

Pax Americana and Middle East Regional Order

Written by Tiphaine Ferry

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TIPHAINE FERRY, APR 13 2013

To What Extent Did the *Pax Americana* in the Middle-East After the Cold War Bring New Regional Order, and Why or Why Not ?

Pax Americana is a complex concept with many definitions during the twentieth century. Historians describe *Pax Americana* as the period of relative peace that followed World War II. In international relations, however – and this is the definition we will focus on in this essay – it relates to the “post-war system of international political economy that was established and maintained, in its various manifestations, by the US hegemon.”[1] This essay will nevertheless also address the US military and politico-cultural pre-eminence, and all the factors that make the US the *world's policeman*. For the purposes of this study, we will be using Garry J. Dorian’s timeline as an appropriate time frame: “the ideology of American global pre-eminence originated during the presidency of George H. W. Bush, developed in the 1990s, gained power with the election of George W. Bush, and reshaped American foreign policy after September 11, 2001.”[2] Regarding the unipolarity that took place after the end of the Cold War, Simon Murden makes the following observation: “Western hegemony had profound implications for non-Western states and societies.”[3] To what extent can we apply this observation on the Middle East? Is the Middle East part of this “non-Western” set, or does the Middle East somehow remains impervious to the Western hegemony?

This essay aims at proving that the *Pax Americana* had a moderate impact on the Middle East, and that the new regional order promised by George H. W. Bush in the context of the post-Cold War *Pax Americana* was never achieved. It raises various questions, but the first we have to ask ourselves are: Was there a change in the Middle East regional order after the end of the Cold War? And did the *Pax Americana* bring it? Since those questions need to be qualified rather than simplified, this directly lead to asking, “To what extent did the *Pax Americana* participated in creating a new regional order in the Middle East?”

Hudson, in his 1992 article “The Middle East under Pax Americana: How new, how orderly?”, sketches four scenarios about the impact of the *Pax Americana* on the Middle East. The first scenario mentions a new order, more stable; the second one, a new order but less stable; the third, no new order and the region remains fairly stable; and the fourth, no new order but an important instability in the region.[4] It is interesting to see that those scenarios were drawn at the time of the events, but that academics are still arguing over it nowadays. The liberal trend seems to believe the *Pax Americana* brought a new order in the region, whereas the classical argument is that the Middle East regional order stayed the same.[5] This essay’s argument will be closer to Hudson’s fourth model, “old order, but more tension.” [6] It will thus be argued that the *Pax Americana* modified the US perception of the Middle East, without having the desired impact on the region. Until September 11, we could even argue that the new order is mostly reached in the White House and its global perception, rather than in the Middle East. This essay will thus present the failure of George H. W. Bush’s promise at the end of the Cold War. It is in fact irrefutable that conflicts and violence outbreaks continued to occur in the Middle East after the Cold War. We will though argue that the impact of the *Pax Americana* on the Middle East should be qualified rather than generalized.

This essay will be articulated over four major points. First, it will look closer to the definition of the *Pax Americana*, and question Bush’s intentions and whether the *Pax Americana* imply the same as what President T. Roosevelt called the “World policeman” role. Then, we will focus on the notion of regional order: addressing the changes on the Middle East regional order through a brief historical overview, to argue that the changes in the regional order depend

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mainly on the internal actors, before, during and after the Cold War. Thirdly, we will observe how the intifadas confirm this observation. We will then stress the strategic importance of the US/UN relationship in the context of the *Pax Americana*, and look at the 2003 Iraq war. Can the US be the “world’s policeman” without surpassing the UN authority?

My approach will be rather analytical, and I will use secondary sources: articles and books from various academics such as Hudson, Hinnebusch, Lieven, and Karsh, but also primary sources such as Bush’s speeches. I will not only use the specific literature existing on the *Pax Americana* but also a more general literature on the Post-Cold War era, the US foreign policy and the notion of regional order in the Middle East (especially Hinnebusch’s work on the Middle East politics).

What is the *Pax Americana*?

The issue of defining the *Pax Americana* cannot be undermined, nor reduced to a point in the introduction of this essay, because it is a contested notion relying on the apparition of a new doctrine after the end of the Cold War. This is why this first part will focus on exploring Bush’s intentions, and different notions often assimilated to the *Pax Americana* such as “world policeman” or “New World Order.” I will also present here the evidences of the US hegemony after the Cold War, and the way it was perceived.

According to most of the academics, including Michael T. Klare[7], the *Pax Americana* describes the US capacity to use force to protect their assets and interests all around the world, but also to enforce “certain rules of international behaviour.”[8] This *Pax Americana* is presented at the end of the Cold War for the second time, the first being the period following the end of World War II. It is presented by the elder G. Bush as a *Pax Universalis*[9]. It is in fact important to notice that the US administration usually rejects the *Pax Americana*, as shown in the President Bush annual UN address in 1991:

“You may wonder about America’s role in the new world I have described. Let me assure you, the United States has no intention of striving for a Pax Americana. However, we will remain engaged. We will not retreat and pull back into isolationism. We will offer friendship and leadership. And in short, we seek a pax universalis built upon shared responsibilities and aspirations.”[10]

In the same way, the official trend under Bush’s presidency seems to be to refuse the appellation of “world policeman”. In 1990, Senator John McCain writes: “the U.S. may not be the world’s policeman but its power projection forces will remain the free world’s insurance policy.” [11] In 1991, General Colin Powell states: “I like to say that we are not the superpower or super-policeman of the world, but when there is trouble somewhere in the world that we least expect, it’s the United States that gets called on to perform the role of being the cop on the beat.”[12] If the American officials reject those terms, it is irrefutable that they embrace the image of the US as the new hegemon, and the only superpower. We will now look more closely at the evidence of the US being the only superpower, and the hegemon, before focusing on Bush’s promises concerning the use of this power. The American power, at the end of the Cold War, is military and economical. In 1991, Klare writes: “The cold war era, which ended with the tearing down of the Berlin wall, was characterized by U.S. supremacy in the military, economic and political sphere – Pax Americana I. The gulf conflict inaugurates a new era characterized by continuing U.S. military supremacy accompanied by neither economic nor political strength – Pax Americana II.”[13] This assertion is shared by Murden, who writes: “US outspending of all other major countries combined purchased military power that was generations ahead of what anyone else had, although George W. Bush became president in 2001 insisting that the United States must do even more. [...]The United States would lead the Western hegemony as long as the key European states did not mobilize and coordinate their own military potential.”[14]

This military supremacy is the key to the role of “world’s policeman” that is embraced by the US at the end of the Cold War. Though the impact on the Middle East regional order is discussed by academics, there seems to be a fair consensus over the way the US military power stabilized the other parts of the globe at this time. The US military power was considered, as the Bush administration liked to stress, as a form of guarantee of security. Lieven even notices: “US military spending soon equalled that of the next six states put together – and four of those were US

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allies.”[15] But the US supremacy after the fall of the Soviet Union goes further than a military supremacy. The US was, at the fall of the East-West antagonism, the only reference in terms of military and economical power, but also in term of currency, language and lifestyle[16]. What is striking in Bush’s rhetoric at this time is his will to create a “New World order”, that is to say, under US leadership. As far as the Middle East is concerned, there is no doubt that Bush wanted to create a new – peaceful – regional order. In August 1990, he said,:

“We succeeded in the struggle for freedom in Europe because we and our allies remained stalwart. Keeping the peace in the Middle East will require no less. We’re beginning a new era. This new era can be full of promise, an age of freedom, a time of peace for all peoples.”[17]

We, though, have to be careful with this rhetoric. Firstly, because it appears that Bush admitted that the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict had to come from the local actors and not from the US. Along with Baker, the Secretary of State, Bush often affirmed that the US role was in allowing the two parties to negotiate[18]. Secondly, because “the official talk emanating from Washington about a ‘New World Order’ and a new regional order for the Middle East must be understood as a political rhetoric rather than serious analysis.”[19] In any case, it appears that George H. W. Bush considers the old order as bygone after the fall of the East-West bipolarity, and intends to create the new global order under the US leadership that imposes itself considering the US military, economical and political supremacy. This New World Order, presented by Bush and Baker, would be based on international peace and cooperation.

At the same time, and in correlation, we observe a reassertion of the *Pax Americana* concept[20]. Along with the reassertion comes the emergence of a new threat in the American discourse. There is a change of paradigm after the end of the Cold War in the American military strategy. This comes with the perception of a new enemy that can be identified in the growing regional powers. In May 1989, G. H. W. Bush declares: “The emergence of regional powers is rapidly changing the strategic landscape. In the Middle East, in South Asia, in our own hemisphere, a growing number of nations are acquiring advanced and highly destructive capabilities – in some cases, weapons of mass destruction, and the means to deliver them.[21]” There are without a doubt changes in the American military model, but also a change on the perception of the use of force to protect Western interests, and, with it, a change in the perception of the Middle East regional order. The US intervention in Iraq in 1990 illustrates perfectly those changes, in the military strategy as well as in the perception of the region.

After this overview of the US hegemony and of the concept of *Pax Americana*, we will now focus on the concept of regional order. Apparently, the US has the will and the means to change the regional order in the Middle East, and to create a new order based on peace and collaboration, and under the US leadership. So why do they have so little impact on the regional order?

Changes in the Regional Order in the Middle East Before 9/11

First, we will present an historical overview of the changes in the regional order in the Middle East from the 1950s to the Cold War to argue that the changes in the regional order are rather the result of internal changes in the balance of power. We will then observe why the US is not the one to trigger the structural changes.

Michael Leifer, on his work on South East Asia, intends to define the notion of regional order:

“Regional order is a high-sounding aspiration which is difficult to define with any precision. In general terms, it means the existence of a stable structure of regional inter-governmental relationships informed by common assumptions about the bases of inter-state conduct. In other words, regional order refers to a condition of security obtaining between regional states which is upheld by their deferring to a formal or informal set of rules.”[22]

In most of the literature, including in Hinnebusch and in Hudson, we can find the notion of regional order likened to the notion of regional system. Hinnebusch’s work is particularly helpful when one needs to assess the changes in the Middle East regional order[23]. In the 1950s and the 1960s, the regional order described by Hinnebusch is centred on two elements: first, the creation of Israel, and second, the power of Nasser in Egypt:

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“As such, from the mid-1950s through the mid-1960s the regional order combined features of the balance of power with those of a supra-state community. On the one hand, the sovereignty of the individual states and the status quo state system were preserved by anti-hegemonic balancing and, in a crisis, outside intervention. On the other hand, trans-state Pan-Arabism (amid global bi-polarity) reduced the historic permeability of the system to outside penetration and confined inter-Arab competition to the ideological level.”[24]

He also describes the fundamental instability of this regional order. According to him, the first time a new regional order appeared in this period was in 1967. The new regional order was then shaped by the two Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973. In the 1970s, he describes the apparition of a system known as “the Arab Triangle.”[25] After the fall of Egyptian leadership over a Pan-Arab system (with the death of Nasser), the regional order organised itself around three pillars: the largest power (Egypt), the richest (Saudi Arabia) and the most Pan-Arab (Syria). This Arab Triangle was at the time replacing the Egyptian hegemony in bringing cohesion to the region. The Arab States system was functioning with a regional order of its own. After the 1973 war, and due to the irreconcilable disagreement of the three states over the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, we can observe the creation of a new regional order again, which Hinnebusch calls “Egypt’s separate peace”.

The two following events leading to the appearance of new regional orders in the Middle East are the Iranian Revolution, and the Iran-Iraq war. We can conclude from this brief historical overview that none of the radical changes in the Middle East order were triggered by the US, or by any other Occidental power. As Hudson expresses it, there are, in the Middle East, deep attempts of penetration from Western countries, but no single external power could dominate the region. There seems to be a sort of opacity of the Middle East regional order to external penetration. This is why I will argue that the *Pax Americana* did not create a new regional order in the Middle East, but rather participated in stabilising the unchanged Middle East order. “One must conjure with the argument that President’s Bush’s Gulf operation, even if carried out in the name of a New World Order, was intended to stabilise the old Middle East order, and it may have succeeded in doing so.”[26]

George H. W. Bush actually seems to have inherited a fairly peaceful and favourable context in the Middle East. The Persian Gulf is drafting its way out of a ten-year war between Iran and Iraq, the PLO was no immediate threat and “the Middle East had at least been defused to the point where American policymakers could think of [...] clearing a lane toward stability.”[27] The first considerable application of the *Pax Americana* in the Middle East indeed happens in 1991, when an American-led coalition intervenes in Kuwait. The intervention of the US after the Iraq invasion of Kuwait has to be understood as a part of the *Pax Americana*, but did not fundamentally change the regional order. After this episode, “Much of the world had acknowledged America’s hegemony in the region,”[28] and it seemed to have more impact on the US than it had on the Middle East region. It led to the Madrid Peace Conference, where the US could demonstrate their will to secure and establish peace on the region, as well as their hope to be the architect of the new peace framework. The peace conference finally ended up in a deadlock. Oren describes the Gulf War in these words: “American arms had defeated a brutal aggressor in the Middle-East and liberated a loyal ally. But the United States had restored tribal rule to Kuwait, rather than instituting representative government, and enabled Saddam to retain his homicidal regime.”[29]

Thus, no new order was achieved and the peace could not be reached. However, some academics (including Oren) argue that there was indeed a new order after the Gulf War, but they all seem to admit that this “new order” was very similar to the pre-war order. Oren even states, “the new world order appeared virtually indistinguishable” from the old.”[30] The changes were mainly in the representations, as argued before. Indeed the first Gulf War established the rules of a new military paradigm, while the perception of the US adversaries changed in the White House. Some academics, including Quandt, also admit that there was a change of perception of US power in the Middle East: “Anti-American sentiment was on the rise in the Arab world, fuelled, perhaps, by a sense of vulnerability in a one-superpower world, and reflecting as well the growing appeal of Islamic radicalism.”[31] This first attempt to attempt to modify the regional order in the context of the *Pax Americana* also had an impact on the perception of the *Pax Americana* itself. By failing at preventing the invasion of Kuwait, the US showed the limits of the American influence in a “New World Order.”[32] On the other hand, it is important to mention that this lack of effect of the *Pax Americana* on the Middle East regional order is contested in the literature, and is at the centre of a long-lasting academic debate. Hudson’s article highlights very well this debate by presenting both the liberal and the classical

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argument. In fact, the liberal argument sustains that the Gulf War resulted in deep structural changes in the regional order.

To assess the lack of structural change in the regional order during the *Pax Americana* period, it might as well be interesting to look at the US incapacity to prevent the outbursts of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The Arab-Israeli Conflict and the *Pax Americana*

After the Gulf War, the Americans seem committed to push the Arab States and Israel toward negotiations. At this time, the perspective of a resolution of the conflict is oriented toward two tracks: the Madrid Conference and the Oslo Process. Those two tracks are interesting regarding the *Pax Americana*, since they both show the willingness of the US officials, and prove their inability to lead a long-lasting peace in the Middle East at the same time. If we go back to the mid-1970s, we can see that the role allocated to the US in the negotiations depended more on the internal actors than on the US themselves. We have one more example of US involvement in the Middle East without the US being the one to distribute the cards, and thus a new example of what we observed earlier: the Middle East attracts an external commitment, but does not let external actors shape its regional order.

In fact, we could consider that the role of US mediator dated back to the Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreement of 1975. This mediation was, above all, allowed by the Israeli vulnerability after the 1973 war[33]. This will fundamentally shape the role of the US as a mediator for the following steps of the peace-process. The US will, in fact, attempt to push the negotiations always further between the Arab States and Israel, but without being able to prevent the violent outbreaks that punctuate the period. It appears that the US only hosts the Oslo agreement, since they were not part of the first secret negotiations taking place in Oslo. The Clinton administration, though, immediately took over the role of implementing the negotiations after the historic handshake in front of the White House. The US had more to do with the Madrid Conference, described as “an American sponsored set of bilateral and multilateral negotiations.”[34] In 1994 and 1995, the Clinton administration seems to succeed at implementing the negotiations and keeping a relative balance in the region. The peace between Israel and Jordan, for example, can be assessed as an American achievement[35]. But they could not prevent the violence outbreak in 1996, and Peres clearly refused to hear Clinton’s voice. The region seems to still be ruled by the old regional order, without any structural changes implemented by the US attempts at stabilising the region. If the order changed in the late 1990s, it can eventually be attributed to King Hussein’s death in 1999, or to the dissolution of the Israeli government. As it was already the case before and during the Cold War, the regional order is still directed by the local actors. In September 2000, the second intifada shows the inability of the US to implement peace in the region or to prevent the violence.

Maintaining peace and being the “world’s policeman” at this time seem to be the function of the US but also the one of the UN, even though the latter seems to be rather absent of the Arab-Israeli negotiations of the 1990s. The importance of the UN was, on the contrary, proved during the first Gulf War. Few years later, with the US-Iraq war, it seems like the US actually has to surpass the UN authority to secure its position of “world’s policeman.” In this context, the importance of the Iraq war in the *Pax Americana* takes a more global sense, and finds a wider application than the Middle-East theatre.

The Iraq War, the US Hegemony and the UN

First, I will present a brief historical overview of the relationship between the US and the UN before the context of the *Pax Americana*. Indeed, it is necessary to understand how the US engaged with the UN before the end of the Cold War. I will then assess the relationship between the UN and the US after the Cold War, and argue that they both have a similar mandate as promoters of peace and Western values and interests[36]. This will lead us to ask the question: can we talk about a “multilateralist hegemony”[37] of the US during the *Pax Americana*? We will finally consider the Iraq war as a shift, not only in the US-UN relationship but also in the US hegemony and its role in the Middle East.

During the 1950s, it appears that the US starts considering the UN as “a platform to unite the world behind US leadership. [...] US support for the organisation was so strong that during the 1950s, US contributions paid for half of the UN’s budget.” [38] During the Cold War, the UN definitely showed support for the US and gave legitimacy to

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American views and interventions around the world. With the decolonization era came some changes in the UN because of the increasing number of members. The new members indeed tend to be more critical toward the US foreign policy and reject the US superiority inside the organisation. At this time, the US “came to perceive the UN as bureaucratic and cumbersome.”[39] During the 1970s, the relationship between the US and the UN deteriorated, until President Carter tried to revive the dialogue with the UN despite their disagreement over the definition of Zionism and over the idea of a new economic order, largely supported by third world countries. But the crisis in the relationship between the US and the UN got worse in the 1980s, and the hostility of President Reagan toward the UN resulted in the US withdrawal from several UN agencies.

The situation seems to take a new turn with the Iraq invasion of Kuwait, and the US need for support from the international community in the context of the US-led coalition. George H. W. Bush indeed used the UN “to provide a multilateral coalition framework and to legitimize the essentially unilateral mobilization of Desert Storm.”[40] After the Cold War, the focus changed in the perception of the UN, giving priority to the Security Council, which determines “what constitutes a threat to international peace and security.”[41] In the post-Cold War era, the UN often legitimized the use of force in the context of US-led coalitions (in Iraq but also in Haiti, in 1994, for example). It appears that the UN and the US agreed to work together for the preservation of the Western values and interests, and for the promotion of peace. According to Ian Johnstone, “The Security Council would never have acted as it did in Somalia, Bosnia and Haiti without US leadership, nor would the Kosovo intervention have occurred.”[42] We can then talk about a “multilateralist”[43] hegemony, even though it will not last long: George W. Bush’s election in 2000 will mark the fall of this “multilateralist” foreign policy to a more “unilateralist” one.

In the direct aftermath of September 11, though, the US tried to work hand-in-hand with the UN to legitimize the use of force in their war against terrorism. One could even conclude that the US showed opportunism in the way they wanted the UN to approve the condemnation of terrorism without constraining their foreign policy. Regarding this opportunism, Johnstone mentions a multilateralism “à la carte.”[44] As he further explains:

“The response to September 11 features three especially revealing normative developments: the US-led military campaign against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, justified on the basis of self-defence; the UN-led political process that culminated in the Bonn agreement and the subsequent peacekeeping and peace-building efforts in Afghanistan; and the adoption of Resolution 1373, and unprecedented legislative act by the Council that bypasses the laborious process of multilateral treaty making by selecting provisions from various terrorism conventions and converting them into universally binding obligations.”[45]

The Iraq intervention changed this situation, since the US decided to maintain their plan of action even after the UN disapproved of the two reasons the US were relying on: self-defence against terrorism and enforcement of the resolutions. It appeared that the US then claimed superiority over the UN and tried to minimize the importance and the legitimacy of the Security Council:

“His [G. W. Bush’s] message to the world on September 12, ‘either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists’, was in effect a declaration of American hegemony. When he spoke to the General Assembly in September 2002, his language suggested not that the US needed UN support for military action, but that the UN was being given a last chance to prove its ‘relevance’ and usefulness’ to the US.”[46]

If we include the Iraq invasion in the *Pax Americana* context, this is a real break-through in the policy, showing that the US is not bound by international rules anymore. How did that affect the regional order in the Middle East? After September 11, the 2003 US invasion of Iraq was a more probable catalyst for the change in regional order in the Middle East. Garry J. Dorian even claims, “The deeper reason that America invaded Iraq was to consolidate American power in the Middle East and change the political culture of the region.”[47] He argues that the main goal was to replace Saddam with a pro-American regime. In this view, the invasion of Iraq has to be considered as a part of the *Pax Americana* policy, in the sense that it was meant to secure the hegemonic place of the United States in global politics. However, we have to underline the debate going on about the Iraq War being part of the *Pax Americana* policy.

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Once again, the changes brought by this intervention are mostly in the perceptions of the US inside and outside its border. In fact, the Iraq war seems to have reshaped the American foreign policy for the rest of Bush's mandate. However, the opacity of the regional order in the Middle East toward deep Western penetrations seemed to hold even after the US intervention in Iraq.

To conclude, the impact of the *Pax Americana* on the regional order in the Middle East must be qualified. We cannot deny the American hegemony after the end of the Cold War. The US indeed shows an unequalled military supremacy, and also shows superiority in terms of influence in the international community. Though, George H. W. Bush's promise of New World Order, and new regional order in the Middle East, was proven a failure. In fact, he appeared to promise, after the fall of the Soviet Union, that the US would lead a new order based on peace and cooperation. The Middle East actually seemed to be more impervious to the attempts of the US to stabilise the region and create a new order than the President predicted. Despite numerous attempts and some achievements in the Middle East, the US could not impose themselves or their leadership, and failed in creating a new order in the region. This might be attributed to the very nature of the Middle East regional order that has somehow been impenetrable for decades. In fact, the historical overview of the apparitions of new regional order in the Middle East shows that it has never been triggered by external powers, but always been the result of internal changes in the balance of power. The impact of the *Pax Americana* on the regional order in the Middle East should however be considered as moderate, but not as inexistent. If anything, the *Pax Americana* resulted in changes in the way the Middle East perceived the US as well as in the perceptions of the US in general.

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[2] Dorian, Gary J. *Imperial Designs: Neoconservatism and the New Pax Americana* (Page 1)

[3] Murden, *Islam, the Middle East, and the New Global Hegemony* (page 8)

[4] Hudson, "The Middle East under Pax Americana: How new, how orderly?"

[5] c.f. L. C. Brown, or see Hudson, "The Middle East under Pax Americana: How new, how orderly?", page 311.

[6] Hudson, "The Middle East under Pax Americana: How new, how orderly?", page 314.

[7] Bennis, *Altered States, a Reader in the New World Order*, chapter "Pax Americana: US Military Policy in the Post-Cold War Era" by Michael T. Klare (page 55)

[8] Ibid.

[9] President Bush annual UN address. 23 september 1991, 46th session of the UN general Assembly.

[10] Ibid.

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- [11] Bennis, *Altered States, a Reader in the New World Order*, chapter "Pax Americana: US Military Policy in the Post-Cold War Era" by Michael T. Klare (page 56)
- [12] Ibid. Page 57
- [13] Klare, « Pax Americana II »
- [14] Murden, *Islam, the Middle East, and the New Global Hegemony*. Page 6.
- [15] Lieven, « The Secret Policemen's Ball : The United States, Russia and the international order after 11 september » Page 246.
- [16] Nye, « Limits of American Power » Page 545.
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Written by: Tiphaine Ferry
Written at: King's College London
Written for: Stacey Gutkowski
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