

## Part III: U.S. Policy in the Middle East in the Twenty-First Century

Today, the United States faces different questions in the Middle East than it did during and just after the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the new status of the United States as the primary superpower in the world did not eliminate U.S. security concerns. Instead, the nature of these concerns changed, leading to shifts in how the United States weighs national priorities and frames its foreign policy.

This section discusses U.S. policy in the Middle East in the twenty-first century. It examines factors that have shaped this policy—including the threat of terrorism, Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism, a series of popular uprisings, and the continued demand for oil. As you read, consider which motivations and principles that guide U.S. involvement in the Middle East have shifted and which have remained consistent over time.

### The Bush Administration's Policy After September 11, 2001

A new era of U.S. foreign policy began on September 11, 2001. Members of the terrorist group al Qaeda attacked the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., killing nearly three thousand people. The attackers, most of whom were from Saudi Arabia, were followers of the al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, who was based in Afghanistan. Organizers of the attacks cited the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia, U.S. support for Israel, and economic sanctions on Iraq as motivations for the attacks.

***“We fight because we are free men who don’t sleep under oppression. We want to restore freedom to our nation; just as you lay waste to our***



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The towers of the World Trade center burn after being attacked by terrorists on September 11, 2001. The attacks profoundly affected the course of U.S. policy.

*nation, so shall we lay waste to yours."*

—Osama bin Laden, in a videotaped speech, November 2004

***"The 15 terrorists who took part in the 9/11 attacks do not represent a broad sampling of Saudis by any stretch. In addition to inflicting unbearable pain and suffering on thousands of Americans, they also brought shame to thousands of Saudis who consider the US their second home, and to millions of their countrymen back in the Kingdom."***

—Fahad Nazer, a Saudi national living in the United States, in *Al Monitor*, April 25, 2013

The attacks have shaped U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. Before September 11, 2001, the United States had cut defense spending, withdrawn U.S. troops from overseas bases, and reduced foreign aid spending. After September 11, the United States went to war in Afghanistan and Iraq, reframing its role in the Middle East—and in the world.

In January 2002, President George W. Bush (2001-2009) laid out new goals for a "global war on terrorism." The Bush administration presented the U.S. response as a struggle to prevent terrorists all around the world from threatening global stability.

The administration's focus broadened from terrorist groups themselves to countries that supported terrorist groups. In October 2001, the United States began a military campaign in Afghanistan against al Qaeda and the Taliban, Afghanistan's extreme Islamic government that supported al Qaeda. U.S. military intervention soon expanded to include countries without direct ties to al Qaeda or the September 11 attacks. U.S. involvement in Iraq provides a clear example of how this "global war on terrorism" shaped U.S. policy beyond any direct response to September 11.

After September 11, Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism increased among the U.S. public. Many in the United States supported anti-Muslim policies. People have felt the impact of this racism in many ways. Muslims, and people perceived to be Muslim, are increasingly victims of hate crimes in the United States and throughout the world.

### ***Why did Iraq become a focus of U.S. foreign policy after September 11?***

Iraq had been on the list of U.S. national security concerns since the 1990s. As part of the Gulf War cease-fire agreement, the UN conducted regular inspections of Iraq to prevent the production of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons—known as "weapons of mass destruction" (WMD).

In 2002, the Bush administration claimed that Iraq had WMD and that the Iraqi govern-

## **Muslim Extremists**

Osama bin Laden, leader of the terrorist group al Qaeda, used his extreme and intolerant interpretation of Islam to justify attacks against the United States. Some other terrorist organizations also use extremist understandings of Islam to defend their actions. For many around the world, this has raised concerns about Islam itself. Some people wonder whether there are justifications for terrorism within Islam, while others have a perception of Islam as a violent and fanatical faith. In fact, the majority of Muslims in the United States and around the world strongly disapprove of extremists and are concerned that their religion is wrongly associated with extremist beliefs.

Like all religions, Islam is subject to interpretation. Most interpretations of Islamic tradition note a history of tolerance and peace. Throughout history, Muslims have lived peacefully with followers of other religions. Since September 11, 2001, numerous important Islamic clerics from different countries and branches of Islam have strongly condemned extremists' acts of violence.

ment was supporting al Qaeda—thus posing a direct threat to the United States and its allies. The UN conducted weapons inspections in 2002 and found no signs of WMD. The Bush administration questioned the effectiveness of the inspections.

The Bush administration argued that the United States should use its military to promote U.S. values and interests abroad. It claimed that overthrowing Saddam Hussein's regime would bring democracy, capitalism, human rights, and an end to terrorism.

### ***What led up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003?***

There was strong opposition within the United States to the Bush administration's stance on Iraq. Some critics did not believe that Iraq possessed WMD or supported al Qaeda. They argued that the U.S. government

had focused on these factors in order to gain support for a war that was actually about controlling Iraq's oil reserves and asserting U.S. power in the Middle East.

Some argued that the decision to go to war in a less powerful country in the name of protecting U.S. security and spreading U.S. values was racist because it ignored the needs, ideas, and backgrounds of the people living there. Other opponents worried about the costs of war, in dollars and lives.

Despite opposition, in March 2003, the U.S. Congress authorized the use of military force in Iraq. Although the UN Security Council refused to authorize a war, Bush ordered the U.S. military to invade. Forces bombed and invaded Iraq, toppling Saddam Hussein's government. An intensive search for WMD began, but no conclusive evidence of WMD or direct links to al Qaeda were found. The main



Public Domain, Jeffrey Wolfe, U.S. Army.

Iraqi women carry water, 2004. U.S. troops were in Iraq between 2003 and 2011 and were a constant presence in the lives of Iraqis. U.S. military forces withdrew in December 2011. Several thousand U.S. military personnel returned in 2014 to help the Iraqi army combat the terrorist group ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria).

argument the Bush administration had used to justify the war turned out to be false.

***What were the consequences of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq?***

Although the Bush administration claimed that the U.S. campaign in Iraq would lead to security and stability, the U.S. presence contributed to long-term violence and instability. By the summer of 2003, opposition to coalition forces had grown into an insurgency (military resistance movement) of local and foreign groups fighting against the U.S. presence in Iraq. These groups also fought each other, vying for power and often targeting civilians.

Tensions between Shi'i and Sunni Muslims, which Saddam Hussein had fostered during his reign, intensified after the invasion. U.S. policies disproportionately punished Sunni Arabs who had formerly been employed by Hussein's government. Sunni Arab militants engaged in violence not only against U.S. forces, but also against the new Iraqi government, which they felt excluded them from power. Many Shi'i Arabs viewed this violence as a continuation of Saddam Hussein's repressive tactics.

The insurgency included extremist groups that saw the fight against U.S. forces in Iraq as part of a broader struggle against U.S. influence in the Middle East. One of these groups was al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), a group that developed after the U.S. invasion. (There was no al Qaeda presence in Iraq before the U.S. invasion.) AQI used violence against U.S. forces and Iraqi Shi'i civilians in an attempt to stoke civil unrest and drive the United States out of Iraq. AQI's violent tactics concerned many Iraqis, and some Sunni insurgent groups aligned with U.S. forces to fight AQI.

U.S. troops remained in Iraq for eight years after the invasion. The war and occupation devastated Iraqi society. Estimates range from one hundred thousand Iraqi deaths to over one million. Almost one in five Iraqis—over five million people—fled their homes after the invasion, often due to violence, unemployment, and insecurity. The war also worsened

the state of Iraq's economy, infrastructure, and ability to provide basic services to its people.

The costs of the war to the United States have also been high. The United States spent at least \$700 billion in Iraq. Nearly 4,500 U.S. soldiers died, and over 32,000 were wounded. Many soldiers who returned from the war have suffered serious psychological effects.

Internationally, the Iraq War was unpopular. It strained relationships between the United States and many of its allies. U.S. claims of promoting democracy in Iraq were met with skepticism, and the prolonged military occupation contributed to a rise in anti-American sentiment across the Middle East and the world.

***“America didn’t come all this way to end a dictatorship and leave. There are many financial and political interests at stake.”***

—Rassam Al-Mawaani, a leader in a movement of Iraqi Shi'a and other refugees in Syria, December 2008

***“Look at what America is doing in Iraq. America is using democracy as a mask to colonize Muslim lands and to steal our oil.”***

—Hazem Salem, Egyptian human rights activist, October 2006

***How did the Iraq War contribute to the threat of terrorism today?***

The presence of U.S. troops in Iraq became a powerful recruiting tool for terrorist groups seeking to harm the United States. After U.S. forces withdrew from Iraq in 2011, the violent extremist group AQI grew in strength. In 2012, AQI adopted a new name, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). ISIS aims to establish a caliphate (a medieval term for Islamic state) across Iraq and Syria. It follows an extreme and intolerant interpretation of Sunni Islam. ISIS has used violence and fear to target Shi'i Muslims and members of other religious groups. ISIS has also claimed responsibility for a number of terrorist attacks in Europe, the Middle East, and the United States.

## The Kurds

Kurds are members of an ethnic group who live primarily in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Armenia, and Syria. Throughout the Middle East, Kurds have historically faced discrimination from their governments. From the twentieth century until today, many Kurds have demanded greater rights and autonomy—and in some places, independence. But the experiences of Kurds vary from country to country. For example, in Turkey, Kurdish efforts to form an independent state met a harsh crackdown from the Turkish government, sparking a civil war that has claimed over forty thousand lives since the 1980s. Today, many Kurds in Turkey no longer seek independence, but want greater rights and political control within the borders of Turkey.

Kurds in Iraq, after suffering a genocide, ethnic cleansing, and repression at the hands of Saddam Hussein's government, gained a greater role in the new Iraqi government that formed after the 2003 U.S. invasion. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) controls a region of northern Iraq commonly known as Iraqi Kurdistan. It has its own military and largely governs itself separate from the federal government in Baghdad. In recent years, Iraqi Kurds have expanded oil production and built a pipeline to Turkey to export oil without the approval of the Iraqi federal government. This has increased tension between Kurdish officials and the Iraqi government.

U.S. officials and members of the Iraqi federal government want Kurdistan to remain part of a unified Iraq. But on September 25, 2017, 92 percent of the Kurds in Iraq voted for independence in a vote that has been condemned by Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria. Each of these countries—which have significant populations of Kurds—is reluctant to allow Kurds to establish an independent state.

In 2014, ISIS took control of a large portion of northern Iraq and eastern Syria and threatened to conquer more territory. The U.S.-trained Iraqi army failed to stop ISIS's advance. President Obama, who had sharply criticized the U.S. war in Iraq in 2003, sent U.S. military personnel back to Iraq to support the Iraqi army against ISIS. These forces remained as of 2017. President Donald Trump (2017- ) promised to defeat ISIS and continue Obama's policy of airstrikes against the group.

Many people around the world believe that the violence in Iraq since the U.S. invasion is worse than it was during Saddam Hussein's rule. Some argue that the U.S. response to the threat of terrorism led to the expansion of this very threat. Terrorism continues to dominate U.S. security concerns today, as U.S. policymakers have also confronted new challenges in the region.

## The Arab Spring Uprisings

In December 2010, protests began against the autocratic government in the North African country of Tunisia. Hundreds of thousands of Tunisians took to the streets demanding an end to authoritarian rule. They called for democracy, an end to corruption, and greater economic opportunity. During the following months, protests spread to more than a dozen countries in the region and became known as the Arab Spring.

Across different countries, the Arab Spring protesters made similar demands—emphasizing democratic government, human dignity,

***“As promised, I directed the Department of Defense to develop a plan to demolish and destroy ISIS—a network of lawless savages that have slaughtered Muslims and Christians, and men, women and children of all faiths and all beliefs. We will work with our allies, including our friends and allies in the Muslim World, to extinguish this vile enemy from our planet....”***

—President Donald Trump,  
February 28, 2017

and a fair distribution of resources. These demands reflected issues that had concerned people in the Middle East for decades. The demonstrations were organized largely by young people. Activists mobilized opposition networks that had been building in their countries for years and took advantage of social media to spread information.

***“If they are trying to scare us, they are wrong. We will continue. Let them come and burn the whole square, we will not leave.”***

—A protester in what demonstrators called “Change Square,” in the Yemeni capital Sanaa, 2013

Protests took different forms in each country and had varied results. Some led to changes in government, while others led to civil war. The political upheaval impacted societies in the region differently, with instability and violence afflicting certain countries more than others.

In addition to affecting countries across the Middle East, the Arab Spring and its complex aftermath led the United States to reassess its role in the region. Policymakers confronted and continue to grapple with major questions about what role, if any, the United States should play in political transitions in the Middle East. The U.S. responses to the uprisings varied, based on how policymakers saw U.S. interests and values at play in each country.

### ***What issues have the Arab Spring revolutions raised for U.S. policymakers?***

The Arab Spring revolutions were not brief moments of political change. They grew out of long-standing tensions, opened up a variety of possibilities, and resulted in complex dilemmas. As policymakers and everyday people have confronted these complexities, some key issues have emerged.

**Political Islam:** One source of uncertainty is the role of political Islam in governments

in the region. Political Islam uses politics to promote Islam as a basis for the laws and organization of society. It has become increasingly popular in the Middle East since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Movements of political Islam have often grown in areas where people have lost trust in their governments. Corruption, mismanagement, and reliance on foreign powers—legacies of colonial rule—weaken popular faith in existing governments. In many cases, this leads people to believe that political Islam presents the best solutions.

While Islam is a unifying force in many Middle Eastern countries, not all Muslims in the region believe that Islam should be the basis of politics. It is also important to understand that Islamist movements vary from country to country and emphasize a range of beliefs. Some movements of political Islam support violence as a means to achieving their goals, but many do not. Some seek a government led by strict religious leaders, as in Iran, while others believe that Islamic groups will push for a more democratic society.

In general, the United States has regarded political Islam as a threat to U.S. interests because some movements take an anti-U.S. stance. Terror attacks by extremist groups have added to anxiety within the United States about political Islam, increasing the spread of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism. Some scholars and policymakers suggest that, since the end of the Cold War, Islamophobia has replaced communism as the main “security threat” that has motivated U.S. policy. President Obama attempted to foster a more complex understanding of Islam within the United States, emphasizing that democratic and Islamic values intersect.

***“I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap and share common principles—***

*principles of justice and progress;  
tolerance and dignity of all human  
beings.”*

—President Barack Obama, in a speech,  
Egypt, June 4, 2009

Political Islam’s role in the evolution of politics in the Middle East is an ongoing question, within and beyond the Arab world.

**Human Rights:** Since the Arab uprisings, U.S. policymakers have faced new questions about how to respond to human rights abuses in the Middle East. The United States has historically struggled to address human rights abuses in the Middle East while also protecting U.S. economic and security interests. In recent years, this struggle has intensified in

countries whose governments have committed serious human rights violations as a way to maintain power after popular uprisings.

*“And the entire time they were beating me, they kept saying: ‘You want freedom? Here’s your freedom!’ Every time they said freedom, they kicked or punched harder.... They started saying if I did not talk, they would rape me.”*

—Nada, a Syrian activist describing her June 14, 2012 torture by government forces in the 2016 book *The Morning They Came for Us: Dispatches from Syria*

Leaders of many Middle Eastern countries continue to suppress the media, torture those



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Protesters in Yemen, August 2011. In 2011, Yemenis began to protest their government. At the time that the protests erupted, Yemen was ruled by Ali Abdullah Saleh for over thirty years. Saleh was known for corruption and human rights violations. Thousands of Yemenis protested with different goals and demands—including an end to economic hardship and government corruption. In November 2011, Saleh agreed to step down. But, tensions in the country intensified, eventually leading to a civil war that has drawn in neighboring countries and other world powers (including the United States) since 2015.

accused of speaking out against the government, and administer violent or unfair punishments. For instance, the Saudi Arabian government faces international criticism for violently punishing activists. Critics of U.S. policy point out that the United States continues to cooperate with repressive regimes like the Saudi monarchy, despite claims to promote democratic values.

***“We strongly believe, especially after the establishment of the broad popular protest movements that began with the Arab Spring...that there is a deep connection between security and stability in the entire region and the protection of human rights of all its citizens without any exception. You cannot separate them, as recent history has proved many times.”***

—An open-letter to Barack Obama from twenty-six Middle Eastern and North African activists, April 2016

The ways the United States has responded to events in the Middle East, including the Arab Spring revolutions, highlight tensions between the values and interests at the heart of U.S. policy in the region. On the one hand, many U.S. officials frame U.S. involvement in the Middle East in terms of promoting democracy and human rights. At the same time, the United States has forged alliances with leaders who promise to protect U.S. interests, even if these leaders rule in unjust, undemocratic ways.



Syrian refugees attempt to board a train at a train station in Budapest, Hungary, September 3, 2015. Since the Arab Spring uprisings in Syria and the outbreak of a civil war, millions of Syrians have been displaced. Some are displaced internally, and others have left the country as refugees.

Public Domain, Freedom House.

***“We only come out to demand legitimate rights, and they call us terrorists. They are afraid of the truth. They don’t want people to speak. They want people to be like sheep.”***

—Ebtisam al-Labad, a Saudi activist whose brother was killed by Saudi government forces, reflecting on her brother’s death as quoted in the *Independent*, October 24, 2012

**Factional Violence:** In some countries, the upheaval of the Arab Spring has led to violence among opposition groups vying for power. (A faction is a group within a larger population, and factional conflicts can arise between different groups.) The Arab Spring uprisings created political space for factions to compete more directly. But, the divisions at

the root of this violence trace back to a century earlier, when the British and French drew new borders to serve their imperial interests after World War I. Since independence, the Arab leaders of these states have had to deal with the consequences of borders that do not reflect unified populations in the region.

Factional violence poses a challenge to policymakers from other countries who are considering how to intervene in nations torn by civil war, such as Syria. In the Middle East, U.S. and other international officials must weigh the possibility that, when supporting groups that are fighting repressive governments, military assistance may end up fueling violence between opposing rebel groups. Additionally, if one faction ends up taking over the government after receiving international support, and then goes on to repress other groups within the country, international policymakers may bear some responsibility for this new stage of the conflict.

Many in the United States applauded the democratic spirit of the Arab Spring uprisings. At the same time, some experts worry that

divisions in Arab societies—long-suppressed by authoritarian rulers—are boiling over, leading to conflict and instability that threaten U.S. interests. U.S. policymakers will need to consider how to balance these concerns moving forward.

***“The breakup of the Syrian and the Iraqi states is happening before our own eyes, and ISIS is just one symptom of the new post-Sykes-Picot configuration.... While the international community still emphasizes publicly the unity of Iraq and Syria....”***

—Joyce Karam, a journalist, in an  
*Al-Arabiya* article,  
June 2015

How the United States responds to current developments in the Middle East builds on a history of U.S. involvement in the region. Considering the principles that have guided U.S. policy historically can inform understandings and decisions about policy today.