

The Arab World and the US: Interests and Concerns in a Changing Environment (An Academic Perspective)

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) will hold an academic conference on Arab-US relations in June 2014. Consistent with the Center's mandate to monitor major strategic changes affecting the Arab region, this conference aims to deconstruct the Arab-American relationship, taking into account its historical transformations over the past decades. This event also forms part of a series of conferences envisaged to address the relationship between the Arab world and a number of key regional and international powers.

Arab-American relations are complex and influenced by a number of factors. Despite the resentment originating particularly from the United States' policy on the Arab-Israeli conflict, the US continues to have a significant number of allies in the Arab world. Even regimes and organizations that openly declare hostility toward Washington continue to seek better relations. The encounter between the United States and the Arab world goes back to the beginning of the 19th century. During the course of the following century, American interests in the Arab East were primarily concerned with trade and cultural-religious activities. Holy sites occupied center stage in the consciousness of Protestant Americans, while trade interests in the region led to the US' first foreign military confrontation in 1801 with Libya.

During the second half of the 19th century, American Protestant missionaries thrived in Syria and Lebanon, making a huge impact upon Arab intellectual revival. The Syrian Protestant College was founded and, in 1920, became the American University of Beirut (AUB). In the interwar period, American interests in the region grew because of the discovery of large oil reserves on the shores of the Gulf. The US obtained concessions to explore for oil in Saudi Arabia, paving the way for the establishment of the Arab American Oil Company (ARAMCO).

Since 1948, American-Arab relations endured significant changes dictated primarily by the US's status as a superpower and the Arab world's geostrategic importance and its vast oil reserves. Relations have since vacillated from cordiality, exhibited when Washington opposed the tripartite invasion of Egypt in 1956; to outright hostility, when Washington sided with Israel, and at a later stage invaded and occupied Iraq. It should be noted, however, that during each of these phases it is difficult to speak of a single Arab position toward the US and vice versa.

Throughout the Cold War, the Arab region occupied center stage in US strategy, with oil supplies, Israel's security and preventing Soviet penetration forming the core of US interests in the region. The nature of threats to US interests has changed since the end of the Cold War, prompting increased involvement in the region especially after the occupation of Iraq. Direct military intervention in the region gave the US more influence in determining its trajectory. The cost was great, however. Because of the invasion of Iraq, the war in Afghanistan, and the "War on Terror," American power began to decline after it reached a peak with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The 2008 financial and economic crisis and the return of the Democrats to the White House led to a gradual US retreat from the region. A new American approach has since been adopted toward the Middle East. Talk of profound change in policy and different management of American relations with the Arab world is rampant. The shift in focus toward the Pacific, China and the Far East further validates this theory, as does the recent US-Iranian rapprochement and the interim agreement on the Iranian nuclear program.

In light of the above, the conference's objective will be:

- To highlight the historic interaction between the Arab world and the United States;
- To define the changing landscape of American interests in the region;
- To question whether the US is seeking new allies and define the position of Israel, the Arabs, Turkey and Iran within American interests;
- To identify the mechanisms of influence on US policy vis-à-vis the mechanisms of US influence in the region;
- To understand the American stance and its impact on the Arab Spring revolutions;
- To understand the role of the Arab communities in the US and the feasibility of creating an effective Arab lobby;
- To identify realistic Arab options in finding an umbrella other than the United States;
- To explore current US policy toward the region and the factors that influence it, domestically and externally;
- To explore whether there is an Arab strategy to deal with the adjustments within the American approach toward the region.

Panel 1: The Historical Track

The United States

This track will discuss the historical background of Arab-American relations, including:

- The American stance on the Arab world since World War I (1914- „18);
- Expansion by means of soft power: missionaries, education and culture (e.g., the establishment of AUB), medically, and by providing oil engineers and technology;

- Reasons for US expansion in the region at the beginning of the 20th century motivated by factors, such as:
 - pursuing energy and oil;
 - filling the imperial vacuum in the region, which resulted from the withdrawal of traditional European colonial powers and the birth of a new bi-polar world order;
 - preventing the penetration of Soviet influence (the Cold War) and the formation of any regional power, Arab or otherwise, to rival the American influence in alliance with the Soviet Union (i.e., Egypt under Nasser);
 - Utilizing Israel as an advanced American base in the region to prevent the emergence of, and to contain, any unfriendly regional power threatening the sources and supplies of energy (Egypt under Nasser; Iran after the 1979 Islamic revolution; and Iraq after the invasion of Kuwait in 1991), and to prevent any inroads of Soviet influence;
 - attempting to contain “Islamic fundamentalism,” and the consequent “War on Terrorism” in the 1990s and the 2000s; and
 - establishing a wide commercial market for American goods.

Arab

This track will discuss the reasons why the traditional Arab regime pivoted toward the US These reasons include:

- The attempt to secure an alternative Western defensive military shield in light of the withdrawal of the traditional colonial powers – and particularly with the Soviet expansion into the region via allied leftist regimes such as Egypt, South Yemen, and Syria. The 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran enhanced such efforts and need;
- The need for modern technology to develop sources of energy;
- The need of the regimes allied with the US for a security umbrella in the hopes of preempting military coups or popular uprisings; and
- The adherence to “conventional wisdom” within these traditional regimes that their “legitimacy” can be secured through close links with the US, rather than by means of popular consent. This sentiment was further enhanced after the “Arab Spring” revolutions.

Panel 2: The Cultural Track

This track will focus on the impact of how the cultural-media portray the “other” in the context of Arab-American relations.

The United States

- How the industry stereotypes and distorts the image of Arabs in the US;
- What kind of role, if any, such stereotyping has in formulating US foreign policy toward the Arab world.

Arab

- How the US is being presented and stereotyped in the Arab world;
- The image of the US in the Arab collective imagination (e.g., “America as the supporter of Israeli aggression,” “Imperialist America,” “America at war with Islam”);

Panel 3: The US and Political Islam Track

The United States

- Is there an official US approach to political Islam? If so, which political Islam (i.e., liberal/Salafi/the Muslim Brotherhood/Ennahda/the Nour Party/the Turkish model) and what is the approach?
- Why is the US interested in political Islam?
- The nature and trends in the American debate over political Islam; and
- Prospects for this approach in light of the downfall of the Muslim Brotherhood experience in Egypt and the tensions in Tunisia and Turkey.

Arab

- Political Islam’s approach toward the US;
- Multiple perspectives in approaching America
- Points of tension (e.g., Israel, Islamophobia, the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the support for dictatorial regimes); and

- What kind of impact does the current situation in Egypt, the removal of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi from power, and the American response have on the approach of political Islam to the US?

Panel 4: The New Adjustments in the American Approach to the Arab Region

- The effect of 9/11 on the American strategy in the region;
- The effect of the US' embroilment in Iraq and Afghanistan and the undefined War on Terror in draining American resources, economically and strategically;
- The deterioration in America's reputation in the Arab and Muslim worlds as a result of its resort to a militarized foreign policy and excessive force;
- The emergence of China as a power in Southeast Asia and the re-emergence of Russian influence;
- The Obama administration and its turn toward Pacific Asia;
- The return to the Arab region in light of the "Arab Spring" revolutions and their reverberations;
- American efforts to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict as a major source of anger toward the US in the region;
- Redefining American alliances in the region through a new regional balancing of powers (e.g., Iran) in light of the US' declining influence in the region;
- The American-envisaged approach to the Turkey-Israel-US role in the region;
- Does the US recognize and acknowledge Sunni and Shiite factors in its new approach to the region?
- Can the US afford to retreat from the Arab region in light of America's growing energy self-sufficiency, its economic decline, and its efforts to focus on other, more strategic locations?

Panel 5: Alternatives to US-Arab Allies in the Region in Light of the US' Declining Influence in the Region and its Quest to Redefine its Allies

- What is the extent of awareness in the Arab region regarding the depth of the changes in the American approach to the region and its Arab allies?

- Are there realistic options for finding an alternative defensive shield other than the US', or at least to diversify it?
- Is it feasible to construct a collective Arab approach to inspire an "Arab identity"?
- Should there be a systematic and serious effort to help strengthen an Arab-American lobby in the US?