

United States Foreign Policy in the Middle East after the Cold War

Written by Jonathan Cristol

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JONATHAN CRISTOL, NOV 14 2018

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On 2 August 1990, the people of Kuwait City awoke at 5am to the sound of Iraqi tanks rolling down their streets. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein intended to annex the small Sheikdom of Kuwait, Iraq's "19th province," and tap its massive oil reserves. The invasion did not come entirely out of nowhere. Iraqi troops were massed at the border as the result of an oil dispute with its tiny neighbor, and the United States tried to persuade Iraq to solve its problems with Kuwait peacefully. This action was the first time one sovereign state had invaded and annexed another since Indonesia annexed East Timor in 1975; and it was the first major challenge to world order since the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall. This chapter examines key events in US foreign policy in the Middle East from Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iraq in 1990 to Donald Trump's announcement of US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal in 2018. It shows how America's strong position at the end of the Cold War and the end of Operation Desert Storm in 1991 led to a period of American hyper-involvement in Middle Eastern politics that ultimately weakened its regional standing.

The Persian Gulf War

The global reaction to Saddam Hussein's invasion and annexation of Kuwait was virtually universally negative. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) issued Resolution 660, demanding that "Iraq withdraw immediately and unconditionally all its forces to the positions in which they were located on 1 August 1990." Saddam Hussein's blatant act of aggression and territorial aggrandizement put an end to decades of stalemate in the Security Council when the USSR and the US voted together on UNSCR 660.

It was not immediately obvious how the United States would react to Saddam's aggression; and it was by no means certain that the US had any interest in fighting a war to restore Kuwait's sovereignty. Congress was divided. The Senate approved the use of force against Iraq by a vote of just 52–47, significantly closer than the 77–23 approval of the 2003 Iraq War. President George H.W. Bush saw an opportunity to establish a "new world order" in which territorial aggrandizement was a product of the past, and adherence to global norms was the wave of the future. He supported a war and it was his decision to make.

Bush wanted a grand coalition operating with UN approval, not a purely American intervention. UNSCR 678 passed on 29 November 1990. It gave Saddam Hussein "one final opportunity" to withdraw from Kuwait. If he did not, the resolution, "Authorize[d] Member States... to use all necessary means" to compel him. "Operation Desert Storm" began on 17 January 1991. Nearly every country in the world joined the coalition – Yemen backed Iraq and Jordan remained neutral. Americans fought alongside 31 diverse countries' armed forces. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Japan, South Korea, and Germany were the major funders of the war effort. In the end, the US Congress's General Accountability Office found that Desert Shield and Desert Storm were, "fully financed from allied contributions without using US taxpayer funds" (Conahan 1991, 12). The Warsaw Pact did not provide support, but it did not interfere. The zero-sum world had ended, and the Warsaw Pact dissolved itself on 1 July 1991.

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Desert Storm ended on 28 February 1991. Saddam Hussein was still president on 1 March. President Bush and Brent Scowcroft, Bush's national security advisor, said of the decision not to remove Saddam Hussein from power, "Trying to eliminate Saddam, extending the ground war into an occupation of Iraq, would have violated our guideline about not changing objectives in midstream... and would have incurred incalculable human and political costs.... We would have been forced to occupy Baghdad and, in effect, rule Iraq.... Had we gone the invasion route, the US could conceivably still be an occupying power in a bitterly hostile land" ("Bush on Iraq" 1998, par. 3). The world would later learn just how accurate that assessment was.

The defeat of Saddam Hussein is often described as the peak of American power and global influence. One headline called it, "the pinnacle of American military supremacy" (Blair 2016). It resulted in the establishment of new American bases in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia (bases that were soon used to establish "no fly" zones to protect Iraq's Kurdish and Shia populations), and record personal popularity for President Bush. Bush decided to use the high standing of the United States, and his personal popularity, to bring an end to the Israeli/Arab conflict.

Israel and the Peace Process

United States support for Israel has been a consistent feature of US foreign policy in the Middle East for more than 40 years. The US/Israel relationship is often portrayed as unwavering, but there are periods of tension and stark disagreements.

In Desert Storm, President Bush asked Israeli President Yitzhak Shamir not to retaliate in the event of an Iraqi attack. It was more than just a polite request. Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney refused Israel's request for the "friend/foe" codes that would allow its fighters to identify enemy aircraft. This made it effectively impossible for Israeli fighters to engage Iraqi targets without risking the accidental downing of a friendly plane. In recompense, the US deployed its Patriot missile defense system to protect Israeli cities from Saddam Hussein's Scud missile attacks. The missile impacts caused two deaths and injured over 1,000 (Haberman 1995, par. 7). Despite early reports heralding the Patriots' success, a 1991 Israeli Air Force report concluded, "there is no evidence of even a single successful intercept" (Weiner 1993, par. 5). Nevertheless, American pressure kept Israel out of the conflict.

Secretary of State James Baker arranged a conference in Madrid on 30 October – 4 November 1991. The participants were the US, USSR, Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and representatives of the Palestinians on the West Bank and in Gaza. This was the first time that these parties sat together, and one of the last times that the USSR sat with anybody. The Soviet Union formally dissolved on 26 December 1991.

The Madrid Conference did not itself yield any significant achievements, but led to the mutual recognition between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which was not present in Madrid. It also set in motion secret talks between Israel and the PLO in Oslo, Norway. These talks led to framework agreements on Israeli-Palestinian peace – Oslo 1 and Oslo 2 (the "Oslo Accords"). But the George H.W. Bush Administration would not be a part of further negotiations. Bill Clinton defeated Bush in the 1992 election and made Israeli-Palestinian peace a presidential priority.

Nine months after Clinton's inauguration, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin shook hands with Clinton and with each other on the White House lawn. The Oslo Accords had been negotiated largely without American help, but Oslo was a "process" and the two parties were just at the start. The premise of the Oslo Process was the "two-state solution" as the basis for a final Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. Arafat returned from his Tunisian exile to the West Bank to assume control of the new "Palestinian Authority" (PA).

The Oslo Accords did not discuss four major issues, which were deemed "final status issues" to be resolved at an indeterminate later date. These issues were: the status of Jerusalem; final borders; the fate of Israeli settlements; and the fate of Palestinian refugees. President Clinton played an active role in the negotiations between Israel and the PA, but the hopes expressed that day on the White House lawn did not last long. Rabin's assassination by a Jewish extremist on 4 November 1995 and a wave of suicide bombings by the Hamas terrorist group were just two factors that caused the "peace process" to stall.

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Clinton brought Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak to Camp David for two weeks in Summer 2000. The two sides came closer than ever before to reaching an agreement. After Camp David, President Clinton developed his own peace proposal. The day after George W. Bush's inauguration the two sides met again in Taba, Egypt in an attempt to reach a final agreement based on Clinton's proposal. However, the negotiations at Taba were cut short by Israel's election of Ariel Sharon as its new prime minister. He had a different view of the peace process, and the same four issues remain between them today.

Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda

The Israeli/Palestinian peace process was just one of many major events that followed Desert Storm. The Saudi royal family may have been grateful to America for protecting the Kingdom, but not everyone was happy about a permanent American presence so close to Mecca and Medina. It was a particular affront to Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden fought in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union, and there he met a man named Abdullah Azzam. Together they founded al-Qaeda, "The Base," in 1988. Al-Qaeda was quickly linked to a series of terrorist acts against the US including a 26 February 1993 attack on the World Trade Center and the 25 June 1996 attack on the US military installation in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.

US intelligence agencies were keenly aware of bin Laden and attuned to the danger he presented, but he was not yet a household name. Bin Laden made international news on 7 August 1998 when al-Qaeda suicide terrorists blew up the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. In retaliation the US launched cruise missiles against an alleged al-Qaeda chemical weapons facility in Sudan and against al-Qaeda training camps in Khost, Afghanistan. As it turned out, the alleged chemical weapons facility was a pharmaceutical firm and the strike was widely criticized.

Bin Laden was not deterred by the US missile strikes. On 12 October 2000, al-Qaeda forces drove a small boat up to the USS Cole, a naval frigate docked in Aden, Yemen, and detonated an explosive device. 17 sailors were killed. The lead FBI investigator of the attack was Special Agent John O'Neil, who would be one of 3,000 people murdered by al-Qaeda on 11 September 2001.

On the morning of "9/11," 19 hijackers boarded planes with the intent of hijacking them. Airplane hijackings had been a regular tactic of terrorist groups for decades, but al-Qaeda introduced a new innovation. Rather than use the hijackings to make demands and extract concessions, they used them as the world's largest suicide bombs.

The hijackers crashed two into the World Trade Center, collapsing both buildings and a neighboring building. They crashed one into the Pentagon, and, realizing what was going on, the passengers on the fourth took control and crashed United Flight 93 into an empty field. Osama bin Laden had made good on his 23 February 1998 fatwa, "The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it." The United States reaction was not swift, but it was severe.

Three days later, on 14 September 2001, Bush received from Congress an "Authorization for the Use of Military Force" (AUMF), which authorized him "to use all necessary and appropriate force" not only against those responsible for the 9/11 attacks, but also "in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States." This vague and ill-defined authorization has since been used to justify US deployments at least 37 times in locations including Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Georgia, Kenya, Philippines, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen (Weed 2006, 2). The AUMF has given three presidents broad powers, but it was originally written to authorize the invasion of Afghanistan and the pursuit of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda.

The United States knew immediately that Osama bin Laden was behind 9/11 and gave the Taliban government of Afghanistan one final chance to turn him over to the US. They declined, and the United States invaded Afghanistan on 7 October 2001. The Taliban government fell on 17 December 2001.

The war in Afghanistan was not controversial and enjoyed bipartisan support. President George W. Bush (2001, par. 59) made clear in his speech to a joint session of Congress that, "any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime." But while the Taliban's harboring of terrorists

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was beyond dispute, the Administration's case for war in Iraq was more controversial.

The Iraq War

The Administration's argument hinged on Saddam developing weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Secretary of State Colin Powell (2003, par. 15) made the case to the UN Security Council that, "the facts and Iraq's behavior show that Saddam Hussein and his regime are concealing their efforts to produce more weapons of mass destruction." He even had pictures to "prove" it, but we now know that his WMD programs had been defunct for many years. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was correct in its assessment that Iraq had no active nuclear program. Powell now calls that speech a "great intelligence failure" and a "blot" on his record (Breslow 2016, par. 1). Nevertheless, the Bush Administration proceeded with its war planning.

Despite Powell's best efforts, the UNSC declined to authorize the use of force. In contrast to his father's global coalition, Bush proceeded with a "Coalition of the Willing" made up largely of the United States, United Kingdom, Poland, and Australia. The Coalition launched airstrikes and a ground invasion on 20 March 2003, and found Saddam Hussein hiding in a hole in the ground. The war was won easily. Saddam Hussein was not loved by his people and initially US forces were "greeted as liberators," just as Cheney had predicted (Cheney and Russert 2003, par. 4). But the fanfare was short-lived and Cheney would later be mocked for the statement.

The American coalition installed Ambassador L. Paul Bremer as Administrator of the new "Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA)." Bremer quickly disbanded the Iraqi Army and purged Iraqi society of members of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party. The 424,000 members of the Iraqi Army were critical to maintaining law and order, and were generally more interested in receiving a paycheck than in loyalty to Saddam Hussein. Because of Bremer's decision they were armed and angry, and with few job prospects in the new Iraq. The situation was similar for Baath Party members above the very lowest ranks. Bremer barred them from government, but to work in government in Saddam's Iraq, one had to be a Baath party member. Thus, the CPA effectively fired the entire government bureaucracy. Nobody could run the electrical grid. Nobody could maintain critical infrastructure. The only people with real authority were the Americans. Many former soldiers and Baath party officials joined militias, and years later, some joined the so-called Islamic State (Sly 2015, par. 5).

The CPA wrote Iraq's constitution with minimal input from Iraqis. Major positions were given to young Republican Party officials. The US military was asked to provide basic law and order but was not given the training to do so. Iraqi institutions were looted and destroyed. Making matters worse, the oil ministry was well-protected. The perception of American forces was dealt a crippling blow when, on 28 April 2004, 60 Minutes aired photographs of American soldiers torturing Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, where Saddam Hussein's regime tortured its own prisoners. These images changed the average view of the United States across Iraq.

As law and order broke down, sectarian tensions and score-settling grew. Militia groups took control of towns and sections of Baghdad. Some of these groups were supportive of the American occupation; others were bitterly opposed. The Coalition faced a growing insurgency and responded with force, which only further alienated the Iraqi people.

The Iraq War produced some winners. The Iraqi Kurds worked closely with the Americans and were able to establish de facto independence. At the height of the insurgency in Baghdad, when over 100 civilians were killed every day, one could take a civilian flight from Europe to a stable and secure Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan. But there was no greater winner than America's long-time regional nemesis Iran.

The United States and Iran

On 9/11, Iran had enemies on its Eastern and Western borders. Iraq invaded Iran on 22 September 1980 and fought an eight-year war against Iran that killed over 100,000 Iranians and ended in a stalemate. The Taliban murdered nine Iranian diplomats in Mazar-e-Sharif. In 2003 neither remained in power and Iran was now bordered by the US military. This was a challenge, but it was a challenge Iran could do something about. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary

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Guard Corps' Quds Force set about arming and training Shia militias in Iraq. One of these militias, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq was responsible for over 6,000 attacks on American forces between 2006–2011 (Sanchez 2016, par. 12).

Iran and the United States had been at odds since a group of Iranian revolutionaries took 52 Americans hostage at the American embassy in Tehran in November 1979. Iran has a long history of support for terrorist groups and its fast-attack craft have harassed American ships in the Persian Gulf for decades. Iranian support for terrorism and regional aggression were major concerns of the United States, but America's greatest concern about Iran was its nuclear program.

Iran had long claimed that its nuclear program was for peaceful purposes, but few believed it. The Bush Administration tightened the economic sanctions on Iran that had been in place since 1979. President Barack Obama further increased the pressure on Iran. The Obama Administration convinced many other countries to join the sanctions regime and closed loopholes on pistachios, caviar, and Persian rugs. It also began secret talks with Tehran in Oman.

In 2003, Iran's perceived need for nuclear weapons was very real. There were 150,000 US troops to its West and 13,100 US troops to its East. The United States had just mounted a war against a country that had no WMD. By the time the 2011 Oman talks led to overt talks in Europe, Iran's geopolitical situation had changed. In 2015 there were just 3,400 US troops to its West and 9,800 US troops to its East (The Associated Press 2016). The US had war fatigue from the endless slogs in Iraq and Afghanistan. Iran also suffered under the weight of the sanctions regime. These two factors brought Iran to the negotiating table. After marathon discussions and negotiations between Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, US Secretary of State John Kerry, and their Russian, Chinese, French, German, and British counterparts (the P5+1) an agreement was reached.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), aka "the Iran Deal," lifted UN and EU sanctions on Iran, along with US nuclear-related sanctions, in exchange for intrusive inspections of Iran's nuclear sites and limitations on Iran's nuclear technology. It seemed that the question of a nuclear Iran had been significantly delayed, if not stopped entirely.

The Arab Spring

Perhaps ironically, years earlier the Bush Administration's WMD negotiations with Libya showed that negotiations with "rogue states" could work. On 19 December 2003, the Bush Administration reached a historic agreement with Libya's eccentric dictator Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. Gaddafi agreed to abandon and destroy his WMD programs, end support for terrorism, and settle accounts relating to the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103. In exchange, the United States would end all sanctions on Libya and welcome it back into the "community of nations." Libya abided by its agreement, but years later US President Barack Obama would make a decision that contributed towards an unexpected end to the dictator's 42-year reign.

The United States has a long history of supporting friendly dictators both in the Middle East and around the world. Morocco, ruled by the Alouite Dynasty since 1631, was first to recognize America's independence. Washington has had decades-long, close relationships with the al-Sauds, the al-Khalifas of Bahrain, the al-Saids of Oman, the al-Thanis of Qatar, the al-Sabahs of Kuwait, and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

In much of the world support for dictators was a product of the Cold War, a necessary evil in the global fight against communism. With the notable exception of support for the Shah of Iran, in the Middle East the situation was different. The aggressively secular Soviet Union was never a serious potential partner for the religious Gulf region. America's support for Arab dictators was for different reasons: assuring the free flow of oil; maintaining peace or stability with Israel; balancing against Iran; or because alternative leaders were thought to be worse. The US was unexpectedly forced to grapple with the classic American tension between the promotion of liberal values and its own self-interest when, on 17 December 2010, a Tunisian food vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi burned himself alive and set off protests around the Arab world.

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The Arab Spring (or, as it is known in Iran, “The Islamic Awakening”) had begun and the Obama administration had to decide if it would support the democratic aspirations of (many of) the protesters or back America’s long-time allies. Protests began in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Bahrain and the Administration decided against a “one-size fits all approach.”

Gaddafi had no intention of holding elections. He brutally suppressed protests in the Eastern city of Benghazi, killing over 100 unarmed protesters. France and the United Kingdom took the lead in an air operation designed to protect the protesters. Reluctant to get involved in another war in the Middle East, Obama pledged air support to the operation, what one of his officials described as “leading from behind” (Lizza 2011, par. 89). On 24 April 2011 the operation targeted Gaddafi directly and struck his Tripoli home, killing his son Saif al-Arab. Months later, Gaddafi would be dragged from a ditch and beaten to death by an angry mob. Gaddafi was never a close friend of the United States, but even longtime friends were not spared by the protest movement.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, in power since 1981, also cracked down on protesters. At first it appeared that the US would back its long-time friend, but on 31 January 2011 Obama sent retired diplomat Frank Wisner to tell Mubarak that Obama wanted him to step down. The Muslim Brotherhood’s Mohammed Morsi narrowly won Egypt’s first election in 2012. The US expressed support for Morsi, but when he started infringing on Egyptians’ freedoms, the people again took to the streets. On 3 July 2013 Field Marshal Abdel Fattah el-Sisi overthrew Morsi and established a military dictatorship in Egypt. This time the US remained quiet. The democratic experiment in Egypt had failed. Obama had pushed for elections in Egypt regardless of potential consequences just as Bush had eight years earlier when, on 9 January 2005, Hamas won the first and last elections held in the Gaza Strip.

The Syrian Civil War

The contagion spreading across the Middle East reached Syria on 15 March 2011. Anti-Assad riots broke out and it looked as though Assad might be caught up in the same wave that toppled leaders in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt; but Assad had no intention of going quietly. He benefited from both his own brutal crackdown and a highly fractured opposition. The United States had no plans to intervene directly.

However, in response to a chemical attack by Assad’s forces on 21 August 2013, ten days later Obama (2013, par. 5) gave a statement, “I have decided that the United States should take military action against Syrian regime targets.... I’m confident we can hold the Assad regime accountable for their use of chemical weapons, deter this kind of behavior, and degrade their capacity to carry it out.” The “red line” had been established. But on 11 April 2014 the Assad regime used chemical weapons again, and the US again did nothing. It was clear that despite Assad’s illegal use of chemical weapons, the Obama Administration would not intervene in Syria. Instead, it relied on an agreement negotiated by Assad ally Russian President Vladimir Putin to remove Assad’s chemical weapons.

Syria was the USSR’s only reliable friend in the Middle East and after the Cold War it remained a friend to Russia. Moscow’s sole military outpost in the Middle East was a small supply depot and naval base located in Tartus, on the Syrian coast. The Syrian Civil War provided an ideal opportunity for Putin, who saw the power vacuum created by America’s perceived withdrawal from the region. Putin intervened on behalf of Assad and took the opportunity to open a new permanent air base in Hmeimim, south-east of Latakia. And while the United States had planned to stay out of Syria, the rise of a new terrorist threat in the region drew America into Syria.

The “Islamic State”

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) began as “al-Qaeda in Iraq,” but was expelled from the al-Qaeda network for its brutality and for its targeting of other Muslims. It grew rapidly and took over large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria. By the end of 2014 ISIS controlled 34,000 square miles. This base of operations and ISIS’s skilled fighters and (stolen) American equipment put both America’s Kurdish allies, and the American-backed government in Iraq, at risk. Additionally, a series of brutal videos of ISIS members decapitating Westerners terrified the American public. The US decided it could not stand by while ISIS caused such damage and terrorized the local population. It reinserted special forces teams and advisors to assist the Kurds and the Iraqi Army in their fight against ISIS. In Syria, where Obama

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had long resisted American involvement, he now committed a small number of US special forces. In 2017 the new Administration increased the US presence in Syria to 2,000.

The Trump Administration and Saudi Arabia

Previous US administrations took different approaches to Middle East policy, yet they all operated within a common set of norms and accepted practices. Donald J. Trump's presidential campaign rhetoric and his actions in office marked a stark divergence from past precedent.

On the campaign trail, Trump articulated a mix of isolationist and hyper-aggressive policies. He opposed the Iraq War, but also thought that America's biggest mistake was not taking Iraq's oil. He supported the use of torture against terrorists and called for killing terrorists' families. He questioned the long-standing relationship with Saudi Arabia. Less than two weeks into his campaign, Trump tweeted, "Saudi Arabia should be paying the United States many billions of dollars for our defense of them. Without us, gone!" Not every policy was new; like almost every candidate before him, he vowed to move America's embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

As president, Trump has done things differently than his predecessors. On 20 May 2017 Trump arrived in Saudi Arabia for his first trip abroad since taking office. He was the first president since Jimmy Carter not to visit Mexico or Canada on his first foreign trip. After this visit to Riyadh, Trump struck a different tone vis-a-vis Saudi Arabia. Trump's newfound appreciation for all policies Saudi may be attributable to the close relationship between Trump's son-in-law and senior advisor, Jared Kushner, and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS).

MBS is a reformer. Sort of. He has allowed women to drive in the kingdom, but arrested the women's rights activists who lobbied for that right. He allowed the first cinema to open in more than 30 years on 17 April 2018 with a showing of Black Panther, but has his critics arrested. He has also pursued an aggressive foreign policy that drew in the US on multiple fronts.

In Yemen, MBS has overseen a proxy war with Iranian-backed Houthi rebels. This war has killed more than 10,000 and brought millions to the brink of starvation (Al-Mujahed and Raghavan 2018, par. 8). The US has backed the Saudis in the Yemen conflict. The Center for Strategic and International Studies reports that, "The majority of US assistance has consisted of aerial targeting assistance, intelligence sharing, and mid-flight aerial refueling for Saudi and UAE aircraft" (Dalton et al. 2018, par. 4). While there is little chance that American ground forces will enter Yemen, support for Saudi Arabia in Yemen has become increasingly controversial.

US support for Saudi Arabia is not a Trump innovation. On 14 March 2011 Saudi troops crossed the causeway into Bahrain to help suppress an uprising by the majority Shia population against the minority Sunni al-Khalifa rulers. The Obama Administration did not get directly involved, but expressed its support for the al-Khalifas. The Trump Administration went a step further by lifting human rights restrictions on arms sales to Bahrain.

Trump took support for Saudi Arabia to new heights in his support for Riyadh in the 2017 Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) crisis. The crisis began when hackers posted false, pro-Iran, statements by the Qatari Emir on the Qatar News Agency website. In response to these false statements, on 5 June 2017 Saudi Arabia announced a blockade of Qatar, which was soon joined by Bahrain, UAE, and Egypt. The next day Trump tweeted his support for the Saudis and implied that he accepted the Saudi position that Qatar supported terrorism, "So good to see the Saudi Arabia visit with the King and 50 countries already paying off. They said they would take a hard line on funding.... Perhaps this will be the beginning of the end to the horror of terrorism!" This statement took both the Qataris and the American defense establishment by surprise. Qatar's Al Udeid base is America's largest in the Middle East and Qatar and the US have extensive security cooperation. Al Udeid is critical to operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and the entire region. The Trump Administration's position has since moderated and it has expressed support for Qatar and an end to the crisis. Nevertheless, the crisis continued into its second year.

Trump Reverses Obama-era policies

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Trump has reversed a variety of Obama-era policies in the region. Obama's final decision on admitting refugees from the Syrian Civil War was to admit 110,000 of the 5.6 million who, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, have fled Syria since 2011. President Trump reduced the number to 0. Trump not only barred Syrian refugees from entering the United States, he barred all citizens of Iraq, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen from entering the US.

In another policy reversal, Trump announced that the US would withdraw from the JCPOA. The US intelligence community and the IAEA assessed that Iran had been in full compliance with the JCPOA. Nevertheless, Trump, having repeatedly called the JCPOA "the worst deal ever negotiated," decided to withdraw from the agreement (Delk 2018, par. 3). The full impact of that decision is not yet known. And in Israel, Trump formally moved the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

The US began the post-Cold War era in the Middle East in an enviable position. It had widespread public and elite support. The region had never been quiet, but the coalition against Saddam Hussein had united disparate actors and there was reason to hope for future cooperation. The United States had never been entirely absent from the Middle East, but 30 years of interventions and more than 17 years of war left both America and the Middle East with countless unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable, problems.

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About the author:

Jonathan Cristol is a Research Fellow at the Levermore Global Scholars Program, Adelphi University (NY) and Senior Fellow at the Center for Civic Engagement, Bard College (NY), USA.