

## INTRODUCTION: RETHINKING THE COLD WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST

*The period that is always most difficult of access is the one that is just within living memory. Not yet written down, its primary sources often still inaccessible, it is at the disposal of fallible memory and prejudice. No generation is ever fair to its parents.*

—ROSEMARY HILL<sup>1</sup>

For nearly half a century, the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union created a glacial divide that loomed over international relations. Its icy tentacles extended across the globe, with often devastating effects. The Cold War provoked a high degree of polarization, as states and political parties aligned themselves with the two superpowers in virtually every region of the world, exacerbating and aggravating pre-existing local conflicts or producing new ones, and envenoming the political atmosphere in numerous countries. Once it became a full-blown ideological and great-power confrontation in the wake of World War II, the East-West division dominated deliberations at the newly established United Nations and became the main focal point of international affairs. Its chill was felt in the domestic politics not only of the United States and the Soviet Union but of countries the world over.

The Cold War did not begin immediately after World War II, although precisely when it did start is a subject of some dispute. Former British prime minister Winston Churchill's fa-

amous observation, in a speech at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, on March 5, 1946, that “from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent,” is often seen as a decisive indication that the Cold War was already under way by that point, less than a year after the war’s end.<sup>2</sup> Historians, however, cite various key events from 1945 until 1947 as marking the end of the World War II alliance between the Western powers and the Soviet Union and the beginning of a cold war between them. It is clear, for example, that Churchill and some of President Harry S. Truman’s advisors were much more hostile toward the Soviets than were others, or than President Franklin D. Roosevelt apparently had been. It is also clear that over time, political circumstances changed, as did the views of decision makers on the Anglo-American side. Although Soviet decision-making was more opaque, it appears as if similar differences regarding American intentions may have existed in the minds of Joseph Stalin and the small circle of advisors around him.<sup>3</sup> Once the Cold War had started in earnest, however, it rapidly came to constitute the central axis of world affairs, and any such differences of opinion as may have existed on either side lost most of their importance.

We now know that this rivalry had been presaged by deep wartime suspicions and devious maneuvering among the Allies at the height of the colossal joint effort against Nazi Germany during World War II. In the case of those wary old adversaries Churchill and Stalin, antagonism to each other’s system was of very long standing.<sup>4</sup> Beyond the crucial questions of the post-war future of Germany, Central Europe, and the Balkans, the concerns of the Soviets and the Western powers extended into the Middle East and the adjacent regions south of the USSR, whence Britain had launched its repeated interventions to crush the Bolshevik regime during the four-year Russian Civil War after the 1917 revolution. It is unlikely that either Churchill or

Stalin, both of whom were central figures in this earliest phase of the East-West rivalry, ever fully forgot the impact of that deadly struggle. In some measure, these intense early experiences can be said to have shaped each one's view of the other side.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Churchill's entire career shows that he was always profoundly anticommunist, while Stalin's long-standing obsession with Britain as an imperialist power, notably in the Middle East, at times seemed to override his strong concerns about the growing role there of the United States in the early phases of the Cold War. Meanwhile, to complete this triangular picture, American policymakers, less experienced in international affairs than their British counterparts, often tended to be influenced by the latter's deep concerns about the spread of communism in the Middle East (which they often conflated with nationalism and anticolonialism). At the same time, the United States was for many years frequently at odds with Britain in different parts of the region, until their simmering differences in approach exploded during the 1956 Suez War, when the United States openly opposed Britain and its French and Israeli allies. This *sub rosa* rivalry between the two Western powers is an underappreciated aspect of the early years of the post-World War II era.

The Cold War and the fears it engendered haunted several generations.<sup>6</sup> It had this impact not only in the United States and the Soviet Union, and in Europe, which at the end of World War II lay battered by combat and virtually prostrate between the victorious armies of the two nascent superpowers. It also had a powerful effect in East and Southeast Asia, notably in Korea and Vietnam, where less than five years after the end of World War II the Cold War soon developed into ferocious hot wars. These were the only such wars directly involving the United States and its allies on the one hand and communist satellites and allies of the Soviet Union on the other. There were

also less overt proxy confrontations between the superpowers in Central America and the Caribbean, Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East, all of which were important arenas of superpower rivalry for decades. The first such non-European confrontations between the USSR and the United States and its allies (even before the wars in East and Southeast Asia) transpired in the Middle East. They were to have a special importance, as we shall see.

The Cold War has now been over for nearly two decades. For students of college age today, it is beyond their experience and their memory. If they know anything at all about it, this period is at best a matter of dim, distant history to them. And yet if time seems to fly for those of us who grew up during the Cold War and do remember it, changes in the way people see history progress very slowly. This may be especially true of recent history, about which many of those who have lived through the events in question may have deeply felt views, views that they are reluctant to modify. Thus, a serious rethinking of this crucial and well-defined period of modern world history, free of the Cold War shibboleths and the intense partisanship that distorted so much earlier scholarship, only began slowly. A reluctance to readdress the period has especially afflicted the “winning side,” where certain aspects of the orthodox, long-accepted interpretation of the conflict have yet to be challenged.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the continuing identification of many older Cold War historians with the received truths on “their side” of the now vanished iron curtain has been a hindrance to the writing of balanced, objective history of the Cold War.<sup>8</sup>

Although much good historical work has been done in recent years, particularly on the origins of the Cold War, there is still significant room for further reconsideration of the broad story of this rivalry’s origins, development, and course, and of its effects, especially as considerable new archival documenta-

tion on the Soviet side and from other sources has become available since the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup> A new look at the Cold War is particularly timely now that even after the demise of communism and the rise of capitalism in Russia, and the end of the ideological struggle that supposedly undergirded the Cold War, Western relations with Russia in East and central Europe, in the Caucasus, and in the Middle East are once again characterized by considerable friction. This is a perfect example of how one's vantage point in time makes possible a completely different view of history. After the West's warm embrace of the first two post-Soviet rulers of Russia, Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, and after the triumphalist proclamations of the "End of History,"<sup>10</sup> who could have foreseen the emergence of grave differences only a decade later between the United States and Europe, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other, over Iran, energy supplies, the expansion of NATO to countries like Georgia and Ukraine, and missile defenses? All of this should perhaps make us rethink at least some of the conventional views of the causes and motivations of the Cold War. Perhaps ideology was not quite as important as some on both sides made it out to be, and perhaps traditional great-power conflicts of interest over strategic issues and resources, the likes of which continually plagued Russian-Western relations before the Bolshevik Revolution, deserve more attention.

Beyond the need for further rethinking of Cold War history in general, relatively little new research has been done about the central role of this great international rivalry in a number of regional conflicts.<sup>11</sup> This follows on a period, from the late 1950s through the early 1990s, when much scholarship in a variety of fields, much of it policy driven and some of it of uneven quality, was devoted to exploring the impact of the Cold War on these regions. The inquiry into regional impacts of the superpower rivalry was a branch of an entire field, Sovietology, which grew up

in the shadow of the Cold War and has now virtually disappeared. There has been a similar drop in recent decades in the number of such works in various Cold War–related fields. Ironically, this has come just as some distance in time has developed between us and the most dramatic events of the Cold War, and when new archival and other primary sources have been made available, at least in theory making the writing of the history of this period easier. The relative paucity of new scholarly work on this vital era is as true of the Middle East as it is of most of the regions that were deeply marked by the impact of the Cold War rivalry from the 1940s until the 1990s.<sup>12</sup>

These regions, whether Africa, Latin America, South and East Asia, or the Middle East, have been marked further since then by what might be called the ghosts of the Cold War. The most striking example is the blowback of United States' involvement in the Afghan war against the Soviet occupation of that country, but there are many others.<sup>13</sup> Understanding these powerful and lingering aftereffects of the Cold War requires going back in time and reassessing that conflict, especially its less-studied final phases. I will seek to explore further on in this book the lingering impact of these Cold War ghosts in the Middle East long after the Soviet Union itself had disappeared and the Cold War was forgotten.

It is important to revisit this period, in the Middle East in particular, for several other reasons. Immediately subsequent to the rapid disappearance of its Soviet rival, in 1990–91, the United States engaged in an extraordinarily confident assertion of its suddenly unrivaled power in the Middle East via its leadership of a grand coalition against Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in the Gulf War of 1991, and in convening the 1991 Arab-Israeli peace conference in Madrid, which led to the 1993 Oslo Accords, signed on the White House lawn. Both were unprecedented initiatives in various ways. Although nominally a collective effort,

the 1991 Gulf War was the first American land war in Asia since Vietnam. Meanwhile, Madrid witnessed the first multilateral peace conference in history bringing together all the parties to the conflict, Arab and Israeli, and all relevant international actors. Moreover, it constituted the first and only serious and sustained American (or international) effort in over half a century at a comprehensive resolution of the Palestine conflict.

In light of these apparently radical departures in American policy immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it would be useful to revise our understanding of the Cold War as simply a prolegomenon to the current era of unfettered American dominance over the region. Such a revision would help us answer a number of questions: Was the United States previously as constrained by the presence of its Soviet rival as sometimes seemed to be the case, and as these two novel departures immediately after the demise of the USSR seemed to indicate? Alternatively, was America in fact more dominant in the Middle East throughout the Cold War era than may have appeared at the time?

These are important questions, since for the United States the Cold War was at least the ostensible reason for an enormously expanded American post–World War II global presence. Similarly, the perceived Soviet threat was the pretext for the establishment of U.S. military bases spanning the globe, and for the development of a vastly enhanced American international intelligence, economic, and diplomatic profile compared with the relatively modest world role of the United States before December 7, 1941.<sup>14</sup> Before that date, the United States was a Western Hemisphere and Pacific power with a major fleet and great economic might, but with limited military and air capacities and narrowly defined international interests. It thereafter became the dominant world power, the sole possessor of atomic weapons, with fleets and air forces that dwarfed those of all

other powers, and an unrivaled global economic, diplomatic, and intelligence presence. The post–World War II expansion of American power around the globe contrasted strikingly with the isolationist aftermath of World War I and the rapid decline of American involvement in European and Middle Eastern issues in 1919–20. The post-1945 expansion was in large measure predicated, at least as it was presented to the American public, on the newfound “need” to confront the Soviet Union (although it is striking to note that certain important aspects of this expansion, especially in the military sphere, well antedated the Cold War).<sup>15</sup> What drove this expanded vision of the role of the United States in the world in the waning years of Roosevelt’s presidency was a sense that the global presence of American power was necessary to prevent yet another world war, and that America’s previous refusal to play such a global role was a major reason for the disasters of 1914 and 1939. Such a view might not have convinced an American public skeptical of shouldering expansive international burdens, whence the utility of the easy-to-understand “Soviet menace” to Truman and those around him in justifying the efforts involved.

In many regions, this expansion of America’s global reach meant that the wartime arrival of U.S. troops—in the case of the Middle East this occurred in North Africa and Iran in 1942—was not followed after the end of the war by their disappearance back over the horizon, as had happened in Europe immediately after World War I. These initial wartime deployments of American forces, and the later establishment and postwar maintenance of major U.S. air bases at Dhahran in Saudi Arabia, at Wheelus Field near Tripoli in Libya, in Morocco, and in Turkey marked the beginning of a continuous U.S. military presence in different locales in this region, a presence that is ongoing to this day. It was the beginning as well of what has become a well-established role for the United States as a major Middle East-

ern power. Indeed, I would argue strongly that these early wartime and postwar moves constituted the beginning of an American role as *the* major Middle Eastern power, a reality that was masked for a time by the power and proximity to the region of the USSR.

Although overshadowed at times by other Cold War arenas, the Middle East was not just a secondary region where the United States and the USSR contended. Already during World War II, the crucial strategic importance of the Middle East had been amply demonstrated in terms of its central geographic location on the southern flank of Europe and astride vital sea and air lanes, and the vast energy reserves it was known to contain. The region's importance in terms of strategy and oil was further established during the Cold War, perhaps to a greater extent than some observers realize, as later chapters of this book will show. And since the Cold War ended, the significance of the Middle East to the United States has only seemed to increase with every passing year. Evidence for this assertion can be found in a series of major recent American initiatives in the region, including those already mentioned such as the defeat of Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War and the 1991–93 Madrid–Oslo Middle East peace process. Further evidence is the Iraq sanctions regime from 1991 until 2003, which involved constant bombing and overflights of Iraq, followed by the invasion of that country in 2003 and its subsequent occupation, which in 2009 will enter its seventh year, the largest, longest-lasting, and most costly such American overseas military effort since Vietnam.

Some of these post–Cold War American actions were unilateral in essence, even if they may have been superficially multilateral in form, while others emerged more genuinely from collective decision-making in the United Nations and elsewhere. Since the end of the Cold War, perhaps only American involvement in the Balkans and the North Korean nuclear crisis

have been actions of the same level of gravity. In any case, these initiatives in the Middle East have been among the most dramatic taken by the United States in the world arena in the wake of the collapse of European communism and the end of the Cold War. They indicate a particular and continuing importance to American policymakers of the vast stretch of North Africa and West Asia running from the Atlantic Ocean to central Asia, even after the end of the Cold War.

Given all of these facts, a reexamination of the Cold War in the Middle East has the potential to clarify several important issues. The first is with respect to achieving a historical understanding of the unprecedented current American involvement in this extensive region. How did the United States get into the situation in which it finds itself today, with a huge military, political, and economic presence in this unstable part of the world, where it is currently fighting two potentially open-ended wars, in Afghanistan and Iraq? Beyond this, the United States appeared at times as if it were on the verge of a third Middle Eastern hot war, with Iran, even as the two powers engaged in a fierce covert rivalry throughout the region that often looked very much like a cold war. Does this extended forward American military posture indeed have its roots in decades of deepening involvement in the region linked to the rivalry with the Soviet Union? Alternatively, is this involvement entirely new in nature and entirely different from that during the Cold War, and was the main reason for it really the changed world situation after 9/11, and the “global war on terror,” as the Bush administration argued?

The second issue is the broader and more general one of the nature of the transformation of the United States from being essentially a power whose ambitions were limited to the Western Hemisphere and the Pacific region before World War II, to being one of two superpowers, to its current position as the

sole global hegemon. Is explaining the growth of American involvement in the Middle East crucial to our understanding of the United States' new post-Cold War global role? What was the importance of the region's energy resources, and those of adjacent Transcaucasia and central Asia, in the ambitions of the team that surrounded George W. Bush to extend American global hegemony through the rest of the twenty-first century? This ambition was clearly indicated by the manifesto issued by the Project for a New American Century (PNAC), to which many of the key members of the Bush administration adhered before they came into office in January 2001.<sup>16</sup>

A final issue that might be clarified by an examination of the Cold War with respect to the Middle East is the extent to which today's massive American involvement in the region is an aberration, no more than the most egregious of the many foreign policy missteps and excesses of the Bush administration. If the current situation is indeed the result of one administration's actions, the pendulum is likely to swing back and we will eventually see this aggressive new course reversed by George W. Bush's successors. By contrast, is this assertive new high-profile American posture in the Middle East no more than a logical—albeit more extreme and violent—continuation and development of what came before in the way of U.S. policy there, going back to the Cold War? If so, the approach inaugurated under George W. Bush may mark the beginning of a new pattern of direct, unilateral American military interventions in this unstable region that is likely to continue into the future, and is also likely to exacerbate further its instability.