

Continuity and change in United States' foreign policy towards Gulf region after the events of September 11th, 2001

A comparative vision between the Bush and Obama administrations

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to scrutinize and analyze the continuity and change in US foreign policy toward the Gulf region, with a comparison between the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations. Also, it explores the nature of the changes in US foreign policy toward the Gulf region to explain the factors that lead to change and when this change occurs. Policymakers were one of the most important factors that led to the occurrence of change in US policy. Therefore, the study also focuses on decision-makers as an engine of change in foreign policy. In this vein, the study seeks to answer the following question: what is the extent of continuity and change in US foreign policy toward the Gulf region under both Bush and Obama administrations?

Design/methodology/approach – The study seeks to answer its research question by using the rational choice approach. This approach explains that foreign policy does not change because of change of leadership. Therefore, this approach is suitable to study the research question.

Findings – The study reached several points of results, the most important of which are as follows: there is continuity within US foreign policy toward the Gulf countries under the two Bush and Obama administrations. Despite the difference of mechanisms of implementing this foreign policy under both administrations, the objectives of the US foreign policy are still constant and continuous. For example, although the events of September led to the occurrence of tensions between the USA and the Gulf region, the repercussions of the events of September were ostensible where the effects were confined to a change in tactical objectives. Also, successive American administrations have recognized the USA's enduring and salient interests in the Gulf region.

Research limitations/implications – The region is important as a source of US energy supplies as a strategic military base of operations and also as a site of US foreign policy influence through relationship with individual nations such as Saudi Arabia and the smaller states of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Practical implications – This paper adds to the existing literature which charts the effects of US foreign policy on the Gulf region.

Keyword Egypt

Paper type Case study



1. Introduction

The Gulf region is the most important US strategy. A great deal of attention has been given to the Middle East in general and the Gulf in particular by the USA. The American attention of the Gulf region started in the 1970s when Britain withdrew from the region. The then American President, Nixon, announced “Nixon Doctrine”, which was based on the “the twin pillars strategy. This strategy relied on Iran and Saudi Arabia to take charge of the Gulf security (Keshk, 2006). This means that the USA replaced Britain in the Gulf region.

In September 1979, the Iranian revolution erupted and the Shah’s regime fell. The regime was Washington’s main ally in the Middle East. Therefore, the USA adopted a new policy called “Carter doctrine” that meant any attempt by an external force to control the Gulf region would be considered a threat to American interests and would be confronted by any necessary means, including military ones.

In the aftermath of the Second Gulf War, the USA adopted a vision based on prioritizing the use of military force and direct intervention to counter any threat to American influence and interests in the Gulf region. The US policy at the time depended on three axes, which are:

- (1) improving the defensive capabilities of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries;
- (2) promoting and strengthening regional collective defenses among the GCC countries to enable them to cooperate together in the context of a collective security system; and
- (3) developing arrangements that help individual Gulf countries to meet their appropriate defensive needs and maintain the bilateral defense.

The events of September 11 were a turning point in the US policy toward the Gulf region. According to the US vision, the Gulf region turned from the region exporting oil to the one exporting terrorism. This led to the occurrence of tensions between the US and some Gulf countries. Also, the Gulf States became highly exposed to a series of different American pressures. However, the American vision was based on a set of constants toward the Gulf region. The most significant of these constants is the stability of this vital region. The Bush doctrine generally focused on three points. The first was preventive war in which the USA would strike an enemy nation or a terrorist group before they had a chance to attack the USA. It focused on deterring any potential attacker. The second point was unilateral action in which the USA would act alone if necessary to defend itself either at home or abroad. The third point embraced spreading democracy and freedom around the world, focusing on concepts such as free markets, free trade and individual liberty (Gary, 2002).

During the era of President George W. Bush, neoconservatives played a major role in shaping the American foreign policy toward the Middle East and the Gulf countries. The neoconservative vision of American foreign policy provided the theoretical and policy content of the Bush doctrine. Charles Krauthammer declares that: “the Bush doctrine is, essentially, a synonym for neoconservative foreign policy” (Brian and Michael, 2008).

The events of September 11 were a controversial issue where it was a subject of considerable debates among political analysts, especially the impact of these events on the US foreign policy. This debate often revolves around two main trends. The first trend is the most common. According to Farson (2002):

This trend perceived these events as an important turning point in US foreign policy, where US foreign policy has fundamentally changed. In addition, these events reformulated the United States’ principles and objectives.

In contrast, the supporters of the second trend suggested that the repercussions of the events of September 11 were ostensible where the effects were confined to a change in tactical objectives and the way of its external handling to adapt to the new style of threat. They believe that the general strategy of the USA is almost stable and constant and it has not significantly changed. They argue that this event was incentive for the US to control the international arena (Al-Ayouty, 2007).

After President Obama came to power in 2009, he began to adopt a new policy with the Middle East in general and the Gulf region in particular. According to the Obama doctrine:

A balance of power between the Sunni majority and the Shiite minority in the Arab region must be established by fighting the first and placing it under a virtual state of siege, and opening up to the second.

The intellectual origins of this doctrine are attributed to Stephen Walt, the owner of the theory of the geopolitical balance between Sunnis and Shiites. This theory justifies reliance on Iran as a pivotal partner and then making tight on Sunnis, especially in the Arab Gulf region (Zidan, 2017).

The theoretical framework of the study depends on the study of the concept of change in foreign policy as a starting point to monitor and analyze the change in US foreign policy toward the Gulf region after the vents of September and compare this change with US policy under President Obama. Then, the fundamental reasons that led to the change of US foreign policy can be determined, whether change was the result of internal factors in the USA or it was the result of reasons stemming from the regional environment or the international one.

The study seeks to answer its research question by using the rational choice approach. The use of this approach was used first in economics, which is one of the first social and human sciences using the rational change or alternative on the basis that the behavior of individuals is usually driven by benefit and profit-making. This economic perception was an input for political scientists, specifically to try to follow the same approach and apply it in their scientific studies. From this point of view, this theory has been formulated. This theory is based on the fact that all individual actions and behaviors are rational and logical in principle and that individuals calculate the potential benefits before deciding to do something (Scott, 2000).

The rational choice approach also played a major role in interpreting the foreign policy behavior of the decision-maker. The rational method recognizes that the decision-maker is rational actor, and therefore his behavior is rational and purposeful. According to this approach, the important events are caused by important reasons. Also, the state's decisions are formed in accordance with its objectives and the state's actions are interpreted by considering that decision-makers are rational and seek to develop and achieve policies (Shalabi, 1996). The approach attempts to explain the behavior of the state toward an event or another state through a rational analysis of the objectives of the state. It provides a logical explanation of the precise calculations that the state might have taken to choose a particular policy. For example, the political scientists "Hans Morgantau" believes that the USA entered the two World Wars as a result of the risks of imbalance of power in Europe (Heti, 1985).

Therefore, it can be said that the concept of interest is the cornerstone of the rational choice approach. According to the theory of realism, the idea of interest is a main objective of international relations.

Accordingly, the study seeks to monitor and analyze the continuity and change in US foreign policy toward the Gulf region, with the comparison between the two Bush and Obama administrations. In addition, it explores the nature of the changes in the US foreign policy toward the Gulf Region. Sections 2 and 3 explain the concept of the continuity and

change in the foreign policy, respectively. Section 4 highlights determinates affecting US foreign policy toward the Gulf region. Section 5 deals with US foreign policy toward the Gulf region during the two Bush and Obama administrations. Finally, the paper will end with research findings in Section 6.

Preservation of Israel's security, the realization of the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people to build their just state, the preservation of the unity of the Iraqi territory and reintegration it within the region, preventing Iran from possessing weapons of mass destruction, cooperation in fighting terrorism and obtaining energy and the integration of the region into world markets.

Accordingly, the study seeks to monitor and analyze the continuity and change in US foreign policy toward the Gulf region, with the comparison between the two Bush and Obama administrations. In addition, it explores the nature of the changes in the US foreign policy toward the Gulf Region. The first section of this paper will explain the concept of the continuity and change in the foreign policy. Section 4 highlights determinates affecting US foreign policy toward the Gulf region. The third deals with US foreign policy toward the Gulf region during the Bush and Obama administrations. Finally, the paper will end with results.

2. The concept of continuity in foreign policy

Continuity in foreign policy means the continuation of the ruling elite in maintaining the pattern of foreign policy toward the international environment regardless of the fact that the regime is democratic or undemocratic (Younis *et al.*, 2008). Thomas Nicholson connects the concept of the continuation of foreign policy to the concept of political stability, explaining why the regime can remain in power for a long time and analyzing the reasons that might eventually lead to its downfall. Nicholson argues that the advocates of foreign policy change do not change foreign policy, but they contribute to the stability of a regime. The regime may examine the available alternatives and eventually, stability might be chosen as the best choice for the system (Niklason, 2006). There are many factors that push decision-makers to continue in the existing foreign policy and maintain the status quo and reduce the impact of factors that lead the change (Goldmann, 2014). Goldmann, Wollger and Schwarzer developed the theoretical literature on the continuity and stability of foreign policy, setting out a set of factors influencing foreign policy stability: bureaucracy, regional and global resources and the features of decision-makers. These features enable them to make fundamental changes in foreign policy-making (Niklason, 2006).

3. The concept of change in foreign policy

The concept of change, like other social science concepts, has no agreement. Change refers to major changes in the foreign policy of an international unit in terms of its objectives or mechanisms of implementing foreign policy to conform to pressures, either stemming from the internal environment or the regional and international environments. There are two major trends to study change in foreign policy. The first trend is the gradual change. The second is the radical change (Selim, 1989).

Many thinkers presented different definitions of foreign policy change, such as Robert Gilben, Karl Holsti and Kjell Goldmann. The concept of change in foreign policy literature had several names: political adaptation, restructuring foreign policy and redirecting foreign policy (Hermann, 1990). Hermann Chares indicates four approaches of change, which are as follows:

- (1) *Adaptive change*: It is a change in the international unit's interests concerning a particular issue without prejudice to the objectives and mechanisms of implementation.
- (2) *Change in program*: It is a change in the mechanisms of implementing foreign policy. New tools are to be replaced without prejudice to objectives and orientations. For example, the state can adopt negotiation policy not the military power to achieve its goals.
- (3) *Change in objectives*: It is a change in the foreign policy of the international unit, not just the change of tools.
- (4) *Change in orientations*: It is a new approach which replaces the old one.

For example, a state can turn from isolation to openness. According to Hermann, the first approach is not a change in foreign policy. However, the other three approaches can be classified as part of the change in foreign policy. Also, Hermann argues that the fourth approach is radical and rare. Therefore, he focuses on the second and third approaches (Hermann, 1990).

4. Determinants affecting US foreign policy toward the Gulf region

The foreign policy of a country is determined by a set of internal and external determinants, which represent the foreign policy of a state. The study will deal with these determinants in the following section.

4.1 First: internal determinants

Internal factors include all elements of the internal environment such as institutions of foreign policy-making, whether at the formal level (governmental systems) or at the informal level (political parties, interest groups, the media and think tanks)

4.1.1 Formal institutions

4.1.1.1 Presidency. The American president determines, to a large extent, the nature and form of the relationship between the USA and other countries, including the Gulf region. US national interests are the motivation that drives the presidency. These interests are protecting the American national security and preserving US interests. Therefore, the USA is always seeking to maintain its presence in this region to ensure the flow of Arab oil to it. However, the American president is the person who determines this policy. Also, the beliefs and perceptions of the American president is a factor which cannot be ignored in any way. This was clear in the policies of American presidents toward the Gulf region. Some presidents adopted the approach of the Cold War and prevented Soviet control over the region such as Truman, Nixon and Regan. Other presidents saw that the Arab region is the reason for threatening the national security such as President George W. Bush. President Bush believed that repression in the Arab region led to the terrorist acts that threatened the USA in its own home. As a consequence, Saudi Arabia–USA relations have been strained after the events of September.

4.1.1.2 Congress. As for the impact of Congress on the US foreign policy toward the Gulf region, there are various examples that show this effect. For example, in March 2005, a set of members of Senate demanded the then US administration to adopt more assertive policy toward Saudi Arabia in particular and the Gulf countries in general due to their violations of religious freedoms. The group of 15 senators from both democratic and republican parties called in a letter to former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to deal firmly with the extremist religious of those countries and to establish relations between Washington and

such countries on the basis of that. Additionally, they demanded that these countries should be held accountable by the US administration because they support the Islamic extremism, which poses the greatest threat to the USA and its national security. Another example, Congress passed a law that allows the victims of the September 11 attacks to sue Saudi Arabia despite the objection of President Barack Obama. Furthermore, the media campaign has clearly influenced Gulf countries in various political, cultural and economic aspects. The US Congress made a decision in March 2006 about the cancelation of the deal won by Dubai Porters (DP World) after buying the Pinsol and Oriental British Company (P and O), which was overseeing six US ports. The USA was based on US national security slogans (Al-Essawi, 2007).

4.1.1.3 Informal institutions. There are a number of informal institutions that are not part of the executive, legislative and judicial powers of the state. However, they have influence on the US foreign policy. These institutions include political parties, interest groups, think tanks and the media.

4.1.1.4 Political parties. The US constitution does not refer to political parties in the USA, although they are important in the process of American foreign policy making (Mansfield, 1993). The party system in the USA is based on two major parties, the Democratic Party and the Republican one, as well as a number of small parties. These parties form an important part of the American system of government. As for the impact of American political parties on US foreign policy, we find that a serious dialogue between the US parties on the US foreign policy has been accrued. In particular, the ruling party at that period was the Republican Party (2001-2009). The party has a set of orientations which directed the US foreign policy. Neoconservatives clearly emerged and had a key role in US foreign policy. In the era of George W. Bush, neoconservatives adopted the use of US forces to promote democracy. They also played an important role in waging war on both Iraq and Afghanistan and launched a campaign against Saudi Arabia because they believed that Saudi Arabia's repressive policies led to terrorism that hit the USA.

In contrast, the Democratic Party has no role in US foreign policy making in the Bush administration. The party was not satisfied with Bush's liberalism and Wilson's ideas about spreading democracy and achieving the global stability. It rejected war and criticized war on Iraq and terror (Koplan, 2006). But, after Obama's Democratic Party victory in 2009, US foreign policy turned to the Democratic Party ideas that rejected war and adopted soft power in international relations and converged with the Gulf countries again.

4.1.1.5 Interest groups. Interest groups are influential actors in US foreign policy, but the influence of these groups in local issues is greater than foreign policy. Despite the multiplicity of interest groups and the diversity of their objectives and trends, some groups have a significant impact on American public opinion and political decision-making in the USA (Al-Beshr, 2014). For example, Zionist Lobby exploited the events of 9/11 and collaborated with the neoconservative figures of the American administration at the time. It launched an organized media campaign against the Arab Gulf countries to achieve many goals: first, lobby has sought to create a picture of gulf countries as the source of extremism and terrorism. Second, it has tried to practice a great deal of pressure on the Gulf countries to stop financial and moral support for the Palestinian cause and the resistance groups. Third, it has urged the USA to pressure the Gulf countries to establish relations with Israel, especially in economic fields (El-Essawi, 2007). Thus, the Israeli Lobby has distorted the image of the Gulf countries in the American and Western media. In particular, the events of September 11 occurred at a time when the GCC countries were criticizing the Israeli practices against the Palestinian people and were supporting Al-Aqsa Intifada, which erupted at the end of September 2000.

4.1.1.6 Think tanks. Think tanks are institutions that conduct and publish research to affect the government. They are trying to fill a very important gap between the academic world and political one (Haass, 2002). They affected US foreign policy on some issues, including the Middle East and the Gulf countries. For examples, the Near East Studies Institute holds a workshop every four years involving a large number of politicians and academics to develop a public perception of government policy toward the Middle East. It prepares a study which is a pressure paper on the new administration to adopt a specific policy toward the Middle East. This policy is based mostly on three axes: the Arab Gulf, The Arab–Israeli relations and the bilateral cooperation agreements with the partners in the region. During the era of President George W. Bush, the think tanks of the neoconservatives played a major role in shaping the American foreign policy toward the Middle East and Gulf countries. After the events of September 11, the US think tanks highlighted the current situation in the Middle East and the Gulf region and focused on the American goals in this region. Also, they developed initiatives to reform the situation by resolving the issue of the Arab–Israeli conflict, and Arab, and economic and social policies. In particular, think tanks faced a charge of unpredictability after the occurrence of the events of September. Therefore, we find that these think tanks developed programs to deal with the unstable reality of the Middle East and the Gulf region (Ibrahim, 2014).

4.1.1.7 Media. The media play a major role in US policy toward the Middle East and the Gulf region. The media distorts the image of the Arab world as a result of the control of Jews and pro-Israel groups on the media in the USA that prevents any *rapprochement* with the Arab side and harms the Arab interests in the US. There was opposition to the war on Iraq, but the media was able to impose a pattern of one position, which promoted the US War on Afghanistan and Iraq. One example of the image promoted by the media about the Gulf countries after 9/11 is the campaign launched by the media on the cultural system in the GCC countries (schools, institutes and the educational system) on the grounds that the cultural system had an indirect role in the events of September. Therefore, the USA was pressing the Gulf countries to reform the educational system. For example, the *Washington Post Journal* published in its issue of 2/2/2002 that Saudi Arabia was supporting the religious institutions and charities in Pakistan and the Islamic world contributing dynamically to the growth of Al-Qaeda. It suggested that the US administration must urge the Gulf countries to reconsider in the educational policy and take into account the issues of freedom and women's rights (El-Essawi, 2007).

4.2 Second: external determinants

There are a set of external determinants governing the US foreign policy toward the Gulf region. These determinants are the nature of the international system and the USA's interests in the Gulf region, which is represented in maintaining the flow of oil of the Gulf region and maintaining the security of Israel, where it is one of the constants of US foreign policy. The study will discuss briefly these external determinants.

4.2.1 *The nature of international system.* After the stability of the nature of the international system, we find that the international variables do not indicate a significant decline in the status of the USA. However, these variables indicate the rise of other competing poles. The world is now characterized by multi-polarity, although USA is still dominant in terms of military power and is still the biggest external player in the political field (Mohamed, 2014). Whatever the nature of the international system, whether was a unipolar system or a multipolar one, the US foreign policy toward the Gulf region did not and will not change. The Gulf is one of the main areas of influence of the USA. It is always

seeking to be present in this region due to its importance in the American strategy and doctrine.

4.2.2 *USA's interests in the Gulf region.* The USA's interests in the Gulf region are represented in maintaining the flow of oil from the Gulf region and maintaining the security of Israel.

4.2.2.1 Maintaining the flow of Gulf's oil. Oil security is one of the most important strategic objectives of the USA. Therefore, the US oil interests were protected by the bases and military alliances established by the USA. The main American strategic objective of the Truman principle is that the Middle East Oil depots are surrounded by fence where the US armed force can depend on these depots at any time (Al-Rumaihi, 1982). This is reflected in the US National Security Strategy announced by Bush on September 20, 2002. Bush stressed the importance of oil as a major determinant of the US foreign policy on the grounds that the control of US over the world starts from its control global oil fields (National Security Strategy of the USA, 2002).

There has recently been controversy in the USA where some see that the USA may dispense with the Gulf oil as a result of the discovery of rock oil. However, the decline of oil prices led to a decline in the production of rock oil because of the high cost of rock oil production. Also, the USA is keen to keep oil under its control in the light of the rising global consumption of international powers (China, Japan and western Europe). The US states wants to control Gulf oil to control the sources of energy of these countries. In particular, the USA imports crude oil from Saudi Arabia by 16 per cent. However, Japan, for example, imports crude oil from Saudi Arabia by 41 per cent (OAEPEC, Monthly Bulletin, 2016).

Accordingly, it must be emphasized that one of the objectives of US foreign policy is to control the Gulf oil, which gives it a dual interest. The USA will ensure the security of its energy and face the rising powers. This matter refutes some allegations that the USA will dispense with the Gulf region.

4.2.2.2 Preserving Israel's security. The US foreign policy toward Israel cannot be separated from the Middle East. There is a correlation between them. The USA considers Israel as a strategic ally in the Region and deterrent element to the regional powers. The USA has adopted a clear and consistent policy toward Israel that aims to support and ensure Israel's security. As former US Secretary of State, Rogers, said in June 1970: "our policies toward Israel are still firm and will not change". We believe in the importance of Israel's sovereignty stability for our national interest (Saudi, 1986).

5. US foreign policy toward the Gulf under the Bush administration

After the events of 9/11, the USA adopted a strategy based on a set of objectives. The first was to the war on terror, which was a response to the breach of security barriers in New York. The second was to the elimination of the new list of Evil Axis countries (North Korea, Iran and Iraq), which have a nuclear program or seek to have weapons of mass destruction. The third was to the establishment of democratic systems in the Middle East (Al-Taei, 2013). Thus, the study will discuss in the following section the four main axes which shaped Gulf-USA relations during the President Bush's term.

5.1 *First: promoting democracy*

President George W. Bush announced that the promotion of democracy and respect for human rights is an independent policy for the USA. This was highlighted by the head of the American delegation at the meetings of the 57th United Nations Commission on Human Rights held in March 2001, before the events of September. The head of delegation pointed

out that President Bush pays great attention to the issue of the protection of human rights (Hancock, 2007).

After the outbreak of the events of September 11, the issue of democratization has returned to the top priorities of the US policy, where the dissemination and promotion of the values of democracy became a key concept in US foreign policy. The then US administration believed that the events of September 11 were the result of the lack of political and economic freedom in the Middle East. For this, terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda have been emerged. Therefore, the USA placed the issue of the dissemination of the rules of democracy within its political agenda because this represents an approach through which the USA can fight against terrorism and eradicate the sources of terrorism (Alessandri *et al.*, 2015). Thus, the US administration opened the file of democracy and political reform in some Arab countries, including the Gulf countries.

Based on this vision, the issue of political and educational reform dominated the relationship between the USA and the Gulf countries. Saudi Arabia was the most targeted Gulf countries by the American campaign based on the saying that 15 Saudis participated in the attacks of September, which indicates the extremism of governance and society in the Kingdom. Thus, there is a dire need to put pressure on the Kingdom in a manner consistent with the goals and interests of the USA. The Bush administration found that terrorism was born in the womb of political, cultural and religious conditions that need to be eradicated and rehabilitated such as the lack of democratic life, religious isolation and educational programs that produce a culture of hatred against the USA and the West as a whole. It is therefore necessary to change this environment and to create an environment that fights terrorism by restructuring the official religious establishment and charitable institutions that finance terrorist organizations (Al-Tabli, 2011).

The Bush administration adopted key mechanisms for democratization and the promotion of human rights in the Arab region such as political pressure and initiatives calling for political reform in the region as the Greater Middle East Initiative. The USA also relied on the mechanism of politicalized reports, which fall within the so-called the diplomacy of coercion. This diplomacy means the annual reports issued by the US State Department after the events of September. Congress authorizes the state of Department to issue these reports. It is an essential tool of foreign policy that was existed before the events of September, but it took a political dimension after 9/11. These reports focus on a number of issues related to the nature and form of existing political systems such as the lack of political participation, restrictions imposed on public freedoms, namely, the freedom of opinion, expression and press, and the issues of women and the conditions of religious freedom (El-Essawi, 2007).

5.2 *Second: war on terrorism*

According to (Swan, 2014):

Combating terrorism and punishing the countries that sponsor it were main objectives for US foreign after the events of September, which is known as the Bush Doctrine (Who is not with us is against us). This means that the Bush administration has put the goal of the war on terror in the same position of the goal of fighting communism during the Cold War. The Bush administration penetrated and excluded international conventions and norms and even international legitimacy as they undermine the United States.

Indeed, the USA waged a war on Afghanistan. The Gulf countries agreed to the USA to conduct military operations in Afghanistan to fight Taliban and Al-Qaeda regimes. However, Saudi Arabia refused to use its territories for air strikes. Simultaneously, it

allowed the USA to use the King Sultan Air Base to coordinate for US air strikes on Afghanistan. Qatar also allowed the USA to use Al-Udeid Air Base in the operation. In general, the Gulf countries provided considerable support and responded to the USA's need to deploy military forces against Al-Qaeda and Taliban. Also, the exchange of information between intelligence services in both parties has been enhanced (Katzman and Thomas, 2017).

Arguably, the events of September were the most serious challenge to USA–Gulf relations, namely, Saudi Arabia. Tension between both parties was the most difficult matter since the 1973–74 oil embargoes. Many analysts argued that Al-Qaeda planners might have chosen a large number of Saudi participants in an attempt to harm Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. In return, Saudi officials acknowledged the negative impact of these attacks on the USA (Blanchard, 2010).

5.3 Third: USA's positions on regional issues (invasion of Iraq)

The most important regional issue of common interest between the USA and the Gulf countries during the period of Bush is the issue of the invasion of Iraq. The US war on terrorism was not confined to Afghanistan, but it extended to a comprehensive war against terrorist groups and organizations and their sponsors. The USA prepared a list of hostile countries to US policy, including Iraq, Iran and North Korea, and announced a campaign to eliminate these rogue states, starting from Iraq (Abdel Gahmi, 2015). The Gulf countries provided land and facilities to the USA for invasion of Iraq through some countries, namely, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman. However, the results of war were disappointing. The Iranian influence in the region increased as a result of this war, although one of the direct aims of this war was to isolate Iran and Syria (Duffield and Dombrowski, 2009).

It can be said that the US occupation of Iraq led to the creation of new conditions in the region that had direct repercussions on the development of political conditions in it. The war revealed a new American vision of the regional system of the Gulf, which is the militarization of the Gulf region. The USA is looking at the Gulf region as a theater of its review operations to devote its uniqueness in the international arena. This contributed to the complexity of regional security landscape. Concurrently, this led to the imbalance of power in the region at the expense of the Arab and regional political presence, creating a vacuum that non-Arab neighboring countries, particularly Iran and Turkey, sought to occupy it, where the two countries have large regional and political projects (Garghoun, 2016).

The Gulf countries felt new threats, although there were no major security crises in any of the Gulf countries since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. However, the weakness of the post-Saddam regime encouraged Iran to undertake a more active role in the security of the Gulf and to seek to lead the system in the Gulf region. Therefore, the Gulf countries and the USA were concerned about Iran. In particular, Iran has weapons of mass destruction programs. Thus, the Gulf and the USA discussed on joint defense initiatives (Katzman, 2006). In general, the invasion of Iraq was not a source of tension between the USA and the Gulf, but the source of tension between the two parties was related to the two previous elements mentioned above, which are the promotion of democracy and terrorism.

5.4 Fourth: USA's position on regional powers (Iran)

During President Bush's era, US foreign policy toward Iran witnessed tension that Bush considered Iran as part of the Axis of Evil or rogue states, a term used in US President's speech before the Congress on the state of the union on January 29, 2002. Since then, the USA adopted a series of measures against Tehran such as: destabilizing the regime in Iran, supporting Iranian opposition groups abroad as people's Mujahedin of organization of Iran,

accusing Iran of interfering in Iraq's internal affairs by providing weapons to Iraqi Shiite groups and inciting the international community against Iran. These mechanisms were used as a result of the failure of previous mechanisms such as double containment and diplomatic pressure (Al-Tarawana, 2007).

It can be said that President Bush's term was characterized by very tense relations with the Iranian side, which has a clear impact on US policy toward the Gulf region. There were very precise files in the USA-Iran relations during that period. For example, the USA accused Iran of supporting terrorism. The Iranian role increased in Iraq after the US invasion of Iraq. Furthermore, the USA accused Iran of possessing nuclear weapons. The USA adopted a policy toward Iran that is compatible with the national security of the Gulf. Therefore, the US foreign policy toward Iran represented an element of agreement between the American side and his Gulf counterpart.

6. US foreign policy toward the Gulf under the Obama administration

It was believed that the arrival of Barack Obama to power in 2009 is a new change in the performance of the US foreign policy as a whole by seeking to change the US diplomacy that prevailed during the era of Bush and conservatives. President Obama has sought to make US policy more flexible in external dealing with various issues after adopting for a long time the hard power by using military force. The Obama administration tried to balance the mechanisms of hard and soft power, especially diplomacy (Zakria, 1999).

Therefore, Obama's first slogan was to change and diplomacy flexibility in his foreign policy. This was confirmed by his Secretary of State Hillary Clinton when she said that:

She would work to renew the US' leading role through diplomacy that enhances the security of the United States, drives its interests forward and reflects the values of the US She added: I and President Obama believe that the US must adopt a new approach in Foreign policy that makes the US able to remain a positive power in the world, including strengthening partnership with allies and institutions and trying to connect with adversaries (Al-Qubasi, 2016).

At the Gulf level, the election of President Obama was generally a positive element for the Gulf countries with regard to its regional security, which was in a bad manner under Bush administration (Koch, 2011). Obama sought to develop a new strategy for US policy toward the Gulf region. This strategy emerged in his address before the General Assembly of the United Nations, which focused on a set of key elements (Sick, 2014):

- The USA is prepared to use all elements of force, including military force, to secure its fundamental interests in the Gulf region.
- External aggression against US allies and partners, as happened in the Gulf War, will be addressed.
- The USA will ensure the free flow of energy from the Gulf region to the world.
- Terrorist networks that threaten the American people will be dismantled.
- The development or use of weapons of mass destruction will not be permitted.

However, the Gulf countries' hopes for US policy in the Obama era faded. The Gulf countries found that the rhetoric of Washington has improved under Obama, which is welcomed by the Gulf countries, but in return, the policies have not changed (Sick, 2014).

In this vein, the study will discuss the same four main axes, as discussed during the Bush administration, which are:

6.1 *First: promoting democracy*

The Obama administration inherited the policy of promoting democracy from the Bush administration, which sought to change the Iraqi regime by force under the name of democratization. Thus, the reputation of the USA as a symbol of democracy and human rights has been damaged.

The Obama administration saw that the USA must move away from supporting democracy, and that change in the Middle East must come from inside. Many analysts believe that Bush's intervention to promote democracy in the Middle East led to the arrival of Islamists to power in some countries as Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamists in Iraq and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (Carothers, 2012), which could harm the interests of the USA in these vital regions. Therefore, Obama refused to use force as a means of promoting democracy.

6.2 *Second: war on terrorism*

The Obama administration has paid attention to the issue of terrorism, especially the terrorism of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The national security strategy of 2015 affirmed the commitment of the USA to lead international alliances to face the major challenges arising from aggression and terrorism. In particular, the USA abandoned the policy of involvement in the costly and widespread land wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in which the US forces bore enormous burdens. Instead, the USA was pursuing a sustainable approach that gives priority to counter-terrorism operations with specific objectives and joint effort with reliable partners (Hussein, 2015). The Gulf countries participated in the USA-led coalition to fight ISIS and provided support to the American efforts because this issue represents a danger to the Arab national security as a whole.

6.3 *Third: the positions of the USA on regional issues (Arab Spring revolutions)*

The Arab Spring revolutions were one of the most important regional issues under the Obama administration. In general, the Obama administration adopted pragmatic policies toward Arab rules with the aim of achieving a greater regional cooperation. The Gulf countries are not affected by the Arab Spring revolutions, except Bahrain and Oman. The problems of poverty and unemployment, which have been a source of inconvenience to people in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria, were not present in the Gulf countries.

The Arab revolutions did not represent a source of divergence of views between the USA and the Gulf. However, there was a difference on the management of post-Arab Spring in some countries, including Egypt. The Egyptian masses went out in another revolution, rejecting the rule of Muslim Brotherhood and demanding the end of the rule of this group. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces supported these demonstrations, which did not appeal to the USA. On the other hand, the Gulf countries welcomed to these demonstrations because they will eliminate the rule of Brotherhood in Egypt. In particular, Morsi adopted a new policy toward Iran based on *rapprochement* between Cairo and Tehran. Consequently, the USA–Gulf relations strained due to the conflicting positions of the USA on June 30 protests and the overthrow of Muslim Brotherhood.

In addition, the Syrian crisis was one of the most important regional conflicts, which created tension between the two sides. The USA has not adopted more clear and firm position toward the Syrian crisis. Obama has pointed out that the Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad has lost his legitimacy, but he did not develop a clear serious plan to remove Al-Assad regime from power. Although the US intelligence agencies introduced reliable evidence that Bashar used chemical weapons near Damascus against his opponents, Obama turned a blind eye to this matter. Instead, he sought to reach an agreement on dismantling

the chemical arsenal in Syria. Thus, the Gulf countries saw that the USA lost its credibility (Harb, 2014). Despite the US–Gulf agreements on the position of the Syrian crisis, the difference stems clearly from the mechanisms of implementation of this position. The Gulf countries saw that the USA did not adopt serious mechanisms to implement this policy.

6.4 Fourth: USA's position on regional powers (Iran)

After the arrival of Obama to power, US–Iran relations shifted from frank criticism to the political spin. According to his statements to the *New Yorker* magazine, Obama explained that the nuclear deal with Iran is part of the security re-arrangement in the Gulf, which will lead to a balance between Sunni and Iran. He said that such agreement is the best available option (Mosa, 2016).

Broadly speaking, the Iranian nuclear agreement signed in July 2015 between the international powers (5 + 1) and Iran made the concerns of the Gulf countries growing. The Gulf countries held that the USA ignored the interests of the Gulf. They criticized the USA due to its acceptance of Iranian nuclear ambitions, affecting the Gulf's regional security.

In this context, Obama invited the members of the six Gulf countries to hold a meeting at Camp David to discuss how to strengthen security cooperation in the future and to discuss the various problems that led to instability in the Middle East. The summit was held on May 13-14, 2015. The leaders of the GCC countries expressed their hope that the framework agreement will lead to a comprehensive agreement. They also stressed the aspirations of the Gulf countries for normal relations with Iran based on respect for the sovereignty of states and principles of neighborhood. In return, Obama stressed that the USA is still committed to the security of the Gulf and it sought to conclude this agreement to achieve security in the Gulf because Iran will not easily produce nuclear weapons after the conclusion of this agreement (Katzman, 2015). Tehran tested a ballistic missile in October 2005 and Gulf's concerns increased. In particular, the Obama administration refused to impose sanctions on Iran although this matter violates the UN Security Council resolutions (Abu Rashid, 2016). Consequently, USA–Iran relations have been a source of tension in the USA–Gulf relations. The Gulf saw that the improvement of USA–Iran relations would negatively affect Gulf security.

7. Research findings

The study has sought to examine the continuity and change in US foreign policy toward the Gulf region, with a comparison between the two George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, and to explore the nature of the change in US foreign policy toward the Gulf region to explain the factors that lead to change, and when this change occurs. The study has sought to answer the main question: to what extent has the US foreign policy toward the Gulf changed under the two administrations. To answer this question, the study has adopted the rational choice approach to explain that foreign policy does not change because of the change of leadership.

By applying this approach to the study of change in US foreign policy toward the Gulf region, the study found that the events of September 11 represented a threat to US national security. According to the beliefs and perceptions of the then policymakers, neoconservatives, these events represented a threat to US national security that requires reconstructing the US foreign policy. Indeed, the US foreign policy toward the Gulf region changed where relations between the two countries have been strained. The US' policymakers believed that the Arab environment produced a threat to national security.

However, when Barack Obama took power, there were different external threats. In addition, the atmosphere of the USA's internal public opinion has become calmer than it

was after the events of September. Therefore, the decision-maker began, in accordance with his beliefs and perceptions based on the use of soft power, to get closer to the Middle East and the Arab world. But, the events of the Arab Spring changed the US foreign policy, which led to the occurrence of tensions between the USA and the Gulf countries. For example, the USA signed a nuclear agreement with Iran which may affect the security of the Gulf region. The USA also did not take strict positions for resolve conflict in Syria. In addition, after the revolution of January 25, 2011, the USA supported the Muslim Brotherhood. Also, a new change in the USA–Gulf relations has been occurred after the USA–Iran convergence. According to the USA's decision-makers, the containment of Iran is an urgent necessity.

In general, this paper seeks to the study of continuity and change in the US foreign policy according to the rational choice approach. To illustrate, Bush represented the realism school, which used the term of national interest as a synonym for power. This school is used on the hypothesis of chaos in the international system. According to it, this chaos is the result of the absence of central supra-national authority which dominates power and tools of coercion. Therefore, ethics, principles and international laws have no impact on the international system.

According to this approach, there are certain steps followed by the decision-maker at taking a decision. These steps are:

- determining the problem and formulating the objective clearly;
- analyzing the problem and collecting data;
- putting the necessary alternatives to face the problem; and
- selecting the alternative and taking the appropriate decisions.

Thus, President Bush determined the problem that directed US foreign policy. This problem is the events of 9/11, which threatened the American national security. Thus, Bush formulated his main objective, which is the protection of the USA's interests emerged in the Bush Doctrine according to the realistic approach, and examined the available alternatives to deal with this crisis. This alternative is the use of hard power in Afghanistan and then Iraq to achieve the objectives of US policy.

However, President Obama determined his goal according to his beliefs and perceptions that were closer to the liberal approach. Obama rejected the war and preferred diplomacy. Obama also reinforced alliance, international standards and international cooperation. But, Obama soon began to be close to the realistic approach in managing foreign policy.

The US foreign policy toward the Gulf region witnessed changes from time to time. The Bush administration failed to achieve the objective of the US foreign policy by using the mechanisms of hard power such as the military option, imposing democracy and pressure on regimes to push them toward the political reform. In contrast, the Obama administration sought to change the mechanisms of the USA's foreign policy by depending on the mechanisms of the soft power such as dialogue, negotiations and partnership, which emerged after the outbreak of the Arab Spring revolutions. For example, the USA held a nuclear agreement with Iran in July 2015, in line with the Democratic Party's orientation. However, Obama did not completely abandon the military mechanisms or realism to protect the USA's interests abroad.

In addition, the change of political leadership has in turn led to a change in US foreign policy. The background of President Bush, his personal qualities, his association with the neoconservatives and the Christian Right and his affiliation to the Republican Party led him

to the use of hard tools such as power, sanctions and political conditionality. However, the background of President Obama, his personal qualities and affiliation to the Democratic Party led him, to the use of soft mechanisms such as dialogue, negotiation and partnership. The study has found that the US foreign policy toward the Gulf region did not change under both administrations. However, mechanisms of implementing this policy change according to the nature of a stage and the change of a leadership. Despite the difference of mechanisms of implementing this foreign policy under both administrations, the objectives of the US foreign policy are still constant and continuous. For example, under Bush administration, although the events of September led to the occurrence of tensions between the USA and the Gulf region, the repercussions of the events of September were ostensible, where the effects were confined to a change in tactical objectives. As for Obama administration, despite the conclusion of the nuclear agreement between international powers, including the USA, Obama stressed that the USA is still committed to the security of the Gulf. This affirms that relations between the Gulf region and the USA did not change. This is consistent with the second approach referred by Herman Chares, which called "change in program". According to this approach, the change occurs in the mechanisms of implementing foreign policy without prejudice to objectives and orientations. By the end of the above analysis, four main concluding remarks could be made. First, successive American administrations have recognized the USA's enduring and salient interests in the Gulf region. The region is important as a source of US energy supplies, as a strategic military base of operations and also as a site of US foreign policy influence through relationship with individual nations such as Saudi Arabia and the smaller GCC states. This has translated into a process of devising comprehensive US geostrategic policies that safeguard the US perennial interests and serve its grand strategy.

Second, despite strained relations between the USA and the Gulf region following the events of 9/11, the USA's pragmatic objectives in the Gulf prevailed over the outcry of those who saw the Gulf countries as enemies. Washington and the Gulf continued to share vested interests and in fact were able to revitalize and sustain their relations, which had been built on firm foundations over decades. The marriage between Washington and the Gulf has been long and beneficial to both sides in spite of its ups and downs. Neither side really wants a divorce, but Gulf elites increasingly worry about this episode of tensions being qualitatively different from those that came before. The agenda between the USA and the Gulf should not be a zero-sum game, but a win-win.

Third, the 9/11 crisis added a new dimension to the American engagement in the Gulf. This crisis represents a turning point in the formulation of the global system in the twenty-first century, which gave the USA the opportunity to determine the criteria of strategic catalyst objectives, called as the global terrorism from the American point of view. Thus, the relative importance of hard foreign policy tools such as the military tool and sanctions policy has been increased. Simultaneously, soft power tools, such as diplomacy and dialogue, have been retreated. In contrast, under Obama administration, soft power tools have been increased and hard power ones have been retreated.

Fourth, there is continuity within US foreign policy toward the Gulf countries under Bush and Obama administrations. Despite the difference of mechanisms of implementing this foreign policy under both administrations, the objectives of the US foreign policy are still constant and continuous. Since the end of the Cold War until now, the US foreign policy has been consistent and persistent, especially in goals and orientations. However, mechanisms change according to the nature of stage and the change in leadership.

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