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# Patterns and Dynamics of United States Military, Diplomatic, and Security Engagement in the Middle East

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## Abstract

This study examined the dynamics of United States strategic engagement in the Middle East between 2001 and 2025, focusing on its military, diplomatic and security dimensions. It investigated how American strategic interests, regional alliances, energy security, geopolitical influence and emerging security threats have shaped United States foreign policy towards the region. The study adopted a qualitative documentary research design, relying on secondary data obtained from United States government publications, Congressional Research Service reports, international organisations, scholarly journals and relevant policy documents. Data were analysed using qualitative content and thematic analysis, guided by Realist Theory and Liberal Institutionalism. The findings revealed that United States engagement in the Middle East has been sustained through military interventions, defence agreements, arms transfers, intelligence-sharing, diplomatic negotiations and regional security partnerships. The study further established that the strategic importance of Middle Eastern countries extends beyond petroleum resources to include military geography, maritime access, intelligence cooperation and diplomatic influence. While Saudi Arabia remains significant because of its substantial oil reserves and influence in global energy markets, Israel, Qatar, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates provide essential military, logistical and security advantages. Major developments, including the September 11 attacks, the Iraq War, the Arab Spring, the Iran nuclear agreement, the Abraham Accords and the Gaza conflict, have significantly influenced American strategic priorities. The study concludes that United States engagement reflects an interconnected pursuit of national interests, regional influence and international security. It recommends stronger diplomatic conflict resolution, balanced regional partnerships, accountable military assistance and multilateral security cooperation to promote sustainable peace and stability in the Middle East.

**Keywords:** Diplomatic Engagement, Foreign Policy, Middle East, Military Cooperation, Regional Stability, Security Cooperation, Strategic Engagement, United States

## Introduction

The Middle East remains one of the most strategically significant regions in international relations due to its geopolitical position, vast energy resources, religious and cultural importance, and persistent security challenges. Its strategic importance has continued to shape the foreign policies of major global powers, particularly the United States, whose engagement in the region has been influenced by concerns about regional stability, access to energy resources, the security of Israel, counterterrorism, nuclear proliferation, and the protection of international trade routes (Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2025; Structure, Agency, and Persian Gulf Security, 2024). Consequently, United States involvement in the Middle East has developed through a combination of military partnerships, diplomatic negotiations, security assistance, intelligence cooperation, arms transfers, and strategic alliances designed to advance its national interests and maintain its influence in the region (CRS, 2024; Ulrichsen, 2025).

Historically, United States engagement in the Middle East has evolved in response to changing international political conditions, regional conflicts,

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and emerging security threats. During the Cold War, American involvement was largely influenced by the need to contain Soviet influence, protect access to strategic energy resources, and maintain relationships with governments considered important to Western security interests. Following the end of the Cold War, the United States expanded its military and diplomatic presence, particularly after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990–1991, while subsequent developments, including the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, significantly transformed the nature and scope of American engagement (CRS, 2025). These developments strengthened the importance of counterterrorism operations, military interventions, intelligence-sharing arrangements, and security partnerships as major instruments of American foreign policy in the region (CRS, 2025).

Military cooperation constitutes one of the most visible dimensions of United States engagement in the Middle East. This cooperation involves the establishment and maintenance of military bases, defence agreements, joint military exercises, arms transfers, military training, intelligence-sharing arrangements, and operational collaboration with regional partners. Countries such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan have maintained different forms of military and defence relationships with the United States, reflecting the importance of bilateral and multilateral security arrangements in American regional strategy (CRS, 2025; Ulrichsen, 2025). These military partnerships provide opportunities for the United States to strengthen the defence capabilities of its regional allies, improve military interoperability, support counterterrorism activities, deter perceived threats, and maintain strategic access to important locations across the Middle East (CRS, 2024; U.S. Department of Defense, 2025).

Similarly, diplomatic engagement represents an important instrument through which the United States pursues its foreign policy objectives in the Middle East. American diplomatic activities include bilateral negotiations, multilateral consultations, peace initiatives, conflict mediation, strategic dialogues, and diplomatic agreements aimed at managing regional tensions and promoting cooperation among competing political actors. One significant example is the Abraham Accords of September 2020, which facilitated the normalization of diplomatic relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, with Morocco subsequently joining the normalization process (Kateb, 2025). The agreements demonstrated the use of diplomatic engagement to promote regional cooperation, strengthen political relationships, and advance shared economic and security interests. Nevertheless, the continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the subsequent war in Gaza have demonstrated the difficulties associated with achieving sustainable diplomatic outcomes in the region (Kateb, 2025; CRS, 2025).

Security cooperation also occupies a central position in United States engagement in the Middle East, particularly in addressing transnational security threats and strengthening the capabilities of regional governments. This dimension encompasses counterterrorism initiatives, intelligence exchange, border security, maritime surveillance, cybersecurity, weapons proliferation prevention, and the development of integrated air and missile defence systems (CRS, 2024; U.S. Department of Defense, 2025). The United States has supported regional security institutions and partner governments through military assistance, training programmes, intelligence collaboration, and defence technology transfers to address threats associated with extremist organizations, regional rivalries, and state-sponsored military activities (CRS, 2025). These arrangements demonstrate that American security engagement extends beyond direct military intervention to include preventive security measures and institutional partnerships intended to strengthen the capacity of regional allies to respond to emerging threats (Ulrichsen, 2025).

Recent developments have further demonstrated the changing character of American military, diplomatic, and security engagement in the Middle East. The October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel and the subsequent Israeli military operations in Gaza intensified regional tensions and created additional diplomatic and security challenges for the United States (CRS, 2025). The escalation of tensions involving Iran, Israel, armed non-state groups, and other regional actors also increased concerns about the security of American military personnel, regional partners, maritime routes, and critical infrastructure (CRS, 2025). In response to these developments, American engagement has involved diplomatic consultations, military support for regional partners, deterrence operations, and efforts to prevent the expansion of regional conflicts (CRS, 2025). Furthermore, the United States and the United Arab Emirates signed a Major Defense Partnership Letter of Intent in May 2025, providing a framework for enhanced military cooperation, joint capability development,

defence innovation, and interoperability (U.S. Department of Defense, 2025).

Despite the longstanding nature of these relationships, United States engagement in the Middle East has become increasingly complex due to changing regional power relations, competing national interests, disagreements among strategic partners, and the growing involvement of other international actors. The United States continues to maintain significant defence and security relationships with Gulf countries, although these relationships are also shaped by partner governments' changing perceptions of American commitments, regional threats, and their own strategic priorities (Ulrichsen, 2025). Similarly, the expansion of diplomatic and economic relationships between Middle Eastern countries and other global powers has introduced additional considerations into American regional policy and security calculations (CRS, 2025). These developments suggest that United States engagement cannot be understood exclusively through military intervention or diplomatic relations but requires an integrated examination of the interactions among military partnerships, diplomatic initiatives, and security cooperation.

Against this background, examining the dynamics of United States strategic engagement in the Middle East is important for understanding the instruments, patterns, and objectives through which American foreign policy is implemented in the region. An analysis of its military, diplomatic, and security dimensions provides an opportunity to establish how these instruments complement one another in advancing American strategic interests, maintaining regional partnerships, responding to security threats, and influencing regional political developments (CRS, 2025; Ulrichsen, 2025). The study therefore examines the patterns and dynamics of United States strategic engagement in the Middle East, with particular attention to military cooperation, diplomatic relations, and security partnerships. It also considers how these forms of engagement have evolved in response to regional conflicts, changing geopolitical circumstances, and emerging security challenges, particularly within the period 2001–2025.

## Literature Review

### Concept of Strategic Engagement

Strategic engagement refers to the deliberate involvement of a state in the political, economic, military, diplomatic, and security affairs of another state or geographical region to advance its national interests and foreign policy objectives. It involves the application of different instruments of national power, including diplomacy, military capabilities, economic assistance, strategic partnerships, and security cooperation, to influence international developments and maintain relationships with relevant actors (Nye, 2021; Brands, 2022). In international relations, strategic engagement is an important mechanism through which powerful states pursue their geopolitical interests, respond to external threats, strengthen alliances, and influence the distribution of power within the international system (Ikenberry, 2020; Brands, 2022).

United States strategic engagement in the Middle East represents a combination of long-term geopolitical interests and responses to changing regional circumstances. Such engagement has historically involved maintaining military access, supporting regional partners, protecting international energy and maritime routes, countering terrorism, preventing nuclear proliferation, and influencing regional political developments (CRS, 2025). The American approach has also involved the use of diplomatic negotiations, defence agreements, economic assistance, intelligence cooperation, and military deployments to preserve its strategic position and respond to emerging security challenges (CRS, 2025; U.S. Department of Defense, 2024).

Strategic engagement is not necessarily limited to direct military intervention or the establishment of permanent military facilities. It may also involve diplomatic dialogue, bilateral agreements, multilateral institutions, security assistance, economic partnerships, and indirect forms of influence. These instruments enable states to pursue their national interests while managing the political, economic, and security consequences of international interactions (Ikenberry, 2020; Brands, 2022). Therefore, understanding United States engagement in the Middle East requires examining the interconnected roles of military cooperation, diplomatic relations, and security partnerships in the implementation of American foreign policy.

### Concept of United States Foreign Policy in the Middle East

Foreign policy refers to the principles, decisions, strategies, and actions through which a sovereign state manages its relationships with other countries and international organizations. It provides the framework for pursuing national interests, protecting territorial integrity, promoting economic objectives, maintaining international influence, and responding to external threats. Foreign policy is implemented through diplomatic negotiations, international agreements,

economic policies, military activities, and participation in multilateral institutions (Hill, 2016; Hudson, 2020).

United States foreign policy towards the Middle East has been shaped by a combination of geopolitical, economic, ideological, and security considerations. These include the protection of Israel, the security of energy supplies, counterterrorism, the prevention of nuclear proliferation, regional stability, and the maintenance of American strategic influence. The importance attached to these interests has influenced the nature of American relationships with regional governments and the instruments employed to advance its objectives (CRS, 2025).

Between 2001 and 2025, American foreign policy in the Middle East experienced significant transformations as a result of international terrorism, military interventions, political transitions, regional conflicts, and changing global power relations. The September 11, 2001 attacks increased the importance of counterterrorism and military operations, while the 2003 invasion of Iraq expanded American involvement in regional political and security affairs. Subsequently, the Obama administration emphasized diplomatic engagement and adjustments to the American military presence, including the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran. The Trump administration adopted a different approach through increased pressure on Iran and the promotion of regional normalization agreements, while the Biden administration combined diplomatic initiatives, regional security partnerships, and military support for allies (CRS, 2025).

Consequently, American foreign policy in the Middle East should be understood as an evolving strategic process rather than a fixed policy orientation. Although successive administrations have differed in their approaches, the protection of American national interests, regional security partnerships, and the preservation of strategic influence have remained important considerations in their engagement with the region (CRS, 2025).

Concept of Military Cooperation

Military cooperation refers to formal and informal arrangements through which two or more states collaborate in defence-related activities to achieve shared security objectives. It includes defence agreements, joint military exercises, arms transfers, military training, intelligence-sharing, logistical support, operational coordination, and the establishment of military facilities. Such cooperation is designed to strengthen defence capabilities, improve military effectiveness, enhance interoperability, and provide mechanisms for responding collectively to security threats (CRS, 2024).

United States military cooperation in the Middle East constitutes a major instrument of its regional foreign policy. Through defence partnerships and military assistance programmes, the United States maintains relationships with countries such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates. These relationships differ in their legal arrangements, operational scope, and strategic objectives but collectively contribute to American military access, regional deterrence, intelligence coordination, and the defence capabilities of partner governments (CRS, 2025).

One significant dimension of American military cooperation is the provision of military assistance and advanced defence equipment to regional partners. Through Foreign Military Sales, Foreign Military Financing, military training, and other defence programmes, the United States supports the development and modernization of partner countries' armed forces. These arrangements also strengthen military interoperability and create opportunities for long-term defence relationships between the United States and regional governments (CRS, 2024).

Military cooperation also involves the maintenance of American military installations and operational facilities across the Middle East. These facilities provide logistical support, intelligence capabilities, force projection, maritime security, and opportunities for military coordination. American military presence in countries such as Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates demonstrates the importance of regional military access to its broader strategic objectives (CRS, 2025).

Nevertheless, military cooperation can generate political and strategic complications. Although defence partnerships may strengthen the military capabilities of regional allies, they can also contribute to regional rivalries, arms competition, and security dilemmas. The presence of foreign military forces may also generate domestic political opposition and perceptions of external interference. Therefore, assessing American military cooperation requires examining not only the defence benefits associated with these arrangements but also their implications for regional stability and the broader international security environment (CRS, 2025).

Concept of Diplomatic Engagement

Diplomatic engagement refers to the processes through which states establish, maintain, and manage relationships with other international actors through negotiations, consultations, agreements, dialogue, mediation, and diplomatic representation. It constitutes an important instrument of foreign policy because it enables governments to pursue national interests, resolve disagreements, establish partnerships, and influence international political developments without necessarily resorting to military force (Hill, 2016; Hudson, 2020). In international relations, diplomacy also provides opportunities for states to communicate their policy positions, negotiate mutually acceptable arrangements, manage conflicts, and promote cooperation within bilateral and multilateral frameworks.

United States diplomatic engagement in the Middle East has involved bilateral relations with regional governments, negotiations over security arrangements, peace initiatives, economic partnerships, and participation in multilateral diplomatic processes. American diplomacy has particularly focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iran's nuclear programme, Arab-Israeli relations, regional normalization agreements, and efforts to manage conflicts involving competing regional actors (Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2025). These diplomatic activities demonstrate the importance of negotiation and political engagement in advancing American strategic interests and maintaining relationships with regional allies and partners.

One important example of United States diplomatic engagement is the Abraham Accords, signed in September 2020, which facilitated the normalization of relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, followed by Morocco. The agreements created opportunities for expanded diplomatic relations, trade, technological cooperation, and security collaboration among the participating countries (Kateb, 2025). However, the subsequent Gaza conflict demonstrated the limitations of normalization arrangements in addressing deeper political disagreements and unresolved regional conflicts (Monshipouri, Dorraj, & Fields, 2025). This indicates that diplomatic achievements may strengthen bilateral relationships without necessarily resolving the underlying political and security challenges affecting the wider Middle East.

Another significant aspect of American diplomatic engagement concerns negotiations over Iran's nuclear programme. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), concluded in July 2015, represented an important diplomatic effort involving the United States, Iran, and other international powers to restrict Iran's nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief. However, the United States withdrawal from the agreement in May 2018 under the first Trump administration weakened the diplomatic arrangement and contributed to renewed tensions between Washington and Tehran (CRS, 2024). This development illustrates how changes in domestic political leadership and foreign policy priorities can influence the continuity and effectiveness of diplomatic agreements.

Diplomatic engagement therefore represents both an instrument of cooperation and a mechanism for managing strategic competition. Its effectiveness depends on the willingness of participating states to negotiate, respect agreements, accommodate competing interests, and sustain diplomatic commitments over time (CRS, 2025; Kateb, 2025). In the context of United States engagement in the Middle East, diplomatic relations must be examined alongside military and security cooperation because these instruments frequently operate together in the pursuit of regional strategic objectives.

Concept of Security Cooperation

Security cooperation refers to organized activities undertaken by two or more states to address common security challenges, strengthen defence institutions, improve information-sharing, and develop collective responses to actual or perceived threats. It encompasses intelligence cooperation, counterterrorism initiatives, maritime security, border management, cybersecurity, arms control, military training, and the prevention of weapons proliferation (Springborg, Williams, & Zavage, 2020). Security cooperation may be conducted through bilateral agreements, multilateral institutions, regional security arrangements, and direct collaboration between national security agencies.

United States security cooperation in the Middle East is designed to strengthen the capabilities of partner governments and support regional arrangements that protect American and allied interests. These activities include counterterrorism operations, intelligence-sharing, military assistance, maritime security initiatives, missile defence cooperation, and the provision of security-related technologies (CRS, 2025). Through these arrangements, the United States seeks to improve the ability of regional partners to identify, prevent, and respond to security threats while maintaining its strategic relationships across the region.

Counterterrorism constitutes one of the most important areas of American security cooperation since the September 11, 2001 attacks. The United States has collaborated with regional governments in intelligence exchange, military operations, financial surveillance, border security, and efforts to disrupt terrorist networks. The establishment of international coalitions against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria further demonstrated the importance of collective security arrangements in addressing transnational extremist organizations (CRS, 2025). These initiatives reflect the shift towards more coordinated security approaches involving military, intelligence, diplomatic, and institutional instruments.

Maritime security is another important dimension of American security cooperation in the Middle East because the region contains strategically significant waterways through which substantial volumes of international trade and energy supplies move. The Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and Red Sea constitute important maritime routes whose security has implications for international commerce and regional stability. American engagement in maritime security involves naval deployments, surveillance, intelligence-sharing, joint exercises, and cooperation with regional and international partners to protect freedom of navigation (CRS, 2025).

Furthermore, security cooperation has increasingly incorporated missile defence, cybersecurity, and the prevention of weapons proliferation. The United States has supported regional efforts to improve early-warning systems, strengthen air and missile defence capabilities, and enhance coordination among partner governments (CRS, 2025). These arrangements reflect the changing nature of security threats in the Middle East, where conventional military challenges increasingly intersect with cyber threats, unmanned aerial systems, missile capabilities, and activities by armed non-state actors.

However, security cooperation is influenced by differences in national interests, threat perceptions, political priorities, and relationships among participating states. Some Middle Eastern governments maintain close security relationships with Washington while simultaneously developing economic, technological, or diplomatic relationships with other international powers (Ulrichsen, 2025). This situation demonstrates that security partnerships are not necessarily exclusive and that regional governments may pursue multiple relationships to protect their national interests. Therefore, the examination of American security cooperation requires attention to the interests of both the United States and its regional partners.

Patterns of United States Engagement in the Middle East (2001–2025)

The patterns of United States engagement in the Middle East between 2001 and 2025 can be understood through the changing combination of military intervention, diplomatic initiatives, security assistance, and strategic partnerships adopted by successive American administrations. Although the instruments and priorities of engagement have changed over time, the protection of American interests, support for regional partners, counterterrorism, and the maintenance of strategic influence have remained important considerations (CRS, 2025).

Military intervention and forward military presence: Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, the United States expanded its military engagement in the Middle East and surrounding regions through counterterrorism operations, military deployments, and interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. These developments strengthened the role of military power in American foreign policy and increased its involvement in regional security arrangements (CRS, 2025). Although subsequent administrations sought to adjust the scale and nature of American military involvement, the United States continued to maintain military facilities and operational capabilities across important locations in the Middle East (Jones & Daniels, 2022).

Bilateral defence partnerships: Another identifiable pattern involves the development of bilateral defence relationships with selected Middle Eastern governments. These relationships have included arms transfers, military training, intelligence-sharing, joint exercises, and logistical arrangements. The continued importance of American defence relationships with Gulf countries and Israel demonstrates the role of bilateral security partnerships in maintaining American regional influence (Ulrichsen, 2025).

Diplomatic negotiation and conflict management: United States engagement has also involved diplomatic negotiations intended to manage regional disputes, reduce tensions, and establish political agreements. The 2015 JCPOA and the 2020 Abraham Accords represent different examples of diplomatic engagement directed towards nuclear non-proliferation and regional normalization, respectively (CRS, 2024; Kateb, 2025).

Multilateral security cooperation: The United States has also pursued regional security objectives through multilateral coalitions and cooperative security arrangements. These arrangements provide platforms for coordinating military operations, sharing

intelligence, strengthening maritime security, and responding collectively to transnational threats (Springborg et al., 2020; CRS, 2025).

Strategic adjustment and burden-sharing: A further pattern involves attempts to encourage regional partners to assume greater responsibility for their own security while the United States maintains selected military and diplomatic commitments. Jones and Daniels (2022) examine alternative American defence postures and the arguments surrounding the scale of continued military presence in the Middle East. Ulrichsen (2025) similarly observes that American-Gulf defence relationships continue to combine practical military cooperation with political disagreements and changing perceptions of American commitment.

These patterns indicate that United States engagement in the Middle East is multidimensional and adaptive. Military presence, diplomatic negotiations, defence assistance, and security cooperation are interconnected instruments through which American administrations pursue their strategic interests and respond to changing regional conditions (Jones & Daniels, 2022; Ulrichsen, 2025).

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Realist Theory and Liberal Institutionalism, which provide complementary explanations of the motivations, instruments, and outcomes of United States strategic engagement in the Middle East. Realism explains the pursuit of national interests, military power, security, and geopolitical influence, while Liberal Institutionalism emphasizes diplomacy, international institutions, cooperation, and negotiated arrangements among states (Mearsheimer, 2001; Keohane, 1984).

Realist Theory

Realist Theory is one of the major theoretical perspectives in international relations and emphasizes the importance of power, national interest, security, and competition in the behaviour of states. The theory assumes that the international system is characterized by anarchy because there is no central authority capable of consistently enforcing rules and guaranteeing the security of all sovereign states (Waltz, 1979). Consequently, states are expected to prioritize their survival, strengthen their military capabilities, establish strategic alliances, and pursue policies that protect their national interests (Mearsheimer, 2001).

The realist perspective provides an important explanation for United States engagement in the Middle East because American military partnerships, defence agreements, military installations, and security assistance reflect the pursuit of strategic interests within a competitive international environment. From this perspective, the protection of Israel, the security of international energy routes, the containment of perceived regional threats, and the preservation of American geopolitical influence constitute important considerations in Washington's regional policy (Jones & Daniels, 2022; CRS, 2025).

Realism also explains the importance of military cooperation and strategic alliances in American foreign policy. Through defence partnerships with Israel and Gulf countries, the United States seeks to strengthen its regional position, deter potential adversaries, and maintain access to strategically important locations. These arrangements reflect the realist assumption that states use military capabilities and alliances to improve their security and influence within the international system (Mearsheimer, 2001; Ulrichsen, 2025).

Furthermore, the realist perspective helps explain the strategic competition involving the United States, Iran, Russia, and other international actors in the Middle East. Competition over military influence, regional partnerships, strategic resources, and political alignments demonstrates the relevance of power considerations in understanding regional security relationships (Jones & Daniels, 2022; CRS, 2025).

Relevance of the theory to the study: Realist Theory is relevant because it provides an analytical foundation for examining the military and security dimensions of United States engagement in the Middle East. It helps explain why the United States maintains military facilities, develops defence partnerships, supplies military equipment, and collaborates with regional allies to protect its national interests. The theory also provides an explanation for the strategic importance attached to deterrence, military alliances, and geopolitical competition in American foreign policy (Mearsheimer, 2001; Ulrichsen, 2025).

Liberal Institutionalism

Liberal Institutionalism emphasizes the importance of international institutions, diplomatic engagement, cooperation, interdependence, and negotiated agreements in promoting peaceful relations among states. Unlike Realism, which places considerable emphasis on military power and competition, Liberal Institutionalism recognizes that states can achieve

shared interests through cooperation, international organizations, diplomatic negotiations, and established rules (Keohane, 1984).

The theory argues that international institutions can facilitate cooperation by providing information, reducing uncertainty, establishing common expectations, and creating mechanisms for managing disagreements among participating states (Keohane, 1984). Through these arrangements, states can pursue common objectives and manage conflicts without relying exclusively on military capabilities.

In relation to United States engagement in the Middle East, Liberal Institutionalism provides an explanation for diplomatic negotiations, peace initiatives, multilateral security arrangements, and international agreements. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action demonstrates the application of diplomatic and institutional mechanisms to address concerns about Iran's nuclear programme (CRS, 2024). Similarly, the Abraham Accords illustrate how diplomatic agreements can establish new political and economic relationships among states that previously lacked formal diplomatic relations (Kateb, 2025).

The theory also explains the importance of security cooperation through multilateral arrangements, intelligence-sharing, joint military exercises, and international counterterrorism initiatives. Such arrangements provide opportunities for participating states to coordinate their activities, develop shared security objectives, and strengthen their collective responses to transnational threats (Springborg et al., 2020; CRS, 2025).

Relevance of the theory to the study: Liberal Institutionalism is relevant because it explains the diplomatic and cooperative dimensions of United States engagement in the Middle East. It provides a framework for examining how the United States uses negotiations, international agreements, diplomatic partnerships, and security institutions to advance its foreign policy objectives. The theory also helps explain the importance of cooperation in addressing regional conflicts and managing complex security challenges (Keohane, 1984; Kateb, 2025).

Application of the Theoretical Framework

The combination of Realist Theory and Liberal Institutionalism provides a broader understanding of United States engagement in the Middle East between 2001 and 2025. Realism explains the importance of military power, strategic alliances, deterrence, and geopolitical competition, whereas Liberal Institutionalism explains the roles of diplomatic negotiations, international agreements, and cooperative security arrangements (Mearsheimer, 2001; Keohane, 1984).

The two theoretical perspectives are complementary because American engagement in the Middle East involves both competitive and cooperative foreign policy instruments. For instance, the United States may strengthen military partnerships to deter perceived threats while simultaneously pursuing diplomatic negotiations to reduce tensions and establish political agreements (CRS, 2025; Ulrichsen, 2025).

Therefore, the study adopts Realist Theory as its primary theoretical foundation, supported by Liberal Institutionalism as a complementary perspective. This theoretical combination provides an appropriate basis for analysing the patterns, dynamics, and strategic implications of American military, diplomatic, and security engagement in the Middle East.

## Materials and Methods

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative documentary research design to examine the dynamics of United States strategic engagement in the Middle East between 2001 and 2025. The design was considered appropriate because the research focused on analysing historical developments, foreign policy decisions, military partnerships, diplomatic initiatives, and security cooperation within the changing geopolitical environment of the region. The study combined historical analysis with qualitative content analysis to identify patterns, policy shifts, strategic motivations, and the implications of American engagement across different periods.

Study Area and Period

The study focused on the Middle East, particularly countries and strategic locations with significant military, diplomatic, and security relationships with the United States. These included Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Syria, and Yemen. Attention was also given to strategically important geographical locations, including the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, Red Sea, and Eastern Mediterranean, because of their significance to international trade, energy transportation, maritime security, and regional military operations.

The study covered the period 2001–2025, beginning with the September 11 terrorist attacks, which

fundamentally transformed American foreign policy and expanded its counterterrorism and military engagement in the region. The period also captured significant developments, including the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, the Arab Spring, the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement, the 2020 Abraham Accords, the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan in 2021, and the escalation of the Gaza conflict in 2023–2025.

Sources of Data and Document Selection

The study relied on secondary data obtained from official government publications, international organization reports, peer-reviewed academic journals, scholarly books, policy research publications, and credible international media sources. Important documentary sources included publications from the United States Department of State, United States Department of Defense, Congressional Research Service, United Nations, International Atomic Energy Agency, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Purposive sampling was employed in selecting documentary materials based on their relevance to the research objectives, institutional credibility, publication dates, and analytical contributions. Particular attention was given to documents addressing American military presence, defence agreements, arms transfers, diplomatic negotiations, counterterrorism initiatives, intelligence-sharing, and regional security partnerships. Materials covering developments outside the study period were considered only where necessary to provide historical or theoretical context. Documents lacking identifiable authorship, verifiable information, or direct relevance to the research focus were excluded.

Method of Data Collection

Data were collected through systematic documentary retrieval and examination of relevant published materials. Official government websites, academic databases, institutional repositories, international organization publications, and recognized research platforms were consulted. The collected information was organized chronologically and thematically to establish the evolution of American engagement across successive presidential administrations.

The documentary evidence was classified into three major categories: military cooperation, diplomatic engagement, and security cooperation. Military cooperation covered defence agreements, military installations, arms transfers, joint exercises, and military training. Diplomatic engagement included bilateral negotiations, peace initiatives, normalization agreements, and strategic dialogues. Security cooperation covered counterterrorism, intelligence-sharing, maritime security, missile defence, and cybersecurity initiatives.

Method of Data Analysis

The study employed qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis to interpret the collected documentary evidence. The analysis involved examining relevant documents, identifying recurring policy themes, classifying information according to the research objectives, and comparing developments across the selected historical periods. This approach facilitated the identification of continuities, changes, and emerging patterns in United States strategic engagement in the Middle East (Bowen, 2009; Mayring, 2015).

The analysis was organized around three principal analytical dimensions:

1. Military cooperation: Examined through American military presence, defence partnerships, military assistance, arms transfers, and joint military exercises.
2. Diplomatic engagement: Examined through diplomatic negotiations, bilateral agreements, regional peace initiatives, normalization arrangements, and strategic consultations.
3. Security cooperation: Examined through counterterrorism operations, intelligence-sharing, maritime security, missile defence, and other regional security initiatives.

A chronological comparative approach was also adopted to examine developments across five periods: 2001–2005, 2006–2010, 2011–2015, 2016–2020, and 2021–2025. This enabled the study to assess changes in American foreign policy priorities and the instruments employed by successive administrations. The findings were subsequently interpreted using Realist Theory and Liberal Institutionalism to explain the relationship between national interests, military power, diplomatic cooperation, and regional security arrangements (Thies, 2002).

Validity, Reliability and Ethical Considerations

The credibility of the study was strengthened through source triangulation, involving the comparison of information obtained from government publications, international organizations, academic research, and independent policy institutions. Documentary sources were assessed based on their authenticity, institutional

credibility, publication dates, and relevance to the research objectives. Particular attention was given to distinguishing official government positions from independent scholarly interpretations and reported developments.

Ethical considerations were maintained through appropriate acknowledgement and citation of all documentary materials. Information was presented within its original context, and care was taken to avoid unsupported claims, misrepresentation, and politically biased interpretations. Since the study relied exclusively on publicly available secondary materials, it did not involve direct participation of human subjects.

## Results and Discussion

Table 1 illustrates that the strategic importance of Middle Eastern states to the United States extends beyond a single dimension of foreign policy. Rather than depending exclusively on energy resources, U.S. partnerships are shaped by a combination of military geography, intelligence cooperation, maritime security, diplomatic influence, and regional stability. Saudi Arabia possesses approximately 267.2 billion barrels of proven crude oil reserves, making it one of the world's largest oil producers and an indispensable actor in global energy markets. However, Israel, despite possessing negligible oil reserves, remains the largest cumulative recipient of U.S. military assistance, receiving US$3.8 billion annually under the current Memorandum of Understanding. This demonstrates that alliance value is determined by strategic utility rather than natural resource endowment alone.

The table further highlights the importance of military geography in shaping U.S. engagement. Qatar hosts approximately 10,000 U.S. military personnel at Al Udeid Air Base, the largest American military installation in the Middle East and the forward headquarters of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). Bahrain hosts the headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, enabling maritime surveillance and protection of shipping routes through the Persian Gulf. Egypt remains strategically indispensable because of the Suez Canal, through which approximately 12% of global trade passes annually, while Jordan provides a stable platform for intelligence sharing and counterterrorism operations bordering Iraq and Syria. Collectively, these partnerships demonstrate that U.S. foreign policy is sustained through an interconnected security network in which energy, military access, intelligence cooperation, and diplomatic influence reinforce one another.

**Table 1: Strategic Importance of Middle Eastern States to United States Foreign Policy**

| Country | Proven Crude Oil Reserves (Billion Barrels) | Estimated U.S. Military Presence/Access | Annual U.S. Military Assistance/Cooperation* | Major Strategic Importance |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Israel | Negligible | Joint military facilities and intelligence cooperation | US$3.8 billion (FMF annually) | Strategic ally, regional military superiority, intelligence cooperation |
| Saudi Arabia | 267.2 | Rotational deployment and defence cooperation | Over US$140 billion in approved arms agreements (2017–2024) | Energy security, Iran containment, regional stability |
| Qatar | 25.2 | Al Udeid Air Base (about 10,000 U.S. personnel) | Extensive defence cooperation | Regional air operations and CENTCOM forward headquarters |
| Bahrain | 0.1 | Headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet (about 9,000 personnel) | Security cooperation and naval support | Maritime security and protection of Gulf shipping lanes |
| Egypt | 3.3 | Military cooperation and training | Approximately US$1.3 billion annually | Suez Canal security, Arab-Israeli peace, counterterrorism |
| Jordan | Negligible | Defence cooperation and joint training | Over US$1.45 billion total annual U.S. assistance (economic and military) | Counterterrorism, regional stability, refugee management |
| United Arab Emirates | 111.0 | Al Dhafra Air Base (about 3,500 personnel) | Extensive defence cooperation and arms purchases | Air operations, Gulf security, logistics hub |

**Source:** (U.S. Congressional Research Service, 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2024; SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, 2024; U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2024)

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The study examined the dynamics of United States strategic engagement in the Middle East between 2001 and 2025, with particular emphasis on military cooperation, diplomatic engagement and security cooperation. The analysis reveals that the Middle East has remained a central theatre of American foreign policy because of its geopolitical location, energy resources, strategic maritime routes, security challenges and influence on the wider international system. Over the period under review, the United States employed a combination of military deployments, defence partnerships, diplomatic negotiations, foreign assistance, intelligence-sharing and multilateral security arrangements to advance its regional interests.

The findings demonstrate that American military engagement has evolved from the large-scale military interventions that followed the September 11, 2001 attacks towards a more diversified approach involving strategic military bases, rotational deployments, arms transfers, joint training and defence cooperation with regional allies. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the fight against terrorism, tensions involving Iran and the security of Israel and Gulf states have all influenced the nature and intensity of American military involvement. Although the United States has adjusted its military posture over time, its continued access to strategic facilities in Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and other partner countries demonstrates the enduring importance of military geography in its Middle Eastern policy.

The study also establishes that diplomatic engagement remains an important instrument of American influence. Initiatives such as the Iran nuclear agreement, the Abraham Accords and diplomatic interventions relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict demonstrate the United States' efforts to manage regional tensions, strengthen alliances and promote arrangements that support its strategic objectives. However, the persistence of armed conflicts, political instability and disagreements among regional actors indicates that diplomatic engagement has not consistently produced sustainable peace.

Furthermore, the analysis of the strategic importance of selected Middle Eastern states reveals that American foreign policy is not determined exclusively by access to petroleum resources. Saudi Arabia's substantial oil reserves make it important to global energy security, while Israel's strategic alliance, Qatar's military facilities, Bahrain's naval importance, Egypt's control of the Suez Canal, Jordan's security cooperation and the United Arab Emirates' logistical and military facilities provide different forms of strategic value. The United States therefore maintains an interconnected network of partnerships in which energy interests, military access, intelligence cooperation and diplomatic influence reinforce one another.

From the theoretical perspective, the findings largely support Realist Theory, as American engagement reflects the pursuit of national interests, strategic influence, military advantage and regional power balance. Liberal Institutionalism also provides an explanation for the importance of diplomatic negotiations, international cooperation and institutional arrangements in managing regional security challenges.

The study concludes that United States strategic engagement in the Middle East between 2001 and 2025 represents a combination of military power, diplomatic influence and security cooperation. Nevertheless, the long-term effectiveness of this engagement depends not only on maintaining strategic alliances and military superiority but also on addressing the underlying political, economic and security conditions responsible for recurring instability in the region.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Strengthening diplomatic conflict resolution: The United States should prioritise sustained diplomatic engagement with Middle Eastern governments and relevant non-state actors to address regional conflicts. Greater emphasis should be placed on negotiations, mediation and peaceful conflict-resolution mechanisms rather than relying excessively on military pressure.
2. Promoting a balanced regional security policy: The United States should adopt a more balanced approach to its relationships with Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran and other regional actors. Such an approach would reduce perceptions of political partiality and create opportunities for confidence-building, regional dialogue and cooperation.
3. Improving accountability in military assistance: United States military assistance, arms transfers and defence agreements should be accompanied by transparent monitoring mechanisms. The United States should strengthen measures to ensure that military support contributes to legitimate defence objectives, civilian protection and regional stability.

4. Expanding multilateral security cooperation: The United States should strengthen cooperation with regional organisations and international institutions to address terrorism, maritime insecurity, weapons proliferation and cross-border threats. Multilateral arrangements could help distribute security responsibilities and reduce excessive dependence on unilateral military interventions.
5. Prioritising maritime security and international trade: Given the strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Suez Canal, the United States should strengthen cooperative maritime surveillance, freedom of navigation and mechanisms for preventing attacks on commercial shipping. These measures should be pursued in collaboration with regional and international partners.

**Declaration of Competing Interest**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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