



Original Article

US Foreign Policy: Towards Middle East (2018-2023)

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ABSTRACT

This research provides a comprehensive analysis of U.S. foreign policy towards the Middle East from 2018 to 2023, a period marked by significant geopolitical transformations and evolving challenges in the region. The U.S. has long held a complex and multifaceted relationship with the Middle East, influenced by historical legacies, economic interests, and security concerns. This study aims to dissect the strategic decisions made by the U.S. government during this timeframe, focusing on the implications of these policies for regional stability, security dynamics, and the broader U.S. geopolitical agenda. The research begins by outlining the context of U.S. foreign policy at the beginning of 2018, highlighting key events that shaped the administration's approach. The analysis includes the impact of the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) and its subsequent "maximum pressure" campaign, which sought to curtail Iran's nuclear ambitions and regional influence. This decision had profound implications for U.S. relations with both allies and adversaries in the region, raising questions about the effectiveness of unilateral sanctions and their consequences for regional security. In addition, the research explores the U.S. response to the ongoing humanitarian crises in Syria and Yemen, examining how American foreign policy addressed these conflicts amidst growing international scrutiny. The study assesses the effectiveness of U.S. military involvement and humanitarian aid initiatives, highlighting the complexities of intervention in civil wars where multiple factions and external powers are involved. The implications of these crises for U.S. credibility and influence in the Middle East are critically analyzed. Another key focus of this research is the evolving dynamics of U.S.-Iran relations. The period under review saw increasing tensions, culminating in significant military engagements and diplomatic standoffs. The analysis delves into how these developments affected U.S. relations with other regional powers, particularly Saudi Arabia and Israel, and examines the role of these countries in shaping U.S. policy decisions. The intricate balance of power in the Middle East, influenced by sectarian divides and historical rivalries, is explored to understand the

broader implications of U.S. actions. Furthermore, the research highlights the normalization agreements known as the Abraham Accords, which were established in 2020 between Israel and several Arab states. This section investigates how these agreements reflected a shift in U.S. foreign policy priorities and regional alliances. The analysis discusses the potential long-term effects of these accords on Arab-Israeli relations and the Palestinian issue, assessing whether these agreements could lead to a more stable regional order or further entrench divisions. To ensure a thorough understanding of U.S. foreign policy during this period, the research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses. It utilizes a comprehensive review of governmental documents, academic literature, and expert opinions, providing a robust foundation for the study's conclusions. The examination of public statements, policy briefs, and diplomatic communications serves to illuminate the strategic priorities and rationale behind U.S. decisions. Ultimately, this research argues that U.S. foreign policy towards the Middle East from 2018 to 2023 has been characterized by a reactive rather than a proactive approach, often influenced by domestic political considerations and the complexities of regional dynamics. The findings underscore the challenges of maintaining U.S. influence in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape, where traditional alliances are tested, and new power dynamics emerge.

Introduction

Three primary goals have shaped US foreign policy towards the Middle East since World War II: protecting friendly regimes and client states; fighting terrorist organisations and Islamic movements like Hamas, Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) that threaten US and ally interests in the area; and maintaining US military bases in the Gulf to maintain free oil flows and limit the influence of the former Soviet Union. As it did with the 1978 Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt, the US was forced to lead an international coalition that drove Saddam Hussein's Iraqi army out of Kuwait in 1991 in order to accomplish these goals. It was also forced to mediate peace. But as the Soviet Union fell apart, the 9/11 terrorist attacks claimed 2,977 lives, and Iraq and Iran began seeking nuclear weapons, the US changed its foreign policy agenda to prioritise stopping the spread of both terrorism and nuclear weapons.

Only recently has the term "Middle East" become more widely used. The British daily newspaper The Times published a number of pieces mentioning the name in 1902. Especially in academic and official contexts, the phrase "Middle East" gained popularity following World War II (Peretz, 1968). There are multiple geographic boundaries to the Middle East, which is also sometimes called Southwest Asia or the Near East. Historians refer to the non-Arab nations of Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey as well as the Arab countries of Asia, North Africa, and Israel as the "Middle East".

Foreign policy is the collective term for the broad goals that direct a state's relations with other nations. A multitude of factors, such as domestic conditions, foreign policy initiatives, and geopolitical objectives, impact the process of developing foreign policy. The use of diplomacy as

a weapon in foreign policy can take many different forms, such as international trade, alliances, and war.

The US has aimed to be a multinational power with a worldwide presence for the majority of the 20th and even early 21st centuries. Through the employment of its economic, military, and diplomatic strength, the United States has advanced its national interests and grown to be a major role in the Middle East. For the past forty years, US foreign policy towards the major international powers in the Middle East has been a confusing affair. US foreign policy has allowed the US to continue being an invasive external force, rather than delivering stability to the region. Thereby, US military and diplomatic involvement in the region has jeopardised US national interests and a stable balance of power internationally. Not only is a pragmatic, nonpartisan approach to conflict resolution possible, but the US's strengthening relations with Iran might also portend a change in US foreign policy in this area. Paul Pillar states that in the event of a shift in perception towards or away from the specific countries in the region, an offshore balancing strategy may be able to be put into place (Prifti, 2005). When ethnic aspirations and advancement are stifled by US influence, it's like setting one ethnic group against another in a competition. Instead of defending US interests in regional wars, the US may embrace a more pragmatic foreign policy that is successful in shifting the power dynamics at a distance, leading the country towards a power-balanced structure (Kaussler, 2017).

After the Cold War ended, the US has made more of an effort to acquire or maintain its influence on a worldwide scale. The primary aim of US activities in the Middle East has been to consolidate regional dominance in an attempt to gain global leadership. For several reasons, the Middle East is considered one of the world's most unstable regions. For the United States, maintaining peace and prosperity in the Middle East is of utmost importance. One of the primary pillars of US strategy since the Bush administration declared a "global war on terror" in response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks has been combating terrorist organisations in the Middle East (Shukri, 2017).

Objectives

The purpose of this study is to gain further insight into US foreign policy in the Middle East between 2018 and 2023. During this period, we will learn about the changes in US foreign policy as well as the nation's participation in the Middle East. The Middle East actions of the United States and the shift in its foreign policy. We will also discuss the ways in which the United States engages with its allies and offers specific support to them.

Methodology

Examining the phenomenon of US foreign policy towards the Middle East from 2018 to 2023, this article has a descriptive tone. The research methodology used in this study is qualitative, and the information was obtained from secondary sources like published research

papers, peer-reviewed journals, and publically accessible websites like Al Jazeera News and the Wall Street Journal.

Findings and Discussion

US foreign policy in the Middle East saw dramatic changes between 2018 and 2023, exhibiting both abrupt volatility and long-term stability. This study looks at the major ideas and advancements that influenced this exciting time period.

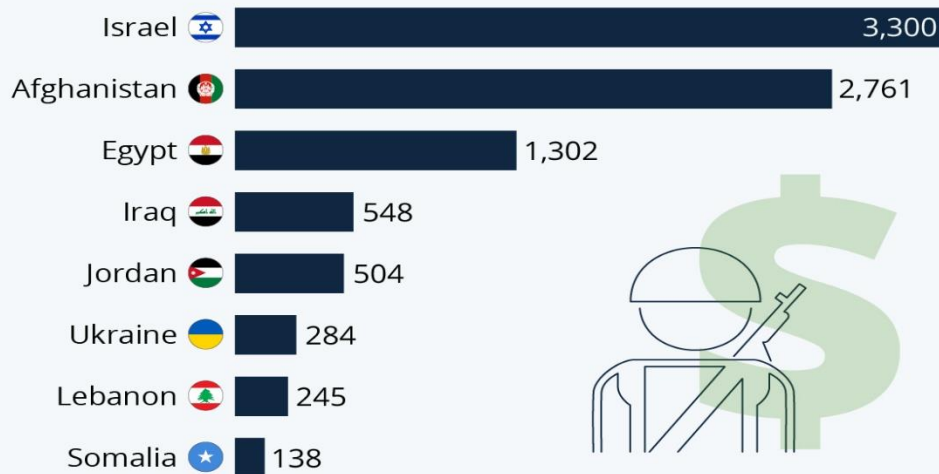
Mouton (2023) asserts that the US has dominated Middle Eastern foreign policy for over 50 years. By taking this stance, it has succeeded in achieving two of its primary foreign policy goals: it has supported Israel and ensured the unrestricted flow of oil. According to expert in international relations Martin Indyk, the US is no longer reliant on Middle Eastern oil supplies. Because of this, maintaining "the free flow of oil from the Persian Gulf area at reasonable prices" is still important, but it is no longer considered to be "a vital strategic interest." Rather, the country has concentrated on producing its own natural gas. Since 2018, the US has surpassed all other countries in the world in terms of natural gas exports. Over 60% of oil imports into the United States come from Canada and Mexico; just 5% come from Saudi Arabia. However, the US's objectives and sway in the Middle East are now shifting. Instead of being a weak state, Israel is becoming into a military superpower that is fortifying its relations with countries that it was formerly at odds with, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt (Mouton, 2023). The United States is no longer a net energy exporter and is not dependent on Middle Eastern oil due to its recent boom in oil and gas output. Meanwhile, the American people are weary of war after the disastrous occupation of Iraq, and new foreign policy challenges like as China's rising influence need the US to redirect its attention elsewhere. While the US remains committed to stopping Iran from getting nuclear weapons, battling terrorism, and supporting Israel, it has ceded some of its regional influence. But with tensions with Iran on the rise, one misplaced step may drag the US into another costly Middle East conflict.

US Military Aid in Middle East

RAND Corp. analysis indicates that the Middle East receives more than half of all U.S. military support. More than 80% of the almost \$6 billion in foreign military funding allocated in 2019 went to Jordan, Egypt, and Israel.

Where U.S. Military Aid Is Going

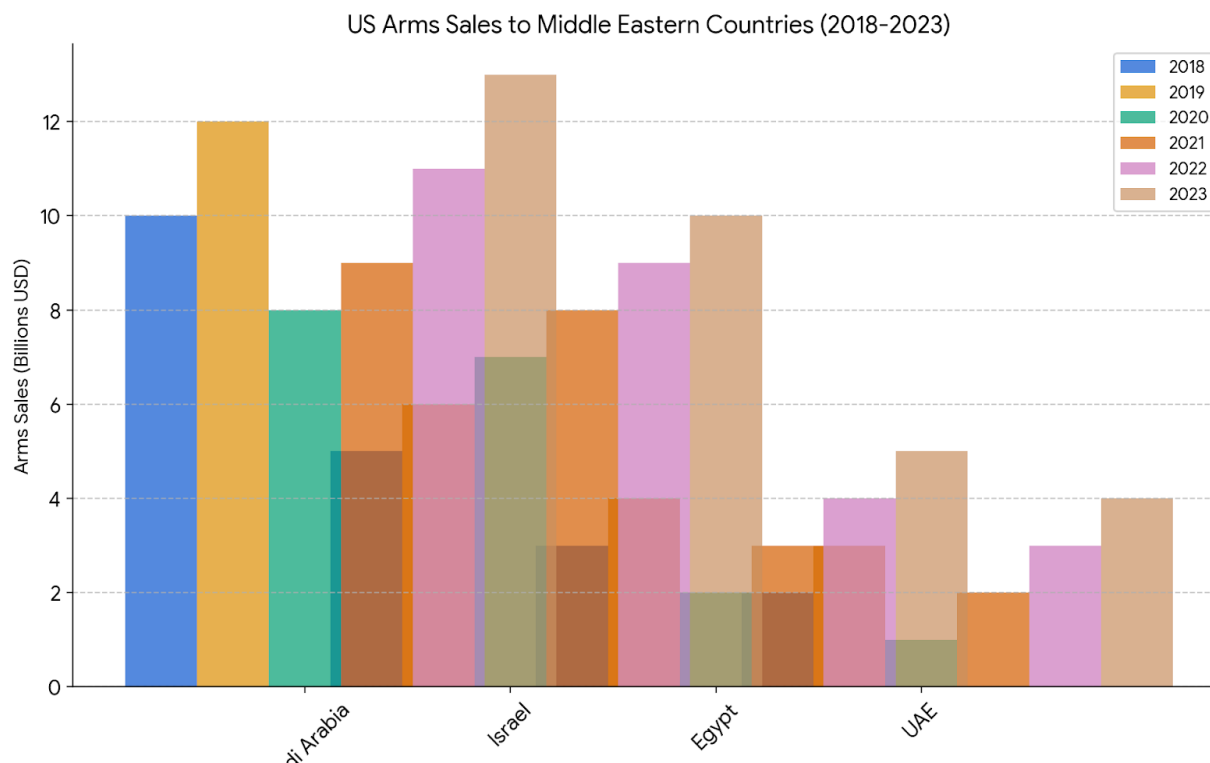
U.S. military aid obligations made in 2020, by recipient country (in million U.S. dollars)



US Arms sales In Middle East

In terms of weapons sales, the Biden administration's policy have remained substantially the same as those of the previous two. America will no longer "check its values at the door to sell arms," according to a promise made by President Biden during the 2020 presidential campaign (Lauten, 2022). He promised to halt American backing for aggressive operations in Yemen and related weaponry sales in his first foreign policy address. Apart from obstructing a single planned bomb sale to Riyadh, the administration's policy swiftly returned to the pre-crisis state. Sales to United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia were also postponed while a policy review was underway. The Biden administration has persisted in arming authoritarian, careless governments that have behaved in a manner that has endangered US interests and drawn the US into needless wars, including those in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Nigeria, and the Philippines.

The argument that U.S. armament sales to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) provide a significant number of employment for American residents has long been used to support such sales; former President Donald Trump's administration notably repeated this argument while exaggerating it. However, it has been unclear if these weapons purchases really increase employment in the United States due to lobbying activities by local armament makers and astute buying strategies by the Middle Eastern government (Caverley, 2021). According to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 79% of all weapons provided to Israel between 2018 and 2022 came from the US.



Among the top ten Middle Eastern imports from 2018 to 22 were products from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Egypt, respectively. Saudi Arabia became the second-biggest arms importer in the world in 2018–22, accounting for 9.6% of all weapons imports. Qatar is now the third-largest arms importer in the world, with weapons acquisitions increasing by 311 percent between 2013–17 and 2018–22.

The US and Terrorism

The goal of US military engagement in the Middle East, according to senior Pentagon commander James H. Anderson, is "ensuring the region is not a safe haven for terrorists, is not dominated by any power hostile to the United States, and contributes to a stable global energy market." In May 2020, Anderson addressed the Congress in a speech. In 2013, ISIS emerged as a breakaway faction of al-Qaeda, and by 2014, it had gained significant territory in both Syria and Iraq. The US-backed Syrian Democratic Army and Iraqi military recaptured territory up until the territorial caliphate was formally proclaimed vanquished in March 2019. ISIS is still active in the Middle East and Northern Africa, and despite its territorial losses, it remains a threat to international security. It has been linked to or inspired lone wolf attacks in a number of countries, including the Philippines, France, Belgium, Turkey, Morocco, Lebanon, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka. Wittes (2022) notes that despite past governments' attempts to withdraw from the region, worries persist about how regional partners can maintain peace, safeguard common interests, and maintain low prices.

This has always been the primary concern. It is particularly critical to battle groups like ISIS. However, concentrated airstrikes and drone operations are currently receiving more attention than extensive military actions (Schatz et al., 2022).

US on Yemen's war fought by Saudi Arabia

The Houthi rebel movement and the coalition led by Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen have been labeled the world's largest humanitarian calamity by the UN, according to The Policy Circle (2022). The alliance led by Saudi Arabia is now receiving intelligence and training from the United States. The fatalities of civilians in Yemen, which are primarily related to Saudi bombs, have long worried lawmakers. According to officials in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, signs that the US is halting help "seem to have emboldened Houthi fighters." According to the Wall Street Journal, the Houthis launched more drone and missile attacks in February 2021 than they had in any other month of the six-year civil conflict.

The government and the Houthis "could have any real competence in administering a large, highly populated state of more than 30 million people with few resources," according to Anthony H. Cordesman of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies. Furthermore, they appear incapable of handling a humanitarian crisis affecting 14 million people and bringing the nation together in a peaceful, stable condition.

Israel and Palestine

The Arab-Israeli conflict in the West Bank and Gaza strongly affects both Israelis and Palestinians. The assault on Palestinian citizens by Israel and the rocket launches by Palestine into Israeli territory from Gaza were denounced in a June 2018 resolution passed by the U.N. General Assembly. The Trump administration defied international convention and the December 2017 agreement establishing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel when it relocated the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in May 2018. "Palestines and many other international actors rejected the decision, while Israel welcomed it warmly." (Source: The Policy Circle (2022)).

Israel's diplomatic relations with the United Arab Emirates, Sudan, Morocco, and Bahrain were restored in 2020, primarily as a result of "shared security interests and deals brokered by the Trump administration." Arab countries have historically opposed Israel's establishment of formal diplomatic ties until Israel's conflict with the Palestinians is resolved. The Palestinians rejected the Trump administration's "peace to prosperity" plan and Jerusalem's designation as Israel's capital. The Biden administration sought to strengthen ties with the Palestinians and bring the US back into active participation.

The October 7 strike by Hamas damaged Israel's reputation as a credible deterrence. Even in the event that Israel had defeated Hamas in the preceding few weeks, this would still have remained the situation. Israel's credibility as an alternative to Iran is momentarily damaged. According to Mouton (2023), the United States dispatched two carrier strike groups along with substantial military personnel to the area to prevent Iran and its allies from escalating the fight. Furthermore, in self-defense, the US has launched three attacks against Iranian proxies in Syria over the past few weeks. Finding a post-conflict political solution with the Palestinian people in Gaza and the West Bank will become more challenging in light of the large number of civilians killed in Israel's onslaught on Gaza, which intends to destroy Hamas and restore deterrence. More impact on Israel's security will come from this arrangement and the Arab neighborhood's acceptance of it than from Israel's immediate actions against Hamas (Stewart et al., 2022).

The US role in Iran

According to the Trump administration, "a lack of progress limiting Iran's nuclear weapons development programme and a failure to adequately deal with Iran's missile programme" led to the official termination of U.S.-Iranian cooperation in May 2018. Concern over Iran's "ballistic missile programme and support for terrorism and for regional actors like the Syrian government, Hezbollah, and Hamas" has also grown (The Policy Circle, 2022).

Iran retaliated by "scaling back curbs on its nuclear programme" since then, leading Germany, France, and Britain to accuse Iran in writing of breaking the JCPOA's provisions. Further obstacles have been met in the ongoing efforts to persuade Iran and the US to amend the JCPOA, which aims "to limit Iran's uranium enrichment in exchange for relief on sanctions." As a reaction to the U.S. withdrawal, Iran argues that the sanctions should be withdrawn first, while the U.S. maintains that Iran must first make reparations for its uranium enrichment infractions.

The Biden administration launched its approach to the region with a depressurization strategy in response to the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, the 2020 strike against Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force Commander Qasem Soleimani, and Iran's demonstrated willingness to conduct state-on-state attacks against Saudi Arabia and the UAE (Mouton, 2023). This lessened the likelihood of conflict in the area and led to Yemen's shaky but long-lasting calm. Furthermore, despite conducting numerous targeted strikes in Syria, the US was able to prevent the situation from getting worse. The deterrence strategy against Iran was contingent on variables that may fluctuate, including Israel's credibility as a deterrent owing to the US withholding weapons from its regional allies and the US reducing its military posture, even if the region had depressurized (Culbertson et al., 2022).

Despite Tehran's ongoing measures, the United States' sanctions on Iran have been successful in limiting the country's political and economic progress. In 2019, there were incidents including attacks on oil tankers, the downing of an American surveillance drone in the

Strait of Hormuz, and the imposition of stricter sanctions against Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Because of their actions, the Iranian leadership was unable to access the American banking system. See the following videos from the Wall Street Journal and the Council on Foreign Relations for additional details on combat in the Gulf of Oman's waterways: one on the Strait of Hormuz's backdrop. The top commander of Iran, Qassem Soleimani, was assassinated by a drone strike in 2020, and tensions persisted after the death of an American contractor at an Iraqi military site. Iran has acknowledged that it shot down a commercial aircraft from Tehran that was heading into Ukraine by accident and had already struck US military installations in Iraq.

Assisting Ukraine in its conflict with Russia

In terms of diplomacy, the Middle East has supported Ukraine in UN voting. It hasn't, however, specifically pledged Ukraine military assistance in opposing Russia's full-scale invasion. The region has attempted to defend itself against the external consequences of the invasion, like as food shortages and inflation in Egypt and Jordan, or to capitalise on increased oil prices, as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar have done (Stewart et al., 2022). That being said, Israel has notably stayed out of the Ukrainian war since it needs Russia's help in order to carry out Israeli operations in Syria against targets with the Iranian affiliation. The US must maintain leadership in the area to keep Russia from using the region as a means of evading sanctions, especially in spite of the Biden administration's efforts to impede Russian attempts to do so. By demonstrating its will to thwart aggression and uphold international law, Biden argues, the US is improving the region's reputation by backing Ukraine.

Aligning Saudi Arabia and Israel

The US launched diplomatic initiatives to ease regional tensions and ally Saudi Arabia with Israel early in the Biden administration. This explains why Biden visited Israel and Saudi Arabia for the first time in 2022. Additionally, it demonstrates the administration's pursuit of security accords that would restore Israel-Saudi Arabian relations and demonstrate US commitment to regional security. It was expected that the diplomatic benefits of the endeavour would completely release the US military from its links to Saudi Arabia and facilitate the establishment of the India-Middle East-Europe business corridor (Mouton, 2023). The process has been halted by the Israel-Hamas conflict, but the Saudis hope to resume it in the future (Schatz et al., 2022). Recent visits to the Pentagon and White House were made by Saudi Arabia's Minister of Defence, Prince Khalid bin Salman.

Up until now, the US has been able to contain both the immediate military risks posed by Hamas's October onslaught and the conflict's significant regional growth. The declared temporary ceasefire and partial hostage release present opportunities for increased diplomatic outreach and humanitarian assistance, even though the Israel-Hamas conflict is far from over

(Stewart et al., 2022). These latest endeavours could potentially alleviate the conflict between Israel's objective of dismantling Hamas and the consequent harm to individuals and deteriorating humanitarian circumstances. The White House's role in this development demonstrates that it recognises that Israel's longer-term security needs remain dependent on Biden's guarantees that Israel will not be acting as an occupying force in Gaza and will protect civilian life.

The ability to uphold a strong regional deterrence order against Iran and its allies will be the first step towards ensuring long-term peace in the Middle East. According to the 2021 Global Posture Review (Culbertson et al., 2022), the US must support a two-state solution in order to preserve this regional order because it lacks the troops to sustain a substantial, long-term defensive posture in the Middle East. Israel will be able to fully integrate into the area and rebuild its ties with Saudi Arabia thanks to these advancements. Apart from the advantages of wider normalisation, the countries in the region hope that the US security arrangements they seek will demonstrate the US commitment to safeguarding the region. As both Biden and McGurk have stated, the future viability of these measures depends largely on how the US can influence Israeli behaviour. Commendable first steps in this direction include the temporary ceasefire and the partial release of prisoners (Mouton, 2023).

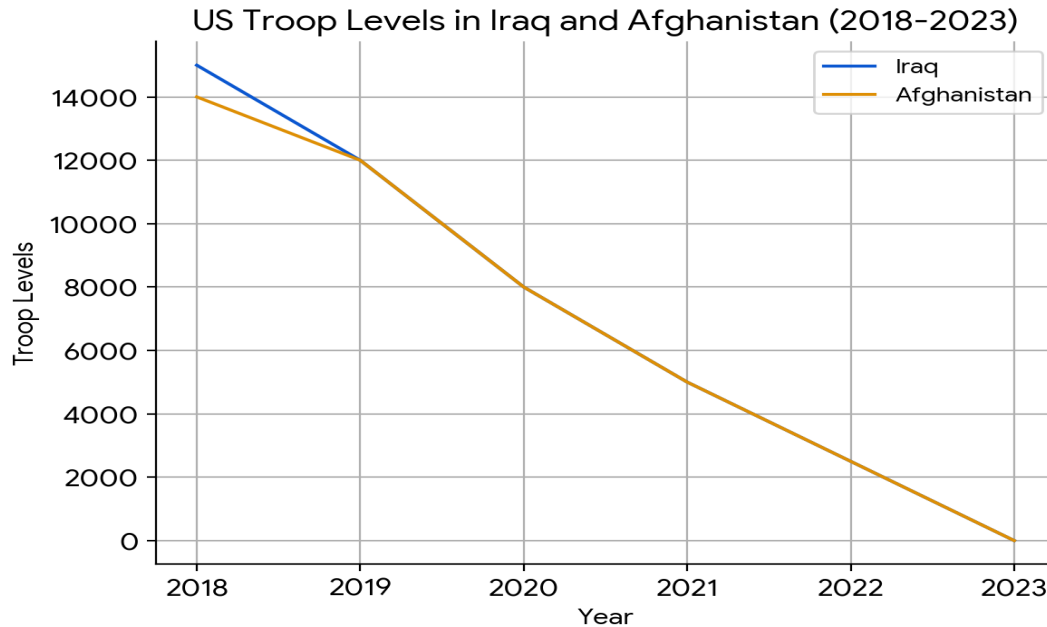
Afghanistan's and Iraq's Peace Initiatives and Stability

The United States withdrew its military from Afghanistan in August 2021, ending any possibility of a peace agreement between the Taliban and the Afghan government. According to The Policy Circle (2022), the US spent over \$840 billion on the war in Afghanistan during this time.

Simultaneously with its withdrawal from Afghanistan, the United States was moving significant portions of its most potent combat capabilities from the Middle East to Europe and Asia. Despite assurances from senior Biden administration officials at the time, leaders in the region saw these actions as an indication that the US was no longer committed to the region's defence. Apart from enacting laws restricting the transfer of weapons to the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, other nations in the area choose to expand their security partnerships with nations such as China (Culbertson et al., 2022). The administration has recently taken steps to create new security arrangements in the region and to unleash arms supplies in order to maintain the pledges of major regional governments to a US-led regional order that is contingent upon the resolution of the Gaza conflict.

The year 2021 "Biden has put an end to the never-ending hostilities in Afghanistan and the Middle East, saving countless lives and causing enormous financial losses. Biden's mission will solely target ISIS and Al-Qaeda. He also intends to end US support for the war in Yemen, which is being directed by Saudi Arabia. Our persistent engagement in loser-take-lose conflicts hinders the rebuilding of the other instruments of American power and further erodes our

capacity to take the initiative on other critical issues. According to Stewart et al. (2021), after rocket attacks on US targets in Erbil, Iraq, the US began military operations against Syrian insurgents with Iranian assistance.



Around 100,000 individuals were evacuated from the country by the US and its allies, including civilian Americans and Afghans who aided the US by acting as translators. Still seeking safety, a great number of others were left behind. According to UN estimates, women and children make up 80% of those impacted in Afghanistan, making it the nation with the third-largest displaced population worldwide. Afghanistan's economy is in shambles as a result of the war, which cost about 40% of the nation's income. Most nations, including the US, stopped giving assistance once the Taliban took over (The Policy Circle, 2022).

The Obama administration's emphasis on employing military action to foster democracy was replaced with a more cautious approach under Trump and Biden. There was notably less direct involvement during the withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq.

Numerous prominent members of the Taliban are included the US terror lists, and the group formed its interim administration in September 2021. It's unclear how the populace will be handled, whether there will be elections or a permanent administration in the future. The brutal responses of Taliban terrorists during protests around the nation have left women fearing that the Taliban would retake the nation. To read more on the Taliban, check out The Policy Circle's Rogue States and Terror Groups Brief.

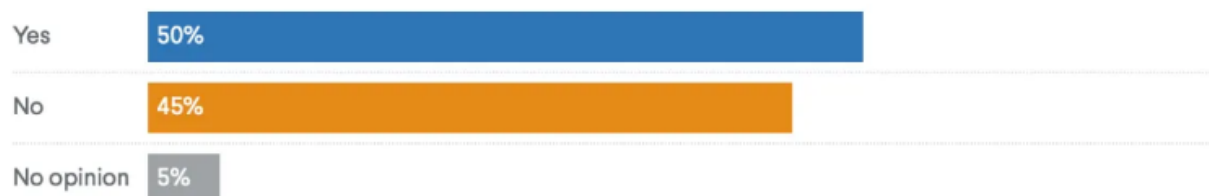
American Views Shift on Involvement in the Iraq War

Polls in 2003 and 2019 asked, "Do you think the United States made a mistake in sending troops to Iraq?"

Results in March 2003



Results in August 2019



This is a Gallup survey results that shows the shift in US foreign policy.

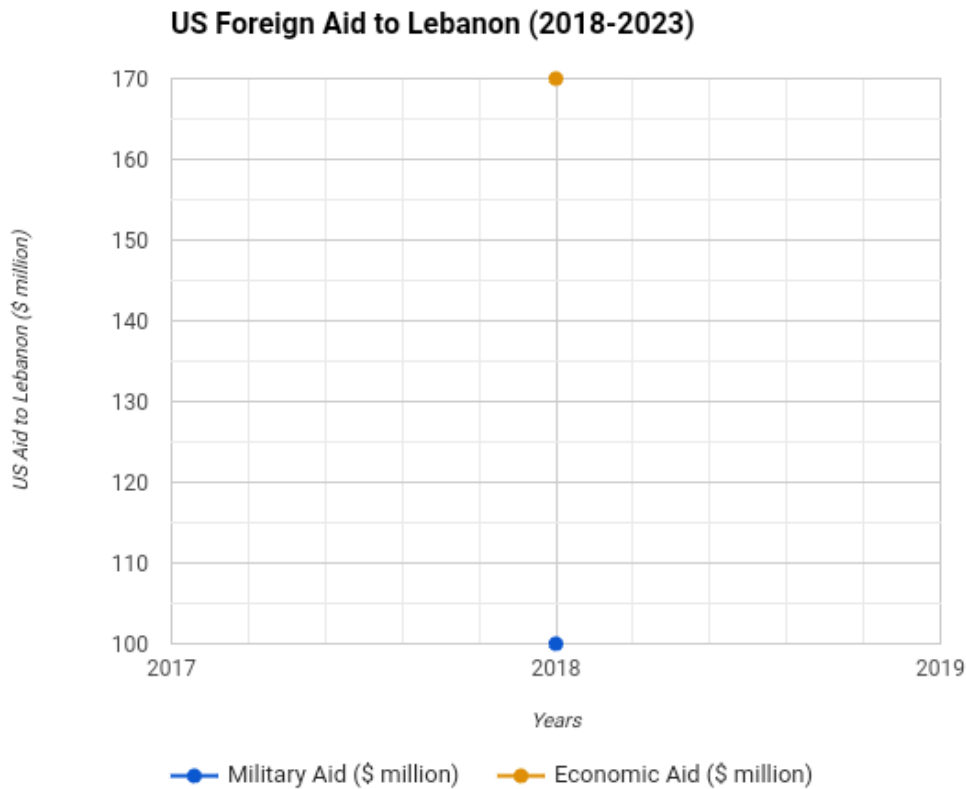
US foreign policy in Lebanon

Between 2018 and 2023, the US and Lebanon's relationship was complicated and tense. In an effort to promote stability and offset Iranian influence, the US kept giving Lebanon economic and military support, but as Lebanon's economic problems worsened, tensions increased dramatically. As Hezbollah's political influence rose, the US became more skeptical of it and pushed the Lebanese government to implement anti-corruption measures. The US sent humanitarian aid to Lebanon after the 2020 Beirut port catastrophe, but the relationship remained shaky due to US aspirations for change and the unstable political and economic conditions in Lebanon.

With the intention of fostering stability and limiting Iranian influence in the area, the United States has long been one of Lebanon's largest donors of foreign assistance. This assistance has included financial support for the Lebanese government as well as military support for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF).

In 2018, the United States gave the LAF more than \$100 million in military aid, while the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) gave more than \$170 million in financial support. Additionally, the US slapped sanctions on Hezbollah, a political party and militant force of Shia Muslims in Lebanon that it lists as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. While the US persisted in offering Lebanon financial and military support, tensions between the two nations grew as Lebanon's economic crisis deepened. Hezbollah's increasing sway over the Lebanese government has also drawn criticism from the US. The US sent Lebanon humanitarian

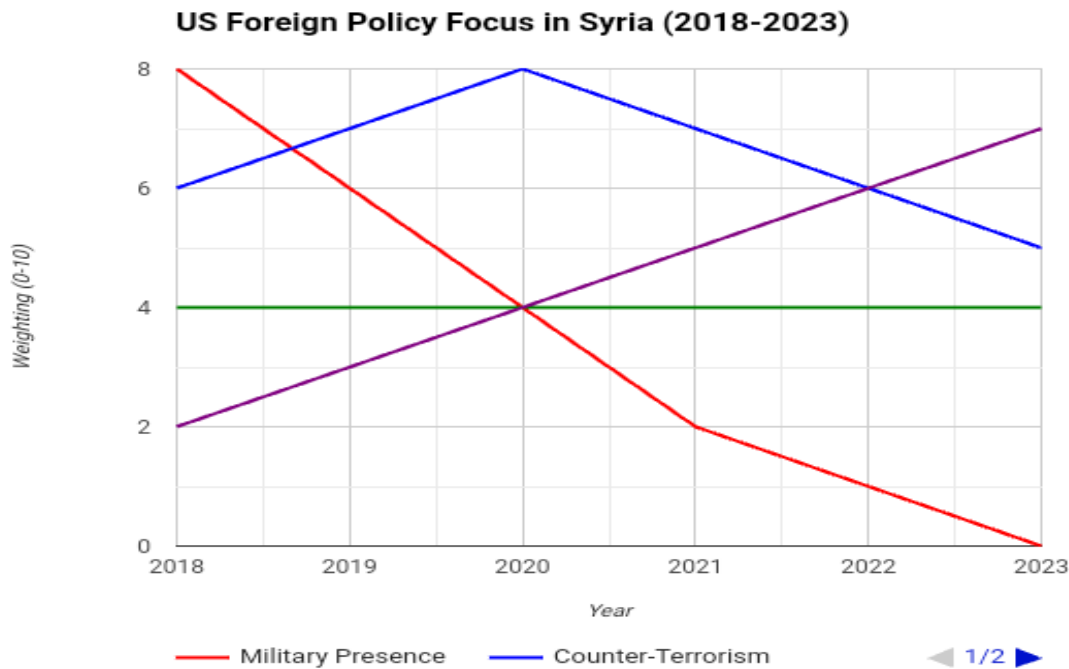
aid after the August 2020 explosion at the Beirut port. The US persisted in applying pressure on the Lebanese government to enact changes aimed at combating corruption, but ties between the US and Lebanon remained tense. The political and economic climate in Lebanon remained unstable, despite the US's continuous provision of humanitarian aid. Additionally, the US kept urging changes in Lebanon.



US Shifting Priorities in Syria:

The US's strategy in Syria from 2018 to 2023 was characterized by changing goals and adaptations to a complex and dynamic war. ISIS was ultimately driven from territory in 2019 thanks in large part to US assistance for the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The US responded to chemical attacks blamed on the Syrian government in 2017 and 2018 with limited airstrikes, hoping to discourage further use. The US continued to play a major role in resolving the humanitarian situation and easing the suffering of the Syrian people. The US originally supported overthrowing President Assad, but as time went on, its position on regime change shifted, with a more emphasis being placed on achieving a diplomatic settlement. The US halted its backing for moderate opposition organizations in southwest Syria with the return of power to the Syrian government. As part of a move away from direct military engagement, the US progressively withdrew its force presence in Syria. Calls for a political settlement to the crisis persisted, but the emphasis switched to combating ISIS relics and

sustaining humanitarian aid. Because of the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons and breaches of human rights, the US kept imposing sanctions on it. During that time, there was a persistent level of tension with Russia, which is a strong ally of the Assad government. The United States was criticized for changing its position on the war and the ensuing humanitarian situation.



From 2018 to 2023, the United States' foreign policy in Syria gradually shifted from emphasizing regime change and direct military engagement to focusing on counterterrorism activities and pursuing a diplomatic settlement. In the beginning, the US carried out airstrikes and provided backing to moderate opposition groups; but, it eventually reduced its military involvement and concentrated on fighting ISIS with the SDF. As time went on, the US's position on regime change shifted, favoring a diplomatic resolution to the crisis over continuing to provide humanitarian supplies and apply sanctions on the Assad government. This changing strategy was a reflection of both the difficulties in accomplishing US goals in the area and the complexity of the Syrian civil war.

US Security Concerns in Middle East

Israel's support came from the US continuing to forge a close military and economic partnership with the country. Still, disagreements emerged over the Israeli-Palestinian issue and the Iran nuclear accord. Encouraging energy diversification in the Middle East, the US sought to lessen its dependency on the region's oil supplies. However, with China's influence growing, energy security has become an increasingly important issue.

We provide a top-ten list of Middle Eastern security concerns that call for continued U.S. management and participation, taking into account the dynamic political, security, and economic environments in both the region and the United States (Schatz et al., 2022). Along with newly prominent unconventional security challenges, they include the three basic U.S. security objectives of energy, nonproliferation of nuclear weapons, and terrorism. A more coordinated U.S. strategy to tackling the following security concerns is necessary due to their interdependent nature:

1. Stopping terrorism
2. Keeping up with great power rivalry
3. Safeguarding international energy markets
4. Averting terrorism;
5. Keeping a step ahead in the struggle between superpowers
6. Safeguarding the world's energy markets
7. Reducing regional hostility and hostilities reducing the financial and human costs of defending American interests
8. Guaranteeing nuclear nonproliferation
9. Addressing forced relocation; preserving the safety and financial security of American partners and friends
10. And advancing communities that value economic opportunity and the rule of law.

From the eighteenth century, the United States has been a peacemaker. As to the 2020 US Department of State report, the Abraham Accords were a diplomatic initiative that saw the US mediating normalization agreements between Israel and four Arab nations: Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates. Arab-Israeli businesspeople now have more options for funding and a chance to expand into the larger Middle East thanks to these accords (Rubin, 2021). As the United States' primary interest in the area, such results downplay the advantages of conflict resolution. Benefits beyond trade and peace were acknowledged by the United States, which took Sudan off its list of countries that sponsor terrorism and acknowledged Moroccan sovereignty over the disputed Western Sahara region (Koplow, 2021). The United Arab Emirates was also granted the right to purchase American F-35 fighter jets, though this was not explicitly linked to the agreement. To ease tensions between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the United States mediated an accord in 2021 (Moore, 2021).

Turn away from interventionism and Focus on Great Power Competitions

U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East has undergone a significant transformation over the past few years, particularly from 2018 onwards. Traditionally, U.S. policy has been characterized by a history of interventionism, rooted in the belief that American military and political power could stabilize the region and promote democratic governance. However, this approach has been increasingly questioned, leading to a shift towards a focus on great power competition. This transformation reflects a broader reevaluation of the effectiveness of

interventionist strategies and recognizes the complexities inherent in the Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape.

Historically, U.S. interventionism in the Middle East has been driven by a combination of strategic interests, including securing energy resources, countering the spread of communism during the Cold War, and combating terrorism in the post-9/11 era. Events such as the Gulf War in 1990-1991 and the invasions of Iraq in 2003 and Afghanistan in 2001 exemplified this interventionist approach. Each military engagement was justified by a narrative of promoting democracy and stability; however, the outcomes often contradicted these aims. Instead of fostering lasting peace and democratic governance, these military actions frequently resulted in prolonged instability, the emergence of extremist groups, and widespread anti-American sentiment (Gordon, 2018).

The limitations of U.S. interventionism became glaringly apparent with the protracted conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq, the initial military success was quickly overshadowed by a failure to establish a stable political framework, leading to sectarian violence and the rise of ISIS (Lynch, 2019). Similarly, in Afghanistan, despite two decades of military presence, the country remained fraught with conflict and uncertainty, culminating in a chaotic withdrawal in 2021 that raised questions about the effectiveness of American intervention (Woodward, 2021). These experiences underscored the challenges of nation-building and highlighted the risks associated with military interventions that do not adequately consider local realities.

As the U.S. grappled with the repercussions of its interventions, a new paradigm began to emerge—great power competition. This shift reflects the growing recognition that global dynamics have changed, particularly with the rise of China and Russia as influential actors in the Middle East. Rather than focusing primarily on unilateral military action, U.S. policymakers have started to emphasize strategic competition with these great powers. This approach involves a more nuanced understanding of regional relationships and acknowledges that traditional interventionist strategies may not yield the desired outcomes (Friedman, 2020).

The term "great power competition" emphasizes the geopolitical rivalry that has become increasingly pronounced in recent years. As China seeks to expand its influence through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, and Russia reasserts itself through military interventions in Syria and Ukraine, the U.S. is compelled to recalibrate its strategies in the Middle East (Dempsey, 2019). The U.S. response to these challenges has involved not only military considerations but also economic and diplomatic efforts to counteract the influence of these rising powers.

In 2018, the Trump administration's foreign policy marked a significant departure from previous interventionist practices. The administration adopted an "America First" strategy that prioritized U.S. interests and reduced military engagements in favor of economic and diplomatic measures. This shift was exemplified by the decision to withdraw troops from Syria and Afghanistan, signaling a recognition that long-term military presence was not sustainable

(Katzman, 2020). The Trump administration's focus on bilateral relationships also reflected an attempt to recalibrate U.S. influence in a way that did not rely solely on military intervention.

The Biden administration has continued to navigate this complex landscape by promoting a foreign policy that seeks to balance great power competition with renewed diplomatic engagement. While there remains a commitment to countering threats posed by Iran and other regional adversaries, there is also a clear emphasis on multilateralism and coalition-building. This strategic pivot acknowledges the importance of alliances in addressing the challenges posed by great power dynamics, particularly in a region where U.S. interests are increasingly contested by other global actors (Meyer, 2021).

The implications of this shift are profound for U.S. relationships with key Middle Eastern allies. Countries such as Saudi Arabia and Israel, which have traditionally relied on U.S. military support, must now adapt to a changing security environment. As the U.S. focuses on competition with China and Russia, these allies may seek to diversify their partnerships, potentially exploring closer ties with alternative powers (Shapiro, 2022). This dynamic could lead to a reconfiguration of alliances in the region, as countries navigate the complex interplay of local interests and global competition.

Moreover, the pivot away from interventionism presents both risks and opportunities for the Middle East. While reduced U.S. military presence may allow for greater autonomy among regional actors, it also raises concerns about power vacuums and the potential for increased instability. Regional powers, emboldened by a perceived decline in U.S. influence, may engage in more assertive behaviors, complicating the already intricate geopolitical landscape. The U.S. must carefully calibrate its approach to ensure that it can effectively engage in great power competition without exacerbating tensions or neglecting its commitments to regional stability (Katzman, 2020).

In conclusion, the shift from interventionism to a focus on great power competition signifies a critical turning point in U.S. foreign policy towards the Middle East. The limitations of past interventions have prompted a reevaluation of strategies, leading to a greater emphasis on understanding the complex geopolitical dynamics of the region. As the U.S. navigates this new landscape, it will be essential to strike a balance between promoting its interests and engaging in constructive diplomacy. This evolution in policy reflects the realities of a rapidly changing world, where great power dynamics increasingly shape the contours of international relations. Understanding these shifts will be crucial for shaping a more effective and sustainable approach to U.S. engagement in the Middle East in the years to come.

The United States and China's great power competition, particularly with China, is playing a more and bigger role in American foreign and security policy. The Biden administration's 2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, in particular, stresses the need to "right-size" the military presence in the Middle East in order to protect other interests while simultaneously deterring Iranian aggression and terrorism and calls for a review of the US

force posture globally. Additionally, it urges giving the military budget top priority in order to free up money for maintaining the country's advantages over Russia and China in terms of security.

The People's Republic of China and the Middle Eastern governments were becoming more and more integrated militarily and technologically, which led to a vicious cycle in which the US governments found it harder to offer alternatives due to the easy access to Chinese infrastructure and technology. The US has been providing alternatives to the Chinese technology that the Biden administration has been pressuring the surrounding nations to give up for the past two years (Schatz et al., 2022). Furthermore, during the Group of Twenty (G20) Summit in 2023, the United States declared the opening of the India-Middle East-Europe business corridor in response to Chinese investments in economic infrastructure. The corridor will only be possible if the Middle East is connected, which will need a diplomatic settlement to the Gaza conflict, regardless of any potential economic advantages (Mouton, 2023). Furthermore, according to Lubold and Strobel (2021) it started the process of reducing American military power and presence in the Gulf. Because of their expanding influence in the Middle East, the Trump and Biden administrations made competing with China and Russia a top priority (Culbertson et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Between 2018 and 2023, there were significant changes to US foreign policy in the Middle East due to shifting opportunities, challenges, and goals. Since the future is still unclear, the US will need to navigate a difficult terrain in order to achieve its objectives in the region.

The US's interests and power have shifted away from the Middle East. The economic, national security, and diplomatic interests of the United States in the Middle East have thus been adversely affected by terrorism, civil unrest, and instability in the area. Strong relationships with allies and an awareness of the nature of conflicts are necessary for the US to achieve its foreign policy goals in the Middle East. They also want US foreign policy to shift away from Middle East terrorism and towards great-power rivalry (Trump, 2017). Above all, there's a strong argument to be made against paying any attention to the Middle East. Stated differently, the US no longer considers the Middle East to be as important as it once was. Consequently, over this period, US foreign policy in the Middle East has evolved, and it now supports its regional allies like Israel while focusing on its rivals.

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