"U.S. Power and Influence in the Middle East: Part One"

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FEATURING
Ambassador Anne Patterson
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Anne Patterson: There’s no place where they clash more than in the Middle East—our values and our interests.

Jon Alterman: That’s Anne Patterson. She served as a U.S. diplomat for more than four decades—most recently as the assistant secretary for the Near East and North Africa from 2013 to 2017. During the Arab Spring, she was ambassador to Egypt.

Patterson was also ambassador to Pakistan, Colombia, and El Salvador, and she served at the United Nations. She represented the United States in countries recovering from civil war and countries fighting extended insurgencies, but to her, the Middle East forces some of the hardest choices on the U.S. government.

There was a time when some in the U.S. government thought the choices would be easy. A century ago, coming out of World War I, the United States had big plans for the Middle East. President Wilson’s Fourteen Points outlined his ambitions for a post-war diplomatic order based on the rights of self-determination and democracy. Of those 14 points, he dedicated one to the former Ottoman territories in the Middle East. According to Karim Makdisi, a professor of international relations at the American University of Beirut, that was welcome news in the region.

Karim Makdisi: The United States had a position of great promise—as far as the Arabs were concerned in the Middle East—coming in with the Woodrow Wilson era where there was so much welcome for American engagements in the Arab world and in the Middle East. Of course, part of that was that they were not British. They were not French. They were coming from what they saw as an anticolonial background with promises of self-determination and the expansion of liberalism and democratic movements, and these were really embraced during that period.

Jon Alterman: As part of the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, the United States sponsored the King-Crane Commission, a 42-day trip to the region to investigate the Arab world’s potential for self-determination, but the entire exercise was stillborn.

Even before the United States had entered World War I, the United Kingdom and France had secretly agreed to divvy up the Middle East between themselves. With isolationist sentiments rising domestically after the war, the United States didn’t push back. As a result, the United Kingdom and France dominated the region for two decades, and when they began to leave after World War II, the United States replaced them, rarely enthusiastically, and often reluctantly. But as the United States plunged into the Cold War, the Middle East was too important to abandon.

Over the next seven weeks, Babel is going to take you on a deep dive into the United States’ experience in the Middle East. I’ll talk to some of the preeminent foreign policy experts and former policymakers that have helped shape U.S. policy in the region. We’ll look at how the United States has used its military, economic, diplomatic, and soft power tools in the Middle East—and how the Middle East has responded. This is the United States in the Middle East podcast miniseries. I’m your host, Jon Alterman, senior vice president, Zbigniew Brzezinski chair in global security and geostrategy, and director of the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C.
In this first episode, we will explore how the United States became the dominant foreign power in the Middle East, how its approach to the region has changed, and how some people think it needs to change a lot more.

As the Cold War emerged after World War II, the overwhelming priority for the U.S. government was countering Soviet influence, wherever it emerged. Suddenly, the United States had new interests around the world. As armies and economies shifted from coal to oil—and as Middle East oil production increased—the Middle East became a decisive battleground in this much larger global competition.

Jimmy Carter, 1980 State of the Union Address:

_The Soviet Union is now attempting to consolidate a strategic position, therefore, that poses a grave threat to the free movement of Middle Eastern oil. Let our position be absolutely clear: an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf will be considered a threat to vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force._

Jon Alterman: Those words by President Jimmy Carter came to be known as the Carter Doctrine, and they changed everything about the way that the United States engaged with the region.

Andrew Bacevich: Prior to the promulgation of the Carter Doctrine in January 1980, from a military perspective, the Middle East really was a marginal concern.

Jon Alterman: That’s Andrew Bacevich. He’s a retired army officer, and a former professor of history at West Point and Boston University. Currently, he’s the president of the Quincy Institute in Washington, D.C.

Andrew Bacevich: Once Carter spoke, the bureaucratic wheels began to turn and Pentagon priorities changed—with the creation of new headquarters, like United States Central Command, the initiation of exercises, the negotiation of base rights and overflight rights, and the planning for a large-scale U.S. military intervention that had not existed before.

Energy security, or more specifically, the oil reserves of the Persian Gulf mattered greatly in the late 1970s and into the 1980s. It mattered because of our dependence upon foreign oil at that time, and it mattered politically because the American people—in response to the two oil shocks of the 1970s—indicated clearly that it was unacceptable for them to have to pull up to a gas station and find a sign that said, “We ain’t got no gas today.”

Jon Alterman: As the Cold War ended, the U.S. began to take stock. Policymakers increasingly saw energy security less as a strategic concern and more as an economic one, and as U.S. domestic energy production has risen, U.S. imports of Middle Eastern oil have dropped. In the last several years, a rising chorus of voices have been asking just how important the region is to the United States.

Andrew Bacevich: First of all, it’s time to evaluate Carter’s judgment. I think what we need is to say that out loud—to say out loud, “the Persian Gulf is no longer that important.”
Jon Alterman: However, the United States is not only focused on the region because of its oil. Another longstanding pillar of U.S. interest in the Middle East is support for Israel.

Anne Patterson: People would argue—I think some do—that our goal in terms of Israel’s security has changed because Israel is now so powerful and militarily capable. I don’t think that’s changed, as we’ve seen with some of the recent flare-ups in Gaza.

Jon Alterman: The United States has supported Israel since its founding in 1948. Presidents and politicians have seen Israel as a like-minded strategic partner surrounded by adversaries, and the U.S. public has mostly agreed. For decades, that support has alienated many in the Middle East who came to see Israel as a relic of Western imperialism—and Palestinian self-determination as a moral imperative.

Makdisi summarizes this view.

Karim Makdisi: There’s a sense of betrayal that comes by the vast majority of the Arabs. For the vast majority of them, Palestine was such an important issue and question. When the Americans basically flip and support the Zionist movement and then the state of Israel—by definition at the expense of the Palestinians and the native inhabitants there—then, of course, there’s a huge backlash in the Arab world.

Jon Alterman: According to Makdisi, that feeling of betrayal has led:

Karim Makdisi: To a situation where the most junior diplomat at—let’s say—the U.S. embassy in Lebanon, has to go around with armed bodyguards and can barely go get a cup of coffee at a cafe without getting permission from a thousand people in security.

Jon Alterman: Makdisi says that shift solidified in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the United States realized that it no longer needed the support of the majority of the population in the Arab world—it just needed the leaders.

Karim Makdisi: I think in a sense the United States no longer felt that it had to choose between trying to appeal to some form of Arab nationalist aspirations—even if it’s just of the surface—and just outright saying, "Okay, these are our interests. We want oil. We want Israel. It doesn’t come at the expense of getting Arab support, because we have certain kinds of Arab leaders that we’re going to prop up, and the so-called Arab street is not going to be much of a problem anymore.”

Jon Alterman: But Patterson thinks that in some ways, the United States has been the victim of its own success reaching out to Arab publics.

Anne Patterson: One of our problems in the Middle East is that we’ve been so successful, in some respects. People speak English. They want to come to American schools. U.S. corporations are the gold standard. All these things have led, in most of these countries—it’s really dramatic in the Gulf—to an elite group of English-speaking, highly westernized people, and they’re a very thin veneer in some of these countries. I suspect they know even less about the rest of their population than we
do. So, in many of these countries, the elites have kind of remade themselves in the American image.

I think, in many places in the Middle East, we don’t do badly in influencing the leadership because we have a lot of clout across a range of issues. But I think the more difficult issue is to get below what I call the English-speaking elite and get to know what’s really going on in villages and in places like the heartland of Saudi Arabia. That’s hard.

Jon Alterman: 9/11 was a turning point for the United States—nowhere more so than its policy in the Middle East. It changed the ways that Americans thought about the Middle East, and the way people in the Middle East thought about Americans.

Anne Patterson: What 9/11 did was focus everybody on counter terrorism, which necessarily focused them on security, so the security emphasis everywhere became the preeminent goal—which meant a convergence of interest with the United States on fighting terrorism. After that, it was hard to get back to some of the soft-power elements of the relationship.

Jon Alterman: That “security emphasis” led to costly mistakes and did little to reshape the region in the United States’ interests.

Karim Makdisi: I think that if America had not invaded Iraq in 2003, the entire Middle East would have been totally shaped in a completely different direction—potentially, a much more positive one. What America did in invading Iraq in 2003 utterly destroyed the region.

Andrew Bacevich: I would call our war for the greater Middle East an act of profound folly that has cost us greatly, has cost others greatly, and has come nowhere near to achieving the objectives that we have outlined.

Jon Alterman: According to Bacevich, that was partly because the U.S. has trouble deciding what its objectives in the region even are.

Andrew Bacevich: Sometimes we say we’re for stability. Sometimes, we’re for democracy. Sometimes, we’re about nation building. Sometimes we’re trying to provide for the rights of women, so the objectives are all over the place.

Jon Alterman: One reason it’s so hard for the United States to define its objectives in the region is that the broader values the United States was trying to promote ran into resistance from governments with their own ideas—whose cooperation the United States urgently needed.

Ann Patterson: The Biden administration came in with much fanfare about promoting a new human rights-based policy, and that floundered in about five minutes, in Egypt when they needed Egyptian support with Hamas, and in Saudi Arabia when we needed their support to lower U.S. gasoline prices.
Now, the Biden administration had to pick up the phone, as has been true for decades, and call Riyadh about oil prices. Regardless of what had happened to Jamal Khashoggi and lots of other people, that was an overriding interest, and it came back to U.S. gasoline prices.

Jon Alterman: That caused some people, in the United States and the Middle East alike, to accuse the U.S. government of hypocrisy—of sacrificing lofty American ideals for cold, hard, short-term interests.

At the same time, when U.S. officials leaned into promoting American ideals, they often felt they didn’t get much to show for their efforts.

Anne Patterson: That was a huge challenge in Egypt, because it was obvious that a lot of the activists—and the citizenry either—didn’t exactly want to take our advice on how their society should be democratized. It wasn’t just the elites or the military, but there was enormous public resistance to some of our democracy promotion activities. We can’t be too heavy handed, and we have to pick our areas of emphasis very carefully. They were happy to take advice on what I call the mechanics of elections—the balloting, the polls, and the poll watchers, all of which is important—but not on the broad democratization of their society.

Jon Alterman: For Makdisi, it’s the United States’ own fault that people in the Middle East don’t think that the United States has much credibility when it pushes for democratization.

Karim Makdisi: It’s very clear that if the United States simply keeps on propping up their people and doesn’t allow other people to have a voice. Not only is that not in the U.S. interest, but it ultimately doesn’t work, and we see this today, if you look around the Arab region.

You can presume to build your policies based on supporting authoritarian regimes and apartheid-like states and all the rest of it, and you can get away with it, but does that come back to bite you in the long term? I think it does. Does it stand in the way of the standing of the United States as a global power? Yes, I think it does. Does it help American interests? I would argue that it does not help American interests.

Jon Alterman: But what would help American interests?

Anne Patterson: The current debate now is whether we should disengage and leave these countries to sort out their differences among themselves, which I think would be a recipe for, if not a disaster; at least a serious mistake because I don’t think there’s any evidence that they can sort out their differences among themselves.

Jon Alterman: Andrew Bacevich doesn’t agree. He says that states in the region need a little breathing room to solve their own problems.

Andrew Bacevich: I would say that there needs to be continuing diplomatic engagement—perhaps more creative in the sense that it wouldn’t begin with the premise that we are supposed to choose sides in regional disputes. Perhaps we shouldn’t favor Saudi
Arabia over Iran. Perhaps what we should try to do is to do what we often say we're doing: to genuinely act as an honest broker and persuade to the best we can—our influence is limited—that actually, they share a common interest and mutual coexistence, that they are better served figuring out ways to tolerate one another. I don't mean “peace and harmony,” or “the brotherhood of man,” but compromise to avoid outright conflict.

Jon Alterman: But if the United States left the region alone to sort its own problems, might great power rivals of the United States move in to fill the vacuum that it leaves behind? Bacevich doubts it.

Andrew Bacevich: What is it, do we think, that China is intent on doing in the Middle East? Do we think that they will create a large network of military bases? I'm guessing no. I think they have two bases in the whole world outside of China. Are they active in terms of investment and economic development? You bet they are. Is that an arena in which we should compete? I would say yes. We want to define competition in military terms. I think that the Chinese define competition in terms of trade and investment, and perhaps we should pay more attention to the game that they're playing and pay a little less attention to the game that we have been playing—which has not served us well.

Jon Alterman: But does the United States have the right tools to play a different game in the Middle East? Anne Patterson has her doubts:

Anne Patterson: We talk about this a lot—retired State Department people—because there's a universal agreement that we don't have the tools. The only disagreement is how bad it is. We have no real expertise on climate change. We have no expertise on disease mitigation. We have hundreds of studies conducted over the years about economic diplomacy, but we're weak at that.

Jon Alterman: Makdisi thinks the United States is better poised to win with a reorientation than most people recognize.

Karim Makdisi: America has a lot of influence. It may be withdrawing at certain levels, but it doesn't mean that American influence is no longer there. It's very much there. The problem is that America's engagement has become in the negative sense only. It no longer has any carrots. It's just, "stick, stick, stick, stick, stick." Look at Iran. You had a little bit there. You had the nuclear deal, which was very much a carrot. Then, very quickly that gets shut down. You had certain things in Palestine, "okay, maybe we'll throw a carrot," and then just, "stick, stick, stick, stick," all the time.
I'm talking about engaging at a level where there's genuine empathy—and which interests can be constructed on that in a very progressive kind of way, rather than, saying, "I'm just going to squash everything and you see, look, it works."

Jon Alterman: Patterson agrees that there are a lot of opportunities for activities with regional governments that advance common interests and don't involve sending soldiers and sailors around the world.

Anne Patterson: The Bush administration did these free trade areas. We could promote regional integration among these countries, and what that would do—the negotiation process itself—is that it would force these countries themselves to take liberalizing and reform steps on their own economy.

Jon Alterman: But that doesn't mean that we can avoid the realities of the situation.

Anne Patterson: Do we have friends? No, we don't have friends. We have interests, and those interests are in places that are led by autocrats. And there's always been an enormous tension when dealing with the Middle East—about the human rights and democracy agenda, and what I would call more strategic interests.

Jon Alterman: The United States was slow to get into the Middle East, but once there, it found itself going deeper and deeper. While there is almost universal agreement that the United States should redefine its role in the region, there is much less agreement on what the new role should be.

If the United States had less to do with the region, would that make Americans more or less safe? And how should the United States divide its attention between governments that are mostly willing to help the United States, and populations that distrust American intentions? What would success look like, anyway?

Some argue the United States hasn't done much right in the Middle East for a long time, but the list of things that the United States has worked to prevent and that never happened is a long one.

Next time on the podcast, we dive into the United States' security toolkit in the Middle East and how the past two decades of heightened U.S. military involvement changed the region and the U.S. military. This is the United States in the Middle East podcast miniseries.

I'm your host, Dr. Jon Alterman, thank you for listening. If you enjoyed this episode, please like and comment on the podcast. To make sure you don't miss any episodes, you can subscribe to Babel on iTunes or Spotify or wherever you listen to podcasts.