#181: Mirages of influence: The US in the Middle East, post "Arab Spring"

VOICEOVER
Welcome to Up Close, the research talk show from the University of Melbourne, Australia.

JACKY ANGUS
I'm Jacky Angus. Thanks for joining us. Well the eminent political theorist, William Wohlfarth, once made the wry observation that the collapse of the USSR in the late 1980s, which led to a politically unipolar world and American dominance, also meant that, and I quote, no article on contemporary world affairs is complete without obligatory citations from diplomats and scholars complaining of US arrogance. The problem is, he said, that policymakers and scholars cannot always have the balance of power they want. In other words, the reality is that only one superpower exists. American strategic interests and its foreign policy have held sway in international affairs since the end of the Cold War in the 1980s. Neither bipolarity nor multipolarity are likely any time soon for the simple reason that unipolarity is durable. Or is it? Political developments in Europe during the 1990s, and ongoing financial crises and the turmoil in the Middle East in the 2000s, have all implications for unipolarity and, by extension, for US foreign policy. With me in the studio to explore this complex subject is Shahram Akbarzadeh, Professor of Asian Politics for the Middle East and Central Asia at the University of Melbourne. Shahram's academic interests and publications range across a wide area. They include books and numerous articles on Central Asia, Political Islam, Islam and Globalisation, Islam and Human Rights and issues relating to American Foreign Policy. You will find details of these publications on our website.
Well, welcome to Up Close, Shahram.

SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH
Thank you.

JACKY ANGUS
Let's start with the Arab Spring, so called. It seems to have created new balances or imbalances of power within the Middle East. Nations like Saudi, Iran and Turkey, with their own interests, have come in as players - new players. Where do you see their place and what's going to be their contribution, do you think?
SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH
Well I think the Arab Spring, as it's often called in the press, has really allowed Turkey to assert itself as the regional player. Turkey has been at the forefront of diplomatic push for change for transition to democracy in the Arab world. Turkey obviously has its own model of democracy with a tinge of Islam in it, and that is quite attractive to many in the Arab world and that has allowed Turkey to really play a leading role.

JACKY ANGUS
And also it's got its own strategic interests. You know, Turkey's been a player for so many years recently, with Israel, and now it seems to have moved very much into a different camp and is quite critical of Israel and is presumably finding its own niche in the Middle East.

SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH
Turkey is finding its own niche in the Middle East. Turkey, in a way, has its foot in two different worlds. On the one hand, Turkey is a member of NATO, is very much in the Western camp, has had diplomatic relations with Israel - of course that has deteriorated following the killing of activists on the flotilla to Gaza. But essentially Turkey has had good relations with Israel and with the West. And by the same token Turkey sees itself as a Muslim state - not an Islamic state, but a Muslim state, which allows it to play, if you like, a mediating role between the Muslim world and the Western world. Yet Turkey has been playing its cards quite cleverly, which has really allowed Turkish diplomacy to flourish in the Middle East.

JACKY ANGUS
And what about Saudi? That's probably been a little bit more discrete than Turkey in terms of its interests.

SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH
Well, Saudi Arabia is very, very concerned about what's going on in the Arab world. Everything that's taking place in its neighbourhood, in North Africa, points to trouble down the track for the Saudi dynasty. Here we have a groundswell of popular movement against ruling regimes, we see a challenge to the status quo, we see a push for accountable government - and of course, all of that is anathema to the Saudi regime.

JACKY ANGUS
What about Iran finally? I know that's an area of interest for you particularly, in terms of the Arab Spring or Arab Winter as they may well see it.

SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH
Iran I think was caught off guard by the Arab Spring. Initially when the news of the popular revolutions in the Arab world reached Iran the authorities in Iran were beside themselves with happiness and joy. This was what they had anticipated. This was what they had expected to happen. They had foretold the story of popular masses rising up against colonial puppets and puppets for Imperialism. So Hosni Mubarak
was seen as a puppet for America as far as Iran was concerned. So this fit perfectly well in the Iranian world view. Iranians had stood up to the West, they had stood up to American pressure and they had called for revolutions and here we go. Now we see revolutions taking place.

But after a few months things started to unravel, because the revolution spread - starting from pro US states to anti US states. So Syria became all of a sudden embroiled in the same kind of mayhem and popular revolt. And that really shattered Iranian narrative of the Arab revolution. So Iran has not benefited from the Arab revolution. In many ways Iran has been a casualty of the Arab revolution. Iran has actually been sidelined by the Arab revolution. When the masses poured out in Egypt, in Cairo, Iranian authorities said, look, they are following our model - our model of Islamic state is being followed. Look at us, we are leading by example. The Muslim Brotherhood came out quite strongly in Egypt and said, no, no, no, no. We are not following your example. Forget that. We have our own model. If anything Turkey is a much more suitable model for us than the Islamic Republic of Iran.

JACKY ANGUS
I gather too, that in Egypt there is some concern that Iran's interests and so-called support, is really a cover for other things - a desire to say, move in there as well as obviously in Iraq and places, to promote the Shii Islam model - you know, the model of Shii governance. But also of Shii theology, which is so different from the Sunni model, which is, of course, the Egyptian style.

SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH
Yes I think - well there is a certain amount of concern about the Iranian model of Government, about the predominance of the clerical establishment in the Islamic regime in Iran and whether that is suitable to an Egyptian context - a Sunni context. Yes there is a problem there.

JACKY ANGUS
Well we haven't mentioned Israel. What's your perception of the fallout of the Arab so called Spring, in terms of Israel's position and in terms, I suppose, of a confrontation now possibly with Israel?

SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH
I think one point we have to bear in mind is that Israel has always claimed to be the only democracy in the Middle East. In all its PR material, Israel presents itself at the only democracy in the Middle East. Now with the Arab world moving in that direction with its transition to democracy, which is going to be very slow - I'm not saying we're going to have democracy in the Arab world tomorrow - but it's going in that direction. So that Israeli claim is now being undermined. Israel may not be the only democracy in the Middle East.

And the other point we have to bear in mind about Israel is that with the arrival of popularly elected Governments in the Arab world, who are likely - more than likely - to have an anti Israel world view, Israel is going to feel a lot more isolated. With the fall of Hosni Mubarak, with the fall of other regimes in the Arab world, Israel is going to be feeling quite isolated. The rise of Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is watched very
closely in Israel because they know that the Muslim Brotherhood has a lot less accommodating stance in relation to Israel.

JACKY ANGUS
Do you think there's been an impact or do you think it'll all go on much as before?

SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH
Well I think Israel desires everything to continue as per normal with no change. But the reality is that there has been a momentum in the Arab world in its neighbourhood for change. That momentum has reached the Palestinian territories that Israel occupies and that desire for change is going to have an impact on how transition is managed in those territories. So Israel has to respond to these popular cries for representation - for political representation.

JACKY ANGUS
I know that your interests encompass a huge area. Would you like to say something about Russia and China, who are two external players, but are still very much caught up through the UN in terms of making judgements about the Middle East?

SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH
Well I think Russia and China - of course they are big powers, great powers, that have a role to play in the Middle East. But the fact that the United States has been at the forefront of international relations, has been at the forefront and has been willing to go around UN institutions - I'm referring to the invasion of Iraq here - it has downplayed the role that Russia and China can play. But they are big players and they have a role to play. It's in everyone's interest to have Russia and China involved in any initiative.

JACKY ANGUS
I'd like to turn now to the more complex question of Saudi and Iran as religious rivals in the Middle East. And I realise that there's a long history of this, but things have changed lately, have they not, particularly with the withdrawal of the Americans from Iraq and the Iranian interest possibly there, and of course the Saudis who always have had an interest in containing all sorts of religious freedoms in the Middle East. Have situations changed now with all these events from 2011-12?

SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH
I think tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia has actually escalated quite sharply and it's reaching dangerous levels. Saudi Arabia never liked the fact that Iraq was invaded by Americans and power was given to the Shia Government in Iraq. That was seen as a big mistake. In fact, if you looked at the press in the Arab world, in the Gulf region, a lot of commentary suggested that Americans were working for Iranian Foreign Affairs - you know, implementing Iranian interests in the region.

JACKY ANGUS
And Zionists, of course.
Of course, yes. Which is quite ludicrous, but that’s the kind of thinking that you get. So Saudi Arabia has been very, very concerned that Shiism is on the rise politically in Iraq. Now we have the Arab revolution taking place in Bahrain where the majority is Shia, where Iran has had territorial claims over that country in the past and there are concerns that a revolution in Bahrain, and a change of Government in Bahrain, could easily mean the toppling of the Sunni Government and the rise of a Shia Government - a pro-Iranian Government in Bahrain. Of course Saudi Arabia has its own Shia minority - Shia population - and it has been very concerned about their political aspirations.

Now this is very different, isn’t it, from 1991 and the first Gulf war, so to speak - the invasion by Saddam Hussein of Kuwait - and the extent to which the Saudis - well in fact the Saudis led the interventions - the Americans provided the fire power - but it was all a much more smooth process despite the fact that there were some negative responses, particularly from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, as you’ve pointed out. That’s a very different situation. Now, does this suggest that there’s a kind of trajectory of change with Saudi Arabia now being less confident of its relations with the Americans and thus affecting American foreign policy?

I think Saudi Arabia is desperately seeking US endorsement and desperately seeking reaffirmation of US commitment to Saudi security. The United States has been willing - very willing - to provide that reassurance that Saudi Arabia is important to US interests. The United States cannot afford to lose Saudi Arabia at this time - at this critical time - when Iran is under sanction and threatens to close the Strait of Hormuz if there are more sanctions imposed on it. So neither party - Saudi Arabia or the Americans - can afford to lose their partnership.

You’re listening to Up Close, coming to you from the University of Melbourne, Australia. I’m Jacky Angus and my guest today is Political Scientist, Shahram Akbarzadeh. We’re discussing American foreign policy in the context of the Middle East.

Now given that, since the Cold War, the United States has really been the only superpower, unipolarity as they say, is this likely to change? Is there going to be a greater competition to share that authority in a global sense so that either bipolarity or multipolarity - where does the UN fit in here, and how do you read the situation over the next five years?

Well the UN suffered a major blow under George W. Bush when he decided to go around the UN institution and invade Iraq and effectively called the United Nations as a relic of the past; something that is not relevant to the 21st century. The present US administration has affirmed and confirmed its commitment to the United Nations, they have appointed a high profile person, Dr. [Susan] Rice, to the United Nations as
its Ambassador and they have tried to work systematically through UN institutions. Would that mean a move away from unilateralism is a moot point, because that would assume the rise of other powers. I wouldn't call the UN a symbol of multipolarity. What's in question is the rise of China and Russia and whether they are in a position to stand up ...

JACKY ANGUS
And challenge United States dominance.

SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH
...and challenge...

JACKY ANGUS
How do you see foreign policy in America developing? We've seen Obama coming through with a kind of goodwill gesture in almost every direction, including Iran, which failed, but in Egypt - which is sort of still a bit negative, isn't it? I mean, it wasn't an entire success. Do you see Obama - and whether or not he stands or falls - he's currently obviously now in power in 2012 - do you see him being able to initiate or even finish the promises that he made for the Middle East?

SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH
I think President Obama is a hostage of a dilemma in US foreign policy. US foreign policy has had two major strands in it. On the one hand they have a commitment to values of democracy and representation and justice and all of that; concepts that are universal in terms of the value and relevance. US has been presenting itself as the champion of these universal values throughout the Middle East. That's on one side. On the other hand, the US has, as a great power, as a superpower, has a strategic interest. It is interested in stability - it can't afford to have a change of Government every second day, it can't afford to see a change of political system in the region every second year. The Middle East is a very important region for US interests. It produces a lot of oil. Not all of the oil goes to the United States; it goes to Asia - Asian markets, Asian economies. But still, it's part of a global economy, and a rupture and crisis in that relationship affects US interests. So the United States has been pulled in two different directions. On the one hand they want to promote democracy, on the other hand they want to have stable governments.

JACKY ANGUS
But they've often been accused of wanting to promote democracy without any intervention, or in fact being a bit ambivalent of the despots that are in power in the Middle East.

SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH
Well I think Obama was trying to walk a very fine line when he came to office, you know. He gave speeches in Istanbul, in Cairo - talked about how the US has not played its hand right, its cards correctly, how it has supported despotic regimes in the past, and how it interfered in the affairs of the governments - internal affairs of
governments in the Middle East.

JACKY ANGUS
However if he pulls back, as he's presumably being trying to do and has been evident in the case of say, Libya in 2011-2012, and wanting to hand that over to other powers to deal with - the French and the British and NATO and so on - it may be that he'll be seen then as pleasing nobody, as not being prepared to come in and intervene and help when the situation arises. Given the instability, particularly of the Middle East in this last couple of years, do you think that therefore he'll have to be on the back foot again promoting democracy but doing very little? And how does that relate to soft-power - is this an option?

SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH
Well I think what Obama is discovering more and more, and I really feel sorry for his administration, is that he is edging towards a Bush strategy towards the Middle East, towards Iran and towards the Arab world. The softly, softly approach that he tried in his first year in office hasn't really borne fruit. The international community, the United Nations, the Europeans - they don't have the stomach for interference - they don't have the stomach for leadership - and it falls back on the American shoulders to take up the leading position, especially in Iran, if you like to look at Iran. I think the Americans, especially the Obama administration, has a really hard job here negotiating the international context. The Obama administration tried to repair relations with Russia. Hillary Clinton, the State Secretary, visited Moscow and they had a symbolic reset button to press with the Russian counterpart, to say that their relations are restarting from scratch, from zero. But the reality is that Russia is not very keen to be following American leadership. Russia is in fact trying to regain its position internationally in the region and that will make the job of Americans a lot harder because when responding to crisis in the Middle East, when responding to problems in the region, and if they want to go through the United Nations and its institutions, then partnership with Russia and China, as you mentioned earlier, is going to be critical. By the same token, if you look at Europe, the European powers are all talk and no action. The European powers are very generous with their advice on how things should be done, but when push comes to shove the Europeans don't have the muscle to pull anything, they don't have the finances or the backbone, if you like.

JACKY ANGUS
So then it devolves really on individuals within Europe - for example, the French and the British - to go out in the name of democracy. Would that be a fair assessment?

SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH
Yes. But that just really makes the situation very complex and convoluted - it becomes a really messy situation. Then the question will have to be through what institution will these players act their roles? Will they be through NATO, will it go through United Nations - it just becomes a very messy situation. The bottom line is that the Americans, as the sole superpower in the world at the moment, have a major responsibility and they have a lot of challenges they have to deal with, and add to
that their challenges are compounded by their own internal strife - financial strife. But the United States has worked quite closely with European powers in responding to the Arab Spring. Of course in Libya it relied on its European partners to invest in supporting the revolt against Gaddafi. And in Iran, since there are UN resolutions for greater sanctions, US and Britain have been at the forefront of imposing those sanctions. Of course you'll be much aware that Australia is also following that lead of imposing sanctions on Iran.

JACKY ANGUS
So you feel that Iran is just going to stick it out and presumably that's going to go on for quite a long time as things shift within the Iranian area - the domestic arena. How do you read that possibility?

SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH
The problem with the Iranian regime is that it has always thrived on conflict. From the very first day of the Islamic revolution you have the Iran-Iraq War - that went on for eight years. There was no reason for eight years of war. After the first year Iraqi forces were pushed out of Iranian territories, but the Government in Iran insisted on continuing the war saying that they want to go through Iraq to liberate Jerusalem from Zionist occupation. So Iran benefits from having that kind of external enemy. It works for the Iranian regime to have that external threat. And in that kind of logic it's in Iranian regime's interest to have this immense amount of international pressure on its nuclear program because it just reaffirms the Iranian world view that Imperialists are banding together to suppress Iranian aspirations.

JACKY ANGUS
And presumably this is underlined by religious Imperialism as well. Do you think that Iran has still got its idea of exporting the Iranian revolution?

SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH
I think they've given up on exporting the revolution. I think that was one of the fantasies that the Iranian regime had immediately following the revolution. But I think the reality has set in. They are not going to export it. They can see that talking of exporting the revolution can actually antagonise some of their allies. For example, in Lebanon, you have Hezbollah who works with Iranian authorities quite closely, but they are also very clear that they don't have to follow the Iranian model. Even though they have borrowed and learnt from the Iranian model, they don't have to follow it to the letter. So that ideal of exporting the revolution doesn't serve the interests of the Iranian regime, so they don't talk about it.

JACKY ANGUS
Do you see that situation in Iran with the mullahs becoming really the political leaders, as they've always been discretely, but perhaps now, as you suggest, more openly? Do you see that as a stable situation or is it going to exhaust itself and implode?

SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH
Well the Iranian regime has been on the verge of implosion for the past decade. 2009 you had the Iranian Presidential election where there was an outpouring of grief against election results, because it's widely believed that it was fraudulent. That led to some tension. Within the regime you had people who were at the very top of the Iranian political establishment questioning the authority of the Supreme Leader and then the Supreme Leader got back at them. So there was tension at the very top of the regime and it really looked like it was going to implode and everything would just fall apart. But it has survived.

JACKY ANGUS
It survived.

SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH
It has survived. It's been two years and it has survived. There has been all this tension and it has survived. I remember people talking about the end of Islamic regime a year after its establishment. They're still talking about it.

JACKY ANGUS
1980, yes.

SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH
Yeah, 1979, when the revolution was, and 1980, when the Constitution was written up. So the regime has survived and I don't really want to engage in that kind of fortune telling.

JACKY ANGUS
Thank you very much Shahram for joining Up Close.

SHAHRAM AKBARZADEH
Thank you.

JACKY ANGUS
That was Shahram Akbarzadeh, Professor of Asian Politics for the Middle East and Central Asia at the University of Melbourne. Relevant links, a full transcript and more information on this episode can be found at our website at upclose.unimelb.edu.au. Up Close is a production of the University of Melbourne, Australia. Producers for this episode were Kelvin Param and Eric van Bemmel. Audio engineering by Gavin Nebauer. Up Close is created by Eric van Bemmel and Kelvin Param. I'm Jacky Angus, until next time, goodbye.

VOICEOVER
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