

# Future Scenarios for The Middle East, Post-U.S. Hegemony

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**Abstract:** *The Americans were successful in taking over control of the Middle East post World War II. The nation, through its diplomacy, democratic values and military strength, has maintained its status in the region. However, as years went by, the Middle East has appreciated this American interference less and less. The U.S and many states in the GCC have decade-long relationships based on friendship and diplomacy. However, the rate at which the position of the U.S is declining in the Middle is alarming. The economic development, technological curiosity regarding nuclear weapons, rich oil reserves and government that can strategically levy it, and the support from Russia and China, pose serious threats to American dominance. The events unravelling in the U.S and the Middle East have set in motion the possibility of the world moving on from western dominance. This paper aims to examine the future of the Middle East post-American hegemony.*

**Keywords:** *Middle East, United States, Hegemony, China, Nuclear Deal, Iran, Israel, Two-State Solution*

## Introduction

The United States has used ‘instability’ in the Middle East to justify its presence in the region. However, parts of the international community are in consensus that a great deal of this instability is owed to the Americans themselves. The Middle East, while it still witnesses conflicts, has come a long way since the 1980s and 1990s, especially in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations. The Middle East remains the biggest source of the world’s oil, and this has shaped the foreign policy in the region.<sup>1</sup> While the success of the region is not equal among all the states of the Middle East, the growth of the region through capitalizing on its energy resources must be applauded. The hegemony that the United States had over the Middle East

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<sup>1</sup> David Oluwafemi Bodunde, “Iran’s Geo-Politics: the Implications of American Hegemony in the Middle East,” *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, April 2021, <https://www.rsisinternational.org/journals/ijriss/Digital-Library/volume-5-issue-4/103-109.pdf>.

served two functions 1) National Security 2) Free Flow of Global Commerce. Neither requires American presence or hegemony in the region. With this knowledge, the nations in the Middle East have embarked on creating strong and robust foreign and economic policies around the globe, causing the decline, but not yet fall, of the American hegemony in the region. The Middle East is retaliating after decades of flawed foreign policy which targeted the Middle East as inferior to the Western Bloc. Despite being the most powerful country in the world from an economic and military perspective, the U.S is facing difficulties in maintaining its leadership in the face of internal and external factors.<sup>2</sup> The United States government has been semi-successful in convincing the world that China is a threat, whereas China is only a threat to American hegemony.<sup>3</sup> This research paper examines the future of the Middle East after it detaches itself from American interference and whether such a future is practical.

Chapter I of the research paper examines the history and origins of the Middle East-United States Administration, which began with the oil trade and further intensified through American military presence in the region to maintain “stability”.

Chapter II explores the challenges and potential cause that contribute to the decline of American Hegemony in the Middle East. Factors such as China’s economic policy for the Middle East, failed diplomatic missions, and the rise of other blocs have impeded the U.S position as a global leader as well as a Middle East mediator.

Finally, chapter III concludes with a dive into the future of the Middle East after American hegemony. By examining the current administration’s policies versus the former, one can assess whether the dominance of the United States can be revived. This chapter also looks into whether

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<sup>2</sup> Emma Ashford, “Unbalanced: Rethinking America’s Commitment to the Middle East,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (2018): 127–48. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26333880>.

<sup>3</sup> “US arrogance the major threat to its hegemony, not China,” *The Global Times*, October 14, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202210/1277163.shtml>.

the Middle East can actually survive without the United States, as neither China, Russia or India has displayed a commitment to the region the U.S has displayed in the Middle East. This chapter also addresses the Trump and Biden Administrations' policies with regard to the Middle East and its contribution to decline.

## **1. The US Policy Towards Middle East From An Historical Perspective**

Despite the traditional American view, enshrined in the Monroe doctrine the U.S aspiration to become the sole superpower in the international game shaped the idea that the U.S had a Global responsibility. Due to the Middle East high strategic value, the initial philosophy of rejecting direct political intervention within other region was retracted in order to curb the spread of communism and terroristic organisations. Washington's contributions through diplomacy, aid, education, espionage, subversion, and military power made the U.S the main foreign State that influenced the Middle East development.<sup>4</sup>

### 1.1 The Middle East during the Cold War

Since the end of World War II, when the United States emerged as a superpower in terms of industrial output and economic power, the aim of American policymakers was to secure status and economic interests. The U.S intended to redesign the post-war landscape through oil, to boost domestic industrial growth and finance a global design oriented towards the capitalistic recovery of Western Europe. Due to the vital role of petroleum for militaries, the U.S that Middle East and its fossil fuel reserves as being a vital strategic interest. Subsequently, the US rapidly became a major political force in the Gulf.<sup>5</sup> Post World War II, the U.S had three main policy objectives regarding the Middle East: to ensure access to the Gulf oil reserves and

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<sup>4</sup> Michael C. Hudson, "To Play the Hegemon: Fifty Years of US Policy toward the Middle East," *Middle East Journal* 50, no. 3 (1996): 329–43. [https://www.jstor.org/stable/4328954#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4328954#metadata_info_tab_contents).

<sup>5</sup> David M. Wright, "Oil Money: Middle East Petrodollars and the Transformation of US Empire, 1967-1988," Cornell University Press, 2021. <https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/9781501715723/oil-money/>.

maintain a stable oil price on the global market, to contain the influence of the USSR in the region, and to ensure the wellbeing of the new-born State of Israel.<sup>6</sup> To do so, the U.S action shifted within various degrees of interventionism in the subsequent years. Maintaining close relationships with regional allies by providing military and economic aid, managing changing scenarios, and controlling the volatile balance of powers became the U.S strategy.

### 1.1.1 US State security policy through Middle East oil

Oil started acquiring a strategic security dimension in the aftermath of the World War II, to successfully end the war and drive Western post-war economic development. Already in 1945 it was recognized that the MENA oil reserves would have played a pivotal role in the global energy market, making it a priority area for the U.S foreign policy. At that time, it was estimated that there were almost forty government agencies dealing with it; moreover, many officials in control of key defense and foreign policy position within the administration had close ties with oil tycoons.<sup>7</sup>

In the subsequent years, the Reagan Corollary to the Carter Doctrine stated that it is in the U.S interest not to maintain good relations with Saudi Arabia and to avoid another Iran scenario. The relationship between the U.S-Saudi governments was strengthening, through petrodollar economy but and military aid. Reagan furnished military equipment and expressed his commitment to protect Saudi Arabia if the Saudi oil reserves were endangered. Progresses was made in the field of regional security, in which the U.S supported the creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council or GCC, a multilateral defensive organization. The GCC was comprised of Gulf States allies, with the main aim to develop a joint air defence strategy, which had limited

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<sup>6</sup> Ilksoy Aslim, "United States and the legacy of the Cold War politics in the contemporary Middle East," *Journal of Social Sciences* XI, No. 1 (2018), <https://dergi.neu.edu.tr/public/journals/7/yazardizini/aslim-i-2018-april.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Michael J. Cohen, "William A. Eddy, the Oil Lobby and the Palestine Problem," *Middle Eastern Studies* 30, No. 1 (1994): 166-80, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4283621>.

capacity. This was since the Gulf allies would be unable to cope with a serious threat from Iran or Iraq without the U.S intervention. Moreover, the States' peculiar identities undermined the functional spill over of unification in the financial, political or security field.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Challenges To The United States' Hegemony

The United States has successfully nurtured and maintained its hegemony since World War II, however in recent years, the nation is facing setbacks in maintaining its position in the Middle East.<sup>9</sup> Although the United States overcame a similar setback in the 1970s, recovery today is doubtful. This chapter will discuss factors and events that contributed to the decline of U.S. hegemony of the United States in the Arab world and future developments that could further accelerate this decline.

### 2.1 Oil, Middle East and Revisiting Diplomacy

While the United States has focused its its time, money and energy on the war in Ukraine, the Biden Administration is facing backlash among American voters for rapid inflation and increased oil prices. Saudi Arabia, one of the U.S.' longest allies, has been criticized for 'war profiting'.<sup>10</sup> While Saudi Arabia blamed the supply cuts on a collective OPEC decision<sup>11</sup>, as the leader of the Organization the decision is still an indicator of a deteriorating relationship with Washington. The Biden Administration initially responded with threats of reconsidering the Saud-U.S diplomatic relations, but did not act further on their threats. This is owing to the

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<sup>8</sup> Waafa A. Alaradi and Hasan A. Johar "Gulf Cooperation Council: Structural and Political Challenges in Establishing a Unified Regional Gulf Identity (RGI)," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 14, No. 2 (2021), <https://go-gale-com.pros2.lib.unimi.it/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=milano&id=GALE%7CA689479468&v=2.1&it=r>.

<sup>9</sup> Fareed Zakaria, "The Challenges of American Hegemony: Then and Now," *International Journal* 54, no. 1 (1998): 9–27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40203352>.

<sup>10</sup> "Biden accuses oil companies of 'war profiteering' and threatens windfall tax," *The Guardian*, October 31, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/nov/01/biden-oil-companies-war-profiteering-windfall-tax-ukraine>.

<sup>11</sup> Leen Al-Rashdan, "OPEC Says Supply Surplus Was Main Reason for Oil Production Cut," *Bloomberg Markets*, October 31, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-10-31/opec-says-supply-surplus-was-main-reason-for-oil-production-cut?leadSource=uverify%20wall>.

following factors. 1) The U.S- Saudi Oil Deals 2) Saudi as an access point to retain control over the Middle East 3) Fear of China replacing its role in the Middle East.

### 2.1.1 U.S-Saudi Oil Deals

President Biden's visit to the Middle East after his presidential win was supposed to seal Saudi's cooperation with the U.S in oil production and supply. However, the Biden Administration was not successful in boosting oil production, which contributed to rising inflation in the U.S Keeping aside domestic displeasure of the Biden Government, the decision of OPEC+ has indirectly affected the Russian-Ukraine war.<sup>12</sup> The OPEC decision plummeted the world, into a deeper crisis, which was already on the brink of recession. The OPEC decision can be understood as a statement of solidarity with the OPEC+ member, Russia.<sup>13</sup> The Biden Administrations' failure to convince the Arab world to side with the Western Bloc highlights the diminished American control over how the Arab world conducts its business and politics.

### 2.1.2 Saudi as the center point of the Middle East

The Americans also know that losing Saudi Arabia as an ally and removing its military from the region would result in losing its presence in the Middle East. The U.S has relied on the proximity of Saudi Arabia to Iran in developing its foreign policy against Iran. Moving out of the region and pulling out military assistance to Saudi Arabia would only aid Iran in strengthening its forces in the Middle East, a scenario both U.S and Saudi Arabia want to avoid.

### 2.1.3 Fear of China replacing its role in the Middle East

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<sup>12</sup> Andrew Desiderio and Connor O'Brien, " 'Enough is enough': Dems rage at Saudis over oil cut, vow to block weapons sales," Politico, October 10, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/10/10/dems-rage-at-saudis-over-oil-cut-vow-to-block-weapons-sales-00061123>.

<sup>13</sup> Simon Johnson, "Op-Ed: OPEC's move to raise oil prices is all about Russia," LA Times, October 6, 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2022-10-06/opec-oil-prices-russia-ukraine-inflation>.

Another concern for the United States, regarding its hegemony in the Middle East, is China replacing its position. China, over developed an economic relationship with the Middle East in the last few years, with over half of China's imported crude oil originating from the region in 2021.<sup>14</sup> The impact and implication of Chinese influence in the Middle East will be further discussed as the article progresses.

Oil and diplomacy have played a crucial role in America ascertaining its hegemony in the Middle East, however, the same has recently contributed to its declining prominence. The factors discussed above have contributed to the U.S losing its voice or being unable to raise its voice against Saudi Arabia, which is a symbol of the decline in hegemony in the region.

## 2.2 The Rise of China in the Middle East

The growing relations between China and the Middle East have gained international attention and caused growing concern among many states including the United States. China, with its long-term vision of conquering markets through its BRI initiative, exporting its industrial surplus capacity, and securing access to critical resources and trade routes, have carved out a spot on the global map.<sup>15</sup> The Middle East, with its strategic routes, which connect Eastern to Western Markets, are of greater interest to Beijing.<sup>16</sup> Unlike the U.S, China has strategically entered the region through robust economic policies rather than military engagement. China has also engaged in business with both Iran and Saudi Arabia, competing superpowers in the region. Ultimately, there was a shift of global power, and this weakened the U.S as it was questioned due to wars not fought in confidence. The success of Chinese rise is due to the ability of staying out

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<sup>14</sup> Yanrong Huang and Dan Han, "Analysis of China's Oil Trade Pattern and Structural Security Assessment from 2017 to 2021," *Chemistry and Technology of Fuels and Oils* 58, 146–156 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10553-022-01362-y>.

<sup>15</sup> Camille Lons, Jon Alterman, Chas W. Freeman Jr. and Jim Moran. "The Rise of China in the Middle East," *Middle East Policy*, 2022; 29: 3– 24, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12617>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

of conflicts as they took neutral position becoming a mediator state for the region of the Middle East. Chinese influence is through trade and diplomatic actions. Even though when the U.S removed military presence in the region this left a void that could be filled by Chinese bases and troops, China did not take this role but was able to increase its influence without having military presence in the Middle East.

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### 2.2.1 Iran-China 25-Year Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement

The Cooperation Road Map between Iran and China was signed in March 2021, which includes cooperation in many sectors such as energy, finance, transportation, and housing. China invested 280 billion dollars in Iran's energy industry (oil and gas) and 120 billion dollars in the

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<sup>17</sup> Camille Lons, Jon Alterman, Chas W. Freeman Jr. and Jim Moran. "The Rise of China in the Middle East," *Middle East Policy*, 2022; 29: 3– 24, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12617>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid



Iranian transportation sector.<sup>19</sup> This is in exchange of a steady supply of oil to China, which would continue to boost their growing economy. China has also offered critical diplomatic support in Iranian nuclear talks.<sup>20</sup> This move by China, not only deepens its presence in the region, but also ruins years of American efforts in isolating Iran.<sup>21</sup> China's support for Iran also can be traced to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), with China backing Iran against the U.S' efforts to revive the deal.<sup>22</sup>

### 2.2.2 China-Saud Relationship

The relationship between China and Saudi-Arabia has transformed over the last decade.<sup>23</sup> China, by entering the Middle East in the guise of economic development, has managed to create strong diplomatic relations with many in the GCC, including revivals such as Iran and Saudi Arabia.<sup>24</sup> Saudi Arabia is the major oil supplier to world's No. 2 economy.<sup>25</sup> China's strategic move of supplying the region with weaponry has furthered the Saudi-Chinese partnership from an economic to military relationship. This power move by China has led to U.S losing its regional powerbroker status in the Middle East. China will play an important role in actualising 'Vision 2030', Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's plan to diversify the

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<sup>19</sup> Farnaz Fassihi and Steven Lee Myers "China, With \$400 Billion Iran Deal, Could Deepen Influence in Mideast," New York Times, March 27, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/27/world/middleeast/china-iran-deal.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Nadeem Ahmed Moonakal, "The Impact and Implications of China's Growing Influence in the Middle East," The Diplomat, July 09, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/the-impact-and-implications-of-chinas-growing-influence-in-the-middle-east/>.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Singh, "When China Met Iran," The Washington Institute of Near East Policy, July 21, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/when-china-met-iran>.

<sup>22</sup> Jon B. Alterman, "China Headaches for Iran Deal," Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 22, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-headaches-iran-deal>

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Y. S. Cheng, "China's Relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council States: Multilevel Diplomacy in a Divided Arab World," *China Review* 16, no. 1 (2016): 35–64, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43709960>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> "China, Arab Nations to Hold Summit in Saudi Arabia Next Month," Bloomberg Politics, November 24, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-11-24/china-arab-nations-to-hold-summit-in-saudi-arabia-next-month>.

country's economy.<sup>26</sup> By providing the region with economic and military support, unlike the U.S who supported it militarily, China is expected to replace the U.S as Saudi Arabia's closest ally in the coming years.<sup>27</sup> However, the decline in Saudi Arabia's trust in the U.S has been declining in the past decades. With the U.S implementing strong and harsh scrutiny over the Middle East post 9/11, Washington has viewed all Arab nations through a lens of suspicion.<sup>28</sup> This can be traced to the U.S's policy of strictly scrutinizing weapons exports into the Middle East. China on the other hand comes in with a fresh start and one without prejudice, which the Arab world has welcomed.

China's Middle East foreign policy strategy China has resulted in the rise of China in the Middle East.<sup>29</sup> The Middle East reassures China that it can easily replace the U.S' status in the region, due to its strong economic and military status. This has resulted in the United States losing its hegemony in the region, despite efforts by the Biden Administration to revamp it. Over the years, the U.S made questionable actions resulting in its declining dominance since 2011. Strained relations with countries such as Saudi Arabia stood out as it is one of the country with the highest level of geopolitical structure.

### 2.3 Failure of the U.S in leading the JCPOA

Former President Donald J. Trump's termination of the United States' participation in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, which led to the re-imposing of

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<sup>26</sup> Bernard Haykel, "Saudi Arabia's China policy is made in the USA," Alarabiya News, November 28, 2022, <https://english.alarabiya.net/views/2022/11/28/Saudi-Arabia-s-China-policy-is-made-in-the-USA>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> David M. Mednicoff, "Compromising toward Confusion: The 9/11 Commission Report and American Policy in the Middle East," *Contemporary Sociology* 34, no. 2 (2005): 107–15, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4147163>.

<sup>29</sup> Theodore Karasik, "The GCC's New Affair with China," Middle East Institute, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17585>.

sanctions, has resulted in Iran resuming and advancing its nuclear program.<sup>30</sup> Pulled out for national security reasons, Trump's call put an end to years of negotiation to dismantle Iran's Nuclear Policy.<sup>31</sup> The failure to stop Iran from gearing up their nuclear activities has made Iran a threat, especially in the Middle East.<sup>32</sup> The United States spread headed the program until 2018 but its inability to revive it shows the downfall of America's voice in the Middle East. American hegemony in the Middle East would be threatened if Iran became powerful enough to force the United States out of the region. If this occurs, Iran will act as a proxy voice for China and Russia in the region, threatening American national security and U.S global power, which is dependent on allies in the Middle East.<sup>33</sup> While the Biden Administration has expressed interest in reinitiating the deal, the Iranian Government, backed by Russia and China, has demanded that the U.S first lift its sanctions on Iran. This crossroads puts the United States in a unique position, in which both pursuing and abandoning the deal could jeopardize U.S hegemony in the Middle East in jeopardy.<sup>34</sup>

The new deal would be different from the original Obama Nuclear deal by including significantly more concessions to the Iranian regime. This would in turn only weaken the American position among its allies in the Middle East, further impeding American economic and

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<sup>30</sup> Laurence Norman and Sune Engel Rasmussen, "What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal? What It Means, from Nuclear Weapons to the Price of Oil," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 16, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-nuclear-deal-explained-11610564572>.

<sup>31</sup> "Protecting America From A Bad Deal: Ending U.S. Participation In The Nuclear Agreement With Iran," *U.S. Government Publishing Office Washington*. June 6, 2018, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-115hhrg31273/html/CHRG-115hhrg31273.htm>.

<sup>32</sup> Kali Robinson, "What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal?" *Council on Foreign Relations*, July 20, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-iran-nuclear-deal>.

<sup>33</sup> Layla Mohey Eldin, "How Iran Acquiring Nuclear Weapons May Benefit the Middle East," *Glimpse from the Globe*, October 12, 2022, <https://www.glimpsefromtheglobe.com/features/analysis/how-iran-acquiring-nuclear-weapons-may-benefit-the-middle-east/>.

<sup>34</sup> Omid Irani, "The Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action And Its Looming Shadow On American-Iranian Relations". *Seton Hall Legislative Journal*. 42:2 2018 <https://scholarship.shu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1133&context=shlj>

political interests in the region.<sup>35</sup> Many allies in the Middle East were already upset about the P5+ and EU negotiating the Iran Nuclear Deal without involving the Arab world, who is most susceptible to Iran's nuclear policies. Similarly, American support for a nuclear arrangement with the Iranian regime would hinder American relations with Israel, which has vehemently criticised the nuclear deal since its inception.<sup>36</sup> By undercutting two of its strongest allies, the United States would further weaken its position in the region.<sup>37</sup>

#### 2.4 The BRICS

As Saudi Arabia, UAE and Iran are eyeing BRICS membership, this could result in a major power shift in the global dynamics. The Middle East giants joining BRICS would shift the power of the group to the East.<sup>38</sup> The new proposed BRICS members would create an entity with a GDP 30% larger than the United States, over 50% of the global population and after Algeria's and Saudi Arabia's candidacy in control of 60% of global gas reserves of the world.<sup>39</sup> Saudi, with its immense potential in energy, and UAE, with its infrastructure and economic growth, come with huge potential to the group. With the new entrants, the organization is also proposing 'BRICS reserve currency' to better serve their economic interests. The new currency will be based on a basket of the currencies of the five-nation bloc: the Chinese RMB Yuan, the Russian Ruble, the Indian Rupee, the Brazilian Real and the South African Rand.<sup>40</sup> If Saudi Arabia joins

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<sup>35</sup> Rohan, Krishnan, "Allies First, Deals Second: An Analysis of the Iran Deal", *The Yale Review of International Studies*. April 2022 <http://yris.yira.org/comments/5682>

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Josef Federman, "Explainer: Impending Iran Nuclear Deal Alarms Israel," AP NEWS, February 23, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-middle-east-iran-israel-europe-f30eca2ae3a7338f8811a49a039c6829>.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Lowe, "The Rise of the BRICS in the Global Economy," *Teaching Geography* 41, no. 2 (2016): 50–53, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26455170>.

<sup>39</sup> Tilak Doshi, "BRICS In The New World Energy Order: Hedging In Oil Geopolitics," *Forbes*, July 21, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tilakdoshi/2022/07/21/brics-in-the-new-world-energy-order-hedging-in-oil-geopolitics/?sh=6ed93b9b24bf>.

<sup>40</sup> "BRICS Working To Develop A New Reserve Currency," *Silk Road Briefing*. October 4, 2022, <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2022/10/04/brics-working-to-develop-a-new-reserve-currency/>.

the group and starts trading in the BRICS currency, it could completely obliterate the dominance of the petrodollar in global trade.<sup>41</sup> The creation of a new currency reserve could be a potential threat to the currently dominant U.S dollar and contribute to the decline in American hegemony. The coalition can pursue de-dollarization to challenge the dollar hegemony.<sup>42</sup> BRICS nations have already advocated to promote the use of local currencies in international settlements in order to build a nondollar alternative global financial infrastructure.<sup>43</sup> They have also taken steps to de-dollarize their economies and protect themselves from sanctions.<sup>44</sup>

### 2.5 Failure of the Abraham Accords

The escalation of the conflict between Israel and Palestine points to the failure of the Abraham Accords which aimed to normalize relations between Israel and the Middle East. While initially it saw the normalization of relationship by UAE and Bahrain, the mandate of the agreement to promote peace in the Middle East has failed.<sup>45</sup> The U.S took central role in facilitating the accord. Blaming the United States for the failure of the Abraham Accords is far-fetched, however, it almost points to the nations failure to act as a successful facilitator in the global domain.

These are among the many factors that contribute to the decline of American hegemony in the Middle East. While the U.S has successfully managed to come out of rocking water such as this in the past, now the nation is crippled with internal issues of inflation and recession, gun

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<sup>41</sup> Gupta, Paurush Gupta, "BRICS currency will give Petro-dollar a taste of its own medicine". TFIPOST. October 21, 2022, <https://tfipost.com/2022/10/brics-currency-will-give-petro-dollar-a-taste-of-its-own-medicine/>.

<sup>42</sup> Zongyuan Zoe Liu, and Mihaela Papa, *Can BRICS De-Dollarize the Global Financial System?* Elements in the Economics of Emerging Markets, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, doi:10.1017/9781009029544

<sup>43</sup> Id.

<sup>44</sup> Ryan Watkins, "Is BRICS a Threat to the Dollar?" U.S Gold Bureau, July 13, 2022, <https://www.usgoldbureau.com/news/is-brics-a-threat-to-the-dollar>.

<sup>45</sup> Jeremy Pressman, "The False Promise of the Abraham Accords," Foreign Affairs, September 15, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2021-09-15/false-promise-abraham-accords>.

control, and a failing health care system. While it is unclear whether the U.S would recover from this decline, it is only time that the before the world should prep for a Middle East post American hegemony.

### **3. Comparison Between Biden and Trump Administrations**

The Biden administration has spent a great amount of time and resources in the past year to differentiate itself from the previous policies of the previous presidency, including through an intense focus on re-establishing a more cordial dialogue with the allies of the U.S government around the globe. However, a great amount of time and resources have been put and are still consumed in mostly domestic issues of the U.S by the current presidency, such as facing a battered economy<sup>46</sup> and dealing with the effects of the Coronavirus<sup>47</sup>.

This leaves a limited amount of time to be applied by the current administration on external issues, and the current strategic priority of the Biden administration is to apply the majority of its resources on deterring the invasion of Ukraine and confronting the advancement of Chinese expansionism in the Indo-Pacific<sup>48</sup>. In consequence, apart from drastic and rapid withdrawal by the U.S. from Afghanistan, after 20 years of war and the resumption of the Iranian nuclear deal, there has been little action by the U.S on the Middle East. Multiple human rights crises in the region, namely in Syria and Yemen with the current Saudi-Houthi<sup>49</sup> war, have yet to

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<sup>46</sup> Quint Forgey, “‘My top economic priority’: Biden op-ed lays out plan to fight inflation,” Politico, May 31, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/05/31/biden-inflation-op-ed-00035951>.

<sup>47</sup> Steve Holland, “Biden says Ukraine, COVID are priorities; Senate Democrats push for spending bill,” Reuters, November 29, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/biden-convening-congressional-leaders-discuss-legislative-priorities-white-house-2022-11-29/>.

<sup>48</sup> Ellen Knickmeyer, “US strategy for Indo-Pacific stresses alliances on China,” Associate Press, February 11, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-antony-blinken-china-asia-united-states-85ca36137fb531fe5da58c122c114271>.

<sup>49</sup> Mwatana, “Violations and Abuses against Civilians during Yemen’s Truce,” Reliefweb. November 8, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/violations-and-abuses-against-civilians-during-yemens-truce>.

be addressed by an administration that has claimed to protect the liberal world order of which the promotion of human rights is a central part<sup>50</sup>.

The Biden presidency has made the commitment to strategically downsize the resources it puts in the Middle East and the presence of U.S military forces there starting with Afghanistan.<sup>51</sup> This was evident through an important public remark when President Biden released a statement through the Interim National Security Guidance indicating that the U.S's number one enemies are states and governments that are identified as quote "antagonistic authoritarian powers"<sup>52</sup>- those powers eager to undermine the U.S-led liberal democratic world order.

While it takes time for the current administration to orient the country's diplomatic apparatuses towards an exact strategic goal, President Biden has inherited a complex legacy concerning the U.S posture in the region from his two predecessors. On one hand the Obama administration made the decision to reposition the foreign policy and regional strategy of the U.S. government in the Middle East away from the neo-conservative Bush-era war-prone approach strategy of the "War on Terror". It furthermore issued a strategic guidance paper in 2012 where it had drawn the commitment to curb military expenditure away from the region and gradually disengage from the various conflicts in the Middle East.

However, the strategy ultimately became an unfulfilled project of reducing conflicts within the region, with the U.S leaving a gap of power that would later be filled by the rise of

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<sup>50</sup> Simon Lewis, and Humeyra Pamuk, "Biden put rights at heart of U.S. foreign policy. Then he pulled punches," REUTERS. September 13, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/biden-put-rights-heart-us-foreign-policy-then-he-pulled-punches-2021-09-13/>.

<sup>51</sup> Jon Greenberg, "Joe Biden declares the war in Afghanistan over," POLITIFACT, August 31, 2021, <https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/promises/biden-promise-tracker/promise/1548/end-wars-afghanistan-and-middle-east/>.

<sup>52</sup>President Joseph Biden Jr, "Interim Strategy Security Guidance," White House Press (2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

ISIS which it helped indirectly create and in the process of trying a pacifist approach to the Iranian problem alienating local allies and partners in the region. On the other hand, the context of tension inside the region got increasingly worse with the Trump administration, which brought a strategically more aggressive and confrontational approach to U.S foreign policy back to the White House in 2016 under the “America First/Maximum Pressure” policy plan. This policy plan ultimately aggravated tensions with Iran and created throughout the region a greater climate of strategic uncertainty.

Ultimately this resulted in a greater militarization in the region by the various actors, with the Trump administration’s favouring a more transactional quid pro quo diplomacy via multi-billion-dollar arms deals that served as strategic rewards to U.S partners in the region, notably the UAE and the Saudi house. Unlike Trump who made his first official overseas visit to Saudi Arabia in his first year in office; Biden made his official visits to the Middle East later on and in a slow and cautious manner, a year after getting put officially into power after being elected democratically.

They have had central meetings with Saudi Deputy Minister of Defence Prince Khalid bin Salman, Emirati Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al Nahyan and Qatari Foreign Minister, Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani. Regional players have made strategic messages to President Biden that they have a vested interest in being more informed and have stated that the Trump administration is more balanced and diplomatic. The Arab Gulf monarchies have made it particularly clear to the Biden administration when they made the decision to close ranks at the al-Ula meeting in early 2020 that for the time being, they want to avoid head-on disputes. This was a clear sign of a new trend of deep-seated transformations that began after September 2019, when President Trump refused to retaliate against Iran after the



drone attacks that targeted Saudi oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais<sup>53</sup>. Efforts to thaw regional relations have also included a Saudi and an Emirati international relations rapprochement with both Iran and Turkey mending fences with the country's regional rivals. However, it should be taken into consideration that the Gulf States are also wary of the domestic shift within the U.S away from military involvement in the region, even as the administration's focus on troop reduction is increasingly less likely to happen.

Calls to do so have been common and have dominated the electoral presidential campaigns of the last three administrations, with the lasting characteristic being that after taking office, both parties have faced difficulties in turning these electoral promises into sustainable, concrete policies. Ambitious agendas, fuelled by strategic realignment or populist sentiment against decade-long "endless wars" have "battered up" in contrast to the realities of the region along with the vested interests of the U.S military and its industrial partners in ensuring an increasing defence budget.

One should also consider that downsizing would require a reassessment of American military bases and accepting the sunk economic, political, strategic and human costs for their maintenance. In the Gulf alone, the U.S 5th Fleet has been harboured in Manama, Bahrain<sup>54</sup>. Troop reductions have been planned but the reality on the ground is that there hasn't been a scheduled major structural transformation that is public. In spite of its strategic feasibility, the Gulf Arab states see the U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan, which is a component of the

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<sup>53</sup> Ben Hubbard, Palko Karasz, Stanley Reed, "Two Major Saudi Oil Installations Hit by Drone Strike, and U.S. Blames Iran," The New York Times, September 15, 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/14/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-refineries-drone-attack.html>.

<sup>54</sup> American Navy, "U.S. 5th Fleet Completes Vessel Boarding Exchange with Regional Partners," November 2022, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/3207123/us-5th-fleet-completes-vessel-boarding-exchange-with-regional-partners/>.

February 2020 Doha Agreement, as a paradigm shift moment in regard to U.S presence in the region.

Since the early 1980's, these countries viewed the U.S military footprint as an insurance policy against the main strategic threat to their national sovereignty and security- Iranian revolutionary Islamic revanchism. Consequently, the GCC monarchies have raised strong doubts regarding the U.S commitment to stand up and deter looming threats to the stability of the ruling families, with the U.S government signing its intention to strategically avoid risks of returning to a position of being trapped in regional conflicts that do not represent their priorities, ultimately giving the signal of leaving its decades-long role as security hegemon and guarantor.

The unabated continuation of the arms sales circle, now accompanying the Biden team, resulted in multi-billion-dollar weapon contracts successfully navigating twists and turns within the power structure of Washington. However, in Riyadh, most Saudi strategic analysts and foreign relations cabinet members remain sceptical about Washington's commitment to the long game in the Middle East. One strategic issue thus entails ensuring the security of Saudi oil production and public infrastructure, with the Saudi kingdom being directly dependent for its security on the U.S resupplying its military with equipment such as interceptor missiles.

To avert this risk, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have increasingly resorted to a balanced diplomatic posture in their foreign policy agendas between the genuine desire to diversify their arms procurement networks away from the traditional American military supply chain. New strategic decisions were made, such as the arms deal signed in August 2021 between Saudi Arabia and Russia<sup>55</sup>, while the UAE leadership has made arrangements with the French fighter

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<sup>55</sup> Mark Katz, "Saudi Arabia is Trying to Make America Jealous With its Budding Russia Ties," Atlantic Council .August 27, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/saudi-arabia-is-trying-to-make-america-jealous-with-its-budding-russia-ties/>.

jet industry, Dassault, to acquire 80 Rafale fighter jets in 2021<sup>56</sup> and made a 3.5 billion dollar contract with South Korea to have in its arsenal the Cheongung II missiles<sup>57</sup>.

It is debatable whether this policy decision by the Gulf Sunni states might prove successful. Both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, as well as Washington understand the strategic reality that the Gulf monarchies military apparatus structure were designed to operate in sync with U.S systems and U.S made technology. However, it should be considered that running a highly diversified armaments architecture is a time and resources-consuming endeavour that is not a strategically sustainable option for either UAE or Saudi Arabia in the long term. Consequently, the primary need to preserve armaments interoperability is bound to keep the relation of interdependence within its long-term strategic boundaries.<sup>58</sup>

As Washington debates which policies should be advanced, U.S warships are still stationed within the Gulf ready for action without any future closures being announced of major U.S. military bases in the Arabian Peninsula. Within this scenario, if President Biden does ultimately decide to go forward with the withdrawal strategy and proceed to effectively change the military and diplomatic presence of the U.S in the region, the U.S government will have the challenge of having to convince and make its partners in the region take more responsibility for maintaining stability in the Middle East.

Consequently, the administration will inevitably have to find a way to persuade its allies to make the strategic commitment to cooperate in a multilateral system and be more self-

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<sup>56</sup> “UAE Signs ‘Historic’ Deal to Buy 80 French-Made Rafale Fighter Jets,” FRANCE24. 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/diplomacy/20211203-france-s-macron-heads-to-uae-aiming-to-secure-major-rafale-fighter-jet-sale>.

<sup>57</sup> Brian Kim, “South Korea Inks Largest Arms Export Deal With UAE for Missile Interceptor,” DefenseNews. January 18, 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/industry/2022/01/18/south-korea-inks-largest-arms-export-deal-with-uae-for-missile-interceptor/>.

<sup>58</sup> Richard Blumenthal and Jeffrey Sonnenfeld, “The Saudis Need a Reality Check: Washington Should Pause Arms Sales to Rein in Riyadh,” Foreign Affairs, October 24, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/saudi-arabia/saudis-need-reality-check>.

sufficient, ultimately achieving its greater goal of saving resources that were in the region and applying them in the other areas of its foreign policy and to regain its credibility<sup>59</sup>. Qatar has taken significant steps and made efforts towards this scenario, as the Gulf state helped broker the 2020 Doha agreement with the Taliban<sup>60</sup> and provided significant logistical assistance for the evacuation of Western diplomatic teams and military troops out of Kabul<sup>61</sup>. Doha has thus made it clear to Washington that despite it being a small power, it has enough credentials and is willing to contribute to the regional security of the Middle East, with its efforts being publicly praised by the U.S government.

On the other hand, the Saudi leadership as well as leadership in the UAE have also seen in the past year full support from the U.S regarding the uninterrupted provision of ballistic missiles and launching systems from the United States as proof that Washington is committed to protecting its allies. Ensuring an air defence system among its partners in the Arabian Peninsula remains a vital issue for the U.S government and despite the confrontational approach chosen by Biden in his criticisms of the actions of the Saudi forces in Yemeni territory during his electoral campaign, once his administration got into power, he adopted a less aggressive attitude.

This can be read as the U.S government understanding that its relationship with Saudi Arabia is too strategically important and that it cannot sever its ties with such a central partner for the stability of the balance of power in the globe. Although Biden can hold Saudi Arabia more accountable in terms of human rights violations, its only relevant action has been taking out

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<sup>59</sup> Rachel Myrick, "America Is Back—But for How Long? Political Polarization and the End of U.S. Credibility," *Foreign Affairs*, June 14, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2021-06-14/america-back-how-long>.

<sup>60</sup> David Roberts, "Qatar, the Taliban, and the Gulf Schism," *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, October 19, 2020, <https://agsiw.org/qatar-the-taliban-and-the-gulf-schism/>.

<sup>61</sup> AP, "Qatar Emerges as Key Player in Afghanistan After US Pull-Out," *The Economic Times*, August 30, 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/uae/qatar-emerges-as-key-player-in-afghanistan-after-us-pullout/articleshow/85761805.cms>.

the Houthi forces out of the U.S terrorist list<sup>62</sup>. It should be noted that although the current administration is more responsible and less impulsive in its foreign policy decisions and strategic decision-making, a more moderate and responsible approach won't safeguard the U.S from the incoming storm of great power competition<sup>63</sup>.

The U.S government will most likely keep a vigilant and active role and try to limit ambivalent attitudes from its partners that may threaten its strategic geo-political interests, goals, and values<sup>64</sup>, as was the case when the Biden administration confronted Chinese influence when, for example, it stopped China's government from its strategic attempt to create a military base in the UAE. Through the Presidents' policies during his first year, we can understand his strategy<sup>65</sup>, and come to the conclusion that although the administration is more moderate compared to the previous administration, its policymaking still fits within the paradigm of the "America first label" since it seeks to restore trust in the hegemony of U.S on all planes of power globally, although through negotiation instead of unilateral actions. The Biden presidency has shown that American policymaking in the Middle East is more based on pragmatism.

However, for a successful eventual exit from the Middle East to happen, the Abraham Accords must be protected and advanced, and for that to happen there is the strategic need to ultimately proceed with the two-state solution.

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<sup>62</sup> John Hudson and Missy Ryan, "Biden Administration to Remove Yemen's Houthi Rebels from Terrorism List in Reversal of Trump-Era Policy," The Washington Post, February 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-yemen-rebels-terrorist-list/2021/02/05/e65e55c8-5b40-11eb-aaad-93988621dd28\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-yemen-rebels-terrorist-list/2021/02/05/e65e55c8-5b40-11eb-aaad-93988621dd28_story.html).

<sup>63</sup> Colby, Elbridge A. and Mitchell A. Wess, "The Age Of Great-Power Competition: How the Trump Administration Refashioned American Strategy," Foreign Affairs, January/February 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/age-great-power-competition>.

<sup>64</sup> Harlan Ullman, "Biden's Defence and Security Strategies Need Specifics," Atlantic Council, December 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/bidens-defense-and-security-strategies-need-specifics/>.

<sup>65</sup> James Traub, "The Biden Doctrine Exists Already. Here's an Inside Preview," Foreign Policy, August 20, 2020

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Strategically, the accords offer Washington a unique opportunity to bring its Middle East partners together for the first time ever as a part of a unique coalition committed to bolstering the forces of stability and peace in the region against the forces promoted by Iran and radical terrorist organizations. After two years, the Abraham Accords lost its original strength, a strategic result of the intensification of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict inside Israel, which is aimed at thwarting violence and Palestinian attacks, setting the country's agenda.

The Biden administration was and is still acting in a strategically slow manner to fully embrace the Abraham Accords, having not advanced any concrete policies to widen or deepen the peace process, even though Israel and its Arab state partners pushed ahead on the diplomatic, economic and cultural potentials of their newfound warm peace. Instead, the administration focused its energies on a different set of regional priorities, including withdrawing from Afghanistan, resurrecting the Iran nuclear deal, and ending the war in Yemen. As these efforts encountered difficulties, important signs emerged of the Biden team's growing appreciation for the value of the Accord.

This includes key diplomatic engagements with important Arab-Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt as well as the Muslim world. While the Kingdom's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Muhamad bin Salman has been supportive of the Accords, there are serious obstacles that still exist to creating a stable and open Saudi- Israeli normalization a reality. One of these obstacles existing at the centre of the current paradigm is the administration's strained relationship with Saudi Arabia due to disagreements regarding foreign policy.

In terms of advancing the security potential of the accords, President Trump's decision in January 2021 to reassign Israel to CENTCOM (United States Central Command)<sup>66</sup> was of great strategic importance, and under its multinational rubric, tremendous opportunities now exist for the U.S to integrate Israel into its network of Middle East partnerships. This will foster both Israel and Arab countries burgeoning military-to-military ties, developing a new regional security framework grounded in the reality of increasing cooperation. If done successfully, these new partnerships can challenge the imperial regional aspirations of Iran in the Middle East and deter it from attempting to cause harm through its proxies and its network of influence on its enemies. This would ultimately shift the regional balance of power in ways that are beneficial for the U.S strategy. This would also enhance America's strategic posture, prestige, and overall power without requiring the direct application of U.S military force, something the Biden administration is also interested in doing.

It was the central role of U.S diplomacy, critical for the Accords success, to continue its central strategic contribution and persistence. Consequently, it is critical for all parties involved, mainly the Arab states and Israel, that the Accords withstand on the long-term, so that access to military technology developed by Israel or the U.S is maintained. However, for this to succeed there must be a greater effort by the Biden administration to advance a dual-state solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Palestinian houses in Jerusalem cannot simply be solely blamed on Israeli leaders and the Israeli government since the fault is mainly centred strategically speaking around the failure of the Palestinian leadership to create a stable

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<sup>66</sup> U.S. Central Command Public Affairs Address, "U.S. Central Command Statement on the Realignment of the State of Israel," September 1 2021, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/STATEMENTS/Statements-View/Article/2762272/us-central-command-statement-on-the-realignment-of-the-state-of-israel/>.

society for Palestinians. The majority no longer supports the two-state solution, and due to it not being viable or realistic, are moving to support a one-state solution, with the civil rights model being the preferred one, although the need for strong partners on both sides that will join forces to change the status quo is necessary.

There are two strategic alternatives that only a limited number of people in Jewish society are currently talking about<sup>67</sup>. The first alternative is correctly considered by the Israeli side as unsustainable for the peaceful existence of both peoples and this is the one-state solution and although it is something that the majority of Israeli society does not accept, this became a reality with the annexation of the West Bank. If things continue as they are, the long-term effect will be the gradual disappearance of a real Palestinian Authority since it will continue to become weaker. At the current pace, the West Bank will inevitably be swallowed by Israel, and as a result, the Palestinian population that lives in it will resist through subversive means against Israeli society<sup>68</sup>. This option is unacceptable to the Israeli elite, since it would put Jews at the mercy of an Arab majority; while the other option which is the only viable path is the creation of a real border between the two people, which would not mean that both sides would independent countries, but rather a clear border separating each other<sup>69</sup>.

The initiative for a peace settlement must be played by an external actor with great influence and only a serious actor such as the U.S can make this process real, and although the U.S government has the capability and instruments to create a platform and promote measures

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<sup>67</sup> Muriel Asseburg and Jan Busse, "The End of a Two-State Settlement? Alternatives and Priorities for Settling the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, April 2016, [http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2016C24\\_ass\\_Busse.pdf](http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2016C24_ass_Busse.pdf).

<sup>68</sup> Moshe Arens, "Two States, Sne State, No State," *Haaretz*, February 2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-two-states-one-state-no-state-1.5438052>.

<sup>69</sup> Bashir, Bashir and Azar Darkwar, "Rethinking the Politics of Israel/Palestine: Partition and Its Alternatives," Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue, 2014, [https://issuu.com/brunokreiskyforum/docs/rethinking\\_-\\_the\\_politics\\_of\\_israel](https://issuu.com/brunokreiskyforum/docs/rethinking_-_the_politics_of_israel).



and policies for a common understanding for both sides, it is central that it also discourages the expansion of the settlements policy. The possibility of the U.S taking such a position is however highly unlikely since the Trump administration officially normalized the settlements, a policy that the Biden administration has not reversed, with his recent visit to both the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli government being marked by the promise that his administration was committed to advancing the project of a peace agreement under the establishment of the dual state deal.

However, a speech is not in itself enough, peace-making measures must be taken, and the current administration is hypocritical since President Biden and his administration have prioritized undermining Russia through the war in Ukraine and confronting the rise of Chinese power in the pacific. Biden understands that his promise is not strategically a serious or feasible one under the current paradigm and with the current approach to the reality of the conflict between Palestinians and Israeli society.

He understands that the current reality on the ground in Israel and in the West Bank as well as the present political reality in the Israeli political system is not conducive to allowing a two-state solution to become a reality or even start its process. Although the announcements regarding financial aid made by the current administration are a positive sign, it is not enough to advance a peace process between Palestinians and the Israeli state. The dual-state solution is consequently necessary for the greater peace and stability of the region.