

# Dynamics of Middle East Peace Process in the Era of US Hegemony

1950-2000

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This article begins with the observation that the us has over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, exerted an unrivalled influence on international affairs. In exerting this influence, which is manifested within various dimensions (military, economic and technological), successive American administrations were able to pursue and consolidate their own interests at the international level of governance. In this respect, it is telling that both advocates and critics of American power agree upon the extent and ultimate goal of American power. In this work, I will further elaborate on this theme of American hegemony, with specific reference to the Arab-Israeli conflict. I argue that American power permeates nearly every aspect of the established peace processes.

*Keywords: Arab-Israel Peace Process, us hegemony, us influence Middle East*

## Introduction and Background

The us's role in the Middle East has substantially increased in recent years. This is reflected in a number of ways, particularly in the role the us has played in establishing the basis for the Arab-Israeli peace process. In this instance, us hegemony appears almost as the underpinning foundation or grounding principle. Although it is important



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to recognise the limitations of us power,<sup>1</sup> in the Middle East it appears almost as a form of galvanisation, a coat that protects domestic or regional units of government from the harsh abrasions of contemporary Middle Eastern politics. The us military is currently based in six Middle Eastern states, including Saudi Arabia (the wealthiest), Egypt (the most populous) and Israel (the most powerful militarily). Given the sheer scope of its influence, it is unsurprising that the us government has dedicated so much time and effort to the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>2</sup>

While the exertion of us power may produce a number of common benefits, it is clear that this power is not disinterested and that, to a substantial extent, it protects and furthers America's regional interests. Yet, even this power has its limits; peace is not currently on the agenda in the Middle East. The best prospect at present is the management or temporary suspension of violent hostilities. In addition, popular distrust of American motives and intentions continues to present a substantial obstacle to American goals and objectives in the region.<sup>3</sup>

Although my predominant emphasis is on American power, I will also examine the Cold War struggle between the us and the Soviet Union. This confrontation was particularly important for the Middle East, primarily because the superpowers heavily influenced this region. These external powers both created political realities and sought to co-opt local realities for their own ends and purposes. Political interactions tended to closely resemble patron-client relationships.

During the Cold War, successive American administrations retained a close and abiding interest Middle East affairs—American oil interests being the paramount consideration and priority. Various American presidents, such as Eisenhower, explicitly voiced the concern that political turbulence in the region would adversely impact the American economy, whether in the form of higher oil prices or supply disruptions. Oil would subsequently emerge as a major priority and determinant of us regional policy.

In the contemporary era, it is clear that the us has had an unrivalled opportunity to impose its own strategic and political priorities on the region.<sup>4</sup> This control has not conformed to the practices and structures of an empire, but has instead utilized subtler mechanisms and techniques. This cannot be said to be a purely military form of power, but also a political and economic one; to an equivalent extent, it cannot be said to correspond to direct domination or control. us power in

the region is hinged upon the understanding that force cannot provide a sufficient justification in and of itself; force, in other words, provides an insufficient basis upon which US power can be legitimised.<sup>5</sup>

Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, various US-sponsored peace initiatives (Camp David, Oslo I, and Oslo II),<sup>6</sup> inextricably linked American interests to a frequently elusive 'peace.' From my perspective, the most interesting element of this is not the success (or lack thereof) of these efforts, but rather the American superpower's frequently evidenced ability to switch between different peace initiatives. Repeated failure has led to neither disengagement nor disinterest, but rather renewed impetus and momentum.<sup>7</sup>

### The Effect of Economics on the Peace Process

In order to comprehend the various ways in which US power has influenced the Middle Eastern peace process, it is first necessary to examine the world order, which was in place during the Cold War. Broadly speaking, and with the partial exception of the nonaligned movement,<sup>8</sup> this order could be categorised as bipolar. This arrangement originated with the Yalta Conference of 1945, which established a pattern of political relations that would last for the next 45 years. While this stalemate did not establish peaceful relations, it did provide the basis for relative and partial stability.

The reason this stability was only partial was that it forestalled direct hostilities between the two superpowers; it did not prevent—in fact, it actively encouraged—a state of affairs in which these mutual hostilities were projected onto the Third World. In various contexts across the globe, indirect superpower competition assumed ideological,<sup>9</sup> cultural, economic and military dimensions. The developing world appeared almost as small pegs, trapped within the small gap that divided the two encompassing world-views. In subsequently pursuing their respective ideological and geopolitical ends, the US and the Soviet Union reconfigured regional alignments of power and fought proxy wars.

As a country that had positioned itself in direct opposition to colonialism, the US was well placed to benefit from the collapse of European empires in the aftermath of WW2. Former colonial powers became dependent on US support and assistance, a development that the Marshall Plan (1948) vividly underlined. After WW2, the international liberal order became inextricably intertwined with, and indeed inseparable from, the Cold War.

arable from, us power. This power assumed a number of dimensions: political, economic and ideological. In this last respect, the us utilised human rights and democratic discourse in order to present itself as the defender of the free world. This freedom was not articulated within the vernacular of national struggle and independence, but rather presented itself in the form of capitalism and open economic systems. In a very specific and particular sense, the us therefore emerged as the defender of the free world.<sup>10</sup>

Observers inevitably drew attention to the fact that this 'freedom' was inextricably interwoven with the interests and priorities of the American state. The difference between the former colonial masters and their American successor was essentially a difference of degree rather than of kind; the Americans could be said to be taking over from where their predecessors left off.<sup>11</sup> In further underlining this point, Thompson observes that the 'liberation' of independent states served as a means through which American power was consolidated. To put it slightly differently, 'containment' of the Soviet threat furthered America's thinly concealed desire for political and economic hegemony.

For historical and political reasons, Americans have tried to keep their influence in the region from appearing colonial; consequently, it must present peace and the spread of democratic ideals as its intention. In this understanding, long-term Middle East stability and the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are inextricably linked.<sup>12</sup> However, it is understood that the two are far from co-terminus. One analyst suggests that 'stability' is merely a code word, attuned to the ears of foreign investors and global managers.

The Middle East holds particular importance by virtue of its oil resources, which are both economically and politically significant. It is not merely that American influence over these resources is an integral component of American power; rather, it is that this influence simultaneously prevents challenges to American hegemony from emerging and consolidating. In the post-ww2 era, us policymakers viewed the Middle East both as a source of power and as a material prize. Economists have observed that the largest consumer of a collective must take the lead in organising production, or it is unlikely others will make any attempt to produce goods. By extended analogy, if the us wishes to attain global access, it must maintain political peace, especially in the Middle East, since a significant portion of the world's wealth is found there. However, while the us is the most powerful military state and

can police political agreements, this interference is liable to damage its domestic economy.<sup>13</sup>

In the decades after ww2, the interrelation of the economic and political aspects of America's geopolitical strategy would become still more pronounced.<sup>14</sup> Paul Kennedy stressed this essential interrelation—in his view, military power must be supported by wealth and established wealthy interests require power in order to obtain and secure wealth. This necessitates a parsimonious balancing of possession and means, as an imbalance in favour of the latter will conceivably diminish the former (the military-industrial complex serves as a clear example). Systemic imperatives necessitate that state planners must remain alert to the dangers of over-extension and the need to manage critical resources, which lie beyond immediate territorial borders.<sup>15</sup> Noam Chomsky has consistently emphasised the role which elite economic interests play within America's foreign policy. In his view, the congruence of interest between America's political and economic elite established the basis for a world order which would further their shared interests and priorities.<sup>16</sup>

The contradiction between liberal ideology and the imperatives of a rapacious economic system would be starkly evidenced in the years following ww2. The spread of us hegemony clashed openly with the political and economic priorities of newly independent states. In other respects, as revisionist accounts of the Cold War so clearly convey, liberal ideology became a powerful tool through which the us promoted its own economic and political interests. The Cold War was an essential accompaniment to, and even condition for, the spread of American power and influence.<sup>17</sup> This hegemonic liberalism essentially corresponds to the set of political and economic arrangements that emerged in the aftermath of ww2. The us assumed the role of guarantor of political and economic stability, upon the understanding that it would be accorded a certain unquestioned privilege.

## The Intertwining of Peace and Trade

The us's status as a superpower was reinforced by the collapse of the USSR. Its hegemony over the Middle East can be traced to the reluctance of other international powers to directly challenge its pre-eminence. us pre-eminence may also be attributed to a set of tacit under-

standings between different international actors –in some cases, the us will demur to Chinese or Russian interests.

In taking the lead in Arab-Israeli negotiations, the American government has historically promoted the principle of 'land for peace'. The 1979 peace agreement between Israel and Egypt was understood to enshrine this principle and to provide a basis for a consensus among moderate Arab states. Nevertheless, critical American observers have argued that existing peace agreements ultimately militate against the prospect of a more comprehensive settlement.<sup>18</sup>

In the absence of political agreement, the us has established a range of economic and trade relations with pro-us Middle Eastern states. The establishment of these relations can be traced back to the broadly neo-liberal premise that heightened levels of economic interdependence and interaction will establish the basis for a more lasting peace in the Middle East. Trade brings about cultural exchange, political dialogue and diplomatic exchange.<sup>19</sup>

The us trade representative has openly stated that trade and economic liberalisation at every level is the ultimate aim of the us government. This viewpoint enjoys broad support among the political elite of many Middle Eastern states, although there is a clear concern with regard to American hegemony. Among the general Arab public, the promotion of neo-liberalism is liable to be viewed as culturally incompatible and a front for us interests. Under us plans, the 'New Middle East' (in reality the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) countries) will become a competitive economic power.<sup>20</sup> Over the past four decades, us commercial interests in the Middle East have steadily grown.

The United States is among the top five trading partners of each GCC country. More than 700 us-affiliated companies operate in the region and employ more than 16,000 Americans.<sup>21</sup> Private sector investments by us companies in these countries account for half of the total world investments in the region. Oil-producing nations, which require capital items for ambitious development strategies, also import from the us.<sup>22</sup>

At the crossroads between Europe, Asia and Africa, the Middle East is rapidly becoming a mega market, with the potential to embrace more than one billion people. Middle Eastern countries have provided substantial investment capital to both the private and the public sectors of the us and other industrial economies for almost twenty years.

The gcc has played a key role in supporting the us dollar. In addition, it has also invested billions of dollars in us treasury securities; this has facilitated a low and stable us interest rate.

The use of trade in the service of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process has been conspicuously less successful. In 1995, President Clinton sought to bring about heightened levels of economic interaction between each of the key protagonists. He proposed to expand the existing Free Trade Agreement between the United States and Israel, and to expand the agreement to include the Palestinian territories, Jordan and Egypt. Clinton's attempts to coerce the respective partners and Congress into agreeing to this proposal ultimately proved to be unsuccessful. Clinton enjoyed more success in bringing about the Qualifying Industrial Zones, which were introduced in 1996.<sup>23</sup>

### Oil in Peace Process Mobilisation: The Role of the US

The 1859 discovery that oil could function as an energy source marked the beginning of a new era, both in America (where the discovery was made) and worldwide. The exploitation of oil soon became a prerequisite for large-scale industrialisation and modernisation. In the contemporary world, oil from the Persian Gulf provides a large market for various crucial sectors of industrialised economies, including construction, engineering and military equipment sales. The use of oil has opened up hitherto unknown dimensions of strategy on the ground, in the air and under the sea. Therefore, oil shortages have become threats to national or international security and countries with oil production capabilities assume pre-eminent economic, political and strategic importance.<sup>24</sup>

In the aftermath of ww1, the British and the French governments divided the Middle East in accordance with their own interests. During the interwar period, the British and American governments frequently found themselves in direct competition for petroleum resources<sup>25</sup>—strenuous efforts were made to secure key oil resources, contain Soviet influence and ensure the free flow of oil.<sup>26</sup> By the beginning of ww2, the us government had gained concession from its British counterpart on petroleum interests in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Iraq. The release of Saudi oil was the most important of these concessions. The first agreement between the American firms, which were subsequently to become known as ARAMCO, (Arabian-American Oil Company), and

Saudi Arabia occurred between 1933 and 1935. An American official in the region was quick to acknowledge the potential strategic significance of this concession.<sup>27</sup>

After 1948, the surge of petroleum supplies would, in the imagination of American policy planners, take second place to Israel's security needs. The essential reasoning behind this prioritisation was not difficult to grasp—petroleum shortages have the potential to undermine both international and domestic security.<sup>28</sup> It was during this same period that the oil reserves of the Gulf states contributed to a political re-evaluation. The political implications reverberate to this day in Cantore's observation that: 'Gulf oil, as well as the security of allied states are the focal point of United States policy.'<sup>29</sup>

The post-ww2 reconstruction of Europe placed substantial demands upon Middle Eastern oil reserves. In the aftermath of ww2, us strategy in the region became increasingly focused upon threats to this supply. This was clearly illustrated in 1953, when the CIA executed a plan to remove Mohammad Mossadegh, the Iranian nationalist leader. The us attempt to balance Arab political opinion and the needs of its Israeli client state became increasingly difficult following the Suez Canal Crisis of 1956, when the Arab nationalist movement became a pronounced obstacle to us control over regional oil resources.<sup>30</sup>

The post-ww2 reconstruction of Europe placed substantial demands on Middle Eastern oil reserves, and further underlined the level of us dependence on foreign oil supplies. By the time of the 1973 oil crisis, imports made up more than one-third of domestic requirements (35 per cent). At the same time, internal oil production was nearing peak capacity.<sup>31</sup> Within two weeks of the outbreak of the 1973 Yom Kippur war, the Saudi government imposed an embargo on oil supplies to the Netherlands and the us, an action that was taken in protest against continued us support for Israel. This initial action was followed, in September of the same year, by a 25 per cent reduction of the pre-war production rate. Arab members of OPEC made it clear that the embargo would be removed when Israel withdrew from occupied territories.<sup>32</sup>

The oil shortage focused attention on the vulnerability of supply and played a key role in transforming oil supply into a key American interest.<sup>33</sup> After the crisis, oil also assumed a heightened political significance for the Saudis. Prior to 1973, King Faisal, the Saudi monarch, had been reluctant to utilise oil in this manner. However, the policy immediately bore fruit, with Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy resulting in

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a disengagement agreement between Israel and Syria. President Carter's attempt to establish peace between Egypt and Israel was also a response to the oil threat (although it should be noted that the Camp David Accords were far from unanimously accepted by most Arab states).<sup>34</sup> In obvious contrast, the Nixon administration considered the direct seizure of key oil fields.

The result of the following embargo and shortages was a significant rise in prices, which created a lengthy recession in the West. It was also the end of the Saudi practice of distinguishing between oil decisions and political issues. Perhaps perversely, the 1973 crisis ultimately proved to be beneficial to national interest: Foreign exchange reserves or 'petrodollars' were subsequently invested in the us economy. As a consequence of foreign investment, oil producers acquired a vested interest in ensuring the integrity of the major industrial economies.<sup>35</sup> The Saudis and other major oil producers came to realise that artificially elevated prices injure the long-term competitiveness of oil as an energy resource. This point is further reiterated by the fact that the Saudis increased oil production in the summer of 1979 (in response to decreases in Iranian output), the autumn of 1980 (in response to the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war) and in 1991 (in response to the first Gulf War).

The integrity of Persian Gulf oil supplies would subsequently re-emerge as a key strategic priority for the us. This was epitomised by the Carter Doctrine of 1980, which explicitly declared America's willingness to use force in defence of its regional interests<sup>36</sup> (something, which the 1991 Gulf War would well-illustrate). Carter emphasised this commitment by establishing a rapid deployment force. The subsequent development of CENTCOM (The United States Central Command) enabled the us to further consolidate its existing ties. These ties were to be particularly useful in the management of regional hostilities (such as the 'Tanker Wars') and external subversion (whether Russian or Iranian).

During this period, Joseph L Lieberman, the prominent us senator, explained that the us had multiple reasons for ensuring regional stability—and economic motivation was at the forefront.<sup>37</sup> The major challenge for the us in this respect is that key regional goals (free access to oil and the commitment to Israel's security) are frequently opposed; it is not difficult to identify instances in which the two directly

contradict each other. This is the inevitable conclusion of the perpetual failure of the peace process.

## The Influence of Oil on Political Decision-Making

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Political and social unrest in the region continues to exert a negative impact on international energy markets and oil prices. A number of the world's largest oil and gas facilities (both production and export) are currently based in the Middle East. Approximately 40 per cent of oil trades and 20 per cent of natural gas exports come from the region.

In the Arab oil monarchies, such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, state formation took place under Western patronage in small and immobilised tribal societies. The main contemporary threat to these regimes comes from the emergent middle classes. Historically, the political vulnerability of these regimes has been contained by traditional (patriarchal and Islamic) sources of legitimacy. By the mid-1970s a further stage in the state-building process, which penetrated all levels of society, had occurred: the establishment of bureaucratic structures, modern forms of communication and forms of political association (including political parties). The impetus had been the threat of war, the explosion in oil revenues and superpower support. More recently, the broad distribution of oil-financed benefits and the instrumental adaptation of local identity<sup>38</sup> have played an essential role in co-opting the middle classes and preventing the emergence of oppositional mass movements. At the regional level of governance, Western power and influence has played an essential role in maintaining state security.

The subsequent over-development of the Gulf state, epitomised by the funnelling of economic resources into unproductive military expenditure, imposed further economic constraints and impediments. These domestic ripples were further exacerbated by US intrusion during the post-Gulf War era. This exemplifies the subtle interplay between internal and external influences, an interplay that local actors must continually take into account and adapt to the same extent; it helps to explain why the "domestic" security of states such as Saudi Arabia has become so reliant upon external actors and agencies.<sup>39</sup>

As a major source of oil and natural gas production, the Middle East is vital to global energy markets. Current regional unrest has shut down some energy production and raised uncertainties about future supply

from the region. Some regional producers are seeking to reassure global energy markets, amid fears that unrest could spread to major producers or disrupt regional commerce. A disruption in any one part of the market affects oil prices everywhere, regardless of its production or consumption site. Although natural gas markets are similarly affected, they are not as significant as oil markets. At present, Europe is being impacted to the greatest extent by events in the Middle East.<sup>40</sup>

It is frequently argued that the us should be more forceful in imposing a solution and that its main constraint in this respect is its special relationship with Israel. Other factors include the autonomy of local agents and the fact that low intensity conflict does not, in the absence of an escalation to regional conflict, present a clear or obvious threat to us national interests. In this respect, the us does not have an obvious preference with regard to the final settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Borders, identity and the refugee issue are only pressing priorities for those who inhabit the region. For this reason, there is an obvious difference in the factors that will feature in the cost-benefit analyses of local and external agents.<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has shown the political implications that derive from us hegemony. The us is, in the absence of countervailing challengers, firmly entrenched as the predominant international power. In the aftermath of ww2, the us was able to make pronounced changes and adjustments to its own economic, political and strategic priorities. In the course of this essay, I have shown oil to be a political resource as well as an economic one. The hegemonic position of the us has allowed the nation to further extend its influence through the inauguration of various peace initiatives. The Israeli-Arab and Israeli-Palestinian peace processes can be seen as sub-sets of this established hegemonic system.

The exertion of American power within the region has frequently given rise to countervailing political responses, which seek to limit or curtail American influence (any analysis of the emergence and development of political Islam must take one example, first acknowledge the spread of American cultural and economic values). A further set of complications and tensions clearly derive from America's two main strategic regional priorities – namely the support of Israel and unhindered oil supplies.

However it is also clear that a regional peace settlement can only be achieved through American influence - this explains why both regional and international actors look to America to take the initiative on this front. Far from fulfilling this expectation, internal tensions and contradictions within American strategy more frequently rise to a clear paradox: peace as war; war as peace. As I have sought to illustrate, if we are to begin to engage with this paradox in its full significance, then we must first acknowledge the unique character of the US-Israel relationship; a relationship which has almost no contemporary or historical analogies, save perhaps that of Sparta being cast in the service of Rome.

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## Notes

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