

Marine Barjol

Midterm

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U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East

True or False?: “American foreign policy in the Middle East is primarily about oil.”

Saying that American foreign policy in the Middle East is primarily about oil would overlook the last 70 years of American foreign policy in the Middle East and what has been built in the region. The United States has cultivated relationships with multiple countries, including Israel, Egypt, and Turkey that do not have oil. Thus, America’s interests in the region are now more focused on counter terrorism, military allies and access, economic benefits, and access to crucial waterways in the region.

First, the United States’ foreign policy historically has had a strong focus on Israel, which is considered our closest and most stable ally in the region, yet Israel has little to no oil. In fact, when the U.S. became the first country to extend de facto recognition to the state of Israel, it forged strong ties between them. U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East has a focus on Israel for multiple reasons, including shared values, Israel’s ability to promote peace and stability in the region, as well as military and economic interest. Israel shares common democratic values and religious affinities (Zanotti, 26) with the U.S. and is a strong, reliable, democratic, pro-American ally in the region (Satloff Freeman, 9). In fact, since U.S.-Israel strategic relations commenced in 1973, there has been a period of continuous diplomacy with periodic outburst of wars, including Arab-Israeli wars, (Satloff Freeman, 5) with peace treaties signed with Egypt (1979) and Jordan

(1994) (Trager, 2). Moreover, it is interesting that the U.S. has an ally in the region with close economic links to the U.S. (Satloff Freeman, 4). Finally, The U.S. and Israel have extremely strong military ties. It is important to consider the military aspect of strategic U.S. interest in Israel. It is a strategic point in the Middle East for logistical reasons as they act as a proxy for U.S. strategic interests in the region as they act not only for their interest but also for American interest in the region. Also, the U.S. and Israel have multiple military arrangements. For example, Israeli facilities can be made available to the U.S. if it is ever needed as the U.S. also stocks war reserves in Israel. Moreover, those same bases are used for training by the U.S. army. Furthermore, Israel and the U.S. have had great intelligence sharing and counter terrorism activities together. Finally, U.S. aid to Israel is usually spent on military equipment produced by U.S. companies. Overall, Israel is a strong ally for the U.S. in the region and also receives a lot of support by U.S. public opinion.

Other countries from the Middle East that show that American foreign policy is not primarily about oil are Egypt and Turkey. One of the U.S.'s most important foreign policy interests in Egypt is securing priority access to its waterway, the Suez Canal. The Suez Canal is important for trade, the shipment of military equipment in the region, as well as allowing our Navy ships access to passage through the region (Trager, 2). If the United States did not have access to the Suez Canal it would be way much more expensive and take much more time to transport our equipment and for our Navy ship to access the region. Moreover, Egypt also granted over-flight rights to the United States which, similarly to the Suez Canal, cut our time and cost of access to the Middle East. Furthermore, Egypt is seen as an anchor in the Middle East because it has a large army that contributes to the stability and peace of the region, especially because of its peace treaty with Israel. The army has the support of the population, who consider

themselves to be the only Arab state that is also a nation. Finally, Egypt has become a strong ally in counter terrorism efforts, as seen in Sinai and Libya. As for Turkey, it has been a strong ally of the U.S. in the region since the Cold War and its help in countering Soviet ideology. Moreover, it is the sole NATO partner that the U.S. has in the Middle East and the U.S. looks to Turkey to defend its interest in the region when it can't or won't get involved, like the start of the Syrian Civil War. Finally, Turkey is also a military ally as well as bolstering counter terrorism efforts by letting the United States store weapons in Turkey in a similar way to Israel. Stability in the region can be seen as an important counter terrorism strategy as in times of war and conflict population are more likely to turn to extreme organization if they feel like the regime in place can't satisfy basic need (security, food and shelter).

Even though Israel, Egypt and Turkey are the countries in the Middle East that align most with United States' foreign policy, there are other countries in the region where the U.S. promotes its interests. For example, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar have been involved in counter terrorism efforts and economic ties. All of these countries invest a lot of money in the U.S. and in U.S. allies that have economic ties with the U.S., such as Great Britain. (CFR, 4 & Weinberg, 5) In addition, since 2003 (When Al-Qaeda attacked Saudi Arabia), Saudi Arabia has become a strong counter terrorism ally in the Middle East. As for the UAE, it's looking to become a dependable and proactive ally of the U.S (Roberts, 1). In fact, the UAE is trying to enforce a more Jeffersonian separation of religion and politics both domestically and abroad, and even supports anti-Islamist groups (Roberts, 3). It has also been sending troops on NATO missions and taking on a more important role in the region and present themselves as a moderate, capable, proactive Arab partner to the U.S. (Roberts, 5).

Finally, another reason why United States foreign policy in the Middle East is not primarily about oil is that the United States only imports about 24% of its oil and, of that 24%, 40% is imported from Canada. Also, the U.S. has been using fracking to extract oil by injecting water into the ground, reducing our dependence on foreign oil.

However, there has been a time when American foreign policy in the Middle East could be seen as primarily about oil. U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East started in the 1930s and intensified when American firms found oil in commercial quantities and OPEC was created. The United States supported Saudi Arabia and Iran, both of which have a lot of oil on their territory. The United States goal was to prevent a price shock by maintaining a strategic oil reserve and military intervention to keep the region stable. Even though Iran is not a U.S. ally anymore, multiple countries who have and produce a lot of oil in the region are still strong allies to the U.S., such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. An argument could be made that since these countries have historically supported values, political systems, and human rights records that the U.S. fundamentally opposes and have even directly or indirectly supported terrorist organizations, the U.S. main foreign policy with these countries must be about oil. After all, Saudi Arabia has an awful human rights record, a lot of terrorist groups' ideology comes from Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi movement (Shane, 2) and fifteen of the nineteen hijackers from 9/11 were from Saudi Arabia. Actually, Al-Qaeda was not unpopular in the Middle East. Qatar has a lot of money going to finance terrorist groups and even have known terrorist residing within its territory. The United States is aware that those countries are engaging in activities that are antithetical to American values. Thus, the only plausible reason for us to be in that region is to extract oil. Moreover, another argument one might make to support the statement that U.S.

primary interest in the region is oil is that the United States has supported oppressive regimes that keep the region stable.

However, with countries like Qatar and Saudi Arabia, in order for the United States to be effective in counter insurgency, it is more important to keep good relations with them and prevent alienating potential partners in the counter terrorism effort. Especially with the example of Saudi Arabia and its influence on terrorism because of Wahhabism, some experts do not see that Saudi Arabia's teaching of Wahhabism as a strong influence on something such as radicalization and terrorism. If terrorist groups want to preach their extremist views and use it as propaganda to recruit new members they do not need Saudi Arabia's input. Even if Saudi Arabia's teaching of Wahhabism may be disruptive it is not monolithic. (Shane, 14) Finally, if stability of the region was an important factor for extraction of oil the United State made a pretty bad job of keeping this stability by starting the Iraq war.

In conclusion, the argument that oil is the primary interest for U.S. involvement in these countries is too weak to have real validity. In reality, the United States produces most of its oil and the oil that the United States does import comes from Canada. Moreover, some of the strongest, most stable allies of the United States in the region are Israel, Egypt and Turkey, which have little to no oil and have better relationship with the U.S. The most important foreign policy for the United States in the region in countries who do have oil is counter terrorism, promoting peace in the region and economic relations. Moreover, Iran, the second biggest oil producer in the region, is not an ally of the United States anymore and now poses major threats to counter terrorism and nuclear nonproliferation.

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