

# EXPLORING THE AUSTRALIA– MIDDLE EAST CONNECTION

*Fethi Mansouri and Sally Percival Wood*

For much of its relatively short history Australia has looked to Britain,<sup>1</sup> and more recently the US, for a sense of national identity, economic prosperity and security. Until the mid-1970s the ‘White Australia’ Policy shaped the cultural image to which Australia aspired in a predominantly non-European region and was a clear reflection of its projected regional and international relationships. Times have certainly changed with Asia looming as a serious economic partner and further afield the Middle East emerging as a critical region for both security and economic objectives. This book focuses on Australia’s increasingly multifaceted engagement with the Middle East, highlighting the need to unlock the complex nature of this region and the potential for improved bilateral exchanges.

Australia’s involvement in Middle Eastern affairs — manifested in its current military engagement in both Iraq and Afghanistan — is not a new phenomenon, though discussions of this relationship have unfortunately tended to be ahistorical. In fact, Australia’s role in the emergence of the Palestinian question could not have been more central. Australia played a leading role in post–Second World War deliberations within the newly established United Nations (UN) and ‘in 1947 participated in the creation of a United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) when Britain announced on 20 September 1947 that it planned to withdraw from Palestine by My 1948.’<sup>2</sup> In addition to the leading role played by Australia’s then–Foreign Minister Dr Herbert Vere ‘Doc’ Evatt in ensuring that UNSCOP’s proposed partition plan was adopted by a majority of UN members, ‘early in 1948 Australia was the first western nation to accord full recognition to Israel.’<sup>3</sup> Given this early involvement in Middle Eastern affairs, it is a surprise that Australia’s subsequent interactions with the region have been constrained by what Foreign Minister William McMahon in 1970 called ‘a position of strict neutrality’<sup>4</sup> towards events in the region. One would,

of course, need to question this neutrality claim given Australia's strong alignment with the US position on all matters involving Israel. Nevertheless, over the past 50 years, the Middle East in Australian thinking continued to be associated with international conflicts, global economic crises and more recently the flow of forced migrants. The current relationship, therefore, needs to be viewed as a reflection of all of these historical encounters with the recent addition of a strong trade dimension.

On the surface, Australia's engagement with the Middle East appears to be steadily building: bilateral trade agreements with the Gulf States and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are currently under fresh negotiation; a diplomatic presence has been established in Kuwait with the opening of an Embassy there in late 2004; Algeria appointed an Ambassador to Canberra in February 2005; and a further contingent of Australian troops was dispatched in 2005 to augment its military support of the US intervention in Iraq. While historically Australia has always had a relationship with the Middle East, it is one that has tended to be ideologically filtered through its external relationships: firstly via its commitment to the British Empire and engagement in the Middle East during the First World War; secondly, and more recently, through its strategic alliance with the United States (US) which, this book will argue, shadows the foreign policy interests of the US, rather than an authentically Australian association. Internally, Australia's relationship with the Middle East has been filtered through the ideology of the White Australia Policy which, dating from 1901 through to 1973, reflected an enduring Anglo-Celtic priority that some argue has been difficult to dislodge from the Australian psyche. The foundations of Australia's direct engagement with the Middle East therefore remain either circumscribed by its military engagements in the region (from Gallipoli in 1915 to Iraq in 2006) or somewhat apprehensive in terms of its acceptance of Middle Eastern migrants from Afghan cameleers circa 1860 to asylum seekers and refugees in the present.

Historically, Australia's external relationships have been reflective of a somewhat tenuous sense of identity, which was evident in a 1999 federal referendum when Australians opted to retain constitutional links with Britain's monarchy rather than move to a republic. An Anglo-Celtic conservatism and wariness of difference thus hovers in the margins of Australia's embrace of multiculturalism, and this is most tellingly demonstrated in Australia's at times difficult relationship with its Asian neighbours. Walker, in *Australia and Asia*, reflects on this relationship as

one in which, historically, Australia has revealed a certain anxiety that its ‘fragile culture ... might easily be overwhelmed by the populous nations to its north.’<sup>5</sup> Though comprehensive studies of Australia’s relationship with the Middle East have not been undertaken to anywhere near the extent to which Australia’s relationship with Asia has been analysed, similar cultural apprehensions, particularly in relation to Arab and Muslim migrants to this country, would not be too extravagant a claim.

This book aims to fill the significant gap that exists in literature on the Australia–Middle East relationship, not only by bringing together these major aspects of the relationship in one volume, but by exploring new areas of potential which have hitherto remained rather fragmented areas of discourse. Still, despite the broad range of inquiry attempted in this volume, some areas remain ripe for further investigation. For example, few scholars have developed a thorough study of Australia’s political response, and contribution, to the Middle East Peace Process, which remains an underdeveloped area of academic investigation in Australia. Similarly, any substantial investigation into the nature of the trade relationship, taking it beyond its current import–export parameters with specific existing trading partners, is difficult to locate. This is highlighted in MacQueen’s chapter which explores the untapped potential of Australia’s trading relationship with North Africa, followed by Mansouri and Sankari’s identification of the need for Australia to take a more comprehensive approach to trade by developing the broader links to human rights in advancing economic relations with the Middle East. Through ambassadorial and consular representation, Australia maintains a presence in the wealthier Middle Eastern states of Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kuwait and the UAE, but among the region’s less affluent nations, such as some Maghrib states (Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania), Australia has no presence at all.<sup>6</sup> The potential for a deepening mutual relationship is, of course, also dictated by the requirement within much of the Gulf that agents or representatives, who are required to be nationals, must be engaged by offshore companies to facilitate trade negotiations.<sup>7</sup> And in the UAE, for example, business is frequently conducted via the South Asians who occupy many of the senior and middle management positions there,<sup>8</sup> which erects a barrier to direct engagement with Middle Eastern counterparts. An analysis of this aspect of the Australia–Middle East relationship is again an area that is under-scrutinized by Australian academia.

The momentum of Australia’s relationship with the Middle East appears to remain set within the paradigm of economic and military

activity, somewhat reminiscent of the imperial age. While closer trade ties with the Middle East are an important priority in expanding bilateral collaborations, as with Australia's military engagement in Iraq, these externally projected enterprises appear to operate 'out there'. Any potential misgivings about the trade relationship have been exacerbated in recent years with a dispute that saw the suspension of live sheep exports to Saudi Arabia in 2003 and the latest scandal involving the Australian Wheat Board's secret payments to Saddam Hussein under the UN's oil-for-food program. We have recently seen Australia inject additional military support into Iraq, a move that further circumscribes its Middle East relationship within military parameters. However, closer to the centre of public and political dialogue domestically is pressure around asylum seekers, a discourse that had, until recently, appeared to have stagnated. Since 2000 Iraqi, Iranian and Afghani refugees have been among the main nationalities held in Australian immigration detention centres.<sup>9</sup> Their presence has fuelled a media-driven fear of an 'influx' of a new 'other', replacing an earlier paranoia — with roots stretching back to the nineteenth-century gold rush era — characterized by the 'Asian invasion' or 'yellow peril'. This coincides with a significant hardening of Australians towards onshore asylum seekers. For example, during the 1970s, Australia accepted some 2000 refugees or 'boat people' from Vietnam<sup>10</sup> and when polled in 1979, only 28 per cent of the population believed that refugees arriving by boat should be put back to sea. In 2001, that figure had ballooned to 68 per cent and a substantial 76 per cent agreed that the *Tampa* 'boat people' should not be allowed to return to Australia.<sup>11</sup> This pinpoints Australia's Achilles heel in its relationship with the Middle East and the area where a more erudite and scholarly discourse is needed to move it beyond the confines of economic and military priorities and into a more sensitive, perceptive engagement.

Another point of contact between Australia and the Middle East is aid, which is generally provided via multilateral organizations such as the World Food Programme and UNICEF. Australia's direct involvement is, however, minimal when compared with the financial support that it provides to states in its own region. Australian aid assistance to the Middle East is limited to Palestine and Iraq: support for Palestine in 2003–2004 was around AUD \$11 million and this will be increased to AUD \$16 million in 2005–2006;<sup>12</sup> aid for the rebuilding of Iraq has been estimated at AUD \$126 million for the same period,<sup>13</sup> but even this more generous amount is modest compared to Australia's commitment to regions closer to home. For example, in the wake of the Indian Ocean

tsunami disaster Australia has committed AUD \$1 billion over the next five years to Indonesia,<sup>14</sup> and Papua New Guinea will receive AUD \$492.3 million in ongoing financial aid during the 2005–06 period.<sup>15</sup> This rather uneven approach to aid is reflective of the overall discourse on Australia's relationship with the Middle East.

There have been some publications focusing on specific, particularized aspects of Australia's engagement with the Middle East, such as military, economic or demographic studies, but in both historical and contemporary terms, this complex relationship remains academically underdeveloped.<sup>16</sup> *Australia and the Middle East: A Frontline Relationship* aims to develop the first comprehensive scholarly text to trace through the history of the Australia–Middle East engagement, from the First World War, to areas of potential strengthening of the engagement post-9/11. This objective is all the more important in the current political climate. Insight into the multi-layered nature of the relationship, past encounters, evaluating present policies and developing a framework for future interactions, will provide an essential basis for improved understanding and more articulate discourse. Rather than focusing on one single aspect of the relationship, this book seeks to draw together its various dimensions across three themes, beginning with Australia's military and migration relationship with the Middle East in pre-Federation days. The challenges posed by 9/11 and the West's response, with which Australia has been allied, informs the second half of the book, exploring Australia's relationships with Arabs and Muslims both at home and abroad. The final section examines future trade potentials, Australia's increasing strategic interest, and current military involvement in the region, which will include its approach to humanitarian interventions.

### **What is 'the Middle East'?**

If one is to understand Australia's relationship with a region as diverse and complex as the Middle East, then it is crucial to outline from the outset what precisely is meant by this term. The 'Middle East' entered geopolitical parlance at the turn of the twentieth century when it was identified loosely as the region lying between the 'Near East' (the region of the Ottoman Empire) and the 'Far East' (India, China and Japan), an area of strategic significance to the imperial interests of Britain and France. *The Middle Eastern Question or Some Political Problems of Indian Defence* published in 1903<sup>17</sup> alerted Europe to the changing nature of land and sea defence with the establishment of railway networks across Asia,

which provided new possibilities for access and the need for greater geopolitical definition. In 1921, Britain's 'Middle East Department' was established by its Secretary of State for Colonies, Winston Churchill, and subsequently became a more tangible geographical region encompassing Iraq, Palestine, Trans-Jordan and Aden.<sup>18</sup> The 'Middle East' was an area delineated at that time 'to denote a non-Western space, a region to be controlled, ruled or confined by the West but not assimilated.'<sup>19</sup>

Among the first countries to extricate themselves from European imperialism were Egypt in 1922, Iraq in 1932, and Trans-Jordan, Syria and Lebanon in 1946, leading the decolonization momentum as it then swept across Asia and Africa. Once Tunisia and Morocco freed themselves from France in 1956, followed by Algeria in 1962, this group of independent nation-states consolidated a newly defined Middle East albeit within redrawn borders. A definitive demarcation of the Middle East, however, remains somewhat elastic, even more so since the dissolution of the Soviet Union which saw the emergence of Muslim nation-states Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, states which might potentially be seen as enlarging the current Middle East. For the purposes of this book, however, the Middle East includes those nation-states which share a number of key cultural, linguistic and religious attributes, most notably Islam and the Arabic language, with the obvious exception of Israel. In the adoption of this broad definition of the Middle East, one notes that all but Israel are Muslim countries with nearly 90 per cent of the region's population identified as such, although Lebanon, Egypt and Syria are all multi-confessional societies with varying proportions of Muslim and Christian denominations. Moreover, and with the exception of Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and Israel, the region's states are all Arab, which explains the dominant status of Arabic language, at least at the cultural level.

In addition to this cultural and linguistic diversity, the region is also characterized by a significant disparity in wealth distribution between major oil-producing countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and the non-producers of oil such as Jordan, Sudan, Yemen and Syria. In fact, the oil-rich countries rank among the world's wealthiest in terms of GNP, while the non-producers of oil are among the world's poorest states. This economic gap is manifested in the level of investment different countries in the region are able to make in key areas such as the development of infrastructure, health, education and other social benefits.

Both the cultural diversity and the economic gap among many countries within the region means that the potential for disharmony exists both internally, because of this cultural and religious diversity, as well as externally, because of the region's natural resources and its increased importance to the global economy. Internally, the Iraq conflicts of 1991 and 2003, in particular, created a polarity in the Arab world leaving it 'deeply divided and incapable of any collective action'<sup>20</sup> despite Shimon Peres' optimistic vision post-1991 for a 'New Middle East' modelled on the European Union.<sup>21</sup> In terms of its external relationships, the Middle East, as the site of over half the world's oil resources, exerts considerable economic influence over oil dependent economies, particularly China, India and the US where demand for oil has boomed in 2005. But the recipients of oil's largesse is restricted to the Middle East's oil producing nations which are, in turn, the nations with which Australia covets an increasing economic interest, such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE.

### **Key Themes**

This exploration of Australia's relationship with the Middle East begins by looking at a history framed by immigration and multicultural diversity extending back to Australia's period of settlement in the nineteenth century. Walker begins in Chapter 2 with his study of an inherent anxiety about the 'other' in Australian history. Australian representations of the Middle East, while differently inflected, can hardly be separated from the cultural anxieties evident in its response to Asia. 'Perilous Encounters: Australia, Asia and the Middle East' provides an historical overview of the ways in which Asia has been represented in Australia along with a discussion of the process by which 'Australia' was understood to be different from 'Asia'. Walker then goes on to consider the representation of the Middle East in Australia: whether it was historically conceived as being a part of Asia or whether it was differently represented in Australia. The chapter addresses the cultural dynamics of representation and the imagery associated with the societies, religions, and landscapes of the Middle East. It comments both on the changes in this imagery over time and the persistence of cultural stereotypes.

These enduring stereotypes, as Lowe explains in Chapter 3, have their origins in Australia's military involvement in the Middle East around a century ago when a revealing taxonomy of identifiers was established. In his chapter 'From Sudan to Suez: Strategic Encounters', as the title suggests, Lowe further elucidates themes of Australia's military

involvement in the Middle East established by Walker. While Australia's current relationship with the Middle East is largely characterized by its support of the US in its 'war on terror' in Afghanistan and Iraq, direct Australian strategic involvement in the Middle East can be dated from 1885, before Australia was a federal nation-state. It was in the late nineteenth century that the self-governing Colony of New South Wales sent a military contingent in support of imperial forces countering the Mahdi-led revolt, a milestone also highlighted by Lowe in this volume. Not only was this a defining moment in terms of an intertwining between Australian nation-making and service in imperial causes, but it also stands at the beginning of a line of significant Australian episodes of military encounters with, and strategic planning for, the Middle East. When Australian expeditionary forces sailed to the cause of empire in the First and Second World Wars, they went first to Egypt, for training and preparation. Then, at the height of Cold War fears about a third world war in the early 1950s, Australian military planners again agreed to send an expeditionary force to the Middle East in order to safeguard British air bases that would be used to launch atomic strikes on the Soviet Union. Similarly in 1956, Australia became directly involved in efforts to resolve the Suez Crisis. Cumulatively, the story up to 1956 is one of close involvement in imperial defence plans involving the Middle East, and of the Middle East becoming an important source of Australians' assumptions about their role in world affairs.

After the Second World War the make up of Australia's migrant intake shifted considerably. Middle Eastern émigrés, however, remained something of a classification conundrum for the Australian authorities. Neither European nor Asian, this group was compelled to work around an immigration policy that was constrained by notions of race. In Chapter 4 Batrouney explores patterns in migration and settlement over the last 120 or so years by identifying government policies across four historical periods: the White Australia Policy (1880s–1920s); the period of assimilation (1950s–1970s); the period of multiculturalism (1970s–1990s); and the last decade of the twentieth century referred to as 'beyond multiculturalism'. Batrouney aims to situate the story of Middle Eastern migration and settlement within the broader picture of the Australian story and, in doing so, discovers the mutual efforts made towards building an enduring relationship. While Arab-Australians have made efforts to become accepted and respected as citizens, and at the same time strived to maintain valued elements of their cultural identity, the post-9/11 climate has presented significant challenges.



The post-9/11 invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, with which Australia was (and remains) militarily involved, have significantly destabilised infrastructure, security remains fragile, and have done nothing to temper the flow of refugees from those two states. Though the repatriation of Afghan or Iraqi refugees therefore remains tenuous at best, the temporary nature of Australia's policy toward onshore asylum seekers provides no guarantee of any lasting refuge in Australia, to their severe psychological detriment. In mid-2002, after the Taliban regime had been toppled in Afghanistan, Australia's then-Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock set about planning the return of Afghan refugees, which included a monetary incentive of AUD \$2000 for individuals and AUD \$10,000 for families. This coincided with the Australian Government's assessment of the situation in Afghanistan which, according to Maley (Australia's leading expert on Afghanistan and a contributor to this volume), 'should be regarded not simply as misleading, but as highly irresponsible.'<sup>22</sup> Maley's appraisal proved correct, if the fact that only 33 of Australia's 3400 Afghan refugees' (less than one per cent) acceptance of the offer is any indication.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, immediately after the fall of Saddam Hussein in May 2003, and despite the UNHCR's recommendation that repatriation of Iraqis would be premature before 2005, the Australian Government began urging their return. Twenty-three agreed, more because life in Iraq would hold less fears than the 'present horrors in Australian detention'<sup>24</sup> than their willingness to do so. Australia's flagrant disregard of the UNHCR's advice was followed in December 2003 by Iraq's exhortations to allow refugees to stay in Australia until security had improved and 'until we have the capability for receiving these people and providing them with housing.'<sup>25</sup>

In Chapter 5, Saeed explores the history of migration from the Middle East rather more specifically as he surveys the presence of Islam and Muslims in Australia, and how these groups have made conscious moves towards firmly establishing themselves socially. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Saeed traverses the various phases of Australian immigration from 'White Australia' through to recent patterns of Islamic migration, assimilation and integration. The impact of a series of external events, such as the Gulf War in 1991 and 9/11 a decade later, which was closely followed by the Bali bombing on 12 October 2002 and an attack on the Australian Embassy in Jakarta, is examined. This series of events, apparently establishing a 'clash of civilizations' or a 'West and the rest' mentality, has culminated in the so-called 'war on terror'. The creation of deep philosophical and ideological opposition framed by 'terror' has

shifted an already at times tentative equilibrium within Muslim communities living in the West. Since those external events, the presence of onshore asylum seekers in Australia has taken an unsettling turn towards regressive, 'Islamicized' fears of the 'other'. The Lowy Institute's poll found that the Middle East, Iran and Iraq are the least favourably viewed countries or regions by Australians: 69 per cent of those polled had negative feelings about the Middle East; 68 per cent about Iran; and 72 per cent about Iraq.<sup>26</sup>

Such negative responses confirm the harmful cultural stereotypes perpetuated in the Australian media, a phenomenon that Saeed addresses in Chapter 5. Such media representations do not go unnoticed by Middle Eastern states with which Australia simultaneously covets closer trade ties. In particular, Arabic media sources such as *Al-Jazeera* and the *Khaleej Times* have kept pace with Australia's treatment of refugees and mandatory detention policies, and often respond to these issues. For example, the infamous 'children overboard' episode prompted scathing editorial in the *Khaleej Times* which questioned Australians' projected self-image<sup>27</sup> and a gruesome image of an Afghan refugee with lips sewn together appeared in the Middle East's highest profile media outlet, *Al-Jazeera*.<sup>28</sup> The mounting desperation of Arabs and Muslims held in remote detention centres reached a climax in mid-2005 and families with children were finally released from detention at the end of July. The labyrinth of Australia's increasingly complex visa regime for refugees and asylum seekers, a topic that Mansouri investigates in Chapter 6, however, remains. In March 2005 Australia's Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone introduced measures intended to release long term detainees awaiting removal from detention and release them into the community. This move was welcomed as an important, albeit small, step in the right direction but it was roundly criticised for the significant obstacles which would make the new visa accessible to only very few detainees. Enthusiasm was also tempered by the fact that this new sub-class visa removes none of the inhumanity of uncertainty under the temporary visa regime. The minimalism of the Minister's attempt to breathe some compassion into the burning issue of refugee detention has recently been characterised as Australia's 'new politics of indifference'.<sup>29</sup>

Mansouri ventures more deeply into the re-emergence of a culture of 'otherness' in Australia and examines Australia's policy responses during its recent encounters with asylum seekers from the Middle East. He focuses on the social and political contexts within which exclusionary policies have been formulated and justified in the public domain in the

wake of 9/11 and the terrorist attacks in Indonesia, first in Bali in 2002 and then the Australian Embassy bombing in 2004, which brought the spectre of terrorism much closer to home. Specifically, he focuses on the Federal Government's introduction of 'deterrence' measures which include temporary protection visas, offshore mandatory detention of asylum seekers in Pacific island nations, and the deliberate linking of treatment of refugees to border protection and security threats. Mansouri argues that this episode in Australia's long history of accepting humanitarian entrants has undermined its reputation in the region and internationally, raised serious questions about its commitment to multiculturalism, and exacerbated an existing undercurrent of exclusion and denigration among members of Arabic and Muslim communities. This sense of anxiety about the direction of Australia's refugee policies targeted at Middle Eastern asylum seekers has been intensified by media coverage which, Mansouri explains, focuses on Muslim asylum seekers as deviant, undeserving and troublesome. They have been deliberately represented not only as the undeserving other but also as potentially hostile strangers.

Batrouney, Saeed and Mansouri's chapters clearly expose the need for Australia, in developing its relationship with the Middle East, to come to a more sophisticated understanding of Islam and Muslim culture. Currently, Australia's most immediate external engagement with Islam is experienced through its relationship with Indonesia, where the world's largest population of Muslims live. Australia's historical relationship with Indonesia is therefore reflective of the nature of its perceptions of Islam, which had to become rapidly more acute after 9/11 and, more particularly, after October 12. As Barton explains in Chapter 7, if 9/11 changed Australia's view of the Middle East then October 12 changed its view of Islam and its need to engage with Islamic issues. 9/11 was a brutal reminder that neo-Wahhabi extremism in Saudi Arabia is not something the world can simply close its eyes to and hope that it will go away, while the Bali attack awoke Australia to the fact that *Jibadi* extremism is no longer neatly contained at 'the other end' of the Islamic world. Barton points out that Australia has long been accustomed to believing that 'our region' on the eastern periphery of the Islamic world was different from, and unconnected to, the Middle East. Unfortunately, Australia also took this to mean that it did not need to seriously concern itself with understanding, much less engage with, Islam in Southeast Asia. Australia is now becoming increasingly aware that globalization is not just about American fast food franchises and MTV. Barton goes on

to analyse Southeast Asian Islam and its own exposure to globalization, which absorbs influences from the Middle East and its environs. This means that Australia, he concludes, needs to pay greater heed to a raft of much more complex issues than it had previously imagined. This is particularly pertinent as Australia ramps up both its military presence in Iraq and its trade negotiations in the Middle East region.

In Chapter 8, Burchill moves the discussion of Australia's military presence in the Middle East to the current situation when he analyses the events of 9/11 and the ongoing Israel–Palestine conflict. He points out the significance of 9/11 and its impact upon Canberra's policy towards the Middle East and, in particular, towards the Israel–Palestine conflict and Iraq. Australian foreign policy, he suggests, has shifted from a pre-9/11 approach that favoured Israel and was framed within the pretence of even-handedness. Post-9/11, policy towards the dispute has dropped any such pretence to become almost indistinguishable from Washington's neo-conservative 'Likudnik' approach. In reality, he concludes, Australian policy is now vicariously formed. In its response to each terrorist attack in Israel, Australia's reflexive support for the so called 'roadmap', its attitude to the Palestinian leadership, and more recently in an altered voting pattern in the United Nations, Australia has accepted Tel Aviv's claim that Palestinian militancy should be conflated with the global threat of militant Islam, and that Israel's response should be seen as part of President Bush's 'war on terror'. This is a departure from previous Labor Party and earlier Coalition (Liberal and National party) policy which was overtly sympathetic to Israel, conscious of the power and influence of the Jewish lobby, but recognised the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinians and the need for a settlement that was fair to both sides. Ignoring the impact of 35 years of brutal occupation, refusing to accept the legitimacy of anti-colonial resistance and insisting on an end to Palestinian attacks as a pre-requisite to any peace negotiations is the approach of Washington, Tel Aviv and now Canberra, towards the Middle East.

Australia's contribution to the war against Iraq in 2003 was a significant escalation from its minor role in 1990–91. Burchill explains that this should not be seen as a new found interest in the region, which has been and remains primarily commercial. Iraq was not a security threat to Australia, nor was it a regional priority. British and US pretexts for the war, copied by the Australian Government, proved to be either fatuous, imaginary or based on poor intelligence. In particular, Saddam's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) were not found and belated

humanitarian concerns expressed in 2003 were not raised in the 1980s at the peak of Saddam's crimes. Australia's joint invasion and occupation of Iraq in March–April 2003 should therefore be understood as a reflection of the growing alignment in the global outlook shared by Canberra and Washington. Australia is not a main player in the Middle East, however, via the close public relationship established between the Howard Government and the Bush Administration, Burchill asserts that Australia is building itself a profile in the region which might well run counter to its long term interests.

Australia's involvement in major military operations in the Middle East continues to raise important questions about the foundations of Australian foreign policy. In Chapter 9, Maley points out that the geographical propinquity of Afghanistan and Iraq should not disguise the fundamental differences between these two cases. In the case of Afghanistan, the 9/11 attacks provided a strong basis for international action (Operation Enduring Freedom), which had firm grounding in international law. In the case of Iraq, international action (Operation Iraqi Freedom) was based on shaky legal grounds, and even shakier factual premises. On 31 March 2005, the Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction, established in February 2004 to examine the veracity of military intelligence used to support the coalition invasion of Iraq, released its report to the President. The report found the invasion to be 'one of the most public — and most damaging — intelligence failures in recent American history' and the US intelligence community to be seriously deficient.<sup>30</sup> Australia's Prime Minister commissioned a similar report on 4 March 2004 a few days after a Parliamentary inquiry into its intelligence agencies ASIO (Australian Security Intelligence Organisation), ASIS (Australian Security Intelligence Service) and DSD (Defence Signals Directories) was released.<sup>31</sup> While the *Report of the Inquiry into Australian Intelligence Agencies*, released in July 2004, found the Australian Government had not applied pressure to intelligence agencies to support the coalition case against Iraq, it did conclude that Australian 'Intelligence was thin, ambiguous and incomplete.'<sup>32</sup> This report followed a furore a year earlier when former senior intelligence analyst Andrew Wilkie resigned in protest over the Australian Government's actions in relation to the Iraq war, claiming that 'Australia's spies knew the United States was lying about Iraq's WMD programme.'<sup>33</sup> Australian involvement in Iraq derives neither from specific interest in the Middle East, nor a wider interest in being a good international citizen. Rather, it

reflects the lengths to which Australia is prepared to go to persuade the Bush Administration that Australia is a reliable ally. Echoing Burchill, Maley concludes that the risks of such open-ended commitments, both for Australia and for Australians, are considerable.

Despite growing unease in several quarters over Australia's support of the US in Iraq, Prime Minister John Howard confirmed in April 2005 that Australia would deploy more troops to Iraq, doubling its military presence there. This came despite wide criticism domestically of Australia's further entrenchment in Iraq after an explicit 2004 election campaign pledge that this was not envisaged. Howard's public acknowledgment that the decision would be an unpopular one<sup>34</sup> did nothing to assuage the deepening sense that Australia's foreign policy alignment is increasingly a shadow of US policy. When the Lowy Institute asked Australians in February 2005 whether Australia takes too much or too little notice of US foreign policy, 68 per cent said 'too much'. Heading off such criticism, the Prime Minister explained in an address to the Lowy Institute the following month that Australian troops would be offering security protection to Japanese personnel in *Al-Muthanna* province in response to a formal request from its regional partner, Japan, and providing further training of Iraqi security forces.<sup>35</sup> This decision to 'lend a hand for freedom'<sup>36</sup> made no mention of the Australia-US alliance, though the rhetoric was rather familiar. What *is* transparent, however, is that Australia's deepening support of the US in Iraq helps to fill a military, and increasingly an ideological, void left by the withdrawal of 14 member states from the original 'coalition of the willing', including Spain and the Philippines in 2004, followed by the Netherlands in 2005, and Italy's intended departure by June 2006. In February 2006, while British Parliament debated its possible commencement of a military withdrawal by the end of the year, it was reported that Japan would leave Iraq 'within months'. But in Australia it was reported that, after discussions in Washington between Australia, Britain, the US and Japan, Australia was considering keeping its troops in Iraq after imminent the Japanese withdrawal.

As the Federal Government pondered its continued military presence in Iraq, the country's most damning corruption scandal ever continued to unfold. In order to secure contracts during the post-Gulf War UN sanctions against Iraq, the Australian Wheat Board (AWB), which has a monopoly over Australian wheat exports, allegedly siphoned off AUD \$300 million to Saddam Hussein through inflated wheat prices and bogus transport costs. Prickly military involvement and shady

transactions notwithstanding, in 2005 Australia stimulated a burst of trade activity with the Middle East. At the time of the 1991 Gulf War, Australian exports to the Middle East amounted to just over AUD \$2 billion but this figure had climbed to around AUD \$5.2 billion by 2004.<sup>37</sup> The Australian Government is in the midst of concerted efforts to establish a more coherent working relationship with nation-states in the Middle East and a Joint Standing Committee reported in February 2005 on strategies for the expansion of Australia's trade and investment relations with the Gulf States. This was followed in March by the Australian Trade Minister's announcement of the initiation of negotiations on a bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the UAE, Australia's first for the Middle East region. It would also be the first FTA entered into by the UAE.<sup>38</sup> The 'Expanding Australia's trade and investment relations with the Gulf States' report makes key recommendations for increasing Australia's trade representation in the Gulf and developing areas of technical co-operation, such as in mining and agriculture, but also to develop strategies for the export of defence-related hardware and services. The latter seeks to expand the trade parameters of the Australia–UAE relationship, which substantially turns on crude petroleum imports<sup>39</sup> and motor vehicle exports.<sup>40</sup> The volume of these two main areas of import–export in the UAE dwarf trade on other resources and products, ranging from liquefied propane to jewellery and glassware, and Australian zinc and meat.<sup>41</sup>

In terms of Australia's current trade relationships with the Gulf States, the most lucrative activity takes place with Saudi Arabia. Motor vehicle exports to Saudi Arabia are four times higher than to the UAE,<sup>42</sup> while petroleum imports, both crude and refined, are on a par with the UAE,<sup>43</sup> accounting for the greater part of Australian imports from Saudi Arabia. Motor vehicle exports to the Middle East are strong — one in five cars sold in the Middle East is Australian-made<sup>44</sup> — but otherwise trade data with the Gulf States generally is uninspiring. Australian imports and exports between Jordan, Iran and Iraq, for example, are negligible. Trade activity between Australia and the North African Arab States slides even further into insignificance. Only Mauritania and Morocco show some signs of life in terms of projected growth while Tunisia and Algeria seem destined for stagnation by current estimations.<sup>45</sup> MacQueen sets out to explore the 'missing link' of Australian trade activity with North Africa in Chapter 10.

As MacQueen points out, while trade and investment continue to take precedence in the nurturing of the Australia–Middle East relationship,

political, social and cultural exchanges remain insubstantial. The relationship between Australia and the North African Arab States (those of the Arab Maghrib Union or AMU) have been negligible. Outside the areas of trade in primary products (principally oil and gas from the region and agricultural products to the region) each of the respective partners has a minimal impact on and presence in each other's region. However, as Australia seeks to boost its presence in the Arab world in the realms of trade and political and cultural relations, the Maghrib provides a fertile ground in which both parties could benefit greatly. MacQueen focuses on the history of the relationship between Australia and the states of the AMU and seeks to single out areas in which this association can be fostered in order to promote a relationship that can take a valuable and prominent place in the broader relationship between Australia and the Arab world.

The volume concludes with a discussion of Australia's strategic interests in the Middle East and the human rights challenge. Mansouri and Sankari discuss current trends and future prospects in the economic and trade relationships between Australia and the Middle East and propose a new approach that links in a principled manner economic interests to local discourses on democratization and human rights. The chapter places the economic relationship in its wider social and political contexts arguing that a narrow focus on short term trade opportunities will not serve Australia's long term strategic interests in the region. Chapter 11 concludes by suggesting that, should Australia widen the strategic sphere of its engagement with the region by incorporating a consistent and systematic approach to human rights and other humanitarian issues, it would do greater justice to its stated commitment to global human rights and democracy. As the situation currently stands, Australian foreign policy has neither been equivocal nor consistent on the issue of linking trade to human rights, but the time is ripe for such a move to take place.

Events continue to move with such speed that it has been impossible to incorporate all the current shifts, not only in Australian immigration and foreign policy, but in the broader world context. Coordinated bomb attacks in London on 7 and 21 July 2005 took terrorism debates into a new direction when it was found that young Pakistanis born in Britain were responsible, adding further to the intricate nature of identity politics and social discontent. In Australia, the much publicised terror plots aborted in late 2005 in Melbourne coupled with Sydney's 'race riots' reinforced the notion of Arab and Muslim migrants as potentially 'hostile



strangers' unable or unwilling to integrate into the nation state. The Sydney riots in particular, where attack and counter-attack between Middle Eastern and Anglo-Australians climaxed when 'an angry crowd of 5,000 Anglo-Australians staged vicious mob attacks on dark-skinned beachgoers and on people they believed to be Muslims', revealed a deep antagonism and hostility toward Arab and Muslim migrants.<sup>46</sup> The situation was exploited by a 'neo-Nazi group known as the Patriotic Youth League, which has links to the German-based skinhead group Volksfront and the British National party, also used the rally to promote white supremacism'.<sup>47</sup> While the Federal Government insisted that racism is not an underlying factor in the Sydney riots, opinion polls showed that 75 per cent of those surveyed think that there is underlying racism in Australia<sup>48</sup>.

It is ironic that the very neo-liberal policies pursued by Western countries such as Britain and Australia and their globalization agenda are presenting new challenges to the concept of citizenship as conceived in the modern nation-state. Indeed, British youth of Muslim background, like Australian youth of Muslim background, may challenge the exclusionary juridical and social nature of citizenship and often articulate dual forms of attachment that reflect their hyphenated identities. Yet, the hybridity of Arab and Muslim youth in increasingly multicultural Western societies such as Australia should also be seen as a proof that rapprochement between the Middle East and the West is not only possible but ultimately unavoidable. It is for this reason that a deeper understanding of the Australia–Middle East connection is a timely endeavour. The Middle East, a complex region that has remained peripheral in much of Australia's history, is destined to always come to prominence in times of wars, conflicts or terrorist activities. The chapters in this book make a collective attempt to unlock the complexity of the Australia–Middle East connection not only at the level of military engagements but also the level of cultural encounters and economic interests.