

## Reshaping the Middle East: Exploring the New Balance of Power and the Decline of U.S. Influence

Naser M. Tahboub<sup>\*1</sup> , Muhammad Ihsan Sandjaya<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Department of International Relations, Prince Al Hussein Bin Abdullah II School of International Studies, The University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan

<sup>2</sup>Senior Researcher, Amman, Jordan

Received: 1/6/2024

Revised: 18/7/2024

Accepted: 18/9/2024

Published online: 1/8/2025

\* Corresponding author:

[Naser1tahboub@gmail.com](mailto:Naser1tahboub@gmail.com)

Citation: Tahboub, N. M., & Sandjaya, M. I. (2025). Reshaping the Middle East: Exploring the New Balance of Power and the Decline of U.S. Influence. *Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences*, 53(1), 7836. <https://doi.org/10.35516/Hum.2025.7836>



© 2026 DSR Publishers/ The University of Jordan.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC) license <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

### Abstract

**Objectives:** This research investigates the new balance of power in the Middle East, focusing on the regional powers and the perceived decline of U.S. influence in the region. The study explores how regional powers are reshaping the geopolitical landscape.

**Methods:** The study combines qualitative data, case studies, and quantitative analysis of military expenditures and diplomatic interactions. Grounded in the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism, the research examines how domestic political factors and systemic constraints influence the foreign policy decisions of regional players.

**Results:** The findings suggest that the recent developments following Israel's declaration of war on Hamas, which led to regional escalation, are regrettable after a series of regional de-escalation efforts. At the same time, maintaining a strong balance of power is essential for regional players and the blocs within the region.

**Conclusions:** The division of the Middle East into two regional blocs, namely the status quo and the revisionist, will remain increasingly intact amid the current escalation, despite the significant progress in the political normalization process. Therefore, the balance of power maintained by the U.S. in the region remains entrenched and superior, indicating that the U.S.'s influence is unlikely to face significant challenges from China or Russia this year or in the near future.

**Keywords:** Balance of Power, Middle East, Islamic World, Regional Power.

### إعادة تشكيل الشرق الأوسط: استكشاف التوازن الجديد للقوى وتراجع النفوذ الأمريكي

ناصر طهوب<sup>1\*</sup>، محمد إhsan ساندجيا<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>قسم العلاقات الدولية، مدرسة الأمير الحسين بن عبدالله الثاني للدراسات الدولية، جامعة الأردنية، عمان، الأردن  
<sup>2</sup>باحث أول، عمان، الأردن

#### ملخص

الأهداف: تبحث هذه الدراسة في توازن القوى الجديد في الشرق الأوسط: حيث تتناول القوى في المنطقة والتراجع الملحوظ لنفوذ الولايات المتحدة في المنطقة. تستكشف هذه الدراسة كيف تعيد القوى الإقليمية تشكيل المشهد الجيوسياسي. المنهجية: تجمع الدراسة بين البيانات النوعية ودراسات الحالة والتحليل الكمي للإنفاق العسكري والتفاعلات الدبلوماسية. تستند هذه الدراسة إلى الإطار النظري للواقعية النيوكلاسيكية، وتفحص كيف تؤثر العوامل السياسية الداخلية والقيود النظامية في قرارات السياسة الخارجية للاعبين الإقليميين.

النتائج تشير النتائج إلى أن التطورات الأخيرة بعد إعلان إسرائيل الحرب على حماس، والتي أدت إلى تصعيد إقليمي، تعد مؤسفة بعد سلسلة من جهود التهدئة الإقليمية. في الوقت نفسه، فإن الحفاظ على توازن قوى قوي أمر أساسي للاعبين الإقليميين والكتل داخل المنطقة.

الخلاصة: سيبقى تقسيم منطقة الشرق الأوسط إلى كتلتين إقليميتين، وهما الوضع الراهن والمراجعة، على حاله بشكل متزايد في ظل التصعيد الحالي، على الرغم من أن عملية التطبيع السياسي قد أظهرت تقدماً دراماتيكياً. وبالتالي، فإن توازن القوى الذي تحافظ عليه الولايات المتحدة في المنطقة لا يزال راسخاً ومتفوقاً، مما يعني أن المؤشرات التي تفيد بتعرض نفوذ الولايات المتحدة في المنطقة لتحديات كبيرة من قبل الصين أو روسيا هذا العام أو في المستقبل القريب غير مرجحة. الكلمات المفتاحية: توازن القوى، الشرق الأوسط، العالم الإسلامي، القوة الإقليمية.

### 1.0. Introduction

Since the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and Israeli declaration of war against Hamas with the potential for an expansion into a regional war compelled the researchers into assessing Arab regional balance of power and with the particular emphasize upon Gulf states' tensions. This has turned the international community's focus intensely towards the Middle East. As of June 2024, the conflict has persisted for eight months, reigniting global attention on the issue of Palestinian statehood. Increasing support for the Palestinian cause, particularly from the US and Western European societies, has influenced shifts in international policies and positions regarding the Palestinian question. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains a central issue, pivotal to the power dynamics in the Middle East region.

The US presidential campaign has influenced the foreign policy of the Biden administration as it seeks re-election, affecting the Netanyahu administration's policies and military actions. Israel recognizes the critical importance of maintaining US unilateral superiority and receiving unwavering support to defend the Jewish state. Currently, Israel is engaged in a multi-front conflict against allies of the Islamic Republic of Iran, including Hamas in the south, Hezbollah in the north, and the Houthis in the far south of the Arabian Peninsula. On April 13, 2024, for the first time Iran directly retaliated against Israel with drones and missiles. The Iranian retaliation has raised international concern about the potential for an expanding conflict that could escalate to a regional war.

This development suggests that the balance of power in the Middle East should be re-evaluated. Israel's war on Hamas has impeded process towards Arab-Israeli normalization, particularly between Israel and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). On one hand, the KSA has expressed openness to the conditional normalization with Israel, as stated by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) in a Fox News interview published in September 2023, a month before the October 7 attack. On the other hand, the KSA considers the de-escalation developments in the region, such as the KSA-Iran peace agreement, Syria's reintegration into the Arab League, and the absence of large-scale conflict. The US-Israeli push for normalization has been hindered by the renewed escalation following the October 7 attacks by Hamas.

The Arab balance of power is predicated on their shared alliances, both among themselves and with major powers, notably the US. Further Arab-Israeli normalization is mainly driven by a mutual concern over the potential threat posed by Iran. For Iran, such normalization would significantly shift the balance of power against them. Iran's "limited and concluded" retaliation against Israel, in response to the bombing of its consulate in Damascus, has highlighted the positions of Arab states in confronting Israel and countering Iran's expansionist ambitions. This initial direct retaliation by Iran, combined with the actions of its allies, signals to the region that Iran remains a formidable force.

This research paper will reevaluate the balance of power in the Middle East. Among the main discussions will be (1) measuring the actors and the 'new' balance of power in the region; (2) contesting the status of regional power between the KSA and Iran; (3) and will examine whether the US influence in the region has decline as claimed.

### 1.2. Background

Regional powers act as leaders of blocs and alliances in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region. The KSA position themselves as the leader of the Arab world and the Islamic World (Gaub, 2016), emphasizing their role as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. Iran, with their revolutionary ideology and their allies perceived to spread their sphere of influence to the wider Middle East region and the Islamic world, declared themselves as the true defender of the Islamic world (Gaub, 2016). In addition to Israel, where the international community's focus has been intensely directed following the continuing war in Gaza, continues to assert their right to 'self-defense', turn a blind eye to the decision of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and International Criminal Court (ICC), and continues to enjoy unwavering support from the US. The KSA, Iran, and Israel have the largest military expenditure in the Middle East in 2023 with the KSA occupying the first position reaching 7.4227% (of GDP) in 2022, Israel in second place with military expenditure at 4.5114%, and in third place Iran at 2.5859%. (Mirza, 2024; *Stokholm*, 2023; *Trading Economics*, 2023). The researchers do not deny the role of Türkiye and Egypt in the regions' balance of power.

### **1.2.1. Egypt, the KSA and the power void in the Arab world**

Historically, Egypt, under the leadership of Gamal Abdel Nasser and his emphasis on Pan-Arabism, held the leadership in the Arab world by actively defending Arab interests during the Cold War. However, a significant shift occurred when Anwar El-Sadat assumed the presidency. Egypt realigned its foreign policy from the Soviet Union to the US, culminating in the normalization of relations with Israel through the Camp David Accords in 1978. This move marked Egypt's decline as the dominant defender of Arab interests, as it ceased to be the leading force against Israeli military presence in the region. The decision was widely criticized in the Arab and Islamic world and ultimately led to Sadat's assassination by his opposition.

The power of dominance then shifted to Iraq, which became a leading force against Israel and engaged in conflict with the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran, aiming to counter Iranian efforts to spread their Islamic revolutionary ideals across the Arab world. However, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the subsequent Gulf War in 1991, followed by the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, diminished Iraq's power and influence.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) emerged as the dominant power in the Arab World and the broader Middle East and North African (MENA) region. The KSA sees themselves as the principal leader, filling the power vacuum left by Egypt and Iraq, and asserting its influence in regional and international affairs.

### **1.2.2.KSA: leadership and regional dominance**

Abundant with oil resources and strategic economic partnership, the kingdom's leadership clearly understands the challenges ahead and adopting policies in order to achieve a dominant regional role. For development, the KSA vision to seize the (current) opportunity to gain the prestigious image as one of the world's driving forces for progress based on the KSA Vision 2030. This vision is reflected in the range of ambitious projects.. In MENA region and the wider Islamic world, the KSA has acted as the driver on multiple fronts such as the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Muslim League of Nations, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, as well as defense organizations such as the Peninsula Shield Force of the GCC. This acts as a marker of the legitimacy and confidence to the kingdom from the international community, especially the Arab world and the wider Islamic World.

As a key player on multiple fronts in the Middle East, the KSA's role is largely accepted, albeit not without occasional disputes, such as the KSA-Qatar crisis from 2017 to 2021. The KSA perceives Iran as its regional rival, posing threat to its influence in the region and the broader Islamic world. The peace agreement signed between the KSA and Iran in March 2023 indicates willingness for cooperation between these two major Muslim powers. However, while this agreement shows a positive step towards mutual understanding, the underlying contestation and rivalry to shape the Middle East remained intact, demonstrating that competition persists despite the agreement.

### **1.2.3.The Islamic Revolution as a model and quest to revise regional order.**

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran has quickly established their leadership by declaring themselves the forefront against rogue regimes and the true defender of the Islamic World, by mobilizing an alliance called the 'Axis of Resistance' consisting of Bashar Al Assad's Syria and a dozen major militias around the Middle East that are mobilized, funded, and/or trained by Iran, with the likes of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip, and *Ansar Allah* (Houthis) in Yemen, among which there are also *Zaynabiyoun* Brigade in Syria, *Al Ashar* Brigade in Bahrain, and *Kataib Hezbollah* and *Asaib Ahl al Haq* in Iraq.

Sunni Arab states that view Iran as a real threat, primarily due to the ideals it represents: the Islamic Revolution, Shia Islam, and a revisionist ideology that could disrupt the region's status quo. For the KSA, these concerns are particularly acute, as they challenge its regional leadership and legitimacy within the Middle East and the Islamic world. Iran in the post revolution period was portrayed aspiring similar revolutions in the region, aiming to overthrow regimes it perceives as analogous to the deposed Shah Reza Pahlavi. This ideological and geopolitical contest underpins much of the tension between Sunni Arab states and Iran, with the KSA at the forefront of efforts to counter Iranian influence and maintain its own dominance in the region (Ghattas, 2020, p. 121-125).

Israel wields significant influence as a Jewish state situated in the midst of predominantly Arab states. Israel desires to

maintain a strategic military advantage over Arab states and Iran. Israel remains a crucial actor in the region, bolstered by unwavering US support. This support is complemented by Israel's diplomatic maneuvers and its extensive intelligence network, which they effectively mobilize to navigate and influence the complex geopolitical landscape of the Middle East.

#### **1.2.4 US regional order in the Middle East**

The US' influence in the Middle East before and after becoming the global unilateral power in 1989, has long colored the series of historical events in the region. Every US administration since Roosevelt has their set of calculated parameters to the Middle East. The region is certainly of great importance to the US because of their dependence on the abundant oil resources the region possessed, and the US is also of great importance for actors in the region dependent on the US for security. However, the trend in recent years shows China's growing role, coupled with the spirit of the global south which makes scholars begin to open the discussion about the possibility for China to challenge the US in the region. A region that is currently gaining the attention of the entire international community and which, in the wake of war in Gaza and Iran's retaliation against Israel, opens the possibility of wider regional war that the Biden administration is trying to contain. What do the current developments indicate for the US balance of power in the region?

### **2.0 Methodology**

The research methodology employed in this research paper combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to comprehensively analyze the shifting balance of power in the Middle East. The researchers establish a robust understanding of recent developments and existing analyses pertaining to regional power dynamics. Case studies offer empirical evidence (qualitative) of past shifts in alliances and cooperation among the regional powers. Statistical data on military expenditures and diplomatic interactions are subjected to rigorous quantitative analysis.

Furthermore, network analysis identifies trends in regional cooperations and agendas through investigating the interconnectedness of actors in the region. Based on the theory of neoclassical realism, this research technique provides important insights into the evolving dynamics of balance of power in the Middle East by allowing a comprehensive assessment of how systemic and domestic issues impact the foreign policy of the regional powers, namely the KSA and Iran.

### **3.0. 'New' balance of power in the Middle East?**

After outlining the current regional dynamics with significant implications for the balance of power, both historically and presently, in the introduction and background sections, as well as discussing the distribution of power in the Middle East region, the following sections of this research will delve deeper into the key developments influencing the balance of power in the Middle East.

The year 2023 witnessed a series of optimistic moves towards de-escalation in the region, beginning with the KSA-Iran peace agreement in March 2023, followed by the Arab League's reintegration of Syria in May 2023, and likelihood of normalization of relations between some Arab states and Israel. However, Israel's ongoing war in Gaza against Hamas, which has resulted in the death of more than forty thousand Palestinian civilians, underscores that the Palestinian issue remains central to the region's instability. This tragedy has once again highlighted the enduring significance of the Palestinian problem in the Middle East.

The region is again shifting towards escalation. Since the Iranian retaliation on April 13<sup>th</sup>, the US pressured parties to the conflict in the region not to escalate into a regional war. Additionally, Israel is preoccupied with limited confrontation with Hezbollah on its northern borders, alongside facing significant domestic challenges. Israeli politics are marked by deep divisions, and society is increasingly polarized over the war in Gaza. These factors collectively contribute to holding back an immediate broader conflict between Israel and Iran. Additionally, Iran is aware that it cannot afford a large-scale war, which would likely involve Israel's allies, notably the US and Western states. These considerations have influenced the Islamic Republic's decision to limit its retaliation and send a clear message to the US and Arab states about its intentions. This strategic calculation has been a key factor in preventing a wider escalation.

### **3.1. New steps towards the Iran Nuclear Agreement**

May 2018 marks the US official withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iran Nuclear Agreement, where Iran also blamed the KSA, which had cut ties with Iran two years earlier (2016), for this decision by the US (Drewett, 2016), severed ties between the KSA and Iran highlights the increasing ineffectiveness of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in addressing issues within the Islamic world (Ilishev, 2016). Regional stability further deteriorated when KSA and Qatar cut ties in 2017, amid accusations of Qatar for being pro-Iran and supported terrorist networks, a stance taken also by the United Arab Emirate (UAE), Bahrain, and Egypt.

These escalations between KSA and Iran were also influenced by the Trump administration's hostile policies towards the Islamic Republic. The US withdrawal from the JCPOA, welcomed by both regional players such as the KSA and Israel, but was criticized by the European allies for not providing an alternative and comprehensive solution to contain Iran's nuclear program (Mills, 2021). Iran accused the KSA of being responsible for the Trump administration's foreign policy decision, asserting that the KSA was disinclined towards the reintegration of Iran into the global community. This reintegration would involve easing or waiving Western sanctions following the nuclear agreement, which the KSA perceived as a threat given Iran's support for militias surrounding the region.

The Iran Nuclear Agreement is not considered by the KSA and Israel as the ultimate solution that the US can demonstrate to contain Iranian nuclear ambition. Stressing that lightened or waived Western and international sanctions will highly favor Iran in the region where despite the nuclear agreement, can still freely mobilize their allies for various regional quests involving the 'Axis of Resistance' that threaten the 'regional status quo'. The Biden administration has the vision to return to the JCPOA track achieved by his predecessor, Barrack Obama, but heading towards the end of his first term of administration, both the US and Iran failed to reach any compromise amid the prevailing conflicts in the region.

Obama's logic for endorsing the JCPOA was for the sole purpose to ensure that Iran will not weaponize their nuclear capabilities by having the international community unlimited access to conduct investigations whenever desired by an independent team to Iran's nuclear power infrastructure. However, the practicalities of the agreement will surely remain contentious within the US and for the states in the region. Israel, which feels threatened by a nuclear Iran, are pessimistic towards the unlimited access to conduct investigation, and will be in a state of dilemma if they choose to conduct a surprise attack on Iran's nuclear power infrastructures that has secured a joint agreement with the 'five plus one'.

The peace agreement between the KSA and Iran certainly has positive implications to reduce the level of hostility between the two Muslim powers and can fill many gaps for cooperative relationship, especially in socio-economical aspects, though remain doubtful that it will certainly put an end to the desire of both states to achieve supremacy. Therefore, the balance of power will remain the critical course, and calculations on the rival's military capabilities, especially their access to nuclear capabilities will continue.

### **4.0. Regionalism in the Middle East**

The rivalry between the KSA and Iran exemplifies regionalism through its deep-rooted historical, sectarian, and ideological dimensions. This rivalry shapes the Middle East's strategic landscape, with the KSA forging alliances with the US and Western states, while Iran, isolated facing Western sanctions, forms strategic partnerships with both Russia and China. Both Russia and China are looking to challenge US and Western influence in the region (Cordesman, 2016).

The GCC, established in 1980 and led by the KSA, was founded in response to the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Regional tensions, such as the Iraq-Iran War, and broader threats faced by Sunni Arab monarchies catalyzed the creation of the GCC. The council was formed to counteract regional players like Israel, Saddam Hussein's Iraq (then a regional power), and the rise of the Islamist ideology inspired by the Iranian Revolution. The GCC members perceived the Iranian Islamic Revolution as a force threatening the survival of the Sunni Arab monarchies, particularly through the activities of the Iranian led 'Axis of Resistance'.

#### **4.1. The KSA led security bloc of the Arabian Peninsula and the US leadership.**

The KSA acts as the leader for the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF), a joint military venture of the GCC formed to deter or

to respond towards military aggression from external actors to the bloc. The effectiveness of the PSF were tested during Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, at a time when the PSF was relatively small and untested, on the other hand, how each member states sees the benefit and placed their commitment to the security bloc varied. This limited the bloc's role as a joint force to liberate Kuwait. Instead, it was the US-led coalition forces under "Operation Desert Storm" that decisively altered the outcome of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The operation included minor PSF participation, in addition to significant contribution from the KSA. This demonstrated the limitations of the PSF in handling large-scale security threats when the military bloc is put to the test and highlighted the crucial role of external military support from the US to maintain regional security.

The case above demonstrates the central role of the US in the defense of its regional allies. When it comes to the crises over the past decade, namely the war in Yemen and the mass protest in Bahrain (2011), the role of the PSF has been limited in terms of coalition unity and its operations on the ground. In order to execute an operation, all six GCC member states must reach a consensus, which often proves difficult as all member states didn't perceive threats uniformly. States like Oman and Qatar, which maintain relatively good relations with their neighbor Iran, often doubt the success of military force to respond.

For instance, in response to the conflict in Yemen, the KSA led their own coalition outside the PSF that included the UAE, underscoring the limitations of the PSF and the divergent threat perceptions within the GCC. Scholars argued that both the process of regionalism and regionalization remain inadequate in the GCC (Legrenzi & Calculi, 2013). Thus, it is not the PSF that acts as the guarantor of the security of the Sunni Arab monarchs of the Gulf which is pivotal influence on the regional balance of power. Instead, the balance of power has been maintained through military pacts and alliances between GCC states and the US.

## **5.0 US declining influence in the Middle East region?**

Indications of the US' declining influence in the Middle East arise from several major developments. The Trump administration's withdrawal of US troops from Northern Syria in 2019 allowed Bashar Al-Assad's Syrian government and Putin's Russia, supportive of Assad's regime, to gain control of the area. Additionally, the US' withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2020 ceded control back to the Taliban, twenty years after their ouster.

Conversely, China emerges as a crucial player in the region. China's successful mediation for the reestablishment of diplomatic ties between the KSA and Iran in 2023 (Drewett, 2016). China's role as a 'trusted but biased mediator' has drawn mixed reactions from the West, who acknowledged the achievement but lamented that the terms did not align with Western interests. China's ability to facilitate such an agreement underscores a shift in the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East. This shift, combined with the US' claimed strategic withdrawals, suggests a 'rebalancing of power' in the Middle East, with China emerging as a prominent actor alongside the traditional influence of the US.

The normalization between the KSA and Iran mediated by China encompasses a broader economic agenda aimed for potential "trilateral" economic cooperation, further reinforcing China's presence in the region. This includes shared ambition from China, Iran, and the KSA to revive the region's historic 'Silk Road' which is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) agenda and the broader BRICS framework. Additionally, the 2021 "25-year agreement" between China and Iran, covering political, economic, and military areas, exemplifies China's strategic partnerships in the region (Motamedi, 2022).

### **5.1. China's expanding strategic agenda in the Middle East?**

China has positioned themselves as an attractive and inevitable major power, making them an essential partner for states in the Middle East region. Beyond expanding its economic presence, China has made significant diplomatic strides. These include hosting leadership summits such as the summit of foreign ministers of OIC member states to address the Palestinian issue and developments in Gaza, bringing together disputing parties like Fatah and Hamas in Beijing, brokering normalization deals between regional powers, and conducting joint military exercises with key US allies in the region (Singer, 2024).

One can argue that China is increasingly challenging the traditional dominance of the US in the Middle East or is winning the Middle East. However, to state definitively that China has won the Middle East from the US may be premature.

While China has made significant inroads, the US still maintains considerable influence through longstanding military, economic, and diplomatic ties with key regional allies. The evolving dynamics suggest a more multipolar region where both China and the US, along with other powers, play crucial roles.

Özekin and Sune (2023) states that the MENA region offers a useful laboratory for evaluating the Western hegemonic decline and refuting it, as demonstrated by the BRICS as a counter-hegemonic alternative to the US-led world order. By evaluating the situation in the Middle East and the Arab world considering the assumption of US's declining influence and relative disengagement from the region, how impactful are the developments that have occurred to the regional balance of power? The researchers suppose that MENA region's brushing dependency on the Western powers, especially the US for security matters will still guarantee superior US' influence in the region. Given the alliance and close security ties that existed between the US and states in the GCC, such as the KSA, Qatar, the UAE, Bahrain, and Kuwait, in addition to Jordan, Egypt, and Morocco outside the GCC (Özekin & Sune, 2023; Ryan, 2014). Recent developments in the region, including the mediation efforts by China and the evolving dynamics within the BRICS framework, suggest a reevaluation of the US-led regional order. However, the security dependency of many Arab states on the US highlights that there are issues more critical than the potential decline of the US' influence or the rise of China.

Perception of Iranian threat reinforces ties with the US for security guarantees and military support. The US' strategic counterbalance is deemed essential for its allies' security. While there are significant shifts in the geopolitical landscape of the MENA region, the deep-seated security dependencies on the US among many Arab states ensure that US' influence remains substantial. The region's balance of power is still heavily influenced by the US' ability to provide security and counterbalance perceived threats from Iran, despite the emerging roles of other global powers like China.

### **5.3. The deep-seated security dependencies and the shifts in the geopolitical landscape of the MENA region.**

The developments indicate that it is premature to conclude that the US influence is significantly challenged or that its regional authority is waning. The US' strategic activities in the Asia Pacific with its regional allies namely Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea and the US' presence in the highly contested South China Sea are more concerning to China than China's increasing involvement in the US' sphere of influence in the Middle East (Severino, 2010). The U.S. continues to play a decisive role in both the Middle East and the Asia Pacific.

During the 'limited and concluded' Iranian retaliation against Israel, Tehran made their intentions clear to Washington, emphasizing that the retaliation was limited and not aimed to push the region into a broader conflict that could involve the US. The US' strategic importance to its regional allies ensures that its influence persists. This entrenched position is bolstered by a series of lessons learned from past engagements. In summary, while there are shifts in the geopolitical landscape of the MENA region, the deep-seated security dependencies on the US among many Arab states ensure that US' influence remains substantial.

### **6.0. Conclusion**

The perception that the US' shifting foreign policy in the Middle East indicates weakening influence in the region is overly simplistic. Within the framework of offensive realism, it might appear that the US is experiencing a decline in its regional power. However, a broader analysis grounded in realism theory, considering recent developments and existing regional power dynamics, suggests that the notion of US' influence being significantly challenged by China or Russia this year or in the near future is highly unlikely.

Iran continues its expansionist pursuits but remains acutely aware of the critical role of the US in the region. This reflects Iran's understanding that being excessive could provoke major reactions, further placing Iran in a security dilemma. The reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the KSA and Iran [have for a time] opened the door to de-escalation in the Middle East. A year since returning to diplomatic language, we witnessed that the space for accusations that was previously continued to be leveled from both states towards each other has closed. However, balance of power between both KSA and Iran will remain the critical course, and calculations on the other's military capabilities, especially their access to nuclear capabilities remain.

The ongoing Israel-Hamas war has shown two things in the regional aspects especially in the region's power struggle. Firstly, it shows the centrality of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as the heart of the conflict in the region and that being at the forefront of confrontation against Israel can provide legitimacy as a regional power and as a force not to be reckoned with. Secondly, the Israel-Hamas war underscores the enduring influence of the US in the region and has also highlighted the deep divisions within the Middle East regarding the approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On one side, there is the status quo bloc, often aligning with the US, with the KSA as the regional power, and on the other side, the resistance bloc led by Iran, advocating for more confrontational stances.

## REFERENCES

- Alhafali, S. (2022). *Arab-NATO: Is it a Gulf security system or an alliance of regional foes?* Research Gate. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357117959>
- Bani Salameh, M. T. (2024). Kuwait's hedging strategy toward Iran and Saudi Arabia. *Middle East Quarterly*, 31(2), 1-11. <https://www.meforum.org/65616/kuwait-hedging-strategy-toward-iran-and-saudi>
- Cordesman, A. H. (2016). *Saudi Arabia and the United States: Common interests and continuing sources of tension*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep23388>
- Drewett, M. (2016). *Winter is coming: Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the execution of Nimr Al-Nimr*. Centre for Geopolitics & Security in Realism Studies. <http://cgsrs.org/publications/44>
- Gaub, F. (2016). *War of words: Saudi Arabia v Iran*. European Union Institute for Security Studies. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06884>
- Goldstein, J., & Keohane, R. O. (1993). Ideas and foreign policy: An analytical framework. In J. Goldstein & R. O. Keohane (Eds.), *Ideas and foreign policy: Beliefs, institutions, and political change* (pp. xx-xx). Cornell University Press.
- Ghattas, K. (2020). Darkness: Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan 1979-1980. In *Black wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the forty-year rivalry that unraveled culture, religion, and collective memory in the Middle East* (pp. 121-125). Henry Holt and Co.
- Gençtürk, A. (2024). Several EU member states considering jointly recognizing Palestinian state on May 21: Report. *Anadolu*. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/several-eu-member-states-considering-jointly-recognizing-palestinian-state-on-may-21-report/3214131>
- Ilishev, I. G. (2016). *The Iran-Saudi Arabia conflict and its impact on the Organization of Islamic Cooperation*. Wilson Center. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-iran-saudi-arabia-conflict-and-its-impact-the-organization-islamic-cooperation>
- Keynoush, B., & Wastnidge, E. (2022). Narratives of power politics in the Iran-Saudi relationship: The view from Tehran. In E. Wastnidge & S. Mabon (Eds.), *Saudi Arabia and Iran: The struggle to shape the Middle East* (pp. 33-54). Manchester University Press.
- Lane, A. (2023). *Iran's Islamist proxies in the Middle East*. Wilson Center. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/irans-islamist-proxies>
- Legrenzi, M., & Calcutti, M. (2013). *Regionalism and regionalization in the Middle East: Options and challenges*. International Peace Institute. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09496>
- Mandaville, P., & Hamid, S. (2018). Islam as statecraft: How governments use religion in foreign policy. *Foreign Policy at Brookings*. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/FP\\_20181116\\_islam\\_as\\_statecraft.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/FP_20181116_islam_as_statecraft.pdf)
- Mills, C. (2021). *Status of the Iran nuclear deal*. House of Commons Library. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9338/CBP-9338.pdf>
- Mirza, P. A. (2024, January 20). Military spending in MENA – Statistics & facts. *Statista*. <https://www.statista.com/topics/7323/military-spending-in-mena/#topicOverview>
- Motamedi, M. (2022, January 15). Iran says 25-year China agreement enters implementation stage. *Al Jazeera*.



- <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/15/iran-says-25-year-china-agreement-enters-implementation-stage>
- Nichols, M. (2024, May 10). UN General Assembly backs Palestinian bid for membership. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/un-general-assembly-set-back-palestinian-bid-membership-2024-05-10/>
- Nye, J. S. (1990). Soft power. *Foreign Policy*, 80, 153–171. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1148580>
- Nye, J. S. (2004). Soft power and American foreign policy. *Political Science Quarterly*, 119(2), 255–270. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20202345>
- Nye, J. S. (2008). Public diplomacy and soft power. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616(1), 94–109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311699>
- Özekin, M. E. K. Ö., & Sune, E. (2023). Contesting hegemony: The rise of BRICS and the crisis of US-led Western hegemony in the MENA region. *The Korean Journal of International Studies*, 21(3), 409–446. <https://doi.org/10.14731/kjis.2023.12.21.3.409>
- Ryan, C. (2014, April 15). Jordan, Morocco and an expanded GCC. *Middle East Research and Information Project*. <https://merip.org/2014/04/jordan-morocco-and-an-expanded-gcc/>
- Severino, R. C. (2010). ASEAN and the South China Sea. *Security Challenges*, 6(2), 37–47. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26459936>
- Shaer, C., Hassan, E., & Knipp, K. (2022). A 'NATO' for the Middle East? *DW.COM*. <https://www.dw.com/en/a-nato-for-the-middle-east/a-62305810>
- Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. (2024, April). Global military spending surges amid war, rising tensions and insecurity. *SIPRI*. <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2024/global-military-spending-surges-amid-war-rising-tensions-and-insecurity>
- Trading Economics. (2024). Iran – Military expenditure (% of GDP). Retrieved May 13, 2024, from <https://tradingeconomics.com/iran/military-expenditure-percent-of-gdp-wb-data.html>
- Trading Economics. (2024). Israel – Military expenditure (% of GDP). Retrieved May 13, 2024, from <https://tradingeconomics.com/israel/military-expenditure-percent-of-gdp-wb-data.htm>
- Trading Economics. (2024). Saudi Arabia – Military expenditure (% of GDP). Retrieved May 13, 2024, from <https://tradingeconomics.com/saudi-arabia/military-expenditure-percent-of-gdp-wb-data.html>
- Vakil, S. (2024, April 15). Iran's attack on Israel was not the failure many claim but it has ended Israel's isolation. *Chatham House*. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/04/irans-attack-israel-was-not-failure-many-claim-it-has-ended-israels-isolation>
- Yazid, M. N. (2020). Tri-polarity structure and the post-Cold War Asia Pacific regional politics. *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change*, 14(3), 117-126. [https://www.ijicc.net/images/Vol\\_14/Iss\\_3/14308\\_Yazid\\_2020\\_E\\_R.pdf](https://www.ijicc.net/images/Vol_14/Iss_3/14308_Yazid_2020_E_R.pdf)