

Fragments of a retrospective history: America in the Middle East

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In many ways the current era in US-Middle East relations resembles the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the region was rife with geopolitical divisions while many people in the United States and across the region had hopes that US might come to play a positive role in the region. By the mid-1960s that hope faded as the region became more polarized in the wake of the 1967 war anti-Americanism reached a cold war era peak. This paper argues that such a path was not inevitable, but more crucially it seeks to excavate moments, ideas, strategies, and personalities from the past to suggest a basis for crafting an alternative future based on a redefinition of American interests in the region.

As others have argues, until the 1950s, when the Cold War led the US to expand its strategic interests in the Middle East, US-Middle East relations were dominated by positive cultural and economic ties. Up until that time, for many in the region “America” represented a path towards freedom and modernity for many Arabs. Some American policy makers in the early Cold War sought to build on these ties to win the hearts and minds of the Arab people in order to block the expansion of communism. But as the US developed closer relationships with conservative oil-rich states and a stronger commitment to the security of Israel in the face of increasing threats, American policy makers began to abandon those efforts directed at Arab publics. In the US attempt to establish a more powerful strategic position in the region, backed by the projection of military power and covert operations, even Western-educated Arab elites lost their previous positive image of America’s role in the region.

While explaining how and why this transformation occurred, the paper’s goal is first to opening the door to suggestions that the conclusion, while likely, was not inevitable, and second, excavate past episodes of more “positive” interaction. It surveys underappreciated aspects of US-Middle East relations such the role 19th century American protestant missionaries played in promoting liberal education in the Middle East, the efforts of American experts and private entrepreneurs in the early post-World War II era to help Arab states build modern economies, the Eisenhower Administration’s efforts to navigate a balanced approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and Senator John F. Kennedy’s bold call for Algerian independence from French rule and later as president his effort to promote third world development and a rapprochement with Nasser and his brand of Arab nationalism.

A retrospective reading of these episodes is used to suggest a basis for redefining the nature of current US-Middle East relations. In short, the US can more effectively promote its national interests by developing positive relations with Arab societies through economic and cultural ties while limiting its reliance on the use of military force in the region. Recalling these moments of US-Middle East relations from the past and highlighting their similarities and differences to today’s era and the current cold war with Iran, collapse of the peace process, and rising populist opposition to “pro-US regimes,” the paper argues that Arab publics would likely embrace a regional role for the US if, and only if, it acted as a mediator of regional conflicts and sought to maintain a balance between regional forces rather than project its own dominance over the region.