

UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY IN THE SOUTHERN AND EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

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Introduction

Over the past decade, conflict and political unrest have remained on-going features in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean region (SEMED), which is part of the broader geopolitical space known as MENA (the Middle East and North Africa). The profound transformations that have swept through the region since 2011 have introduced new challenges that overlap with existing crises. State fragility, conflicts, security threats, and socio-economic inequalities have turned this area into one of the world's most volatile regions, with a geostrategic importance that extends far beyond its geographical borders.

The stabilization of this strategically important region remains one of the key priorities of American diplomacy. Washington has traditionally been invested in resolving conflicts in the region, eliminating the threats of weapons of mass destruction and Islamist extremism, and supporting democratization, human rights, and a rules-based international order.

However, there has been a significant reduction in U.S. involvement in the SEMED region. Washington's withdrawal from regional issues, particularly the wars in Syria and Libya, has paved the way for intense geopolitical competition between key regional powers and created an opportunity for more active engagement by alternative international actors, primarily China. Today, the SEMED region has become a space where Washington's geopolitical competitors have significantly strengthened their positions, and its traditional regional allies have begun pursuing increasingly independent policies. These trends further exacerbated by the global impact of Russia's war in Ukraine present new challenges for the United States.

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the evolution of the policies of the Trump and Biden administrations regarding the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean region as part of the broader American Middle East strategy. The section identifies the region's place within the foreign policy priorities of U.S. presidents, examines the degree of alignment between their declared principles and actual political actions, highlights the similarities and differences in Trump's and Biden's regional policies, and analyses the impact of new security challenges – primarily Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine and the war in Gaza – on the evolution of U.S. policy.

U.S. Policy in the SEMED under Trump and Biden Administrations

Donald Trump demonstrated a clear vision for his regional strategy during the 2016 presidential campaign. Its central element was the “maximum pressure” policy on Iran, which was recognized as the number one threat to American interests in the region. Another key objective was to normalize relations between important American Middle Eastern partners – Israel and the Arab monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia – with the aim of creating a kind of “anti-Iran axis”.

As part of this approach, in May 2018, Trump unilaterally withdrew from the nuclear deal with Iran – the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – and intensified sanctions against Tehran. Secondly, he pursued a policy of unconditional support for Israel: he recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and moved the U.S. embassy there, recognized Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights, completely ceased political dialogue with the Palestinians, and suspended their funding (Kausch, 2018). Despite these controversial moves, which caused widespread resonance in the Arab-Muslim world, Trump achieved a significant breakthrough at the end of his presidency in normalizing relations between Israel and its neighbours: with U.S. mediation, Tel Aviv signed peace agreements with the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan in 2020-2021, the so-called Abraham Accords. Guided by the principles of *realpolitik*, Trump also ceased pressuring Arab states on human rights and democratization issues and established strong

relations with authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, particularly with Saudi Arabia.

Under Trump, the U.S. trend of gradual disengagement from the region became more evident, a process that had already begun under his predecessor. For instance, Barack Obama completed the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq in December 2011, “led from behind” during the Libya crisis, and refrained from involving the U.S. in the civil war in Syria, which later became a significant source of regional instability. During Obama’s administration, the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan was significantly reduced, and informal contacts were established with the Taliban (Wechsler, 2019). Trump continued this policy. In December 2018, he announced the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria. He also initiated official negotiations with the Taliban, which culminated in the signing of an agreement in Doha on February 29, 2020. According to this agreement, the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces was to be completed by May 2021 in exchange for a series of guarantees from the Taliban (Joint Declaration, 2020).

Joe Biden built his 2020 presidential campaign on the need for a fundamental revision of his predecessor’s foreign policy course, particularly in the MENA region. Biden repeatedly emphasized the need to return to a more balanced approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and promised to bring the U.S. back into the JCPOA and resume negotiations with Iran (Candidates Answer CFR’s Questions, 2019).

As a presidential candidate, he stated that he would place human rights at the centre of U.S. foreign policy. In particular, he promised to treat the Saudis “as the pariahs that they are” (Democratic Debate, 2019), accusing the Saudi regime of human rights violations (most notably the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Arabian Consulate in Turkey on October 2, 2018), political repression, and barbaric methods of waging war in Yemen.

At the same time, Biden pointed to the need to end the “endless wars” in Afghanistan and the Middle East, for which the United States had “paid an extraordinary price in blood and loss” (Biden, 2020, p. 72). He planned to reduce

the number of American troops in the region and focus on specific military missions, primarily combating ISIS and Al-Qaeda. Overall, this approach indicated a continuation of the course of reducing U.S. presence in the region. As with his two predecessors, the MENA did not hold a priority position in Biden's foreign policy agenda. Instead, China took that place, which he referred to as America's primary competitor.

Immediately after taking office, President Biden reaffirmed his commitment to promoting human rights and announced a recalibration of relations with Saudi Arabia. He ended support for offensive operations in Yemen and suspended the implementation of large-scale arms deals to Saudi Arabia and the UAE that had been approved by Trump. In addition to this, Biden demonstratively distanced himself from Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who is considered the de facto ruler of the Kingdom. In July 2021, under the president's directive, a report by U.S. National Intelligence was released, which claimed that the operation leading to the killing of opposition journalist Jamal Khashoggi was personally approved by the Crown Prince. All of these significantly strained relations between Washington and Riyadh (Cook, & Indyk, 2022).

Biden's policy regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict did not undergo such drastic changes. Fulfilling his campaign promises, the new president quickly restored political dialogue with the Palestinians and provided them with \$235 million in financial aid, of which \$150 million was allocated to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The new administration reaffirmed its commitment to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on the two-state solution but refrained from proposing any specific peace initiatives.

At the same time, Biden did not reverse his predecessor's most controversial decisions: moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem and recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, thereby solidifying the new status quo. The president also failed to fulfil his promise to reopen the U.S. Consulate in East Jerusalem, which had provided diplomatic and humanitarian services to

Palestinians and, more importantly, symbolized America's recognition of Palestinian claims to East Jerusalem (Youssef, 2021). The Biden administration demonstrated a high level of strategic partnership with Israel and even increased economic assistance to Tel Aviv: in 2021, it provided an additional \$1 billion for the enhancement of the Iron Dome missile defense system.

Regarding Iran Trump's "maximum pressure" policy transformed into Biden's policy of "smart pressure". In April 2021, negotiations with Tehran over the JCPOA were resumed in Vienna, but they eventually reached a deadlock. In recent years, Iran has made significant technical progress in its nuclear program, causing considerable concern for Israel and Saudi Arabia, both of which have opposed the resumption of negotiations with Tehran from the outset. The White House also understands that the Iranian threat is not limited solely to nuclear issues. Therefore, amid the stagnation of the negotiations, the Biden administration began reassessing its approach to the Iranian issue.

In line with his campaign promise to end the "endless wars," on April 14, 2021, the Biden administration announced the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan by September 11 of that year. The hasty and poorly planned withdrawal led to the Taliban's return to power in the country and dealt a serious foreign policy defeat to Washington. The exit from Afghanistan, along with the renewed negotiations with Iran against the backdrop of a general reduction of the U.S. military presence in the region, caused clear disappointment among America's regional partners (Mazzucco, & Alexander, 2022). Washington's recalibration of its engagement with the region since the Obama administration has fuelled the perception in regional governments that the United States is reducing its commitment, especially as a security provider. A sense of abandonment has permeated Arab countries that rely on the U.S. security umbrella. Under these conditions, MENA leaders began to pursue more independent policies.

Evolution of U.S. Regional Policy after 2022

Tensions in relations between the U.S. and its regional partners further intensified after Russia's aggression in Ukraine. With the start of the war, most MENA countries did not join the Western sanctions campaign against Russia and sought to distance themselves as much as possible from the confrontation between the West and Russia. On the other hand, the war in Ukraine once again highlighted the strategic importance of the Middle East for the global energy sector, as well as the growing significance of Arab oil-exporting countries for global players (Macaron, 2022). The interest in increasing oil production, the threat of deepening military cooperation between Russia and Iran, and the stagnation of negotiations on Iran's nuclear program have created the preconditions for a reset of U.S. policy in the region.

President Biden's first visit to the Middle East took place from July 13-16, 2022, and aimed to strengthen U.S. relations with its traditional partners in response to the growing influence of Russia and China in the region. The agenda included discussions on issues such as the resolution of the Yemeni conflict, Israeli-Arab normalization, the Iranian issue amid the lack of progress in JCPOA negotiations, the global consequences of the war in Ukraine, particularly energy matters, and food security.

During the tour, Biden visited Israel, the West Bank, Saudi Arabia, and participated in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) + 3 Summit Meeting: a format that includes Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, the UAE, Oman, along with Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan. The most successful part of the trip, both for Biden and the host country, was his visit to Israel. During the visit, the "Jerusalem U.S.-Israel Strategic Partnership Joint Declaration" was signed, in which both parties outlined the directions for further cooperation. A key focus of the Declaration was Washington's efforts to "build a robust regional architecture and deepen ties between Israel and all of its regional partners", demonstrating the Biden administration's commitment to furthering Arab-Israeli normalization. The Declaration also emphasized that Washington will never allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons and promises to "use all elements of its national power to ensure

this outcome” (The Jerusalem U.S.-Israel Strategic Partnership Joint Declaration, 2022).

The U.S. president’s visit to Palestinian territories, which took place immediately after the Israeli visit, was aimed at demonstrating a balanced and impartial approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Speaking alongside Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas in Bethlehem, Biden reaffirmed his commitment to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on the two-state solution. At the same time, he stated that “the ground is not yet ripe” for the resumption of negotiations, and a settlement could not be achieved in the near future (Remarks by President Biden and President Abbas, 2022). Thus, the U.S. president made it clear that his administration did not plan to make significant efforts in this area.

The most high-profile stop of Biden’s tour was in Saudi Arabia. The U.S. president faced a difficult challenge: how to balance the strategic interests of cooperation with authoritarian regimes and American values, such as human rights. Some analysts convincingly argued that Biden’s meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman directly contradicted his promises to isolate the Saudi regime and seemed especially inappropriate against the backdrop of his administration’s efforts to unite the world around the act of Russian aggression in Ukraine and defend the rules-based international order (Callamard, 2022).

To appease critics, a few days before the visit, the U.S. president had to publish an article in *The Washington Post*, where Khashoggi had been a correspondent. In the article, Biden promised to open “a new and promising chapter of American engagement” in the Middle East and noted that the region’s energy resources are “vital to mitigating the impact of Russia’s war in Ukraine on global supplies” (Biden, 2022).

Following the U.S.-Saudi talks in Jeddah, a joint Communiqué was signed, in which both countries “emphasized the importance of further strengthening their strategic partnership,” and Biden firmly reaffirmed Washington’s unwavering support for Riyadh’s security (The Jeddah Communiqué, 2022). Regarding the

increase in oil production by Saudi Arabia, Saudi officials stated during the negotiations that further decisions on this matter would be based on market data and consultations with other OPEC+ members, including Russia.

The key message of Biden's Middle East tour was delivered during his speech at the GCC + 3 Summit Meeting. Biden assured that the United States "will not leave the region and will not create a vacuum to be filled by China, Russia, or Iran," and that America "will remain an active and engaged partner in the Middle East." Additionally, Biden outlined five principles that Washington will adhere to in the MENA over the coming decades: partnership, deterrence, diplomacy, integration, and values (Remarks by President Biden at the GCC + 3 Summit Meeting, 2022). These principles markedly differed from those expressed by Donald Trump during his 2017 MENA tour.

The most ambitious project discussed between Biden and regional leaders was the possibility of creating an integrated regional air defence system involving Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf countries to protect against the threat of ballistic missiles and unmanned aerial systems launched by Iran and its proxies in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. This could serve as the foundation for forming a regional coalition of moderate U.S. partners (the so-called "Middle Eastern NATO"), who face common security threats and share similar social, economic, energy, and climate challenges (Shapiro, 2022). This security architecture is not new and is essentially a continuation of the process of normalizing relations between Israel and the Arab states under the Abraham Accords, brokered by the Trump administration in 2020. This coalition could take primary responsibility for addressing its own security needs, while the United States would play an active supporting role, protecting its interests and fulfilling commitments to its partners.

The results of Biden's visit to the MENA received mixed reviews in both the U.S. and the region. Critics argued that the president returned without any major achievements: Saudi Arabia made no promises to significantly increase oil production; no peace treaty was signed between Saudi Arabia (or any other Arab country) and Israel; and no new regional alliance was formed to support U.S.

interests. Moreover, to achieve such questionable outcomes, Biden had to step back from his course of supporting democracy (Hoffman, 2022; Kaye, 2022).

However, most analysts agree that Biden's visit, which confirmed the administration's shift toward a pragmatic policy, was not only appropriate but also necessary to strengthen both Washington's regional and international positions. The visit was an important step toward traditional U.S. partners, demonstrating America's commitment to allied obligations and the strength of American security guarantees (Ibish, 2022; Vakil, 2022).

U.S. Response to New Security Challenges

The war in Gaza, which began on October 7, 2023, posed a number of new challenges for the Biden administration and led to a significant intensification of U.S. policy in the SEMED. As a result of the war and the escalation of Israeli-Iranian confrontation, a highly dangerous hotspot of instability emerged in the region, undermining the already fragile balance of power that had formed here after the Arab Spring.

President Biden swiftly responded to the Hamas attack on Israel in his emotional speech on October 10, in which he strongly condemned the actions of the Islamist group and reaffirmed unwavering support for Tel Aviv (Remarks by President Biden on the Terrorist Attacks in Israel, 2023). During his visit to Israel on October 18, he reiterated the U.S. commitment to ensuring the security of the Jewish state, along with providing the necessary military and financial assistance. At the same time, he emphasized that the ultimate resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must be based on the principle of the two-state solution (Remarks by President Biden and Prime Minister Netanyahu, 2023).

Overall, the Biden administration formulated five main objectives in the context of Israel's war in Gaza: to support Israel's self-defence and eliminate the threat posed by Hamas; to ensure the return of hostages; to prevent the crisis from escalating into a full-scale regional war; to protect the civilian population and halt the growing humanitarian crisis in Gaza; and to develop a post-war reconstruction

plan that would lead to the implementation of the two-state solution and broader efforts toward regional normalization in coordination with regional and international partners (Katulis, Freedman, & Taylor, 2024).

Secretary of State Antony Blinken, CIA Director Bill Burns, and senior Middle East White House official Brett McGurk made multiple trips to the region and Europe to advance a ceasefire and secure the release of hostages, as well as to engage regional partners in efforts to enhance security coordination. In addition to increased arms transfers and enhanced security and intelligence cooperation with Israel, the United States deployed two aircraft carrier strike groups to the region in the early weeks of the conflict, as a deterrent message to Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and other actors threatening to escalate the war. The United States also remained a key leader in international and regional efforts to increase the flow of humanitarian aid to Palestinians living in Gaza.

In formulating his strategy in response to Israel's military operation in Gaza, Biden faced numerous complex challenges. First, there were clear differences between the positions of the U.S. president and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu regarding the post-war governance of Gaza and the future of the Palestinian state. According to Biden's vision, after the defeat of Hamas, Gaza and the West Bank should be unified under the administration of a reformed Palestinian National Authority (PNA) as a cornerstone of the two-state solution. However, Netanyahu has consistently opposed both the establishment of a Palestinian state and the expansion of PNA's power (Shavit, 2024). Second, due to significant civilian casualties among the Palestinian population, criticism of Israel has increased markedly in Arab and Muslim countries, in Europe, and even within the United States.

A particularly complex challenge has been the need to prevent broader regional escalation and the involvement of other radical groups, primarily Lebanon's Hezbollah and Yemen's Houthis. The Houthis in Yemen attacked international shipping in the Red Sea in response to Israel's military operation against Hamas in Gaza. They also targeted Israeli territory with ballistic missiles

and drones. In response, the Biden administration launched “Operation Prosperity Guardian,” a multinational military effort involving over 20 countries aimed at securing the safety of shipping across the Red Sea. In addition to this defensive coalition, the United States, in coordination with other partners, conducted a series of airstrikes against Houthi positions in Yemen (Statement from President Joe Biden on Coalition Strikes, 2024).

Hezbollah has also opened a war front on Israel’s northern border with Lebanon, raising concerns about a broader regional spillover. Previously sporadic fighting between Israel and Hezbollah escalated on October 8, 2023, the day after Hamas’ attack on Israel. Since then, Hezbollah has launched more than 8,000 rockets at northern Israel and the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights. In response, the Israel Defense Forces have retaliated with airstrikes, as well as tank and artillery fire, targeting Hezbollah positions in Lebanon.

Both the Houthis and Hezbollah are key players in Iran’s “axis of resistance.” U.S. policy towards Iran remains one of the weakest links in Washington’s broader MENA strategy. Tehran consistently threatens regional stability by advancing its nuclear program, intervening in regional conflicts, supporting terrorism, and carrying out repression against its own people.

On April 13, 2024, Iran launched its first-ever direct attack on Israeli territory, using more than 300 drones and missiles. Tehran’s strike followed an Israeli air raid on April 1, which killed several high-ranking Iranian military officials at the Iranian consulate in Syria. These events marked an unprecedented escalation in the Iran-Israel confrontation. The United States played a key role in repelling Iran’s attack on its ally. With assistance from British, French, and Jordanian air forces, the U.S. shot down over 70 air targets using fighter jets and missile defence systems aboard guided-missile destroyers (Crowley, Schmitt, & Wong, 2024). The Biden administration also vowed to coordinate a global response to Tehran’s unprecedented assault.

Finally, on May 31, 2024, the Biden administration outlined a plan aimed at linking efforts to resolve the Israel-Hamas war with broader initiatives to foster

increased regional integration. The first phase of the proposed agreement would last for six weeks and include a “full and complete ceasefire,” the withdrawal of Israeli forces from all populated areas of Gaza, and the release of several hostages, including women, the elderly, and the wounded, in exchange for the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners. The second phase would involve the release of all remaining living hostages, including male soldiers, and the complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza. The third phase calls for the commencement of major reconstruction efforts in Gaza, which faces decades of rebuilding from the devastation caused by the war (Remarks by President Biden on the Middle East, 2024).

Conclusion

The Israel-Hamas war, which has undermined the security of the entire SEMED region, has become one of the main foreign policy priorities of the Biden administration during the final year of his presidency. As a result, the United States significantly increased its military presence in the region, combining this with extensive diplomatic efforts aimed at preventing a broader regional war.

The United States has a short-term goal of containing the escalation, but it seems to lack a coherent strategy for long-term countermeasures against Iran and its numerous proxies. For now, Washington has managed to avoid a wider regional war, but the overall security situation in the MENA continues to deteriorate, as various state and non-state actors persist in posing threats to the U.S. and its partners. America remains the most influential external actor in the Middle East, but it would be a mistake to overestimate its ability to shape the regional agenda. Initiatives for regional integration, including Saudi-Israeli normalization, are also likely to remain elusive as long as the conflict between Israel and Hamas persists.

In a broader context, Russia’s war in Ukraine and the war in Gaza have become markers of the transformation of the contemporary international order. Two clearly differentiated camps are emerging: the democratic camp (the U.S., EU countries, and their allies), which advocates for liberal democracy and the rule of

law, and the revisionist, or authoritarian camp (Russia, Iran and its proxies, North Korea, and others), which seeks to challenge and revise the existing international norms and rules. The SEMED countries, like most of the so-called Global South, act as a third force, showing no desire to align with either group and observing how events unfold. Thus, the key task of the U.S. strategy is to strengthen the unified front of democratic countries in the fight against the axis of revisionist actors.

During the U.S. presidential elections in 2024, candidates Kamala Harris and Donald Trump presented two fundamentally different visions of the role the United States should play in global affairs. The next U.S. president, whoever they may be, will have to confront serious foreign policy challenges, including the ongoing war in Ukraine and the escalation of conflict in the MENA.

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