

# US Foreign Policy in the Middle East

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## Introduction: Defining the Scope of US Influence in the Arab World

The relationship between the United States and the Arab world is characterized by profound power asymmetry, a dynamic frequently analyzed through the lens of **hegemony** or structural domination, rather than simple bilateral relations. This complex entanglement, evolving significantly since the mid-twentieth century, transcends mere political alignment, encompassing deep military, economic, and cultural integrations that often privilege American strategic interests over local sovereignty and popular self-determination. The term "domination" in this context refers not necessarily to direct colonial rule, but to the establishment of institutional frameworks and dependencies--such as security pacts, monetary policies tied to the US dollar, and decisive military presence--that severely constrain the policy choices and developmental paths available to Arab states. Understanding this relationship requires moving beyond episodic events, like wars or crises, to examine the foundational structures of control established during and after the Cold War, structures designed primarily to ensure the stable flow of petroleum resources and maintain regional stability aligned with Western geopolitical objectives.

This structural influence is multifaceted, operating simultaneously across several registers. On the political level, it involves backing regimes, often authoritarian ones, perceived as reliable partners in the containment of radical or anti-Western ideologies, thereby prioritizing stability over democratic development. Economically, the influence is rooted in the integration of Arab economies into the global capitalist system, managed primarily through US-influenced international financial institutions, leading to varying degrees of fiscal dependence and vulnerability to global market fluctuations dictated from Washington or New York. Furthermore, the extensive deployment of military assets and the establishment of sophisticated security architectures solidify the US role as the ultimate regional guarantor, a position that grants unparalleled leverage in diplomatic negotiations and crisis management. This entry seeks to meticulously detail these mechanisms, recognizing that while Arab states are not passive recipients of US policy, their agency operates within a tightly defined sphere of tolerated action.

A crucial starting point for this analysis is acknowledging the perceptual gap: while many US policymakers view their regional role as one of necessary stabilization and counter-terrorism, critical Arab scholars and activists often interpret the same actions as forms of neo-imperial control designed to stifle genuine political and economic independence. The persistence of these highly divergent narratives underscores the ethical and political urgency of examining the historical and contemporary realities of American power projection. The analysis must rigorously address how Washington has successfully managed conflicting imperatives, such as promoting human rights rhetorically while consistently supporting regimes with poor human rights records, provided those regimes adhere to core US strategic goals, particularly regarding oil access and the security of Israel.

## The Genesis of Engagement: Oil, Cold War, and Early Alliances

The foundation of deep American involvement in the Arab world was laid in the aftermath of World War II, coinciding with the terminal decline of British and French colonial empires. The strategic vacuum created by this withdrawal provided a clear opportunity for the nascent US global hegemony to assert itself, driven primarily by two interconnected imperatives: securing access to the vast oil reserves of the Persian Gulf and containing the expansion of Soviet communism during the **Cold War**. The perceived necessity of controlling this "strategic commodity" led to the forging of critical alliances, most notably the 1945 Quincy Pact between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud, which guaranteed US military protection for the Saudi monarchy in exchange for secure oil access. This established a transactional model where security was exchanged for resources, forming the bedrock of US regional policy for decades.

The articulation of the **Eisenhower Doctrine** in 1957 formalized the commitment of US economic and military aid to counter threats perceived to emanate from international communism or Arab nationalism aligned with Soviet interests. This doctrine marked a significant shift, signaling direct American willingness to intervene militarily to prevent any state in the region from falling under hostile influence. This era saw the US systematically undermining secular, pan-Arab nationalist movements, such as Nasserism in Egypt, which were viewed as ideological threats to US-backed monarchies and conservative regimes. The sustained effort to destabilize or neutralize these nationalist projects ensured that the political landscape remained favorable to US strategic interests, often at the expense of genuine popular movements advocating for non-alignment and true independence from external powers.

Furthermore, the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent Arab-Israeli conflicts profoundly shaped the nature of US engagement. While US policy consistently sought to mediate these conflicts, the unwavering financial, military, and diplomatic support provided to Israel positioned the US in direct opposition to the core concerns of the Arab public and many Arab states, particularly regarding the Palestinian question. This dynamic created a permanent point of tension, forcing many Arab regimes to balance their need for US security guarantees and economic ties with the need to placate domestic populations angered by US foreign policy perceived as biased. The early alliances thus cemented a structure of dependence: Arab states relied on US protection against external threats and internal instability, while the US secured vital resources and geopolitical leverage.

## Mechanisms of Political and Diplomatic Hegemony

American domination operates significantly through sophisticated political and diplomatic leverage, often utilizing international forums and bilateral aid packages to steer the internal and external policies of Arab states. A primary mechanism involves the strategic deployment of foreign aid,

particularly military assistance, which is often conditioned upon policy compliance or adherence to specific strategic goals, such as cooperation in counter-terrorism or normalization of relations with Israel. The leverage afforded by being the primary source of advanced military technology and training ensures that the armed forces of key regional allies, such as Egypt and Jordan, remain interoperable with US forces and often dependent on US logistical supply chains, effectively creating a structural military dependency that limits independent defense planning.

Diplomatically, the US utilizes its position as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and its role as the principal mediator in regional conflicts, particularly the Arab-Israeli dispute, to maintain control over the political agenda. By positioning itself as the indispensable arbiter of peace, Washington can dictate the terms of dialogue and marginalize alternative diplomatic frameworks. This control is frequently exercised through the consistent use of veto power or the threat thereof, protecting allies from international censure and ensuring that diplomatic outcomes align with American strategic preferences. This process reinforces the perception among many Arab populations that the US acts not as a neutral broker, but as a primary stakeholder whose interests supersede international law or consensus.

Moreover, the US exerts influence by cultivating deep, personal relationships with ruling elites, often bypassing democratic institutions where they exist, and supporting authoritarian stability over democratic transition. This policy of supporting "friendly dictators" or monarchies is predicated on the belief that these regimes offer greater predictability and reliability in protecting US interests, particularly the free flow of oil and access to strategic bases. The consistent prioritization of transactional stability over democratic ideals has led to significant political stagnation in many parts of the Arab world, fueling internal discontent and often directing popular resentment towards both the local ruling class and their American backers. This intricate web of political patronage and conditional aid forms the backbone of US diplomatic hegemony.

## Military Intervention and Security Architecture

The most visible manifestation of American power and control in the Arab world is its extensive and enduring military presence, which fundamentally shapes the regional security architecture. Since the 1991 Gulf War, the US has established a network of permanent or semi-permanent military bases, forward operating locations, and naval facilities across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, including Bahrain (home to the US Fifth Fleet), Qatar (Al Udeid Air Base), and Kuwait. This physical infrastructure ensures the capacity for rapid deployment and sustained power projection, effectively turning the Gulf into an American strategic lake. The maintenance of this extensive structure is justified primarily under the rubric of securing global energy supplies and, post-2001, conducting **counter-terrorism operations** against non-state actors.

The invasions of Iraq in 1991 and 2003 represent the most dramatic examples of direct US military

intervention aimed at restructuring the regional political order. The 2003 invasion, in particular, demonstrated the willingness of the US to unilaterally depose a sovereign government perceived as hostile, fundamentally altering the balance of power and leading to years of instability and conflict. While the official objectives were often stated in terms of democratization or eliminating weapons of mass destruction, the long-term consequence was the expansion of US military footprint and the creation of a vast dependency complex in the newly formed Iraqi state, cementing American influence over its vast oil reserves and political trajectory.

Beyond large-scale interventions, the US maintains security control through massive arms sales and joint military exercises. These sales not only generate significant revenue for the American defense industry but also tie Arab military capabilities inextricably to US technology and training doctrines. This system ensures that even when Arab states seek to address regional security threats, they must often rely on US intelligence, air support, or logistical coordination. The use of drone warfare and special operations forces in countries like Yemen and Somalia further illustrates a subtle but pervasive form of military control, where localized lethal force is employed without the need for large conventional deployments, yet still projecting US power deep into sovereign territories under the guise of transnational security interests.

## Economic Dependence and Structural Adjustment

Economic domination is perhaps the most subtle yet pervasive form of US influence, rooted in the global financial architecture established after Bretton Woods, where the US dollar holds primary reserve currency status. For the oil-producing Arab states, this manifests through the **petrodollar system**, where oil sales are denominated in USD, requiring these nations to hold vast reserves in US currency and invest their surpluses in US Treasury bonds or Western financial markets. This mechanism effectively transfers wealth back to the US and gives Washington significant leverage over the stability of key Arab economies, ensuring a continuous demand for the dollar and integrating Gulf wealth directly into the Western financial system.

For non-oil-producing Arab states, particularly those reliant on foreign aid or struggling with debt, economic control is exerted through international financial institutions, namely the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, where US influence is paramount. Loans and financial assistance are routinely conditioned upon the implementation of structural adjustment programs (SAPs). These programs typically mandate privatization of state assets, reduction of public subsidies (especially on food and fuel), currency devaluation, and deregulation. While proponents argue that SAPs promote fiscal responsibility, critics contend that these externally imposed reforms often dismantle social safety nets, exacerbate wealth inequality, and open up vital national sectors to foreign corporate control, thereby increasing economic dependency on Western capital and policy dictates.

The result of this economic structure is a systematic limitation on independent economic diversification. Arab states are often encouraged to remain specialized in primary resource extraction (oil and gas) or low-value manufacturing, rather than developing high-tech, self-sufficient industries that could challenge global market hierarchies. This economic structure reinforces the political status quo, as ruling elites who benefit from the petrodollar system and US aid are incentivized to maintain alignment with Washington, even when domestic economic policy choices are detrimental to the broader population's long-term welfare.

## The Role of Cultural and Informational Power

American influence is not solely maintained through military and economic coercion; it is equally dependent on the pervasive force of **cultural hegemony**--the ability to shape global values, norms, and desires. This "soft power" operates through the dissemination of media, educational frameworks, and consumer culture, subtly promoting Western liberal democracy and neoliberal capitalism as the universal, desirable model of modernization and development. Hollywood films, popular music, global technology platforms, and multinational corporate branding all contribute to the widespread adoption of American cultural norms among urban, educated Arab youth, creating a complex relationship of aspiration and resentment.

The informational domain is critical to this exertion of power. US-backed or US-aligned media outlets, think tanks, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often play a significant role in framing political discourse within Arab nations, defining concepts like "terrorism," "reform," and "democracy" in ways that align with US strategic interests. Funding for specific educational initiatives, cultural exchange programs, and academic research further promotes intellectual dependency, encouraging the adoption of Western academic methodologies and theories, often sidelining indigenous intellectual traditions and critical perspectives on power. This system ensures that the very tools used to analyze political reality are frequently derived from the dominant power structure.

This cultural penetration often generates a significant backlash, manifesting in various forms of cultural resistance, including the resurgence of traditional or fundamentalist religious movements that explicitly reject what they perceive as corrosive Western secularism and consumerism. However, even these resistance movements often operate within a framework defined by the global information age, utilizing Western communication technologies to articulate their anti-Western message. The ongoing tension between local cultural preservation and the overwhelming force of globalization, largely driven by American cultural exports, remains a central dynamic in the social and political life of the Arab world.

## Critical Perspectives and the Discourse of Resistance

The concept of American domination has been rigorously critiqued by scholars, most famously by Edward Said in his seminal work, **Orientalism**, which exposed the intellectual framework used by Western powers to construct the "Orient" as an exotic, irrational, and inferior "Other" requiring Western management and control. Critical theory views US policy not as a series of well-intentioned mistakes, but as the systematic implementation of a neo-imperial agenda designed to secure resources and maintain global supremacy. Arab nationalist movements, socialist parties, and later, various forms of political Islam, have historically provided the primary organized resistance to this perceived domination.

Resistance manifests in diverse forms. Politically, it has involved attempts by regional powers, such as Iran or Syria, to form non-aligned blocs or seek alternative security partners (e.g., Russia or China), thereby challenging US regional supremacy. Ideologically, resistance often centers on reasserting Arab or Islamic identity against perceived cultural erosion, mobilizing powerful local narratives of historical sovereignty and religious authenticity. Economically, some states have attempted to circumvent the dollar system through bilateral trade agreements or exploring alternative financial mechanisms, although these efforts face immense structural barriers erected by the global financial system.

Furthermore, the rise of powerful non-state actors, including various militant groups, can also be understood, in part, as a radical response to the failures of US-backed regimes and the humiliation felt by continuous external interference. While these groups are often framed solely through the lens of criminality or religious extremism by Western media, their appeal frequently rests on their ability to articulate a clear, uncompromising opposition to US foreign policy and its perceived local proxies. The discourse of resistance, therefore, is crucial for understanding the political agency and ideological complexity within the Arab world, demonstrating that the relationship with the US is a dynamic contestation rather than a static state of subservience.

## Contemporary Challenges and Future Trajectories

The structure of American domination, while deeply entrenched, faces significant contemporary challenges that suggest a potential shift in regional dynamics. The rise of competing global powers, particularly China and Russia, offers Arab states alternative sources of investment, arms, and diplomatic support without the stringent political conditionality often imposed by the US. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provides vast infrastructure investment, challenging the economic leverage previously held exclusively by Western financial institutions, while Russia remains a significant supplier of advanced military hardware and a key diplomatic player in conflicts like the Syrian Civil War. This diversification of patronage subtly erodes the exclusivity of US influence.

Internally, the social and political upheavals witnessed during the **Arab Spring** demonstrated the fragility of the US-backed authoritarian status quo. While the US sought to manage these

transitions, the resulting instability and the subsequent resurgence of regional powers like Iran and Turkey have complicated the strategic environment. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the perceived retrenchment of American interests globally have also led key Arab allies, particularly the GCC states, to adopt more independent and assertive foreign policies, prioritizing their own regional security frameworks and engaging in reconciliation efforts with former adversaries.

Looking forward, the trajectory of US influence is likely to move from overt military domination to a more focused strategic competition, prioritizing counter-terrorism and containing peer competitors over maintaining detailed control of every internal political process. Arab states are increasingly adept at balancing competing external powers, leveraging their strategic location and energy resources to maximize their autonomy. However, the foundational structures--the petrodollar, the security architecture, and the deeply integrated economic systems--ensure that the US will remain a primary, if evolving, actor in the Arab world for the foreseeable future, necessitating continued critical scrutiny of the power dynamics inherent in this enduring relationship.