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Timothy Dressel  
*Dickinson College*

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# The Incremental Process of American Ascendance in the Middle East

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Timothy Dressel

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Today, the US is the dominant power in the Middle East. The US has over twenty bases in the region and several naval strike groups in the waters of the Red Sea and Persian Gulf (Piven 2012). The US first stationed troops in the Middle East during World War II to ensure the delivery of Lend-Lease supplies to the USSR (Kuniholm 1980, 145-146), yet removed nearly all of its military assets out of the region after the war, maintaining only a ceremonial naval group of a few old ships (Macris 2010, 148-149). How did the US ascend to dominance in the Middle East between World War II and today? What does this process indicate about the future of American power in the region?

Following World War II, the US created an international political economic order to preserve peace, promote economic prosperity, and contain the USSR (Ikenberry 2011, 167). The Middle East, particularly the Persian Gulf, was essential to this order because of its oil. The availability of Gulf oil was essential to the economies of Western Europe and Japan and denying the USSR access to this oil was essential to containment. The US became increasingly involved in the Persian Gulf because the regional security organizations and other states were unable to ensure the flow of Gulf oil to states of the American order, ensure regional stability, and deny Soviet influence in the region.

American power in the Middle East is pre-eminent yet uneven between its sub-regions. In the Levant, the US relied on its relationship with Israel to counter Soviet influence. The US did not create an extensive security structure in the Levant because of Israel's ability to balance against Soviet influence, America's main objective in the sub-region during the Cold War (FRUS Nixon XXIV, 2). In contrast, the US became the dominant state with an extensive security structure in the Persian Gulf through an incremental process of increasing American commitment. This process began in 1946 and was completed in 1991. American involvement in

the Gulf increased due to the competition of the Cold War, the decline of British power in the Gulf, and America's inability to use regional security organizations and actors to secure its interests in the Persian Gulf.

There are some observers who claim that the Suez Crisis of 1956 was a watershed moment when American power eclipsed British power in the Middle East. They state the former British colony of Egypt "twisted the lion's tail" and saw its former occupiers withdraw (Reynolds 1991, 205). Richard Nixon (Vice President at the time) stated that Britain and France were so humiliated that they would no longer play a major role on the world stage (Smith 2012, 67). This essay proves that the Suez Crisis was not the significant event these observers claim it to be.

## **Definitions**

There are several terms that must be identified for this essay. The first term is the Middle East, which is the geographic area of Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey. The major sub-regions of the Middle East this essay discusses are the Levant and the Persian Gulf. The Levant includes Syria, Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian Territories, and Jordan. The Persian Gulf includes Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, UAE, Oman, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. The Middle East is distinguished from Arab North Africa because, with the exception of Egypt, North Africa is not a focus of study in this paper. This definition also excludes Muslim Central Asia.

There is a large debate surrounding the concept of empire. Empire has a variety of definitions but most posit that an empire possesses three basic elements: a hierarchical order based on relative power; direct or indirect control of policies of weaker states by the dominant state; and control through core-periphery elite relationships (Ikenberry 2011, 67). This essay

defines empire as a hierarchical international political system based on the imposition of power to maintain a security and/or economic relationship between the dominant political entity and the periphery. The empire imposes its power to control the system directly through military intervention and involvement in internal politics or indirectly through the use of a hub and spokes system.

Liberal hegemony is a situation in which the dominant state in the international political system creates and protects an international political economic order based on liberal economies and agreed-upon rules (Keohane 1984, 39). John Ikenberry describes liberal hegemony as a “hierarchical order built around political bargains, diffuse reciprocity, and mutually agreeable institutions and working relationships” (Ikenberry 2011, 26). Robert Gilpin posits that these public goods include an international currency, tariff reductions, and international security (Gilpin 74). Another important public good in the modern era is access to oil, which has been a major component of American hegemony (Keohane 1984, 140-141).

Comparing Liberal Hegemony and Empire <sup>1</sup>		
	Liberal Hegemony	Empire
Institutional Form	Multilateral	Hub and spokes
Rules	Negotiated	Imposed
Compliance	Consent	Coercion
Public Goods	Provided	Absent
Method of Creation	Agreements	Imposition of power

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<sup>1</sup> Adopted from *Liberal Leviathan* by G. John Ikenberry.

## **America in the Middle East: Between Liberal Hegemony and Empire**

In *Liberal Leviathan*, Ikenberry stated that the US is a liberal hegemon because the US created a multi-lateral institutional order based on mutual agreements, and provided public goods to the world (Ikenberry 2011, 26). However, he also stated that the US has exercised its hegemony in an imperial manner in Latin America, East Asia, and the Middle East (Ikenberry 2011, 27). Was the US a liberal hegemon in the Middle East or was it an empire? The stability of the Persian Gulf was essential to maintain the flow of oil and thus enable the US to provide the public good of oil to the world economy as a liberal hegemon. Oil and its importance to the world economy made the Middle East vital to America's role as leader of its international order yet it acted at times in an imperial manner in the region to ensure the provision of this public good.

Empire and liberal hegemony are political entities with a favorable asymmetry of power compared to other entities. An empire is distinguished from a liberal hegemon because an empire engages in organized control over weaker polities while a liberal hegemon creates mutually agreed-upon institutions to create order to the benefit of those in it (Ikenberry 2011, 71). An empire can exercise control over weaker polities through direct physical coercion and intervention or indirectly through a hub and spokes (also called client-state or proxy) system.

After World War II, the US approached defense in the region in terms of collective security to counter Soviet aggression. The US assisted in the creation of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) as a multi-lateral security organization to protect the states on USSR's southern flank and the Middle East from Soviet aggression (Sanjian 1997, 226). CENTO was ineffective and eventually failed. Due to the weakness of CENTO and prohibitive conditions for the creation of a collective security organization and other institutions, the US turned to

strategies more consistent with empire to pursue its interests in the Middle East instead of its preferred liberal manner.

The US acted similar to an empire through indirect control in the hub and spokes system of regional proxies to pursue security interests. The US used the hub and spokes method in the Persian Gulf by using Britain and then Iran to ensure regional security. The US used this method in the Levant by using Israel to contain Soviet influence. In all three cases, the US gave military and financial support to its clients so they could project power to maintain US interests. The US directly intervened in the Middle East by engineering coups in Syria and Iran in the 1949 and 1953, deploying military forces to the Persian Gulf during the Iran-Iraq War, and creating a permanent military presence in the Gulf in the 1990s.

However, it would be untrue to say that the US imposed control over Britain and Israel. The British sought to maintain their role in the Persian Gulf and worked to obtain American support to maintain their position (Jones 2010, 51). The US did not force Israel to fight the Soviet-backed Arab states, they were already at war prior to Israel's position as a valued US ally. The Shah of Iran asked the Johnson and Nixon administrations for support to promote Iranian regional hegemony, which would in turn promote American interests<sup>2</sup> (FRUS 1964-1968 XXII, 173). While the US did maintain a hub and spokes system in the Middle East, it chose its clients based on the situation as it was and did not seek to alter the status quo.

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<sup>2</sup> However, because the US colluded in the coup to install the Shah, the US-Iran relationship was based on imposed US control by placing the ruling political elite in power.

## Background

After World War II, the US was the only western state capable of creating and maintaining an international political economic system to counter Soviet aggression<sup>3</sup> and to promote the world economy (Ikenberry 159-160). World War II produced three major changes in the international political system: the destruction of the Western European core; the bankruptcy of the British Empire (Peden 2012, 1080); and the rapid expansion of American and Soviet military power (Kennedy 1987, 359). After the war, the US had the world's largest economic power, producing 35% of world GDP (Chase-Dunn et. al 2010). Western Europe's economic output was decimated because of destruction of World War II. The war bankrupted Britain, leading to Britain's financial dependency on the US and the dismantling of the British Empire. In 1947, Britain withdrew from Palestine, India, and Greece. The war also led to the rapid expansion of American military power in Europe and the Pacific Ocean and the rapid expansion of Soviet military power in Europe (Kennedy 1987, 359).

The destruction of Western European economies and the decline of the British Empire made Europe, and the world, vulnerable to the Soviet aggression because Europe could not defend itself from the USSR. The USSR became aggressive toward the West between 1945 and 1947, reneging on its wartime promises to hold free and fair elections in Eastern Europe and deploying additional troops to northern Iran, despite the agreement to withdraw troops at the end of the war (Kuniholm 1980, 304). To counter the USSR, the US began to become more involved in European economic recovery (instituting the Marshall Plan in 1948) and made a security commitment to Europe by joining NATO in 1949.

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<sup>3</sup> John Mueller makes an argument that the USSR sought to create a security buffer for itself after World War II and after this buffer was established, the USSR was content with subversion of the American order instead of expansion. Mueller, 1989, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War*, USA: Basic Books, 101.



In addition to multi-lateral steps to strengthen and unite its European allies, the US began to assume British security commitments along the “Northern Tier” of the Near East<sup>4</sup> (Kuniholm 1980, 426). The assumption of British commitments marked the beginning of America’s rise to dominance in the Middle East.

### **American Strategy in the Middle East**

America’s ascendance in the Persian Gulf was the result of an incremental process between 1946 and 1991, in which the declining capability of other states to pursue American interests in the context of the Cold War led to the gradual assumption of Britain’s role in the region by the US. American and British interests in the Gulf frequently coincided. The gradual ascendance of American power in the Persian Gulf includes American strategy in five phases: the beginning of the Cold War in the Persian Gulf (1946-1955); British management of US interests in the Persian Gulf (1956-1971); America’s use of Iran to pursue its interests (1971-1979); confusion after the Iranian Revolution (1980-1990); and the establishment and continuation of a permanent American military presence in the Gulf (1990- ).

In the Levant, the American strategy to contain Soviet influence had two phases. In the first phase (1948-1969), the US sought to restrain Israel, fearing that it would destabilize the region and convince the Arab states to turn to the USSR for support (Little 1993, 575). In the second phase (1970- ), the US used Israel to pursue its interest of containing Soviet influence in the Levant and provided it with the military edge to do so. The US still ensures that Israel maintains a “qualitative edge” in the region (U.S. Dept. of State “Israel’s Qualitative Edge”).

### **The Beginning of the Cold War in the Middle East (1946-1955)**

The driving force behind post-World War II American security strategy was the world-wide containment of the USSR. American containment of the USSR in the Middle East involved

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<sup>4</sup> The Northern Tier is Greece, Turkey, and Iran

three main elements: the assumption of British commitments on the Northern Tier; denying the USSR access to the Middle East; and the use of other states to contain the USSR. In the beginning of the Cold War, the US acted as a liberal hegemon but also in a manner consistent with an empire to pursue these public interests.

During World War II, Britain and the USSR invaded and occupied Iran to create the Persian Corridor for Lend-Lease supplies en route to Russia (Kuniholm 145-146). The two powers agreed to separate spheres of influence and occupation and to withdraw these forces from Iran six months after the end of the war (Kuniholm 1980, 143). The USSR did not withdraw its troops after six months, it in fact deployed more, precipitating the Iran Crisis of 1946. The deployment of Soviet forces in March 1946 demonstrated Russia's aggression and the need for the US to confront the USSR (Kuniholm 1980, 379). To counter the USSR, the US brought the crisis to UN Security Council and demanded that Soviet forces be withdrawn from Iran. By the end of March 1946, the USSR agreed to withdraw its forces from Iran (Kuniholm 1980, 331). The Iran Crisis was the first case where the US confronted the USSR to contain its aggression, but it certainly was not the last.

The Iran Crisis also demonstrated that Britain alone could no longer shoulder the burden of containing Russian imperial ambitions in the Middle East (Kuniholm 1980, 382). In early 1947, the British Government appealed to the US to assume British commitments to the stability of Greece and Turkey, both of which were threatened by communist expansion and destabilization due to the British withdrawals from both (Kuniholm 1980, 382). The US responded with the Truman Doctrine in which Truman stated that the integrity of Turkey,

is essential to the preservation of order in the Middle East.<sup>5</sup> The British government has informed us that...it can no longer extend financial or economic aid to Turkey. As in the

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<sup>5</sup> The US treated Turkey as primarily a European actor on the southern flank of the USSR. The US gave Marshall Plan aid to Turkey and persuaded NATO to include Turkey as a full member in the organization (Guney 2005, 342).

case of Greece, if Turkey is to have the assistance it needs, the United States must supply it. We are the only country able to provide that help (Kuniholm 1980, 436-437).

Thus, the US assumed British commitments to Greece and Turkey because Britain was no longer able to sustain them and the US was the only power that could provide the aid needed to maintain regional stability. Truman's address articulated a broader strategy of containment by saying "it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures" (Kuniholm 1980, 437-438).

While the US began to assume British commitments along the Northern Tier, the US also supported efforts to create the regional security organization CENTO (Sanjian 1997, 226). The members of CENTO included Britain, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan- the US was never an official member. The organization was focused on containing the USSR on its southern flank in Central and West Asia and preventing the USSR from gaining access to the Arab Middle East (Sanjian 1997, 226, 232). Despite the importance of defending Arab oil resources, Iraq was the only Arab member of CENTO because of the difficulties creating an international organization which included Britain in the context of Egyptian anti-colonialism and inter-Arab rivalries (Sanjian 1997, 237). CENTO was established in 1955, yet was ineffective and fell apart soon after its establishment, with the withdrawal of Iraq in 1959 and its collapse by 1979 (U.S. Dept. of State "The Baghdad Pact"). With the failure of CENTO to be a multi-lateral security organization in the Middle East, the US turned to specific states to pursue contain communism and protect the flow of oil in the Middle East.

The US used imperial techniques to influence the Middle East during this time as well. In 1949, the US backed the Chief of Staff of the Syrian Army in a coup. The US interests in Syria at the time were to have a friendly stable government amenable to an ARAMCO pipeline from

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Much of the US-Turkish Cold War relationship revolved around basing and protecting American bombers and denying access of the Mediterranean Sea if war erupted (Leffler 1985, 814, 823).

Saudi Arabia to the Mediterranean and stabilizing the region by making peace with Israel<sup>6</sup> (Little 2003, 563). In 1953, the US and Britain cooperated to remove the Iranian Prime Minister, Muhammad Mossadaq, and install Reza Palvi as the absolute governing authority in Iran. The US supported this coup because of fears that the USSR would gain control over Iran's oil resources and would threaten the Persian Gulf (Gasiowski 1987, 275.)

American strategy at the start of the Cold War in the Middle East was characterized by the US seeking to create the multi-lateral security organization, CENTO; beginning to assume British security commitments in the region; and intervening in internal politics of Iran and Syria. In this phase, the US acted as a liberal hegemon by supporting the creation of a multi-lateral security organization and making commitments to regional stability yet the US also acted in a manner consistent with empire by intervening directly in its participation in coups to place friendly political elites in power.

### **Britain's Continued Management the Persian Gulf and the Special Relationship (1956-1971)**

By 1955, it was clear that CENTO would not be an effective organization for maintaining regional stability or containing the USSR. Both British and American officials sought to create an institutionalized relationship following the Suez Crisis in 1956 to manage their parallel interests. The British sought to institutionalize consultation between American and British officials to coordinate policies (Jones 2003, 49) and use American power to uphold British interests (Jones 2003, 51). The US used Britain as the security guarantor to the Gulf and subsidized this role (Alvandi 2010, 341). This use of the hub and spoke system demonstrated an

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<sup>6</sup> The short-lived administration of the coup approved the pipeline and signed a Syrian-Israeli armistice.

American strategy consistent with an empire. The US and Britain cooperated in the Persian Gulf in this manner until the British withdrawal in 1971.<sup>7</sup>

American and British interests in the Persian Gulf frequently coincided with one another, yet were not the same (Fain 2008, 202-204). Control of the Gulf's oil resources was a vital interest for Britain since the discovery of oil's strategic potential in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Yergin 2008, xiv). An essential part of the pursuit of this interest was the exclusion of rival powers, such as the Germans and Russians, from the region. By the 1950s, Britain's interests in the region revolved around ensuring the flow of oil to Britain, maintaining a network of sea-lines of communication in the Indian Ocean, and the protection of British investments (Fain 2008, 202-204). In the pursuit of its interests, Britain acted as the security guarantor by providing relative stability to the region which allowed other states, particularly the West and Japan, to benefit from access to the Gulf's oil.

American interests in the Middle East began with the extraction of oil but grew substantially after World War II. In the new context of American leadership of the western world, the US sought the stability of the Persian Gulf to ensure the flow of oil to the world economy and the prevention of Soviet encroachment in the Middle East (Alvandi 2010, 371). These general, public interests were secured by Britain until 1971.

The Suez Crisis of 1956 did not have a major impact on British strategy in the Persian Gulf; Britain continued its policies in the Gulf and did not become subservient to the US. Sir Bernard Burrows, the British political resident in the Persian Gulf remarked "I do not know what is the justification for the assumption that the Gulf states and our relationship with them cannot continue more or less as they are" (quoted in Smith 2012, 253). Britain maintained its influence in the Gulf after the crisis and continued to use its military to intervene in Oman in the late

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<sup>7</sup> The US-Britain special relationship continues today.

1950s, Jordan in 1957, and Kuwait in 1961. The events at Suez in 1956 had little bearing on British Gulf policies and Britain continued to act in the Gulf as it had prior to the Suez Crisis. Additionally, the US wanted Britain to remain in the Gulf (Fain 2010, 205).

The US relied on Britain to maintain the public interests in the Persian Gulf of the flow of oil to the world economy, the maintenance of regional stability, and the exclusion of the USSR (Smith 2012, 260). Eisenhower realized immediately after the Suez Crisis that it was in America's best interests to smooth relations with Britain to pursue American interests in the Gulf (Smith 2012, 255-256). The US saw that all western interests in the Gulf were dependent on the British presence and that no other western power would be as effective as Britain. Recognizing Britain's importance, the US sought to maintain the British presence and subsidized Britain's commitment to the Gulf (Alvandi 2012, 341). The US was unwilling to assume British responsibilities in the Gulf following the withdrawal in 1971; American policy-makers were surprised by the British announcement to withdrawal in 1968 and the US unprepared for it. The American Secretary of State Dean Rusk exclaimed to the British Foreign Minister, "For God's sake, act like Britain!" indicating the shock and dismay of the US because Britain's announcement (quoted in Fain 2010, 141).

The American National Security Council (NSC) considered five options for maintaining American interests in the Persian Gulf after the British withdrawal. The five options for the US were to: assume the British role as protector; back Iran as the chosen instrument to maintain stability in the Gulf; promote Saudi-Iranian cooperation; work directly with states of the lower Gulf; and promote the creation of a regional security pact (FRUS 1969-1976 XXIV, 82). A NSC study identified the first and the last as impractical; the US could not increase its commitment to the Middle East during its withdrawal from Vietnam and there was no hope for an effective

regional security organization. The study recommended encouraging Saudi-Iranian cooperation and working with the new states of the lower Gulf while realizing Iran had the preponderance of power in the Gulf after the British withdrew (FRUS 1969-1976 XXIV, 89). The US sought to replace Britain with Iran as the new American proxy and security guarantor to the Gulf, thus maintaining an indirect form of control over the Gulf through a hub and spokes system.

### **The US Turns to Iran (1971-1979)**

American strategy in the Persian Gulf remained to be the hub and spoke method as it had been in the prior phase. The difference was that the US changed who it backed as its regional proxy from Britain to Iran.

From 1968 until 1971, the US was concerned about the stability of the Persian Gulf and its impact on the flow of oil, the possible spread of radical Arab nationalism, and Soviet influence in the international environment following the British withdrawal (FRUS 1969-1976 XXIV, 82). The British completed the withdrawal while the US was implementing Nixon's Doctrine of looking to "the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense" (Nixon).

In the Persian Gulf, the US chose to support Iran because of its preponderance of power in the region. The US provided Iran material assistance to manage regional conflicts and contain the USSR (Alvandi 2010, 346). Nixon Doctrine was exactly what the Shah of Iran had asked for since the Johnson administration. In a letter dated August 15, 1966, the Shah presented reasons how a strong Iran, with American military aid and support, would be able to serve American interests. The Shah claimed a strong Iran can "avert the spreading of conflicts in the region, guarantee the smooth and orderly flow of oil to the west" while also being a deterrent to any country around (FRUS 1964-1968 XXII, 173). The Johnson administration did not fully endorse

the idea of supporting Iranian regional supremacy and opted for a policy of a Saudi-Iranian balance of power (Alvandi 2010, 434). The Nixon administration, however, agreed with the Shah that Iran was a stabilizing factor in the Gulf and chose to use Iran to support American interests after the British withdrawal (Alvandi 2010, 347).

By 1973, the US clearly decided to base its Persian Gulf policy upon Iran as the security guarantor instead of a Saudi-Iranian balance. The US believed Iran was more stable than Saudi Arabia and feared the monarchy of Saudi Arabia could fall. Kissinger and the Shah discussed contingency plans in which Iran would secure Saudi oil fields and restore the royal family in the event of instability. Kissinger and the Shah did the same for the other Arab states as well (Alvandi 2010, 357). These contingency plans demonstrate America's reliance on Iran to maintain regional stability and American interests. While Saudi Arabia was important because of its oil resources, it was not of the same importance as Iran's military power. Thus, American policy in the Persian Gulf during the 1970s was clearly to support Iran and use it to ensure the public goods of the flow of oil, maintenance of regional stability, and containment the USSR (Alvandi 2010, 370-371). This continuation of the hub and spoke system fell apart in 1979.

### **The Pillar Falls, America Rethinks its Persian Gulf Strategy (1979-1990)**

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 shocked American foreign policy-makers and forced the US to create a new strategy in the Persian Gulf. Chaos and confusion characterized American strategy in the eleven years following the fall of the Shah and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The hub and spoke system was broken and the US had little ability to control events in the Gulf in the early 1980s. America's need to project power into the Gulf became apparent in this period and the US began to develop the ability to do so. Because the US had no proxy to maintain its interests, the US acted in an imperial manner to directly commit forces to pursue its interests in



the region. However, while the US created and exercised the ability to use military force in the Gulf, it did not intend to remain directly involved in the region (Macris 2010, 218). This phase marked a half-step to American dominance in the Persian Gulf.

The fall of the Shah and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan the same year prompted President Carter to declare in his State of the Union Address that “any attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force” (NSC-63). These developments led the US to make a major change in its Gulf security policy; the US could no longer allow local powers to guarantee US interests in the Persian Gulf (Macris 2010, 208). Instead, the US would have to develop a military capability to project force into the region.

Prior to 1979, the US only maintained a symbolic naval presence in the Persian Gulf (Macris 2010, 148-149). In the early 1980s however, it became evident that the US would need an actual ability to project and sustain force in the region. In a Presidential Directive to the National Security Council dated January 15, 1981 (NSC-63), National Security Advisor Brzezinski identifies the build-up of American military capabilities to project force into the Gulf and maintain a credible presence as the first way to defend vital American interests. This build-up included not only additional forces, but increased strategic lift capacity, access to military facilities, and prepositioning supplies in the region (Brzezinski 1981, 1-2).

NSC-63 demonstrated that the US would develop its own capacity to project force into the Gulf to defend its interests and directly ensure the provision of oil to the world economy. The US began to develop a rapid deployment force to quickly react to regional threats to American interests, particularly the export of oil from the Gulf (Macris 2007, 374). The rapid deployment

force required access to bases in the region and the ability to quickly move troops and material. To enhance American military capabilities in the Gulf, the US obtained base agreements with Oman, Kenya, and Somalia and increased spending on cargo planes and pre-positioned ships loaded with equipment (Macris 2010, 208-209). The chaos in the Persian Gulf following the fall of the Shah included the horrific Iraq-Iran War which brought American forces into the Gulf to ensure its interests.

During the Iran-Iraq War, the US began to move military forces into the region. The US sent Airborne Control and Warning Systems (ACWS) aircraft to Saudi Arabia and deployed two aircraft carriers into the Arabian Sea, just outside the Persian Gulf. These deployments were meant to calm the regional situation and limit the spread of the conflict to other states, namely Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (Macris 2010, 212). In 1986, six years into the war, Iran and Iraq began to target each other's and even neutral oil tankers in the Persian Gulf (Macris 2010, 213). This escalation of the war led the US to act militarily in the Persian Gulf to maintain regional stability.

Both of America's vital interests were threatened by the targeting of oil tankers. Not only did the attacks on oil tankers disrupt the flow of oil out of the Gulf, American failure to defend the tankers of neutral states<sup>8</sup> like Kuwait could have resulted in the expansion of Soviet influence in the oil-rich Gulf. Kuwait approached the US and USSR in December 1986 for protection in the tanker war. The Reagan administration quickly agreed to support Kuwait in order to prevent the USSR from becoming the security guarantor to the small Gulf states (Macris 2010, 214). The US launched Operation Earnest Will in 1987 in which it re-flagged and provided naval escorts convoys of oil tankers as they transited through the Persian Gulf. This operation led to the

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<sup>8</sup> The Arab Gulf states, while technically neutral, funded Iraq's war effort.

deployment of additional naval and air assets to the Persian Gulf in what would be one of the first direct American military actions in the Gulf since World War II (Macris 2010, 215).

The US deployed military capabilities to the Persian Gulf during the Iran-Iraq War and took a step to pursuing its interests in the region itself; however, its military presence during this period did not constitute a permanent presence. While Saudi Arabia allowed ACWS planes to be based within the Kingdom, Kuwait and Bahrain only allowed American personnel and assets to be anchored offshore or floating on barges (Macris 2010, 215). Operation Earnest Will signaled that the US would intervene in the Gulf to defend its interests. After the Iran-Iraq War ended in August 1988, the US withdrew the majority of its military assets from the Gulf by the end of September (SOCOM 2007, 31). The operation was important in the respect that it demonstrated American will and capacity to directly intervene in the Gulf to defend its vital interests. Yet the quick withdrawal of American assets indicated that the US was not going to assume a permanent presence in the Persian Gulf (Macris 2010, 214,).

The US considered using Iraq to ensure American interests following the fall of the Shah. The US supported Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War to balance the two off of each other. The US feared that Iraq was going to lose and worked to avert this by assisting Iraq (Reagan 1984, 2). Howard Teicher, director of Political-Military Affairs at the NSC during the war, stated

the United States actively supported the Iraqi war effort by supplying the Iraqis with billions of dollars of credits, by providing U.S. military intelligence and advice to the Iraqis, and by closely monitoring third country arms sales to Iraq to make sure that Iraq had the military weaponry required (Declaration of Howard Teicher 1995, 2).

This level of support to Iraq indicated the importance of containing Iran to the US; Iraq was still a Soviet client at the time.

After the Iran-Iraq War, the US sought to engage Iraq to promote American interests and stability in the Middle East. The US provided Iraq with \$1 billion of agricultural credits as a way

to begin the normalization of relations. These credits were divided into two and the delivery of the second half depended on a review of Iraq's compliance with using these credits for food and not military hardware. The Bush administration also overrode Congress to authorize a \$200 million line of credit from the Export-Import Bank (Baker 1995, 267). These actions marked the high-point of US-Iraq relations, Saddam's openness to moderation had turned ominously by early 1990 (Bush and Scowcroft, 1998, 307).

### **The Invasion of Kuwait and the Creation of a Permanent American Presence**

In 1990, Iraq quickly and decisively conquered Kuwait, placing Iraq in a position to dominate the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf. The US missed opportunities to deter Saddam from invading Kuwait because of the hesitance of the Arab states to allow the US to deploy military assets to the region and the belief that Saddam was bluffing (Macris 2010, 224). However, the US moved quickly in response to the Iraqi invasion. Three days after the fall of Kuwait, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney obtained Saudi Arabia's approval to base American forces in the Kingdom in order to defend Saudi Arabia (Bush and Scowcroft 1998, 331). During Operation Desert Shield, over 500,000 American troops were deployed to the Persian Gulf (Baker 1995, 279).

The US organized and led the international effort to remove Saddam from Kuwait. The US was acting for the global good and, as Secretary of State James Baker III stated, would do so "as the leader of the world community, not the Lone Ranger" (Baker 1995, 278). The international effort required international support and international legitimacy. The US began by obtaining agreements with the permanent members of the UN Security Council to punish Iraq for its actions. This resulted in the UN resolutions condemning Iraq, imposing sanctions, and authorizing force to remove Iraq from Kuwait. The US also obtained regional support and

funding for the international force. The US acted as a liberal hegemon in the creation of the coalition against Iraq. The international coalition led by the US quickly ejected the Iraqi invaders in Operation Desert Storm. The US did not withdraw its troops from the Persian Gulf.

The US established a permanent military presence in the Persian Gulf following the Gulf War. The US developed this presence because of the absence of any other power to provide the public goods of regional stability and the flow of oil, and the threats of Iraq and Iran. After the war, the US proposed a regional security organization, bolstered by US naval support, to maintain security and stability in the Gulf. However, the Gulf states did not support the proposal or take responsibility for regional security themselves (Baker 1995, 413-414). From 1991 until 2003, the US contained Iraq and Iran. The American National Security Strategy of 1997 described America's containment of Iraq to make it comply with UN Security Council resolutions and containment of Iran to compel it away from obtaining weapons of mass destruction and supporting terrorism (31-32). Thus, the US acted as a liberal hegemon by enforcing the internationally agreed-upon resolutions to remove Iraq from Kuwait and prevent further Iraqi aggression. Additionally, the US was able to establish its presence in the Gulf because of the willingness of the Gulf states to host American troops on-land (Macris 2010, 226), instead of off-shore as during the Iran-Iraq War. These states saw the benefit of the American presence to ensure regional stability and sought American protection from Hussein's Iraq.

The inability of American allies to maintain regional stability and the failure to create regional security organizations forced the US to become directly involved in the Persian Gulf to provide the public good of oil to the world. In assuming the provision of public goods, the US acted as a liberal hegemon yet it acted similar to an empire to provide these goods.

## **The US-Israel Relationship**

American strategy in the Levant sub-region of the Middle East was different from the one pursued in the Persian Gulf because of different interests and different ally capabilities. While the US had the interests of regional stability and the containment of Soviet influence in the Levant (FRUS Nixon XXIV, 2), the Levant does not contain substantial oil resources and therefore the flow of oil was not an American interest in the Levant. Additionally, when the US implemented Nixon Doctrine in the Levant, Israel was the chosen instrument and proved to be able to maintain American interests in the region, unlike Iran in the Gulf. As a result of Israel's reliability in the Cold War, the US never needed to develop security infrastructure in the Levant. Despite the connection between the US and Israel in the Cold War, the relationship was initially lukewarm and can be divided into two periods. In the 1950s and 1960s, the US provided conventional military aid to Israel to restrain it and to prevent it from producing nuclear weapons (Little 1993, 580). From 1970 until the end of the Cold War, the US recognized Israel as a tool to pursue American interests in the Levant in the hub and spoke system.

### **Arming to Restrain (1948-1969)**

While the US quickly recognized the State of Israel, the US did not provide Israel with military aid in its War of Independence. In 1959, the US agreed to supply Israel with \$100 million of technical and financial assistance over a two year period which was larger than all previous US aid to Israel (Little 1993, 567). In 1960, the US agreed to sell \$10 million of advanced radar systems to Israel yet refused to sell advanced missile-systems (Little 1993, 567).

During the Kennedy administration, US policy sought to create a strong Israel that would not seek to obtain nuclear weapons (Little 1993, 572). The US feared that a nuclear Israel would move the Arab states further into the Soviet sphere and seek the placement of nuclear weapons in

the Middle East. To prevent Israel from obtaining nuclear weapons, the US made nearly every conventional weapon it had available to Israel (Little 1993, 576). However, the US supplied these weapons quietly and still preferred for Israel to obtain its arms through western European intermediaries. This logic for supplying conventional arms to Israel continued during the Johnson administration who saw the potential for Israel to be a strategic partner against Soviet and radical Arab influence (Little 1993, 580). Despite seeing the potential, it was not until the Nixon administration that Israel became recognized as an asset in the region.

Prior to the Six Day War in 1967, Israel pleaded for the US to end the Egyptian blockade and requested military assistance against the mobilizing Arab armies. The US predicted that Israel would overcome its numerical inferiority to defeat the armies of Egypt and Syria. President Johnson said that Israel “whip the hell out of them” in a matter of days regardless of who struck first (FRUS 1964-1968 XIX, 77). Specifically, American intelligence predicted the war would end with an Israeli victory and last seven days if Israel pre-empted and ten to fourteen days if Israel was attacked (McNamara 1998). Israel ignored US warnings not to pre-empt. While the spectacular, but predicted, Israeli victory in the Six Day War received much attention and demonstrated Israel’s military prowess, it did not cement Israel’s role as an American strategic asset.

### **The Special Relationship Forms**

US-Israel relations during the Nixon administration began in a lukewarm manner, yet it was during his administration that the US recognized and began to use Israel as a proxy in the Levant (Kochavi 2008, 465). In September 1970, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan was in a state of civil war with Palestinian guerillas threatening the regime. This episode of internal instability in Jordan quickly grew to an inter-Arab conflict. Syria mounted an invasion of Jordan

on September 19 with 300 tanks and a mechanized infantry brigade (Pedatzur 2008, 304). Within a matter of days, Syrian forces occupied Irbid in northern Jordan and were able to reach the Jordanian capital of Amman within a day. Both the US and Israel valued the Jordanian regime as a moderate Arab state and a relatively unthreatening neighbor to Israel. During the crisis, Nixon said to Kissinger that if the situation demanded military intervention, it should not be done by the US (Pedatzur 2008, 305).

As the US sought to disengage from Vietnam, it was weary to commit troops who might have become involved in the open-ended Arab-Israeli conflict. To save the Hashemite monarchy, the US asked Israel to intervene militarily while the US provided protection from the USSR (Pedatzur 2008, 304). Additionally, the US pledged to make-up for any Israeli material losses from an air-strike with new planes (Pedatzur 2008, 306). The IDF air force flew jets over Syrian forces in Jordan in a display of force, without firing a shot, on September 18 as American and Israeli policy-makers contemplated additional measures to expel the Syrian forces from Jordan (Pedatzur 2008, 308). However, Syrian forces began to withdraw on September 22, before a decision to expand the intervention was made. It was Israel's display of force which compelled the Syrians to withdraw and thus achieve American and Israeli objectives.

The crisis in Jordan and Israel's actions cemented the US-Israel relationship. In the crisis, Israel demonstrated that it could be a reliable partner to the US and advance American interests in the Levant. On September 24, Kissinger told Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir that Nixon would "never forget Israel's role in preventing the deterioration in Jordan...the US is fortunate in having an ally like Israel in the Middle East. These events will be taken into account in all future developments" (quoted in Kochavi 2008, 460). American aid to Israel grew quickly after the September Crisis. The US gave Israel \$93.6 million in aid in 1970; the US provided Israel with



\$634.3 million in 1971. By 1977, Israel received a minimum of at least \$1 billion annually from the US (Sharp 2008, 19). Israel became the chosen instrument of Nixon Doctrine to support American interests in the Levant, just as Iran was the instrument in the Persian Gulf. The September Crisis is what prompted the choice of Israel; while the US recognized Israel's military strength, it was Israel's cooperation during the crisis which proved Israel could be a reliable ally. After the crisis, Nixon and Meir intensified the institutionalization of communication between the US State Department and Israeli Foreign Ministry (Kochavi 2008, 460-461).

On November 30, 1981, the US and Israel formalized their cooperation in a memorandum of understanding between the two governments. The memorandum was created to "enhance strategic cooperation to deter all threats from the Soviet Union to the region" (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs). In addition to declaring the US-Israel partnership to contain the Soviet influence, the memorandum stated explicitly that the US and Israel were to provide each other with military assistance, conduct joint exercises, and create working groups to create and coordinate defense policies of Israel and the US in the Levant (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs). This degree of formalization demonstrated the importance of Israel to America's containment policy in the Middle East.

## **Conclusion**

The US became the dominant power in the Middle East through an incremental process with security organizations and American allies failing to provide the public goods of regional stability, containment of the USSR, and flow of Gulf oil to the world economy. This process was accelerated by the competition of the Cold War. While the US acted as a liberal hegemon, providing public goods to those in its order, the US used imperial methods to maintain these public interests when the preferred liberal method of using multi-lateral institutions failed.

The US tried to establish a regional security organization with CENTO during the 1950s, yet this organization was ineffective as a security alliance and failed to support American interests (U.S. Dept. of State “The Baghdad Pact”). As a result, the US abandoned its liberal institutional approach in the Middle East and sought regional actors to be allies in a hub and spokes system to support American interests. The US relied on Britain and then Iran to contain the USSR in the Persian Gulf and maintain the provision of oil to the world economy; the US used Israel to contain Soviet influence in the Levant. When the hub and spokes system failed in the Gulf after the fall of the Shah, the US developed a capacity to project force into the Gulf (Macris 2010, 218). Because the hub and spoke system worked in the Levant, the US did not establish a large military presence in the sub-region during the Cold War. After the US-led force expelled Iraq from Kuwait in 1991, the US once again attempted an institutional approach and supported a regional security organization and even a Middle East Development Bank but the Arab states did not support these (Baker 1995, 413-414). The failure of the hub and spokes system and collective security organizations in the Persian Gulf demanded that the US create a permanent military presence in the Gulf to ensure the provision of oil to the world economy and to enforce UN resolutions against Iraq. Thus, the US had to act in an imperial manner in the Gulf to be the global liberal hegemon.

In the new international environment, the US must reconsider its relations with the states of the Middle East. The USSR, the opponent who drove American policy for nearly fifty years, has fallen and the security arrangements created against it may no longer be suited to pursue American interests. After twenty years of intense involvement in the Middle East, the US is pivoting to the Pacific. This pivot will require the US to reallocate power resources to the Pacific and away from the Middle East. With the new priorities of the US and the relative decline of

American power, the US will have to re-evaluate its presence in the Middle East and how it provides the public good of oil from the region to the world economy. This re-evaluation must question the manner in which the US seeks to maintain stability in the Middle East and the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf.

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