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US POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST. HOW THE SYSTEM DETERMINES THE BEHAVIOR¹

This paper discusses US policy in the Middle East since 2010–2011, which includes the periods of the presidencies of Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and the incumbent, Joe Biden. The region has been undergoing substantial and rapid transformations in the last decade, which have reshuffled the regional security system and the balance of power. The study employs Neorealism theory and system-level analysis to describe and explain US policy in the region. It focuses on several issues, including the relations with Iran, the Kurdish issue, the war in Syria, and the relations with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia, to reveal certain patterns of US policy. The conclusion is that Washington's behavior in the Middle East is strongly affected by the nature and transformations of the regional subsystem. This approach explains why US policy in the Middle East has become more situational and reactive.

Keywords. US policy, neorealism, Middle East, regional system, Iran, Syria, Gulf states, Kurds

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Introduction

The political arena in the Middle East has undergone substantial transformations in the last 10–12 years. Those changes have affected US policy as well. There is a consensus among scholars and experts that the US presence and influence in the region have notably diminished, and the country has been retreating from the region. The question of debate is whether it is a temporary phenomenon conditioned by internal and external factors or whether the process is irreversible, and what are the reasons for the current state of affairs of the US in the Middle East? What policy does the United States conduct in the Middle East, and how can it be explained?

The United States has become involved in Middle East affairs since the end of the Second World War. Its policy goals and tools in the region have followed a certain path of evolution. This paper is an attempt to explain Washington's policy behavior in the Middle East in the last 10-12 years and discuss the approaches of three US presidents, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joseph Biden, their policies in the Middle East, and certain outcomes. The paper discusses the US policy towards four important issues in the Middle East: the confrontation with Iran, the war in Syria, the Kurdish issue, and relations with the Gulf Arab countries. This is, undoubtedly, not a comprehensive list of the problems the US has dealt with over the years and decades.

The article first represents the features of the Middle East regional subsystem, the current situation in the Middle East, and the background of US involvement there. Then, it discusses the US policy towards the above-mentioned issues and, based on the conclusions derived from the analysis, tries to present an explanation of the US policy behavior.

Understanding the US policy in the Middle East through the lens of neorealism

Various theories and approaches can be employed to address the issue of US policy in the Middle East. Indeed, the factors influencing the decision-making process in the US are numerous, both at national and international levels. This paper focuses on the neorealist interpretation and employs the approach of system-level analysis. Given the fact that the international

system is anarchic and the units, in this case, the states of the Middle East region, are constantly making efforts to increase their capabilities to defend their integrity and maintain security and stability, the neorealist approach is capable of explaining the behavior of the states, including the US policy in the region.

According to the neorealist explanation, the structure of the international system determines the behavior of the units (Waltz, 2010). The characteristics of the international system dictate how states position themselves at a certain point in time. Neorealism also argues that the hegemon's misuse of power entails resistance from weaker actors and their efforts to balance against the hegemon. Different theories agree that anarchy is the core of the international system, and realists say that in the system, states aim to ensure their own survival and increase their power relative to others. The difference is in the sources of the behavior of the actors.

Certain regions within the international system may also qualify to be recognized as systems or subsystems. The political realities can be explained not only through global or international systems but also through regional subsystems as well (Buzan & Wæver, 2009). After the Cold War, as Gause notes, scholars tend to analyze geographic regions as systems, not simply as subordinate components of a global international system (Gause, 1999, 12). Indeed, the Middle East region has its own distinctive features that have to be taken into consideration for analysis. Although none of the countries in the region are world powers, the factors of energy resources and geographic location have made it a place of strategic importance due to its exporting capacity (Bustos, 2017, 42).

The current Middle East region consists of a group of states and non-state actors that are confronting each other. With a couple of exceptions, all countries are engaged in military campaigns and civil wars. Four regional powers, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel, widely use their military forces or patron proxies. Israel continues strikes in Gaza, regularly hits targets in Syria, allegedly organises attacks in Iranian territory; Turkey invaded Syria and occupied part of the northern territories, continues strikes against the Kurds in Syria and Iraq, sent troops to Libya; Iran is backing Houthis in Yemen, helps the Syrian government politically and militarily and assists other forces, mainly Shia militias throughout the Middle East; Saudi Arabia formed a coalition and waged a war in Yemen,

funds various militant groups, etc. In the 2010s, tensions arose between Saudi Arabia and Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran, Iran and Turkey have been on opposing sides in Syria; and the relations between Turkey and Israel were frozen.

Since 2010–11, Saudi Arabia, along with three non-Arab countries—Iran, Turkey, and Israel—have been dominant powers in the Middle East. Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Libya, the traditional leaders of the Arab world, have all suffered greatly from regional transformations, and several are now struggling to preserve their integrity. Instead, Iran and Turkey are filling the power vacuum created by the weakening of the Arab states. In their turn, the Arab states of the Gulf region have successfully survived the revolutionary wave and have already begun to assume a greater role in regional affairs (Coates Ulrichsen, 2011, 232).

The post-Arab Spring order is characterised as a situation where all are against all forming fluid coalitions (Soler & Lecha, 2017). Some regional powers, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, want to form blocs, while other actors struggle to preserve their autonomy. Compared to the pre-2011 order, Sunni – Shia sectarian tensions have broadened, involving more actors in the region (Malmvig, 2014, 146).

While the regional system resembles multipolarity, the regional order is hierarchical. According to Kamrava, at the top of the pyramid of the hierarchy in the MENA region sit Saudi Arabia and Israel, seeking to preserve the regional status quo, and two challengers, Iran and Turkey. In the second row of the pyramid, the middle powers are situated, some of whom are closely aligned and allied with the status quo powers (Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE), while others (Algeria, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, and Tunisia) try to conduct more independent policies (Kamrava, 2018, 13).

Non-state actors were able to challenge states during the time period mentioned. Some of them conquered entire regions in Syria and Iraq. Other organisations have been acting under the patronage of regional powers. Moreover, other non-regional actors have also entered the game: Russia established its military presence in Syria, and China has been advancing economically. The emergence of new actors has changed the existing balance of power and transformed the political setting of the Middle East (Charountaki, 2014, 264).

A clarification is needed here to describe the Middle Eastern system. Theories describe systems as unipolar, bipolar, multipolar, or apolar. During the Cold War period, the system was bipolar, with the countries of the Middle East being either US or Soviet allies and partners. The following 20 years after the Cold War were unipolar, where the United States was a hegemon, including in the Middle East (if excluding the US, the subsystem was multipolar). The current or post-Arab Spring system in the Middle East is rather quasi-multipolar, where none of the actors has enough power to consolidate a coalition around him, project power throughout the region, or act to strongly influence RSC members to move in specific security policy directions (Frazier & Stewart-Ingersoll, 2010, 741). In the post-Arab Spring system, the US is in the role of the declining hegemon, with a deeply damaged reputation in the region and doubts from allies. In this situation, every unit, stronger or weaker, seeks ways to balance against threats and diversify its security opportunities. First of all, they are increasing military expenses, developing relations with other powers. The "terraforming" of the new system in the region is still underway.

In this article, I argue that the US, with its deep presence in the region, may qualify as an extraterritorial unit of the Middle Eastern regional subsystem, and therefore Washington's behavior in the region is affected by the structure of the regional subsystem and its transformations. The dependence is not unilateral and in one direction—from the US to the Middle East—but the opposite direction may be as decisive, if not more.

Numerous pieces of research on US foreign policy focus on domestic variables, trying to explain the roots of US policy through internal factors such as public opinion, group interests, lobbying, values, identities, etc. Indeed, domestic factors cannot be neglected and have to be integrated into the research. However, not a single factor or approach can comprehensively describe the reasons and motives of Washington's policy in the Middle East. For instance, why does every US president, despite promises to pull out of deadly wars, repeatedly use military force to mitigate emerging threats? The answer lies in the combination of multiple factors.

To provide empirical evidence for the argument of the research, it focuses on several major regional issues in which the US has been involved and the US response to them. These "hot spots" are not mere objects of US

foreign policy, but they are becoming stronger factors that force Washington to adapt to them and adjust its policy.

Within the scope of this research, four instances of US involvement in the Middle East are discussed.

1. Relations with Iran: Iran is one of the Middle East's most powerful countries and the US's most formidable adversary. Any major change in their relations, from war to rapprochement, will substantially change the power configuration in the Middle East. Besides, nuclear non-proliferation is one of the declared goals of the US in the Middle East.
2. US policy towards the Kurds—this is an interesting case, as the period discussed in this paper has seen a significant rise of the Kurdish factor, from a domestic to a regional factor with the capability of becoming a game changer in the region. They have been an important ally of the United States in the fight against terrorists. This is another declared goal of the US.
3. Relations with the Gulf Arab countries, especially with Saudi Arabia and the UAE: These countries are strategic allies of the US. They are important partners in fulfilling another US goal in the region: guaranteeing the free flow of oil at predictable prices.
4. War in Syria: This is an interesting case, as two regional and one other power, Iran, Turkey, and Russia, have been conducting military operations in Syria, and jointly they try to oust the US from the Syrian process. This is a case in terms of the involvement of other powers seeking more influence in the region.

The US interests in the Middle East

The United States' key three goals in the Middle East were ensuring the free and predictable flow of oil from the Middle East basin; countering its geopolitical and ideological rival, the Soviet Union, as another contender for spreading its influence in the region; and assisting its regional partners and allies. These three goals were interconnected, and implementing them guaranteed the defense of US interests in the region. Later, two other goals were added: fighting against terrorism and ensuring nuclear non-proliferation. (Salem, 2020) The US employed a wide range of tools in

service of these goals, among them political and financial assistance, covert operations, isolation, sanctions, and military interventions. After George W. Bush's presidency, no new goals were announced for the Middle East region. Currently, US policy in the Middle East focuses on several essential issues. First is the containment of China, a policy implemented in different parts of the world. China has challenged the US's hegemonic positions in the global economy, trade, and politics. The second important issue for Washington is Iran's nuclear program. Despite the efforts to make a deal with Iran, the agreement failed to come into force for several reasons, including controversies among US political groups and leaders. The US keeps putting pressure on Iran to abandon its nuclear aspirations. Among other issues, it is worth mentioning the continuing struggle against terrorism and forming partnerships among its allies in the region in order to promote its interests there. For instance, it includes the settlement of relations between Gulf Arab states and Israel.

Slowing but not stopping: US-Iran relations in the 2010s

Before 1979, a close US ally in the Middle East, but after the Islamic Revolution, Iran has been the fiercest and strongest rival of the United States in the Middle East. After the 9/11 attacks, the US under the George W. Bush administration established an unprecedented presence in the Middle East, toppling the Afghan and Iraqi regimes for a very short period of time. Iran was designated as a member of the "axis of evil," along with Iraq and North Korea (*State of the Union Address, George W. Bush, 2002*). According to the declared goal, the change of regime in Iraq would bring new perspectives for the country in the post-Saddam era based on the Bush administration's vision of democratisation (*Full Text: George Bush's Iraq Speech, 2005*). In the case of successful testing in Iraq, it could have set a precedent for other regional countries. Nevertheless, quite the opposite scenario developed as the US failed to stabilise Iraq. The failure to establish a strong state aided the spread of Iranian influence in the region. The next problem was that Iran had been increasing its nuclear capabilities, which could have led to having enough material for building nuclear weapons, according to the US (*Iran Nuclear Milestones: 1967-2022, 2022*). Iran would have grown even more powerful if it had been successful in accomplishing that goal, and other nations in the region

would have definitely considered their own nuclear programs, triggering a new arms race.

However, the US's successful military missions came with a number of issues related to resources and reputation. In the medium and long term, US campaigns that skirted international organizations harmed the country's image. For this reason, Barack Obama, who assumed office in 2009, announced a settlement of relations with the Muslim world in his famous Cairo speech in the same year (*The President's Speech in Cairo: A New Beginning*, n.d.). Among the Obama administration's steps, one of the most important initiatives was the negotiation over the Iranian nuclear program. That initiative pursued several goals, including an attempt to restore a positive image of the country and contain Iranian aspirations.

Barack Obama's administration reached a near-historic achievement in relations with Iran when in 2015 the sides (the UN's five permanent members, Germany, and Iran) signed the JCPOA, or the famous nuclear deal (*Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action Vienna*). On the other hand, Obama's administration imposed a mass of sanctions against the country, which strongly affected the country's economy (Colvin, 2010). In Obama's team's view, Iran is a defensive, status-quo power that tries to maintain what it has. Moreover, in certain cases, both countries' interests converge, for instance, in stabilising Iraq. Iran also shared the view that Sunni radicalism must be defeated (Doran, 2020, 271). Trump's view on Iran was very different. In the matter of Iran, the Obama administration chose the option of making Iran more negotiable by pressuring and tightening the noose. Overall, successive US administrations dealt with Iran using a "carrot and stick" approach (Albarasneh & Koleilat Khatib, 2019, 382). Western sanctions specifically targeted Iran's oil and banking sectors, significantly slowing economic growth opportunities. At the same time, negotiations began between the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany on the one hand, and Iran on the other, to reach an agreement on the latter's nuclear program. After the signing, some sanctions against Iran were lifted, and it caused considerable excitement both in Iran and around the world.

However, his successor in the White House, Donald Trump, an opponent of the deal, annulled it (Landler, 2018). His views on the Middle East are mainstream Republican views that reject Obama's attitudes towards Iran. In their view, the nuclear deal was restricted only temporarily (Doran,

2020, 274). He called the Iran nuclear deal a big mistake and almost a capitulation, and it was expected that his administration, which had a large presence of pro-Israel figures, including his son-in-law Jared Kushner, would renege on the deal.

Trump's administration has adopted tougher methods to contain Iran. Apart from the restoration of sanctions, the US did not hesitate to use military force. In particular, attacks on Iran's nuclear and other important facilities and the murders of Iran's nuclear specialists, which according to data available in open sources, the Israeli special services were behind them, increased significantly in this period. While the Obama administration objected to Israeli strikes against Iranian targets, the Trump administration was supportive of these actions (Doran, 2020, 276). The other example was the murder of high-ranking Iranian military personnel in Syria. The culmination of the use of military force was the drone assassination of Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Qods unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps in 2020, who had been the commander of Iranian forces in Syria (Schmitt, 2020). Iran responded by launching missiles at US military facilities in Iraq (Safi et al., 2020). Despite the tough bilateral rhetoric, both the US and Iran decided to be satisfied with the status quo. The only case where Obama's and Trump's views were similar was that ISIS must be defeated, and both administrations turned a blind eye to the rise of the Popular Mobilisation Units assisted by Tehran (Doran, 2020, 277).

In the 2020 elections, Trump lost to the Democratic candidate, Joe Biden. Biden decided to reverse Trump's policy and return to Obama's strategy. While keeping the sanctions, Biden resumed negotiations with Iran, and there was some optimism in this regard in early 2022 (*US and Iran Edge Closer*, 2022). Nevertheless, the parties have been unable to reach an agreement so far. Moreover, Iran's supply of drones to Russia in its war against Ukraine further pushed the deal away and opened the door to new economic sanctions (*Iran Says It Shipped...*, 2022). It should be noted that possible Iranian supplies could be used to exert pressure on the US to soften its stance on the nuclear issue.

Thus, for almost a decade, the picture has been the following: US-Iran relations have been in a state of strain and negotiations, from historical agreements to limited military operations. If we compare the reality with the declared American goals, namely the containment of Iran, there are

some successes and failures for the US. The success is that economic sanctions, especially in the oil and financial sectors, are weakening Iran economically and limiting the possibility of obtaining nuclear weapons. At the same time, they are not capable of stopping Iran's pursuit of a nuclear program. In addition, over the course of a decade, Iran has expanded its presence in the Middle East, also thanks to projecting its power through proxies. To increase its opportunities and weaken the effect of imposed sanctions, Iran has been promoting cooperation with other powers like China, India, and Russia. Iran and China signed a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement (Motamedi, 2022). Therefore, the US policy of Iran containment is like a brake that slows down but is unable to stop.

War in Syria - whom to contain?

Syria, Libya, and Yemen are the countries suffering the most as a result of the Arab Spring. While in Libya the standoff between the regime and opposition ended with the interference of France, the UK, and the US and the murder of Jamahiriya's leader, in Syria the scenario evolved differently. In the early period of the Syrian crisis, Obama's administration demanded that Bashar al-Assad resign but did not launch a military campaign as in Libya (Ukman & Sly, 2011). Instead, it provided assistance to the opposition and further isolated the regime.

Several circumstances prevented the US from striking Syrian government forces. Firstly, the opposition forces were in a better position than the Libyan rebels, where after several months of fighting they were close to suffering a catastrophic loss at the hands of the government army. The second reason is that the US and its partners avoided carrying out two operations simultaneously. The third factor is the tougher opposition from other countries, as Russia, China, and Iran strongly criticised the possibility of military intervention in Syria. These factors, along with the chaos that emerged in Libya with no better perspective for Syria, prevented the US from entering into an armed conflict with Damascus. Instead, Barack Obama declared that the use of chemical weapons would be a red line for the US (*Remarks by the President*, 2012).

In August 2013, Washington accused the Syrian government of carrying out a chemical attack. Nevertheless, despite the deterrence of the US administration about the "red line," it hesitated to act militarily against the Syrian government forces. Later, Obama defended his decision not to bomb Syria, saying that it was his most courageous decision, despite the fact that presidents are praised for military actions (Abramson, 2017). Washington and Moscow agreed to dismantle chemical weapons in Syria (Gordon, 2013).

If Iran and Russia had not intervened in the early years of the civil war, Bashar al-Assad's regime would have collapsed even without direct US intervention. The Iranian assistance since 2013 and Russian ground operation since 2015 completely overturned the situation, helping Assad to regain initiation and restore control over tens of thousands of square kilometers of Syrian land. The US program of training and other kinds of assistance to the opposition forces did not yield either. The US administration confessed that the training program for moderate opposition had failed (McKelvey & O'Molloy, 2015).

According to the statements of senior US officials, they pursued several interests in Syria, including the demand for Assad's resignation, the fight against terrorist groups, the prevention of the use of chemical weapons, and addressing humanitarian issues (Feltman & Balian, 2021).

The war in Syria was marked by the loss of the "monopoly" of military interventions by the US. Other powers, including Iran, Russia, and Turkey, entered the conflict. This trio also formed a political platform, known as the Astana process, to deal with the problems in Syria. The restraint of the US entailed its distancing from the Syrian developments, and the trio took advantage to negotiate a new-status quo in Syria. With the strengthening of Assad's position, the US also became less persistent in its demands for his resignation.

If the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime did not become a true red line for military intervention, the rise and successes of terrorist groups left Washington no choice but to send troops. The US military campaign in Syria started in 2014, when it became clear that neither Syria, nor Iraq were capable of stopping the rapid advance of IS militants. Both armies collapsed under the attacks of the militants, and they appeared very close to Baghdad and captured large territories in the east of

Syria. In September 2014, the US started to strike the positions of the terrorists, Washington deployed 2000 soldiers of special forces (Mohammed et al., 2015). Along with airstrikes, the US funded, trained, and promoted other assistance to the Syrian Democratic Forces, which mainly consist of Kurdish fighters as well as Arabs (*Conflict in Syria* 2022). The SDF forces, numbering in the tens of thousands, successfully fought against ISIS and reclaimed most of the territories conquered by the terrorist group.

Donald Trump continued his military campaign in Syria and launched strikes against Assad's forces as well. In April 2017 (*Statement From Pentagon...* 2017) and April 2018 (Garamone, 2018), the US forces bombed Syria's bases and positions, accusing them of chemical attacks in Idlib and Douma. The US forces occasionally collided with Syrian, Iranian-backed, and Russian mercenary forces, as well (Weiss & Ng, 2019). With the 2020 presidential elections in mind, Trump declared victory over ISIS and announced the withdrawal of 2000 US troops. In 2019, Trump announced that US troops would withdraw from the territories bordering Turkey, which was a green light for Erdogan to start an intervention against Kurdish forces. The decision was so surprising and unpredictable that Secretary of Defense James Mattis resigned (*James Mattis' Resignation Letter in Full*, 2018). This decision was a horrific blow for the SDF, a US partner in fighting IS (Wilson, 2019). The Turkish invasion forced tens of thousands of Kurds to leave their homes (Beaumont & Chulov, 2019). Turkey established its administration in the northern parts of Syria, which had been under Kurdish control. And in June 2020, the US announced sanctions against Damascus known as the "Caesar Act." It presumed the freezing of the assets of anyone doing business with Syria. (Caesar Syria Civilian... 2020). Biden administration officials defined their priorities in Syrian policy: military presence to prevent the rise of IS, maintaining local ceasefires, and enhancing humanitarian conditions (al-Masri, 2022). A limited US contingent has remained in Syria, conducting local operations. For instance, in February 2022, the White House announced that Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, the leader of IS, was killed (Statement by President Joe Biden, 2022).

What defines US policy in Syria over the past decade is the lack of strategy and consistency, as the country has never been a priority policy direction (Sokolsky & Miller, 2017). First, it hesitated to intervene to oust Assad, then stepped back from its red line. Later, it sent troops to fight against

ISIS, as no one wished or was capable of stopping their advancement. The US military presence in Syria was tactical and limited to the east of the Euphrates. From time to time, US forces attacked Syrian troops and bases, killed several terrorist leaders, repelled attacks on them, and remained detached from conflict resolution, leaving the arena to other powers. The public discontent over US policy in Syria may be summarized in the words of the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who noted that the administration's Syria policy is impossible to understand (Rogin, 2021). None of the US administrations wished for an engagement in the Syrian conflict, they promised to disengage from very unpopular wars in the Middle East. However, none of them have found a way to pull out. The developments in Syria have forced Washington to make situational decisions to deal with emerging problems.

The Agenda of the US and the Gulf States: Iran, oil, and security

"We will not walk away and leave a vacuum to be filled by China, Russia, or Iran," said Joe Biden in his first visit to Saudi Arabia, where he met the leaders of the Gulf Arab states (*US 'Will Not Walk Away'...* 2022). This announcement was made to assuage US allies' concerns about the latter's future plans in the region.

Over decades, the Gulf Arab states (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman), along with Israel, have been key allies of the United States. Because of their oil and gas reserves, these countries have had strategic importance for Washington. The oil pumped in the region has been vital for the world economy and the stability and predictability of fuel prices. In turn, those countries, due to their limited capabilities compared to their neighbours, have experienced an acute lack of security, and the alliance with the US has been the only possible solution to address security issues. The alliance between the US and the Gulf States has been based on this convergence of mutual interests.

The main threat to the Gulf countries came from ideologically different regimes: the republican, Arab nationalist, and, since 1979, the Iranian

regimes. Another threat came from Saddam Hussein's regime, which occupied Kuwait in 1990. The Iraqi threat was neutralised solely thanks to the American military intervention. The following decades were a period of prosperity for the Arab states of the Gulf, given the political stability and the purchase of tens of billions of dollars' worth of arms thanks to the revenues from the sale of hydrocarbons. Since the overthrow of the Iraqi regime in 2003 and the ouster of decades-old ruling groups in several other Arab countries since 2011, as well as the civil wars and instability in many Arab states, the Gulf Arab countries have been claiming a leading role in the Arab world. This is manifested by the use of political, economic, and military force.

Another important aspect of mutual relations is the weapon trade. The Gulf region is a major importer of US arms. Particularly, in 2021, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar were among the top ten importers of American weapons (*U.S. Arms Exports* 2022). In 2016-2020, 46.7 percent of US arms exports went to the Middle East and almost a quarter to Saudi Arabia (*CAAT - US Arms Exports*, 2021). Saudi Arabia imported 13.7 billion dollars in American weapons between 2008 and 2018, ranking first in the world; the UAE imported 7.6 billion dollars, ranking third; Qatar imported 2.63 billion dollars, ranking 14th; Kuwait imported 1.36 billion dollars, ranking 22nd; and Oman imported 842 million dollars, ranking 25th (Frohlich, 2019). The US has a military presence in all the Arab countries of the Gulf region with a number of bases and about 6,000 soldiers (Wallin, 2018).

In short, as vital players in the oil market, major importers of American weapons, and a foothold for Washington's policy in West Asia, the Gulf Arab countries are of strategic importance for the US. In this sense, American policy in this region is more stable and continuous, and occasional frictions do not undermine those relations, as interest-based pragmatism takes over ideological factors.

Despite this clear convergence of interests, the relations between the parties, particularly between the US and Saudi Arabia, have experienced vicissitudes. In the period discussed in this paper, two different attitudes are apparent: Democratic leaders, Obama and Biden, have had strained relations with Saudi leadership, while Republican president Donald Trump promoted pragmatism: the US assists in security, and Gulf states help economically.

The Obama administration insisted on greater respect for human rights and civil liberties in the Middle East, the greatest irritant in US relations with its Gulf partners (Feierstein, 2019). Other concerns for Gulf elites included Washington's support for Egypt's 2011 revolution, which they saw as an abandonment of an ally, Hosni Mubarak. Another fear came from US negotiations with Iran over the nuclear deal.

Human rights were not a priority during Trump's presidency. Trump has made it clear that for US policy toward the KSA, economic interests prevail (Dunne, 2019). Nevertheless, Trump openly blackmailed and humiliated its ally with undiplomatic statements, "We protect Saudi Arabia. Would you say they are rich.... But I said 'King - we're protecting you - you might not be there for two weeks without us - you have to pay for your military' (Rampton et al., 2018). The election of Donald Trump has given new impetus to bilateral relations. Saudi Deputy Crown Prince and Minister of Defense Mohammad bin Salman visited Washington and had a warm meeting with Trump (Chulov & Borger, 2018). Among the topics that were discussed were Iran and its influence in the region, as well as deepening economic cooperation between the two nations. Early in 2016, Trump had said in a television interview, "I would want to protect Saudi Arabia. But Saudi Arabia is going to have to help us economically." Secretary of Defense Mattis assured of his government's support to the Kingdom and its war on Yemen (Statement by Secretary..., 2018). On another occasion, he stated that the US has reinforced Saudi Arabia's capabilities against the threat from Iran and has made the Kingdom more effective with the military (Remarks by Secretary Mattis..., 2017).

Trump's approach proposed strengthening the cooperation between regional allies. That cooperation will enable the US partners to assume more responsibility and be capable of dealing with emerging challenges. The existence of such a capable force will also free the US from the necessity to intervene on the ground and better promote its interests. Trump's administration promoted the idea of establishing a new military bloc (a middle Eastern analog of NATO) consisting of Gulf monarchies, Egypt, and Jordan. This alliance, according to Trump, should fight international terrorism and counter Iran (Bayoumy, 2018). Trump also initiated the settlement of relations between the Gulf states and Israel. The UAE, Bahrain, and Israel have signed the Abraham Accords on normalizing relations. In perspective, those two alliances may create a powerful pole in the region friendly to Washington.

Biden's administration policy towards the Gulf partners was not as promising, as he refused to meet with Mohammad bin Salman for a long time, withdrew Washington's support for the Saudi and Emirati-led campaign in Yemen, revived the negotiations with Iran, removed the terrorist status from the Houthis, and delayed arms deals with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi (Soliman, 2022).

Biden's first visit to the region occurred 1.5 years after his election as US president. Despite public announcements that Biden and Saudi leadership had agreed to increase oil production to stabilize the market, the Saudis did not follow through, which was a setback for Biden and a win for Russia (Mazetti et al., 2022).

In Saudi Arabia, Joe Biden represented his expectations and offers for Saudi Arabia. He welcomed the opening of Saudi airspace to Israel and expressed hope for further normalisation of relations. Biden said that Saudi Arabia will invest in new U.S.-led technology to develop and secure reliable 5G and 6G networks, which aim to outcompete other platforms, including those from China. Washington expects that its allies will ensure global energy security and adequate oil supplies to support global economic growth. Finally, the issue of human rights and the need for political reform were also touched upon. Biden made it clear that the topic was vitally important to him and to the United States. In return, he promised assistance in extending the ceasefire in Yemen and addressing Saudi Arabia's security needs, given threats from Iran (*Remarks by President Biden*, 2022).

This kind of policy convinced Saudi Arabia to hedge its bets against the alliance with the US. China, with its economic expansion, is one of the options for diversification (Schaer, 2022). China has emerged as those countries' primary trading partner. The KSA and the UAE have continuously increased cooperation with Russia. For the US, it is becoming harder to coerce the Gulf Arab states into certain decisions, as they seek more leadership and independence. For instance, the refusal of Saudi Arabia to increase oil production prompted fury in the White House. Biden promised consequences (Baker, 2022).

The Kurds - a friend only to fight against terrorism

The Kurdish issue has been a huge problem for Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran, capable of undermining the integrity of those countries. Over the past century, those states have used brutal methods to eliminate Kurdish political aspirations and suppress the revolts. Nevertheless, they have failed to do so, and the role of the US has been decisive for the Kurds on certain occasions when the interests of both sides converged. In the 1990s, the Americans imposed a no-fly zone over the Kurdish region of Iraq, which enabled them to establish state institutions. Given the fact that the US political establishment had long been weighing the possibility of kicking off Saddam Hussein's regime, Washington was in search of allies for that purpose.

In this term, the interests of the US and the Kurds converged, and the culmination of this cooperation was the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Kurds fought against the Iraqi army and were rewarded with broad autonomy. In 2014, another convergence of interests happened when the Islamic State conquered large areas in Iraq and Syria. Despite the political crisis and hard social and economic conditions in the Kurdish region, the Peshmerga successfully fought against IS with the support of the US military. In light of the weakness of the Iraqi state and Kurdish achievements in the struggle against terrorism and a positive image in the world, they initiated an independence referendum in 2017. However, this decision was opposed by all the neighbours and the US as well. Another example of Kurdish-American cooperation became possible after 2011, when the Syrian Kurds took control over the northern territories of Syria.

Obama was very skeptical about sending American troops into combat in Iraq and Syria, so he needed local partners. The US had no background of cooperation with the YPG (People's Defense Units), but over time it became clear that the Kurds were the most effective force against the terrorists (Gürçay, n.d.).

The Kurdish forces in Syria and the US forces cooperated in several ground operations. The US sought to defeat the IS and limit Russian and Iranian influence in Syria, and the Kurds hoped to fulfill their wishes with the help of the US. The US provided support to the YPG with airstrikes and the

supply of weapons from the air. Washington's support for the YPG was conditioned by a number of factors, including the successful fight against IS and public opinion in the US, which had some sympathy for the Kurds and tended to see them as a force fighting extremism. In addition, the United States supported Kurdish militias in northern Syria to have a partner on a platform that Turkey refused to occupy (Petrosyan, 2015, 27-28).

In 2018, Donald Trump declared victory against IS and announced the withdrawal of troops from Syria. He ordered the withdrawal of all American troops from northeastern Syria in October 2019. Thus, the US gave the green light to the Turkish incursion into Kurdish-controlled areas.

US foreign policy towards the Iraqi Kurds has always been influenced by US foreign policy towards Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. The change in governance in the United States has had no impact on its Kurdistan policy (Hama, 2021). According to Barkey, one reason the US will likely not commit to the Syrian Kurds is that influencing change in the borders of the Middle East would hurt the US status within the region, considering the *Western world's* record of creating or drawing borders (Gürçay, n.d.).

There has never been any indication from the US that it will take the next step and recognize an independent Kurdish state. As a force that could be a reliable partner, the Kurdish-American cooperation was undoubtedly a benefit for American foreign policy in the Middle East. The opposition of regional powers is one of the justifications for the policy of not recognizing independence, as Turkey and Iran will retaliate violently. The US might not be able to take the new state under its protection if other nations launch further invasions as a result of the recognition of the Kurdish state in Iraq. Additionally, the neighbours' pressure on the new state will inevitably have a detrimental impact on the nation's reputation.

Nevertheless, the Kurds' alliance with the US turned them from a marginalised minority into temporary powerful actors for a large part of Syria (Aziz, 2020). Although the Kurds have undoubtedly profited from the partnership with the US, which is why they are pushing Washington for a more active political role, the US has also benefited from the collaboration with the Kurds.

In sum, the US policy towards the Kurds is tactical; cooperation is rather situational, fitting into the wider interests of the US in the region and relations with regional countries. The episodes of active cooperation are short-term, with no signs from the successive US administrations to lift them to a higher level.

Conclusions

In bipolar and unipolar systems, the role of the US was clear—it was a hegemon state. Multiple factors, both domestic and international, have affected US policy and presence in the Middle East, imposing a number of limitations. This paper discussed the factor of regional system transformations and Washington's responses in four instances. The post-Arab Spring system was described as "quasi-multipolar." In this system, some states have been collapsing while others are extending their influence. Because no one is safe from threats, they try to drive potential threats away from their borders by enforcing a more active and aggressive policy. The combined actions of all the actors create an atmosphere that prompts other players to react. In this context, US policy is focused on reacting to emerging challenges and adjusting its policies. For instance, the collapse of the Syrian state created two new actors: the IS and Rojava. The US had to adjust its actions to deal with them. Another example is the rise of Saudi Arabia and Iran as a direct consequence of the Arab Spring. Their strengthening makes them more persistent and less coercive for certain actions. The US presidents promise to end wars in the Middle East but have to re-engage again and again to defend their interests. The US uses negotiations and limited military operations to respond to the emerging challenges and coerce the regional countries to take certain steps. To deal with Iran, the US has been in negotiations to sign the nuclear deal that will limit Iran's nuclear aspirations. On the other hand, it has been pressing Iran economically and even militarily to force Tehran to give up or transform its program. In the case of the Kurds, the US reinforced and assisted them to fight against IS to avoid carrying out a larger campaign at the hands of its military. Occasionally, the US presses and strikes the Syrian forces to deal with chemical weapons problems. Overall, US regional strategy resembles putting out spontaneous fires that occur in the Middle East. In

their turn, those fires emerge from the existing system and order in the region. The US tactic of responding to challenges in the region is often described as absence of strategy, being inconsistent, lacking vision, etc. On the other hand, it is not obvious that any well-elaborated strategy can effectively address those challenges.

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