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Donald Trump's Relationship with the Middle East: A Critical Approach in Light of the Structural Transformations of U.S. Policy

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Abstract: The article examines the changes in U.S. policy toward the Middle East under Trump, describing them as a transition from a liberal approach to a utilitarian "pragmatic realism" under the banner "America First." This policy focused on the direct exchange of interests and the marginalization of democratic values, which led to a diplomatic rupture in the form of a total alignment with Israel through the relocation of the embassy and the Abraham Accords, prevailing over Palestinian rights. In the security arena, Trump has adopted a strategy of "maximum pressure" and sanctions against Iran, while avoiding a direct military confrontation. Despite tactical advances, this approach has eroded confidence in the U.S. role, increased regional polarization, and opened the way for rival powers such as China and Russia, amid the Biden administration's attempts to return to diplomatic multilateralism.

Keywords: Donald Trump, Middle East, Abraham Accords, Maximum Pressure (Iran), Palestine Question.

Introduction

Donald Trump's policy toward the Middle East represents a revealing model of the shift from the liberal-institutional approach that characterized U.S. foreign policy after the Cold War to a pragmatic realist orientation marked by clear utilitarianism. The Trump administration redefined the role of the United States in the region as a contractual role based on the exchange of direct interests rather than on long-term strategic commitments or value-based narratives related to democracy and human rights.

At the political level, the Trump administration introduced a clear rupture with traditional American diplomatic norms in dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict. The recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the relocation of the U.S. embassy to the city constituted a structural shift in the American position, contributing to the reconfiguration of the balance of the conflict in Israel's favor while simultaneously undermining the legitimacy of the U.S. role as an impartial mediator. From a critical perspective, this policy did not aim at resolving the conflict so much as it sought to impose new political realities that redefine the concept of "peace" in accordance with the Israeli-American vision, disregarding the structural imbalance of power and the rights of the Palestinian side[1].

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In the same context, the Abraham Accords represented an expression of a new conception of regional security based on bypassing the Palestinian issue as a central entry point to stability in the Middle East. Although these agreements achieved a diplomatic breakthrough in terms of Arab–Israeli relations, from a critical analytical perspective they reflect a shift in U.S. policy from addressing the roots of the conflict to managing its consequences, thereby entrenching the logic of “economic peace” and security alliances at the expense of political justice[2].

From a security perspective, Trump’s policy toward Iran was characterized by a striking duality. On the one hand, his administration adopted a strategy of “maximum pressure” by withdrawing from the nuclear agreement and imposing unprecedented sanctions; on the other hand, it showed reluctance to engage in a comprehensive military confrontation. This contradiction contributed to increased regional insecurity, as it led to an escalation of proxy conflicts in several Middle Eastern arenas, particularly in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, without offering an integrated vision for managing regional balances.

Economically, the Trump administration reduced its relationship with the Middle East primarily to its commercial dimension, especially through arms deals and investments. This orientation reveals a retreat of the value-based dimension in U.S. foreign policy in favor of a growing logic of profit and loss. From a critical perspective, this approach reinforced allied regimes without linking American support to political or institutional reforms, which negatively affected the prospects for democratic transformation and sustainable stability in the region [3].

In analytical conclusion, it can be argued that Trump’s policy toward the Middle East was not merely a temporary deviation, but rather an expression of a deeper crisis in the structure of the American global role, as multilateral leadership receded in favor of short-term unilateral policies. While this policy achieved immediate tactical gains, its long-term consequences revealed increased regional polarization, erosion of trust in the U.S. role, and the opening of space for competing international and regional powers to reshape the balance of power in the Middle East.

Methodology

The approach used in this study involves a qualitative analytical research methodology aimed at analyzing the significant shifts in the foreign policy patterns of the United States towards the Middle East during the presidential Trump administration. This study is based primarily on secondary sources of data from an in-depth literature review of relevant academic literature, policy documents, academic articles, books, and conference proceedings on U.S. foreign policy, international relations, and Middle Eastern geopolitics. These sources were chosen for their significance, reliability, and the value they add to the exploration of the development of the American stance towards the region. Employing a critical-interpretive analytical capacity, the research assesses flagship US political economic and security decisions under the Trump administration, such as the symbolic gesture of recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, the moving of the US embassy, the promotion of the Abraham Accords and the “maximum pressure” strategy against Iran. The paper also analyses the wider geopolitical impacts of such policies on the regional order, alliances, and the international balance of power among actors such as Russia and China. Comparative analysis was further used to examine foreign policy continuity and change from Trump to previous and later administrations on the challenges of multilateralism, diplomacy, and military presence in the region. This methodology allows for an integrative assessment of how ideological orientations, domestic political dynamics, and strategic interests helped formulate and implement U.S. policy in the Middle East under Trump by synthesizing insights from multiple scholarly perspectives. This qualitative analytical approach offers an essential foundation for understanding both the regional and global consequences of these developments, both for the future of

American national security policy and for the broadly transformative reconfiguration of the nature of American world leadership.

Result

One of the relevant previous studies is entitled “Call for Papers: U.S. Policies and Strategic Transformations in the Middle East,” which aimed to analyze the transformations in U.S. policy under the administration of President Donald Trump, with particular emphasis on their impact on the region. This conference was held at the headquarters of the Academy of International Relations in the United Kingdom on 6-8 November 2025 [4].

Trump’s policy toward the Middle East witnessed structural transformations, representing a departure from the traditional approach based on realism, the security of Israel, and the flow of oil. It was characterized by a “strategic deal” combining economic pragmatism, arms sales, normalization agreements, and a strategy of maximum pressure on Iran. The slogan “America First” governed this policy, as external costs were reduced in favor of domestic gains, while the limits of power were tested vis-à-vis Iran, Turkey, China, and Russia.

Policies thus became an instrument for reproducing balances of power and weakening the influence networks of rivals. In practical terms, three main trajectories emerged: reshaping alliances by integrating Israel with Arab states; employing economic sanctions as a deterrent tool, particularly through the “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran; and military repositioning, including withdrawal from Syria and reductions in Iraq and Afghanistan, which opened space for other powers.

These developments generated debate as to whether they represented retreat or tactical redeployment. They relied on non-traditional instruments such as economic measures, sanctions, cyber warfare, and new forms of diplomacy. The conference provided a platform for analyzing these transformations and for offering analytical and forward-looking perspectives on regional security, the nation-state, and geopolitical balances. It sought to foster dialogue among academics, policymakers, and experts to discuss issues such as the formulation of security equations, the limits of success and failure, and the reordering of regional priorities under conditions of uncertainty.

Another relevant study is entitled “Multilateralism in U.S. Foreign Policy under the Biden Administration: Between Continuity with the Trump Era and Change,” by Abbasi, Adel and Ghazi, Farouk, published in the *Algerian Journal of Human Security*, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 650–668, 2022.[5]

This study addresses the issue of multilateralism in U.S. foreign policy under President Biden’s administration. The central problem it raises concerns whether the orientations of the current administration fall within a framework of continuity with its predecessor, Trump, or represents a shift toward change. The study identifies a pattern of fluctuation in the degree of commitment to multilateralism as a tool of U.S. foreign policy under several previous administrations, from Clinton to Obama, for example. This pattern is also evident under the current Biden administration through foreign policy discourse and decisions taken within less than one year, which reflect an attempt to implement a project of change in U.S. foreign policy by restoring multilateralism. This stands in contrast to Trump, who adopted the slogan “America First” in his approach to U.S. foreign policy, thereby favoring unilateral action over multilateralism. Despite the clear tendency of President Biden toward multilateral international action, the possibility of unilateral behavior in the future remains plausible whenever this becomes necessary in accordance with U.S. national interests.

Another study is entitled “U.S. Foreign Policy during the Presidency of Donald Trump (2017–2021).” Publisher: The Arab Democratic Center, Berlin. Authorship: A collective work by a number of researchers, published on 24 November 2021, first edition. This collective volume was produced as part of the initiative to support young researchers

in authoring joint books, sponsored by the Arab Democratic Center (Germany–Berlin) in cooperation with the Scientific Research Forum. Head of the Scientific Committee: Dr. Islam Ayadi, Assistant Professor at the Arab American University and researcher in international relations[6].

The Trump presidency (2017–2021) constituted a watershed phase in global diplomacy due to its confrontational behavior toward international actors. The slogan “America First” encapsulated his foreign policy, which was expressed through unilateral and confrontational practices marked by continuous fluctuation and confusion. These practices were characterized by unpredictability, lack of coherence, strained relations with European allies, and support for populist and nationalist governments. Trump’s policy reflected internal developments within the United States, notably the rise of nationalism and populism, as well as a protectionist tendency aimed at restoring “American greatness.” He adopted a confrontational style through controversial Twitter statements and demonstrated affinity with far-right currents and with Huntington’s ideas on the “clash of civilizations.” By the end of his term, a commercial “cold war” with China had emerged (since 2018), revealing the fragility of unipolar American hegemony after 1991. U.S. foreign policy thus became both a background and an outcome of domestic social mobilization, leaving long-term effects shaped by his mobilized popular base.

Another relevant study is entitled “U.S. Foreign Policy toward the Middle East between the Trump and Biden Administrations,” published in the *Academic Journal of Legal and Political Research*, issued by the Faculty of Law and Political Science at the University of Ghardaia (Algeria). Its ninth issue (Part Two) was published on 25 September 2025, pp. 740–760. The authors are Tassi Nour El-Houda and Abdelaziz Lazhar, researchers in foreign policy and international relations, whose work focuses on analyzing U.S. transformations in the Middle East[7].

Trump’s policy focused on the doctrine of “peace through strength,” manifested in withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear agreement, the imposition of severe sanctions on Tehran, and strong support for Israel through the relocation of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem and the Abraham Accords. This approach also emphasized strengthening bilateral alliances and reducing military presence in Syria and Iraq.

The Biden administration maintained elements of continuity, such as support for normalization and the fight against ISIS, but adopted a multilateral diplomatic approach toward dialogue with Iran and de-escalation, alongside withdrawal from Afghanistan and a reduced strategic focus on the Middle East.

While presidential personality led to certain changes, continuity in supporting Israel and in reducing military influence remained constant. This dynamic reshaped regional interactions between a model of bilateral power politics under Trump and a model of collective diplomacy under Biden.

Another study is entitled “The American Strategy in the Middle East between Constants and Variables under Trump,” prepared by Dr. Khaled Hashem Mohammed, researcher at the Iraqi Center for Strategic Studies of the Arab Democratic Center, dated 15 April 2019 [8].

Trump adopted the “America First” approach while maintaining core constants such as combating terrorism (ISIS), ensuring Israel’s security, guaranteeing the flow of oil at acceptable prices, and preserving the stability of allies (the Gulf states and Egypt). However, he introduced changes in operational mechanisms, including the use of strict sanctions against Iran instead of diplomacy, pressure on allies to bear the costs of protection, and the reduction of military interventions.

In comparison with Obama, Trump rejected conditional democracy promotion and large-scale interventions, favoring economic deals and the so-called “Deal of the Century,” which was biased in favor of Israel, along with a new strategic alliance against Iran. The

main determinants of this policy included domestic isolationist tendencies, shale oil production, a strategic pivot toward Asia, and the rise of Russia, which constrained American influence. From a critical perspective, although pragmatic, this approach intensified tensions and enhanced the influence of rival powers, while maintaining the continuity of U.S. interests through more rigid mechanisms.

Another study is entitled **“The Middle East at a Crossroads: Has the Era of American Hegemony Ended?”** published by the **Bayan Center for Studies and Planning** on **23 November 2024**, authored by **Rami Al-Shammari**, a researcher in regional affairs [9].

The study analyzes the decline of American hegemony in the Middle East as a result of the failure of the democracy model, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and continued support for Israel and authoritarian regimes. The Arab Spring generated widespread disillusionment, while the policy of “maximum pressure” on Iran further intensified sectarian tensions.

Russia and China—whose Chinese investments have reached approximately USD 123 billion—have emerged as flexible economic and political alternatives. The Gulf States have begun to oscillate toward new alliances, a development that threatens Washington’s traditional interests in the region [10][11][12][13][14][15].

Conclusion:

This paper critically analyzed the structural changes in American foreign policy toward the Middle East under the presidency of Donald Trump that have witnessed a profound transition from the conventional liberal-institutional paradigm to a pragmatic realist school based on the “America First” doctrine. The results underscore an era where the Trump administration reframed U.S. engagement in the region as more transactional characterized by short-term strategic goals, as opposed to long-term value-based initiatives surrounding democracy promotion and multilateralism. Major highlights were the political consolidation on Israel reflected in the endorsement of Jerusalem as its capital and the normalization transaction known as the Abraham Accords, the transfer of the “maximum pressure” policy vis-a-vis Iran from the political domain to the economic domain through sanctions while avoiding a full-scale military conflict, and the gradual marginalization of diplomatic mediation to make room for economic and security deals. While these policies produced some tactical victories, such as consolidating bilateral partnerships and furthering normalization deals, they also exacerbated regional polarization, undermined the credibility of the United States as an impartial broker in regional disputes, and created space for rising global powers, like China and Russia, to deepen their influence in the Middle East. These findings have implications that expansion away from unilateral and interest based approaches towards foreign policy will lead to a new light in the regional balance of power while straining the ability of the US to exert liberal hegemony. More generally from an international relations perspective, the research cautions policymakers from too heedlessly prioritising short and medium-term strategic gains at the expense of long-term diplomatic credibility and regional stability. Yet, this study is primarily descriptive, being confined within the Trump administration time frame; additional research should provide comparative studies across U.S. administrations, assess the long-term implications of the policy sea changes, and assess the extent to which changes in global power competition are likely to continue to reshape U.S. relations with the Middle East.

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