

The U.S. Policy toward Middle East in the Post-Cold War Era

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The aim of this paper is to discuss the United States' physical and ideological presence in the Middle East since the end of the Cold War. The paper argues that the U.S. Middle East policies are in serious crises and need to be re-formulated if any efficiency is wanted. In addition, this paper aims to discuss the reasons behind the failure which ended in mistrust and resistance against the U.S., ideologically and physically. Author of this paper believes that this crisis is not because of deficit in the message, but because of the misunderstanding of the receiver and errors in the policies of the sender.

Disintegration of the Soviet Union, September 11 and United States' Middle East Politics

The Cold War ended with the Soviet withdrawal from the Third World in general, leaving the the United States unchallenged at a regional level¹, for an uncertain period of time. Sudden collapse of the Cold War rival, disintegration of the Soviet Union, brought the super military and economic power in need to "readjust from one attuned to the global activities and ambitions of the Soviet Union to one with new definitions of security and political interests."²

The end of the Cold War has affected world politics to a very important extent. This has been defined as a systemic change, a change in the hierarchy of actors of the international system. Dependently, impact of the systemic development has observed at various levels at various extents. The year 1989 proved to be a very important watershed in world politics with regard to its reflections and influence on the flow of political history. That

is why any discussion regarding the international politics today requires a special emphasis on the 1989. This scientific tradition will also be followed in this paper. It is believed that evaluating the post-Cold War period with drawing parallels to the Cold War years will help our attempts to evaluate new developments.

The Cold War period was a distinctive one with its governing rules, actors, and dangers. This was a period with a potential of sudden turn of cold relations into hot war, but with the danger of simultaneous threat to hundred thousands of lives. To put it briefly, this bipolar rivalry between the U.S. and the Soviet Union reflected its spirit on all levels of interaction among all actors of the system. This had also been observed in the interaction between the superpowers and one particular sub-region, one of the most problematic artificial region of recent times- the Middle East. After subjecting to a certain level of limitation, factors that had shaped the U.S. Middle East policies during the Cold War did emerge as preventing the expansion of Communism by the Soviet Union, securing the free-flow of the Middle Eastern oil to Western industry, and providing the security of newly formed state of Israel³ and other pro-Western states.

The Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, that resulted in the emergence of new independent states, which became the pawns of the new rivalry between big powers to fill the power vacuum after the Soviets to utilize from their natural resources. But for the sake of the aim of the paper, after a brief look at global developments, the study will focus on the U.S. and Middle Eastern relations in more detail.

In the new period, as the victor of the competition, the United States needed a reform, but not a revolution in her foreign policy toward the region, other than canceling the prevention of the penetration of the Soviet ideology to the Middle East. In addition, she has been aiming to fill the power vacuum after the Soviet Union. This has been expected to at all levels- economic, political and social. The regional states has been demanded to integrate into

world economy, and adopt western form of political governance. Liberalization of the economy and democratization of the politics have emerged as the new American slogan and legitimization tools for the American presence there.

Color of the new period started to become obvious with immediate signs provided by Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, civil war in Somalia, etc. These have been contributions to the demands and claims of the U.S. by the regional states'. 'Uncivilized' parts of the world invited the saviors to bring peace and happiness, but on tanks, through mistreating their neighbors and citizens.

The blaming of any external interventionists being left aside, sometimes atrocities covered the world can not be permitted and watched from aside. An external hand has really been requested by the victims of different extremities. In trial of adapting into new conditions, the superpower was hit from her heart unexpectedly, even unimaginable, in September 11, 2001. While her Middle East policy is regarded, this paper argues that the attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., has had important impact on, or put it in another way, the attacks provided sudden opportunities to implement more militarized policies toward the region. This is different expressions of the idea that “the decision shaping the U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan shows a remarkable continuity on an ongoing, pre-September 11 evolution in approaches to global system.”⁴

After 1989, September 11, 2001 was expected and demanded to be another important turning point in world politics, but when the result is evaluated, it is easily seen that “notwithstanding the shock of 11th September 2001, many important aspects of world politics have not changed. The basic political structure of international politics, built on the concept of the sovereign nation state, and the dilemmas of global governance in an anarchic world arising from the state system, have not changed” but “the US response to 11th September 2001 has resulted in a new assertiveness in the US foreign policy. The war on terrorism and the

related struggle against the proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction have become the central elements of the u.s. foreign policy.”⁵

All operations and involvements in the Middle East, from military to humanitarian, were colored with the slogan of bringing democracy to the region. Democracy “has been there in a variety of guises for decades” and “has emerged as a central component of U.S. thinking in the reassessment of its security perceptions in the post-9/11 environment and looks to be a central factor for some time to come.”⁶

Today, after certain period of experience, it is meaningful to ask what are reached as a result of a decade lasted involvements, operations, from military to humanitarian, and initiatives? Forthcoming section looks for the signs of answer.

The Middle East Today: In a Progress or Regression?

Before focusing on practical results of a decade-long U.S. involvement in the Middle East, I will quote a theoretical perspective that aims to understand the Middle East in the period of transformation that have taken its start in 1989. This perspective is at two levels: global and regional. It should also be remembered that regional developments were influenced and shaped by the global ones.

On the global level, international system has entered into a systemic transformation process, basically from bi-polar to unipolar U.S. hegemony, which is also named as a systemic change by Gilpin.⁷ It is a change in the power hierarchy within the international system. In other words, it is the rise and decline of the dominant states that govern the particular international system.

On the other hand, this global transformation influenced the Middle East and was reflected as an incoherence, argued by Manfred Halpern, which means a disconnectedness, a time when old systems break down and new ones have yet to form.⁸ When the U.S. and Middle Eastern relations are considered, “incoherence is that form of encounter in which self

and other face each other in the same place and at the same time but are unwilling or unable to agree upon how, simultaneously, to manage continuity and change, collaboration and conflict, and the achievement of justice...”.⁹ Departing from this argument, it becomes easier to name the problem in relations and inefficiency in the U.S.-led initiatives and operations in the Middle East.

Furthermore, “incoherence is always painful. This is an age when gaps between the haves and have nots become chasms, a time when imbalances and inequities have fed anger and discontent. Huge advances in technology have led to a new awareness of one’s relation to the other. A new generation finds itself trapped in the jaws of unemployment, corruption, political oppression, and injustice.”¹⁰

The picture of the Middle East, one that is drawn with special respect to the point that is reached today supports the idea of incoherence and its impact on the mutual relations. “The briefest survey of the issues dominating the region reveals much that would ha been familiar a decade ago, and much that is likely to remain unchanged.”¹¹ This is argued to be so, by Halliday, because of four reasons.

Firstly, as Halliday argues, the relationships between the Middle East as a whole and the world economy, including the U.S., is characterized by structural weakness and dependency. Other than oil, and we should add violent actions as a reaction to anger against the U.S., the region exports nothing. Secondly, relations between states and societies continue to be dominated by authoritarian rule, complemented by elite theft (averaging 30% of state income), and maintained by an ideological resort to nationalist and/or religious demagoguery.

Thirdly, argues Fred Halliday, suspicion, conflict and latent is dominant even on inter-regional relations. Militarily, the region is one of the main areas where interstate military rivalry prevails. Last, but not least, as again argued by Halliday is the role of regressive and dictatorial structures sway on the culture of individual freedom of expression and ideology in

the region. This was a picture in the millennial turn, drawn by Halliday in 2000. Another more specific picture provided by Fuat Keyman in the aftermath of atrocity in the Felluce is well illustrating the result of decade-long U.S. involvement in the Region and its impact on public's perception of the U.S.

“Post-Saddam Iraq period was proved to be a period when humane tragedies were observed daily, big amount of people died, terror intertwined with resistance and political instability turned into civil war. Weapons of Mass Destruction and any organic bond between Iraq and September 11 terrorist could not be found, and legitimacy and plausibility of U.S. foreign policy was met with serious challenge. Again, in this period, we have seen violent actions in different parts of the world. And world turned into a more insecure place. In the same period we observed that Palestine question, that has key role in the formation of regional peace, entered into irresolvable situation.”¹² Then we compare the result with the American promises, we observe a huge gap, and I want to name this as a failure. In the next section I will try to discuss impact of those unsuccessful U.S. policies on the Middle East point of view about the U.S.

Reasons of Failure of Policies and Inefficiency of Initiatives by the U.S. in the Middle East

After more than a decade-long period we observe that not much thing have changed despite lots of efforts and high cost. I think it is now the proper time to ask and evaluate the reasons behind this picture, and the result of years lasted developments in the region. Since the focus of this paper is relations between the U.S. and the Middle East, this section will try to evaluate the reasons of abovementioned failure. Departing from this point, this paper, in search of factors behind, argues that both sides, both the U.S. and the Middle Eastern governments, are responsible for this. But here I will focus on the U.S. side and I will put U.S. policies in the center of my discussion. My argument here is that the U.S. existence in the Region, both

ideologically and physically, is in a serious legitimacy crisis. This, perhaps, may not lead to an overall uprising against the U.S., but seems to cause hatred and anger. In other words, mistrust is the dominant color of the Region's perception of U.S.

First of all, the discursive trope of democracy was used in an instrumental fashion, a tactic in a wider strategy to achieve a specific set of political objectives, rather than for its own sake or for the sake of a certain set of principles.¹³ Better empirical evidence is the United States' selectivity in forcing for democratization or applying sanctions and embargoes on Middle Eastern countries. Departing from this argument, we can compare U.S.' treatment toward Iraq with her treatment toward Saudi Arabia. Political situation in the latter was subordinated to Saudi loyalty to the U.S.

Secondly, the region, especially in terms of its socio-cultural structure, is not clearly known by the U.S., even wrongly known. In a more general perspective, as argued by Halliday, "one of the besetting distortions of the region, replicated by Western stereotyping and local ideology alike, is that the region's politics and history can be explained by timeless cultural features, a Middle Eastern 'essence' or an 'Islamic mindset'."¹⁴ Furthermore, with paying special attention to the war in Iraq, Aras argues that, the war made it obvious that how unaware are the Bush and his advisors about the map of the symbols and values of the region.¹⁵ Since the Ramadan (a name of month that Muslims fast) and its twenty seventh night (which is attributed a very high level of religious importance) were expected to be last date to realize strikes on Felluce.

Third point that I want to add is the United States' irrational support to Israel. A certain level of support can be understood, but unconditional support and abstention from condemnations because of killing of children have been adding hatred over hatred against the US.

Another very important U.S. fallacy is her failure and unwillingness to support

reformists in Iran. Reformist Iranian government has been in political struggle against the conservative regime in the country, but United States' failure to support this government started to strengthen conservatives against them. On the way of democratizing the country, Khatami government has been faced with accusations like adopting the ideology of the one that is even naming them as terrorist and putting them in the category of axis of evil. By the way, clash in the definition of terrorist is (and will be) another obstacle on the way of cooperation.

Some other points that the U.S. have to keep in mind are as follows: elections do not make democracy, democratization takes time and rests on educated and informed populace, independent and responsible media is essential, women are vital for democracy, political and economic reforms are mutually reinforcing, and although it can be encouraged from outside, democracy is best built from within.¹⁶ Furthermore, it must be remembered that democracy cannot be tried to be implemented from up to down. It must be the desire and will of people to rule.

Absencies in the U.S. foreign policies resulted in failure; despite nearly more than a decade lasted unilateral and active involvement in the region. There has not been progress in the situation in the region. But, with the loss of development in the region, U.S. is face to face with a serious legitimacy crises in the region and any initiative suggested and headed by her is received with scepticism, and even hatred.

Middle Eastern Perception of United States: Mistrust and Resistance

The United States has put the democratization in the region into its policy toward the region. In the name of stabilizing the Middle East via bringing peace and opening way for economic development through connecting the region into global economy, and democratizing the regional countries, the U.S., since 1989, has realized many operations and headed many initiatives. But, when the picture above was scrutinized, unfortunately, it convince us to say

that all operations, especially military ones, ended with failure, and initiatives have been abandoned. All these damaged the credibility of U.S., and even produced anger against her that was added to one having its root in the the Cold War. In other words, because of misrepresentation by the United States, mistrust toward Western values in general- democracy, rule of law, liberal economy, etc.- and anger and enmity to U.S., in particular, are dominating the Middle Eastern approach.

With the aim of providing a theoretical tool to read the Middle Eastern perception of the United States, I want to introduce a foresight by Hudson. In beginning of the 1990s he argued that developments since 1989- the collapse of Soviet Union, the development of Arab-Israeli peace process, and the crippling of Iraq in the second Gulf War- and two long term trends, have dramatically altered the structure and dynamics of Middle East politics. The two long term trends demanded to be “the accelerated integration of the Middle East region into a global economic, cultural and political order,” and, on the other hand, “the culturally rooted resistance to such assimilation by movements and regimes generally identified with ‘political Islam’.”¹⁷ And he argued that all these gave rise to an ‘inclusion’ and ‘exclusion’ trends in the Middle East. At present, a decade after the Hudson, I think it will not be wrong to add a new factor that has contributed to the ‘exclusion’ of West in general and U.S. in particular, that is, the policies and methodology implemented by U.S. To sum up, we can say that the dominant approach toward the U.S. is a reflection of ‘exclusion’: mistrust.

In addition, “be it dependency or interdependency, the relation of the Middle East as a regional system and of Middle Eastern states to the dominant West is such that it is the West that defines the terms: Washington and other capitals determine who should be excluded from the emerging new system-who should be branded the rogue.”¹⁸ Departing from this argument, the United States’ inclusion of some of regional countries into the category of ‘rogue states’ and some into ‘axis of evil’ resulted in exclusion of her and the values that she is demanding

to transfer into the region.

As is also argued by Hudson, “democratization is probably a good thing for the Middle East by the most universalistic, widely accepted standards; and yet it is not difficult to understand why negative perceptions of of the messenger override the message.”¹⁹ In conclusion, “of the humanitarian costs of the four years of sanctions against Iraq (with no end in sight) can only feed exclusionary attitudes in the region and further erode the legitimacy of regimes that participated in the US-run policy.”²⁰

Concluding Observations

In this study I tried to evaluate U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East since the end of the Cold War that left the U.S. as a lone superpower to a certain degree on global level and by itself in the region. And it was also argued that the ideological dress of the United States’, as a legitimizing tool, has been democratizing the regional societies. Since 1989 the U.S. realized various involvements within the region, varying from military operations to civil initiatives. But, as this paper argues, when a general picture is evaluated I decide that there have been little change in addition increasing hatred and anger against the U.S. that resulted in mistrust to the U.S. She is not perceived as sincere by regional societies. Impact of this is directly affecting any initiatives headed by her and are received with suspicion. In a step further, this paper tried to focus on some points that caused to such a failure and those mistakes demanded to be, in summary, United States’ misunderstanding of the region, her compulsion and impatient manner, and her appeal to use of military force. Departing from this point, now I want to focus on some suggestions both from different scholars and of mine.

First of all, the U.S. should get better informed and accumulate enough knowledge about the region and its socio-cultural structure, and she should re-evaluate global developments in parallel with the region. At this point arguments developed by Bill and Chavez are worth to mention.²¹ First, the United States must understand the nature of the

world in which we live.²² This is a world caught in the midst of fundamental transformation. Incoherence is dominant. Order, stability, and stasis are increasingly rare. Second, they argue, the US must better inform itself about the world in which we live. It is in America's interests to understand other cultures and religions. Many of these cultures are subtle and complex. Such is the case of Islam, which is comprised of numerous sects. It is necessary to understand these differing sects rather than to lump all Muslim groups into a single category called "Islamic fundamentalism." Third, United States decision-makers would do well to view the Middle East as a system in which political events are intertwined with one another.

Secondly, United States have to accept the fact that internalized features of societies do change gradually. As also mentioned above, it must be recognized that democracy does not have a unique form and rests on well informed base. Compulsion and dictated procedures do not make democracy. Thirdly, use of force is nothing other than an invitation to resistance. Conservative mind and braveness of the society of the Middle East will be more radicalized against the U.S. and the West that will bring nothing other than conflict. In dealing with other nations, the US must understand the value of modesty and humility, and despite its enormous power on the global landscape, the United States must resist the temptation to be arrogant.²³

Furthermore, U.S. must remember that people are changing- quite literally.²⁴ At the top, the leaders who have dominated the region since the 1960s are leaving the scene. New faces are becoming visible, possibly more vicious and determined than their predecessors, but perhaps not. Change is also evident in the realm of ethnic identity and conflict. Successive waves of post-1945 epoch- secular, radical nationalism and Islamism- are being challenged. In such a situation attempts and use of force, one observed in Felluce, is capable of turning the way of changes. Last, but not least, together with all above, U.S. must prove the applicability and utility of what she demands to the societies of the region. Still bleeding Palestine, unstable Afghanistan and Iraq are prerequisite for forthcoming initiatives wheter be

Broader or Greater Middle East.

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NOTES

¹ Richard Falk, "U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Tragedy of Persistence", in Hooshang Amirahmadi (ed.), *The United States and the Middle East* (New York: State University of New York, 1993), p.75

² Louis J. Cantori, "The Middle East in New World Order: Political Trends", in Tareq Y. Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael (eds.), *The Gulf War and the New World Order* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 1994), p.451.

³ Richard W. Cottam, "United States Middle East Policy in the Cold War Era", in Dale F. Eickelman, ed., *Russia's Muslim Frontiers* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp.19-37.

⁴ Bülent Gökay, "The Most Dangerous Game in the World: Oil, War, and U.S. Global Hegemony," in Gökhan Bacik and Bülent Aras (eds.), *September 11 and World Politics* (Fatih University Press, 2004), p.177.

⁵ Andrew Cottey, "September 11th 2001 One Year On: A new Era in World Politics? ", *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relation*, 1(3), Fall 2002, 1-2.

⁶ Daniel Neep, "Dilemmas of Democratization in the Middle East: The Forward Strategy of Freedom," *Middle East Policy*, Fall 2004, 11 (3), p.75.

⁷ Robert Gilpin, *War & Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp.41-44.

⁸ Manfred Halpern, "The Second Coming," in Richard J. Finneran ed., *The Poems: A New Edition* (New York: Macmillan, 1983), and also cited in James A. Bill and Rebeca Bill Charvez, "The Politics of Incoherence: The United State and the Middle East," *The Middle East Journal*, Autumn 2002, 56(4), p.562.

⁹ Halpern, *op.cit.*, p.83.

¹⁰ James A. Bill and Rebeca Bill Charvez, "The Politics of Incoherence: The United State and the Middle East," *The Middle East Journal*, Autumn 2002, 56(4), p.563.

¹¹ Fred Halliday, Millennium Middle East: Changing Orders, Shifting Borders," *Middle East Report*, No.213, Winter 1999.

¹² Fuat Keyman, "Amerika Felluce'de Sertleşiyor, Dünya Kaygılı!", *Zaman*, 10.11.2004.

¹³ Daniel Neep, "Dilemmas of Democratization in the Middle East: The Forward Strategy of Freedom," *Middle East Policy*, Fall 2004, p.75.

¹⁴ Halliday, *op.cit.*

¹⁵ Bülent Aras, "ABD Kendisiyle Çelişti, Felluce'de 'Sivil Katliam'", *Zaman*, 12.11.2004.

¹⁶ Richard N. Haass, "Toward Greater Democracy in the Muslim World," *The Washington Quarterly*, 26:3, Summer 2003.

¹⁷ Michael C. Hudson, "Transformations in the Middle East Regional System: The Dialectics of Inclusion and Exclusion," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, p.561.

¹⁸ Hudson, op.cit., pp.562-563.

¹⁹ Id.

²⁰ Ibid, p.561.

²¹ Bill and Chaves, op.cit.

²² Bill and Chaves, op.cit.

²³ Bill and Chaves, op.cit.

²⁴ Halliday, op.cit.