tsui, "Framing the Threat of Rogue States: Iraq, Iran and President Clinton's Dual-Containment Approach to Middle East Peace", *Paper Presented at the Australian Political Studies Association Annual Conference, Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia, 2013*, p. 14, <[http://www.auspsa.org.au/sites/default/files/framing\\_the\\_threat\\_of\\_rogue\\_states\\_chinkuei\\_tsui.pdf](http://www.auspsa.org.au/sites/default/files/framing_the_threat_of_rogue_states_chinkuei_tsui.pdf)>, 22 May retrieved 2017.

<sup>101</sup> While the United States isolated Iraq fully, it was more willing to open dialogue with the Iran, see, P. Clawson, "The continuing logic of dual containment", *Survival*, Vol. 40, No. 1, 1998, p. 38, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/survival/40.1.33>>, retrieved 22 May 2017.

<sup>102</sup> See, Stephen Zunes, "Continuing Storm: The U.S. Role in the Middle East", *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 1 April 1999, <[http://fpif.org/continuing\\_storm\\_the\\_us\\_role\\_in\\_the\\_middle\\_east/](http://fpif.org/continuing_storm_the_us_role_in_the_middle_east/)>, retrieved 2 June 2017, and Amr G.E. Sabet, "Dual Containment and Beyond: Reflections on American Strategic Thinking", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 1999, p. 70, <<http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/10.1080/13629399908414700>>, retrieved 2 June 2017.

negotiations between Israel and several Arab countries,<sup>103</sup> driven in part by the need to deprive the radical forces the “ability to exploit the Arab-Israeli conflict to promote their regional ambitions”.<sup>104</sup> This undertaking started with the Madrid Conference in 1991 and paved the way for a series of peace treaties between the Arabs and Israelis, including Agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1993, and Israel and Jordan in 1994.<sup>105</sup>

### 2.2.3. The United States and the Middle East in the post 9/11 era: democracy agenda and nation-building.

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, US involvement in the Middle East surged to uncharacteristic high levels. It became the virtual epicenter of the Bush Administration’s war on terror, blocking nonconventional proliferation, and pursuing an agenda of democracy and freedom.<sup>106</sup> It argued that terrorist groups could not have subsisted if not for support provided by Anti-US regimes whose interests converge with the goals these groups.<sup>107</sup> Subsequently, the dual containment strategy, which was executed in the 1990s, gave way gradually to a broader strategy of regime change and pre-emptive war.<sup>108</sup>

These new strategies were designed to address potential threats to the United States security by taking anticipatory actions and use force to forestall those threats before being

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<sup>103</sup> The Israeli-Egyptian peace negotiations throughout 1977-1978 held under the auspices of the United States as well. See, William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967*, (Washington D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), p. 177-204.

<sup>104</sup> Anthony Lake, "Confronting Backlash States", 1994.

<sup>105</sup> William B. Quandt, pp. 310-334.

<sup>106</sup> Jeremy Pressman, "Power without Influence: The Bush Administration’s Foreign Policy Failure in the Middle East”, *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 2009, pp. 179-179, <<http://www.mitpressjournals.org.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/doi/pdf/10.1162/isec.2009.33.4.149>>, retrieved 5 June 2017.

<sup>107</sup> Bledar Prifti, "US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Case for Continuity", Palgrave Macmalin: 2017, pp. 91-92, <<https://link-springer-com.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/content/pdf/10.1007%2F978-3-319-45327-9.pdf>>, retrieved 5 June 2017.

<sup>108</sup> Issandr El Amrani, "The US Response to the Arab Uprising: Part of the Problem?", in *Re-thinking Western Policies in Light of the Arab Uprising*, ed. Riccardo Alcaro and Miguel Haubrich-Seco (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2012), p. 58, <[http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iairp\\_04.pdf](http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iairp_04.pdf)>, retrieved 5 June 2017.

formed.<sup>109</sup> Fear of the spread of weapons of mass destruction technology to states with a history of aggression required taking anticipatory action to thwart it.<sup>110</sup> The Bush Administration postulated that terrorism and violence were rife in the Middle East because of oppression and a lack of democracy. Eradicating terrorism and bringing about stability and prosperity was contingent upon advancing human freedom and dignity through effective democracy.<sup>111</sup> President Bush laid out his Administration's perspective concerning the correlation between the absence of democracy in the Middle East and spread of violence:

Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe ... As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export. And with the spread of weapons that can bring catastrophic harm to our country and to our friends, it would be reckless to accept the status quo.<sup>112</sup>

In accordance with a combination of strategic visions based on thwarting threats preemptively, precluding the spread of the WMD and proselytizing democracy, the Bush Administration's Middle East strategy proceeded. The quest to put the vision into practice left the US engaged in two major wars in Afghanistan and Iraq beginning in 2001 and 2003 respectively.<sup>113</sup> Although US military entanglement and strategic commitments remained in

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<sup>109</sup> The United States National Security Strategy stated that the U.S had the right to act unilaterally and preemptively against any "terrorist or state sponsor of terrorism which attempts to gain or use weapons of mass destruction". See, The White House. (2002, September). The National Security Strategy of the United States, p. 6, <<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf>>, retrieved 9 June 2017.

<sup>110</sup> James B. Steinberg et al., "The New National Security Strategy and Preemption", *Brookings*, 21 December, 2002, <<https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-new-national-security-strategy-and-preemption/>>, retrieved 13 June 2017.

<sup>111</sup> Christopher Hobson, "A forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East: US democracy promotion and the 'war on terror'", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 59, No. 1, p. 40, March 2005, <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/1035771042000332039?needAccess=true>>, retrieved 13 June 2017.

<sup>112</sup> Osman Ali Hassan, "*George W. Bush, September 11th and the Rise of the Freedom Agenda in US-Middle East Relations: A Constructivist Institutional Approach*", PhD dissertation, University of Birmingham, 2009, p. 18, <<http://etheses.bham.ac.uk/399/1/Hassan09PhD.pdf>>, retrieved 15 June 2017.

<sup>113</sup> Thomas Henriksen, "*Cycles in US Foreign Policy since the Cold War*", Springer International Publishing, 2017, p. 181, <<https://link-springer-com.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/book/10.1007/978-3-319-48640-6/page/1>>, retrieved 15 June 2017.

place throughout the Bush Presidency until 2008, the two pillars of the ‘Bush Doctrine’, “pre-emption” and regime change, gradually faded away, especially during his second term.<sup>114</sup>

## 2.3. Conclusion

US security and strategic engagement in the Middle East started taking shape after the end of WW2 increasing steadily over the proceeding decades. It went through several stages, such as the Cold war post- Cold War era, and e Post-9/11. Strategies to secure US interests during each era varied in accordance with changes in the regional and international geopolitical landscape, and changes in the nature of the perceived threats. From the early stages of the Cold War to the mid-1970s, the US relied on international allies and regional proxies to safeguard its interests. As the tide of the Cold War receded, and new threats arose, the US assumed more direct security responsibilities via troop deployments in adjacent regions. After the implosion of the Soviet Union, the US opted for more direct approaches and deployed troops directly to counter new threats emanating from Iraq and Iran. In the aftermath of 9/11, the region became the centre of the Bush administration's global war on terror and the arena to forward its freedom agenda, increasing US military and diplomatic engagement to historically high levels. Throughout the next chapter, we will discuss how the US Middle Eastern foreign policy during the Obama Administration shifted.

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<sup>114</sup> Gideon Rose, “ What Obama Gets Right: Keep Calm and Carry the Liberal Order On”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 5, September/October 2015, p. 6.

## Chapter Three:

### THE US AND THE MIDDLE EAST DURING OBAMA'S PRESIDENCY: HOW DID OBAMA MIDDLE EASTERN FOREIGN POLICY VEER AWAY FROM ITS PREDECESSORS'

#### 3.1. Introduction

Viewing six decades of the U.S engagement in the Middle East, as shown in the previous chapter, reveals one persistent aspect that changed little. This aspect is the incremental yet constant increase in US political, diplomatic, and military involvement in the security and geopolitical architecture of the region. US involvement went through several stages in which a different set of approaches and strategies was deployed, ranging from extensive reliance on proxies and allies, a subsequent gradual military build-up in surrounding regions, to a direct military presence, culminating in the use of military power to redesign the Middle East's economic and political structure. The Obama Administration came to office in 2009 at a time when US engagement was at its highest level. The US was not only engaged in two major wars in Iraq and Afghanistan but was also pursuing a quest of creating a pro-Western democratic region. In effect, this strategy not only did not yield what was aimed for, it also burdened the US with substantial costs in blood and treasure, tarnishing its global image. As such, upon entering office in 2009, President Obama appeared to be determined to change the trajectory of US foreign policy in the Middle East. His administration sought to implement an incremental strategy of disengagement, aiming to reduce US military and political commitments.

In this chapter, we identify how and where the Obama Administration veered from the course its immediate predecessor pursued. We also illustrate the phases characterised by continuity with policies initiated by former administrations.

## 3.2. How did the U.S Middle Eastern foreign policy shift under Obama?

Obama's Middle East strategy was characterized by several features, setting it apart from previous policies pursued by the administration of George W. Bush. The Obama administration, for a wide range of reasons, which we will discuss in the next chapter, was determined to reverse many of Bush's policies. Below we will discuss the main changes of the US Middle Eastern strategy during Obama's presidency.

### 3.2.1. Reducing the US military and political commitments in the region and avoiding to get involved in a new large-scale war:

The first and overriding goal of Obama's Middle East strategy was reducing the US's massive military and political investments in the region, and avoiding involvement in a new large-scale war and long-term military commitments.<sup>115</sup> The Obama administration was committed to decreasing its military presence was manifested in ending the war in Iraq and withdrawing US troops.<sup>116</sup> By December 2011, the US had withdrawn its major combat

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<sup>115</sup> Marc Lynch, "Obama and the Middle East Rightsizing the U.S. Role", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 5, September/October 2015, p. 18

<sup>116</sup> In spite of the pre-existing determination to withdraw the U.S troops from Iraq, the Obama administration reconsidered this decision in light of mounting warnings coming out of the U.S generals in the country that any hasty withdrawal will undermine the fragile peace gained after the 2007 surge. Nonetheless, the Obama administration moved on with its plan mainly because it couldn't conclude an agreement to safeguard the legal immunity for the remaining troops and because if the Obama back down from his promises, it might affect his

troops, retaining a few troops to guard diplomats in Baghdad and train and advise Iraqi security forces.<sup>117</sup> The Obama Administration was also set on reducing the US presence in Afghanistan and eventually withdrawing all US troops.<sup>118</sup> Despite an initial increase in the number of troops, there were just 9,800 by the end of 2015.<sup>119</sup> President Obama was determined to withdraw all troops before the end of his second term, yet the deterioration of the security situation in Iraq in the summer of 2014 compelled the Administration to deploy some 5,500 troops fearing Iraq's scenario in Afghanistan.<sup>120</sup> Nonetheless, President Obama remained committed to his convictions of not getting involved in another major shooting war or long-term military commitment across the region.<sup>121</sup> Rejection of the use of overwhelming force explains why the US stuck to a "light-footprint" strategy, as in the case of its limited intervention in Libya in 2011 and the war against the Islamic State in 2014.<sup>122</sup>

### 3.2.2. Abandoning the freedom agenda policy

The second goal, in contrast to the Bush Administration after 9/11, was rejection using coercive measures and regime change as a means to promote democracy throughout the Middle East.<sup>123</sup> As early as 2002, long before becoming President, State Senator Obama was

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2012 reselection campaign. See, Colin Dueck, '*The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today*', Oxford University Press: New York, 2015, pp. 88-89.

<sup>117</sup> John Cassidy, "Obama and the Bush Legacy: A Scorecard", *The New Yorker*, 13 May 2012, <<https://goo.gl/bn2FcB>>, retrieved 3 July 2017.

<sup>118</sup> Contrary to his stance on the war in Iraq, president Obama believed that the war in Afghanistan was just and critical for the U.S national security, and thus he authorized the U.S troop surge during his first term. See, Paul D. Miller, "Obama's Failed Legacy in Afghanistan", *The American Interest*, Vol. 11, No. 5, 2016, <<https://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/02/15/obamas-failed-legacy-in-afghanistan/>>, retrieved 5 July 2017.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid,

<sup>120</sup> Ibid,

<sup>121</sup> Robert G Kaufman, "Dangerous Doctrine: How Obama's Grand Strategy Weakened America." Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016, pp. 97-99.

<sup>122</sup> Bradford Ian Stapleton, 'The Problem with the Light Footprint Shifting Tactics in Lieu of Strategy', *CATO Institute*, 7 June 2016, <<https://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/problem-light-footprint-shifting-tactics-lieu-strategy#full>>, retrieved 5 July 2017.

<sup>123</sup> The Obama administration adhered consistently to this conviction throughout its tenure. The only exception was the U.S involvement in Libya, which resulted in the overthrow of the Gaddafi's regime, a decision President Obama made grudgingly. See, Ryan Lizza, "The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring remade Obama's foreign policy.", *The New Yorker*, 12 May 2011, <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/the-consequentialist>>, retrieved 8 July 2017.

an opponent of the Iraq War.<sup>124</sup> In 2006, a few weeks before announcing his Candidacy, , Obama criticised the ‘freedom agenda’ pursued by the Bush Administration, stating that ‘proselytizing about democracy and the haste to bomb other countries in the name of humanitarian aid had stretched our military to the breaking point and distracted us from the growing threats of a dangerous world’.<sup>125</sup> Obama argued that the United states did not need a strategy ‘driven by ideology and politics but one that is based on a realistic assessment of the sobering facts on the ground and our (U.S) interests in the region’.<sup>126</sup> On coming to office in 2009, President Obama made it clear that the ‘freedom policy’ agenda would not continue. In a famous speech in Cairo in June 2009, he announced that ‘no system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other’, implying that the US was abandoning the policy of promoting democracy via coercive means<sup>127</sup>. Additionally, while President Obama believed that US values and national interests overlapped, promoting US values must not be at the expense of national interests. His prioritisation of perceived interests over promoting democracy was reflected in the Administration's ambivalent reaction to the eruption of pro-democratic protests across the region. When pro-democratic protests unfolded in Iran and Egypt in 2009 and 2011, respectively, the Obama Administration was reluctant to endorse them, fearing that endorsement would undermine ‘higher’ national interests.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>128</sup> In Iran as well as in Egypt, the Obama administration hesitated to support and endorse the protests. The administration feared that such move might jeopardize the U.S national interests across the region. These interests were the Obama administration's quest to outreach the Iranian leadership, and in the case of Egypt, the United States did not want to abandon one of its staunchest allies in the region, namely president Hosni Mubarak. See, Eli Lake, ‘Why Obama let Iran’s ‘Green Movement’ fail’, *The Japan Times*, Aug 29, 2016, <<https://goo.gl/pWt1zW>>, retrieved 11 July 2017, and Alan Philps, ‘How Mubarak decision divided the White House’, *The National*, March 31, 2016, <<https://goo.gl/yqbJpM>>, retrieved 11 July 2017.

### 3.2.3. Engaging with adversaries

The third feature highlighting the shift in Obama's Middle East policy is an unprecedented willingness to reach out to and engage adversaries, with the aim of altering their behaviour and encouraging cooperation.<sup>129</sup> Contrary to the Bush Administration, which viewed adversaries as enemies with whom diplomatic approaches could not be employed, the Obama Administration rejected dealing with adversaries through a rigid amity and enmity dichotomy.<sup>130</sup> During Bush era, for example, Iran, along with Iraq and North Korea, was dubbed as a rogue state and a part of an “axis of evil”.<sup>131</sup> Threatening military action against Iran in order to dissuade the latter from pursuing its nuclear activities was a recurring theme during the Bush Administration.<sup>132</sup> The Obama Administration willingly offered concessions and diplomatic engagement, hoping to alter its negative attitude toward the US, empower more moderate Iranian forces, and provide an incentive for Iran to relinquish its nuclear ambitions and change its regional conduct.<sup>133</sup> The change in policy culminated in the ‘Joint

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<sup>129</sup> Engaging and reaching out U.S foes and adversaries were at the heart of Obama's foreign policy and was not limited to Iran and the Middle East region, rather it included countries like North Korea, Cuba, Russia, and China. And the premise behind this policy was that if the United States outreaches adversaries and make certain concessions, these adversaries will reciprocate and make their concessions and therefore a compromise can be reached, serving both side's interests. See, Charles A. Kupchan, "Enemies Into Friends How the United States Can Court Its Adversaries", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 2, March/April 2010, p. 120.

<sup>130</sup> Harper Neidig, "Obama doctrine is best option for U.S. foreign policy", University Wire, 14 April 2015, <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/docview/1673214458?accountid=10910.>>, retrieved 16 July 2017.

<sup>131</sup> Philip Sherwell & David Eimer, 'Barack Obama starts US talks with 'axis of evil': North Korea and Iran,' *The Telegraph*, 12 September 2009, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/barackobama/6180350/Barack-Obama-starts-US-talks-with-axis-of-evil-North-Korea-and-Iran.html>>, retrieved 18 July 2017.

<sup>132</sup> Edward Wastnidge, 'Obama's Iran legacy is noble, complicated – and endangered,' *The Conversation*, 10 January 2017, <<https://theconversation.com/obamas-iran-legacy-is-noble-complicated-and-endangered-65928>>, retrieved 18 July 2017.

<sup>133</sup> Since entering office, Obama struck a conciliatory tone with Iran and showed a series of goodwill gestures, such as writing letters to Iran's supreme leader assuring him that the U.S does not intend to overthrow his regime, recording a video message to the Iranian people, aiming to encourage Iran's leadership to engage in negotiations regarding its nuclear programs. However, as Iran's stance remained unchanged, the Obama administration resorted to more coercive measures against Iran, like imposing sanctions and carrying out a covert campaign of cyber sabotage. It was only after president Hassan Rouhani got elected in 2013 when a new round of negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent United Nations Security Council members, plus Germany) began. In other words, Obama's Iran approach contained elements of both containment and accommodation. See, Colin Dueck, ‘The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today’, pp. 60-62, and Sasan Fayazmanesh, ‘Containing Iran: Obama's Policy of "Tough Diplomacy." Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, pp. 3-8.

Comprehensive Plan of Action,' or Iran nuclear deal, in 2015, which was deemed a significant breakthrough and fundamental shift in the US-Iranian relationships<sup>134</sup>

#### 3.2.4. Willingness to pressure allies and partners

Finally, the Obama administration showed a willingness to take a stronger stance on and use firm rhetoric with traditional US allies, breaking longstanding policy norms. As the Obama Administration was negotiating with Iran, its closest allies, that is, Israel and the Gulf States, raised concerns and objections, fearing that any settlement would be at the expense of their interest and security. However, the Obama administration did not pay heed to its allies' concerns and moved on with its plan and sealed a nuclear deal with Iran.<sup>135</sup> The Obama administration broke with tradition when it criticized Israel's settlement building and unprecedentedly allowed a UN resolution demanding a halt to all Israeli settlement in the occupied territories to pass without vetoing it.<sup>136</sup> Divergences over issues such as the Iran deal and not taking coercive measures against the Syrian regime frayed ties with traditional partners in the Arab world, namely the Gulf States, whose security was underwritten by the US for decades.<sup>137</sup> As for the Saudi relationship, President Obama not only accused it of flaming sectarian tensions but questioned its value as an ally.<sup>138</sup> Also, as civilian casualties from Saudi airstrikes in the Yemen rose, the Obama Administration halted arms sale to Saudi

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<sup>134</sup> Steven Hurst, "Obama and Iran: Explaining Policy Change", in *The Obama Presidency and the Politics of Change*, ed. Edward Ashbe and John Dumbrell, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 289.

<sup>135</sup> Uri Friedman, "Obama: Reaching Out to Adversaries, Alienating Allies", *The Atlantic*, 31 December 2016, <<https://goo.gl/H5eVXf>>, retrieved 22 July 2017.

<sup>136</sup> "Obama says Israeli settlements making the two-state solution impossible" *Reuters*, 11 January 2017, <<https://goo.gl/79xNfp>>, retrieved 22 July 2017.

<sup>137</sup> Ilan Goldenberg and Melissa G. Dalton, "Bridging the Gulf: How to Fix U.S. Relations With the GCC", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 6, 2015, pp. 59-62.

<sup>138</sup> When asked by the Australian prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, whether he considers the Saudis as friend, president Obama said: it's complicated. See, F. Gregory Gause III, "The Future of U.S.-Saudi Relations: The Kingdom and the Power", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 95, No. 4, 2016, p. 114.

Arabia.<sup>139</sup> The same can be said about relationships with other regional partners such as Turkey and Egypt, whose ties with the United States deteriorated during Obama tenure.<sup>140</sup>

### 3.3. Elements of continuity:

Although in many respects the Obama Administration's Middle East policy shifted considerably from its predecessor, its conduct demonstrated elements of continuity. The Obama administration was consistent in two major areas: the war on terror and the peace process.

#### 3.3.1. War on Terror:

In fighting terrorism, the Obama Administration embraced and expanded many aspects of the Bush Administration's counterterrorism approaches and strategies.<sup>141</sup> In principle, before becoming President, Obama did not oppose the war on terror, believing it was a 'war of necessity, not a war of a choice.'<sup>142</sup> Nonetheless, he thought that the manner in which it was conducted was flawed for two reasons. First, deployment of a large number of troops in order to fight terrorism was not cost efficient, in terms of human and material costs. Second, deployment of US forces in the Islamic world was counterproductive because it was only furthering anti-US hostility.<sup>143</sup> Despite symbolic changes in the rhetoric of "global war on terrorism" to "countering violent extremism", the Obama Administration continued the

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<sup>139</sup>Simon Henderson, "Saudi Arms Restrictions Reflect U.S. Exasperation over Yemen War", Washington Institute, December 15, 2016, <<https://goo.gl/rwkRXC>>, retrieved 25 July 2017.

<sup>140</sup> While Obama's inaction in Syria strained the U.S-Turkey ties, the Egyptian-U.S relationships worsened after Egypt's military took over power in July 2013 as a result of a coup d'etat. See, Kemal Kirişci and Ali Tuygan, "U.S.-Turkey relations under Trump may hinge more on Turkey than on Obama", *Brookings*, November 30, 2016, <<https://goo.gl/35tQDm>>, retrieved 2 August 2017, and Eric Trager, "Obama Wrecked U.S.-Egypt Ties", *The National Interest*, April 8, 2015, <<https://goo.gl/Kti9gf>> retrieved 5 August 2017.

<sup>141</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "Barack Obama Was a Foreign-Policy Failure", *Foreign Policy*, 18 January 2017, <<https://goo.gl/mNDxNi>>, retrieved 7 August 2017, and Andrew Moran, "Barack Obama and the return of 'declinism': Rebalancing American foreign policy in an era of multipolarity", in *The Obama Presidency and the Politics of Change*, ed. Edward Ashbe and John Dumbrell, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 271.

<sup>142</sup> Unlike the war on Iraq, Obama supported the war in Afghanistan because he believed that it was waged to address a tangible and real threat to the United States security. See, Mark N. Katz, "Assessing the Obama Strategy toward the "War on Terror", *Middle East Policy Council*, <<https://goo.gl/Zmt3ba>>, retrieved 10 August 2017.

<sup>143</sup> Mark N. Katz, "Assessing the Obama Strategy toward the "War on Terror".

counterterrorism policy it inherited,<sup>144</sup> operating within the frameworks set by the Bush Administration.<sup>145</sup> The initial surge of troops in Afghanistan ordered by Obama was within the context of the war on terror that commenced under Bush.<sup>146</sup> The Obama Administration did not abolish all abusive interrogation techniques carried out by the CIA during the previous administration.<sup>147</sup> Nor did it shut down the infamous Guantanamo prison.<sup>148</sup>

The defining feature of Obama's counterterrorism strategy was extensive use of drones and special operation forces. During the Bush Administration, some 50 drone strikes were ordered.<sup>149</sup> The Obama Administration, until mid-2015, authorized 450 drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen, resulting in an estimated 2,800 terrorists and 200 civilian deaths.<sup>150</sup>

### 3.3.2. Pursuing the peace process between Israel and Palestine:

The Obama Administration did not break with tradition when advancing the peace process between Palestine and Israel, has been a presence on the US Middle East policy agenda since the early 1990s. It attached great importance to a peace settlement based on the two-state solution believing it would mitigate tensions with the Arab and Muslim world, enhance stability and deprive radical factions of a rallying cry.<sup>151</sup> Obama vowed that a two-state would be achieved by the end of his first term in office.<sup>152</sup> However, despite the administration's immense diplomatic investment in the peace process, only meagre results, if any, were realised. Nearly two years of diplomatic efforts yielded nothing, ending in a

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<sup>144</sup> Jessica Stern, "Obama and Terrorism: Like It or Not, the War Goes On", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 5, September/October 2015, p. 63.

<sup>145</sup> Javier Martín Merchán, "Has Obama Delivered Change or Continuity in US Foreign Policy?", *E-International Relations Students*, 20 January 2017, <<https://goo.gl/4RKqZs>>, retrieved 12 August 2017.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>147</sup> Jessica Stern, p. 63.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>149</sup> Micah Zenko, "Obama's Embrace of Drone Strikes Will Be a Lasting Legacy", *The New York Times*, 12 January 2016, <<https://goo.gl/6q3cRR>>, retrieved 15 August 2017.

<sup>150</sup> Jessica Stern, p. 63.

<sup>151</sup> Obama also believed that such resolution would weaken Iran, which uses both Hamas and Hizbullah to increase tension in the region. See, Zaki Shalom, "The Obama Administration and the Peace Process", *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, Volume. 10, No. 2, 2016, p. 258, <<https://goo.gl/i28Jac>>, retrieved 22 August 2017.

<sup>152</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "Barack Obama Was a Foreign-Policy Failure"

deadlock in late 2010.<sup>153</sup> The quest to realise a peace settlement was resumed in 2013-14, with US Secretary of State John Kerry working relentlessly to broker a framework agreement, but with little success.<sup>154</sup> Arguably, several factors accounted for the failure to advance the peace process. The first was Israel's categorical rejection of the US precondition of halting settlement building activities. The second was personal tension between Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.<sup>155</sup> The Obama Administration not only did not live up to expectations of establishing a Palestinian state, but it also strained relations with Israel.

### 3.4. Conclusion

The Obama Administration's Middle East foreign policy shifted from its predecessor's in many respects. First, the Obama Administration was set on reducing US security commitments and military presence in the Middle East, determined not to get involved in any new conflict. Unlike its predecessor, the Obama administration rejected using military power and regime change to impose democracy. It not only showed a willingness to engage adversaries, such as Iran, it also took a firm stance towards traditional allies and partners. Nonetheless, US conduct showed some continuity with previous administrations. Obama not only continued the Bush Administration's war on terror, but expanded its scope. Likewise, the quest to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continued, with considerable diplomatic and political capital invested to achieve this goal, but without success.

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<sup>153</sup> Zaki Shalom, "The Obama Administration and the Peace Process", p. 257.

<sup>154</sup> Khaled Elgindy, "Obama's Record on Israeli-Palestinian Peace: The President's Disquieting Silence", *Foreign Affairs*, October 5, 2016, <<https://goo.gl/jPW52x>> retrieved 26 August 2017.

<sup>155</sup> Zaki Shalom, pp. 260-264.



## Chapter Four

# WHY DID THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION DISENGAGE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST

### 4.1. Introduction:

In the previous chapter, we analysed the main aspects of the Obama Administration's Middle East policy. Unlike its predecessor, the policy rested on decreasing military and security commitments across the Middle East, eschewed involvement in future conflicts. What were the reasons for such a policy? Why did the Obama Administration, notwithstanding the spread of violence, remain committed to a “light footprint” strategy? This chapter answers these questions. We argue that the Obama Administration’s vision for the US's global role and how to optimise that vision dictated its Middle East policy. Also, the rise of China and the growing economic and strategic significance of the Asia-Pacific region compelled the US to deprioritise the Middle East in favour of a global ‘re-balance’ to Asia. Another factor was the eruption of the Arab spring and the ensuing commotion, which deepened President Obama’s conviction that the Middle East was irredeemable. Finally, the US ‘energy revolution’ resulted in the diminishing importance of uninterrupted and secure access to Middle Eastern oil, and the very strategic significance of the Middle East as a whole.

## 4.2. Obama Doctrine

To understand the Obama Administration's Middle East policy we must first grasp its vision and optimal strategies for US leadership in world politics, or the 'Obama Doctrine'. First, what does a 'presidential doctrine' refer to? Although it is hardly clear what constitutes a presidential doctrine, the most common definition is "a set of prescriptions that specify how tools should be employed in the service of strategy and that serve as a guide to decision making".<sup>156</sup> Others, however, see presidential doctrines as a synonym encapsulating a president's foreign policy strategy, which imposes a coherence between ends and means on a country's international behaviour over a range of specific regional cases'.<sup>157</sup>

It is argued that the Obama Doctrine or Obama's "grand strategy" combined elements of both retrenchment and accommodation.<sup>158</sup> 'Retrenchment' meant a gradual reduction in overseas security commitments through scaling down defence spending, and encouraging allies to assume more responsibilities in dealing with international problems.<sup>159</sup> 'Accommodation' meant a willingness to open up to and engage potential adversaries and rivals, hoping that accommodation of an adversary's interests and perspectives would modify assertive behaviour.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>156</sup>Emily O. Goldman and Larry Berman, 'Engaging the World: First Impressions of the Clinton Foreign Policy Legacy', in Colin Campbell and Bert A. Rockman (eds.), *The Clinton Legacy* (New York: Chatham House, 2000), pp.226–54, 23, cited in John Dumbrell, "Was There a Clinton Doctrine? President Clinton's Foreign Policy Reconsidered", *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 13, Issue. 2, September 2002, p. 44, <<http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/10.1080/714000309>>, retrieved 4 September 2017.

<sup>157</sup> Colin Dueck, "The Obama doctrine", pp. 2-3.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, p. 14

<sup>159</sup> Obama believes that sharing responsibilities with others will help to restrain the U.S tendencies to opt for military force as the United States has a history of resorting to the military power in events that the U.S interests were not threatened directly. Obama's inclination to transfer some of the U.S foreign policy responsibilities to its allies renders him a classic adherent of the retrenchment strategy. Obama foreign policy has shown features of the retrenchment approach like cutting risk, reduce spending, and sharing defense responsibilities and burdens with allies. The defense spending, for instance, went down from 4.9% of America's gross domestic product(GDP) in 2010 to around 3% of U.S GDP in 2015. Meanwhile, in 2011, the Budget Control Act was enacted, imposing significant budget cuts amounting to some \$2 trillion over the course of the ten-year period. And in 2012, the U.S Defence Strategic Guidance (DSG) abandoned the pretense that the United States would be able to fight two major regional conflicts at the same time. See, Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama doctrine", *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <<https://goo.gl/r66FT6>>, retrieved 5 September 2017; and Colin Dueck, pp. 94-95.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

A wide array of international and domestic imperatives inspired the Obama Doctrine. Internationally, the global standing of the US was affected negatively by the interventionist policies it pursued after the 9/11 attacks, which the Obama Administration set about reversing.<sup>161</sup> Furthermore, the contours of world politics in which the US pursued its interests changed, regarding the global distribution of both power and wealth. Power and wealth were dispersing in ways not experienced previously.<sup>162</sup> The world was hyper-connecting. It was more interdependent via global value and supply chains but facing more 'non-traditional' security threats, such as pandemics, climate change, non-state actor, violent extremism, and cyber warfare requiring collaborative and multilateral efforts to address each one. For the United States to retain its global posture, ending reliance on the unilateral military to meet challenges was almost inevitable.<sup>163</sup>

The Obama Doctrine was also driven by domestic imperatives. The Administration believed that international strategic entanglements restrained its ability to realise 'domestic transformational goals,' such as healthcare reform and economic rejuvenation.<sup>164</sup> Reducing broad international security commitments, it was argued, would save effort and resources that could be directed toward securing a legacy of progressive, liberal reforms at home.<sup>165</sup>

However, Obama's strategy of "retrenchment and accommodation" was not a "return to isolationism", nor was it driven by Obama's conviction that US power was declining. The rationale was to redefine the role of the US in the world in order to prevent a

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<sup>161</sup>Toshihiro Nakayama, "Strategic Patience in a Turbulent World: The Obama Doctrine and its Approach to the World.", *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 3-4, 2015, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13439006.2015.1038888>>, retrieved 7 September 2017.

<sup>162</sup> Scholars and commentators started talking about the 'Post-American world'. This concept while implies a certain degree of American retreat, it does not mean that the United State global power is declining and on its way to being a second-tier power in the international system. Rather, it points out that the United States while still a dominant global power, other centres of power are rising, bringing about limitations on the U.S freehand to act unilaterally. To put differently, the 'unipolar moment' emerged after the implosion of the Soviet Union is over and other actors are now participating in shaping the course of international affairs. See, Toshihiro Nakayama, p. 4.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>164</sup> Andrew Moran, p. 269.

<sup>165</sup> Colin Dueck, p. 33-34.

future decline in power induced by being overextended globally.<sup>166</sup> Obama made it very clear at the outset that he would not dismantle its leading role in global affairs, but encourage a more cooperative and peaceful international order, and focus on domestic social and economic challenges which, if left unchecked, might also undermine the US's international standing.<sup>167</sup>

The Obama Doctrine was visible in many aspects of US Middle East policy. Retrenchment translated into reducing its military presence and security commitments, abstaining from investing too much diplomatic and political capital, and avoiding deploying large numbers of troops for long periods.<sup>168</sup> First, the Obama Administration worked on extricating the US from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars inherited from its predecessor.<sup>169</sup> Secondly, the Obama Administration was keen to keep the US from getting drawn into conflicts in Libya and Syria.<sup>170</sup> The accommodation was the basis of the Administration's foreign policy toward Iran.<sup>171</sup> It opened up on Iran and embarked on diplomatic negotiations, resulting in the conclusion of the Iran nuclear deal, according to which Iran was to dispense with certain nuclear activities in exchange for a gradual lifting of the international economic sanctions.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Andrew Moran, p. 279

<sup>167</sup> Colin Dueck, p.47.

<sup>168</sup> Michał Woźniak, "The Obama doctrine: The U.S retrenchment and its consequences," *Securitologia*, No. 2, 2015, p. 60, <<https://goo.gl/yBDdk7>>, retrieved 10 September 2017.

<sup>169</sup> Robert G. Kaufman, p. 97

<sup>170</sup> In Libya, despite partaking in Gaddafi's overthrowing campaign, Obama insisted on keep the U.S involvement limited. No troops were deployed on the ground. Nor did the United States supervise and nurture a political transformation in the country during the post-Gaddafi era. Likewise, Obama posture in Syria rested on avoiding deep intervention in the country's civil war. Although Obama, during the early months of the unrest, stated that Syria's president should go, he did not translate this announcement into a practical policy. See, Colin Dueck, pp. 82-87.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>172</sup> John Glaser and Trevor Thrall, "Obama's Foreign Policy Legacy and the Myth of Retrenchment", CATO WORKING PAPER, No. 43, April 24, 2017, <<https://object.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/working-paper-43-updated.pdf>>, retrieved 10 September 2017.

### 4.3. Obama's reorientation of U.S policy toward Asia:

During his first trip to Asia, eleven months into his Presidency, Obama described himself as “America’s first Pacific president” and promised “a new era of engagement”.<sup>173</sup> Two years after this trip, he declared that a “re-pivot to Asia” was a priority for US foreign policy.<sup>174</sup> The rationale for the 're-pivot' was that the US had “overinvested” in the Middle East, “a crisis-prone region of dwindling importance to the U.S. national interest.”<sup>175</sup> Because Obama's predecessor was preoccupied with the global war on terror, the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia, the Asia-Pacific had not received sufficient attention proportionate to its growing economic and strategic significance.<sup>176</sup>

After entering the office, President Obama and senior administration officials stressed the geo-economic and the strategic significance of the Asia-Pacific, and its importance to future of the US’s global standing.<sup>177</sup> In an interview with *Time* magazine in 2012, President Obama explained the imperatives that prompted the Pacific’s prioritisation stating that

The United States has pivoted to focus on the fastest-growing region of the world, where we have an enormous stake in peace, security, the free flow of commerce and, frankly, an area of the world that we had neglected over the last decade because of our intense focus on Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Middle East.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Niels Bjerre-Poulsen, "Here, We See the Future": The Obama Administration’s Pivot to Asia" in *The Obama Presidency and the Politics of Change*, ed. Edward Ashbe and John Dumbrell, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 307.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 307.

<sup>175</sup> Fareed Zakaria, "Whatever happened to Obama’s pivot to Asia?," *The Washington Post*, 16 April 2015, <<https://goo.gl/UmD8DK>>, retrieved 13 September 2017.

<sup>176</sup> There is ample evidence indicates the Bush administration's political and strategic underinvestment in the region. The former U.S secretary Condoleezza Rice, for instance, missed two out of four of the ASEAN annual meetings. Also, In 2007, the U.S not only declined to accede the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation but also canceled a US-ASEAN meeting. See, Niels Bjerre-Poulsen, p. 308.

<sup>177</sup> Kurt Campbell, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs in Obama administration said that the United States was “on a little bit of a Middle East detour over the course of the last ten years”, and that the U.S future “will be dominated utterly and fundamentally by developments in Asia and the Pacific region”. See, Ryan Lizza,

<sup>178</sup> Fareed Zakaria, ‘Inside Obama's World: The President talks to TIME About the Changing Nature of American Power,’ *Time*, 19 January 2012, <<https://goo.gl/UGRqak>>, retrieved 15 September 2017.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in an article published in *Foreign Policy*, in 2011, laid out the framework of the U.S future role in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>179</sup> She asserted that the ‘re-pivot’ was inevitable if the US was to sustain its global leadership.<sup>180</sup> As a result of wars in which the US was involved and economic challenges, the Obama administration, she argued, was obliged to rebalance long-term priorities, and to “invest its resources and its power in the right place.”<sup>181</sup> The US had allocated a vast amount of time, effort and wealth in the greater Middle East over decades. The time had come, she concluded, for the US to invest more diplomatically, economically, and militarily in theatres other than the Middle East. Instead of wasting efforts in the Middle East with its growing intractable crises, the US will focus on the Asia-Pacific, a region that will shape the future of the global order.<sup>182</sup>

For the US the Pacific is endowed with a set of geopolitical and economic attributes which make it extraordinarily important in the global politics. Unlike the Middle East, the Asia-Pacific comprises around half the world’s population, and is where a great deal of the global wealth is generated.<sup>183</sup> President Obama stated that:

*“When compared to the Middle East, Asia, despite still having huge problems pertaining to corruption and poverty, is mired with ambitious, energetic people who are determined to improve their lives through building infrastructures, getting education and creating jobs... in Asia, many young people yearning themselves to self-improvement, modernity, education, and material wealth.”*<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific century: The future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States will be right at the center of the action”, *Foreign Policy*, 11 October 2011, <<https://goo.gl/AahEdu>>, retrieved 22 September 2017.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 2011.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 2011.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 2011.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 2011.

<sup>184</sup> Jeffery Goldberg

The Obama Administration sought to expand the US bilateral and multilateral economic and diplomatic relationships with the region, seeking to enmesh the US further into regional institutions and to establish an enduring framework for engagement.<sup>185</sup> The economic pillar of the re-pivot strategy was the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP), a free-trade pact including the US and 11 Pacific states. In addition to its economic function, the TPP was intended to assure allies in the region of sustained US engagement.<sup>186</sup> The rebalance was not solely motivated economic considerations, but also a strategic one. In fact, the United States perceived that China, empowered by economic growth and a rapid increase military capabilities, was pursuing an assertive foreign policy, especially under President Xi Jinping from 2012.<sup>187</sup> From the US perspective, Chinese actions in the South China Sea, such claiming sovereignty over disputed territories, building artificial islands, and employing anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategies, undermined the 'rules-based' regional order, and challenged US leadership.<sup>188</sup> Therefore, the 're-pivot' to Asia was not limited to expanding economic and institutional networks. Rather, it sought to ramp up the US's military presence, deepening security commitments to allies, and expanding military and defence ties with other nations across the region.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> In 2009, the United States joined the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia. One year later, the Obama administration appointed a resident Ambassador to the ASEAN. Also, President Obama was the first US president to participate in the East Asia Summit in 2011. See, U.S Embassy & Council in Vietnam, "Fact Sheet: Unprecedented U.S.-ASEAN Relations" 12 February, 2016, <<https://goo.gl/dwVkyU>>, retrieved 25 September 2017, and Mike Green, "The Legacy of Obama's "Pivot" to Asia", *Foreign Policy*, 13 September 2016, <<https://goo.gl/m4NxGz>>, retrieved 25 September 2017.

<sup>186</sup> Niels Bjerre-Poulsen, p. 318.

<sup>187</sup> Niels Bjerre-Poulsen, pp. 310-311.

<sup>188</sup> Georg Löfflmann, "The Pivot between Containment, Engagement, and Restraint: President Obama's Conflicted Grand Strategy in Asia", *Asian Security*, Vol. 12, Issue. 2, 2016, p. 100, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2016.1190338>>, retrieved 1 October 2017.

<sup>189</sup> While the Obama administration reinforced its defense ties with both Japan and South Korea, it expanded the U.S access rights to military installations in Darwin, (Australia), five sites in the Philippines (under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement), and Singapore. Also, the United States deepened its military cooperation with new potentially strategically relevant partners such as India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam. See Scott Warren Harold, "The Legacy Obama Leaves His Successor in Asia", *Rand*, October 26, 2016, <<https://goo.gl/9ASwzx>>, retrieved 3 October 2017.

The geostrategic logic of the 'Asia re-pivot' reflected the Obama Administration's belief that the region was becoming the centre of the globe's gravity, coupled with its desire to extricate the US from long and unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Obama Administration sought to reorient US priorities from a volatile, unstable region to a more strategically and economically significant region.<sup>190</sup> Nonetheless, although it was determined to steer clear of the Middle East and concentrate on the Pacific, the Administration was dragged grudgingly into the Middle East's disarray. Developments such as the war in the Yemen conflicts in Syria and Iraq, and Iran's nuclear deal diverted a great deal of the diplomatic and political effort and resources toward the Middle East instead of Asia.<sup>191</sup>

#### 4.4. The diminishing significance of Middle Eastern oil

As argued previously, the geostrategic significance of the Middle East's oil was invariably at the heart of US strategic thinking. Although US oil imports from the region were relatively insignificant, safeguarding the flow of oil was always a national security imperative, because the stability of oil markets was essential for the stability of the global economy, and thus for the US economy. However, over the Administration's two terms, a substantial transformation took place in the US Oil industry, with the implementation of new extraction techniques.<sup>192</sup> With advanced technologies, such as fracking and horizontal drilling, the US extracted petroleum and natural gas from vast reserves of oil shale, increasing domestic production of previously commercially economic resources to an unprecedented level.<sup>193</sup> As Blackwill and O'Sullivan observe "horizontal drilling, which allows wells to

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<sup>190</sup>Stephen P. Cohen, and Robert Ward Wednesday, 'Asia Pivot: Obama's Ticket out of Middle East?', *Brookings*, 21 August 2013, <<https://goo.gl/7pV9EW>>, retrieved 3 October 2017.

<sup>191</sup>Fareed Zakaria, "Whatever happened to Obama's pivot to Asia? 2015.

<sup>192</sup>Robert D. Blackwill and Meghan L. O'Sullivan, 'America's Energy Edge The Geopolitical Consequences of the Shale Revolution', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 2, March/April 2014, p. 102.

<sup>193</sup>Robert G. Kaufman, p. 98.

penetrate bands of shale deep underground, and hydraulic fracturing, which uses the injection of high-pressure fluid to release gas and oil from rock formations.”<sup>194</sup>

These profound changes played a major role in reducing the significance of the Middle East's oil to the US economy and, thus, the Middle East's strategic importance. President Obama stated that the energy revolution rendered the Middle East a region with negligible significance to the US economy, furthering the Administration's inclination to disengage from the Middle East.<sup>195</sup> Data shows that between 2007 and 2012, new drilling techniques generated an 18-fold increase in production of “light tight crude”, high-quality petroleum found in shale or sandstone released by fracking.<sup>196</sup> The US succeeded in reversing the long decline in crude oil production, which grew 50% between 2008 and 2013.<sup>197</sup>

The energy revolution, with its economic implications, was of enormous geopolitical consequence. In 2013, the US surpassed Russia as the world's leading energy producer and, according to projections by the International Energy Agency (IEA), will surpass Saudi Arabia as the top producer of crude oil.<sup>198</sup> The US economy had shown a degree of vulnerability to the volatility in global oil markets, dating back to the 1973 embargo. The Obama Administration found the US increasingly unfettered by strategic obligations to the Middle East.<sup>199</sup> As the North American producers increased oil production, the ability of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to control prices diminished. According to projections from the EIA between 2012 and 2020, the US was expected to produce more than three million barrels of new petroleum and other liquid fuels each day,

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<sup>194</sup> Robert D. Blackwill, p. 102.

<sup>195</sup> Jeffery Goldberg

<sup>196</sup> Robert D. Blackwill, P. 103.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., P.104.

mainly from light tight oil.<sup>200</sup> These developments undercut OPEC's traditional role as the manager of global energy prices, to the extent that energy prices fell.<sup>201</sup>

In 'The End of Pax Americana: Why Washington's Middle East Pullback Makes Sense', Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson suggest that one of the factors that drove US disengagement from the Middle East was America's energy revolution.<sup>202</sup> They argue that the US growing energy self-sufficiency weakened the bases of US partnerships and alliances with the Gulf States:

the advent of hydraulic fracturing has dramatically reduced direct U.S. dependence on Gulf oil and diminished the strategic value and priority of the U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf Arab states: indeed, the United States will soon overtake Saudi Arabia as the world's largest producer of crude oil and will need to import less fossil fuel. Although Gulf producers will keep determining the world price of oil and U.S. companies will continue to have a stake in the Gulf's wells, the United States will enjoy greater policy discretion and flexibility.<sup>203</sup>

Additionally, the increase in US oil production provided it with leverage when implementing its Middle East strategy. The surge domestic energy production boosted the US ability to convince other states to impose sanctions on Iran. Given that Iran is a major energy exporter the US spike in production covered for sanctions against Iranian exports, with more than one million barrels a day of Iranian oil forced off the market.<sup>204</sup> Had it not been for the US supplies, the sanctions would have been harder to impose, eliminating fears of

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., P. 105.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>202</sup> Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, 'The End of Pax Americana: Why Washington's Middle East Pullback Makes Sense, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 4, November/ December 2015, p. 3.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>204</sup> Robert D. Blackwill, p. 111.

potential spikes in oil prices.<sup>205</sup> Sanctions did major damage to the Iranian economy and helped push Tehran to the negotiating table.<sup>206</sup>

Notwithstanding, while domestic US production had enormous economic and geostrategic impact, the continuation of Middle Eastern oil supplies to global markets will remain indispensable for the foreseeable future. Given the way the global oil market functions, complete oil independency and self-sufficiency are not feasible.<sup>207</sup> Oil as a commodity is sold on global markets and is subject to worldwide supply and demand pressures. For that reason, any disruption to oil supplies anywhere will affect global oil prices, and thus the US economy.<sup>208</sup> Accordingly, the United States interest in preserving the stability of international markets will continue.<sup>209</sup>

#### 4.5. The eruption of the Arab Spring and the erosion of the state-centred regional system

As shown above, Obama entered office with great hopes for starting a new chapter in the relationship between the US and the Arab and Muslim world. The relationship was damaged due to military intervention, pursuit of regime change, and promotion of freedom during the Bush Administrations. And to improve this damaged relationship, Obama declared since the inception of his tenure that democracy is a system of governance that cannot and will not be imposed from without.<sup>210</sup>

However, the eruption of the Arab spring in 2011 boosted hopes that genuine changes were occurring in the region. Obama rushed to endorse an agenda of “democracy-

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>207</sup> Charles L. Glaser and Rosemary A. Kelanic, “Getting Out of the Gulf: Oil and U.S. Military Strategy”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 1, January/February 2017, p. 123.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>209</sup> Robert D. Blackwill, P. 110

<sup>210</sup> Ryan Lizza,

promotion”, similar to that pursued by his predecessor, arguing that it was the “right moment to stop dealing with the region as it is and start dealing with it as it should be.”<sup>211</sup> Nonetheless, Obama's hopes about the spread of democracy throughout the region were soon dashed by the grim realities unfolding on the ground. The optimism generated by the relatively smooth and peaceful power transition in Tunisia and Egypt rapidly withered away when uprisings in Libya and Syria turned rapidly into full-scale civil wars.<sup>212</sup>

As the Gaddafi regime’s crackdown was intensifying, divisions arose within the Obama Administration as to whether the US should get involved. While President Obama and his vice president Joe Biden were not in favor of US involvement, the secretary of state Hillary Clinton, the US Ambassador to the United Nations, Suzan Rice, and Samantha Power, Special Assistant to the President, lobbied hard to get the President to agree to intervene in Libya to avert the imminent massacre of civilians in Benghazi, and to sustain the momentum of the Arab Spring.<sup>213</sup> Eventually, President Obama agreed to participate, although under the condition that US allies had to share the burdens of the operation fiscally and militarily.<sup>214</sup> Despite a quick and relatively costless success of the campaign in Libya, the country situation deteriorated rapidly. Violence did not stop, and democracy did not flourish. Libya swiftly descended into a failed state and a haven for terrorist groups.<sup>215</sup>

The failure in Libya furthered Obama’s misgivings regarding the feasibility of military intervention in bringing about change to the Middle East.<sup>216</sup> The aftermath highlighted the complexity of Libya’s internal dynamics and illustrated how neither the US nor the NATO

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<sup>211</sup> Jeffery Goldberg

<sup>212</sup> Jeffery Goldberg, “The Obama doctrine”,

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>215</sup> Alan J. Kuperman, "Obama's Libya Debacle: How a Well-Meaning Intervention Ended in Failure", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 94. No. 2, March/April 2015, p. 67.

<sup>216</sup> , Jeffery Goldberg, “The Obama doctrine”,

was ready to deal with them.<sup>217</sup> Post-Gaddafi Libya proved to Obama that the Middle East is a complicated terrain and the US should distance itself from it.<sup>218</sup> Obama was quoted as saying that “there is no way that we should commit to governing the Middle East and North Africa...that would be a basic fundamentalist mistake.”<sup>219</sup>

The US's troublesome experience in Libya affected President Obama's later actions, or inactions, in Syria and magnified his disinclination regarding an increase in US involvement in the Middle East. Although Obama embraced the goal of regime change in Syria in August 2011, stating that the Syrian President must leave power, this did not trigger forceful US military action.<sup>220</sup> In 2012 Obama set up the use of chemical weapons as a ‘red line’ not to be crossed, or the US would respond militarily.<sup>221</sup> In 2013, when civilians in areas around Damascus were struck by rockets containing chemical agents, President Obama faced a predicament. If he responded, this action could escalate into a long-term commitment drawing the US to the Syrian quagmire.<sup>222</sup> Not responding damaged global US credibility. In the end, Obama chose not to intervene and agreed to a Russian initiative to destroy Syria's chemical stockpiles.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>220</sup> Colin Dueck, p. 85.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., p. 86

<sup>222</sup> Obama was quoted as saying that “ Any president who was thoughtful, I believe, would recognize that after over a decade of war, with obligations that are still to this day requiring great amounts of resources and attention in Afghanistan, with the experience of Iraq, with the strains that it is placed on our military... any thoughtful president would hesitate about making a renewed commitment in the same region of the world with the some of the same dynamics of the same probability of unsatisfactory outcomes. See, Jeffery Goldberg, ‘The Obama doctrine’”.

<sup>223</sup> Although Obama's reticence to get the United States involved in a war in Syria stemmed from his longstanding vision of the infeasibility of employing military power to bring about political change, and because the conflict in Syria did not pose a direct threat to the United States, a range of situational variables played critical role in Obama's decision not to attack Assad. Among those variables was the refusal of the main U.S allies to partake in this campaign. First was Britain parliament which did not authorize the prime minister to participate in the war in Syria. And second was the German consular who refused to partake in any attack. Another factor was the indecisiveness U.S intelligence apparatus, whose experience in Iraq made it more cautious. The chief of the intelligence community, James Clapper, did not hesitate to inform the president that the evidence while strong, it was not ‘slam dunk”. See, Jeffery Goldberg, ‘The Obama doctrine’”.

President Obama's rejection of escalation, even when violence was spreading across the region, can be attributed to two fundamental convictions. First, the conflicts sweeping the Middle East were of a sectarian and tribal nature, and thus more US military involvement would not help to allay them.<sup>224</sup> Second, the developments taking place across the region did not pose a direct threat to US national interests.<sup>225</sup>

President Obama realised that structural changes caused by the Arab Spring limited what the US could do to influence the course of events and bring about preferred outcomes. The immediate result of the Arab Spring was that the regional state-centred system underwent profound transformation.<sup>226</sup> Non- states actors played an increasingly significant role in the political dynamics.<sup>227</sup> As Waleed Hazbun pointed out, “political and economic developments in the Middle East have reduced the opportunities for effective intervention to a vanishing point.”<sup>228</sup> He argued that “shifting national interests and changing dynamics below the level of the state have reduced the US political leverage in the region.”<sup>229</sup>

The Administration thought that the Middle East was exhibiting intractable and complicated problems, beyond the US’s ability to control, or any other state for that matter.<sup>230</sup> According to Goldberg, Obama viewed the Middle East through a “Hobbesian prism”, or a

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>225</sup> Obama believes that a president should not place American soldiers in danger in order to prevent humanitarian disasters unless the latter pose a direct security threat to the United States. And as for the Middle East, Obama thinks that there are only two vital national interests that if they were threatened, the U.S should use military force. Those interests are defending the existence of the state of Israel and Iran's acquiring nuclear weapons. See, Jeffery Goldberg, “The Obama doctrine”.

<sup>226</sup> Louise Fawcett, “States and sovereignty in the Middle East: myths and realities”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 4, July 2017, p. 789, <<https://goo.gl/2kC2pX>>, retrieved 10 October 2017.

<sup>227</sup> Tamara Cofman Wittes, “Real security: The interdependence of governance and stability in the Arab world”, *The Brookings Institution*, November 2016, p. 34, <<https://goo.gl/SJpQbe>>, retrieved 10 October 2017.

<sup>228</sup> Waleed Hazbun, "Beyond the American Era in the Middle East: An Evolving Landscape of turbulence," in *New Conflict Dynamics, Between Regional Autonomy and Intervention in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Rasmus Alenius Boserup, Danish Institute for International Studies, 2017, p. 35, <<https://goo.gl/QfzcyL>>, retrieved 15 October 2017.

<sup>229</sup> Waleed Hazbun, p. 35.

<sup>230</sup> David Ignatius, “ ‘The U.S. can't fix it': James Clapper on America's role in the Middle East’”, *The Washington Post*, 10 May 2016, <<https://goo.gl/VBLy2Z>>, retrieved 2017.

war of all against all.<sup>231</sup> The region was, according to Obama, polarizing across tribal and sectarian lines, fighting each other in a process that soon became self-sustaining. President Obama tried to explain to US allies that escalating tensions with Iran would only exacerbate the situation in the Middle East and widen the sectarian rift. Even if the US intervened militarily on the side of its friends, there will not be a decisive victory, only more chaos. The President believed that tribalism and sectarianism played a critical role in inflaming chaos and paralysing any quest for modernity and stability in the Middle East.<sup>232</sup>

#### 4.6. Conclusion:

Several factors were behind US disengagement from the Middle East policy during the Obama Administration. First was President Obama's grand strategy, or 'Doctrine', which contained elements of accommodation and retrenchment. It guided US policy across the region, allowing Obama to concentrate on realising transformative domestic goals and to allocate more resources and attention to regions, such as the Pacific, of critical significance to US national interests. Retrenchment in the Middle East was translated into winding up wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and employing 'leading from behind' and 'light footprint' strategies in Libya and Syria. Accommodation was the Administration willing to deal with adversaries such as Iran. The second factor was the Administration's "re-pivot" to Asia. It concluded that the US should end a "lost decade" of involvement in the Middle East and start focusing on the Pacific, with its immense economic and strategic significance and China's rise as a potential peer competitor to the US. The third factor was the US energy revolution brought about by new drilling techniques. It increased US oil production to unprecedented levels, reducing the importance of the Middle Eastern oil. The final factor was the wave of conflict and upheaval that engulfed the Middle East in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. It entrenched

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<sup>231</sup> Jeffery Goldberg,

<sup>232</sup> Jeffery Goldberg,

President Obama's longstanding conviction that no amount of the US military involvement can help in quelling conflict across the region.

## Conclusion:

Despite being commonplace in media and academia, neither the definition nor the borders of the Middle East are agreed upon. The region's geographical representations varied over the years in accordance with changes in Western interests. As the tide of geopolitical rivalry between the United States and the former Soviet Union was rising after the end the Second World War, the Middle East's strategic significance grew. Throughout the Cold War, the overriding US goal was preventing the Soviet Union from controlling the vast oil reserves of the Middle East. Establishment of the state of Israel furthered US involvement. This new state played an instrumental role in checking adversaries of the US across the region, serving as a bulwark against the expansion of the Soviet influence. The Middle East did not lose its strategic significance for the US after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. If anything, US engagement region increased. The United States started assuming direct security responsibilities and stationed a considerable number of troops across the region to confront new threats emanating from states such as Iraq and Iran that aspired to dominate the region. After the 9/11 attacks in 2001, direct US intervention surged to unprecedented levels. The Middle East became not only the centre of the US global war on terror but also an arena in which values such as democracy and freedom were to be promoted and enforced by power if necessary. Accordingly, two wars across the region were waged resulting in immense human and material costs.

From 2009, the Obama Administration was determined to rectify the course of US conduct in the Middle East. President Obama believed that in order for the US to restore its damaged global standing, reducing security commitments overseas, especially in the Middle East, was essential. Furthermore, the rise of China and the increase of the Asia-Pacific's geo-economic significance required shoring up political, diplomatic and military investment in the

region, which could not be done with high levels of US involvement in the Middle East. The eruption of the Arab Spring and the erosion the state- centred regional order deepened the Obama Administration's desire to disengage from the region as the US ability to determine and influence outcomes waned. Finally, the US energy revolution reduced in relative terms the economic relevancy of Middle Eastern oil to the US and global economy, enabling the Obama Administration to disengage.

The Obama administration veered away from its predecessors' Middle East policies in many aspects. First, it ended the wars inherited from the Bush Administration and avoided embroiling the US in any new long-term military commitments. Second, the Obama administration abandoned the 'freedom agenda' persuaded by the Bush Administration. Thirdly, the Obama Administration demonstrated a willingness to open up and to engage with adversaries, especially Iran. Fourthly, President Obama was willing to pressure traditional allies in the region such as Israel and the Gulf States, at least diplomatically and rhetorically, to change their conduct. However, although there were considerable changes in US conduct under President Obama, there were also elements of continuity. He carried on with the war on terror, expanding it in certain respects, and protracted US efforts to broker a peace deal between Palestine and Israel did not cease.

This thesis did not discuss the implications and ramifications of US disengagement from the Middle East. Nor did it explore future US Middle Eastern strategic options in the Post-Obama era. Assessing the repercussions of Obama's Middle Eastern foreign policy and discussing whether it was an aberration are interesting topics best addressed in future studies. Its prolonged involvement meant the US was a significant actor in shaping the regional system, for good and bad. Disengagement from the Middle East could upset the regional balance of power, and thus regional stability, with US allies feeling threatened and exposed, while foes feel empowered and emboldened. The nexus between US disengagement and

issues such as the rise of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, the expansion of Iran's regional clout, Turkey's changing role, and increase in Russia's sphere of influence in the Middle East require further study and investigation.

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