

## **US Policy towards the Islamic World**

**Enayatollah Yazdani\***

### **Introduction**

US relations with the Islamic world are a part of its international relations that cannot be overlooked. Here the main questions are how America has instituted its policy towards the Muslim world? How has the US global hegemony affected the Islamic World? How US policy towards the Islamic World may be influenced by the radical Islamic movements? And what is the influence of the war in Iraq on perceptions of US relations with the Islamic World? This paper aims to answer these questions.

Actually, the USA has not kept a single policy towards the Islamic nations during and after the Cold War. In other words, American relationships with the Muslim World varied from time to time and nation to nation. During the Cold War, for instance, in some countries the USA had been a supporter of some Islamic movements as an instrument in the fight against the Soviet Union or the pro-Soviet governments in the Muslim countries. Whereas, in other countries America had been acting against the same movements. In the 1980s, Washington openly backed the Afghan *Mujahedin* in their struggle against the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> However, after the Cold War in late 1990 America strived to overthrow the Taliban regime, which its people more or less belonged to the *Mujahedin*. Whilst, in Iran the CIA overthrew the moderate constitutional government of Mohammed Mosadeq backed by the Islamic movement in 1953, followed by years of support for the brutal government of the Shah, this led directly to the rise of the Islamic revolution in 1979<sup>2</sup>.

The main argument in this paper is that although US has followed a double standard policy towards the Islamic World, its relationships with the Muslim nations has been based on

a kind of hegemony which had taken shape in the Cold War age and has continued in the post-Cold War era.

### **US policy towards the Islamic World during the Cold War: The Middle East at the centre**

During the Cold War American, effort was to develop its presence in different parts of the world including Muslim countries to contain the Soviet Union, and to achieve its international objectives. Chifley among them was the Middle East as a main part of the Islamic World. However, the Soviet Union was also willingness to expand its influence in the region.

The Middle East was important to the United States for several reasons. First, the large oil and gas reserves of this area could play a significant role in the US industries. Second and more important was the strategic location of the region, which could help America to protect communist development. In addition to these two elements to Washington the Middle East was important due to the Arab-Israel dispute.<sup>3</sup>

Simultaneously, the Soviet government also wanted to develop its influence in this important region. S. Ambrose and his colleague indicate that both the United States and Soviet Union were trying to impose on the scene the Cold War rivalry habits – movement and response bluff and counterbluff- as each superpower has attempted to gain a temporary advantage in many regions including the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> Of course, it has to be mentioned that in addition to the Arab nations of the Middle East non-Arabs countries of the region such as Iran and Turkey were also at the centre of US attention due to their strategic position that helped the United States to block the Soviets from developing towards warm waters. Meanwhile, Iran's oil resources were very significant to the United States.

During the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Red Army (1979-1989) the US was a supporter of the fighters (*Mujahedin*) against communists. Washington tried to arm the Islamic groups in the country. Some of the groups such as Bin Laden that were fighting against the Soviet invaders originally received their training from the CIA during that period.<sup>5</sup>

In short, as Wesley M. Bagby has argued US national interests in the Middle East seemed to require excluding Soviet power, preserving secure access to the region's oil and keeping strategic trade routes open.<sup>6</sup> For these purposes, the United States had to support pro-Western Arab and non Arab nations to retain their independence during the 1950s and 1960s in order to strengthen their ability to resist Soviet expansion.

## **The end of the Cold War and US relations with the Islamic World**

The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 ended the Cold War. This left the United States as the only superpower in the global system. This new circumstance has affected the world.

From the theoretical point of view, with regards to US foreign relations in the age of post-Cold War there were two views. The neo-isolationists suggested that the United States pay more attention to its domestic issues since “the USSR [The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics], as an immediate threat, has gone the United States can and should turn away from an active international role, and focus instead on its own outstanding domestic needs.”<sup>7</sup> According to this view, America has to reduce its global activities and overseas military presence and avoid becoming involved in international affairs to strengthen its role at home. To the neo-isolationists, isolationist strategy, which would produce a minimal foreign policy, was “almost the natural condition of the United States” in an age of absence of rival powers.<sup>8</sup> They pointed to the costs of war and maintaining military abroad as well as the necessity of growing the US economy and then draw a conclusion that America should reduce its outside activities and become involved in its own domestic issues. In this regards, as Richard Haass has argued, the theme most central to the minimalist or neo-isolationist perspective, however, was economy.<sup>9</sup> That is to reduce the overseas costs and to save money for home.

Alternatively, some opposed the neo-isolationists' view, and claimed that although the Soviet Union has gone there are still some potential threats, such as a possible renewed Russia, the emergence of China, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism attacks, drug trafficking, economic globalisation and particularly political Islam, to the United States.<sup>10</sup> With such international threats, they have argued that the United States should not step back from the global arena. W. Christopher, former US Secretary of State, for example, has pointed out that “it is true that the United States faces many challenges today unlike any in the nation's history. But to me, that means we must be more engaged internationally, not less; more ardent in our promotion of democracy, not less; more inspired in our leadership, not less.”<sup>11</sup> Based on such vision in the framework of "grand strategy" and "enlargement" Washington tried to expand its influence and presence around the world in general and the Islamic World in particular.

US policy towards the Muslim countries in the wake of the Cold War has been relatively formulated in the framework of the Huntington's theory of 'clash of civilizations' which included a clash between the Islam or Islamic world and the West in general and the United States in particular.<sup>12</sup> In a same view M. Rodinson has pointed out that “the Muslims

were a threat to Western Christendom long before they became a problem.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, in the post-Cold War period, some have tried to define Islam as a new threat or an 'enemy' of the West after the collapse of the Communist regime in the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup> Rodinson, for example, has pointed out that “the Muslims were a threat to Western Christendom long before they became a problem.”<sup>15</sup> In a 1990 address Bush Junior Vice President, Dan Quayle, listed Islam with Nazism and Communism as the challenges the Western civilization must undertake to meet collectively.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, in February 1995 the former North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Secretary General, W. Claes, warned that Islamic fundamentalism is as much a threat to the Western alliance as communism once was.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, it is fair to claim that with regard to political Islam, the US policy particularly in the post-Cold War era, is being to contain it much the way communist was during the Cold War. Accordingly, D. Pipes stated, "main element of any United States policy toward [militant Islam] must be that of long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of [its] expansive tendencies” this is what Kennan, a former American policy-maker, proposed for the US policy toward the Soviet Union and communism during the Cold War.<sup>18</sup> Such views indeed were based on the myth of the ‘necessary enemy’. Hence, in the absence of the Soviet Union the West, particularly the United States, needed to introduce a new enemy to rationalize its military policies and more importantly as B. Tibi has argued to “ensure the continuity of its political and military unity and hegemony.”<sup>19</sup> J. Hippler and D. Luge have outlined this approach:

We no longer have the Soviet Union or Communism to serve as enemies justifying expensive and extensive military apparatus. It was in the mid-1980s at the very latest that the search began for new enemies to justify arms budgets and offensive military policies, at first as part of the Communist threat and then in its place.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast, some scholars not only believe that the Cold War has been replaced with a new competition between Islam and the West but also question the ‘necessary enemy’. F. Halliday, for instance, has described ‘necessary enemy’ for the West as a big mistake because he believes that “Western society as a whole and Western capitalism in particular, have never ‘needed’ an *enemy* in some systemic sense.”<sup>21</sup> Of course, as Halliday and some other scholars have discussed the ‘created enemy’ leads the world to international and ideological conflict and that benefits the US arm industries and more significantly it justifies its military invasions and presence all over the world. Consequently, to the USA it is reasonable to organize war against one the poorest nations in the world i.e. Afghanistan.

The increase of the political Islam or according to the Western term the Islamic fundamentalism in some of the Islamic countries since the 1970s, the establishment of an Islamic regime in Iran and increasing of militant groups and terrorism attacks on the US embassies and buildings, which uncertainly linked to some Islamic countries, led the United States to pursue different policies toward Muslim world. In 1994, then-the Clinton National Security Advisor, A. Lake, made it clear that the United States dose not and will not have a unified policy toward the entire Muslim world.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, while some of the Muslim countries, such as Iran, Iraq, Syria and Libya are characterized 'rogue', 'backlash', 'the bad sons of the world' and 'axis of evil' by the US leaders and policymakers some other Islamic nations particularly Turkey, Pakistan are viewed as fully 'democratic countries' in the Islamic word!.<sup>23</sup> These latter countries plus Saudi Arabia are described as friend and allies of the United States in the region. The USA maintains close strategic cooperation—including massive arms transfers, training and logistics, and a permanent military presence—with these nations.<sup>24</sup>

From the military point of view, while America has armed some Muslim countries and has made bases in those countries, particularly Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey over the past decade, it has bombed Lebanon, Sudan, and Afghanistan in an effort to challenge Islamic radicalism and governments viewed as antithetical to U.S. interests.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, in terms of Weapons of Mass Destructions (WMD), for instance, the USA singling out some specific countries such as Iraq and to some degree Iran, in return in case of Pakistan or even Israel (a non-Muslim country but in the Islamic orbit) has not talked about dismantling their nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.<sup>26</sup> Thus, it can be seen two contradictory policies of the United States in the Islamic world even in military aspects.

### **US policy towards the Muslim nation in the aftermath of 9/11 events**

The terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 have affected US global policy. Indeed, these events have accentuated and intensified a trend in US domestic and foreign affairs whose advocates had been struggling for influence over national policy throughout the 1990s. The terrorist attacks have presented an “opportunity” for Washington to attempt to constrain the emerging complexity of the emerging international system as a whole by shifting international focus to the relatively narrow, but no less significant, issue-area of 'anti-terrorism'. Since then, the US has made consistent and persuasive, indeed unremitting, attempts to reduce many other items on the international political and economic agenda to an anti-terrorist essence. In this way, current American international behaviour represents a

return to Cold War styles of thinking and acting, even if developments in technology and communications have radically changed their implementation.

With regards to US relations with the Islamic World, the 9/11 attacks have created a new wave of anti-Islam movement in the USA and even other Western countries. More importantly these events led the US officials to believe that American policy in the Muslim world should include a commitment to "deeper, more sustained, and better-coordinated engagement on the full range of issues upon which [they] agree and disagree."<sup>27</sup> In fact, the events confirmed the importance of the Islamic World to US vital interests. Accordingly, the US policymakers came to believe that the deeper their presence, the more likely they were to achieve their objectives. This new approach has necessitated new US steps in engagement, significantly reorientating its foreign policy, and attempting to enhance involvement with the Muslim world.

At the beginning President Bush tried to identify a crusade however, it was quickly reacted by the Muslim world and some non-Muslim nations as well. But as it has been stated the 'war on terror' was not limited to Afghanistan and Bin Laden's group it would be continued against Muslim and non-Islamic countries that the America considered to be supporter of terrorism. Based on this statement Bush characterised Iraq, Iran and North Korea 'axis of evil'.<sup>28</sup> Bush attracted controversy with his comments. In the mentioned countries and other Muslim countries and more importantly within the United States and its allies the Bush's words have met with angry responses. Former US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, for example, called Mr Bush's comments "a big mistake."<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, NATO's Secretary-General, Lord Robertson, warned that the US has to provide evidence to justify any action against Iran, Iraq and North Korea.<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, possible links between the Al-Qaeda terrorist network in Afghanistan and some radical groups in some parts of the Islamic World such the Central Asian region made these parts a US security priority. In this regards, President Bush proclaimed in his address to Congress on 20 September 2001: 'The evidence we have gathered all points to a collection of loosely affiliated terrorist organisations known as Al-Qaeda. [This] group and its leader, a person named Osama bin Laden, are linked to many other organisations in different countries – including the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.'<sup>31</sup>

Despite such view after Afghanistan US attacked Iraq In 2003 under the name of the 'war on terror' and fight against WMD. This led to the invasion of Iraq for more than three years.

To sum up, the US-led anti-terrorism campaign since September 2001 and subsequent war in Afghanistan and Iraq have greatly affected Washington's policy in the Islamic world, and have led the United States to establish more footholds in some of the Muslim countries, such as Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

### **The Islamic World policy towards the USA: A Brief Appraisal**

In the side of the Islamic world, certainly, some factors and events have affected the relations between them and the USA. American policy toward Israel and its support for Israeli repression against Palestinians, in fact, could be mentioned as one of the most effective factors in this regard. This policy however, has not been considered by some of the Muslim courtiers, namely Pakistan and Turkey but it has become one of the major elements of problematic relations between Iran and the United States since 1979.

In addition, the re-emergence of Islam as a vital socio-political and cultural force and dynamic, and its domestic and international role and impact in ex-Soviet Central Asia as apart of the Islamic world has attracted the US policymakers' attention. Particularly, there has been some actual and potential of Islamic movements in the newly independent republics of this region. More importantly, political Islam "abroad offer up an extremely effective mobilizing ideology of resistance to [this] region that is deeply troubled and where communism and socialism have been discredited by 70 years of the Soviet power."<sup>32</sup> Therefore, as M. E. Ahrari has also pointed out, the off-handed response of the United States was that these republics should be nudged away from Islamic fundamentalism.<sup>33</sup> In Tajikistan, for instance, "the US has allied with old-line Communist Party bosses as a means of countering the growth of Islamic movements."<sup>34</sup> In effect, to keep these states away from the political Islam the US policy has been to discourage them from adopting the Iranian model of Islamic regime and in contrast to lead them toward the Turkish secular model.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the US policy towards the Islamic World. It has demonstrated that the history of US policy toward the Muslim societies, even those who have been characterized fundamentalism, shows that America has not perused a specific policy in this context. In one part of the Muslim world America is supporting for repressive and corrupt monarchies whereas in other part it claims to be fighting against authoritarian governments of some Islamic nations.

The rapid spread of Islamic movements or political Islam in the last two decades is seen as a serious threat to the US security and national interest particularly in the Middle East. In fact, central to the US policy is the fear of the spread of the Islamic regimes in the Middle East and elsewhere, which to the US leaders this might threaten American interests. Therefore, its policy toward those Islamic nations who follow this kind of Islam or might be affected by that has been to prevent it or if necessary to fight with it.

The US engagement with the Islamic world was strongly affected by the events of 11 September 2001, which changed the international context, with a direct and profound impact on its foreign policy in the Muslim societies.

In general, reviewing US policy towards the Islamic World indicates that Washington involvement with the Muslim countries has been shaped in the framework of its global hegemony during and after the Cold War. In other words, Washington's multiple engagement with the Islamic World is part of a broader US global strategy, which seeks to restrain potential adversaries and strengthen US power throughout the world. Therefore, one can assume that from the *Realpolitik* point of view US policy in the Muslim nations has been geared to develop its hegemonic influence.

## NOTES

---

\* Dr Enayatollah Yazdani, Assistant Professor of International Relations, Department of Political Science, The University of Isfahan, Isfahan-Iran, Email: [yazden@polt.ui.ac.ir](mailto:yazden@polt.ui.ac.ir)

<sup>1</sup> Kai Hafez, (ed.), *The Islamic World and the West: An introduction to political cultures and international relations*, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill, 2000, p. XIV see also S., Telhami, "American foreign policy toward the Muslim world", *SAIS Review*, Vol. XXI, No. 2, Summer-Fall 2001.

<sup>2</sup> See S. Zunes, "US policy toward political Islam", *Foreign Policy in Focus*, Vol. 6, No. 24, June 2001, pp. 24-30, also U.S. support for the regime of Jafaar Nimeiry during most of his repressive 16-year rule of Sudan led to the destruction of much of that country's civil society, resulting in the 1989 coup by hard-line Islamist military officers who overthrew that country's brief democratic experiment.



---

<sup>3</sup> For more information about the importance of the Middle East to the United States see H. Kissinger, *Years of renewal*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999, and Howard J. Wiarda, (ed.), *On the agenda: current issues and conflicts in U.S. foreign policy*, London: Scott Foresman, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Ambrose and Brinkley, op. cit. p. 254.

<sup>5</sup> See S. Zunes, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> W.M., Bagby, *America's International Relations Since World War I*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 207.

<sup>7</sup> Walter B., Slocombe, "The role of the United States in international security after the Gulf War" *Adelphi Papers*, No. 265, Winter 1991/92, pp. 41-52.

<sup>8</sup> M. Cox, "Requiem for a Cold War Critic – George Kennan: 1946-1950", *Irish Slavonic Studies*, No. 11, 1990-1991, pp. 1-35.

<sup>9</sup> R. Haass, *The Reluctant Sheriff: The United States after the Cold War*, Washington: the Council on Foreign Relations, Inc, 1997, p.57, Richard Haass is Director of Foreign Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution. Previously he was Director of National Security Programs and a Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. From 1989 to 1993 he served as Special Assistant to President George Bush and a Senior Director on the National Security Council Staff.

<sup>10</sup> For more information on America's new threats see Haass, op. cit. pp. 55-60 and also S. Huntington, "Clash of Civilizations", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3, 1993, pp. 22-28, even prior to 11 September that was strongly enough for the bombing of the Federal Building at Oklahoma city to be blamed initially on Muslims, whereas in reality it was the work of an American.

<sup>11</sup> W. Christopher, *In the stream of history: shaping foreign policy for a new era*, California: Stanford University Press, 1998. pp. 53-54.

<sup>12</sup> For more details see Huntington, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> M. Rodinson, "The Western image and Western studies of Islam", In J., Schacht and C.E. Bosworth, (eds.), *The Legacy of Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974, pp. 9-62.

<sup>14</sup> For instance see Howell, Llewellyn D., "Islam as a political force", *USA Today*, Vol. 120, No. 2564, May 1992, p. 67, D. Pipes, "The Muslims are coming! The Muslims are coming!", *National Review*, November 19, 1990.

<sup>15</sup> Rodinson, op. cit. pp. 9-62.

<sup>16</sup> Esposito, L. John, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality*, Oxford: OUP, 1992, p. 324.

<sup>17</sup> *Guardian*, 3 February 1995 see also Spencer, Claire, 'Europe and Political Islam: Defining Threats and Evolving Policies', in Kramer, Martin, (ed.), *The Islamism Debate*, Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1997, p. 93.

<sup>18</sup> D., Pipes, "Who Is the Enemy?" , *Commentary*, January 2002.

<sup>19</sup> B. Tibi, *The challenge of fundamentalism: Political Islam and the New World Disorder*, Berkeley: University of California, 1998, p. 2.

- 
- <sup>20</sup> J., Hippler, and A., Lueg, (eds.), *The Next Threat* (translated by Friese, L.), London: Pluto Press, 1995, p. 4, see also Y. Sezgin, "Does Islam pose a threat to the West?", *Perceptions Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. V, No. 2, June-August 2000, pp. 34-41.
- <sup>21</sup> F. Halliday, *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation*, New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1996, p. 113 see also Edward P. Djerejian, "The US and the Middle East in a changing world", *US Department of State Dispatch*, Vol. 3, No. 23, June 1992, p. 444.
- <sup>22</sup> S. Telhami, "American foreign policy toward the Muslim world", *SAIS Review*, Vol. XXI, No. 2, Summer-Fall 2001.
- <sup>23</sup> D., Pipes, "The Muslims are coming! The Muslims are coming!", op. cit, see also Enayatollah Yazdani, "United States Policy towards Iran, after the Islamic Revolution: An Iranian Perspective", *International Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 3, July-September 2006, pp. 267-290.
- <sup>24</sup> S. Zunes, "US policy toward political Islam", *Foreign Policy in Focus*, Vol. 6, No. 24, June 2001.
- <sup>25</sup> For details see S. Zunes, "US role in the Middle East", *The Progressive Response*, Vol. 4, No. 2, January 14, 2000.
- <sup>26</sup> See Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> E. Jones, Testimony at Senate Subcommittee on Central Asia and the Caucasus, Washington, 14 December 2001.
- <sup>28</sup> The President's State of the Union Address Washington.
- <sup>29</sup> B.B.C. News, "Bush's 'evil axis' comment stirs critics", 2 February, 2002.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> B. Pannier, "Central Asia: US Can Expect Varied Levels Of Support", *RFE/RL*, 24 September 2001, p. 4.
- <sup>32</sup> Edward W. Walker, "Roots of Rage: Militant Islam in Central Asia", University of California, Berkeley, at <http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~iseees/>, [accessed 29/10/2005], and Enayatollah Yazdani, "US Democracy Promotion policy in the Central Asian Republics: Myth or Reality?", *International Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 2007, pp. 141-155.
- <sup>33</sup> M. E., Ahrari, "The dynamics of the new great game in Muslim Central Asia", *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1994, pp. 525-529.
- <sup>34</sup> Zunes, "US role in the Middle East", op. cit.