

Chapter 13: Chapter exercises

Post-Oslo: Failure to progress in the Bush/Blair era and beyond

Various US Presidents have claimed to be committed to peace in the Middle East, yet few have ever been willing to utilize the military and economic leverage of America in order to attain it. Moreover, the somewhat contradictory nature of successive Presidential administrations towards the Arab–Israeli conflict has only served to deepen suspicions with regards to the underlying intentions of the US in this area, especially given its perceived bias towards Israel. Therefore, following the breakdown of the Oslo Peace Accords in the 1990s and the end of the Clinton administration, President Bush walked an inconsistent path when it came to the Israeli–Palestine question. In the face of frequently calling for an independent Palestinian state, the Bush administration actively embraced many of the more contentious Israeli policies that undermined this idea, despite international pressures to resolve the conflict. In contrast, from his election as British Prime Minister in 1997 and his subsequent role as Middle East Envoy, Tony Blair maintained a strong commitment to the peace process, but seemingly exhibited limited leverage over the Bush administration to progress the process as much as he would have liked. This is all the more striking given his close ties with the US government following the events of September 2001.

Shaped largely by the failure of the previous Clinton administration to find a lasting settlement despite the substantial political capital that was invested, the Bush administration was initially keen to distance itself from the troubles. Although it would later play a more active role in the conflict, its initiatives were all too often thwarted by frequent outbreaks of Palestinian terrorism. Furthermore, following the terrorist attacks on the United States of 11 September 2001, the perceived terrorist links of Yasser Arafat made Palestinian views less accepted in Washington than at any time before. Moreover, existing divisions between factions of the Bush administration (with hard liners such as Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney opposed to Colin Powell’s more diplomatic/internationalist approach with the external support of Prime Minister Blair), in relation to the conflict and issues of the wider region would later create a degree of incoherence regarding US Middle Eastern policy. The war in Iraq and the subsequent instability in that country only served to further distract the US administration from the objective of Arab–Israeli peace. Despite the calls of the international community, most prominently Blair, to not lose focus on the Arab–Israeli problem (a source of underlying anti-western sentiment in the region), this trend continued through the first Obama administration as regional issues such as Iran’s nuclear ambitions and the Arab Uprisings competed for Washington’s attention. Indeed, such was the situation that in early 2013 Thomas Friedman opined that ‘the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has shifted from a necessity to a hobby for American diplomats’.

Despite an inability to coerce the Bush administration into a more active role in the process, Blair was appointed as the Middle Eastern envoy for the Quartet (the EU, US, Russia, and the United Nations) in 2007. Given Blair’s links with the Bush administration’s arguably failed policy in the region, his appointment surprised many commentators. In spite of repeated attempts by Blair to fully engage and commit American leverage behind the resolution of the Arab–Israeli conflict and the commitment to a Palestinian state, his concerns seemingly fell on deaf ears.

Obama began his first term as President with a clear determination to have a positive approach to the Middle East, as seen in his speech in Cairo in July 2009. In it, he called for peace between Israel and Palestine, and officially acknowledged the US government's participation in the 1953 coup in Iran that overthrew the popular Prime Minister Muhammad Musaddiq. In the later years of his administration, Obama oversaw the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, the Arab Spring, and, most importantly, the lifting of sanctions against Iran with the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), curtailing Iran's nuclear programme. Peace in the Middle East, however, remained elusive.

With the arrival of Donald J. Trump in the Oval Office, American leadership in the peace process has faced renewed scepticism. Delegating key roles to close associates and family members, such as Jared Kushner, the new President nonetheless heralded a signature change in tone, and arguably policy, regarding the Arab–Israeli conflict. Recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital in December 2017, and ordering the relocation of the US Embassy from Tel Aviv, the strength of Trump's support for a two-state solution to the broader conflict has come under question.

Compare and contrast the policies of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump regarding the Arab–Israeli peace process.

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