Two major speeches have defined the Obama administration’s diplomatic approach to the MENA region. In this paper, we will reflect on the first three years of Obama’s Middle East policy, the shifting regional realities and relations, and the implications for state sovereignty.

On 4 June 2009, in a speech at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Obama reached out for ‘a new beginning’ in US diplomacy towards the Arab and Muslim world. This renewal of relations would be based on “mutual interest and mutual respect; and … the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition.”

Then in a speech at the State Department in May 2011, with uprisings and protests spreading across the region and sweeping away old realities and certainties, Obama was more distanced. While he sought to place America on the side of democratisation and emphasised this was a ‘moment of opportunity’, Obama’s intervention was selective in its focus and careful to reassert conventional US interests and strategic priorities in the region.

The emphasis on responsibility in the Cairo speech pointed to the changing nature of sovereignty in the region, shifting from an absolute *quality* of states to a *process* contingent on the state fulfilling certain responsibilities to its people and to the international community. With military interventions in Pakistan and Libya, and very different approaches towards Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Israel/Palestine, further questions are now essential: what are the *borders* of this responsibility, who *defines* this responsibility, who is *perceived* as acting irresponsibly, and with what *consequences*?