

# Efforts to Maintain the U.S. Role in The Middle East under President Joe Biden (2021-2023)

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## Abstract

The Middle East region has historically been regarded as a significant area of geopolitical tension and conflict. The Middle East - North Africa region experienced a significant sociopolitical, commonly referred to as the "Arab Spring", upheaval in 2011. This event has brought about a transformative context, exerting a profound influence on the political landscape, altering established power dynamics, and developing an alternative order within the region. Since becoming president in 2021, Joe Biden has shifted the U.S. approach to the region. In light of Middle Eastern developments and the U.S.'s strategic adjustments in this region, the U.S.'s role in the Middle East has declined. The article applies international relations research methods, as well as analytical synthesis and evaluation methods, case study methods, system structure methods, and forecasting techniques. The key objective of this article is to address the question of issues or trends that clearly demonstrate the U.S.'s attempts to maintain an influential role in the Middle East (2021-2023), as well as identify challenges to U.S. interests and goals in this region. This analysis provides a comprehensive examination of the intricate dynamics between domestic factors within the United States, challenges encountered in the execution of its foreign policy, and relevant global concerns that collectively influence of the U.S.'s capacity to sustain its influence in the region. The study suggests that the United States has significant problems in preserving its influence in the Middle East during the tenure of the Joe Biden Administration. Therefore, it is imperative for the United States to contemplate the development of appropriate strategies in order to address and resolve the escalating competition among significant nations in this region, if it intends to uphold its influence .

**Keywords:** Middle East; Joe Biden; the U.S. policy; The U.S. role.

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## **1. Introduction**

The Middle East region has historically been considered an area of great geopolitical tension and conflict. In 2011, the "Arab Spring" crisis broke out across the region, creating a transformative context that had a profound impact on the political landscape, changing the existing power dynamics, and developing an alternative order in the region. Since assuming the presidency in 2021, Joe Biden has made modifications to the U.S. approach to the Middle East region. The evolving situation in the Middle East, along with strategic adjustments by the United States in this region, has led to a notable transformation in the United States' role in the Middle East.

This study aims to evaluate the role of the U.S. in the Middle East under President Biden to answer the following research questions: What is the new points of adjustment in the Biden administration's policy towards the Middle East region? How is the U.S. role in the Middle East region under President Biden played out? What are the main challenges of U.S. is facing in the Middle East during this period?

The study was based on the hypothesis that The United States continues to seek ways to increase its influence in the Middle East region. This study uses research methods in the field of international relations, analytical methods to synthesize and evaluate, case study methods, system structure methods and forecasting techniques to synthesize and analyze related issues.

## **2. Literature Review**

The U.S. involvement in the Middle East has long been a complex and multi-faceted issue, with policies varying with each U.S. president. Each different U.S. president has made different policy adjustments to try to achieve a fragile balance between strategic interests, regional interests and global power. Since Joe Biden became U.S. president, there have been many studies analyzing, evaluating, and predicting U.S. policy towards the Middle East region, especially in light of changes in global power and the threats facing the United States today [6]. Previous research has provided valuable insights into the continuity of U.S. foreign policy objectives in the region, as well as the evolving dynamics of U.S. relations with key players such as Israel, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. Many studies focus on Biden's policy adjustments in this area, such as Hassan Hamdan AlAlkim (2022) using a comparative analysis method to evaluate the suitability of Biden's foreign policy with other Gulf countries and the Middle East region [1]. Hassan also identified issues such as human rights, the Yemen conflict and the Iran nuclear agreement as key points in U.S. policy towards the Middle East during this period. Shelly Culbertson, Howard J. Shatz, Stephanie Stewart (2022), and Anthony H. Cordesman (2022) have all made proposals to reframe U.S. national security interests in the Middle East in the context of changing political security and the economy.

An important aspect of the U.S. strategy in the Middle East under President Biden is that the Biden administration is aware that it is necessary to move away from tough armed intervention in this region as in the past, especially is in the context of the increasingly unstable Middle East region since the 2011 Arab Spring crisis [6]. In addition, this change is also partly motivated by the fact that the U.S. is increasingly reducing its dependence on Middle Eastern oil, as well as shifting towards addressing challenges coming from the influence

of China is increasing day by day in the Middle East region. Many studies show that, while the US is seeking to reduce its military presence in the region, the country still invests heavily in the stability and security of the Middle East, and the U.S. continues to show its prospects and role in solving regional problems [1].

Significantly, the existing literature also points to the potential for complementary U.S.-China engagement in the Middle East, particularly in areas related to security governance and conflict de-escalation [2]. This raises intriguing questions about how the Biden administration may navigate the evolving Sino-American dynamics in the region. However, the research gap lies in the lack of a comprehensive analysis of the specific efforts and strategies employed by the Biden administration to maintain the U.S. role in the Middle East, particularly in the context of the shifting global and regional power dynamics [16]. In fact, the increasing prestige of Russia and China in this region is directly affecting the role and influence of the U.S. Monshipouri, M., & Dorraj, M. (2023) believe that to evaluate the U.S. role in the Middle East, it is necessary to consider emerging points in U.S. foreign policy under President Joe Biden. This paper aims to address this gap by conducting a thorough examination of the Biden administration's policies, actions, and engagement with key Middle Eastern actors, with a focus on identifying the underlying drivers, challenges, and potential implications for the U.S. role in the region during this period after 3 years of Biden's term, from 2021–2023.

### **3. Context of the Middle East region from 2021 - 2023 and the adjustment of U.S. strategy towards the Middle East region**

#### ***3.1. Context of the Middle East region from 2021 - 2023***

The Middle East region has gone through many significant changes due to political, economic and security problems that continuously arise here. The Abraham Accords signed in 2020, between Bahrain, UAE, Morocco and Israel were a notable development during this period. This shift has transformed the region's political landscape, opening up new avenues for economic, security and technological cooperation. In addition, after years of prolonged tensions, Saudi Arabia and Iran have actively participated in many rounds of negotiations, and in April 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran have officially reopened their embassies and resumed bilateral relations through China's promotional efforts [4]. Yemen continues to endure one of the worst humanitarian crises globally due to the ongoing conflict. The Saudi-led coalition and the Houthi rebels have yet to reach a definitive peace agreement despite multiple negotiating efforts, including those encouraged by the Biden administration. In addition, the long civil war in Syria continues. President Bashar al-Assad's government, supported by Russia and Iran, still maintains control over key areas. Conflicts with the opposition continue to erupt. On the other hand, the threat from terrorist groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda still exists, motivating regional countries and international allies to launch large-scale campaigns to neutralize these groups. Furthermore, the US-Iran relationship has remained tense since the U.S. withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018, although efforts to renegotiate the nuclear agreement are still ongoing but have not yet achieved a definitive result [5].

#### ***3.2. The adjustment of U.S. strategy towards the Middle East region under Joe Biden***

The strategic interests of the United States in the Middle East have experienced a notable change in the past

three years under Biden. One of the main reasons comes from United States has shifted its focus towards the China, viewed as a possible strategic competitor and this is the resulting in a shift away from the Middle East. Beside, The Biden administration has its sights set on the Iran nuclear deal and is focusing all of it's energy trying to revive a return towards JCOPA. Beside of this, The United States is in talks with Iran and other parties involved to address the issues to ensure that it sticks by each term of the deal [14].The Biden administration remains committed to prioritizing counterterrorism efforts in the area, particularly focusing on combating extremist organizations like ISIS and Al-Qaeda. U.S. still maintain with nearby allies and global alliances to continues essential in the fight against terrorism. Some other important adjustments in U.S. foreign policy towards the Middle East include providing humanitarian aid and support to those impacted by conflict in the Middle East, including refugees and displaced individuals. This involves backing peaceful resolutions to disputes, tackling the underlying reasons for unrest, and promoting human rights and democratic changes. Based on the legacy of the previous Trump administration's policy of gradually withdrawing the military and giving more autonomy to generals on the ground and then gradually withdrawing U.S. troops from Syria and Iraq; Biden tends to reduce the role of the military more clearly. In the Interim National Security Strategic Instructions (March 2021), the Joe Biden administration emphasized that "military force is not the solution to the problems of the Middle East region. Therefore, the United States will not give military force to its partners in the Middle East as a guarantee for countries in the region to pursue policies contrary to U.S. values and interests" [10]. The Biden administration explains that the purpose of "withdrawing support for military operations" is to "reduce tensions" in the region and "create space for people to realize their aspirations" [10]. This is one of the Biden administration's adjustments in the new context, when America's resources need to be refocused on other issues and when the Biden administration has clearly determined that great power competition is one of the key issues. Important issues that govern the foreign policies and actions of countries in this next period. So if before, the Trump administration's National Security Strategy emphasized military power, now the Biden administration talks more about "integration", "diplomacy"...Biden's foreign policy approach shows many differences from previous President Trump's approach to the Middle East. While the Trump administration prefers a unilateral approach and calculates economic benefits, Biden focuses on diplomacy and multilateralism in solving regional problems. The Biden administration's rejoining the Iran nuclear deal and strengthening ties with long-standing U.S. allies in the Middle East are signs of this clear change. Previously, the Trump administration also tried to cultivate warmer relationships with autocratic governments like Saudi Arabia and implemented a policy of maximum pressure on Iran. These differences in foreign policy approaches have the power to alter regional alliances and dynamics. On the other hand, compared to Trump's approach, which risks escalating existing tensions and conflicts in the region, Biden's approach is expected to bring about a more stable and cooperative Middle East when Biden focus on participating in multilateral organizations and strengthening diplomacy with countries in the region. Recently, the U.S. has shown that it is tending to reduce its presence and military intervention here, gradually withdrawing troops from Afghanistan and Syria. President Joe Biden's National Security Strategy dated October 13, 2022 affirmed that it is time for the U.S. to move away from "large structures" in favor of more practical steps to "build partnerships, coalitions and allies to enhance deterrence, while also using diplomacy to de-escalate tensions, reduce the risk of new conflicts and create a long-term foundation for stability" [11]. The Joe Biden administration emphasizes strengthening economic integration in the Middle East to promote trade development, economic reform, promote growth, and create

jobs. The main tool is deterrence, so according to the National Security Strategy, the purpose of military operations in the Middle East is to counter the military expansion of external elements in the region. Joe Biden vowed to only use force in cases necessary to protect U.S. national security interests, not for regime change or social reconstruction. At the same time, the National Security Strategy also affirms that the use of force must be consistent with international law and security cooperation is aimed at countering terrorist threats in the region

#### **4. Efforts to maintain the U.S. role in the Middle East under President Biden**

##### ***4.1. In solving regional problems***

Although the U.S. still has close allies and a military presence in the Middle East, U.S. influence has in fact declined significantly in recent years. America's prestige is increasingly declining in the eyes of many observers and politicians in the Middle East. This has indirectly contributed to countries in the region trying to reduce U.S. influence.

Since the Arab Spring, America's prestige in the Middle East has been greatly reduced in the eyes of countries in the region. Not only that, the US's intervention actions (whether direct or indirect) in the region have left many major instability in the region. Although the U.S. has been present in this region for a long time, its role as a mediator in Middle East issues is almost insignificant. The bright spot during this period can be Trump's efforts in signing the Abraham Accords. However, the Biden administration's subsequent efforts to promote the normalization of relations between other countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran have not achieved positive results. With a safe, traditional approach, Biden has avoided facing a number of controversial issues, including those he once criticized Trump for. According to Biden's assessment, the Middle East has become "more stable and secure". The ceasefire between the Saudi-led Coalition and the Houthi rebels regarding the Yemeni civil war is a remarkable achievement. The US's efforts and role in arranging a ceasefire ending 11 days of fighting between Israel and the Hamas movement in May 2021 is also a success of the Biden administration. Or limiting the power of the terrorist organization Islamic State (IS) in the region and ending the U.S. combat mission in Iraq is also an important step forward. The Iranian nuclear program is a focus of U.S. policy in the Middle East that President Biden addresses differently than his predecessor. Through the EU, the Biden administration negotiated with Iran to revive the JCPOA agreement that the Trump administration unilaterally tore up, bringing Iran closer and closer to possessing nuclear weapons. Although due to many objective reasons from both sides and due to the internal situation in the US, the negotiations are still deadlocked. However, President Biden has announced that he will maintain Mr. Trump's previous position of considering Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps a terrorist organization. The U.S. is trying to push Israel and Saudi Arabia to normalize relations, but there are still many difficulties. Conflict in the Gaza Strip erupted when Hamas attacked Israel in October 2023, causing Saudi Arabia to pause plans to normalize relations with Israel.

##### ***4.2. The Palestinian-Israeli issue and the Middle East peace process***

The Palestine-Israel conflict is always a hot spot in the region and the world, and the U.S. has taken many initiatives to promote peace. However, previous U.S. actions such as recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and supporting settlement building activities were considered "biased" by the Palestinian side to Israel,

causing the regional situation to become tense. . Under President Joe Biden, the U.S. continues to show its commitment to the Middle East peace process, but with a more cautious approach. The Biden administration emphasized the importance of a two-state solution and called on Israel and the Palestinians to resume negotiations [7]. In 2021, the U.S. government re-established relations with the Palestinian Authority, reopened the U.S. consulate in Jerusalem, and resumed funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA) and criticized Israel for its actions in resettlement areas in the West Bank. Biden visited Israel in July 2022, meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, reiterating his support for the two-state solution, providing \$316 million in economic aid to the Palestinians and oppose Israel's annexation plans. In 2023, the U.S. launched new diplomatic efforts, providing more humanitarian aid and criticizing Israel's actions in the West Bank [3]. However, ongoing tensions and conflicts between Israel and Palestine, especially in the clashes in Gaza, continue to be a major challenge to U.S. peace efforts. The recent outbreak of the Israel-Hamas conflict is putting pressure on the United States to promote regional peace and maintain its image in the region. Resolving this conflict satisfactorily will be a big challenge for the United States.

#### ***4.3. Relations with allies in the region***

First of all, it should be recognized that the United States is still one of the most influential powers in the Middle East, with strategic alliances with countries such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. The Biden administration has continued to maintain security commitments and military support to Israel, evident through the mobilization of troops and military aid. This is not only to protect U.S. interests in the region but also to maintain America's position in the confrontation with terrorist forces and hostile countries like Iran.

However, Biden's approach also faces many criticisms and challenges. His foreign policy aims not only to protect American interests but also to promote democratic values and human rights. This has led to tensions with regional allies, especially Saudi Arabia. The relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia has gone through many storms, from the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi to Riyadh's policies in Yemen and relations with Iran. Biden's criticism of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's policies has widened the gap between the two countries, despite efforts to maintain cooperation in security and economic areas [8]. Recently, current President Joe Biden has made adjustments to strengthen relations with allied countries here, especially Israel and Saudi Arabia. It can be said that President Biden's trip to the Middle East to strengthen the important role of the United States has solved many diplomatic problems as well as opened up prospects for cooperation in economics, science and technology. . This trip also reaped certain achievements in "warming up" relationships with key allies and expanding cooperation with countries in the region. However, currently the U.S. focuses its foreign policy on the Indo-Pacific, so its resources with the Middle East have decreased significantly. The competition between China and Russia here also partly causes Middle Eastern countries to make certain choices and adjustments in their policies with the US, so it seems that the Middle East is increasingly moving away from the US. The United States faces lack of trust from Iran and suspicion from its Arab allies. America's oil-centered involvement in the Middle East is becoming less strategically important as the United States moves toward becoming the leading exporter of oil and gas [15]. The Middle East is in dire need of cooperation on issues of long-term interest to the stability and well-being of the whole region. The Arab Spring has resulted in political

instability in many countries, while extremist and terrorist groups have wreaked havoc across the region. It is imperative for Middle Eastern countries to work collaboratively in order to tackle these region-wide challenges [13]. Recent adjustments in U.S. foreign policy have made countries in the Middle East share a common perception that it is difficult for the U.S. to fulfill its commitments to the region. Israel and Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, are also seeing that current U.S. policies are not strong enough to prevent threats from Iran.

## **5. US challenges in the Middle East under President Biden**

Currently, the landscape in the Middle East has changed a lot. As countries in the region tend to reduce competition and increase cooperation, the two clearest examples are the Abraham Accords and the normalization of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. At the same time, the increasing influence of China and Russia in this region has formed a "new Middle East". In the context of Asia's strong economic growth, Middle Eastern and North African countries are realizing the potential and opportunities from the development of the Asian region and gradually shifting their cooperation to this region. Instead of focusing mainly on relations with Western countries as before, countries in this region are strengthening cooperation with Asian countries more. This could include promoting economic cooperation, investment, cultural and educational exchanges, as well as seeking cooperation opportunities in new areas such as technology and renewable energy. This change not only creates a new opportunity for development and peace in the Middle East and North Africa region, but also opens up the potential for building a more balanced and multilateral relationship in international relations system and help this region contribute more actively to global stability and development. In the current context, through the adjustment of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, the dynamics of U.S. policy towards the region have changed many times. Typically, the announcement of the "Maritime Superiority" strategy announced in December 2020 shows that the U.S. interests are paying attention to the new geostrategic area, focusing on power coming from the sea, in which the main force is the navy, but the Middle East has not met the expectations of this U.S. benefit problem [12]. This is also one of the reasons why in the following period, the U.S. gradually stepped back from its leadership role in the Middle East peace process and conflict management in the region. This withdrawal has left a significant gap for other large countries such as Russia and China to have the opportunity to increase their influence in this region. Oil interests no longer take priority in U.S. policy towards this region because the U.S. is able to provide its own mines to meet domestic demand and export oil. Of course, the U.S. still wants to keep the problem of oil benefits so it can dominate and control the oil supply. Meanwhile, major oil-exporting countries in the Middle East are gradually demonstrating independence and self-determination in oil issues while also setting out vision plans for more comprehensive and sustainable development. The motivation for anti-terrorism cooperation also decreased and was no longer as urgent as in the previous period. In addition, humanitarian issues or conflicts in the region also seem to receive less U.S. attention than before. The wars in Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq, and Libya have consumed too many U.S. resources but still fall into a deadlock; The Palestinian issue has also been kept by the U.S. at the level of "controlling the situation without too much volatility" for a long time. The U.S. still provides humanitarian aid here but does not take too many actions to change its situation. Reality shows that although the Middle East is no longer one of America's top strategic priorities, Iran is still a "thorn" in the implementation of global strategy throughout many terms of U.S. president. In the recently, the world context, which under the impact of new

political fluctuations such as the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the Israel-Palestine conflict, has changed the landscape of world politics, forcing the U.S. to return to its traditional allies in the region. Russia and China have recently performed well their role as mediators in the Middle East region. Over the past years, China has made significant progress in its development, expanding its strategic space and establishing its position as a great power in the region and on the international arena. From 2021 to 2023, China is strengthening economic ties with the region, with trade volumes increasing tenfold over the past two decades. The country is also investing heavily in the region, with a total investment of at least 123 billion USD, especially in Arab countries and the Middle East [9]. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a key driver of its growing influence in the region. In 2021, the Middle East and Africa received 38% of total Chinese BRI investment, up from 8% in 2020. The country's investment in the region has grown rapidly, with a 360% increase in 2020 and 2021 and a 116% increase in construction activity [9]. China's growing influence in the Middle East is seen as a challenge to the United States, which has traditionally played a key role in the region. The U.S. is concerned about China's growing presence and influence, especially regarding its economic and strategic interests. The country has strengthened its relationships with regional countries such as Saudi Arabia, UAE and Israel. Until now, China is trying to take advantage of positive relationships with countries in the Gulf, Israel and Iran. Each of these relationships brings great value to China's investment projects, while also opening up opportunities for cooperation and common development in many different fields. In particular, in March 2023, China was a mediator, successfully promoting Saudi Arabia's normalization of relations with Iran. This is also proof of China's growing influence and prestige in the region. President V. Putin of Russia has deployed a strong strategy to regain Russia's position in areas where it once had influence. Although Russia faces many difficulties in the economic field, it still affirms its role as a great power. Since the "Arab Spring" crisis spread in the Middle East - North Africa region, Russia has demonstrated its role in the Middle East as a reliable partner in supporting traditional allies. In particular, since September 2015, Russia has deployed troops to protect President Bashar al-Assad's government in Syria. By 2019, Russia has gradually become an important and influential negotiator in resolving disagreements and conflicts in the Middle East region. The official visit on October 14, 2019 of Russian President V. Putin to Saudi Arabia and the UAE marked a new and stronger development in the cooperative relationship between Russia and these countries. In addition, Russia has also strengthened multilateral relations and cooperation with many other countries such as Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and Egypt, to promote peace, stability and common development in the region. In 2021, Russia is also the country that creates conditions to promote Syria joining the Arab League and reintegrating into the regional community.

## **6. Conclusion**

Under President Joe Biden, the U.S. role in the Middle East has witnessed many changes and challenges, reflecting adjustments in U.S. foreign policy to adapt to geopolitical fluctuations. Although Biden has tried to restore and strengthen the U.S. position in the region through diplomatic measures combined with deterrence, however, the practical impacts show that the U.S. is facing many difficulties in maintaining its role in this region. The U.S. policy towards the Middle East under Biden has had a certain impact on this region, however, it cannot be denied that the U.S. role is gradually decreasing. The Biden administration's approach to the Middle East has been marked by a shift towards greater emphasis on multilateral cooperation and diplomacy, in contrast to the more unilateral and confrontational tone of the previous administration. This is evident in the



administration's efforts to rejoin the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran, should Tehran remain in compliance, and its focus on nuclear non-proliferation in the region. However, the practical outcomes have been less straightforward, with the U.S. struggling to effectively address conflicts and instability in the region, such as the ongoing crisis in Yemen and the conflict in Gaza. U.S. diplomatic and military measures have not been able to completely prevent conflicts and instability in the region, such as the conflict in Gaza and the crisis in Yemen. This not only reduces U.S.'s prestige but also increases skepticism about America's ability to act as a mediator and protect regional security. The recent years have witnessed a significant shift in the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East, with many countries in the region actively seeking to reduce their dependence on the United States and develop independent relationships with other global powers. The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) initiative and efforts to normalize relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel are typical examples of this change. Although the United States has played an active role in promoting these initiatives, the reality is that Middle Eastern countries are increasingly seeking independence and diversifying their international relationships. Especially now, the influence of China and Russia in the Middle East is gradually growing, especially after Russia and China performed well their role as mediators by helping normalize relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as helping Syria rejoin the Arab alliance. On the other hand, the dramatic change in U.S. policy over the past decade - from Obama to Trump and Joe Biden - has increased the sense of uncertainty among Middle Eastern countries about their relationship with the U.S. Many countries in the region also want to maintain good relations with China due to China's growing economic influence over the Middle East. In the foreseeable future, the U.S. role in the Middle East is likely to face significant challenges. Countries in the region will continue to seek ways to reduce their dependence on the U.S. and expand cooperation with other powers such as China and Russia. This reflects a change in the regional and world political situation. Although the United States still maintains an important role in the fields of security and economics, it will need to adjust its strategy to adapt to the new context, at the same time, it seeks multilateral cooperation measures to maintain its influence in the Middle East.

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