

## 7. Promoting stability in the Middle East? The American alliance with Saudi Arabia after the “Rebalance”

Eoin Micheál McNamara

The Middle East represents a vital, yet problematic, region for the US as it seeks to promote a more stable international order. The effort to achieve greater political stability in the Middle East has largely occupied a priority position in US foreign policy as it has been formulated since the end of the Cold War. Nevertheless, over the past fifteen years, US security management efforts in the region have met with little success, while the Middle East’s security circumstances continue to deteriorate. Following the large-scale US military withdrawals that began in Iraq in 2009 and Afghanistan in 2014, this chapter will examine the place of the Middle East within the redesigned US foreign policy that is emerging under the “rebalance”. It will address two main research questions: what are the prime challenges facing US security management efforts in the Middle East, and what options exist for the US to promote greater stability in the region?

Analysis will specifically focus on the perpetually problematic American alliance with Saudi Arabia. In recent years this alliance has become a crucially important part of a US strategy that aims to manage security in the Middle East. The effort to prevent wider nuclear proliferation due to increased tensions in the region is outlined as a critical security challenge for the hegemonic US specifically and international security more generally. This chapter will be divided into four main sections: section one will examine the US foreign policy transition in the Middle East, from the “maximalist” approach attempted under George W. Bush to the more “minimalist” forms of engagement that are outlined under the “rebalance”; section two will analyze the often problematic underpinnings of the US-Saudi alliance; section three will examine the consequences for US foreign policy

that are born of the regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia as it continues against the backdrop of the threat of wider nuclear proliferation; and section four analyses the options the US has at its disposal in its efforts to coax and coerce Saudi Arabia away from any possible nuclear aspirations it might harbor.

#### A “REBALANCED” US FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

It is no surprise that the shift in US foreign policy focus that was signaled during Barack Obama’s two presidential terms has received a lot of international attention. The core of this change is the apparent initiative to fundamentally reorder US foreign policy preferences. During the Cold War, the US strategic calculus regarded Western Europe as being of the utmost importance, followed by the Middle East and East Asia respectively. As the Middle East is a key supplier of energy for the US economy, as well as a problematic source of international terrorism and the location of states that are willing to frustrate US interests, such as Iran and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, the region began to demand the majority of US strategic attention as the 1990s drifted into the 2000s, but the large-scale US military withdrawals from Iraq that began in 2009 and Afghanistan in 2014 appear to show that the pendulum of America’s foreign policy focus has again swung in the direction of changed regional focus. Under the Obama administration, industrialized East Asia has been strongly underlined as an emerging region that will be of foremost importance for future US security strategy. This has been spurred on by China’s potential to emerge as America’s chief geopolitical rival, together with significant economic progression in many other parts of the wider Far East.

Early in the Obama presidency, this change in US foreign policy focus was introduced as the “pivot to Asia”. The term “pivot” quickly became diplomatically cumbersome as it fostered the impression that this change would lead to core allies residing in other regions receiving a considerable reduction in US security provision. Some people, such as John Mearsheimer, have argued that the term “pivot” has accurately captured the change of direction that is underway in US foreign policy: for Mearsheimer, in order to “pivot to Asia” Washington would naturally have to “pivot away” from other regions that it perceives to be of comparatively less importance, namely the Middle East

and Europe.<sup>1</sup> Accurate or not, however, US foreign policy vocabulary sought to lessen such impressions and “pivot” was subsequently exchanged for the more diplomatically prudent term “rebalance”. Diplomatic masking aside, while East Asia now appears to be firmly in the ascendency these changes still pose questions for the two regions in the awkward position of still being considered important but seeing their stock as a US priority go into decline. Questions concerning US security management in the Middle East are especially pertinent in this regard. As the Middle East is by far the most politically volatile among the three regions of core strategic importance for the US, how must Washington strive to improve security in a region that it will now probably devote less foreign policy resources and strategic attention to?

It has been the view of some analysts that a reduction in US foreign policy attention towards the Middle East might well constitute a positive development for the region’s security as well as the national security of the US itself. US foreign policy in the Middle East is now formulated against the downstream of the failed American efforts to stabilize and democratize the region between 2001 and 2008 that took place during the presidency of George W. Bush. This was an era in which the US pursued an extremely ambitious, “maximalist” foreign policy line. Long at the heart of the debate on America’s role in the world has been the issue of whether US interests can be best served through either a “maximalist” or “minimalist” foreign policy, and Jonathan Monten has provided a succinct overview of this “minimalist” – “maximalist” spectrum. Those who advocate isolationism can be positioned at the “minimalist” extreme. Isolationists stress that the only prudent way for the US to positively influence others in the international system is to lead by example, by demonstrating virtue in its domestic affairs while avoiding intervention. This logic frames “the little city on the hill” analogy. By contrast, those at the “maximalist” extreme argue that the US should intervene actively with an almost missionary zeal in order to spread American values, which are perceived as holding universal benefits. US-based liberal values are seen by those who subscribe to this position as promulgating peace, freedom and economic prosperity.<sup>2</sup>

1 Comments of J.J. Mearsheimer cited in S. Kay, ‘Indecision on Syria and Europe may undermine America’s Asia pivot’, *War on the Rocks*, 8 July 2013, <http://warontherocks.com/2013/07/indecision-on-syria-and-europe-may-undermine-americas-asia-pivot/>, accessed 15 January 2016.

2 J. Monten, ‘The roots of the Bush doctrine: power, nationalism, and democracy promotion in U.S. strategy’, *International Security*, vol. 29, no. 4, pp. 113–115.

Following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, US foreign policy fell heavily under “maximalist” influences. Strategic direction was formulated predominantly by a group of influential neoconservative policy staff and intellectuals that sought to widen the scope of America’s national security interest.<sup>3</sup> This widening has been argued to have been inspired by “offensive liberalism”, a normative ideology that strongly justifies the use of military force in order to achieve what are perceived as morally desirable ends. This included the overthrow of regimes that were believed to be denying their populations basic human rights and other liberal freedoms.<sup>4</sup>

This guiding ideology behind George W. Bush’s foreign policy appeared to dovetail satisfactorily with the logic of liberal democratic peace and thus with wider US strategic desires, particularly in the case of the Middle East. The region is home to Israel, Washington’s most politically important ally, and also a source of the petroleum supplies that are crucial for the US economy. By forcefully promoting regime change in the Middle East, the Bush administration believed that US actions could ultimately reestablish the region’s political foundations to align with liberal democratic peace. The US would assist the political and economic recovery of the nations concerned in such a way that anti-American terrorist networks and “rogue states” would diminish, the US would be observed favorably within the region, Israel’s national security would be reinforced and the security of oil supplies would be enhanced.<sup>5</sup>

Observing regional security in the Middle East from a 2016 standpoint, it can be seen that this vision was not realized. Instead, American actions have led to a number of chronic setbacks both for the US itself and for the region’s security. As early as 2010, Linda Bilmes and Joseph Stiglitz calculated that the US-led war in Iraq after 2003 alone had created a \$3 trillion loss for the US treasury.<sup>6</sup> From a strategic perspective, instead of winning the democratic peace, an excessive US use of military force left a trail of anarchy and extreme political

- 3 For elaboration on this, see M.C. Williams, ‘What is the national interest? The neoconservative challenge in IR theory’, *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 11, no.3, 2005, pp. 307–337.
- 4 B. Miller, ‘Explaining changes in US grand strategy: 9/11, the rise of offensive liberalism, and the war in Iraq’, *Security Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2010, pp. 26–65.
- 5 For connections between George W. Bush’s foreign policy and democratic peace theory, see J. Snyder, ‘One world, many theories’, *Foreign Policy*, no. 145, 2004, p. 54.
- 6 J. E. Stiglitz and L. J. Bilmes, ‘The true cost of the Iraq War: \$3 trillion and beyond’, *The Washington Post*, 5 September 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/03/AR2010090302200.html>, accessed 15 January 2016.

violence in its wake. Ironically, this increases the risk of “blow-back” terrorism against US targets or those of its regional allies. Saddam’s overthrow in Iraq quickly led to a three-way civil war between Sunni and Shia Muslims and Kurdish separatists, and volatility in post-invasion Iraq facilitated a networking hub for foreign jihadists and Al-Qaeda affiliates. This allowed the dispersal of terror tactics among anti-American terrorist groups.<sup>7</sup> Finally, together with civil war in Syria, state fragility in Iraq played a central role in the rise of the Islamic State after 2011.

Following the often destructive consequences of its recent foreign policy in the Middle East, the US currently finds itself in a very challenging position concerning its future strategy in the region. The strategy that aimed to pacify the Middle East through a mix of military force and an aggressive promotion of liberal values is now obsolete, but at a time when its main foreign policy focus emphasizes East Asia, the Middle East continues to present a number of acute security problems of both regional and international significance. Hence, the US must retain a strong secondary focus on the region. As the failures of George W. Bush’s “maximalist” foreign policy design began to become clear as his second presidential term approached in 2004, many from both the realist and liberal sides of the foreign policy debate began to offer alternative approaches for US strategic engagement.

Falling into this category was the idea of “smart power”, a term first coined by liberal thinker Joseph Nye, which argued that America should wield lighter forms of a combination of both “hard” and “soft” power than neoconservatives were advocating. For Nye, while not retreating into isolation, the US could better achieve its national security goals and incur lower costs if it projected power through a mix of coercion and attraction.<sup>8</sup> On the realist side, both “offshore balancing” and “selective engagement” have been two of the most popular foreign policy alternatives that have been put forward for the US since the end of the Cold War. Seeing “offshore balancing” as a strategy that would help the US secure its core interests in Europe, the Middle East and East Asia while avoiding the folly associated with a “maximalist” foreign policy, Christopher Layne has advocated that the US should only station a light military presence in each region, but have larger

7 P. Bergen and A. Reynolds, ‘Blowback revisited: today’s insurgents in Iraq are tomorrow’s terrorists’, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 84 no.6, 2005, pp. 2–6.

8 J. S. Nye Jr., ‘Get smart: combining hard and soft power’, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 88 no. 4, 2009, pp. 160–163.

numbers of military units on stand-by elsewhere that can be mobilized should a US ally come under threat.<sup>9</sup> Layne argues that the heavier and more visible US military presence that has in the past been stationed in the Middle East has increased the risk of terrorism by fostering anti-American sentiment and also motivated Iran to seek a nuclear deterrent as a self-help defense measure.<sup>10</sup>

Agreeing with Layne on many virtues of “offshore balancing”, Robert Art nevertheless takes a contrasting view in proposing his “selective engagement” strategy to include the continuation of a considerable “on-site” US military presence in each region of core concern: East Asia, the Middle East and Europe.<sup>11</sup> Finally, Barry Posen has argued that previous US interventionist policies aiming to quell nationalist violence and engineer a liberal peace abroad have done more harm than good and have been counter-productive from a US national security perspective. Posen argues that a more cost-effective US security strategy would involve greater leverage of its “command of the global commons”<sup>12</sup>, making its military superiority over international airspace, the high seas and outer space count in order to coerce its enemies into line.<sup>13</sup>

While Nye’s concept of “smart power” and the various realist alternatives hold considerable merit, a number of blind spots can also be found concerning issues of critical current importance for US foreign policy decision-making. Firstly, while most realist alternatives underline the frequently made point that East Asia, the Middle East and Europe are the three general regions that the US should prioritize, they do not provide a precise answer as to exactly where the US should “selectively engage”. Secondly, they do not outline precisely which security issues are most pressing for the US, and thus which issues

- 9 C. Layne, ‘From preponderance to offshore balancing: America’s future grand strategy’, *International Security*, vol. 22, no.1, 2007, pp.86–124.
- 10 C. Layne, ‘America’s Middle East grand strategy after Iraq: the moment for offshore balancing has arrived’, *Review of International Studies*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2009 pp. 5–25.
- 11 R. J. Art, ‘Selective engagement in the era of austerity’, in R. Fontaine and K. M. Lord, Eds, *America’s path: grand strategy for the next administration*, Center for A New American Security, Washington D.C., 2012, pp. 15–27. And R. J. Art, ‘Geopolitics updated: the strategy of selective engagement’, *International Security*, vol. 23 no. 3, 1998–1999, pp. 79–113.
- 12 For analysis of US military supremacy in these areas see, B. R. Posen, ‘Command of the commons: the military foundation of U.S. hegemony’, *International Security*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2003, pp. 5–46.
- 13 B.R. Posen, ‘Stability and change in us grand strategy’, *Orbis*, vol. 51 no.4, 2007, pp. 565–566, see also B. R. Posen, *Restraint: a new foundation for us grand strategy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2014.

Washington should prioritize as part of any scaled-down “selective engagement” strategy.

On the first point, drawing on the case of the US–Saudi alliance, this chapter will illustrate that perseverance in US alliance management can benefit the wider regional security, even if managing problematic allies can be an arduously difficult responsibility for Washington. The contemporary alliance theory literature does not perhaps take this aspect sufficiently into account and focuses on how states subordinated to the US might align in a unipolar international system. For instance, Stephen Walt presents the conventional understanding that states subordinated to US power have three main options: to either balance against the US, to bandwagon with the US, or to stay neutral. Walt also argues that the end of the Cold War allowed the US “greater freedom of action” as the Soviet Union had disappeared as a strategic counter-weight.<sup>14</sup> While these observations are correct, the picture is incomplete regarding some other intricate challenges that are often encountered in formulating US alliance policy. Despite its hegemonic status, the US position regarding global security affairs is sometimes heavily dependent on the behavior of its subordinate allies.

It has been argued that Washington uses its peacetime alliance management options to both monitor and restrain the behavior of allies that have been problematic within the context of wider regional security circumstances.<sup>15</sup> As a past example, Turkish and Greek accession to NATO during the Cold War served to mute their otherwise tense regional rivalry as both knew that aggression against the other might risk the withdrawal of crucial security privileges they received through their alliance with the US. Reassurance provided from Washington can prevent a problematic ally seeking other security options that might otherwise upset the wider regional security order and thus risk regional instability. US efforts to provide stability through its alliances often reduces its “freedom of action”. Moreover, while “entrapment” is often conceived as a fear experienced by the subordinate states within an alliance, the US can also encounter “entrapment” in its relations with a problematic ally, should the regional balance be so delicate that retaining the alliance exists as one of the few options to stop the wider security situation deteriorating further.<sup>16</sup>

14 S. M. Walt, ‘Alliances in a unipolar world’, *World Politics*, vol. 61, no. 1, 2009, pp. 94–95.

15 For general elaboration, see P. A. Weitsman, ‘Intimate enemies: the politics of peacetime alliances’, *Security Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1997, pp. 156–193.

16 G. Snyder, ‘The security dilemma in alliance politics’, *World Politics*, vol. 36, no. 4, 1984, p. 466.

On the second point, the first-order threat of wider nuclear proliferation still lingers in the Middle East along with the second-order potential for greater regional volatility as the region's main rivals posture against the backdrop of a possible nuclear option. Even a utilitarian US approach to "selective engagement" in the Middle East would advocate the use of American strategic assets in the region as a means of curtailing these specific dangers. Discussion surrounding possible US efforts to prevent wider nuclear proliferation feeds into the debate on whether the spread of nuclear weapons can promote either stability or volatility. Through added deterrence, Kenneth Waltz has stressed that the wider acquisition of nuclear weapons can promote greater systemic stability. This claim is based on the logic that the emergence of nuclear-armed rivals will raise the stakes to a level of extreme caution where each side will refrain from attempting even a conventional attack.<sup>17</sup> It is under these assumptions that Waltz advocated Iranian nuclear weapons acquisition.<sup>18</sup>

However, this argument tends to forget what can occur during the time it takes for a state to develop nuclear weapons capabilities. The early stages of an arms race might foster the risk of armed conflict; the rival that possesses a nuclear weapon first may wish to retain its strategic advantage, and with its opponent's deterrent still under development there would be no restrictions on the opportunity to wage a preventative war.<sup>19</sup> This scenario is quite possible, so a reduction in regional tensions is unlikely. Moreover, arguing that nuclear proliferation is more likely to destabilize a region, Scott Sagan highlights a scenario where a nuclear-armed state may behave more aggressively by increasing its support for proxy wars in order to strategically weaken a regional rival. This is motivated by the idea that the possession of a nuclear deterrent reduces the possibility for nuclear, conventional or unconventional retaliation.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, contrary to the improbable threat assessment that an Iranian nuclear strike is likely should Tehran acquire the capability, more plausible Israeli security thinking echoes a similar perspective, wary that were Iran to possess

17 K. N. Waltz, 'Nuclear myths and political realities', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 84, no.3, 1990, pp. 730-745.

18 K. N. Waltz, 'Why Iran should get the bomb', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 91, no.4, 2012, pp. 2-5.

19 C. L. Glaser, 'The causes and consequences of arms races', *The Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2000, p. 260.

20 See the three-way debate on the Iranian nuclear program: S. D. Sagan, K. N. Waltz, and R. K. Betts, 'A nuclear Iran: promoting stability or courting disaster?', *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 60, no. 2, 2007, pp. 135-150.



nuclear weapons it would become more zealous in its support for Hezbollah, Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.<sup>21</sup> Hence, despite arguments to the contrary, this chapter will adhere to the assumption that attempts to change the existing regional nuclear status quo are often likely to have a destabilizing effect. Thus, with the US–Saudi alliance at its heart, this chapter will explain how a number of issues threatening the strategic nuclear balance in the Middle East stand to provide many intricate diplomatic challenges for the US as it applies its “rebalanced” foreign policy to the region.

#### SAUDI ARABIA: PROBLEMATIC BUT PIVOTAL?

As well as assisting other strategic objectives for the US in the Middle East, the security assurances that Washington has long provided to Saudi Arabia can be perceived as part of a foreign policy that is designed to limit the risks of further nuclear proliferation in the region. In contrast to US security management in both East Asia and Europe, where American security guarantees have largely worked well to support stability, Kathleen McInnis argues that US extended deterrence has long suffered from a “credibility gap” in the Middle East. This has emerged from the often politically irritable relations that the US has had with some of its main allies in the region. Should Turkey, Egypt or Saudi Arabia perceive US security assurances as unreliable to meet the possible threat of a nuclear Iran, these states may then decide to seek their own nuclear arsenals. Washington would thus encounter the threat of wider nuclear proliferation as well as a deep crisis in the Middle East.<sup>22</sup>

The US–Saudi alliance has not been formed on a cohesive basis of shared values or deep mutual trust but is rather, as Gawdat Bahgat highlights, a minimal and highly pragmatic bargain. Saudi Arabia has long maintained a stable supply of oil for the US economy. Riyadh has subsequently used the influence gained from this to ensure that petroleum prices remain at profitable levels on the world market, while Washington seeks to guarantee Saudi national

21 S. Pifer, R. C. Bush, V. Felbab–Brown, M. S. Indyk, M. O’Hanlon and K. M. Pollack, ‘US nuclear and extended deterrence: considerations and challenges’, *Brookings Institution Arms Control Series*, Paper 3, 2010, p. 40.

22 K. J. McInnis, ‘Extended deterrence: The U.S. credibility gap in the Middle East’, *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 28, no.3, pp. 169–170.

security against external threats.<sup>23</sup> Although doubts concerning Saudi Arabia's nuclear intentions are occasionally voiced, Bahgat outlines that the Saudi leadership has long denied that it harbors any nuclear ambitions. Speculation on the nuclear option for Saudi Arabia can gain some anecdotal plausibility when one observes the country's arduous strategic circumstances combined with its regime's financial affluence. A Saudi nuclear program might not have to progress through the same lengthy research and development process that other past nuclear aspirants have had to establish, rather it might simply be able to purchase a nuclear weapons infrastructure at relatively short-notice. Conversely, a long-standing argument against the possibility of Saudi acquisition of nuclear weapons has been based on the logic that the reliable security guarantees it receives through its alliance with the US eliminates the incentive for Riyadh to develop a nuclear deterrent.<sup>24</sup>

In order to assess the strength of the latter prognosis, the durability of the pragmatic bargain forming the core of the security partnership between the US and Saudi Arabia needs to be reconsidered in light of the deteriorating security circumstances in the Middle East. The question of Saudi nuclear weapons acquisition tangibly emerged following the 11 September 2001 attacks on the US. Many of the attackers possessed Saudi citizenship, and social inequality is a prominent trend in Saudi society. Large sections of the population who are not privileged with connections to the Saudi ruling regime are often denied social opportunities and can instead come under the influence of clerics preaching extreme Wahhabi ideologies.<sup>25</sup> Saudi society's emergence as a supplier of radicalized personnel for Islamic terrorist organizations caused considerable unease in US policy circles, and Riyadh feared that the crucial security assistance that it had traditionally received from the US was on the verge of diminishing as a consequence.

The strategic turmoil in the Middle East caused by the US military intervention in Iraq in 2003 did little to reduce Saudi fears. Saddam Hussein's Iraq – a strategic counter-weight serving to constrain Iran's regional power – had fallen. While its alleged nuclear arsenal is officially undeclared, many reputable sources refer to Israel holding

23 G. Bahgat, *Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East*, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 2007, p. 79.

24 *Ibid.*, p.84–86.

25 For further explanation of social inequality in Saudi society, see I. Bremmer, 'The Saudi paradox', *World Policy Journal*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2004, pp. 23–30.

nuclear weapons.<sup>26</sup> Israel's nuclear preponderance among the Middle East's littoral states, coupled with Iran's newfound freedom of action, meant that Riyadh began to nervously contemplate the plausibility of two bitter regional rivals eventually posing a nuclear threat.<sup>27</sup> With the number of serious threats multiplying as the 2000s progressed, the Saudi leadership were further prompted to consider whether their ties with Washington were durable enough to indefinitely protect the country's security. Saudi thinking in this regard was suppressed temporarily as it became a crucial ally, both during the US "war on terror" after 2001 and during the US military intervention in Iraq in 2003, although the latter was not seen as wholly benefitting Riyadh's strategic position.

#### RIVALRIES, PROXY WARS, AND MIDDLE EAST TENSION

Doubts concerning the condition of the US-Saudi alliance have continued to fester under the surface. These have in part been heightened as an indirect result of US and Israeli actions or policy in the wider Middle East over the last fifteen years, since 2001. The response of Iran to US foreign policy in the region during this time has had many problematic repercussions for Saudi Arabia, among other countries. Often provoking arduous complications for US security management attempts, the densely entangled patterns of enmity that define the Middle East's security order often mean that efforts related to resolving one particular dispute can simultaneously have negative repercussions for conflicts elsewhere in the region. Riyadh has long looked on with anxiety at Iran's extremely hostile rivalry with Israel. Since the early 1990s, successive Israeli governments have sought to communicate to Washington their grave assessment of the threat that Iran's regional power strategy holds for the Middle East. Tel Aviv has repeatedly called for US support through harsh coercive sanctions and even possible pre-emptive military options to curtail Iran's nuclear program.<sup>28</sup> Paradoxically, Israel's alarmist approach has been argued

26 See Z. Maoz, 'The mixed blessing of Israel's nuclear policy', *International Security*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2003, pp. 44-77.

27 E. MacAskill and I. Traynor, 'Saudis consider nuclear bomb', *The Guardian*, 18 September 2003, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/sep/18/nuclear.saudi-arabia>, accessed 11 January 2016.

28 F. Rezaei and R. A. Cohen, 'Iran's nuclear program and the Israeli-Iranian rivalry in the post revolutionary era', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2014, p. 449.

by some to have counter-productively strengthened Iran's zeal to realize its nuclear ambitions.<sup>29</sup> Together with Israeli policy, George W. Bush's US foreign policy in the Middle East was argued by some to have exacerbated regional difficulties. US actions in the region had the effect of unintentionally galvanizing hardliners within the Iranian regime.

Between the 11 September 2001 attacks and the US military intervention in Iraq in 2003, Washington widened its security policy focus beyond the threats of transnational terrorist organizations to include "rogue states". The Bush administration declared Iran part of the "axis of evil" together with Iraq, North Korea and Syria. These were the prime states outlined by the White House as posing a menacing threat to the US and its allies. Following the US military intervention which overthrew Iraq's ruling Ba'ath dictatorship in 2003, the Iranian government perceived itself firmly within the American and Israeli lines of fire. Iran was clearly signaled as a threatening state that ought to be tackled next by the US. Through its actions against Iraq, Washington had already displayed its intent to overthrow unfriendly regimes with overwhelming military force. In this context, perceiving the need to safeguard its sovereignty as imperative, Iran is argued to have accelerated its efforts to attain a nuclear deterrent.<sup>30</sup>

While receiving marginal attention as the tense stand-off between the US and Israel on one side and Iran on the other has escalated over the past decade, the questions surrounding Iran's nuclear program that have emerged from this dispute would nevertheless hold serious implications for Saudi Arabia's security policy. Throughout the Iranian nuclear crisis, Riyadh has called for the halting of Iran's nuclear program. Based on action-reaction security dilemma logic, Iran's post-2003 nuclear ambitions perhaps increased the risk of Saudi Arabia being lured into a dangerous nuclear arms race. Interestingly, the 2015 agreement negotiated to stop the possibility of Iranian nuclear acquisition does not appear to have allayed Saudi fears. After arduous negotiations, in return for the lifting of Western sanctions, Iran agreed with the world's major powers to eliminate any possibility of its nuclear energy industry producing weapons-grade uranium.

Ironically, this outcome has triggered renewed fears of Iran's regional resurgence in Saudi Arabia and cast doubts on the sustainability

29 L. Horowitz and R. Popp, 'A nuclear-free Middle East – just not in the cards', *The International Spectator*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2012, p.2.

30 R. Takeyh, 'Iran's nuclear calculations', *World Policy Journal*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2003, pp. 23-24.

of the US–Saudi alliance. Armed conflict in the Middle East has long been fuelled by a bitter ideological divide between the Sunni and Shia Islamic sects. The fall of Saddam’s Iraq in 2003 left Saudi Arabia strategically weakened as a remaining Sunni power. Iran holds the region’s largest Shia society. With actions structured in line with religious affiliation, Saudi Arabia and Iran have previously vehemently supported opposing sides in many bitter civil conflicts around the Middle East. For both Riyadh and Tehran, these conflicts have emerged as strategic proxy wars where both have sought to inflict damage on the interests of other, and both have recently supplied weapons and financing to opposing belligerents fighting in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has pointed to recent unprecedented aggression from Iran and accused it of overstepping previous “red lines” by supporting political and militant opposition forces among the Shia minority concentrated in Saudi Arabia’s oil-rich eastern province and Shia opposition groups in neighboring Bahrain.<sup>31</sup>

While on the surface the Saudi leadership have demonstrated a reluctant acceptance of the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal, the agreement provokes its two principal fears: firstly, one strand of Saudi thinking believes that relief from Western sanctions will rejuvenate Iran’s economy and thus present Tehran with greater financial resources to support its proxies battling Saudi-backed adversaries in the region<sup>32</sup>; and secondly as the agreement is binding for a ten-year period, suspicions exist that Iran might use this time to establish nuclear weapons technologies outwith its territory in a clandestine manner, possibly in partnership with North Korea.<sup>33</sup> The amplified sense of threat that arises from these perceptions could prompt the Saudi leadership to revisit the debate on whether their alliance with Washington provides enough security vis-à-vis the alternative of a nuclear deterrent.

31 M. Knights, ‘What would a Saudi–Iran war look like? Don’t look now, but it is already here’, *Foreign Policy*, 11 January 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/11/what-would-a-saudi-iran-war-look-like-dont-look-now-but-it-is-already-here/>, accessed 11 January 2015.

32 Y. Trofimov, ‘Saudi Arabia considers nuclear weapons to offset Iran’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 May 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-considers-nuclear-weapons-to-offset-iran-1430999409>, accessed 11 January 2015.

33 J. R. Haines, ‘Foreseeable, foreseen, ignored: Is Iran advancing its missile program at home while offshoring its nuclear program to North Korea?’, *Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Notes*, January 2015, <http://www.fpri.org/articles/2016/01/foreseeable-foreseen-ignored-iran-advancing-its-missile-program-home-while-offshoring-its-nuclear-program-north-korea>, accessed 18 January 2015.

CONTROLLING PROLIFERATION:  
LIMITED OPTIONS FOR THE US?

While doubts linger in Riyadh, many views have emerged from Washington that see Saudi Arabia as an increasingly problematic state within the US alliance network. Chief among the critics has been the foreign policy team at the CATO Institute, a prominent libertarian think-tank that advocates the virtues of a “minimalist” US foreign policy. Proposing that the US should disqualify Saudi Arabia as an ally, CATO analyst Ted Galen Carpenter has pointed to the behavior of Saudi Arabia’s ruling regime, which has committed many grievous human rights abuses and follows a reckless policy of financing Sunni-aligned transnational terrorist organizations, which in turn emerge to threaten US security interests. Saudi Arabia is alleged to have supported the Sunni rebel groups in Iraq and Syria that would later form the Islamic State.<sup>34</sup> Dissatisfaction towards Saudi behavior in the region has also been displayed by some high-level US politicians. October 2014 saw Vice-President Joe Biden chastise Riyadh by saying:

“Our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria... ..the Saudis, the Emirates, etcetera. What were they doing?... ..They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad – except that the people who were being supplied, [they] were al-Nusra, and al-Qaeda, and the extremist elements of jihadis who were coming from other parts of the world”.<sup>35</sup>

Realizing the acute difficulties such comments could create for US foreign policy in the Middle East, Biden later apologized. However, illustrative of the pragmatic US alliance management approach

34 T. Galen Carpenter, ‘With “friends” like Saudi Arabia, the United States doesn’t need enemies’, *CATO At Liberty*, 18 August 2015, <http://www.cato.org/blog/friends-saudi-arabia-united-states-doesnt-need-enemies>, 11 January 2015.

35 A. Taylor, ‘Behind Biden’s gaffe lie real concerns about allies’ role in rise of the Islamic State’ *The Washington Post*, 6 October 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/10/06/behind-bidens-gaffe-some-legitimate-concerns-about-americas-middle-east-allies/>, accessed 11 January 2015.

towards Saudi Arabia's often duplicitous Middle East policy, one US analyst described Biden's mistake as "political" rather than "factual".<sup>36</sup>

Preventing the Saudi attainment of nuclear weapons appears to be at the heart of this US pragmatism. Mirroring concerns that foresee that Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon would strengthen Tehran's resolve to support Shia extremist groups, some have argued that a Saudi foreign policy bolstered by nuclear weapons capabilities would risk galvanizing Riyadh's efforts to support Sunni insurgents operating in conflict zones throughout the globe. This would further frustrate US counter-terrorism policy.<sup>37</sup> For reasons such as this, despite the acutely problematic contradictions in Saudi policy, it has been outlined that Washington must strive to retain Saudi Arabia firmly within its alliance network. To ensure this, Gene Gerzhoy advocates projecting US influence towards Riyadh through a mix of both coercion and reassurances. On one hand, Washington can threaten to lead embargos on conventional arms exports to Saudi Arabia. Replacing and maintaining Western-standard military equipment would be almost impossible were Washington's cooperation cut off. This would drastically weaken Saudi military potential, leaving it increasingly vulnerable to regional security threats. On the other hand, in return for greater Saudi discipline in curbing its support for extremist militias, consistent actions demonstrating its commitment to nuclear non-proliferation, and acceptance of contemporary US policy on Iran, Washington is able to offer many territorial defense benefits, possibly including sanctioning sophisticated military technology and improving intelligence sharing.<sup>38</sup>

However, focusing on the latter, some evidence from past inconsistent US policy in dealing with delicate nuclear security situations perhaps weakens Washington's ability to provide credible reassurances. Firstly, among other security matters, Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in March 2014 raised questions about nuclear security order because Ukraine agreed at the 1994 Budapest

36 Cited in M. Lander, 'Saudis are next on Biden's Mideast apology list after Harvard remarks', *The New York Times*, 6 October 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/07/world/middleeast/saudis-are-next-on-bidens-mideast-apology-list-after-harvard-remarks.html>, accessed 11 January 2015.

37 J. M. Ndungu, 'Is nuclear balancing in the Middle East possible?', *International Policy Digest*, 15 April 2015, <http://www.internationalpolicydigest.org/2015/04/15/is-nuclear-balancing-in-the-middle-east-possible/>, accessed 11 January 2015.

38 G. Gerzhoy, 'How to manage Saudi anger at the Iran nuclear deal', *The Washington Post*, 22 May 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/05/22/how-to-manage-saudi-anger-at-the-iran-deal/>, accessed 11 January 2015.

Memorandum, to transfer the portion of the Soviet nuclear arsenal on its territory to Russia in exchange for political assurances from a group of powers led by the US that guaranteed Ukraine's territorial integrity. The US, among others, was ultimately unable to enforce this guarantee. This perhaps damages Washington's credibility should it wish to offer or renew similar assurances in exchange for a de-escalation of nuclear tensions in the future.<sup>39</sup> Secondly, a general theme of George W. Bush's US foreign policy between 2000 and 2008 was the separation of states into "good" and "evil" categories. Paradoxically, while firmly emphasizing the grave dangers arising from the nuclear ambitions of US adversaries, the Bush administration was simultaneously lenient towards "good" states that either already possessed a nuclear arsenal or held nuclear aspirations, if these states were US allies or important strategic partners in the "war on terror". This category included nuclear weapon-states that were not party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) such as India, Pakistan and Israel. Moreover, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan were grouped as "good" potential aspirants.<sup>40</sup>

During the Cold War, Israel was able to conceal its development of nuclear weapons capabilities from the US through a clandestine program. Yet, due to Israel's important status in relation to both US domestic politics and US security strategy, Washington found itself having to accept Tel Aviv's nuclear acquisition rather than imposing sanctions. Saudi Arabia falls lower down the US alliance hierarchy compared to Israel, but this past American tendency indicates possible acceptance rather than coercion for allies of high strategic importance who ultimately achieve nuclear weapon-state status. From this perspective, experience perhaps demonstrates to Riyadh that the risks might be lower than expected for a hedging strategy that would include pursuing a clandestine nuclear program, possibly in partnership with Pakistan, while simultaneously seeking to salvage its alliance with the US.<sup>41</sup>

However, weighing up a contra perspective, Saudi Arabia might after all only have a marginal opportunity to undertake a clandestine nuclear program. The large US military presence located in the Persian

39 D. S. Yost, 'The Budapest Memorandum and Russia's intervention in Ukraine', *International Affairs*, vol. 91, no. 3, p. 523.

40 M. E. Carranza, 'Can the NPT survive? The theory and practice of US nuclear non-proliferation policy after September 11', *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2006, p. 501.

41 R. J. Russell, 'A Saudi nuclear option?', *Survival*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2001, pp. 78-80.



Gulf, including US bases located in Saudi Arabia itself as well as neighboring Qatar and Kuwait, means that Washington holds both the regional intelligence and military coercion capacities to ensure that any Saudi effort to develop a clandestine nuclear program will be difficult to both conceal and implement. Pursuit of the nuclear option would carry a perilous degree of strategic risk for the Saudi regime.<sup>42</sup> While this on-site presence aids US containment of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, the possibility that Washington may have to rely on its military capabilities to coerce Saudi Arabia away from nuclear aspirations illustrates just how chronically problematic the US alliance with Saudi Arabia is. While strategic circumstances dictate that both will continue to be shackled with this unhappy alliance, it is difficult to foresee an improvement in US-Saudi relations.

These security policy problems coincide with a time of increased economic strain between the two states. The US “oil-shale revolution” has reduced both the US and global demand for Saudi Arabia’s petroleum products and thus triggered serious problems for the Saudi economy.<sup>43</sup> This has the potential to increase Saudi insecurity and thus foster animosity in its relations with the US, which is likely to create further difficulties for US alliance management efforts that seek to limit the possibilities of a Saudi nuclear program as well as curtail Saudi Arabia’s proxy support for extremist groups.

#### CONCLUSION

Considering the security problems of both regional and international significance that find their source in the Middle East, it would not be wise for Washington to substantially downgrade its strategic focus on the region as it formulates its “rebalanced” foreign policy. The US promotion of stability in the Middle East can still be conducted in a far more utilitarian manner compared to the overly “maximalist” approach attempted under George W. Bush. In this regard, much will hinge on the highly problematic US alliance with Saudi Arabia, and maintaining this alliance will prove a politically treacherous task for

42 A. Kadhim, ‘The future of nuclear weapons in the Middle East’, *The Nonproliferation Review*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2006, p. 587.

43 A. Evans-Pritchard, ‘Saudi Arabia may go broke before the us oil industry buckles’, *The Telegraph*, 5 August 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/oilprices/11768136/Saudi-Arabia-may-go-broke-before-the-us-oil-industry-buckles.html>, accessed 13 January 2016.

American leaders on an almost perpetual basis. The Saudi regime's abysmal human rights record alone means that the preservation of the alliance will continue to attract criticism from many commentators in the US. Considered together with Riyadh's regular support for many extremist Sunni insurgencies that in turn threaten US security interests, this would indicate a grim outlook for the health of the US-Saudi alliance. Despite this, it appears that the "lesser evil" for the US will be to choose to continue to maintain its security ties with Riyadh, as a termination of this arrangement comes with the danger of pushing Saudi Arabia towards attaining a nuclear deterrent of its own, and this kind of development could well trigger a wider nuclear arms race in the Middle East. The Saudi acquisition of nuclear weapons would further inflame its bitter rivalry with Iran and thus increase the risk of chronic regional destabilization.

From Saudi Arabia's point of view, Riyadh is often dissatisfied with US actions. Having called for international action against Iran's nuclear program for more than a decade, the 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and the world's major powers to halt Iran's nuclear ambitions ironically provoked renewed apprehension in Riyadh. Saudi Arabia fears that the reduction of sanctions on Iran will revitalize its economy and thus provide Tehran with greater resources to support Shia insurgencies against the Saudi-backed Sunni proxies that violently clash throughout many of the Middle East's conflict zones. The US initiative to facilitate the nuclear deal with Iran probably fostered further doubts in Riyadh concerning the value of the security assurances it receives from Washington, and a declining US reliance on Saudi-supplied oil as a consequence of the American "oil-shale revolution" will do little to ease these doubts. As a Saudi rejection of these assurances in favor of its own nuclear deterrent would mark an almost irreversible blow for the US security strategy in the Middle East, the US might eventually have no option but to dissuade its ally through coercive diplomacy. Thus, rather than an overly "minimalist" form of "offshore balancing", US difficulties with Saudi Arabia spell out the strategic necessity to retain a substantial "on-site" military presence in the Middle East with the aim of guarding against wider nuclear proliferation, among other threats.