

American Policy in the Middle East: Taking Stock and Looking Ahead

by Daniel C. Kurtzer



Relatives and supporters of Israelis held hostage in Gaza since the October 7 attacks by Hamas hold posters and chant slogans calling on the U.S. to intervene for their release during a demonstration in Tel Aviv on October 22, 2024, amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in Tel Aviv at the time, urged Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to seize on the killing of Hamas's leader to work towards a ceasefire in Gaza, also calling for more aid to reach the war-battered territory. JACK GUEZ/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Analysts of American policy in 2025 have the unusual advantage of being able to assess the new president's likely policies against the backdrop of what he did in his first term, four years earlier. The prognosis is not positive. In that first term, Donald Trump's approach to the Middle East oscillated between emotional, uninformed, uncaring, and impulsive statements and actions, on the one hand, and a sustained effort to undermine the policies that had defined American interests and informed decades of American diplomacy in the region, on the other. The Middle East in 2025 has changed, and in most respects the problems facing President Donald Trump are more complicated and less amenable to the haphazard approach he followed in his first term as president.

The war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, the war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the escalation

of hostilities between Israel and Iran have exposed fundamental weaknesses of American policy in the Middle East. Following Hamas's horrific attack in Israel on October 7,

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2023, the Biden administration threw its weight behind Israel's response and delivered billions of dollars of military equipment to sustain Israel's offensive operations in Gaza. The U.S. also assisted in the provision of humanitarian assistance to Palestinian civilians in Gaza who had lost their homes and become internally displaced. The Biden administration invested heavily in diplomatic efforts to achieve a ceasefire and secure the release of Israeli, American, and hostages of other nationalities taken by Hamas.

The administration also sent U.S. military assets to the region to deter Iran and Hezbollah from attacking Israel and to defend Israel against such attacks. But the administration proved unable for many months to secure a ceasefire despite the involvement of numerous senior officials and much telephone diplomacy by President Biden personally. Prolonged war and heavy Palestinian civilian casualties created significant backlash, both internationally and domestically in the U.S., especially by pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel protestors on college campuses.

Following almost a year of incessant Hezbollah rocket and missile attacks, Israel responded with a series of spectacular military and intelligence operations, assassinating Hezbollah's leaders, killing scores of fighters, and destroying a significant part of Hezbollah's arsenal. Although weakened, Hezbollah continued attacking Israel.

For the first time, Iran attacked Israel directly, once in April following an attack by Israel on Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) senior officials in Syria, and again following Israel's assassination of a Hamas leader at an IRGC guest house in Tehran. These attacks caused little damage and few casualties in Israel, attributable to Israel's multitiered missile defense system and American and allied support. Israel's calibrated responses to

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The History, Structure, Agenda, and Capabilities of Hamas and Hezbollah

Hamas, an Arabic acronym for the Islamic Resistance Movement, was founded in Gaza in the late 1980s as an independent offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Hamas's charter called for the elimination of the State of Israel and the establishment of an Islamic state in Palestine. Starting in the first Palestinian intifada, or uprising, in 1987, Hamas engaged in violent resistance and terror activities, including suicide bombings. In 2005, Hamas candidates secured a victory in the election for the Palestinian Legislative Authority; and a Hamas official briefly became prime minister. In 2007, Hamas clashed with Fatah (formerly the Palestinian National Liberation Movement) officials and took over control of Gaza.

Hezbollah is a Lebanese Shi'a terrorist organization founded in the early 1980s largely in reaction to Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Hezbollah's goals have been to regain all the territory that Israel occupied at the time and, ultimately, to destroy Israel. Hezbollah has engaged in significant terror activities inside Lebanon and internationally. In 1983, Hezbollah bombed the U.S. Embassy in Beirut and the barracks of U.S. and French soldiers sent to Lebanon to try to bring about stability. In 2000, Israel withdrew entirely from Lebanon, and Hezbollah turned some attention to Lebanese politics, including running candidates for Parliament. Hezbollah assassinated the Lebanese prime minister in 2005. Since then, Hezbollah has been a significant force in politics while continuing attacks against Israel.

The International Court of Justice Hearing on Genocide

In late 2023, South Africa filed a petition with the International Court of Justice (ICJ) asking that Israel be declared as violating the Convention against Genocide. The ICJ held hearings and issued a preliminary ruling that, while Israel had a right to defend itself, it must act in a way that avoids the commission of genocide. The ICJ also ordered Israel to ensure that its military does not commit genocide. No date was set for the ICJ's final determination.

the Iranian attacks revealed significant weakness in Iran's air defense system.

None of the parties in these conflicts entered hostilities with an achievable long-term strategy, or even a strategy for the day after the fighting stopped. Hamas's leader, Yahya Sinwar, seemed to believe that the October 7 attack would lead Iran and Hezbollah to attack Israel and start a multifront, regional war. Hamas also appeared to believe it could conquer and hold Israeli territory, and it engaged in preparations to govern those areas that it had taken. This was an irrational ambition proved foolhardy and unachievable within days of the initial attack, when Israel killed many of the Hamas fighters who invaded the country and pushed the remaining

fighters back into Gaza. Iran did not join the war, and Hezbollah engaged in a carefully calibrated, almost daily exchange of fire on a relatively low burner. Hamas's objective then became survival, that is, to emerge from the war with enough fighters to claim that it had achieved something. Israel's assassination of senior Hamas leaders, including Sinwar and Ismail Haniyeh, dealt a serious blow to the organization.

Hezbollah probably believed that it could establish "rules of the game" with Israel that would allow it to shoot at Israel, in solidarity with Hamas, without evoking a major Israeli response. In this respect, Hezbollah's strategy failed as miserably this time as it did in 2006 when Hezbollah's

secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah, admitted that its kidnapping of Israeli soldiers was a mistake, in that he had not anticipated Israel's response. In its devastating attacks against Hezbollah, Israel killed Nasrallah and other senior Hezbollah leaders.

Iran's calculations revolved around its regional leadership ambitions. Engaging its proxies in what was called the "Axis of Resistance," Iran hoped to form a "ring of fire" directed at Israel designed to weaken Israel and enhance its own standing as a regional power. Iran failed to anticipate that the attacks on Israel by Hezbollah, IRGC operatives in Syria, Iran-backed Shi'a militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen would invite the kind of massive response for which Israel had been preparing for many years.

For its part, Israel responded to the Hamas attack with equally unrealistic ambitions, specifically what Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu initially called the destruction of Hamas. Modified over time, this objective was described as removing Hamas's capability as a fighting force and its ability to return to govern Gaza. To accomplish these goals, Israel embarked on a highly destructive campaign that levelled large areas within Gaza, killing more than 18,000 Hamas fighters, but also more than 20,000 civilians. Israel's heavy bombing campaign destroyed housing, infrastructure, and food supplies to a point where a serious humanitarian situation developed.

Even after prolonged fighting, Israel had no plan for when the war ended: who would provide security and basic government functions in Gaza, and who would fund and be responsible for reconstruction. Complicating Israel's stance were demands from extremist members of its governing coalition—specifically, Minister of Finance Bezalel Smotrich and Minister of Internal Security Itamar Ben Gvir—that the Israel military remain in Gaza and that Israeli settlements—withdrawn in 2005—be rebuilt and repopulated.

Israel's strategy vis-à-vis Lebanon was grounded in a more realistic possible outcome, namely, full implementation of UN



Hundreds of Palestinians wait to buy bread at the only bakery in Deir al-Balah, Gaza, on October 25, 2024. They are struggling with hunger due to Israeli attacks on Gaza for more than a year, and because of the closure of border crossings and the limited access to aid in the region. ASHRAF AMRA/ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES

Security Council resolution 1701 (2006) that, among other outcomes, would move Hezbollah north of the border with Israel and have the Lebanese army deploy in Hezbollah's place. American diplomats worked hard to achieve these goals, made possible by the decapitation of Hezbollah's leadership and the debilitation of its military capabilities.

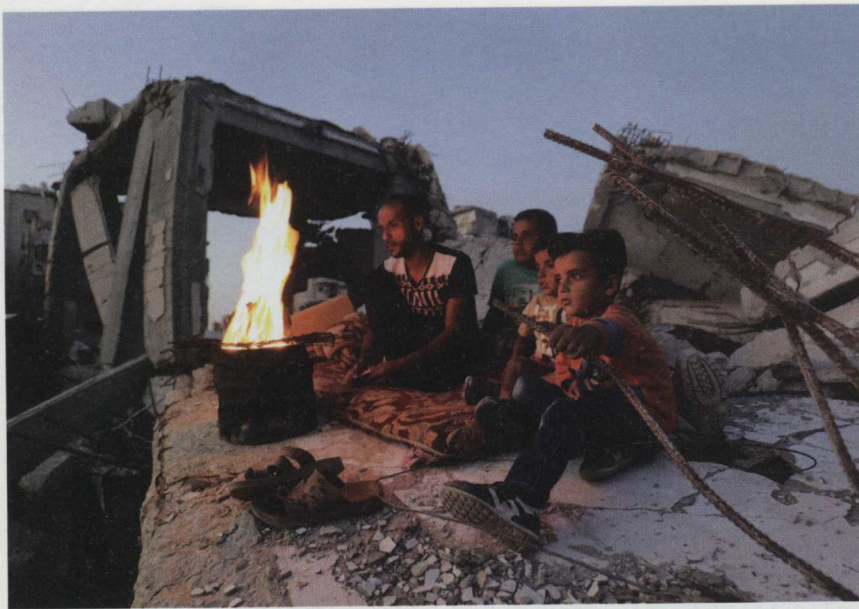
As it sought to negotiate a ceasefire deal in Gaza to secure the release of the hostages, the Biden administration examined a number of options for the post-war period, but returned time and again to a fundamental impasse. If an alternative to long-term Israel reoccupation of Gaza existed, it would require substantial involvement of Arab states to provide security and govern the area until the Palestinian Authority—the legitimate government of the Palestinians according to the 1993 Oslo Accords—underwent fundamental reform and proved able and willing to take control of Gaza. However, the government of Israel said it wanted no part of the Palestinian Authority's role in Gaza, and it similarly rejected demands from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and other Arabs that the post-war period see a serious and sustained effort to resolve the underlying Israel-Palestine dispute. As the war continued throughout the year, the Biden administration found itself at

a dead end—unwilling to press Israel either to stop the fighting or to agree to a serious post-war peace process, and unsuccessful in negotiating a ceasefire/hostage deal.

This protracted war in Gaza—the fifth since 2007—the intense war between Israel and Hezbollah, and the increasing prospects of escalation between Israel and Iran highlighted a fundamental reality—namely, that U.S. policy in the Middle East is in need of a dramatic overhaul. The question is whether the current conflicts and the election of Donald Trump as president afford an opportunity for a long-overdue recalculation and recalibration of American national security interests and activities in that region, or whether Trump's lack of strategic focus and the worsening regional situation will overwhelm American efforts to construct a coherent policy.

Trump 47 and American interests

Since World War II, U.S. regional interests have remained relatively unchanged: support Israel and its right of self-defense; advance the prospects of peace between Israel and its neighbors; maintain positive relations with moderate Arab states such as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia; assure the security of



A Palestinian family on October 26, 2024, in the Bureij refugee camp in the central part of Gaza, where Israel continues its attacks. Palestinian families light fires on the rubble of their houses to cook and keep warm. MOIZ SALHI/ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES

the region's oil and gas exports; fight against terrorism; stop the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the region; and promote human rights and democratization. The United States has also supported efforts to prevent destabilization within the region and from outside powers. While successive American administrations have proved able and adroit enough to succeed more often than not in realizing some of these interests over the past 75 years, the Middle East is so changed and in such turmoil that it is time to reconsider why we are there, what we want to achieve, and what we are prepared to do.

The Trump administration faces at least three fundamental challenges in restructuring American policy in the Middle East. First, much of the region is broken and dysfunctional, and thus policymakers will face hard choices about the limits of U.S. intervention. The failure of the Arab Spring, waves of pro-democracy protests in Middle Eastern and North African countries beginning in 2011, and the persistence of authoritarian rule, corruption, violations of basic rights, growing economic inequality, and endemic violence by governments and non-state actors suggest that the United States alone, or even in concert with others, cannot

resolve all the challenges in the region, especially as the competition for foreign aid and humanitarian assistance has grown in other areas of the world.

Second, as a result of prolonged U.S. engagements in Iraq since 2003 and Afghanistan in 2001–2021, and the overextension of the U.S. military, the U.S. public and Congress are unlikely to support new military action in the foreseeable future in a volatile region that hosts many protracted conflicts. During the 2024 presidential campaign, Trump made clear his aversion to military action, and thus it is an open question whether he will continue the Biden administration's decisions to increase the U.S. military posture in the region. Coupled with the hollowing out of our diplomatic infrastructure and capabilities—which a Trump administration is likely to continue—the reality is that the United States no longer can act as effectively in the Middle East as it did in the past. Simply put, both friends and adversaries now pay less attention to what the United States says, leaving the United States appearing to chase after them. American diplomacy during the current Gaza war exemplified this problem, as senior U.S. envoys repeatedly chased an elusive ceasefire/hostage deal with no success.

There are also old and new priorities

for American policy in Asia and the Pacific, in particular responding to the expansion of Chinese economic, political, and military power and influence. And there are enduring but traditionally underappreciated U.S. interests in our own hemisphere. The war in Ukraine, tensions in the South China Sea, political turmoil in parts of South America and Africa—as well as the growing importance of dealing effectively with climate change—are likely to dominate American national security activities, drawing policymakers' attention away from the Middle East.

Third, U.S.–Middle East policy has become victim of the same partisanship and outbidding that have infected all of American politics. Israel has become a domestic political issue, not a foreign policy issue, with the Republicans and Democrats sparring over who can be more supportive of the Israeli government. Sanctions have become the tool of choice in Congress, often complicating the more nuanced work of diplomacy. Strong rhetoric has preceded thoughtful policy. Trump's election will likely exacerbate rather than resolve these problems. His early appointment of a supporter of right-wing settlers as ambassador to Israel suggests he will cozy up to Israel's right-wing government, essentially ignoring the underlying protracted conflict with the Palestinians. And his penchant for not well thought-out statements and social media posts will lead to confusion among friends and foes as to what the United States policy is.

If this diagnosis is even partially correct, the critical question is whether there is a cure—what interests and values should motivate U.S. policy in the Middle East, and what policies might best address those interests and values. At best, the Trump administration can make a start on correcting the course of U.S. policy, a process that will require years to unfold. At worst, the administration could exacerbate the problems and draw the United States deeper into the complexities of Middle East politics without a clear sense of why the U.S. is there and what we are trying to accomplish.

Change and continuity in the Middle East

The promise of change and revitalization brought on by the Arab Spring is a distant memory. The early signs of democratic rule in Tunisia are long past. Syria, Yemen, and Libya have experienced civil wars, displaced populations, refugee crises, and societal fragmentation. Eight monarchies weathered the storm that followed the Arab Spring (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Jordan, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar), but they and several of the Middle Eastern and North African republics remain deeply rooted in authoritarian rule or praetorian rule, in which armed forces have effective political control while operating behind the scenes.

Virtually none of the region's endemic problems have changed for the better since the end of World War II and after decolonization, and they

appear to be impervious to change. Authoritarianism is deeply rooted, bolstered by strong ties between ruling elites, the military and security services, and the business community. Corruption and crony capitalism have exacerbated already deep divides between rich and poor. Unchecked population growth has outstripped the capacity of governments to feed, clothe, house, and provide jobs in many countries.

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP), which has published regional human development reports since 2002, has tried to define these issues through the eyes of Middle Easterners themselves, not outside experts. In a series of Arab Human Development Reports, UNDP reported three deficits identified by the Arab analysts: a deficit of freedoms, a deficit of knowledge—that

is, poor educational systems—and a deficit of women's empowerment that keeps 50% of the region's population shut out of many jobs. Very little progress has been achieved in remedying each of these deficits.

These crises have severely impacted the people and the governments in the Middle East. The traditional state system—dominated throughout history by Egypt, Syria, and Iraq—has crumbled, giving way to the dominant position of states essentially on the periphery—Iran, Israel, and Turkey—as well as the rise of violent, non-state actors such as Hezbollah, Hamas, al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State. These groups have benefited from the breakdown of borders and the expansion of ungoverned space. Civil society is weak throughout the region.

Changing structures and alignments

Regional and extra-regional politics and diplomatic alignments are also changing in fundamental ways. The preeminent role long enjoyed by the United States is being challenged by China, drawn to the region by its need for oil and gas resources. Traditional American allies are concerned that the U.S.'s foreign policy focus is pivoting away from its friends and the region. In 2021, China and Iran signed a 25-year cooperation agreement. China is now the only major buyer of Iranian oil, thus helping Iran evade sanctions. China has advocated including Middle East states in the BRICS organization. And China helped broker a diplomatic agreement in 2023 designed to end long-standing tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The 2018 decision by President Trump to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed in 2015, which restricted Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief, has brought Iran dangerously close to being a nuclear threshold state—that is, a country with the technical and material capabilities to build a nuclear

weapon but has not yet done so—with but minimal warning time before it crosses that threshold. President Biden entered office seemingly intent upon bringing the United States back into the JCPOA and thus bringing Iran back into compliance with its terms,

but diplomacy failed, and the Iranian nuclear program continued to progress.

Iran parlayed its enhanced nuclear position, its influence within Shi'a Islam, and its unrelenting hostility toward Israel into a leadership role in the so-called Axis of Resistance,



An Israeli Army officer watches as U.S. military personnel from the 5-7 Air Defense Artillery Joint Task Force take part in a ceremony marking the end of their mission on April 20, 2003, at the Israeli army's Tel Yona base. Hundreds of American troops normally based in Germany were deployed in Israel with their Patriot missile batteries to improve Israel's defense against Iraqi Scud missiles during Operation Iraqi Freedom. DAVID SILVERMAN/GETTY IMAGES

loosely comprising Iran, Iranian Revolutionary Guards in Syria, armed militias in Iraq, Houthi rebels in Yemen, Hamas and other Palestinian resistance groups, Hezbollah, and Syria. In 2004, Jordan's King Abdullah II forecast this development when he spoke of a "Shi'a crescent" extending from Yemen through Iran, Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, encompassing areas with substantial Shi'a Muslim populations.

At the same time, some regional states have shown rarely demonstrated diplomatic agility. Saudi Arabia is trying to transition domestically and in its foreign policy, agreeing to end its backing of the Yemeni government in its civil war with Houthi insurgents, repairing ties with Iran and Qatar, and, before the war in Gaza, exploring normalization of relations with Israel. The United Arab Emirates and Qatar compete for regional influence, drawing on vast sovereign wealth reserves from their

petroleum and natural gas resources. And Egypt remains an instrumental player in dealing with crises that erupt in Gaza involving Hamas.

Several new regional alignments have also come into being, helped along by the United States. Building on the Abraham Accords—in which four Arab states (Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates) signed bilateral agreements in 2020 normalizing ties with Israel—the following new groupings have gotten off the ground:

- Negev Forum Regional Cooperation Framework (2020), signed by Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States, encourages regional integration, cooperation, and development, as well as initiatives to strengthen the Palestinian economy and improve Palestinians' quality of life.
- I2U2 partnership (2021), comprising Israel, India, the United Arab

Emirates, and the United States, focuses on investment and initiatives in water, energy, transportation, space, health, and food security.

- India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (2023), is designed to foster connectivity and economic integration between Asia, the Persian Gulf and Europe in a proposed route from India to Europe through the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Greece.
- East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), comprising Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and Palestine as members, and the United States, the World Bank, and the European Union as observers. The EMGF seeks to set common strategies based on shared vision, promote a competitive regional gas market, assure the security of supply and demand, and coordinate efforts to optimize resource development.

Why are we there—changing U.S. interests and roles

For more than a decade, policy analysts have argued that the United States should pivot from concentrating on the Middle East and instead focus on emerging threats and challenges in Asia and the Pacific. The issues of competition, cooperation and potential conflict with China represent the most

significant foreign policy priority for the Trump administration. Protracted U.S. military deployments in the Middle East and long-standing foreign aid commitments, however, have been seen as diverting American policymaking attention from the more significant requirements elsewhere.

The United States has been slow to reorient its policies to align with changes in the region, however, and thus the pivot away from the Middle East has been more of a modest recalibration of interests and foreign policy investment. Anomalies remain: the U.S. continues to take the lead in assuring the security of Persian Gulf oil and gas exports, even though the amount of oil and gas purchased by the U.S. from Persian Gulf countries has shrunk. In 2023, the U.S. imported just 860,000 barrels per day of crude oil and petroleum products (which includes hydrocarbon gas liquids, refined petroleum products, and biofuels) from the Persian Gulf, representing 10% of total U.S. petroleum imports. Notwithstanding, Brookings Institution expert Michael O'Hanlon estimates that the United States has spent \$25–\$50 billion for military deployments in the Persian Gulf and to secure Gulf hydrocarbon exports, including those destined for China. In effect, the United States is guaranteeing the security of Iran's oil exports to China.



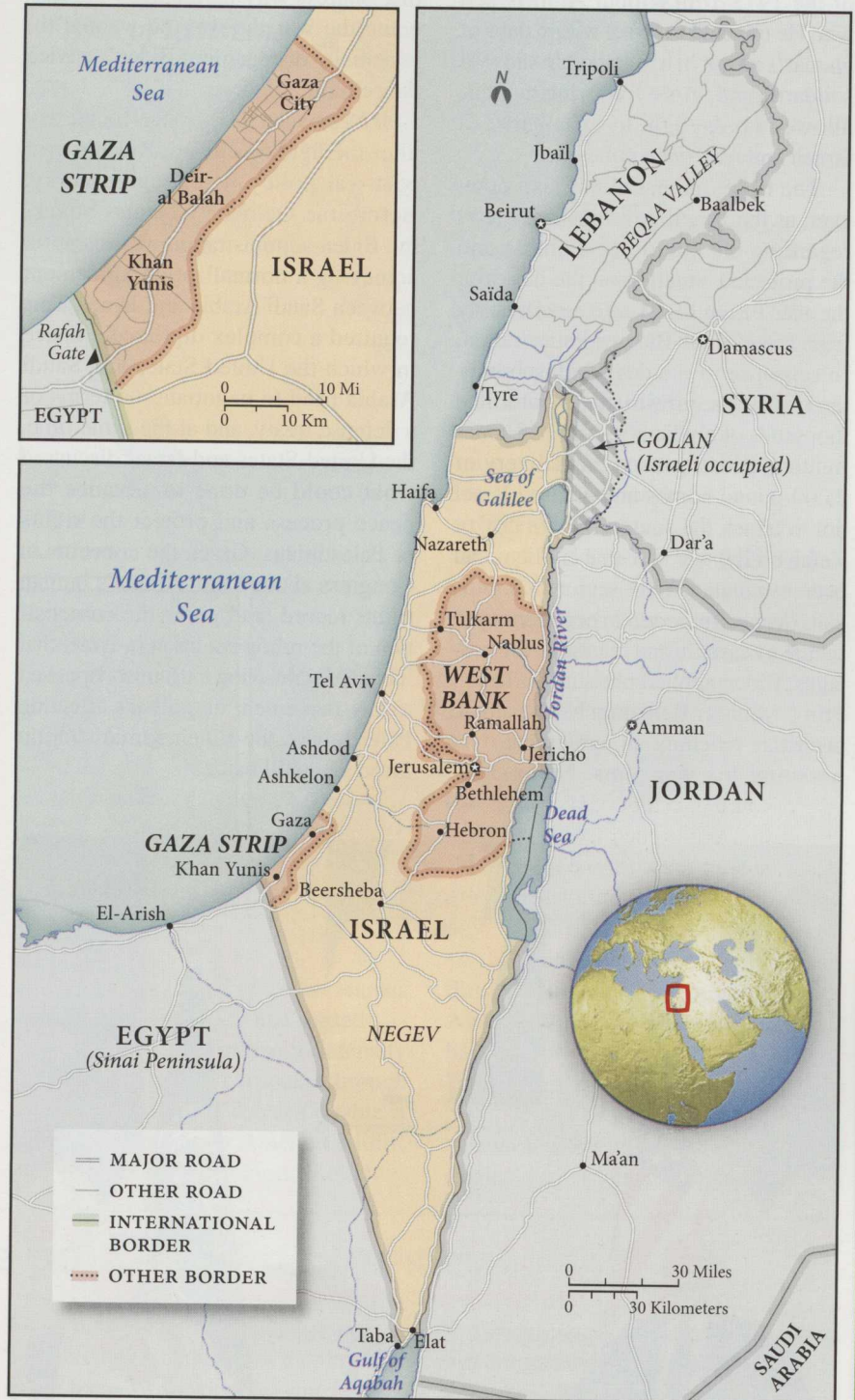
U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson (left) and Senator Ben Cardin applaud during a speech by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at a joint meeting of Congress at the U.S. Capitol on July 24, 2024. SAMUEL CORUM/BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES

What interests and values do and should motivate us in the Middle East?

President Biden began the challenging task of reorienting American policy in the Middle East at the beginning of his presidency. According to Carnegie Endowment for International Peace distinguished fellow Jessica Matthews, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, Biden shifted “the basis of American foreign policy from an unhealthy reliance on military intervention to the active pursuit of diplomacy backed by strength. He has won back the trust of friends and allies, built and begun to institutionalize a deep American presence in Asia, restored the United States’ role in essential multilateral organizations and agreements, and ended the longest of the country’s ‘forever wars.’”

At the same time, however, Biden continued, did not challenge, or failed to reverse several elements of former President Donald Trump’s policies, leaving American foreign policy in some distress. This was the case in the Middle East peace process initiated following the 1993 Oslo Accords to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Biden tried to repair some elements of U.S. relations with Palestinians and resumed some assistance, but he left in place Trump’s 2018 shuttering of the U.S. Consulate in Jerusalem and the diplomatic office of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in Washington. He failed to reverse Trump’s recognition of Israel’s annexation of the Golan Heights in southwestern Syria. He left in place former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s announcement that “[T]he establishment of Israeli civilian settlements in the West Bank is not per se inconsistent with international law.” And he proposed a “vision of peace” that was so one-sided in favor of Israeli right-wing preferences that it was dead in the water the day it was unveiled. Most significantly, Biden tried but failed to reach agreement with Iran on resuming the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, resulting in Iran’s acceleration of its uranium enrichment program, to a point where it is close to being a nuclear threshold state.

These inconsistencies between Biden’s stated intentions and U.S.



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policies manifested themselves in his administration’s response to Hamas’ October 7, 2023, attack on Israel and the ensuing Gaza war. Consistent with long-standing U.S. policy, Biden rushed to Israel’s defense, proclaiming Israel’s

right to defend itself after the horrific attack that left some 1,200 Israelis dead and more than 200 Israelis and foreigners taken hostage by Hamas. Biden underscored the rhetorical support of Israel by authorizing the supply of billions of

dollars worth of weapons to Israel in a round-the-clock effort reminiscent of the 1973 Yom Kippur Arab-Israeli war. He traveled to Israel within days of Hamas's attack in a remarkable show of solidarity and, in the following months, allowed no daylight to exist between Israeli and American policy.

The honeymoon did not last, however, as the Israeli government's views regarding the aim of the fighting and the projected situation on the day after the war began to diverge significantly from those of the Biden administration. In response to the devastating bombing of Gaza's infrastructure that killed thousands of civilians as well as Hamas fighters, Biden paused the delivery of 2,000-pound bombs and advised Israel not to attack the southern Gaza city of Rafah until it was sure that civilians had been evacuated. With senior U.S. officials deeply immersed in negotiations to secure a ceasefire and release of the hostages, Biden applied pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to prioritize reaching an agreement over pursuing his war aims. Netanyahu,

however, paid scant attention, and traveled to Washington to tell a joint session of Congress why he intended to prosecute the war the way he wanted to, essentially disregarding Biden's advice concerning Rafah.

If Netanyahu had no plans for the day after the fighting ceased, Biden's own post-war policy was equally murky. Before the October 7 Hamas attack, the Biden administration was intent on achieving a normalization agreement between Saudi Arabia and Israel. This required a complex diplomatic dance in which the United States and Saudi Arabia tried to negotiate the terms of a defense treaty, and at the same time, the United States and Israel discussed what could be done to advance the peace process and protect the rights of Palestinians. Given the concerns in Congress about Saudi Arabia's human rights record, and given the composition of the ruling coalition in Israel that included right-wing extremists opposed to any movement on policies affecting Palestinians, the Biden administration faced an uphill battle.

Surprisingly, the administration believed this goal was achievable even after the Hamas attack on October 7 and the beginning of the war in Gaza, and U.S. diplomacy toward this end continued well into 2024. Some analysts even argued that achieving normalization could be Biden's signature achievement in his last months in office. This absurdly unrealistic policy prescription persisted despite Saudi, Egyptian, and other Arab state demands that post-war diplomacy focus on establishing a Palestinian state, despite Israeli opposition to negotiations with the PLO, and despite growing evidence of what some analysts have termed the "one-state reality," that is, Israeli settler policies and actions in the Israeli occupied territories have essentially removed from the table the possibility of achieving a two-state outcome.

As the 2024 election campaign began in earnest after Biden withdrew from the presidential race and Vice President Kamala Harris became the Democratic candidate, two radically different approaches to the Middle East became evident. Left unclear, however, was whether either approach—that of Harris or the Republican candidate Donald Trump—would assimilate lessons from the past and recalibrate U.S. policy in line with the changed circumstances in the region and changing American interests. Indeed, newly elected President Donald Trump has a vastly different view of U.S. interests and values in the Middle East.

Iran

There is near consensus within the U.S. policy community and across party lines that Iran represents the greatest threat to stability in the region. Its nuclear weapons program has advanced considerably since Trump withdrew the United States from the JCPOA in 2018. Speaking to the Aspen Security Forum in July 2024, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the breakout time for Iran to produce enough weapons grade material for a nuclear weapon was one to two weeks. This assessment reflected Iran's significantly accelerated production of fissile material, the main component of nuclear



U.S. President Joe Biden meets with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman at Al Salman Royal Palace, on July 15, 2022. President Biden later presented his vision for the U.S. role in the Middle East at the Jeddah Security and Development Summit, attended by Gulf state leaders. SAUDI PRESS AGENCY/UPI/NEWS.COM

weapons. In addition to concern over Iran's nuclear program, the so-called Axis of Resistance, the informal political and military coalition led by Iran, while not under direct Iranian control, reflects and advances Iranian interests in projecting power at the expense of U.S. allies.

The current U.S. approach has been to exercise maximum pressure on Iran, primarily through sanctions and the deployment of significant military assets in the region to help defend Israel and deter Iranian aggression. This strategy has had mixed results, witness Iran's launching over 300 missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) against Israel in April 2024 and its response to Israel's assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran in July.

The situation deteriorated dramatically in September. Several thousand pagers and walkie-talkies held by Hezbollah operatives exploded simultaneously, presumably orchestrated by Israel. The Israelis followed up with a massive strike on Hezbollah headquarters in south Beirut, killing Hezbollah's secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah, and a significant number of Hezbollah and Iranian commanders. Israel launched a sustained bombing campaign against Hezbollah arms depots and missile launching sites throughout Lebanon, and sent ground forces into southern Lebanon to root out Hezbollah's positions there. With its main asset, Hezbollah, weakened considerably, Iran launched some 180 ballistic missiles at Israel in early October. The regional war that many



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predicted and feared after the Hamas attack in October 2023 had started.

Trump can be expected to intensify pressure on Iran, in particular through tougher sanctions. It is questionable if Trump will maintain America's military posture in the region, including

the deployment of a Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense anti-missile battery and U.S. military operators. However, it may prove impossible for him to reduce or withdraw U.S. military and naval assets in the face of continued Iranian aggression against Israel.

The politics of diplomacy

The political divide in the United States over domestic issues carries over to the question of the right tools to advance American interests abroad. Whereas Democrats favor diplomacy backed by the willingness to employ sanctions and the use of force, if necessary, Republicans largely eschew diplomacy as a tool of American power. This fundamental difference obscures a critical underlying issue: should the United

States actively pursue regime change in Iran through sanctions and the threat of using force, or should the United States focus on changing Iranian behavior by appealing to moderates within the Islamic Republic's system and to the majority of Iranians who clearly chafe under the restrictions imposed by the ruling regime? An initial assessment is that Trump is likely to double down on sanctions and massive pressure, hoping

that the ensuing economic distress in Iran will bring Iranians to the streets and bring down the Islamic Republic.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the measure of American policy in the Middle East—its success or failure—will depend on how the Iran issue is handled. Regime change may be a desire, but it is not a policy. Sanctions are a tool, but not a policy. And the threat of the use of force is a tactic, not

a policy. An integrated approach to Iran would see the United States strengthen its relationship with key allies—especially the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates)—and employ a combination of tactics and tools in a diplomatic strategy that offers Iran a way to integrate into the region peacefully. While it cannot be expected that Iran will abandon its core interests, friends, and proxies, it is not impossible to foresee a less aggressive Iranian policy in the region in return for more of a role in regional political and security forums.

A key first test of this for the Trump administration—as it was for the Biden administration in 2021—will be the Iranian nuclear program. Trump is unlikely to try to revive the JCPOA, and in any event, Iran appears uninterested as well. Massive sanctions, especially if unilateral, are unlikely to change Iran's policies or behavior, as Iran will turn to Russia and China for assistance. While newly elected Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian has an interest in making progress on economic and social issues, tensions with the Trump administration will make this unlikely.

As the Trump administration develops a workable policy toward Iran, it will be equally important to deal with Iranian

allies and proxies who are responsible for significant malign actions in the region. The threat to maritime shipping posed by Houthi rebels in Yemen will require ongoing commitment from the United States Navy and other countries' navies involved in protecting shipping in the Red Sea. The impact of Houthi aggression on worldwide trade and on the economies of Red Sea littoral states—in particular, Egypt and the Suez Canal—has been and will continue to be profound. Trump's aversion to military action will be tested immediately in this regard.

Israel/Palestine

If the wars in Gaza and Lebanon continue into 2025, it will become an overriding priority for the new administration to bring the fighting to an end. The prospect of significant regional escalation will remain high, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza will turn even more serious than it is already, and the situation on the ground in the West Bank and East Jerusalem will threaten to erupt into a full-blown Palestinian intifada. This is particularly the case if Trump's former ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, embarks on his ambition to have Israel annex the West Bank as a solution to the conflict. If this becomes U.S. policy, regional and Western allies will lose confidence in the United States, and the conflict will become a wedge issue in

our domestic politics. Trump may try to bring the Gaza and Lebanon wars to an early end, but he will face stiff opposition from the Israeli leadership.

Whenever the Gaza war ends, Gaza and the Palestinian issue will continue to impact the administration's policy agenda. While there is a need to plan for post-war Gaza—who handles security, who is responsible for normal government functions, how fast can the humanitarian situation be ameliorated, and who pays the bill for reconstruction—there is no plan for any of these requirements, and the Trump administration is unlikely to adopt this as a policy priority. In addition to the sheer enormity of the tasks ahead, there is the problem of donor fatigue and competition from other crises for scarce resources.

The Trump administration will evince little interest in addressing the underlying Israel-Palestine conflict. Trump unveiled a vision of peace in 2020 that fell flat everywhere except among Israeli right-wing leaders. Trump personally will devote much more attention to relations with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, where transactional relations can prove of immediate political and economic benefit to Trump, and he will leave Israel/Palestine to advisors who have their own right-wing agenda. Trump can justify his uninterest in the underlying conflict by pointing to the absence of Israeli or Palestinian leadership ready to take the hard decisions and to offer the difficult concessions that would be required in a peace process.

A daunting challenge for the Trump administration will be the widening conflict in the region involving Israel and the Axis of Resistance. This has already drawn in the United States, which deployed substantial naval and other military assets in an effort to deter Hezbollah and Iranian aggression and which mobilized an air defense coalition to help defend Israel against Iranian missile and armed UAV attacks in April and October.

Both the Trump and Biden administrations tried to change the narrative by focusing more on the normalization of relations between Israel and some Arab states. The Trump administration



U.S. Central Command and the Royal Jordanian Air Force conduct a combined humanitarian assistance airdrop to northern Gaza to provide essential relief to civilians on March 5, 2024. U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND/ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES



Leaders of BRICS countries during the 16th BRICS Summit in Kazan, Russia, on October 23, 2024. The summit was hosted by Russian President Vladimir Putin (center). LI XUEREN/XINHUA VIA GETTY IMAGES

achieved normalization breakthroughs with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. The Biden administration invested substantial effort to bring about Saudi-Israel normalization. This was a long shot even before the Gaza war, and that war essentially ended the effort. Trump might try his hand at expanding normalization but will not make it a priority.

Conflicts abhor vacuums, however, and persistent conflicts draw in even the most skeptical U.S. administration,

usually to deal with an outbreak of violence. The Trump administration can try to avoid diving into the conflict resolution process, but at its own peril. Violent outbreaks between Israel and Hamas in 2008, 2012, 2014, 2021, and the current war, as well as Israel-Hezbollah wars in 2006 and 2024 have required a substantial investment of time and effort by senior U.S. officials to try to bring the violence to an end.

There are those outside the Trump administration and abroad who will

argue for a determined effort to resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict, but they are unlikely to get a serious hearing in Trump's Washington. Trump's efforts to court the so-called Jewish vote fell far short of his expectations, and thus he will not feel compelled to pay attention to entreaties for active U.S. diplomacy. As happened in his first term as president, Trump is thus likely to leave the Israel-Palestine conflict and broader Arab-Israel conflict in far worse shape when he leaves office in 2029.

Multilateral cooperation on transnational issues

Human development

Apart from the peace process, the United States retains some influence to convene regional and extra-regional parties on issues of common concern. This can be the goal of a multilateral diplomatic effort to engage serious, endemic problems in the Middle East. The agenda is full, and thus the strategy must be ambitious. Taking a cue from the United Nations Development Program's Arab Human Development initiative, the Trump administration could try to bring together regional and extra-regional states to define an agenda and a plan of action. While Trump is no fan of multilateralism, selective engagement could be attractive as a means of sharing the burden.

Regional security

For more than 30 years, outside powers and regional states have searched for a formula to advance regional security arrangements. These efforts have failed due to mistrust between states, concerns over derogation of sovereignty, fundamental differences regarding the threat environment, and competing national security interests. While achieving agreement on a unified regional security architecture is unlikely, there would be value in convening a forum to discuss these issues, akin to the Arms Control and Regional Security Working Group in the multilateral process following the 1991 Madrid Conference. The agenda for such a gathering would be intense,

as there are several competing frameworks on the table: the U.S.-Middle East strategic alliance initiative aimed at bringing the GCC countries, Egypt, and Jordan to cooperate against threats to security; Russia's collective security concept for the Persian Gulf; and Iran's Hormuz peace endeavor. Bringing all parties into the same room will itself be challenging, but the discussion forum could prove beneficial over time.

Health and environment

Again, drawing on the post-Madrid Conference multilateral talks, regional forums can also be convened to discuss issues that do not recognize national borders, like the environment and health.

A Middle East Cancer Consortium has existed quietly for many years. It represents a structure of cooperation involving states that do not necessarily have diplomatic relations to try to develop cures for cancer that could be adapted for other health issues. A specific and immediate need would be a forum for sharing information on pandemics.

An umbrella organization?

The Middle East can draw upon a lesson from the Cold War and come together in a Conference on Security and Cooperation—CSCME—to begin substantive dialogues on issues such as security, climate, and human rights. As specific forums get organized, the

United States, the EU, China, Russia, Japan, and others can work with members of the Arab League to structure the umbrella organization. There can be no illusions of major breakthroughs, but, as Churchill said, “Jaw, jaw is better than war, war.”

Strategic choices and uncertainties

President Trump will face difficult decisions that will need to be made in the Middle East, as elsewhere. Currently, there is no “theory of the case” for U.S. engagement in the region. Decades of U.S. military deployments have not deterred conflicts and have not resolved protracted disputes. While it would be unwise to withdraw forward bases and deployments immediately, it is harder and harder to argue that these should be forever commitments. Reducing the American footprint in the region would square with long-standing Trump views related to U.S. commitments abroad.

The thorniest of regional issues complicates the search for a new U.S. strategic framework. The Arab Spring raised expectations for change, but these hopes were dashed by repressive government actions and civil strife. The United States thus needs to choose whether we intend to remain a status quo power in the region and thus prop up authoritarian regimes in Saudi Arabia or praetorian regimes in Egypt and elsewhere; or whether we intend to put teeth into long-standing human rights initiatives that have almost never been supported by consistent U.S. policy. In his earlier term in office, Trump crowned Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as his “favorite dictator,” and he made his first trip to Saudi Arabia, a visit that paid off handsomely in new contracts for military equipment and, after Trump left office, in a \$2 billion Saudi investment in a fund set up by Trump’s son-in-law.

Two security challenges will not disappear whatever strategy is chosen by the new administration: nuclear proliferation and terrorism. In both cases, choices need to be made between pursuing essentially unilateralist approaches, or trying to build diplomatic coalitions of the willing.

Restructuring diplomacy

If the new administration chooses to prioritize diplomacy over military deployments and sanctions, it will have to address the dysfunctional nature of our diplomatic infrastructure. The U.S. State Department is a frail institution, having been hollowed out during the earlier Trump administration and not yet built back by the Biden administration, let alone built back better. It is also an organizational mystery, with more than a score of assistant secretaries reporting to numerous under secretaries in a system that militates against coordination of policy and resources. Both Democratic and Republican administrations have preferred engaging in diplomacy through officials in the National Security Council or special envoys, rather than investing in and relying on the professional diplomatic corps.

Countless studies have been undertaken over the years focused on reforming and restructuring the State Department. Two requirements have been missing: the political will in the administration and in Congress to see it through, and the willingness of the administration and Congress to fund

the State Department at a level commensurate with its responsibilities. While this should sound like a logical priority for an incoming administration, it is unlikely to attract the support of Trump or his new secretary of state.

Toward a sustainable U.S. policy in the Middle East

Continuing the militarization of American policy in the Middle East is as unsustainable as pursuing a pivot away from the region. Even though the region has changed to a point where it is no longer a top priority, substantial U.S. equities—security and political interests, alongside American values—prove the United States needs to stay engaged. However, difficult choices need to be made as to where we invest time and effort, and the way we do business needs to change.

Investing in diplomacy as an important asset and tool of American power is a first, necessary step. Thinking and acting multilaterally, when possible, can have a multiplying effect in dealing with both protracted conflicts and crises that arise. Developing a sustainable approach in dealing with the conflicts and the endemic human, social, and economic problems that beset this region will be required. These are policy choices and prescriptions that are well within the capability of the United States to sustain and advance in the Middle East.

Discussion questions

1. How would you prioritize American interests in the Middle East, and how do these interests measure up to foreign policy challenges elsewhere in the world?
2. Should the United States continue to try to play the paramount role in Israel-Arab peacemaking, should there be a multilateral effort instead, or should the United States leave peacemaking to other parties?
3. Is peace possible between Israel and the Palestinians?
4. Given the history of anti-American actions by the Islamic Republic of Iran, should the United States maintain its policy of sanctions and maximum pressure, or should the United States try to integrate Iran into the region?
5. Since the United States imports little oil and gas from the Persian Gulf, should the United States continue to bear major responsibility for assuring the security of Gulf hydrocarbon exports?
6. How has American public response to the current events in the Middle East made a difference in this crisis?

Suggested readings

Lisa Anderson, “The Forty-Year War: How America Lost the Middle East,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2023. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/middle-east-forty-year-war-china> Anderson provides a sweeping account of American fortunes and misfortunes in a turbulent region.

Daniel Byman, “Why the Middle East Still Needs America: The U.S. Military Keeps a Volatile Region from Descending into Chaos,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 2024. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/why-middle-east-still-needs-america> Byman offers little hope for change coming from within the Middle East, and thus he argues for the United States to remain active militarily to defend and deter.

Steven Cook, *The End of Ambition: America's Past, Present, and Future in the Middle East* (Oxford University Press, 2024). Cook argues that U.S. policy in the Middle East enjoyed relative success from World War II until the 1990s, when it turned to broad social engineering projects, such as democratization. He argues for a return to traditional interests, such as energy security, Israel, counterterrorism, and counterproliferation, as well as climate and great power competition.

Daniel C. Kurtzer, “Trump’s Middle East Legacy: Arms, Autocrats, and Annexations,” in Julian E. Zelizer, ed., *The Presidency of Donald J. Trump: A First Historical Assessment* (Princeton University Press, 2022), 279-297. Kurtzer argues that Trump tore down almost all the pillars of long-standing U.S. policy in the Middle East. Many of the policies and actions undertaken during Trump’s first term remain in place.

Robert O’Brien, “The Return of Peace Through Strength: Making the Case for Trump’s Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2024. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/return-peace-strength-trump-obrien> A former senior Trump advisor, O’Brien’s prescription for the region is to elect Trump so that he can reprise what he did previously while in office.

Ben Rhodes, “A Foreign Policy for the World as It Is: Biden and the Search for a New American Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 2024. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/biden-foreign-policy-world-rhodes> A former senior Obama advisor, Rhodes argues that the United States must cope with a challenging Middle East, without aspiring to change things significantly.

Steven Simon, *Grand Delusion: The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East* (Penguin Press, 2023). Simon offers a searing analysis and critique of four decades of American involvement in the Middle East that boils down to one conclusion: finding the balance between Reagan’s flamboyance and Obama’s “Don’t do stupid sh*t.” Simon believes traditional U.S. interests regarding energy and Israeli security no longer pose dangers; instead he urges focusing on Iran and counterterrorism.

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