

STUDY

The Gaza War and the United States Clout in the Middle East

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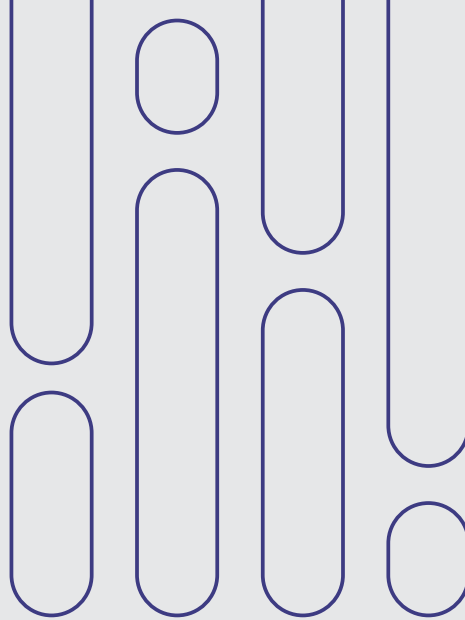
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Introduction

Before Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on October ,2023 ,7 the US assessment of the situation in the Middle East was that it was moving in a direction favorable to US interests .Even US President Joe Biden ,when he embarked on his first trip to the region as president in ,2022 praised the fact that it was the first time since 9/11 that a US leader had visited the region without the participation of US forces in combat missions .This was also confirmed by US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan a few days before Operation Al-Aqsa Flood when he said that the Middle East was calmer today than it was two decades ago and praised the United States shift for focusing on priorities beyond the Middle East .

The United States ‘current dilemma arises from the fact that it has exerted efforts to reestablish its influence in the region through accelerating diplomatic interactions ,offering economic incentives and signing security agreements while diverting attention to addressing challenges in other regional spheres like Ukraine and South Asia .Despite its diplomatic approach ,the United States has found itself compelled to re-engage and pursue additional military operations in the region due to unprecedented challenges .These challenges extend beyond relations with regional adversaries like Iran and its proxies ,or competition with major powers such as China and Russia .They also encompass relations with regional allies whose perspectives diverge from those of the United States. These allies perceive the United States ‘policies as destabilizing and disrupting the security initiatives spearheaded by key regional powers ,notably the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia .

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, viewed as a seismic event in the region, sparked renewed debate concerning the United States’ interactions with the region. In this context, fundamental

questions emerged, prompting exploration, primarily questions examining the consequences of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood and the subsequent impacts on US influence in the region and the pursuit of its strategic goals. Several sub-questions arise from the aforesaid primary questions: firstly, what characterized the United States' relationship with the region before the onset of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood? Secondly, how did the United States respond to Operation Al-Aqsa Flood and Israel's war on Gaza, and what objectives and motivations guided its responses? Lastly, to what extent has the United States upheld its policies, and what are their resulting outcomes and implications in the region?

This study aims to answer the aforesaid primary and sub-questions by adopting a realist framework, considering the United States' involvement in a significant regional conflict for the sake of reasserting its dominance. The United States employs various instruments, primarily military force, to safeguard its security and prevent any alteration in the balance of power that could risk the status quo. In this context, the study adopts inductive reasoning, which is premised on making generalized conclusions from specific observations. Similar to other scientific methodologies, this method pinpoints the issue or phenomenon under scrutiny, dissects its causes, and then shifts from specific details to broader conclusions, or from a particular concept to a general one. This method can be useful in extrapolating the implications of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood and the Gaza conflict on the United States' influence in the Middle East and its global standing.

US Policy Before Operation Al-Aqsa Flood

Since the Gulf War in 1990, the Middle East has remained a focal point of US interests. However, the United States' gradual

disengagement from the region has been part of a deliberate strategy since the Obama administration, aimed at redirecting Washington's attention toward its escalating rivalry with China. This approach reshaped US perceptions of the region, reminiscent of the period preceding 1990 when the United States maintained a minimal military presence and depended on regional allies to uphold stability. Although this approach faltered as the Middle East continued to assert itself on the US agenda during the Obama and Trump administrations, the Biden administration initially took pride in its ability to pivot toward other global priorities despite regional challenges. Nonetheless, the repercussions of this policy have been significant for both Washington and the Middle East. The erosion of the US security umbrella has exposed US influence to considerable challenges.

Iran's Clout and Approaching the Nuclear Threshold

The waning of US interests in the region has presented Iran with an opportunity to expand its regional influence, consolidate its presence near strategic sea lanes, and embolden its indirect assaults on US bases in the region. While President Joe Biden's primary objective after taking office was to revive the nuclear agreement with Iran to curb its nuclear ambitions, negotiations stumbled. Consequently, Iran intensified its uranium enrichment capabilities, getting even closer to the nuclear threshold. Moreover, it exhibited greater defiance toward the United States by backing Russia in its conflict with Ukraine and solidifying alliances with China, Venezuela and North Korea. These moves form part of a systematic endeavor to foster anti-US hegemonic alliances on the global stage.

US Tensions With Some Traditional Allies:

The United States' allies grew increasingly frustrated with its lackluster responses to regional unrest and perceived neglect

of their interests. Consequently, US traditional allies started to pursue more independent policies and diversify their strategic partnerships. Over time, major regional countries became much more self-assured, recognizing that the United States was either unwilling or unable to solve their problems, prompting them to take matters into their own hands. This shift laid the groundwork for the Saudi-Iran rapprochement deal and the reintegration of Syria into the Arab sphere of influence. These developments signaled a significant departure in the approach of regional powers, particularly led by Saudi Arabia, toward negotiation and de-escalation as viable alternatives to confrontation. As a result, there was a noticeable increase in coordination between Saudi Arabia and the United States regarding Iran. Meanwhile, Iran pursued oil policies more aligned with its national interests, distancing itself from US pressure. It became evident that, for the first time since 1990, the region was undergoing significant transformations without direct US involvement.⁽¹⁾

The Gulf's Future Oil Policy

It was previously assumed that the energy dimension had diminished in the United States' Middle East strategy, particularly with the shale oil boom and the global push toward liquefied gas and renewable energy sources. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine underscored the continued significance of Middle Eastern oil, particularly from the Gulf states, in preserving Washington's international position. Nevertheless, the United States' withdrawal from the region had adverse impacts on its influence in the oil sector. With the decline of strategic partnerships with the Gulf states, the United States sought alternative economic paths and diversified its sources and relationships. The reluctance of Saudi Arabia and the UAE to respond to US pressure by increasing oil production

to mitigate price hikes following the Russia-Ukraine conflict greatly frustrated the United States, highlighting Washington's miscalculations on this front.⁽²⁾

China's Growing Clout

China seized a historic opportunity to expand its influence in the region, integrating the Middle Eastern sphere into the geopolitical and geo-economic competition with the United States. Its efforts culminated in brokering an agreement to normalize relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, significantly altering the conflict's dynamics in the region. Consequently, the United States is facing the challenge of diminishing regional influence, the erosion of influential alliances vis-à-vis Iran, and the ceding of economic leverage in the region to China. This shift represents a challenge to the longstanding role of the United States as the primary external power broker in the region. The decline of the US presence has spurred the emergence of actors seeking to fill the security vacuum. Turkey, for instance, expanded its military operations in Syria and Iraq while extending its influence into Lebanon. Additionally, Russia's intervention in the Syrian conflict successfully altered the balance of power in its favor against the United States. Furthermore, non-state actors such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthi rebels in Yemen and Kurdish forces in Syria have further complicated the geopolitical landscape, adding layers of complexity to the regional dynamics.⁽³⁾

To navigate the ongoing transformations in the Middle East and assert influence, the Biden administration formulated a new strategy comprising five key principles:⁽⁴⁾

- **Partnerships:** The United States will prioritize supporting and enhancing partnerships with regional states aligned with the rules-based international order. This entails enabling these states to defend themselves against external threats.

- **Deterrence:** The United States will not permit foreign or regional powers to risk the freedom of navigation in vital waterways such as the Strait of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab. Any attempts by nations to assert control over another country or the region through military means, incursions, attacks or threats will not be tolerated.
- **Diplomacy:** In addition to deterring threats to regional stability, the United States will actively seek to reduce tensions and resolve conflicts through diplomatic means, aiming to prevent escalation whenever possible.
- **Integration:** The United States will work toward fostering political, economic and security ties among its regional partners, while respecting each nation's sovereignty and independent decision-making.
- **Values:** Emphasis will be placed on promoting human rights and upholding the values enshrined in the United Nations Charter as guiding principles in US engagement in the region. The United States has strategically employed guiding principles that mutually support one another to manage the ongoing changes in the Middle East. Consequently, certain US initiatives have proven effective in achieving their intended objectives.

Recalibrating relationships with allies: During a summit held in Saudi Arabia, President Biden pledged to Arab leaders to rebuild trust and deliver tangible results, emphasizing a commitment to navigating the current landscape of the Middle East. He expressed optimism about a region that is more united than in previous years. The United States has concentrated its efforts on establishing an integrated air and naval defense system in the region through innovative partnerships and technology. Additionally, it has supported infrastructure communication projects spanning Iraq, the Gulf and Jordan,

facilitated the creation of new free trade agreements and Israeli flights over Saudi airspace. Notably, the United States has achieved diplomatic breakthroughs with longstanding allies like Morocco, Egypt and the Gulf states through joint military exercises, official visits and behind-the-scenes coordination efforts.

Abraham Accords: Expansion and Reshaping Regional Balances

The normalization efforts and Abraham Accords serve as crucial aspects of US strategy in the region and both have significant implications. These agreements were viewed as potentially reshaping the Middle East in line with US interests, shifting the focus away from traditional peace efforts to the Abraham Accords. Notably, the Palestinians were sidelined in these developments. The Biden administration, in particular, believed that by promoting regional cooperation, it could postpone efforts toward Israeli-Palestinian peace. The Israeli government leveraged the Abraham Accords to argue against the necessity of reaching a settlement with the Palestinians, instead proposing separate agreements with Arab nations in the region.⁽⁵⁾ Prior to the eruption of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, negotiations were underway with Saudi Arabia to sign these agreements. However, progress was impeded by Riyadh's insistence on a just resolution to the Palestinian issue as a condition. If successful, such negotiations would have represented a significant diplomatic achievement for the United States, potentially restoring its waning regional influence, given Saudi Arabia's prominence and role in the region.

Integrating Regional Allies Into International Projects Supportive of US Hegemony:

In response to regional dynamics, the United States initiated the formation of strategic alliances such as the I2U2 alliance

made up of India, Israel, the UAE and the United States, along with the Negev Forum. This forum and others are also geared toward addressing various pressing challenges including food security, climate change and regional security. Additionally, the United States launched a new trade route connecting India to the Middle East and Europe via railways and ports, heralded as the beginning of a “new era of connectivity” by the White House. This initiative is positioned as a direct challenge to China’s Belt and Road Initiative, aiming to integrate Middle Eastern allies with Southeast Asian and Western partners to counter China’s rising influence.⁽⁶⁾ By creating and bolstering regional alliances, the United States intends to reshape regional competition dynamics, counteract constraints on its influence, such as China’s expanding presence and Iran’s outreach in the region, and prevent isolation from regional affairs. Simultaneously, efforts are concentrated on containing threats posed by Iran and its regional proxies.

Supporting Stability and Achieving Regional Deterrence

Washington has intensified its efforts to promote regional stability, thus enabling the reallocation of its assets to emerging conflict zones in Europe and Southeast Asia. It has actively pursued initiatives to bolster relations between key actors in the Middle East, such as between Turkey and the UAE; Turkey and Israel; Qatar and Bahrain; and the UAE and Qatar. Through diplomatic channels and shared interests, the United States has worked to mitigate longstanding rivalries that have contributed to polarization in the region. In this vein, the United States has facilitated negotiations for the demarcation of maritime borders between Lebanon and Israel, engaged in diplomatic dialogue with Iran to address differences regarding its nuclear program, and explored the potential revival of the 2015 nuclear agreement, including provisions for the ex-

change of prisoners. These diplomatic endeavors underscore the United States' commitment to promoting regional security and stability.⁽⁷⁾ Concurrently, the United States has pursued the establishment of a regional security framework under its supervision, aimed at integrating Israel and distributing security responsibilities among regional actors to address risks and challenges collectively. This structure primarily targets Iran, with the potential to yield several strategic advantages for the United States.

US Responses to the Post-Al Aqsa Flood Developments

The United States displayed a comprehensive reaction to Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, however, with discernible limitations and driven by key objectives and motivations.

Ensuring Israel's Security and Ending the Palestinian Resistance:

In response to the attack by Hamas on October 7, 2023, the United States perceived it as a grave threat to its key ally, Israel. Consequently, as Israel vowed to dismantle Hamas and launched a significant offensive in the Gaza Strip, the United States extended military, political, and economic support to help Israel achieve its aim. Following Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, President Biden swiftly reached out to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, affirming unwavering support for Israel's right to self-defense. President Biden further underscored this stance by promptly visiting Israel, demonstrating solidarity with Israel during the crisis, and participating in high-level military deliberations held by the Israeli war cabinet.

Moreover, President Biden and his administration embraced the Israeli narrative regarding the October 7 attack by Hamas, which included unsubstantiated accusations of atrocities like

beheading children and raping women. These allegations, aimed at rallying global support for Israel's offensive in the Gaza Strip, lacked concrete evidence. Simultaneously, the Biden administration justified Israeli military actions by asserting that Hamas members were using Palestinian civilians as human shields and concealing themselves amongst civilians. This stance was aimed at shaping public opinion and mobilizing international support for Israel. Additionally, the United States actively shielded Israel from international criticism by obstructing any UN Security Council resolutions condemning Israel's actions or calling for an end to the conflict. The United States reaffirmed its commitment to providing military assistance to Israel. Under the Biden administration, Israel has received a replenishment of military aid, including Iron Dome air defense missiles, small-diameter bombs and JDAM equipment, which enhances the precision of unguided bombs through GPS guidance. This support supplements existing agreements for advanced weaponry such as F-35 fighter jets, CH-53 heavy helicopters and KC-46 aerial refueling tankers. Additionally, the Biden administration has requested an additional \$14 billion in aid for Israel from the Congress.⁽⁸⁾

In pursuit of a shared objective, the United States strongly backs Israel's ongoing military campaign aimed at dismantling Hamas and reshaping Gaza's reality following the conflict. President Biden emphasized that mere ceasefires will not bring lasting peace as long as Hamas remains committed to its ideology of destruction. He highlighted that each ceasefire serves as an opportunity for Hamas to regroup, rearm and resume attacks on civilians. President Biden warned against allowing Hamas to regain control in Gaza, arguing that it would perpetuate violence and hinder the prospects of progress for Palestinian civilians.⁽⁹⁾ Additionally, the United States

is actively exploring post-Hamas scenarios for Gaza, seeking viable governance alternatives after retracting plans for displacement, a move opposed by regional players like Egypt and Jordan.

Protecting US interests and Reasserting Global Dominance:

The United States perceived the Hamas attack as a direct challenge to its strategic interests and as part of a broader trend in the region opposing US policies. Consequently, US responses were driven by a pressing need to safeguard US interests, prevent regional instability, and potentially leverage the situation for diplomatic gains. Despite acknowledging a decline in its regional influence compared to previous decades, the United States still considers itself the most powerful global actor capable of both military and diplomatic interventions in the Middle East. This contrasts with China, whose growing economic presence in the region suggests a focus on economic initiatives rather than geopolitical involvement. With China's economic influence expanding, the United States may view recent developments as an opportunity to reaffirm and solidify its influence in the region.

The establishment of the US-led naval coalition to protect the Red Sea in December 2023 underscores a perspective that extends beyond the stated objective of countering Houthi attacks and safeguarding trade routes in the region. There is a suspicion that unspoken motives are at play, linked to the growing strategic importance of the Red Sea and the broader Horn of Africa region in US strategy. This suspicion suggests a potential inclination for the United States to militarize the area as part of its broader strategy to reposition and expand its influence globally. Securing control over critical chokepoints like the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, countering the Chinese

Belt and Road Initiative, and addressing the increasing presence of Russia, Iran and Turkey in the region are believed to be among the implicit objectives. Simultaneously, there is a focus on protecting Israeli interests and reshaping strategic dynamics in East Africa, highlighting the multifaceted nature of US interests in the region.⁽¹⁰⁾

Deterring Iran and Its Proxies and Preventing the Conflict's Scope from Expanding

The United States has taken significant measures to deter participation from resistance factions alongside Hamas and other Palestinian groups in the conflict, while also safeguarding its regional interests. These actions include warnings to Hezbollah in Lebanon and militias in Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen against involvement in the conflict or attacks on Israel. Additionally, the United States has deployed two aircraft carrier groups to the eastern Mediterranean, stationed 2,000 marines offshore and positioned 2,000 soldiers in readiness, demonstrating a robust commitment to supporting Israel and a preparedness to utilize force if necessary. Recent airstrikes by the United States, alongside its British ally, targeted militias in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, with a notable operation involving strikes on 85 targets on February 2, 2024, executed by B-1 bombers launched from the United States. These actions form part of what US officials describe as a multi-day campaign against regional targets associated with Iran.⁽¹¹⁾ The United States aimed to bolster its deterrent capabilities to prevent further escalation and the expansion of the conflict's scope, allowing Israel to focus on its robust campaign against Hamas without opening additional fronts.⁽¹²⁾ Efforts were also directed at curbing Iran and the "axis of resistance's" ability to exacerbate the situation through coordinated sanctions. Working alongside Western allies, the United States imposed additional sanctions on Iran

and its regional proxies in response to heightened tensions. Multiple rounds of sanctions were enforced to undermine Hamas' financial networks, sever external funding sources and block access to new channels, including those facilitated through social media platforms.⁽¹³⁾

Coordinating With International and Regional Allies

On the international stage, the United States coordinated closely with its allies to address the crisis, with many Western leaders pledging unwavering political and military support for Israel. The United States aimed to rally similar global backing for Israel as it did for Ukraine, viewing broad international mobilization as crucial. This concerted US effort aligns with its broader strategy of securing its global standing amid competition from powers like China and Russia. The escalation in the Red Sea, notably the Houthi attacks using drones and missiles against ships bound for Israel as well as targeting US and UK flagged vessels posed a significant challenge for the United States. These attacks not only threatened global trade routes but also served as leverage that could impact the Gaza conflict's trajectory. In response, Washington spearheaded a multinational initiative aimed at safeguarding commercial ships in the Red Sea. Subsequently, military strikes were launched on Houthi targets within Yemeni territory in collaboration with the UK as part of efforts to ensure the freedom of navigation and security in the region.⁽¹⁴⁾

At the regional level, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and other members of the Biden administration embarked on visits to numerous countries in the region. Amid growing discontent among regional allies over perceived bias toward Israel, the United States made significant efforts to ease tensions and reaffirm its commitment to regional partnerships. The United States pursued four primary objectives: firstly, to

contain the escalation of the conflict; secondly, to address the urgent need for humanitarian aid to Gaza, where Palestinians are grappling with starvation due to Israel's blockade; thirdly, to mitigate the humanitarian crisis exacerbated by Israel's daily airstrikes; and fourthly, to explore avenues for political agreements post-ceasefire, with the aim of fostering stability and peace in the region. Discussions also centered on cooperation in the reconstruction of post-war Gaza. Overall, the United States aims to ensure that the Gaza conflict does not derail its broader regional approach and long-term plans set in motion prior to the events of October 7, 2023.

Attempts to Moderate and Influence Public Perception

As the Israeli offensive on Gaza intensified, so did the humanitarian crisis, prompting heightened international calls for the protection of civilians. The United States faced mounting criticism for its perceived role in preventing international action to halt the conflict. In response, the Biden administration began exerting pressure on Israel to mitigate the crisis, alter its course, exercise restraint and prioritize civilian protection.⁽¹⁵⁾ Furthermore, the United States urged the Houthis and other militias to de-escalate tensions and refrain from involvement in the Gaza conflict. The United States also engaged in negotiations that led to temporary truces, facilitating prisoner exchanges and the delivery of humanitarian aid. President Biden aimed to contain the escalation and prevent the conflict from spreading to southern Lebanon, exemplified by the withdrawal of the US aircraft carrier USS Gerald Ford from the Mediterranean to its US base. This move conveyed implicit messages to Israel, Iran and Hezbollah, emphasizing the United States' preference to avert a regional war. Additionally, US envoy Amos Hochstein conducted official visits to Israel and Lebanon to advocate for the implementation of UN Security

Council Resolution 1701 (2006) and encourage negotiations for delineating land borders.⁽¹⁶⁾

Implications of US Policy After Operation Al-Aqsa Flood

Certain observations can be made on US policy in the region since the onset of the Gaza war:

- Observation one: The United States sought to gauge the impact of the conflict on its influence in the region and aimed to strike a delicate balance among several objectives. These included demonstrating solidarity with Israel, managing relations with Arab partners, containing the Gaza conflict to avert regional escalation, upholding the United States' image and status along with its adopted norms and values, and maintaining President Biden's popularity ahead of the presidential elections. However, these efforts appeared to entail reconciling multiple conflicting goals.
- Observation two: The mindset of hegemony and power continues to shape US behavior, evident in the United States' departure from diplomatic principles and multilateral engagement in favor of dependence on force and military intervention.
- Observation three: The evolving developments compelled the United States to adjust some of its stances, leading to perceptions of wavering US influence.
- Observation four: There is a possibility that the United States employed Operation Al-Aqsa Flood as a means to reposition military forces and implement strategic arrangements to secure influence in West Asia, the Red Sea Basin and the broader Middle East. This approach aligns with securing the United States' international standing, encircling adversaries, and

thwarting their economic and political agendas.

In any event, Operation Al-Aqsa Flood and the subsequent US responses have forged a new reality in the region. Within this altered landscape, the most significant repercussions on US policy can be highlighted as the following:

Refocusing Global Attention on the Palestinian Cause Amid Limited Prospects for Reaching a Settlement

Following the Biden administration's efforts to shape a new regional dynamic that sidelined the Palestinian issue, including the two-state solution, the recent conflict has thrust the Palestinian cause back into the spotlight. It underscored that the Abraham Accords cannot serve as a foundation for peace as long as Palestinian rights remain disregarded. This realization resonated among regional powers, including members of the Abraham Accords themselves, who were compelled to denounce Israel and reassess their trajectory in light of Israel's continued aggression.⁽¹⁷⁾ Saudi Arabia, in particular, reiterated its steadfast stance, asserting that it will neither normalize relations with Israel nor assist in Gaza's reconstruction until Israel ceases its hindrance of Palestinian statehood. Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan stated, "If we are reverting to the status quo before October 7 in a manner that qualifies us for another cycle, as we've seen in the past, then we are not interested in this conversation."⁽¹⁸⁾

In light of these developments, the Biden administration has come to recognize the necessity for a political process following the cessation of hostilities in Gaza. Discussions have ensued regarding post-war plans in Gaza, however, the Biden administration faces the challenge of formulating a credible, time-bound and conclusively defined plan to avoid fruitless endeavors. Another obstacle lies in the entrenched right-wing dominance in Israeli politics, which remains unconvinced of

any settlement and pursues a path of force as the sole recourse, buoyed by popular sentiments supportive of this hardline stance. Moreover, the impending US elections may hinder the exertion of adequate pressure on Israel's ruling right-wing faction. Additionally, the Palestinian Authority's legitimacy as a negotiating partner is in question, while resistance against Israeli campaigns persist, with violence even escalating in the West Bank. Consequently, the Palestinian issue has imposed itself on the Biden administration as an enduringly intractable matter subject to power dynamics, with the United States' role as a purportedly impartial mediator viewed skeptically. Prospects for a shift toward a two-state solution remain dim, suggesting instead the onset of a new cycle of struggle, albeit with distinct contours from previous ones.⁽¹⁹⁾

A Regional Confrontation on Multiple Fronts and a Forced Return to Combat Missions

Hezbollah has initiated actions on the northern front with Israel to alleviate pressure on Palestinian resistance factions.⁽²⁰⁾ Simultaneously, militias associated with Iran in Iraq and Syria have escalated attacks with missiles and drones on US bases, positions and interests in both countries. These attacks have extended to include strikes directed toward targets within Israel. Additionally, the conflict line has widened with the involvement of the Houthis, who have opened a front with Israel in the Red Sea.⁽²¹⁾ Since October 7, 2023, estimates suggest there have been over 150 missile and drone attacks on US forces across the Middle East.⁽²²⁾ The United States has blamed Iran for these attacks on its interests. US intelligence indicates that an Iranian vessel stationed in the Red Sea provided information to the Houthis to target ships using precision drones and missiles.⁽²³⁾ The Pentagon went so far as to directly accuse Iran of involvement in a drone attack on a chemical tanker

near India. In response, voices in the US Congress calling for military action against Iran are growing and will get stronger if attacks on US interests in Iraq, Syria and Yemen persist.⁽²⁴⁾ Furthermore, in Washington, the United States holds Iran accountable for the deaths of two US Marines in the Gulf of Aden, where they were reportedly intercepting a shipment of Iranian ballistic and cruise missile components destined for Yemen. Additionally, the United States attributes responsibility to Iran for a suicide drone attack on the Tower 22 outpost, located in Jordan's northeast close to the borders with Iraq and Syria. This attack resulted in the deaths of three US soldiers and injuries to dozens, marking the most severe assault on US forces in the region since October 7.

These unfolding events have compelled the United States to reinforce its military capabilities and reallocate its resources back to the region. However, this time, the United States finds itself engaged in a multifront confrontation, with multiple actors uniting with the objective of expelling US forces from the Middle East. These parties are executing systematic and well-coordinated operations, exploiting US vulnerabilities to launch more severe attacks than ever before. Simultaneously, they leverage anti-US sentiment, not only among Shiites but also among Sunnis, imposing a new reality on the United States.⁽²⁵⁾

The operations conducted by Iran and its affiliated militias pose a significant threat to US interests, showcasing a growing organic connection and considerable capability to undermine US deterrence.⁽²⁶⁾ This situation raises concerns that the United States may be drawn into heightened attacks or even direct conflict with Iran. Such a scenario could resemble the Tanker War of the 1980s or escalate further, akin to the aftermath of the assassination of Qassem Soleimani in January 2020. Fol-

lowing attacks on the observation point in Jordan, some US factions advocated for direct strikes on Iran, expressing dissatisfaction with limited strikes on the IRGC or affiliated militiapositions.⁽²⁷⁾

There is a possibility that the United States may find itself compelled to reassess its military presence in the region, possibly including a full withdrawal from Syria. Sources within the Biden administration suggest a waning interest in maintaining the mission, with active internal deliberations on the timing and manner of withdrawal.⁽²⁸⁾ Similar considerations apply to Iraq, particularly following the establishment of a bilateral committee aimed at expediting the completion of tasks for the international coalition forces against ISIS. This shift comes amid mounting public pressure in the aftermath of the Gaza war.⁽²⁹⁾

Divergent Viewpoints With Regional Allies:

The United States had been working to mend relations with its regional allies, but the Gaza conflict highlighted significant disparities in positions. It appeared that the United States, for the first time, was engaging in military confrontations without explicit and clear Arab support, particularly in the confrontation with Iran and its proxies. Notably, Jordan canceled a summit where President Biden was slated to meet with the Jordanian and Egyptian presidents, as well as Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.⁽³⁰⁾ As the war escalated and Washington seemed unresponsive to the advice of its allies, they sought alternatives. A group of Arab foreign ministers embarked on a tour of the permanent member states of the UN Security Council, beginning with Beijing on November 20, 2023. This move signaled that Arab states were exploring options beyond the United States.⁽³¹⁾ Arab states, even those traditionally opposed to Hamas' ideology, have issued strong

condemnations against Israel. This signals a significant shift in regional dynamics and perceptions regarding the United States' role. Former Jordanian Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher remarked, "All these myths have been shattered, and the United States finds itself in a position where it no longer enjoys the influence that it enjoyed before."⁽³²⁾ This marks a fundamental change, with some of the United States' regional allies hesitant to engage in joint tasks led by it to maintain the previous period of calm and stability. They also aim to avoid indirect support for the ongoing conflict in Gaza and its associated internal and external repercussions. In the aftermath of the Gaza conflict, US diplomacy appears to be encountering challenges in garnering support for its regional policies. There is a growing perception that the United States is increasingly unable to spearhead initiatives for settlements, reminiscent of its efforts in the 1990s. One notable outcome of the post-Gaza war developments is the apparent strengthening of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, contrary to expectations of strained ties. The conflict also served to consolidate the positions of key Arab powers, while China's influence in the region and its relationship with the United States continued to evolve independently of Washington's influence. These developments underscore a shifting dynamic in the region, highlighting the constraints on US influence.⁽³³⁾

Risking International Standing at a Delicate Juncture

It appears that the United States' influence in the Middle East has diminished compared to two decades ago, evident in its diplomatic and military setbacks when confronting non-state armed groups and engaging in asymmetric warfare on multiple fronts. These challenges are exacerbated by the use of new military technologies, some of which are sourced externally and capable of inflicting harm without regional support.

This contrasts with previous instances, such as the campaigns against ISIS or during conflicts like the Gulf War in 1990 and the Iraq War in 2003, where regional backing was more evident. This shift may impact the ongoing confrontations with Russia in Ukraine and with China in the context of Taiwan. The United States could face difficulties in engaging in simultaneous conflicts on distant fronts⁽³⁴⁾ while struggling to rally allies, as seen following its actions against Russia after the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war. Moreover, differing perspectives among US allies in East and South Asia regarding the Palestinian conflict further highlight internal divisions within the Western camp.

Moreover, the unfolding of events in the Middle East conflict, coupled with the challenges confronting various states and the setback of the Ukrainian counterattack, might embolden additional international powers to challenge the status quo. The escalation of violence and conflicts could serve as a precursor to broader and potentially uncontrollable wars, reminiscent of the lead-up to World War I and World War II. It is essential to note that adversaries of the United States, namely China and Russia, stand to gain from the US position in this conflict. While the United States risks tarnishing its reputation in the Global South due to its seemingly unwavering support for Israel, Beijing has tactfully navigated its response to the conflict. By carefully gauging public sentiment in the developing world, China has garnered diplomatic favor, evidenced by the visit of Arab foreign ministers and growing popularity in opinion polls, where Arab populations now favor China over the United States. In the event that Xi Jinping chooses to invade Taiwan in the future, he may well anticipate that his stance on the Gaza conflict will bolster Beijing's appeal to the Global South, potentially undermining support for Washing-

ton.⁽³⁵⁾ This scenario sheds light on some of the challenges confronting the United States following Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. However, a comprehensive analysis underscores the gravity of the situation, echoing President Biden's assertion that "The United States today faces one of those rare moments, which is no less important than the dawn of the Cold War, or the post-11 September period."⁽³⁶⁾

Militarization of Maritime Lanes and the Potential Impact on Trade Growth

The United States' perceived biased stance on the Gaza conflict has resulted in the conflict's expansion into the Red Sea region. Given the strategic significance of the Red Sea, which hosts 11 military bases near its southern entrance, it has become a focal point of international competition involving numerous regional and global powers. The increased deployment of US forces and the formation of a broad coalition with its allies, alongside joint operations with the UK, may intensify international competition in the region, potentially impacting its security and stability.

Moreover, the United States has faced threats stemming from naval attacks launched by the Houthis targeting ships bound for Israel and US naval vessels, affecting maritime traffic through Bab al-Mandab. As a result, companies have been compelled to reroute their convoys toward the Cape of Good Hope, consequently increasing shipping costs. Should this situation persist, supply chains could be disrupted, leading to a slowdown in global trade growth. Continuing with a forceful approach risks exacerbating the situation, potentially spreading the crisis to other vital sea lanes. Iran has previously threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz, a critical passage for one-fifth of global oil production. Analysts anticipate that a broader escalation of the conflict could drive oil prices up

to \$150 per barrel, precipitating a new global economic downturn with far-reaching political ramifications.⁽³⁷⁾

Isolation and Lacking Credibility

The Palestinian issue has attracted global attention, potentially isolating the United States due to its significant military support for Israel. This support has drawn accusations of indirect responsibility for Israel's alleged violations of international humanitarian law and civilian casualties. The prevailing perception suggests that the United States is complicit in Israel's military campaign. Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh's statement on October 30, 2023, further fueled this perception, affirming that the United States imposes no restrictions on how Israel utilizes weapons supplied by Washington in its conflict with Hamas.⁽³⁸⁾ Thus, the United States has compromised its standing in defending a rules-based international order, as evidenced by a recent court ruling that contradicted the Biden administration's dismissal of the case as "unfounded." The initial decision from the International Criminal Court (ICC) implies an inconsistency in US policy, particularly concerning accusations of supporting potential genocide in Gaza. Despite US efforts to influence Israel's actions, the widely broadcast scenes of the conflict, disseminated by Hamas and its sympathizers through various media platforms, have tarnished the United States' international and domestic image. What distinguishes this conflict from previous ones is the growing sympathy among younger generations, both domestically and globally, for the Palestinian cause. Opinion polls indicate a decline in President Biden's popularity at home, with opponents leveraging his stance on the issue to sway public opinion against him. This underscores the extensive impact of the conflict on the United States, both

internally and externally.⁽³⁹⁾

Incentivizing Extremist Organizations to Mount Attacks on the US and Its Allies

Undoubtedly, the Israeli offensive on Gaza and the United States' stance during the conflict have provided extremist groups with a significant opportunity to bolster their influence. These groups seized the conflict to reorganize their forces, propagate extremist ideologies and mobilize fighters to launch further attacks as well as recruit new members. This was evident in the series of statements issued by various branches of these organizations across different regions, outlining their positions on the events and outlining their strategies. For instance, ISIS launched a global campaign titled "Kill them wherever you find them," which has already led to a resurgence of violence in some regions. In Syria alone, ISIS claimed responsibility for 35 attacks across seven governorates in the first 10 days of 2024, as part of a broader wave of 100 attacks worldwide. While ISIS currently lacks the strength it possessed in 2013 and 2014, the ongoing war in Gaza and the escalating regional crisis present opportunities for the terrorist group to exploit the situation to its advantage. Coupled with the potential withdrawal of the United States from Syria or Iraq due to mounting pressure, there is a risk of the region regressing to the state it was in during 2014. This was when the organization declared its so-called state across parts of Syria and Iraq.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Additionally, there is a concern that "lone wolf" attacks may resurface in Western countries aligned with Israel and the United States. Several Western nations have taken notice of these potential risks and have escalated their efforts to counter possible attacks. This response follows recommendations that emerged from a conference organized by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation in California on October 17, 2023. The

conference saw participation from intelligence leaders representing Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the United States. Together, they issued a joint warning about the potential increase in local attacks following the events in Gaza.⁽⁴¹⁾

Conclusion

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood has been described as a seismic event with far-reaching strategic and geopolitical implications for the Middle East. Following this operation, the United States encountered significant and unfavorable developments. Rather than enhancing regional stability, the operation has led to a complex and unprecedented reality, reversing the trajectory toward stability. This shift has hindered US efforts to contain China, while also thrusting the United States into a large-scale confrontation with Iran instead of effectively managing it. Unlike previous confrontations, the United States now finds itself without a cohesive regional alliance or an international coalition akin to the one formed against Russia over its conflict with Ukraine. Furthermore, Operation Al-Aqsa Flood has disrupted the trajectory of the Abraham Accords and has contributed to a deterioration in Washington's reputation in the region.

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood has not only disrupted the US strategy in the Middle East but has also posed significant challenges at the international level, providing opportunities for its adversaries, namely China and Russia, to exploit the crisis in the context of ongoing international competition. Despite the belief within the United States that the Gaza conflict could facilitate a return to the Middle East and a reassertion of influence, the failure to address the importance of resolving the Palestinian issue and the neglect of treating regional allies as gen-

uine partners have resulted in a misguided approach. This return through the wrong door and repetition of past mistakes may exact a higher cost than ever before, risking what little remains of US clout and interests in the region.

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