

The Arab World and the U.S.: Interests, Concerns and Changing Dynamics

The ACRPS will hold an academic conference on Arab-American 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 centuries. This event also forms part of a series of conferences convened to address regional powers and the Arab world.

Arab-American relations are highly complex, and influenced by a number of factors, and despite hostile Arab public opinion and the resentment over issues such as the US's stance on Palestine, the US continues to have a significant number of allies in the Arab world. Even regimes and organizations that openly declare hostility toward Washington do not hide their desire to improve relations with the US, and when they manage to achieve a rapprochement, they boast of it to their opponents. The relationship between America and the Arab world goes back to the beginning of the 19th century, when the US declared independence from Great Britain. Over the course of the following century, US involvement in the Arab east was primarily concentrated on trade and cultural-religious interests. The Arab world's holy places occupied an important place for protestant immigrants to the US, and the US had substantial trade links with the Ottomans, which led to the US's first foreign military confrontation in 1801 against Libya.

During the second half of the 19th century, American protestant missionaries thrived in Syria and Lebanon, holding enormous influence on the Arab intellectual revival. Founded in 1866, what was once the Syrian Protestant College would become, in 1920, the American University of Beirut, an institution which has left an enormous impact on the cultural life of the Arab region. In the interwar period, US interests in the region grew as a result of the discovery of large oil reserves on the shores of the Arabian Gulf and Iran. 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, this relationship has witnessed a number of economic, cultural, intellectual, and political shifts, primarily dictated by the US's status as a superpower and the Arab region's geostrategic importance linked to its possession of half of the world's oil reserves. Relations have since then vacillated between periods of cordiality, exhibited during Washington's opposition to the tripartite aggression against Egypt in 1956 and Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai in February 1957, and outright hostility, particularly after Washington openly supported Israeli policies against Arabs and its subsequent invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. It should be noted 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 a central place in American strategy, especially because of vital US interests in oil, the role of Israel, and the prevention of Soviet penetration, an interest that remained unchanged during the post-Cold War period. Today, despite the different nature of the threats to US interests, the US's increased presence in the region follows its occupation of Iraq, giving the US more direct influence in deciding its fate. This

influence, however, comes with enormous repercussions as the nation's power has declined, after peaking with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, as a result of the (2003) invasion of Iraq, the war in Afghanistan and the US war on terror.

Over the past few years, with American involvement in the Arab world and the consequent economic and political burdens entailed, thereby stretching the US's capabilities, the region has witnessed the US's gradual retreat from the region, further delineated by the financial and economic crises that hit the US, and the return of the Democrats to the White House. With Obama's administration, the Arab world is witnessing a new American approach toward its region. Talk of profound change and a different management of US relations with the region is rampant. The gradual retreat of commitments in the region and the focus of the US on Southeast Asia further validate this theory, as does the recent US-Iranian rapprochement and the reaching of an interim agreement on the Iranian nuclear program.

In light of the above, the conference's objective will be to address the following issues:

- To highlight the historic interaction between the Arab world and the US
- To define the changing landscape of US 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 US interests
- To identify mechanisms of influence on US policy in contrast with mechanisms of US influence in the region
- To understand the US stance and 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 US
- To explore the current US policy toward the region and the elements it influences, domestically and abroad
- To explore an Arab strategy that deals with the changes to the US approach to the region

Panel 1: History Panel

America

This panel will discuss the historical background to Arab-American Relations, including:

- The US's 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), medicine, and oil engineers and technology; and
- Reasons behind US expansion in the region at the beginning of the 20th century, such as:
 - energy and oil;
 - filling an imperial vacuum in the region arising from the withdrawal of traditional European colonial powers and the birth of 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 US influence and ally with the Soviet Union (i.e., Egypt under Nasser);
 - Israel as an advanced American base to prevent the emergence and containment of any unfriendly regional power threatening the sources and supply of energy (Egypt under Nasser; Iran after the 1979 Islamic revolution; and Iraq after the invasion of Kuwait in 1991), and to prevent any inroad of Soviet influence;
 - The effort to contain “Islamic fundamentalism” then the war on terror in the 1990s and the 2000s; and
 - Trade by ensuring wide markets for American goods.

Arab

This panel will discuss the stances of traditional Arab regime toward the US.

- A Western defensive military shield in light of the withdrawal of the traditional colonial powers—particularly with the Soviet expansion into the region via allied leftist regimes like Egypt, South Yemen, and Syria—and following the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran;
- Developing sources of energy and the need for modern technology;
- A security umbrella for regimes allied with the US to preempt military coups or popular uprisings; and
- Securing legitimacy through close links with the US, rather than by popular consent, particularly after the Arab Spring revolutions.

Panel 2: Culture

This panel focuses on the cultural dimension of Arab-American relations.

America

- Stereotypes of Arabs in the US
- The role of stereotypes in US policy formulation

Arab

- Stereotypes of the US in the Arab world
- The image of the US in the Arab collective imagination (e.g., “America the supporter of Israeli aggression,” “Imperialist America,” “America at war with Islam”)

Panel 3: The US and Political Islam

America

- 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?
- American interests 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 support for dictatorial regimes); and
- Egypt and the US’s position Morsi’s removal.

Panel 4: The US's New Approach

- The effect of 9/11 on the US strategy in the region
- The effect of US embroilment in Iraq and Afghanistan and the undefined war on terror
- The decline 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 in Southeast Asia and the growth of Russian influence
- The Obama administration and the attempt to orient toward Southeast Asia
- The return to the Arab region in light of the Arab Spring revolutions and their reverberations
- The Arab-Israeli conflict
- Redefining US alliances in the region through regional balances of power (e.g., Iran)
- The US envisaged approach to the Turkey-Israel-US role in the region
- Sunni and Shiite factors in the new US approach to the region
- A possible US retreat from the Arab region in light of its growing energy self-sufficiency, its economic decline, and its efforts to focus on other, more strategic locations

Panel 5: The US's Waning Influence and Attempts to Redefine its Allies

- The extent of awareness in the region on the depth of the changes in the US approach to the region and its Arab allies
- Realistic options for finding an alternative defensive shield other than the US or at least to diversify
- Chances of building a joint Arab approach working to revive a transnational Arab entity and the feasibility of such an entity
- Should support be provided to an Arab-American lobby in the US?