

## Understanding the Middle East's Centrality in US Foreign Policy

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### Abstract

**Objectives:** This study examines the complex interactions among several factors that shape the strategic role of the Middle East in US foreign policy. It explores how the geopolitical dynamics of the region, oil and energy resources, security issues such as terrorism and regional conflicts, and cultural and ideological influences affect US foreign policy.

**Methods:** The study employed a qualitative research methodology, involving a comprehensive study of literature, documents, and current academic works. Objective analysis was employed to explain the interactions among various factors affecting the centrality of the Middle East in US foreign policy.

**Results:** The geopolitical significance of the Middle East is crucial in influencing US foreign policy due to its strategic location and abundant oil reserves. US involvement in the region is deeply affected by security concerns, especially those related to terrorism and regional conflicts. The United States uses the Middle East as a theater for proxy wars, in addition to political alliances and diplomatic initiatives, all of which play a central role in maintaining regional stability. Furthermore, cultural, religious, and ideological factors significantly influence how the United States makes its policy choices.

**Conclusions:** The Middle East holds significant importance in US foreign policy due to its economic, security, and geopolitical significance. Achieving stability in the region is essential for the continuity of global energy markets and addressing security challenges. Additionally, American diplomatic efforts and understanding of the religious, cultural, and ideological backgrounds are crucial in dealing with the complex geopolitical reality of the Middle East.

**Keywords:** US foreign policy; Middle East; geopolitical dynamics; energy resources; regional security; cultural and religious factors; diplomatic initiatives.

### فهم مركزية الشرق الأوسط في السياسة الخارجية الأمريكية

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#### ملخص

الأهداف: يدرس هذا البحث التفاعلات المعقدة بين عدة عوامل مجتمعة تشكل الدور الإستراتيجي لمنطقة الشرق الأوسط في السياسة الخارجية الأمريكية. يستكشف كيف تؤثر الديناميكيات الجيوسياسية للمنطقة، وموارد النفط والطاقة، وقضايا الأمن مثل الإرهاب والصراعات الإقليمية، والتأثيرات الثقافية والأيدولوجية على السياسة الخارجية الأمريكية.

المنهجية: المنهجية البحثية المستخدمة في هذه الدراسة هي منهجية نوعية، تشمل دراسة شاملة للأدبيات والوثائق والأعمال الأكاديمية الحالية، وتم توظيف التحليل الموضوعي لشرح التفاعلات بين العديد من العوامل التي تؤثر على مركزية الشرق الأوسط في السياسة الخارجية الأمريكية.

النتائج: للموقع الجيوسياسي للشرق الأوسط أهمية كبيرة في التأثير على السياسة الخارجية الأمريكية بسبب موقعه الإستراتيجي واحتياطيات النفط الوفيرة. تتأثر مشاركة الولايات المتحدة في المنطقة بشكل عميق بالمخاوف الأمنية، وخاصة تلك المتعلقة بالإرهاب والصراعات الإقليمية. تستخدم الولايات المتحدة الشرق الأوسط كمسرح للحرب بالوكالة، بالإضافة إلى التحالفات السياسية والمبادرات الدبلوماسية التي تلعب جميعها دوراً محورياً في الحفاظ على الاستقرار الإقليمي - وفقاً للمعايير الأمريكية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تؤثر العوامل الثقافية والدينية والأيدولوجية بشكل كبير على كيفية اتخاذ الولايات المتحدة لخيارات سياستها.

الخلاصة: تعد منطقة الشرق الأوسط ذات أهمية قصوى بالنسبة للسياسة الخارجية الأمريكية نظراً لأهميتها الاقتصادية والأمنية والجيوسياسية. إن تحقيق الاستقرار في المنطقة أمرٌ ضروري لاستمرار أسواق الطاقة العالمية والتصدي للتحديات الأمنية. كما أنّ الجهود الدبلوماسية الأمريكية وفهم الخلفيات الدينية والثقافية والأيدولوجية أمران حاسمان في التعامل مع الواقع الجيوسياسي المعقد لمنطقة الشرق الأوسط.

الكلمات الدالة: السياسة الخارجية الأمريكية؛ الشرق الأوسط؛ الديناميكيات الجيوسياسية؛ موارد الطاقة؛ الأمن الإقليمي؛ العوامل الثقافية؛ المبادرات الدبلوماسية

### **Introduction and Statement of the Research Problem**

The Middle East has long played a central role in shaping US foreign policy, requiring an extensive American political and military engagement in the region. However, the underlying factors that have driven this strategic focus keep changing and each time necessitating a re-examination of US priorities, interests and policy options or strategies toward the region as a whole. So this study aims at examining the underlying factors that stand behind the central role that the Middle East plays in the context of US foreign policy. It clarifies the geopolitical significance of the area by scrutinizing its economic ramifications, security threats, and diplomatic strategies used by the US. By analyzing the complex interactions between several factors that together impact the relationship, this study seeks to shed light on the delicate dynamics between the US and the Middle East.

### **Research Questions**

This article addresses this debate through research to answer the central question: What are the underlying factors influencing the Middle East centrality in the US foreign policy? The latter encompasses the following sub-questions:

1. How do the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East impact US foreign policy?
2. How do the oil and energy resources in the region influence the economic plans and geopolitical goals of the US?
3. What roles do security concerns, particularly terrorism and regional conflicts, play in shaping US policy and involvement in the Middle East?
4. How does US use the Middle East as a battleground for its proxy warfare strategy?
5. How do US political alliances and diplomatic initiatives in the Middle East impact regional stability and the broader global geopolitical landscape?
6. How do cultural and ideological factors influence the US approach to foreign policy in the Middle East?

### **Significance of the Research**

This research is of utmost importance as it thoroughly analyzes an complex and strategically crucial aspect of international relations. It offers a contribution to the academic understanding of US foreign policy dynamics vis-a-vis the Middle East.

**Objectives of the Research.** The aims of this study are:

1. To thoroughly analyze the Middle East's importance within the geopolitical landscape and its relevance to the US.
2. To analyze the influence of energy resources in the Middle East on the economy and the economic interests of the US.
3. To assess how security concerns, such as terrorism and regional conflicts, shape the US policy options regarding the Middle East.
4. The implications of the US proxy warfare strategy on the Middle East regional geopolitical dynamics and US foreign policy interests.
5. To study the complexities of US alliances and diplomatic interactions in the region and their effects on stability within and globally.
6. To explore how cultural and ideological factors impact US policy towards the Middle East.

### **Research Methodology**

This study utilizes a qualitative research methodology, which involves a systematic examination and analysis of current literature, policy documents, and scholarly works. The research employs a thematic analysis method to combine and integrate sources to gain a wide-ranging comprehension of the dynamics of US Middle East foreign policy.

### **Geopolitical Importance**

#### ***Strategic Location at the Crossroads of Continents***

“The Middle East matters to the rest of the world for its resources, its current struggles between rulers and peoples, and the rise of various forms of resurgent Islam. Its history helps to explain many of the political and military events that

dominate today's news" (Goldschmidt & al-Marashi, 2018). The Middle East, as defined by naval strategist Alfred Taylor Mahan in 1902, is a complex region that combines political, cultural, and strategic elements outside traditional physical borders. This region, which stretches from Southwest Asia to the Eastern Mediterranean, is home to a variety of landscapes, such as the North African Arab Maghrib nations, the Nile Valley, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Fertile Crescent. The region's unique features are formed mainly by its biological and geological features; its desert landscapes and dry temperatures are especially noteworthy (Ismael & Ismael, 2012).

A feature of the Middle East, which is home to Arabs, Turks, Iranians, Kurds, and Berbers, is its linguistic and cultural variety. This diversity contributes to the distinct cultural fabric of the region. Its historical significance as the birthplace of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism also adds to its enormous worldwide influence. The sociopolitical dynamics of the region become apparent through various religious communities, such as Sunnis, Shi'is, and other groups. These groups shed light on the complex nature of the region's social and political environment (Gelvin, 2018).

For a long time, the Middle East has been a focal point of attention and engagement from other countries due to its strategic position at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa. Its importance goes beyond geography; it is intertwined with major international political and economic trends. Events in the region have repeatedly shown their ability to influence global dynamics, highlighting their crucial significance in international politics (Ismael & Ismael, 2012).

President Obama once stated: "we know that our own future is bound to this region by the forces of economics and security, by history and by faith" (The White House, 2011). The Middle East has long been strategically important to the US; this view is based on more than just the region's abundant oil resources. The US geopolitical interests in the Middle East include preserving world peace, opposing regional powers, and defending important international trade routes such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Suez Canal (Brito & Jaffe, 2005). The Middle East's strategic significance in US foreign policy is further cemented by its closeness to conflict zones and its participation in important issues like the Israel-Palestine conflict and the worldwide fight against terrorism. The necessity of Middle Eastern stability and dynamics for international peace and security is best illustrated by the US extensive involvement in the region's complicated political landscape, which is marked by intricate networks of interstate disputes and alliances.

#### ***Influence on Global Trade and Political Stability***

The Middle East's control over vital maritime routes, such as the Suez Canal and the Strait of Hormuz, is pivotal in upholding worldwide economic and political stability. The marine routes play a vital role as essential conduits in the global oil economy, enabling the efficient transportation of products across different continents. The Suez Canal is a vital passage connecting the Red and Mediterranean Seas. Moreover, the Strait of Hormuz, a vital conduit linking the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, is pivotal in facilitating oil transportation (The US Energy Information Administration (EIA), 2017). This strategic significance is emphasized by Annah Mosly from the Gulf Research Center (2023), cited the US Energy Information Administration (2019): "The Gulf region is of strategic importance when it comes to seaborne traded petroleum. In 2018, around 40% of global petroleum liquids trade passed through the Strait of Hormuz (21%), the Bab el-Mandeb Strait (9%), and the Suez Canal". Moreover a journalist named Tshona (2023) wrote: "The Middle East holds a crucial position in the global supply chain due to its strategic location as a bridge between Europe, Asia, and Africa.... Any disruption in this region can have far-reaching consequences for global trade and supply logistics".

The Middle East's political construction, composed of democracies and monarchies, makes international relations and global diplomacy more challenging. This was clarified by the US Secretary of Defense Ash Carter when stated: "This can be a region of great turbulence, confusion, and internal strife – challenges that spill outside the region, including in the form of terrorism – much more so than any other region of the world" (US Department of Defense, 2016). The region's history is marked by several regional conflicts, times of internal unrest, and the existence of several non-state actors. These problems fueled concerns about international security and the delicate balance of political power. Furthermore, as seen by the political turmoil in Syria and Lebanon's civil war, the Middle East's rich cultural and ideological variety has fuelled several disputes. Such examples highlight the complex relationship between cultural identity and regional stability (Goldschmidt & al-Marashi, 2018). The historical setting of colonialism in the Middle East, particularly under British and French authority,

has had a profound and long-lasting impact on the region's current political dynamics. The enduring consequences of colonialism can be seen in ongoing border conflicts, ethnic tensions, and resource distribution issues. Despite these challenges, the Arab-Islamic legacy shared by most Middle Eastern countries significantly impacts their cultural and social structures. However, this shared heritage is not universal throughout the region, as Israel, Turkey, and Iran have separate cultural identities, contributing to the region's variety (Merabet, 2012).

### **Oil, Energy Resources and Economic Interests**

#### ***The Critical Role Of Middle Eastern Oil in Global Energy Markets***

The Middle East, an area abundant in hydrocarbon resources, contains around 61 % of the world's confirmed oil reserves and 41 % of its natural gas reserves. This substantial contribution positions the region as a leader in the worldwide energy sector. Nevertheless, there is a substantial disparity between the projected output suggested by these extensive reserves and the current production levels. The region contributes to global oil output at a mere 31 %. The discrepancy indicates an intricate interaction of geopolitical, technological, and economic elements that impact the choices made regarding production in different nations (Looney, 2014).

In the Middle East, countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Kuwait have become essential participants in the global oil industry. These nations consistently hold positions within the top ten world oil producers—their production potential, especially that of Saudi Arabia, is beyond mere quantitative output. The strategic importance of these countries in the global oil market arises from their capacity to adapt production levels with flexibility (Amineh, 2007). The capacity to increase or decrease production gives them significant leverage over worldwide oil pricing and market stability. The quantity of oil they generate is essential, and their ability to adapt to global market demands and geopolitical developments, improving their position in the worldwide energy hierarchy. The geopolitical and economic consequences of these Middle Eastern countries' production capability and reserve holdings are extensive. Their position in the worldwide energy market is a question of economic significance and strategic relevance. The capacity of influential actors such as Saudi Arabia to modify oil output is a potent instrument that can exert influence over global economic conditions, impact international relations, and mold energy policies on an international scale.

#### ***US Dependence on Oil Imports and Energy Security Concerns***

Since the early 20th century, the US' reliance on imported oil, especially from the Middle East, has shaped its foreign policy and economic strategy, raising serious energy security concerns. The US generated most of its electricity from coal and water during the First Industrial Revolution. However, when oil became the primary energy source during the Second Industrial Revolution, a paradigm change took place. This change accelerated America's rise to prominence in the world petroleum industry, a tendency that was exacerbated by increased military demands during World War I (Hahn, 2005).

The 1930s were a critical period in American foreign policy because of the growing interest in Middle Eastern oil, sparked by significant discoveries made in Saudi Arabia by Standard Oil of California. This strategic partnership was best exemplified by a meeting between Saudi Arabia's King Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud and President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1945. This meeting created a vital connection between Middle Eastern oil and US national security, resulting in a deal that gave the US cheap oil in return for security guarantees (Yergin, 2012).

To prevent future economic disruptions brought on by fuel shortages, the US stepped up its attempts to obtain steady access to oil resources after World War II. During this time, the US intensified its efforts to get oil concessions in Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait. Businesses such as ARAMCO were crucial in strengthening US commercial relations in the area. The US saw a divergence between domestic oil production and consumption due to this increased engagement; as a result, the country accounted for almost 30% of global oil consumption even though it only held 6% of the world's oil reserves (Yergin, 2012). The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) oil embargo that followed the 1973 Arab-Israeli War highlighted the severe consequences of the US' reliance on imported oil. The US economy was under significant hardship during this time, highlighting the complexity of its Middle East foreign policy. This period was notable for highlighting the frequently at-odds dynamics between US policies in the Persian Gulf and the US.. alliance with Israel (Bard, 2006). In addition, the US has faced many obstacles in

its efforts to project power throughout the Gulf. The 2003 invasion of Iraq illustrated the complex relationship between oil, conflict, and US foreign policy in the Middle East. It was partially prompted by the events of 9/11 and represented long-term US plans to protect oil resources (Jones, 2012).

#### ***US Trade Relations and Investment Opportunities in the Middle East***

The commercial and investment relationship between the US and the Middle East is complex, marked by longstanding interdependencies, especially in the oil industry, and an increasing inclination towards diversification in other areas. In 2011, the commerce between the US and the Middle East reached a value of around \$193 billion, representing nearly 5% of the entire trade of the US. Historically, the predominant aspect of this commerce has entailed swapping diverse American merchandise for unrefined petroleum. Excluding Israel, the Middle East region has been a major oil supplier for the US, ranking second and contributing approximately 21% of US oil imports (Akhtar et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, in recent years, there has been a change in this pattern as Middle Eastern nations have made deliberate attempts to broaden their economies and reduce their reliance on oil ("Public Papers," 2003). The economic change has created fresh prospects for trade and investment in the US, namely in the technology, healthcare, renewable energy, and infrastructure industries. Israel, known as the "Startup Nation," has emerged as a focal point for American investment in technology, enticing major American tech companies to set up research and development facilities (Singer & Senor, 2011). Moreover, the UAE's emphasis on establishing itself as a prominent renewable energy center in the region has resulted in partnerships with American companies in solar and wind energy initiatives (Jamil et al., 2016).

The primary focus of US commerce with the Middle East in 2011 was on eight specific countries: Saudi Arabia, Israel, Algeria, Iraq, UAE, Egypt, Kuwait, and Qatar. These countries accounted for more than 90% of the overall US trade with the region. Although countries such as Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Iraq, and Kuwait primarily relied on oil as their main export to the US, Israel had a more varied range of exports. Bilateral trade agreements have played a crucial role in shaping these developing commercial partnerships. The US-Israel Free Trade Agreement has established a model for forthcoming deals between the US and other states in the Middle East. These agreements have substantially contributed to the growth of trade and economic collaboration (Akhtar et al., 2013).

Another crucial facet of economic relations between the US and the Middle East is the exchange of military goods and services. Middle Eastern countries extensively buy US military equipment. In 2011, Saudi Arabia made a noteworthy agreement to acquire and enhance F-15 fighter aircraft, with a total value of \$29.4 billion. This transaction stands as the largest sale of its kind to a single buyer. The UAE has also committed to acquiring a significant amount of US military equipment, specifically F-16 fighter jets, with a total value of billions of dollars. These agreements consist of all-inclusive packages covering system support, logistics, and updates. In addition, the US has consented to dispatch standoff weapons to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. At the same time, American military officers regularly engage in collaborative training sessions with Emirati and Saudi pilots ("Background briefing," 2013).

#### ***Impact of Middle East Regional Stability on Global and US Economy***

The Middle East's stability is critical to the global economy, with ramifications that extend far beyond its borders. This region's importance as a leading oil supplier is well understood, but the broader ramifications of its geopolitical stability are complex and go deep into global economic institutions. Regional volatility, whether in the form of armed wars, political upheavals, or societal unrest, has the potential to interrupt the flow of oil and critical global commerce routes and investment conditions. These disturbances can cause volatility in global markets, affecting commodities, equities, and currencies and altering worldwide economic stability (Shai & Yiftah, 2001). For the US, the stakes in Middle Eastern security are incredibly high, reflecting a complex web of economic and strategic interests. Despite progress toward energy independence, the US remains closely linked to the global oil market. Disruptions in the Middle East can cause rippling effects throughout the market, influencing global oil prices and, by extension, the US economy. This link highlights the global nature of the energy markets, where local happenings may have significant effects that range from gasoline prices to more important economic indicators (Bluedorn & Koranchelian, 2023).

American significant investments in the Middle East demonstrate the region's importance to the American economy.

Numerous American businesses have invested substantially in oil, technology, and defense in the Middle East. Regional instability may raise the risks associated with these investments, leading to monetary losses, decreased profitability, and broader economic ramifications beyond the local area. Among these hazards include supply chain interruption, reputational harm, and direct financial loss (Hazbun, 2020).

Moreover, the US's need to sustain security in the Middle East, whether via military action or diplomatic initiatives, has significant political and economic implications. The financial strain of long-term military deployments, such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan, has had severe budgetary consequences for the US. These commitments, which require substantial resources and manpower, significantly impact the direction and priorities of US foreign policy. The expenses are financial and include the political capital needed to navigate the complicated regional dynamics and home ramifications of overseas military involvements. These elements impact the US strategic decisions and its approach to global diplomacy and defense planning (Providence, 2021).

### **Security Concerns**

#### ***The Middle East as a Focal Point for US Security and Counterterrorism Efforts***

Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper (2019) said: "The US' strategy in the Middle East seeks ensure the region is not a safe haven for terrorists, is not dominated by any power hostile to the US, and contributes to a stable global energy market." Following the 9/11 attacks, the Middle East has emerged as a crucial area in US foreign policy, particularly about security and counterterrorism. Multiple causes, such as imminent threats to American lives and interests, geopolitical forces, and the disturbance of regional power balances, have influenced the current emphasis. The development of US counterterrorism strategy has been significantly shaped by acts of aggression in the past, including the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole, the 1998 bombings of US embassies in East Africa, and most notably, the 9/11 attacks ("9-11 Commission", 2004). These occurrences revealed the aptitudes of terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and resulted in substantial policy changes. The response entailed the deployment of military forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the founding of the Department of Homeland Security. The rise of the Islamic State introduced intricacy, prompting apprehension regarding foreign combatants and the dissemination of extremist ideology (Zegart, 2011).

Terrorism plays a crucial role in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, which in turn impacts US relations with different states in the region. Iran, which has been listed as a State Sponsor of Terrorism by the US Department of State, has been accused of exerting influence by providing support to militant groups in regional wars (Katzman, 2021). Likewise, the intricate association with Pakistan, a collaborator in the War on Terror but also alleged to endorse extremist factions, underscores the paradoxical facets of US foreign policy in the region (Rashid, 2009). The influence of terrorism extends to the power dynamics inside the Middle East. The activities carried out by organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS have resulted in the deterioration of government institutions, heightened sectarian tensions, and widespread violence. These advancements provide difficulties for the US in upholding regional peace and attaining strategic goals (Bergen, 2011). The utilization of digital tools by terrorist factions for recruiting and transmitting propaganda signifies a substantial change, posing a challenge to conventional counterterrorism strategies (Weimann, 2006).

Terrorism has had a momentous impact on public opinion and policy formulation in both the US and the Middle East. The 9/11 attacks resulted in heightened backing for military involvement against terrorism in the US, directly influencing foreign policy choices such as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In contrast, the acts carried out by the US in the Middle East, such as the invasion of Iraq and the use of drone strikes, have influenced how the region perceives America. This influence is often unfavorable, making it more difficult for the US to achieve its regional goals (Byman, 2013). The US depends on its Middle Eastern partnerships to exchange intelligence, provide military assistance, and collaborate in counterterrorism efforts. However, these ties depend on the specific terrorism situation in each region and how the actions of the US are seen. Israel and Saudi Arabia, as allies, offer crucial intelligence assistance. However, the use of controversial US strategies like drone strikes and detention center management can put a strain on these partnerships (Rosenau & Peter, 2004).

### ***Regional Conflicts and their Implications for US National Security***

The Arab-Israeli conflict continues to be a crucial element of the intricate geopolitical situation in the Middle East, exerting a substantial impact on US foreign policy. This struggle involves a wide range of difficulties, including terrorism, extremism, and complex interactions between domestic and international politics. The US administrations have the ongoing task of balancing a solid alliance with Israel, which includes significant military and financial aid, with the need to maintain strategic relationships with Arab nations that are important for energy security and counter-terrorism efforts (Byman, 2018; Riedel, 2018; Bard, 2006). The consequences of this war have a significant impact on worldwide oil markets, emphasizing the need to establish stability in the area, especially concerning the Israel-Palestine issue (Kumaraswamy, 2023). Furthermore, the war serves as a connection point for extremist organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS to promote their objectives, hence emphasizing the crucial importance of conflict resolution in the US counter-terrorism operations (Waxman, 2019). John Kerry (2016), the US Secretary of State, claimed that: “has been deeply committed to Israel and its security, and that commitment has guided his pursuit of peace in the Middle East...My job, above all, is to defend the US—to stand up for and defend our values and our interests in the world. And if we were to stand idly by and know that in doing so we are allowing a dangerous dynamic to take hold which promises greater conflict and instability to a region in which we have vital interests, we would be derelict in our own responsibilities”.

The Arab-Israeli conflict has a significant impact on US politics, influencing the actions of interest groups and affecting public opinion. Organizations like AIPAC and the Council on American-Islamic Relations embody various perspectives, influencing policy development. The long-lasting, nonpartisan backing of the US for Israel has a substantial impact on its strategic position in the Middle East. The US and Israel alliance is based on common security interests and shared principles. This partnership is crucial in collectively dealing with regional dangers, including Iran's nuclear program (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007; Bard, 2006).

Another crucial element of US strategy in the Middle East is effectively handling the competition between Iran and the Gulf States, with a particular focus on Saudi Arabia. The US seeks to limit Iran's nuclear aspirations while maintaining peace in the Gulf region. The geographical positioning of Iran near the Strait of Hormuz, along with its revolutionary philosophy, influences its foreign policy and regional engagements. The aspirations frequently clash with those of Saudi Arabia, thus affecting US interests in the area (Byman, 2001; Cook & Roshandel, 2009; Reardon, 2012). The progress made by Iran in military technology, particularly in the development of ballistic missiles and the prospective acquisition of nuclear capabilities, has generated apprehension over the escalation of a regional arms race and the potential risks posed to US interests. The US has taken steps to limit Iran's procurement of sophisticated military technologies and advocated for global supervision of weapons sales to Iran. The primary objective of the US policy is to restrain Iran's dominant influence in the region, namely in Iraq and other countries where it is actively involved (Gause, 2010; Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007).

### **Middle East as a Theater for US Proxy Warfare**

The Middle East's function as a battlefield for US proxy warfare is a multifaceted aspect of global politics, intricately connected to changing geopolitical dynamics and US foreign policy goals. Throughout the Cold War, the region was a crucial arena where the US and the Soviet Union competed for dominance. The US provided momentous support to regimes and movements that shared its opposition to communism, particularly in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict. This support included enormous assistance to Israel and its supporters. This period was distinguished by a predilection for indirect involvement, employing local intermediaries as foreign policy tools rather than engaging in direct military intervention (Niakoui, as cited in Farhadinsab & Jafari, 2016).

The end of the Cold War brought about a significant change in US policy in the Middle East, which was most noticeable after 9/11. Despite a shift toward more direct involvement, such as its military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, the US continued to employ proxy warfare. This dual policy was demonstrated in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, changing the political dynamics of the region by combining direct military engagement with support for local forces through supporting Sunni militias in Iraq as they battled rebel groups. Likewise, the US sent assistance to several rebel groups in Syria.

Simultaneously, the US has persistently employed covert tactics to exert influence over the Middle East. To counterbalance neighbors like Iran, this strategy entails providing military and economic support to allies. An example of this may be found in the significant military support the US gives to Israel and in its backing of Saudi Arabia in its conflict with the Houthis rebels in Yemen, whom Iran aids. These measures are part of a larger plan to employ regional friends as surrogates to accomplish US goals and maintain the balance of power in the region (Farhadinsab & Jafari, 2016).

The reasons behind US engagement in the Middle East are complex and varied, as stated by Secretary of Defense Ash Carter: "Our strategy in the region, America's strategy, is grounded in America's core national interests – that's the foundation – tailored to address specific circumstances in specific and various places"(US Department of Defense, 2015). Their objectives or "interests" include preserving regional dominance, ensuring the availability of crucial energy resources, and countering perceived threats, particularly in the war on terror. Following the conclusion of the Cold War, the US approach has developed to combine direct military intervention with indirect engagement. Under the influence of neoconservative philosophy, US actions in the region have progressively prioritized the promotion of democracy, independent action, and the utilization of military power, frequently bypassing international institutions. This position is demonstrated by acts such as the military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, attempts to bring about a change in government in Iran, and exerting pressure on allies to adopt democratic practices and implement social reforms. Although these techniques were designed to alter the regional order, they frequently resulted in intricate and unforeseen outcomes, ultimately influencing the present geopolitical situation in the Middle East.

### **Political Alliances and Diplomacy**

#### ***Key US Allies in the Middle East***

##### ***Israel:***

Secretary Antony J. Blinken at the 2023 American Israel Public Affairs Committee Policy Summit(AIPAC) stated: "Now, you all know this very well. That partnership touches on every aspect of our lives, from security to business, from energy to public health. Our ties have not only delivered for one another but for countries around the world"(US Department of State,2023a).The US-Israel relationship is a fundamental and essential aspect of American foreign policy in the Middle East. It is based on a joint commitment to democratic principles, shared security concerns, and strong cultural and political connections. This comprehensive alliance goes beyond mere symbolic backing, involving noteworthy military, technological, intelligence, and commercial collaborations. Historically, after the end of the Cold War, the US has regarded Israel as an essential partner, driven by moral, emotional, and political factors. It seems unlikely that the consensus about the importance of Israel's security will alter shortly. However, how to provide this security is still a matter of debate, particularly in light of Israel's ongoing occupation and settlement-building on territory captured in the 1967 war. This position poses a complex diplomatic challenge since some US officials view threats to Israel's occupation as a danger to the country's continued existence. On the other hand, many believe that Israel's security concerns are primarily related to the occupation and the potential for annexation. In his 1991 speech, President Bush underlined the US adherence to ensuring Israel's security. He proposed having talks on territorial issues to settle the Palestinian cause ("Address before," 1991).

A fundamental component of the US-Israeli alliance is the commitment to maintaining Israel's "Qualitative Military Edge" (QME). The commitment is demonstrated through tailored regulations and significant military assistance packages, such as the agreement worth \$30 billion in 2007 and the Memorandum of Understanding worth \$38 billion in 2016. Israel, being the primary recipient of US foreign military assistance, has obtained sophisticated weaponry such as F-35/Joint Strike Fighters and bunker-penetrating bombs. The defense alliance also encompasses collaborative initiatives such as advancing the Arrow and Arrow II anti-missile systems. In times of crisis, the US also possesses a strategic stockpile of military assets in Israel, which may be readily accessed. An exemplary instance of defense collaboration between the US and Israel is the "Iron Dome" anti-missile system, which plays a vital role in safeguarding Israel against rocket assaults. The alliance between the US and Israel is continually strengthened by public statements by US leaders, which express steadfast support for Israel's security and defense capabilities (Arms Sales, 2012; Opall-Rome, 2013).



***Saudi Arabia:***

“Saudi Arabia’s unique role in the Arab and Islamic worlds, its holding of the world’s second largest reserves of oil, and its strategic location all play a role in the long-standing bilateral relationship between the Kingdom and the US. The US and Saudi Arabia have a common interest in preserving the stability, security, and prosperity of the Gulf region and consult closely on a wide range of regional and global issues (‘‘US Department of State, 2023b). Despite their contrasting ideologies, the strategic alliance between the US and Saudi Arabia is a fundamental element of US policy in the Middle East, primarily due to Saudi Arabia’s substantial oil reserves and regional clout. This alliance has been crucial in determining the US strategy toward major regional developments, particularly in mitigating Iran’s impact. The relationship is characterized by substantial military cooperation and the exchange of weapons, which indicates a solid strategic bond between the two countries (Blanchard, 2009).

The lasting military collaboration is a crucial aspect of this partnership. The US has invested in the training of the Saudi military to improve its capabilities but with varying degrees of success. Although there is no official defense agreement, the US has shown a resolute dedication to ensuring the security of Saudi Arabia. This was particularly apparent in the 1990s when the US deployed substantial military forces to Saudi Arabia as a defensive measure against Iraqi aggression. However, these forces were later withdrawn after the downfall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Now, a group of US military personnel is stationed in Saudi Arabia, primarily to conduct training activities. The military engagement is evidence of the wider security assurance the US provides Saudi Arabia (Cordesman & Wilner, 2012). Saudi Arabia is the largest foreign military sales (FMS) customer from the US, participating in ongoing FMS contracts above \$100 billion. The 2023 Technical Cooperation Agreement, signed in Jeddah, signifies the progression of a collaboration established in 2008. The purpose of this agreement is to enhance Saudi Arabia’s capacity to protect its vital infrastructure and citizens against emerging terrorist risks. Over time, the deal has been adaptively modified to adequately tackle the evolving threats that Saudi Arabia faces (‘‘US Department of State, 2023b).

The alliance also prioritizes counterterrorism to a great extent. Cooperative endeavors in this field encompass a range of projects, specifically focusing on funding terrorism. These collaborative efforts are crucial for the cooperation, as they correspond to the strategic interests of both nations in countering regional terrorist risks. Nevertheless, the relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia is not without difficulties. The alliance has been occasionally strained due to concerns regarding human rights issues and divergent approaches to regional crises. These challenges underscore the intricate nature of the partnership since it involves managing strategic goals alongside diplomatic and ethical considerations.

***Egypt:***

“The US recognizes the Egyptian government’s leadership and long-term vision in working towards peace in the Middle East” (Blinken cited in U.S Embassy in Egypt, 2023). Since the signing of the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty in 1979, the alliance between Egypt and the US has been a fundamental aspect of US foreign policy in the Arab region. The US continually provided Egypt with substantial military and economic aid, recognizing its position as a stabilizing force in the Middle East. Since 1987, Egypt has been one of the greatest beneficiaries of US foreign assistance, mainly military support. Egypt has received an annual \$1.3 billion in military aid, making it the second-highest recipient after Israel. This aid is essential for strengthening Egypt’s military capabilities. It covers major expenses for acquiring weapons, such as advanced military equipment like M1A1 Abrams tanks and F-16 fighter jets. As a result, Egypt’s defense system is greatly improved (Sharp, 2012; ‘‘Arms Sales,’’ 2012).

The relationship between the US and Egypt has overcome numerous political obstacles. Events such as the Egyptian military’s removal of President Mohammed Morsi prompted discussions within the US political realm regarding the ongoing provision of military assistance. Calls in Congress to halt or decrease funding arose due to these political changes. However, the Obama administration, seeing the crucial importance of the alliance, chose to continue providing the \$1.3 billion aid package (Kagan, 2013). This decision indicated a broader US foreign strategy emphasizing stability and collaboration for security in the Middle East. The administration chose a subtle and sophisticated strategy by evaluating aid programs individually, considering both US strategic interests and the changing political situation in Egypt.

The US considers its alliance with Egypt important, not just as a bilateral partnership but as a crucial component in maintaining regional peacekeeping and security. Egypt's vital contribution to counterterrorism endeavors and the Arab-Israeli peace process underscores its significance as an important US ally in an unstable region. The US has continuously offered support despite sporadic political disruptions, exhibiting a geopolitical strategy prioritizing long-term stability and solid security relationships more than impulsive political responses. This strategy demonstrates the commitment of the US to maintaining a state of equilibrium in the Middle East, with Egypt serving as a key player in accomplishing this tactical objective.

### ***US Influence on Regional Diplomacy and Peace Processes***

Within the complicated geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East, the US assumes a multifaceted and intricate role in regional diplomacy, frequently serving as a mediator in conflicts and peace initiatives. This function places considerable emphasis on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. The US endeavors to mediate a resolution are hindered by its robust affiliations with Israel, which give rise to concerns over its impartiality as a mediator. This scenario highlights the intricate and subtle nature of US participation in the peace process, where its predispositions are closely examined (Robinson, 2023).

Another crucial element of US involvement is the Iran Nuclear Deal. The US played a vital role in negotiating the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, which is a critical component of its strategy to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and maintain peace in the area. This diplomatic endeavor demonstrates the US dedication to seeking diplomatic resolutions in intricate and controversial circumstances (Robinson, 2023). Amidst the Syrian Civil War, the US has deftly managed a complex web of alliances and divergent interests. This dispute has assessed the US diplomatic acumen and underscored the challenges of harmonizing the goals of several regional allies, each pursuing their interests. The Syrian crisis serves as a prime example of the limitations and intricacies that naturally exist within the various geopolitical landscapes of the region (Itani & Rosenblatt, 2018).

US regional strategy places great importance on collaborating with Middle Eastern countries in counterterrorism. Nevertheless, this collaboration is not devoid of conflicts, particularly over apprehensions about human rights. The US is perpetually faced with balancing its security objectives and its responsibility to defend international human rights standards. This attempt is not without its challenges, and criticism might be directed towards it (Byman, 2018). Ultimately, the US employs diplomatic and economic strategies to influence regional policy and promote peace efforts. This approach entails implementing sanctions, providing assistance, and actively engaging in diplomatic efforts to guide regional dynamics toward stability and resolving conflicts. The strategies discussed emphasize the intricate nature of American involvement in the Middle East. The US aims to delicately navigate between exerting influence and respecting the region's sovereignty and internal dynamics.

## **Cultural and Ideological Factors**

### ***Influence of Religious and Cultural Dynamics***

Given that the Middle East is the cradle of major global religions, including Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, its geopolitical background greatly influences US foreign policy activities. The historical narratives surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the growth of political Islam are directly linked to the theological history of this area and influence US policy (Feste, 2011). The delicate blend of geopolitical strategy, religious affiliations, and cultural connections that make up US support for Israel reflects the profound interplay between domestic policy forces in the US and their religion-culture links to Israel.

This relationship is further complicated by how Islam is viewed and how it fits into US foreign strategy. Based on Islamic beliefs, Sharia Law is occasionally seen as incompatible with liberal democratic ideals. After 9/11, American views of Islam were significantly shaped by the narrative of Islamic radicalism -as stated by Samuel Huntington:

“the problem is not Islamic fundamentalism, but Islam itself”(cited in Safi,2003)-, which affected significant legislative initiatives like the “War on Terror.” This perspective, especially when considered through the counterterrorism lens, has substantially impacted US ties with Middle Eastern nations (Byman, 2018). Furthermore, the US has been required to

navigate complex regional ideologies such as Islamic extremism, Arab nationalism, and democratic movements exemplified by the Arab Spring. These shifting power dynamics have presented major challenges for US foreign policy, which has sought to navigate between supporting authoritarian regimes and democratic principles and human rights (Lynch, 2012).

A sharp examination of how American policy is formulated regarding the Middle East reveals a propensity to depend on generalized and too simplified perceptions of the region. These methods frequently simplify the Middle East to a single entity, ignoring its wide range of states, each with unique political systems, cultures, and histories. This simplicity runs the danger of ignoring the subtleties and complexity unique to each place, which might result in poorly thought-out policy options.

#### ***US Efforts to Promote Democracy and Human Rights in the Middle East***

The advent of neoconservatism in American foreign policy has had a profound effect on the nation's attempts to advance democracy and human rights, as well as its strategic approach to the Middle East. Neo-conservatives support US dominance over the rest of the globe and think that America is special. They advocate for free markets, democracy, and peace—a philosophy sometimes referred to as "Wilsonianism with teeth." Although President Wilson's vision of promoting democracy and human rights inspired this ideology, it advocates for a more interventionist approach and the active application of these ideals, especially against governments that are hostile to these objectives (Mearsheimer, 2001).

According to this neoconservative perspective, the US has supported democratic movements and institutions throughout the Middle East through financial and diplomatic means. The US invested \$293 million in these initiatives between 2002 and 2005; an additional \$120 million is planned for the 2006 fiscal year. The specific goals of these grants were to uphold the principles of good governance, assist civil society groups, and enhance the conduct of free and fair elections. With an emphasis on fostering regional governance and civil society, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) has played a significant role in these initiatives. In addition, the US has launched a number of educational programs to advance a greater understanding of democratic principles and human rights. These initiatives are based on the idea that political beliefs and social norms are greatly influenced by education (Stewart 2005).

The US argument for promoting democracy and human rights in the Middle East is based on the belief that democratic countries that preserve and protect human rights are less likely to generate extremist beliefs. Democracies are regarded as intrinsically more stable and less subject to external threats. As a result, the US sees promoting democratic government as both a moral necessity and a strategic method of ensuring long-term regional peace and security (Ottaway & Carothers, 2010). However, this strategy has not been without criticism and problems. Critics claim that the implementation of neoconservative concepts has not always taken into account the Middle Eastern countries' complex social, political, and cultural realities. Initiatives promoting widespread democracy have faced opposition or failed to adequately account for the complicated interrelationships among tribes, sects, and regions. Neoconservatism's interventionist principles have also provoked debates over the effectiveness and appropriateness of foreign interference in sovereign states' internal affairs, raising questions about the policies' long-term durability.

#### **Conclusion:**

At the beginning of this study, several research questions were formulated to better understand the centrality of the Middle East in US foreign policy. The findings that we arrived at from this study show that the Middle East's geopolitical location substantially impacts US foreign policy. The region's large oil and natural gas reserves are vital to the US economic and geopolitical interests, underscoring the necessity of sustaining stability in this strategically important area that plays a major role in international energy markets. Security concerns, particularly those including terrorism and regional conflicts, have a significant influence on US involvement policy. The US uses the Middle East as a theater for its proxy warfare in order to achieve its interests. Political alliances and diplomatic initiatives are critical in ensuring regional stability and dealing with international geopolitical concerns. Finally, religious, cultural, and ideological elements deeply influence US foreign policy in the Middle East, necessitating a comprehensive understanding of the region's various religious and cultural histories.

This study has resulted in a number of recommendations that are highly significant for Middle Eastern countries. First, supporting inclusive government is critical; prioritizing governance systems that include the different ethnic, cultural, and religious groups inside these nations can reduce internal tensions, improve regional stability, and prohibit external interventions. Second, there is an immediate need for economic diversification to eliminate the total reliance on oil and natural gas. Middle Eastern nations should foster sustainable economic development by allotting resources to technology, renewable energy, and education sectors. Third, developing regional alliances is critical since they enhance collective security and promote economic cooperation. Strengthening regional partnerships is also vital for effectively addressing shared challenges.

Fourth, adopting diplomatic strategies is paramount by placing diplomatic involvement and negotiations at the forefront. This approach can effectively resolve ongoing conflicts and simultaneously contribute to establishing lasting stability in the region. Fifth, addressing the fundamental factors contributing to extremism is crucial. Middle Eastern nations may effectively counteract the underlying conditions that fuel extremism by implementing educational initiatives, encouraging community involvement, and promoting economic growth. Sixth, it is recommended that international partners, including the US, should collaborate on shared interests because such cooperation can provide reciprocal benefits while respecting each nation's sovereignty and regional dynamics. Eventually, it is crucial to protect human rights and support democratic norms, as these principles are indispensable for fostering the growth of secure and prosperous communities in the Middle East.

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