THE RISE AND FALL OF AMERICAN HEGEMONY IN THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA

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"The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish... the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions".
— Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*

"Democracy cannot be brought on the back of a tank".
— Riad al Turk, Syrian dissident

Abstract. The early 1990s marked the end of the Cold War, at least in terms of the strategic competition between the USA and the USSR. That moment coincided with America's emergence as the sole global superpower, given the dismantling of its former Soviet adversary. Although at the time the Middle East was not a priority on Washington's agenda, the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein's Iraq represented an opportunity that the US could not miss: the first international crisis of the post-Cold War era, in a new global order, which fell under the jurisdiction of new rules that the Americans now had the chance to rewrite themselves. Starting with the Operation Desert Storm (The Gulf War, August 1990 – February 1991) – the US entered a cycle of engagement and retrenchment in and from the Middle East region, directly initiating three wars – Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003) and Iran (2025, 2026) –, participating in other military operations, such as those in Somalia (1993), Libya (2011), Yemen (2015, 2025) or Syria (2014), and then completely withdrawing from Afghanistan, in 2021. Thus, for two decades, the US represented the unchallenged global authority in the Middle East, and managed to create a network of military bases and economic partnerships that became one of the main pillars of American foreign policy. Yet, time is not on the side of an overstretched hegemon, because the economic costs of 'forever' wars pile up faster than the strategic benefits can be reaped. 70 years after the Suez Crisis, the US have marched

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into a strikingly similar trap in the Strait of Hormuz, shortly after launching, along with Israel, a war against the Islamic Republic of Iran. This article analyzes the American rise and fall in the Middle East from 1990 to 2026, using Neoconservatism, Structural Realism, and Hegemonic Stability Theory as theoretical benchmarks. Methodologically, this article is organized around the three stages of the US presence in the region: its *rise*, *apex* and *decline*, examining also the prospects of the foreseeable regional multipolarity.

Keywords: *US Foreign Policy; Middle East; Neoconservatism; Structural Realism; Hegemonic Stability Theory*

Introduction: The Gap Between Strategic Theory and Operational Reality

The year 1991 was an *annus mirabilis* for United States foreign policy: the collapse of the Soviet Union transformed Washington into a global hegemon, in a new international order, whose rules the Americans could now rewrite themselves. And this was exactly what the US did, starting with the Middle East. The collapse of the USSR facilitated American intervention in the Persian Gulf, following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, a strategy that would not have been possible if the former Soviet colossus, a permanent member of the Security Council and the biggest world nuclear power, would still have had the necessary drive and means to challenge at the United Nations the resolution that first legitimized the sanctions, then the outbreak of the war.

Washington's ability to wage a limited and successful war in 1991 was an expression of US strength. As the undisputed global superpower at the end of the Cold War, America could confidently assert its new leadership role as guardian of the international order. In September 1990, President George H.W. Bush outlined to Congress his vision for a "new world order,"[1] where "the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle, (…) nations recognize the shared responsibility for freedom and justice, and (…) the strong respect the rights of the weak."[2] It was the promise of this new world order that Saddam Hussein had jeopardized by invading Kuwait, the former US president argued, leaving the United States with no alternative but to uphold the rule of law and stand up to aggression. American power was intrinsically linked to maintaining this emerging international order. This approach was naively understood as liberal internationalism, because it was, in essence, an expression of the alignment of middle and great powers in Europe and West Asia with the new global hegemon. Thus, the goal of this new world order was to project an image of impartial authority while concealing the mechanics of US primacy behind the curtain.

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[1] George H. W. Bush, "Commencement Address on New World Order", at *C-SPAN*, April 13, 1991, https://www.c-span.org/program/white-house-event/commencement-address-on-new-world-order/12161, accessed on January 7, 2026.

[2] *Ibidem*.

The 2026 war against Iran was conceived, like the one of 1991, as an effort to maintain a US-dominated world order. But the nowadays Middle East is no longer the one from the beginning of the Cold War, or even the one from the last twenty years. The military calculus has changed, and attacking Iran no longer meant 70 hours of bombing (as it did between December 16-19, 1998, when Bill Clinton authorized Operation Desert Fox, the bombing campaign of Iraq). The US-Israeli war *vs.* Iran, initiated in February 2026, quickly turned into a regional war, with predictable escalation and the indirect involvement of China and Russian Federation.

Against many criticisms, the most famous of which was that of Jean Baudrillard (1995)[3], the First Gulf War was the geopolitical moment that established America's status as both, *primus inter pares* and global hegemon. But while the 1991 *momentum* was built under the sign of multilateralism and UN resolutions, in 2026, US power is exercised without mediating structures or even concern for legitimacy. President Donald Trump's abandonment of the UN represents a further narrowing of the basis on which US power rests. This means that while the American military is still the most powerful in the world, Washington is unable to command the recognition, alignment, or *de facto* legitimacy that underpinned its global primacy in the post-Cold War world of the 1990s.[4]

Despite the geographical distance between the US and the Middle East, the region holds a crucial position in Washington's foreign policy which, especially after the loss of Iran in 1979, has constantly tried to influence and shape the domestic politics of the states in the Persian Gulf region, in order to secure its national interests. According to former Assistant Secretary of State Robert H. Pelletreau, these interests encompass achieving Arab-Israeli peace, supporting Israel's security, preventing conflicts, ensuring the free flow of oil from the Gulf, countering terrorism, and containing rogue regimes[5].

One of the most vocal exponents of the new American policy in the Middle East, especially of the 'war on terror', was the former *Washington Post* and *The National Interest* columnist, Charles Krauthammer. He argued in particular that "disdaining the appeal of radical Islam is the conceit also of secularists"[6], considering that the phenomenon he was referring to "flies under a flag with far more historical depth and enduring appeal than the ersatz religions of the swastika and hammer-and-sickle that proved so historically thin and insubstantial."[7]. But Krauthammer was strongly contradicted by Francis Fukuyama who, citing Gilles

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[3] In a provocative analysis written during the unfolding drama of 1992, Jean Baudrillard draws on his concepts of simulation and the hyperreal to argue that the Gulf War did not take place but was a carefully scripted media event – a "virtual" war. See Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, Power Publications, Sydney, 2012, pp. 30, 32, 73.

[4] Daniel Neep, "Iran Is the Dumb, Disastrous Remake of Desert Storm", in *Foreign Policy*, April 3, 2026, https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/04/03/iran-trump-bush-iraq-gulf-war/, accessed on April 3, 2026.

[5] Robert H. Pelletreau, "U.S. Policy toward the Middle East: Steering a Steady Course: Address before the Chautauqua Institution", *U.S. Department of State, Archive*, New York, August 21, 1996, https://1997-2001.state.gov/regions/nea/960821.html, accessed on April 3, 2026.

[6] Charles Krauthammer, "In Defense of Democratic Realism", in *The National Interest*, September 1, 2004, https://nationalinterest.org/legacy/in-defense-of-democratic-realism-699, accessed on April 9, 2026.

[7] *Ibidem*.

Kepel and Olivier Roy, argued that "as a political movement, jihadism was a failure"[8]. Furthermore, Fukuyama argued that America is not fighting Islam or its followers, but a radical ideology that appeals to a distinct minority of Muslims, and that type of thinking "can also influence Western thought, not just that of the pan-Muslim world, and can be embraced by the same type of individuals who, in the past, would have entered the orbit of communism or fascism"[9].

This expansive, interventionist, preemptive and "democracy-promoting"[10] policy became an epitome of American strategy in the Middle East, especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and has come to be considered the essence of *neoconservatism*. Max Boot called it "radical Wilsonism"[11], and Jordan M. Smith referred to it as "Wilsonism on steroids"[12]. About these types of optional wars and the leaders who were supporting them, John J. Mearsheimer said that those who promoted *wars of choice*, especially *preventive wars*, were likely to engage in fearmongering. It was difficult to motivate the public to support a preventive war, which is when one country attacks another that was not an imminent threat to it at that time, but might be sometime in the future.[13] Moreover, preventive wars are also prohibited by both, international law and just-war theory, which raises great difficulties in legitimizing them. For these reasons, the lawmakers and experts have adopted a "wait and see"[14] policy, hoping that trouble never shows up. In order to counter this opposition, the advocates of preventive/interventionist wars resorted to tactics of intimidation and fear-mongering, in order to create the impression that the country was facing an immediate threat, and they began to promote these wars as *preemptive*. The latter are those wars in which one country initiates a conflict against another that is about to attack it. Preemptive wars, which are essentially a form of self-defense, are widely recognized as legal as well as just.[15] The US justified its actions by asserting the need for preemptive action against perceived threats, such as weapons of mass destruction and alleged connections between Saddam Hussein's regime and terrorists, or against Iran, to prevent it to acquire nuclear capacity. However, the unilateral stance of the US, including its refusal to sign international agreements like the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, showcased a trend of bypassing the UN system and acting in its own interests[16].

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[8] Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004, pp. 1-55. See also Gilles Kepel, *Beyond Terror and Martyrdom: The Future of the Middle East*, Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press, 2009.

[9] Francis Fukuyama, *America la răscruce. Democrația, puterea și moștenirea neoconservatoare*, Filipeștii de Târg, Antet, 2006, trad. Andreea & Nicolae Năstase, p. 63.

[10] *Ibidem*, p. 39.

[11] Max Boot, "Myths About Neoconservatism", in *Neoconservatism*, London, Atlantic Books, 2004, pp. 45-52.

[12] Jordan M. Smith, "We Aren't the World", Book Review, in *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, No. 44, 2026, https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/44/we-arent-the-world/, accessed on April 9, 2026.

[13] John J. Mearsheimer, *Adevărul despre minciunile din politica internațională. De ce mint liderii?*, Filipeștii de Târg, Antet, 2011, trad. Andreea Năstase, p. 67.

[14] *Ibidem*.

[15] *Ibidem*, pp. 67-68.

[16] Gabriel T. Abumbe, Nsan Kingsley, Okimisor Ofem Lawrence, "Hegemony of the United States and Wars in the Middle East", in *Global Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 23, 2024, p. 232, https://www.ajol.info/index.php/gjss/article/view/276985, accessed on April 3, 2026.

In addition to neoconservatism, realism and the hegemonic stability theory completes the theoretical framework.

Offensive realism postulates that states, constrained by the anarchic nature of the international system, seek security and power, with a penchant for hegemony[17]. In offense-defense theory, a subset of structural realism, states pursue self-help measures, encompassing unilateral acquisition of economic, military, or technological capabilities for defensive or offensive purposes[18]. Post-Cold War, the 'dual containment' policy targeted few countries in the Middle East, such as Iran and Iraq, emphasizing the need for their isolation economically, politically, and militarily. However, this paradigm is strictly state-centric. In the modern Middle East, power is heavily wielded also by non-state actors like Hezbollah, ISIS, or the Houthis. Offensive realism struggles to account for how these groups disrupt the 'balance of power' between regional giants, as they do not follow the same territorial or survival logic as sovereign states. This theory critics argue that by constantly seeking maximum power to ensure security, a state inevitably triggers a counter-reaction, or the so-called "Security Dilemma" Trap[19]. In the Middle East, US offensive posturing (like "Axis of Evil"[20] rhetoric) arguably forced adversaries like Iran to seek nuclear hedging and proxy networks as a survival mechanism, creating less security for the US rather than more. Finally, offensive realism last shortcoming is its failure to predict cooperation. Because the theory assumes a world of constant competition, it has difficulty explaining long-term strategic partnerships that aren't based on immediate threats, or on the role of economic interdependence and international law in smoothing over regional frictions.

The concept of *hegemonic stability theory* (HST) was coined by Robert O. Keohane, who later challenged it, arguing in *After Hegemony*[21] that international institutions can maintain stability even after a hegemon declines. HST is a framework in international relations which postulates that the global system is most stable when a single state – the hegemon – dominates as the world power. Its core principles are presence of a hegemon, provision of public goods, international security, open markets, financial stability and enforcement of rules. In his *War and Change in World Politics* (1981), Keohane underlines that HST suggests that the hegemon's strategic overstretch will finally weaken its positioning against other peer rivals (e. g. US *vs.* China). The very same author will write,

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17 John J. Mearsheimer, "Structural realism", in T. Dunne, M. Kurki and S. Smith (Eds.), *International relations theories: discipline and diversity*, (3rd ed), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.

18 Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "Offense-Defense Theory and Its Critics", in *Security Studies*, Vol. 4, Issue 4, pp. 660-691, 1995, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09636419509347600, accessed on April 12, 2026.

19 Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma", in *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2, Jan., 1978, pp. 167-214, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2009958?origin=JSTOR-pdf, accessed on March 12, 2026.

20 "Axis of Evil" rhetoric, coined by US President George W. Bush in his January 29, 2002, *State of the Union address*, identified Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as a collective threat to global security. It framed these nations as state sponsors of terrorism pursuing weapons of mass destruction, centralizing the "War on Terror" post-9/11. See George W. Bush, "State of the Union – Axis of Evil Speech", *C-SPAN*, January 29, 2002, https://www.c-span.org/clip/the-presidency/user-clip-george-w-bush-state-of-the-union-axis-of-evil-speech/5104350, accessed on September 19, 2018.

21 Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony. Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1984, pp. 5-18.

years later, that the alternative stability to HST is cooperation through international organizations, because this strategy is more sustainable than relying on itself, a single dominant state. Like the offensive realists, the HST authors believe that the imperial overstretch will ultimately lead to the decline of the respective superpower. As the cost of maintaining the *status quo* rises faster than the hegemon's economic capacity to support it, the system enters a period of instability. This imbalance is often caused by the diffusion of technology and economic power to rising rivals, as well as the rising domestic costs of maintaining a large empire.

The post-Cold War history of American wars and interventions in various forms in the Middle East has demonstrated that there has always been a void between *strategy as theory* and *strategy as an operational reality*. And these discrepancies ultimately led to the diminution of American influence in the Middle East region. Anyone can talk in theoretical terms about preemption *versus* deterrence, capability *versus* threat-based force plans, asymmetric war and terrorism, *versus* conventional war. Every major crisis or war, however, forces a superpower to reshape its declared strategy to deal with real world problems and issues, and make major changes to deal with the lessons of operational practice.

It is true that, for the time being, America retains its military prowess and its economic strength. But, for more than one decade now, it has seemed increasingly unable to effectively harness either of them to its advantage. Instead of enhancing its hegemony by deploying its strengths wisely, it has repeatedly squandered its efforts, diminishing both its aura of invincibility and its standing in the eyes of other nations. The vaunted global war on terror – which included Bush's invasion of Iraq for the purpose of finding weapons of mass destruction that did not exist, Barack Obama's decision to intervene in Libya and his indecisiveness about a 'red line' in Syria, and Donald Trump's abandoning the Kurds in the same country, his 2020 deal with the Taliban to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan[22], and the war against Iran, has effectively weaken the US influence and projection power of American force in the Middle East region. Thus, the economic costs of 'forever' wars accumulated faster than Washington could reap the long term hoped-for strategic benefits. 70 years after the Suez Crisis, the US have marched into a strikingly similar trap in the Strait of Hormuz, shortly after launching a war against the Islamic Republic of Iran.

This article is organized around the three stages of the US presence in the region: its rise, apex and decline, examining also the prospects of the foreseeable regional multipolarity.

The Rise: Unipolar Dominance (1991–2003)

Since the Second World War made the US a world superpower, it had always been fixated on its Soviet rival. The 1990 invasion of Kuwait by Iraq was the best opportunity the new world order could offer America to consolidate itself as the sole global hegemon. That event was the first international crisis that fell

22 Jon Lee Anderson, *To Lose a War*, London, Fitzcarraldo Edition, 2025, pp. 30-35.

under the new rules, which the Americans were realizing they now had a chance to rewrite. Before the Kuwait crisis, the only permanent US military foothold in the Middle East was a naval base in Bahrain. But when US troops went to the region in 1990, they stayed. The Pentagon practically moved out to the Middle East and in 1991 it began a habit of military intervention there who will have, for the next almost four decades, immense and unintended consequences.[23] When victory against Saddam Hussein came quickly, it seemed in Washington, D.C. to be the promising first chapter of a new era. President George H. W. Bush promised a new world order, more peaceful and secure than the old world of Cold War confrontation[24]. By the late 1990s, the US had prepositioned enough hardware to quickly assemble formidable ground forces, cementing its role as the region's ultimate security guarantor.

The First Gulf War was the coronation of the new arrangement: a 34-nation coalition, UN authorization, with Arab states fighting alongside NATO allies. The coalition liberated Kuwait and stopped. The newly born hyperpower actually worked *within* the rules it claimed to uphold. But Saddam Hussein and its camarilla remained in power, and the sanctions regime that followed was corrosive to American credibility. However, while the first war's restraint preserved the legitimacy of American primacy, it also left behind some unfinished business.

In light of the first international success of the new era, Washington has also brought Arab-Israeli peace talks back to the forefront. The 1991 Madrid Peace Conference had made a promising start toward resolving this long and bitter conflict. Then, in 1993, the Oslo Accords brought new hope that the elusive final status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians might finally become a reality. The Palestinian Liberation Organization had accepted Israel's existence, Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin was genuinely interested in a permanent peace, and the Clinton administration seemed to be in an ideal position to broker the deal[25]. For the first time since Israel's founding in 1948, a lasting peace in the Middle East appeared within reach. Unfortunately, the results of this ambitious attempt to reshape the security architecture of the Middle East have been dismal, and the consequences of that (new) failed endeavor will be part of the complicated web of the next regional wars.

Even though the international and regional situation was not entirely easy to rearrange and control, the dangers that troubled Washington after the Cold War were far less ominous than the threats the US had faced during it. Instead of competing with a continent-size nuclear superpower driven by a revolutionary ideology, America's main adversaries were now an array of weak "rogue states"[26] such as Iraq, Iran, Cuba, North Korea, Libya, Syria, Afghanistan ruled by the Taliban, and Serbia. These regimes were all unsavory dictatorships, and each

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[23] Jeremy Bowen, *The Making of the Modern Middle East*, London, Picador, 2022, pp. 15-19.

[24] *Ibidem*.

[25] Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018, pp. 28-29.

[26] Robert D. Blackwill, Jennifer M. Harris, *War by other means: geoeconomics and statecraft*, Cambridge, MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016, p. 236.

was a troublesome influence within its own region. But they "were all third-to fifth-rate powers when compared with the mighty US"[27], and none of them posed an existential threat to any of its vital interests. As late General Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, ironically noted in 1991, "I'm running out of demons. I'm running out of enemies. I'm down to Castro and Kim Il Sung"[28]. Moreover, the first Gulf War and the subsequent containment of Iraq suggested that the US and its allies could take care of any of these states rather easily, if it became absolutely necessary. From a broad historical perspective, America could hardly have asked for a more benign security environment.

International terrorism also seemed to be a manageable problem. US officials were aware that Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups were hostile and dangerous, and attacks on the World Trade Center (1993), the Khobar Towers dormitory in Saudi Arabia (1996), the American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya (1998), and the carrier USS Cole in Yemen (2000) stressed the challenge. But the American administration also believed that the threat could be contained and that significant adjustments in US strategy, such as distancing itself from its various Middle East clients or reducing its military presence there, were not required. Instead, in Washington it was believed that the long-term solution was the further spread of US ideals: "Democratization, however hazardous and unpredictable the process may be, is the key to eliminating sacred terror over the long term"[29].

Things were going well for America, even though George H. W. Bush left the incoming Clinton administration with a legacy of unfinished business in Iraq. The US hegemonic stability in the Middle East, characterized by *Pax Americana*, emerged and rose through military intervention, energy security, and Arab-Israeli peace efforts. The US expanded its presence through strategic alliances, military strength, and regional security initiatives to ensure the free flow of oil. This last aspect was of particular importance not only for the economies of the Persian Gulf states, but also for America's partners. The Middle East being of crucial importance for the world's energy security – its oil export accounts for 40% of global demand and is critical for the world's transportation systems (contributing 96% of its energy demands) –, the US, by securing and guaranteeing the production and transit of hydrocarbons in the Gulf, has managed to consolidate its position as an "indispensable nation"[30] for all its allies.

However, *indispensability* does not mean serving as the world's policeman or sending US combat troops into forever wars. It also does not mean that the country must be omnipotent. What is indispensable, some authors argue[31], is America's active performance of a critically important leadership role that no other country

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[27] Stephen M. Walt, 2018, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

[28] Quoted in "Communism's Collapse Poses a Challenge to America's Military," *U.S. News and World Report*, October 14, 1991, p. 28.

[29] Daniel Benjamin, Steven Simon, *The Age of Sacred Terror: Radical Islam's War Against America*, New York, Random House, 2002, pp. 407-418.

[30] See Madeleine K. Albright, Interview on *NBC-TV* "The Today Show" with Matt Lauer, February 19, 1998, https://1997-2001.state.gov/statements/1998/980219a.html, accessed on March 17, 2020.

[31] Robert J. Lieber, *Indispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in a Turbulent World*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2022, p. 5.

is able to take on. Many factors create this indispensability: the absence of desirable alternatives, the shortcomings of other proposed strategies, the harmful consequences of retrenchment for allies and like-minded countries, the unique ability of the United States to resolve dilemmas of collective action among allies, and the importance of a stable, open, rules-based world order for America's own national security, interests, and values.

During the period 1990-2000, America met all these conditions. Practically, the United States has consolidated two different postures: to act as a leader (American leadership) and as a hegemonic power in both, the Middle East region and internationally. Following a struggle of 44 years between the two superpowers, from 1947 to 1991, followed by the collapse of the USSR, the US appeared preponderant. With China not yet a major factor, Washington was able to conduct and project its foreign policy without having to consider the interests of opposing powers. It would be another two decades before America found itself in a new era of major power competition.

These advantages seemed so pronounced that the historian Paul Kennedy described America's situation as unprecedented. As he wrote in the *Financial Times*, in February 2002: "Nothing has ever existed like this disparity of power; nothing… Charlemagne's empire was merely Western European in its reach. The Roman empire stretched farther afield, but there was another great empire in Persia, and a larger one in China. There is there-fore no comparison."[32]

Then came the infamous terrorist attack by Al Qaeda on September 11, 2001. The historians' dilemma when writing about that day, is where to begin their story, recognizing that "every effect has a cause, or many causes, some general and others specific"[33], and that these can and do reach far back in time. The events of 9/11 were axial not just because they were the first successful attacks against the continental United States by a foreign adversary since the War of 1812, or the most profound intelligence failure since Pearl Harbor in 1941, but because they were a response to American activism in the Middle East. The attacks were a cruel, if only momentary, correction to the idea that the United States was the subject and the Arab world the object. Bin Laden's appalling raid against a civilian target demonstrated that the dynamic could be reversed. America could be acted upon, just as it had acted upon others. As a statement, it was both eloquent and repugnant. It also aroused the United States to a reply that was much deadlier than bin Laden's gruesome provocation.[34] Unlike historians, America had no dilemma: its position as the sole global superpower was consolidated, most liberals recognized its character as a peacemaker and peacekeeper, so when it went to the United Nations Security Council to invoke Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, it encountered no opposition. Less than a month after the terrorist attack on American soil, a US–led coalition attacked Afghanistan, under the name 'Operation Enduring Freedom', in response to the 11 September attacks carried out by the Taliban-allied al-Qaeda.

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[32] Quoted in Robert J. Lieber, 2022, *op. cit*., pp. 37-38.

[33] Steven Simon, *Grand Delusion: The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East*, New York, Penguin Press, 2023, p. 308.

[34] *Ibidem*, pp. 318-319.

This was America's first forever war in the Middle East, a confrontation that would consume immense human, financial, and political capital. The invasion was widely deemed as a "war of necessity"[35], justified under the right of self-defense after the Taliban refused to hand over Osama bin Laden, with a clear focus on preventing follow-on attacks.

The Turning Point: Apex and Forever Wars (2003–2011)

Iraq was the dominant issue as 2003 began. It was the period of the rebirth of American neoconservatism, and in the hallways of the White House the voices that were heard almost exclusively were those promoting a new war in the Middle East. Former US Vice President Dick Cheney belief that Saddam Hussein was close to a nuclear weapons capability and was preparing to unleash other weapons of mass destruction on the world seems to have had no basis in US intelligence analysis. In fact, the administration had never asked for such an assessment. The only large-scale coordinated intelligence assessment of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction program was completed in 2002 at the request of Congress, not the White House or any other executive branch department.[36] But Cheney was one of the leaders of the 'war hawks' movement of the Bush Jr. administration. The former American vice president, along with prominent figures in the defense department, including Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith, argued for an aggressive, preemptive foreign policy. All of them downplayed war costs and risks, arguing that military intervention would establish a democratic, pro-American foothold in the Middle East.

One of the main arguments of the pro-war lobbyists were also based on the strategic error of Saddam Hussein, who had expelled UN inspectors from Iraq in November 1997, so five years had elapsed during which Saddam could in theory have launched a personal Manhattan Project[37] without anyone outside Iraq noticing.

"The *what ifs* can kill you"[38], Ron Suskind wrote in 2006. American neoconservatives no longer wanted to leave room for any "what ifs", or to any failure of the will to act preventively. In terms of the tragedy of 9/11, a particular regret was lingering for those who might have made a difference. The success of removing the Taliban from power, the international emulation surrounding the American tragedy of 9/11, as well as the status of the only global superpower, were the main pillars of the George W. Bush administration's overconfidence when it took the final decision of invading Iraq, on March 20, 2003.

However, Iraq was fundamentally different. The president wanted to destroy an established nemesis of the US. And he wanted to change the course of history, transforming not just a country but the region of the world that had produced the

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[35] See Richard N. Haass, *War of necessity: war of choice*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2009.

[36] Central Intelligence Agency, "National Intelligence Estimate: Iraq's Continuing Programs for Weapons of Mass Destruction", approved for release April 2004, https://fas.org/irp/cia/product/iraq-wmd-nie.pdf, accessed on April 5, 2026.

[37] Steven Simon, 2023, *op. cit*., p. 330.

[38] Ron Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2006, p. 5.

lion's share of the world's terrorists and had resisted much of modernity. Some authors[39] consider that Bush jr. may have sought to accomplish what his father did not. The arguments put forward for going to war – noncompliance with U.N. resolutions, possession of weapons of mass destruction – turned out to be essentially "window dressing"[40], trotted out to build domestic and international support for a policy that had been forged mostly for other reasons.

And yet, why was president George W. Bush so keen to invade Iraq? After 9/11, the president and those closest to him wanted to send a message to the world that the United States was willing and able to act decisively. 'Liberating' Afghanistan was a start, but in the end, they didn't manage to achieve their desired goal. The fact that Iraq was not involved in 9/11 or tied to al-Qaida (despite repeated intimations and claims by the president and others to the contrary) mattered not. Indeed, the president's instruction to counterterrorism coordinator Richard Clarke to look for a connection between Iraq and 9/11 when there was no reason to suspect one seemed more than anything to reflect a desire to justify a course of action Bush jr. was already inclined to take. The fact that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld instructed Central Command in November 2001 to begin planning for a war with Iraq reinforces this point.[41]

The 2003 invasion marked the hubristic peak of unipolarity. The US aimed to establish a liberal democracy in Iraq that would serve as a regional role model, and yet, the war has come to be described as a "war of choice"[42], a peak of American hubris. The invasion and subsequent removal of Saddam Hussein marked the peak of US unipolar confidence. The swift collapse of the Iraqi state was seen as a validation of US military might.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq is widely viewed as the turning point that undermined US credibility and influence, and some of the war unintended consequences have profoundly altered the regional security architecture. The invasion led to security vacuums, the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS), and inadvertently made Iran the dominant military power in the northern Gulf – with a growing influence in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen –, while exhausting American public support for 'forever wars.' Also, the high human and financial costs of Afghanistan and Iraq wars ($8 trillion)[43] led to a "retreating hypothesis"[44], as public and political support for large-scale ground interventions waned. Unlike traditional hegemons

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[39] See Richard Haass, 2009, *op. cit.*

[40] *Ibidem*, p. 321.

[41] *Ibidem.*

[42] *Ibidem*, p. 18. See also Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial. American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2021; Raymond Hinnebusch, "Hegemonic Stability Theory Reconsidered: Implications of the Iraq War," in Rick Fawn & Raymond A. Hinnebusch (Eds.), *The Iraq War: Causes and Consequences*, Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006.

[43] Linda J. Bilmes *et al.*, "The Financial Legacy of Iraq and Afghanistan: How Wartime Spending Decisions Will Constrain Future National Security Budgets", in *HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series RWP13-006*, March 2013, https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/financial-legacy-iraq-and-afghanistan-how-wartime-spending-decisions-will-constrain#citation, accessed on April 5, 2026.

[44] Anthony H. Cordesman, "America's Failed Strategy in the Middle East: Losing Iraq and the Gulf", in *CSIS*, January 2, 2020, https://www.csis.org/analysis/americas-failed-strategy-middle-east-losing-iraq-and-gulf#, accessed on April 3, 2026.

that seek stability, the US acted as a "regional revisionist,"[45] using force to dismantle existing political structures. Moreover, the post-2003 occupation quickly bogged down in insurgency, revealing the limits of unipolarity. In short, an 'American Quagmire'[46].

Starting with the Obama administration, the US sought to reduce its physical presence, but crises like the Arab Spring, the emergence of ISIS, and Iran's nuclear ambitions repeatedly prevented a clean exit.

From a political perspective, the Second Iraq War may have actually set back the cause of promoting democracy in the region, since democracy came to be widely associated with disorder, impunity, and strategic failure. From a strategic point of view, the US made Iran one of the two most influential local states. Not only has Tehran emerged as the principal external influence inside Iraq, but the Iraq that served as a balancer and foil to Iran no longer exists. US credibility has taken a hit, in that Washington claims (e. g. about the nuclear programs of others such as Iran's), came to be viewed with greater suspicion. As a result of the decision to go to war, perceptions of incompetence, and such abuses as Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib[47], US prestige has suffered throughout the world and anti-Americanism has increased.

Furthermore, all too many policy makers, heady with apparent success, rejected diplomatic opportunities in the belief that regime change in Tehran and Damascus would be all but certain to follow and, when it did, would solve the American problems with those governments. It is true that in the meantime the Assad regime in Damascus has been replaced, as a result of an American-Israeli-Turkish collaboration, but the alternative is at least questionable. And as for the leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it has been subject to internal protests since 1980, with a long series of protests that culminated in those of December 2025-January 2026. At the time of writing this paper, the US and Israel are at war with Iran, which they attacked on February 28, 2026. But regime change seems, at least for the moment, a utopia, and the invasion of the Islamic Republic could have as an unintended consequence of accelerating the Iranian nuclear program, if Washington and Tehran do not reach a compromise solution. In may 2018, the first Trump administration, withdrew the US from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear agreement between the US, China, Russia, France, Great Britain, Germany and Iran, signed during the Obama administration, on July 14, 2015.

An administration that came into office belittling nation building ended up doing just that and then some. It was an administration that began in the camp of the realists and ended up outdoing Woodrow Wilson in its muscular embrace of the need to promote democracy. And more than anything else, a war launched to transform the region did so in ways never intended. The second Iraq war, a classic *war of choice*[48], led to the narrowing of American options.

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45 Linda J. Bilmes *et al.*, 2013, *quoted art.*
46 Anthony H. Cordesman, 2020, *quoted art.*
47 Richard Haass, 2009, *op. cit.*, p. 361.
48 *Ibidem*, p. 362.

The Fall: Overstretch, (Partial) Retrenchment and Multipolarity (2011–2026)

The discussion on American foreign policy in the Middle Eastern is a confusing elixir of normative proposals and questionable empirical assertions. Also, the accounts about the beginning of American decline in the region since 2011 must consider the fact that after the capture of Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, the US strategy toward Middle East have changed.

Several theoretical arguments support US foreign policy and involvement in the Middle East and, equally, the retreat. Gregory Gause[49] argues that the American policy attitudes and action towards the region are anchored on realism – the general pursuit of national interest disguised as moral concerns. Here, the realists propose that the international system is anarchic (lacking central authority). Thus, actors are concerned with their security, pursue their interests and struggle for power. While there have been legitimate reasons, including Kuwait's sovereignty (after Saddam's invasion) and national security in the nuclear world, Washington's 'bigger picture' in the Middle East region has always been oil, Israel, and the projection of its own power over the entire region.

The other paradigm belongs to political scientist John Mearsheimer[50], who considered that the tragedy of great power politics lies in the inability of its states to build a stable regional order. This comes as the influence and interventionist impulses of the region's former hegemonic power, the United States, are receding, creating a vacuum in which strong, assertive countries have engaged in sustained competition and tested the limits of their capacities, while resisting domination by rivals. However, none is strong enough to dominate and reshape the region decisively.

About ten years since declaring war on Middle Eastern countries harboring terrorism, the Obama administration declared his intention to pivot Washington's foreign policy efforts from the Western Asia (Middle East) toward South-East Asia, meaning China. This was the first of his foreign policy objectives that he hoped to achieve in his first term. In November 2011, approximately three years into his term, President Barrack Obama stated that, "The tide of war is receding. Now, even as we remove our last troops from Iraq, we are beginning to bring our troops home from Afghanistan, where we've begun a transition to Afghan security and leadership"[51].

The second was to put the US approach to the region on a different footing, emphasizing his administration's departure from regime change as America's *modus operandi*. Setting the stage for a return to Israeli-Palestinian negotiations

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[49] See Gregory Gause III, "Hegemony, Unipolarity and American Failure in the Middle East", in *The Project on Middle East Political Science*, March 2026, https://pomeps.org/hegemony-unipolarity-and-american-failure-in-the-middle-east, accessed on April 3, 2026.

[50] See John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York, W. W. Nanon & Company, Inc., 2001.

[51] The White House Office of the Press Secretary, *Remarks by the President on the way forward in Afghanistan*, The White House, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press office/2011/06/22/remarks-president-way-forward-afghanistan, accessed on June 3, 2021.

was a third. Blocking Iran's path to a nuclear weapon was the fourth and most ambitious goal. And, indeed, on July 14, 2015, after a process of nuclear diplomacy that lasted 12 years, the US, along with China, Great Britain, France, Russia and Germany, signed, alongside Iran, the JCPOA, the strongest nuclear control agreement ever negotiated.[52] As for the other three objectives, none of them have been met. The withdrawal from Afghanistan came in August 2021, during the Joe Biden administration, the conflict between Palestine and Israel has worsened, especially after the terrorist attack by the Hamas organization on October 7, 2021, and the Pivot to Asia strategy has not been fully realized to this day.

The Middle East has been always shaken by unrest, through increased violence and instability. For the US, most countries in the Middle East present the fundamental challenge and necessitate a *cost-benefit analysis*[53], but America's overexposure in the region even cost it the loss of a good part of the influence it had gained in 1991. When the US partially departed from Iraq in 2011, there was little for the massive military investment or earlier allegation that Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction. The rise of Islamic State militants complicated the US' efforts within the region, and, according to Washington, there was no longer a critical strategic vantage point[54].

Syria is another nation of interest introducing complexities for the American administration, although Bashar al-Assad's regime was replaced by that of Ahmed al-Sharaa, a former member of the terrorist groups ISIS and Al Qaeda, one agreed upon by the West, Israel and Türkiye. Afghanistan and Pakistan are equally volatile regions with critical concerns about whether the US has significantly prepared the government to deal with Taliban and Al Qaeda resurgence within the region. These efforts are primarily influenced by significant military expenditure, public calls for cost-benefit analysis, and, more importantly, challenges within the region. Thus, it was increasingly difficult for Washington to get involved in endless wars and stay forever in the region. However, Byman and Moller[55] argue that the US continues to have several critical interests in the Middle East; (a) maintaining Israel's security; (b) preventing Iran to build nuclear arsenal; (c) maintaining oil flow and its strategic partners from the Gulf safe.

Similarly, Stephen H. Gotowicki and Bernard Reich[56] believe that the US cannot withdraw permanently from the region. Since American ambitions to control the Middle East were also influenced by the desire to limit the power projection

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[52] Ioana Constantin-Bercean, *The Great Powers' Nuclear Diplomacy toward Iran, 2003-2015*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022, pp. 4-5.

[53] Joseph Stiglitz, Linda J. Bilmes, *The three trillion dollar war: The true cost of the Iraq conflict*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2008, p. 16.

[54] Seyom Brown, *Higher realism: A new foreign policy for the United States*, 1st ed., New York, Routledge, 2016, pp. 2-34.

[55] Daniel Byman, Sara Bjerg Moller, "The United States and the Middle East: Interests, Risks, and Costs", in *The Tobin Project*, 2016, https://tobinproject.org/sites/default/files/assets/Byman, accessed on April 2, 2026.

[56] Stephen H. Gotowicki and Bernard Reich, "The United States and the Soviet Union in the Middle East", in David Howard Goldberg, Paul Marantz, Stephen Page (Eds.), *The Decline of the Soviet Union and the Transformation of the Middle East*, 1st ed., 1994, Boulder, Westview Press.

of its geopolitical adversary, the defunct USSR, with China seeking to exert global dominance, Washington is unlikely to stand by and just hand the Middle East to Beijing.

The current US strategy in the Middle East became to be defined by "offshore balancing"[57], with a focus on Great Power Competition with China, and to some extent, with Russia. Beijing has increasingly acted as a diplomatic mediator, such as facilitating the 2023 Saudi-Iran rapprochement, while Russia maintains some military presence in Syria. Under current frameworks, the US emphasizes "Peace through Strength"[58], a syntagm that has come to characterize the regional strategy of the second Trump administration, maintaining core interests, such as Israel's security and energy flow, while avoiding new forever wars.

Although the new US National Security Strategy criticized the previous administrations for attempting to address every global issue and conflict, calling that approach "unrealistic"[59], stressing the importance of prioritization and emphasizing that foreign policy should protect vital national interests rather than manage every global problem, the current Trump administration waged a new war in the Middle East, partnering with Israel in attacking Iran.

The initial stated goal was to dismantle Iran's nuclear program, but as the war progressed, Washington's military and political objectives were revised. Thus, the most plausible goal, although not officially stated, was a counter-hegemony strategy: preventing any single hostile regional power (Iran, in this case) from dominating the Middle East region. However, battered, but unbowed, the Islamic Republic survived, responded by engaging in asymmetrical warfare, and in its survival found the strength to withstand the two nuclear powers that attacked it on February 28, 2026. Defying a generational campaign of isolation, Tehran converted a fight for existence into a strategic win. The US underestimated the response that Iran would have it, which is why many authors have asked themselves 'Who will win the war? – a dilemma that no one has had in no other American war in the Middle East. Iran has taken control of the Strait of Hormuz, bombed the Persian Gulf states that host American military bases, and damaged Israel's military and civilian infrastructure. Moreover, bound by Washington and exposed by Iran, the Gulf states found themselves trapped in a conflict they did not choose.

Each regional war from the last decades has decreased the US influence, pushed the Gulf states closer to China, and undermined the institutions America claimed to lead. The first war was fought to announce the new global order. The second paid tribute to that order while breaking its rules. The third disregarded it completely. And it can be called as a *war of ambition*, maybe the last of its kind for the foreseeable future.

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[57] Qifeng Fang, Xiaocheng Lu, "The Transformation of the US Strategy in the Middle East: Retreat after 2011", in *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, Vol. 586, 2021, https://www.atlantis-press.com/proceedings/icprss-21/125961669, accessed on April 8, 2026.

[58] C. Todd Lopez, "Epic Fury Quelled for Now, Objectives Accomplished", *U.S. Forces Remain Ready*, U. S. Department of War, April 8, 2026, https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4454276/epic-fury-quelled-for-now-objectives-accomplished-us-forces-remain-ready/, accessed on April 8, 2026.

[59] Ali Al-Din Hilal, "The Future of the Middle East in Light of the US National Security Strategy", in *Future for Advanced Research and Studies Analysis*, December 17, 2025, https://futureuae.com/en/Mainpage/Item/10677/the-future-of-the-middle-east-in-light-of-the-us-national-security-strategy, accessed on April 8, 2026.

Conclusions: The 2026 Realist Reset and the End of Pax Americana

The logic of the US-Israel war against Iran is best explain thru the theory of Mearsheimer's offensive realism: states that perceive windows of opportunity to destroy emerging threats exploit them, regardless of international legal frameworks or alliance commitments. Israel's calculation – that Iran's convergence of nuclear capability, regional reach, and domestic fragility created an irreproducible window – conformed precisely to this logic. The outcome has been the destruction of the regional order without a clear architecture for 'the day after'. Also, the 2026 American strategy in the Middle East frames previous post-Cold War policies as having eroded US influence, advocating for a pragmatic approach that privileges power over diplomacy in the short term.

The US did not fully consult regional partners before initiating the February strikes, causing strain in relations with some Gulf states and creating a *fiat accompli*. Hence, given that America's partners were the first victims of a war they did not initiate, some authors[60] consider that this new American war in the Middle East would significantly erode the US influence in the region. Moreover, some Gulf states began to expand their security agreements beyond the American umbrella (e. g. Saudi Arabia signed a security agreement with Pakistan). The Middle East is undoubtedly changing, but the order that is emerging is hardly clear-cut or certain. Rather, it is marked by indecision, flux, and will certainly depend on the outcome of the US-Israel *vs.* Iran war. Right now, it feels as if the American era in the Middle East isn't quite over, but it isn't what it once was, either. If the result of the war will not be a decisive victory but protracted stalemate, in imperial terms, such an outcome amounts to defeat.

The near- and even long-term prospects for the Middle East are not difficult to predict. Either some outside power will have to step in and impose order on the region or it will collapse into chaos and instability, becoming the stage upon which untold numbers of state and nonstate actors, each with a different script, will attempt either to assume the regional leadership, or to wreak havoc. China would love to play the role of great power in the region, and, one might argue, is preparing to do exactly that. Just as the US pivot east, China is pivoting farther west. And it is doing so through its close and growing economic and diplomatic relationships with the Arab world, Pakistan, Iran, and Türkiye.[61]

In a world where the US wants other countries to choose between its camp and the camp of the burgeoning China-Russia front, even America's closest Middle East partners are seeking to hedge. That fact might be less about existing power realities and more about the states' perceptions of where global power realities will be in coming decades. Regardless, perceptions about power are themselves a power reality. If Middle Eastern leaders believe that American

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[60] Seva Gunitsky, "The Three Gulf Wars of American Hegemony", in *Hegemon*, March 18, 2026, https://hegemon.substack.com/p/the-three-gulf-wars-of-american-hegemony, accessed on April 8, 2026.

[61] Vali Nasr, *The dispensable nation: American foreign policy in retreat*, New York, Random House, Inc., 2013, p. 15.

regional unipolarity is crumbling, the edifice will decline all the faster. This suggests that the coming years will see great power competition and regional state maneuvering that might resemble the early years of the Cold War in the Middle East, though without the strong ideological element characteristic of that period. That kind of regional flexibility will test an American foreign policy establishment (and Trump's opposition alike) that is used to (mostly) getting its own way in the Middle East.

The end of Pax Americana in the Middle East – the US-led regional order that emerged after the Cold War's end in 1989 – has been a reality for more than a decade. Empire and its offered or perceived peace depend not only on power but on consent. The 2026 American war in Iran eroded both.

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