

US Foreign Policy in the Middle East from Counter-Orientalism to Neo-Orientalism

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Theories of international relations (IR) usually deal with repetitive events in world affairs, as these theories attempt to uncover law-like regularities by isolating a phenomenon (the dependent variable) and then examining which independent variable(s) leads to that phenomenon in a cause-effect relationship (if X then Y). However, theories of IR rarely address change or attempt to develop a theory that can explain change, simply because change is unpredictable. This article however attempts to explain when a change in US foreign policy in the Middle East occurs and what factor(s) lead to a change in US policy. The Middle East has its own unique culture and regional dynamics of intra- and inter-state relationships. An elected U.S. President typically has very little knowledge of this culture and dynamics. Therefore, the assumption of this article is that a U.S. president must rely on an existing problem-solving model that would guide his foreign policy toward the region. The question is how a problem-solving model is consolidated and what causes a shift from one model to another.

From Crisis to Change

This article utilizes two sets of theories: social constructivism in order to explain continuity in existing policy, and the eruption of a major crisis to explain change. The theory of social constructivism claims that reality is a reflection of ideas, where a consensus around a set of ideas guides the behavior of statesmen and their decision-making process and prompts policymakers to construct reality based on these ideas (Berger & Luckmann, 2016; Checkel, 2004; Wendt, 1999). The article claims that a set of ideas constitutes a problem-solving model that guides US foreign policy during a historical bloc. During each historical bloc, there was only one set of ideas or problem-solving model that dominated and guided the US foreign policy towards the region. As long as the set of ideas was not proven to be wrong, such a set ties the minds of policymakers, where they cannot think outside of it. In this sense, ideas that run counter to the mindset are rejected. Thus, reality becomes a reflection of intersubjectivity among policymakers.

The article argues that the eruption of a major crisis in the Middle East usually proves though that the existing problem-solving model is no longer valid, thus triggering a change in US foreign policy towards the region, which leads to both the bankruptcy of the existing set of ideas (model) that has had hitherto guided the policy and bestowed on its legitimacy and common sense, and the consolidation of a new set of ideas that would seek to address the roots of the crisis (Halabi, 2009). A major crisis may involve a single event that occurs abruptly in a short period of time, such as the 1973-74 Energy Crisis, the Iranian revolution in 1978 or the events of September 11, or it may involve a protracted event, such as the civil war in Iraq or Afghanistan, which taught the hegemon in the hard way that not only the goals that were originally set are unattainable, but also the plan that was implemented does not match the circumstances on the ground (Hermann, 1990). A major crisis leads to the bankruptcy of the existing model and gives rise to a new set of ideas that would address the causes of the crisis and provide new guidelines for dealing with the post-crisis period (Gustavsson, 1999).

According to Hermann, change could be leader-driven, bureaucracy advocacy, domestic restructuring or an external shock (Hermann, 1990: 3). This article claims that despite change in the Administration, one can notice continuity in US foreign policy, while change was merely triggered by external shocks that took place in the Middle East. These external shocks include: the Yom-Kippur War that resulted in the Oil Embargo, the Iranian Revolution, and 9/11

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events and the failure of US Intervention in realizing its initial goals in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Hermann also points out four levels of change: Adjustment Changes, Program Changes, Problem/Goal Changes, and International Orientation Changes (p. 5). This study claims that after both the Yom-Kippur and Iranian Revolution, Program Changes were figured out, where the US changed its policy course, while the goals remained constant: stabilizing the Middle East, without promoting democratization.

Stabilizing the Middle East though is predicated on the fact that some countries in the region are indispensable for the US as well as the whole world: Saudi Arabia (the jewel in the crown), UAE, Qatar and Kuwait. All of these countries are major exporters of either oil or natural gas. There are two questions that remain unanswered: First, whether Jordan and Egypt should also be included in this list; and second, what would the US do if the regime in any of these countries is in danger of being overthrown by an Islamist movement, especially since the US has no plan B for what to do next. Would the US intervene at all, and would it try to restore the same old regime against the will of the people? With regard to Jordan, it should be emphasized that fundamentalist sentiments in the Hashemite Monarchy are also influenced by tensions within Israel over the holy sites and the Temple Mount in particular. Tensions within Israel over the Temple Mount intensify pressure on the monarchy to retaliate, as Jordan is the custodian of this third holiest site for Muslims.

The 1973-74 Energy Crisis: Stabilizing the Middle East through peace process

The Yom-Kippur War instigated 1973-74 energy crisis, which directly led to the exigency of instigating a peace process between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Prior to the crisis, however, the U.S. felt no pressure to initiate such a process based on the prevailed assumption at the time that Israel's Arab neighbors were relatively too weak and deterred by Israel's military might, while their demands for full Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories as a precondition for ending belligerency were unacceptable on Israel, hence unrealistic from an American point of view (Quandt, 2010: 64-65; Kissinger, 1979: 559). The Yom Kippur War proved to the Nixon/Ford Administrations that the reality on the ground was different, as Arab states were unhappy with the status quo and thus undeterred. The outbreak of the October War and the ensuing energy crisis resulting from the Arab Oil Embargo led to a sharp rise in the price of the barrel of oil and stagflation (i.e. inflation and rising unemployment) (Quandt, 2010: 98-100). Thus, it was not only the war itself that compelled the U.S. to change its political course, but more importantly, the energy crisis that was felt by every American household and the accumulation of Petro-dollars in the hands of a few traditional monarchies (Kissinger, 1999: 664). The energy crisis proved to the US that the pre-1973 status quo was abnormal and that stability in the Middle East cannot be maintained through military might and deterrence, but through a peace process.

The Iranian Revolution: The advent of neo-orientalism and neo-liberal reforms

The 1979 Iranian Revolution gave birth to the ideas of Neo-Orientalism, which refuted the old Orientalist assumptions that Muslim people passively and blindly obey their leaders, whether the leader happens to be a descendant of a monarchical family, a former military officer, or a secular or religious figure (Al-Kassimi, 2021; Hazran, 2012: 116; Kedourie, 1994: 7). This crisis also had domestic political repercussions in the U.S. and outrage in the American public opinion following the occupation of the U.S. embassy in Tehran, the ensuing American hostage crisis, and the sharp rise in the price of oil barrel, which reached about \$41 in 1981 at current prices (Houghton, 2001: 5; Sick, 1985: 31). Prior to the Iranian revolution, the set of ideas informed US policymakers that the domestic arena within the Arab/Islamic states is stable due to the assumption that Arabs/Muslims always defer to their leader and that civil society is too weak in these countries, thus the US should mainly intervene in the regional balance of power in order to protect its allies, but without meddling in their internal affairs. After the revolution, neo-Orientalists claimed that Muslims are always eager to establish an Islamic regime that reflects their religious beliefs and values (Al-Kassimi, 2021; Kumar, 2012), and that they despise a secular authoritarian leader who adopts and implements Western-oriented policies, especially in domestic affairs, as the Shah of Iran attempted to do through the White Revolution during the 1960s. Thus, neo-Orientalists claim a direct link between the White Revolution and the Islamist one, following which, the US began embracing the ideas of stabilizing Middle Eastern countries through the ideas of neoliberal reforms.

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The US extrapolated that reforming the economies of Arab/Muslim states and transforming them into market-oriented economies would create an efficient allocation of resources, generate more jobs, attract foreign direct investments, and create more wealth, which would trickle down to the lower classes and would dissuade ordinary Muslims from joining or supporting Islamist movements (Halabi, 2009: 88). However, the U.S. was reluctant of promoting democratic reforms, fearing that free and fair elections would bring anti-American, Islamist groups to power. Thus, neo-Orientalism continued to adhere to the Orientalist ideas that the Islamic world is neither amenable to embrace modernization nor democratization, where the assumption is that Muslim societies are anti-Western and anti-democratic in nature (Al-Kassimi, 2021); however, at the individual level, neo-Orientalists maintain that Muslims aspire to realize a decent standard of living and a normal life under capitalism, where members of the middle- and working-class would be less inclined as individuals to support Islamist movements against an incumbent leader (Sadowski, 1993; Samiei, 2010: 1148). Neo-orientalists contend that poverty, disparity in the distribution of wealth and corrupt regimes induce the lower classes to lend their support to Islamist movements, where in their view, free-market reforms would boost the living standards of the lower classes and curtail their support to the Islamists (Waterbury, 1998: 160).

Another set of ideas that the Iranian Revolution undermined was the US participation in the regional balance of power. Till 1979, the consensus in the US was that the Arab/Islamic states were able to take care of subversive groups within their border, whereas the presumption was that the US should merely take care of their external threats, by participating in the regional balance of power. Thus, there was hitherto a division of labor between the US and its regional allies, where the former was responsible for the external security of the latter and the regional stability by participating in the regional balance of power, while US allies focused on their internal security. The Iranian revolution shattered this set of ideas and induced the US to start consolidating new ideas that would maintain internal stability in addition to the regional one.

September 11, 2001: democratization strategy and its spillover effect

The events of 9/11, 2001, likewise, refuted in the eyes of U.S. policymakers the neo-Orientalist notions that Muslims constitute essentialist, immutable societies that reject Western freedom and are not amenable to embrace modernization and democratization (Halabi, 2009: 103). The Bush Jr. administration solidified counter-Orientalist mindset by assuming that there was a connection between the lack of democratization in the Middle East and global terrorism, even though the perpetrators of this mega-terrorist attack came from upper middle-class families and their goal was to force the U.S. to withdraw from Saudi Arabia, in particular. The administration came out with a roughly two-step grand strategy for the Middle East. First is U.S. military intervention to remove two authoritarian regimes from power: the Taliban and Saddam regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, respectively, and eliminate the insurgent groups in those two countries. And second is that the fight against jihadist terrorist insurgent movements, such as Al-Qaeda, should be accompanied with democratization. The administration hoped that the establishment of two democracies in Afghanistan and Iraq would constitute Islamic democratic prototypes and would inevitably allow the democratization process to spillover into other countries in the region (McKinley, 2021). However, after the failure of the two missions of nation building in both Iraq and Afghanistan, including the failure to achieve either of the two steps of the grand strategy, the Biden Administration has finally decided to abandon the counter-Orientalist ideas (Rasmussen, 2021). The question is whether this administration would reluctantly re-embrace the neo-Orientalist ones? Given the failure of democratization in both Afghanistan and Iraq, Neo-Orientalism has inevitably become the administration's default strategy and the standard set of ideas. Yet, this article claims that there is still another option called semi-democratization, as explained below.

Neo-Orientalism

The main difference between Orientalism and neo-Orientalism is that the former perceives societies in the Arab-Islamic world as passive and ones that always defer to their leader. This model was shattered following the Iranian Revolution, which led to the rise of the Neo-Orientalist model. Neo-Orientalism perceives these societies as powerful enough and always aspire to establish an Islamist regime that blocks the penetration of Western values into the Arab-Islamic societies. Therefore, the model that was developed and is succinctly summarized in the words of Robert Pelletreau, former Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs:

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certain manifestations of the Islamic revival are intensely anti-Western and aim not only at elimination of Western influences but at resisting any form of cooperation with the West or modernizing evolution at home. Such tendencies are clearly hostile to U.S. interests.... Because we believe that opening political systems to participation offers the only proven means to preserve civil liberties and render governments accountable to the will of the people, we're opposed to those who, regardless of religion, oppress minorities, preach intolerance, practice terrorism or violate human rights. We're suspicious of those who would use the democratic process to come to power only to destroy that process in order to retain power and political dominance (Pelletreau Jr, Pipes & Esposito, 1994: 3).

In a different interview, Pelletreau outlines the strategy of stabilizing the Middle East and realizing US interests:

We support free-market economic reforms in the region and are encouraged by progress in countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, and Israel. Egypt and Algeria have launched important market-oriented initiatives. We also encourage movement toward more participatory government and respect for human rights and the rule of law. We encourage practical measures to foster greater political freedom and openness. We do this not because we are trying to impose Western models of society and government on the Middle East, but because experience has taught us that governments must be seen as responding to the aspirations of their people and acting for the benefit of their people in order to ensure long-term allegiance and stability (Pelletreau, 1996).

In short, according to Pelletreau, the U.S. should encourage free market economies, and limited political openness that on the one hand would encourage more political freedom and accountability, but one that cannot be used by Islamists to come to power.

Analyzing the causes of the failure of nation-building in general and the democratization of Iraq and Afghanistan in particular is beyond the scope of this article. What is certain is that Iraq has been mired in a sectarian civil war between Sunnis and Shiites, a predictable outcome of both the Orientalist and Neo-Orientalist models, while the American (read: Western) intervention in Iraq not only failed to foresee the rise of the insurgent Islamist groups, let alone eliminate them, but inadvertently led to the rise of Al-Qaeda affiliated groups that culminated in the consolidation of Islamic State reign over parts of Syria and Iraq (Stansfield, 2014). These movements perceived the U.S. intervention as a crusade that should be defeated at all costs. The Shia-led government in Baghdad was perceived as illegitimate by Sunnis, who sought to overthrow it, while state institutions remained weak and unable to impose order and stability. In Afghanistan, state institutions remained weak while the democratic process failed to consolidate a legitimate regime and strong state institutions. While Islam, according to Orientalism and neo-Orientalism hindered democratization, tribalism and centrifugal forces in traditional societies like Afghanistan, which never developed loyalty to a central, remote government, hindered the consolidation of strong state institutions (Eikenberry, 2013; Berman, 2010). Thus, while both Orientalism and neo-Orientalism concur that Islam can facilitate the rise of a strong central Islamic (khalifate) regime, both models agree that Islamic and tribal forces are hostile to a strong, central democratic state.

Following the U.S.'s abandonment of Afghanistan and withdrawal of its main forces from Iraq, however, the U.S. has no intention of leaving the Middle East, simply because the region remains the major oil exporter and abandoning the Middle East would negatively impinge on the global economy and Israel's security. But while the US has no interest or desire to support democratization in the region, it is also not enthusiastic about supporting authoritarian or traditionally monarchical regimes that tarnish its reputation in the eyes of the local population. Thus, the US finds itself in a catch-22 state. Supporting non-democratic regimes would diminish its credit in the eyes of the local population, while supporting democratization is doomed to fail and would bring more chaos than stability, not to mention bringing Islamist parties to power. Given that the US has ditched the democratization and nation-building options, it was reluctantly left with the default option of continuing to support its traditional allies in the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, etc. These regimes are indispensable to the US. However, with the reintroduction of neo-Orientalism, the US has no plan B on what to do if any of these regimes are toppled, as the US has no plan to interfere in the internal affairs of these states, knowing that intervention for the sake of nation-building would be futile.

What is peculiar about the models guiding U.S. foreign policy in the post-Afghan and post-Iraq interventionist era is

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that the U.S. has run out of new ideas and is falling back on an old model that has some flaws. One of the main criticisms of neo-Orientalism is that the model perceives the culture of the Islamic world as immutable, static, monolithic, homogeneous, and uniform. As such, the model does not mandate the promotion of democratization, but also sees the promotion of democratization as a major threat to U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, because democratization, according to its proponents, would bring anti-Western Islamist parties to power. First, the model envisions cultivating relations with and strengthening the position of pragmatic, pro-Western authoritarian leaders, such as the monarchs in Jordan, the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia or President Al-Sisi of Egypt. Second, the model assumes that the Muslim societies in these states are immutable cultures that are not different in their mindset from the pre-revolution Iranians. The model ignores the impact of globalization on the young generation. In this regard, there are many Muslim citizens who genuinely aspire to live under a democratic regime and to put an end to the lack of transparency and corruption of their authoritarian regime. These citizens would perceive the U.S. foreign policy as one that strangles their aspirations and they would therefore develop anti-American attitude and may even be pushed into the ranks of the Islamist camp, which is considered the strongest stream in any Islamic society.

Third, neo-Orientalism advocates the promotion of capitalism, free trade and free market reforms that seek to maximize economic growth. However, these reforms would widen the gap between the haves and the have-nots. Furthermore, from a Gramscian perspective, capitalism in Western societies leads to stability that is underpinned by the consolidation of a strong civil society. Yet, civil society has remained weak in Middle East societies, and civil society organizations have been suppressed and consequently weakened by the local regimes. Hence, the combination of the widening of the gap between the lower classes and the rich and the weakness of civil society would also lead the working class to overthrow the regime. In short, authoritarianism drives the working class into the hands of the Islamist movements that would exploit the demands of the working class for reforms, as happened in Tunisia and Egypt after the outbreak of the uprising in these two countries in early 2011. The uprising was instigated by the young generation and was later led by the Islamist Ennahda and the Muslim Brotherhood movements in Tunisia and Egypt, respectively.

Semi-democratization

As the leader of the free world, the US cannot simply resort to brute force in order to support non-democratic, traditional regimes in the Middle East, simply because the alternative to these regimes is a fundamentalist, anti-Western one. By the same token, the US cannot afford not to intervene in the internal affairs of the above-mentioned states, simply because international law forbids intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states, given the assumption that the type of regime should be determined by domestic forces. Any abrupt revolutionary transition nonetheless from the existing pro-Western regimes into a fundamentalist anti-Western one in any of these countries would have major repercussions to world economies. Therefore, the US not only would feel obliged to intervene, but also the US should put in place pre-emptive measures that would allow it to avoid the worst-case scenario of having to fight against fundamentalist, Islamist forces that threaten to seize power.

Given the current conditions of Middle East politics, the US should encourage through peaceful means promoting semi-democratization, i.e. free parliamentary elections, yet a controlled liberalization process, similar to the system that already exists in monarchies, such as Jordan, Kuwait and Morocco (Ryan, 1998; Robinson, 1997). Semi-democratization would allow representation of society, yet would keep the authority to dismiss the parliament in the hands of the monarch or the president (in the case of Egypt) (Ryan, 1998; Robinson, 1997). The US can promote semi-democratization through diplomatic pressure, persuasion of the current regimes that it is in their interest to embrace such measures, or through financial incentives; thus, the US should resort to means that are short of the use of force. A government that would be formed would need to gain confidence from the parliament and would run the daily affairs of the country; yet foreign and security affairs would remain in the hands of the monarch/president. While promoting semi-democratization, the US should also avoid some pitfalls and learn from the experience of other semi-democracies in the region.

First, the US should avoid promoting regional, district elections, where the winner gets all, and instead, it should promote proportional elections with a threshold that would be set at around 5 percent. Given that the Islamist

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movements are considered as the most powerful political forces in any Islamic state, district elections foster the principle of winner-gets-all, would magnify Islamists' political power by leading to overrepresentation of such movements and underrepresentation of other non-religious movements. Therefore, proportional elections would allow less powerful secular movements to enter the parliament and constitute a counterbalance to the Islamists. A 5-percent threshold would at the same time prevent fragmentation in the parliament as it would block small movements from being elected. By forming a government that would gain confidence from the parliament, the government would enjoy more legitimacy and would deflect criticism from the monarch/president to the government in case something goes wrong.

Second, these semi-democracies should have a strong constitution that on the one hand protects the status of a monarch, yet limits his authority to dismiss parliament to certain outstanding circumstances. Further, the constitution should avoid referring to Shariah laws as the main or sole source of the constitution. Further, the constitution should put a limit on state expenditures and avoid the Kuwaiti democratic model of a nation of bureaucrats, where state employees are turned into an interest group, who hijack the parliament by electing MPs that serve their own interests. State employees have become the most powerful group in Kuwait, who put their interests ahead of the nation's interests (Herb, 2009).

In contrast, other monarchies, such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar are ruling their people without a parliament. A parliament constitutes a major link between society and the ruling monarchy, where its absence points to a disconnection between the two. It is possible that employing external pressure by the US on these monarchic regimes to adopt semi-democratization could be met with stiff objection by these regimes, thus severing US relations with them. Yet, the US should see the bigger picture that the persistence of the status quo may lead to an abrupt revolution similar to the 1979 Iranian revolution, where semi-democratization may stabilize these regimes for many years to come. Further, elected parliament allows better transparency in the operation of the government and provides hope for implementing reforms, based on the will of the people. Given that these states are highly vital for the operation of the world economy, the world has an interest in maintaining political stability in these states. Under these circumstances, the US should put pressure on these states to embark on a process of regulated-liberalization and controlled-democratization process.

Conclusion

This article explains the way a major crisis in the Middle East highlights the deficiency in an existing set of ideas or problem-solving model and allows the rise of a new set of ideas that aims to address the causes that led to the crisis and to stabilize the region in the post-crisis period. These crises include: the 1973/74 Yom-Kippur War and Oil Embargo, the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the 9/11 Events, and the failure of US nation-building mission in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

Following 9/11, there were both Program and Problem/Goal Changes in US policy towards the Middle East. The US embraced the use of force in order to promote democratization in the Middle East. After the bankruptcy of US policy in Iraq and Afghanistan, though there was again a change in both Program and Problem/Goal: ending US military intervention in the project of nation-building/democratization and shifting towards supporting local authoritarian regimes. Yet, the fact that the US failed to promote democratization through the use of force should not deter the US from promoting semi-democratization through cooperation and persuasion of the existing regimes. The policy of military intervention contained its own seeds of destruction: the use of force portrayed the US as an imperialistic power in the eyes of Muslims, and the policy lacked popularity among the American people. Promoting semi-democratization though would be pursued in coordination with the existing regimes and would gain the support of both the American people and the people of the targeted states.

Under this reality, it seems that the Biden Administration is relapsing back to the old neo-Orientalist set of ideas. Yet, in order to avoid alienating the masses, especially following the Arab Spring, the Biden Administration can lend its support to pro-American authoritarian regimes, and at the same time, encourage these regimes to support semi-democratic institutions combined with market-oriented economies, where Arabs/Muslims would slowly learn how to run these institutions and gradually integrate into the world economy.

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