



BUCK-PASSING AND DIRECT BALANCING STRATEGIES IN U.S. MIDDLE EAST POLICY: INSIGHTS FOLLOWING THE OCTOBER 7 GAZA WAR

ABD'NİN ORTADOĞU POLİTİKASINDA SORUMLULUĞU DEVRETME VE DOĞRUDAN Dengeleme Stratejileri: 7 Ekim Gazze Savaşı Sonrası Çıkarımlar

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Abstract

For years, US policy in the Middle East has prioritized securing energy resources in the region, countering regional threats and ensuring the security of key allies such as Israel. The October 7 Gaza War posed significant challenges to the United States' efforts to balance its two key interests: countering regional threats and ensuring the security of key allies. The policies implemented by the U.S. during the war reflect a case of its enduring reliance on regional allies to re-stabilize the regional balance of power. Assessing US policy during the October 7 Gaza War, this study examines the functionality of the burden-shifting strategy in this process, an element of the theory of offensive realism. The findings provide new insights into the nature of U.S. strategy in the Middle East, emphasizing the interplay between military, diplomatic, and regional considerations in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.

Keywords: US, Offensive Realism, buck-passing, direct balancing, October 7 Gaza War

Öz

ABD'nin Orta Doğu politikası uzun yıllardır bölgedeki enerji kaynaklarını güvence altına almaya, bölgesel tehditlere karşı koymaya ve İsrail gibi kilit müttefiklerinin güvenliğini sağlamaya öncelik vermiştir. 7 Ekim Gazze Savaşı, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin iki önemli çıkarı olan bölgesel tehditlere karşı koyma ve İsrail gibi kilit müttefiklerinin güvenliğini sağlama çıkarları arasında denge kurma çabalarında önemli zorluklar ortaya çıkardı. ABD'nin savaş sırasında uyguladığı politikalar, bölgedeki çıkarlarını gerçekleştirmek için bölgesel müttefiklere olan sürekli bağımlılığının bir örneğini yansıttı. ABD'nin 7 Ekim Gazze Savaşı sırasında ortaya koyduğu politikaları değerlendiren bu çalışma, saldırgan realizm teorisinin bir unsuru olan yük aktarımı ve doğrudan dengeleme stratejilerinin bu süreçteki işlevselliğini incelemektedir. Bulgular, ABD'nin Orta Doğu'daki stratejisinin doğasına dair yeni içgörüler sunmakta ve hızla değişen jeopolitik manzarada askeri, diplomatik ve bölgesel dinamikler arasındaki etkileşimi ön plana çıkarmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: ABD, saldırgan realizm, sorumluluğu devretme, doğrudan dengeleme stratejisi, 7 Ekim Gazze Savaşı

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Introduction

Significant developments in the distribution of power in the international system have continued to increase since the end of the Cold War, leading US administrations to develop new responses to these challenges. Before the 2003 Iraq War, the United States shaped the Middle East as an extension of the international order based on rules, through both coercive and conciliatory means directed at regional powers.¹ However, after the failure of the Iraq invasion in 2003 and the U.S. withdrawal from the region in 2011, this order was disrupted.² The Arab Spring and the subsequent counter-revolutions created a structure dominated by weak states and non-state actors.³ The Middle East is now characterized not by a state-centered system but by a “neo-medieval” order, where informal authorities and actors are intertwined.⁴ The regional order built on American unipolarity, although it began to decline with the Arab Spring, still faces the reality that there is no hegemonic power capable of truly challenging the U.S. This absence of a rival power leads the U.S. to continue showcasing its traditional reflexes in regional developments.

After the US large-scale withdrawal decisions from Syria, Iraq⁵ and Afghanistan, the offshore balancing approach has gained prominence among other foreign policy options.⁶ This strategy can also be a useful guide for understanding the recent changes in US policy towards the Middle East. Offshore balancing, in its simplest form, entails ensuring U.S. interests by maintaining its position as the sole major power in the Western Hemisphere while preventing any other power from achieving a hegemonic status in Europe, the energy-rich Persian Gulf region, and East Asia. In an environment where no hegemonic actor exists,

1 Andreas Krieg (2024). “The war in Gaza, the decline of US leadership and the emergence of a networked regional order”, *Mediterranean Politics*, 1-10.

2 Marco Cornelos, “Iraq war: Twenty years on, the US has learned nothing”, *Middle East Eye*, March 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/us-iraq-war-disastrous-learned-nothing>, erişim 31.12.2024.

3 Nader Hashemi, “The Arab Spring, U.S. F ab Spring, U.S. Foreign Policy, and the Question of , and the Question of Democracy in the Middle East”, *Denver Journal of International Law & Policy*, 41-1, January 2012, <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1108&context=djilp>, erişim 05.01.2025.

4 Sadık Ünay, “Neo-medievalism and the new regional order in the Middle East”, *Daily Sabah*, https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/sadik_unay/2017/10/07/neo-medievalism-and-the-new-regional-order-in-the-middle-east, erişim 04.01.2025.

5 Christopher Layne, “America’s Middle East Grand Strategy after Iraq: The Moment for Offshore Balancing”, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2009.

6 Posen, B. R. (2014). *Restraint: A new foundation for U.S. grand strategy*. Cornell University Press; Walt, S. M. (2018). “U.S. Grand Strategy After the Cold War.” *International Security*, 42(4), 30-66.

the United States aims to avoid deploying its military forces directly. Instead, it adopts a strategy of buck-passing, delegating responsibility to regional powers and preventing any disruption of the balance of power. The U.S. military presence is shaped by the distribution of power across three key regions: Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East/Persian Gulf. However, a substantial military shift to these regions is not deemed highly functional. The U.S. commits to supporting its allies in these regions as necessary but avoids prolonged military deployments abroad. Essentially, the United States delegates regional responsibilities to local powers ⁷. This strategy, in summary, emphasizes staying as distant as possible while only deploying military forces to relevant regions when absolutely necessary. In the context of the Middle East, this strategy has manifested in U.S. policies aimed at securing energy resources, countering regional threats, and ensuring the security of key allies such as Israel, which emerged as a regional power following the Six-Day War.

The Gaza War, which began on October 7, became a significant event in this context. Following the outbreak of the war, questions arose regarding how the U.S. would position itself and how it would shape its policies in the region moving forward. Against this backdrop, the study aims to provide a fresh perspective on the continuity and changes in the U.S. view of regional power dynamics after October 7. ⁸ While a significant portion of the studies on this subject has concentrated on the current state of the U.S.-Israeli alliance and the impact of the Gaza War on relations with Europe and the broader global standing of the U.S., less attention has been given to how the U.S. has instrumentalized the October 7 War to protect the regional balance of power through the buck-passing, as outlined in the framework of offensive realism. The study begins by examining key issues in US Middle East policy prior to the October 7 war, including cooperation with Israel, in order to provide a clearer picture of relevant developments. The second part focuses on the situation after October 7, applying the theory of offensive realism and its strategic framework of buck-passing and direct balancing strategies to analyze U.S. policies on the matter. The conclusion synthesizes these findings and discusses their implications for future research in international relations. This

7 John J. Mearsheimer, Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 95, No. 4, 2016, s. 70-83.

8 Brain, Katulis, The Biden Administration's Middle East Policy at a Time of War: An Assessment of US Policy Six Months Into the Israel-Hamas War, *Middle East Eye*, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/biden-administrations-middle-east-policy-time-war-assessment-us-policy-six-months>, erişim 14.11.2024.

approach indicates the US continue to prioritize its focus on ensuring the protection of its key interests in the Middle East through regional alliances.

1. The Regional Order before October 7 Gaza War

At the conclusion of the Six-Day War, Israel demonstrated to the Arab world that it would remain a sovereign state, prompting the United States to recognize Israel as a regional power that could no longer be overlooked. During this process, one of the closest countries the U.S. allied with was Israel. For Israel, being part of this approach was significant in demonstrating its strategic importance in the eyes of the rising Cold War power, the U.S., as a newly established state. From the U.S. perspective, Israel could serve as a balancing force against other regional states such as Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Iran, and Egypt, thus facilitating the implementation of the balance-of-power policy. In this context, a symbiotic relationship emerged between the strategic interests of the U.S. and Israel, both of which recognized the need for an assertive foreign policy to maintain their hegemonic status. Within these policies, bilateral cooperation with Israel, spanning the military, economic, technological and intelligence sectors, has been crucial. While trade and innovation have flourished between the two countries, security, comprehensive cooperation in defense systems, joint military exercises and intelligence sharing have remained the cornerstone of the US-Israel relationship. The Foreign Military Financing (FMF) relationship between the US and Israel amounts to around \$3.4 billion annually, as US law requires the executive branch to take measures to maintain Israel's Qualitative Military Edge (QME) and ensure its technological superiority in defense. The agreement guarantees \$3.3 billion annually until 2028, with the potential for additional funding in times of crisis, such as the Gaza conflict. ⁹For fiscal year 2024, Congress has allocated over \$12.6 billion to Israel.¹⁰

While the U.S.-Israel security agreement has progressed in this way, the United States has also sought to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through various initiatives aimed at promoting peace and stability in the region. As a mediator in key peace negotiations such as the Camp David Accords (1978)¹¹, the Oslo

9 Jim Zanotti, "Israel: Major Issues and U.S. Relations", Congressional Research Service, 9 July 2024, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44245>, erişim 05.05.2024.

10 US Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation with Israel", 19 October, Bureau of Political- Military Affairs, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-israel/>, erişim 05.04.2024.

11 The Office of the Historian -U.S. Department of State, "Camp David Accords and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process", <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/camp-david>, erişim 06.05.2024.

Accords (1993)¹², and the Camp David Summit (2000)¹³, the US has sought to establish frameworks on critical issues related to the subject. However, since the 2011 Arab Spring, the US focus has shifted due to the growing threats posed by critical developments in the region, such as the wars in Syria and Yemen, Iran's regional ambitions, and the rise of extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS.¹⁴ As a result, the US has prioritized addressing these pressing security concerns over efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. With the Trump administration in office, the United States abandoned its traditional role as a neutral mediator and gave full support to Israel, recognizing the disputed status of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and taking the lead in improving relations between Israel and countries in the region. The Ibrahim Accords, which marked a major shift in Middle East diplomacy, sought to deepen both US-Israeli relations and broader regional cooperation.¹⁵ Following the UAE's normalization with Israel in August 2020, other countries such as Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan announced US-brokered agreements to normalize relations with Israel. The agreements further strengthened Israel's ties with Arab countries and promoted cooperation in areas such as trade, security and technology.¹⁶ Through the agreements, the US strategically aims to unite key US allies in the region against extremist forces, build a new regional coalition, realign Arab-Israeli relations and create momentum for broader peace agreements, and last but not least, shift the regional balance in favor of US interests.

When the Biden administration took office, it directly criticized the Israeli government on issues such as settlement expansion and judicial reforms. Biden argued that these reforms posed a threat to Israel's democratic structure, explicitly criticizing Prime Minister Netanyahu and delaying an invitation for him to visit Washington. Through this stance, the U.S. attempted to reinforce its influence in shaping Israeli policies while navigating the delicate balance of its alliances

12 The Office of the Historian -U.S. Department of State, The Oslo Accords and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process , <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1993-2000/oslo>, erişim 02.06.2024.

13 Greg Shapland, Yossi Mekelberg, Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking, 26.09.2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/01/israeli-palestinian-peacemaking>, erişim 21.11.2024.

14 Mehreen Yaseen, Sadaf Ghayoor, Musaiab ul Hassan Shakir, Iqra Zafar, US Foreign Policy: Towards Middle East (2018-2023), *Indus Journal of Social Sciences*, 2:2, 2024.

15 Neri Zilber, Normalization Deal Between Israel and the UAE Signals a Shift in the Region, Foreign Policy, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/13/israel-uae-normalization-west-bank-annexation/>, August 13, 2023.

16 Kali Robinson,, What Is U.S. Policy on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict?, <https://www.cfr.org/background/what-us-policy-israeli-palestinian-conflict>, July 12, 2023.

and interests in the Middle East. Although Biden was not immediately successful in fully directing U.S. Middle East policy with a clear doctrine, the strategy that emerged, referred to in public discourse as the “Biden Doctrine,” was seen as a critical framework for the region. Without such a doctrine, commentators warned that the crisis in the Middle East could strengthen Iran, isolate Israel, and fragment the U.S.’s ability to influence events, thus undermining its strategic objectives in the region. The Biden administration sought to preserve the regional balance of power through its approach to the October 7 War, conceptualized within the framework of the Biden Doctrine, which focused on five key pillars. In his 2023 speech ¹⁷, Brett McGurk outlined key elements of the Biden Doctrine for U.S. engagement in the Middle East, emphasizing five core principles: partnerships, deterrence, diplomacy, integration, and values. These principles were first articulated by President Biden during his 2022 meeting with the GCC+3 in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and were later integrated into the administration’s National Security Strategy. While the Biden Doctrine is not much different from the doctrines put forward by other US presidents, it basically reflects a comprehensive approach to securing US interests in the region. Consistent with the US offshore balancing strategy in the Middle East, the doctrine aims to reduce traditional military interventions and direct engagement in the Middle East, while strengthening security cooperation with regional partners and seeking more diplomatic solutions. Another important aspect of the US Middle East strategy was the introducing of IMEC (the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor) project. The IMEC which was subject to discussions as a complementary element of the normalization of relations between the Gulf countries and Israel with the support of the US, was seen as important for the US to maintain its influence in the region. Faced with the challenges of strained US-Russia relations due to the Ukraine War on the one hand and the growing tension in the US-China rivalry on the other, the US administration aimed to increase economic cooperation among countries in the Middle East and to contribute to regional stability. The project, which has the potential to strategically strengthen the US presence in the region, also aimed to emphasize the economic aspect of US diplomacy.¹⁸

17 Atlantic Council, Brett McGurk sets out the ‘Biden doctrine’ for the Middle East, February 15, 2023. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/transcript/brett-mcgurk-sets-out-the-biden-doctrine-for-the-middle-east/>.

18 Alberto Rizzi, The infinite connection: How to make the India-Middle East-Europe economic corridor happen, ECFR, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-infinite-connection-how-to-make-the-india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor-happen/>, 23 April 2024, erişim 06.02.2025.

The outbreak of the Gaza War posed several challenges to the United States in maintaining its strategy to uphold regional order, managing its strategic alliances with Arab countries, and its support for Israel. The conflict strained U.S. relations with countries critical of Israeli actions, such as those in the Arab world, requiring the U.S. to carefully navigate its role in the broader Middle East amid concerns about further destabilization. To address these challenges, the United States has implemented its regional strategy through specific policies. This section will evaluate these concrete policies under two main headings: 1. Reduced Military Footprint vs. Strengthened Engagement, 2. Delegating Security Responsibilities to Regional Allies.

2. After 7 October: Concrete Indicators of US's Buckpassing Strategy

The most significant axis perceived as a threat to the interests of the U.S. in the region is the Axis of Resistance - Hamas in Gaza; Hezbollah in Lebanon; the Houthis in Yemen; militias in Iraq, Syria, and the West Bank; and Iran itself¹⁹, given that its core objective is defined as opposing U.S. and Israeli hegemony in the region. Particularly after the onset of the Syrian Crisis in 2011, USA's concerns about the Axis of Resistance—comprising both state and non-state actors that challenge its regional policies—intensified considerably. In an effort to mitigate these concerns, the U.S. sought to limit the expansion of the Axis through military operations, diplomatic pressure, and various alliances. After October several concrete indicators of the United States' buckpassing strategy became apparent. In the context of the U.S., several actions post-October 7 point to the implementation of this strategy.

2.1. Reduced Military Footprint vs. Strengthened Engagement

Following the events of October 7, the US military buildup in the region was also massive and indicative of US priorities in the changing geopolitical environment. Illustrating the seriousness of the situation, the President ordered a fleet of United States naval forces to the Eastern Mediterranean, including the USS Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group. Shortly thereafter, the deployment of the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group to the Persian Gulf signaled the US commitment to deter potential threats.²⁰ While the U.S. deployed

19 According to the Israeli Prime Minister Israel is engaged in defending itself on at least seven fronts, all Iranian-inspired and supported: Hamas in Gaza; Hezbollah in Lebanon; the Houthis in Yemen; militias in Iraq, Syria, and the West Bank; and Iran itself. (Neville Teller, The Axis of Resistance may crumble on its own - opinion, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-819392>, 10.09.2024.)

20 Oren Lieberman, Natasha Bertrand and Brad Lendon, US sending second carrier strike group, fighter jets to region as Israel prepares to expand Gaza operations, CNN, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/14/middleeast/us-aircraft-carrier-eisenhower-israel-gaza-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>, erişim 10.11.2024.

aircraft carriers and military assets to the Eastern Mediterranean, evaluations were conducted to determine the specific target of this deployment. By increasing its military presence while avoiding direct confrontation, the US sought to place greater responsibility on regional actors to maintain security and stability. The biggest message behind the deployment of the US Navy in the region (besides supporting Israel's security and projecting power) was sent to the Axis of Resistance, warning them not to intervene in the war and at the same time not to open another front against Israel.²¹

There are reasons behind this approach by the United States. During this period, the Houthis in Yemen launched attacks on both Israeli territory and international shipping in the Red Sea, linking the attacks to their opposition to Israeli military operations against Hamas in Gaza. In response, the Biden administration has engaged regional actors by launching "Operation Prosperity Guardian", a multinational military effort involving more than 20 countries aimed at defending the security of shipping in the Red Sea. Similar attacks have taken place in Syria and Iraq, while Iranian-backed militias have targeted Israel and the US military presence in the region in hundreds of attacks. In addition, conflict and tensions between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon have escalated over the past six months, with cross-border attacks and Israeli strikes targeting Hezbollah leaders. The Biden administration has repeatedly deployed special envoy Amos Hochstein in diplomatic efforts to reduce tensions on the border between Israel and Lebanon. As a result, the United States has so far avoided a wider regional conventional war, placing the burden mainly on Israel.²²

2.2. Delegating Security Responsibilities to Regional Allies

2.2.1. Reliance on Israel

While the Axis of Resistance has responded to the policies of U.S.-Israel alliance in the Middle with varying degrees of intensity over the years, Hamas emerged as the key actor on October 7. The U.S., which has designated Hamas as a terrorist organization since 1997, immediately condemned the attacks, framed Israel's war against Hamas as part of the broader fight against ISIS and terrorism.

21 Michael R. Gordon and Nancy A. Youssef, How Oct. 7 Upended America's Global Military Strategy, *The Wall Street Journal*, <https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/how-oct-7-upended-americas-global-military-strategy-9e288f96>, 9 October 2024, erişim 12.12.2024.

22 Brain, Katulis, The Biden Administration's Middle East Policy at a Time of War: An Assessment of US Policy Six Months Into the Israel-Hamas War, *Middle East Eye*, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/biden-administrations-middle-east-policy-time-war-assessment-us-policy-six-months>, erişim 14.11.2024.

In this process, the US perspective was very close to Israel's. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly stated that Israel seeks "total victory" over Hamas, including by eliminating its military and administrative capabilities.²³ President Biden and other officials described Hamas's actions as a severe assault on civilians, calling them horrific and indiscriminate.²⁴ Throughout Israel's extensive operations in Gaza, the United States consistently supported Israel by intensifying military aid²⁵ to weaken Hamas, aligning with Israel's declared aim of achieving total victory over Hamas.

The Biden administration reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to Israel's security, including continued military aid and support for its defense. This commitment aligns with the broader U.S. strategy of maintaining strong bilateral ties with Israel, ensuring its security in the face of regional threats, and upholding its qualitative military edge. In a speech delivered just days after the crisis erupted²⁶, U.S. President Joe Biden referred to the moment the attacks began as "a moment when pure, unadulterated evil was unleashed upon this world." U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's high-level meetings with Israel's Emergency War Cabinet marked a first since 1973. During the years of the Yom Kippur War, a similar visit was conducted by Henry Kissinger, then the top American diplomat.²⁷ Through his subsequent visit to Israel, following these statements, Biden demonstrated that the U.S. is deeply committed to Israel's security, going beyond rhetoric. The U.S. tried to avoid direct confrontation with the Axis of Resistance by encouraging Israel to address its own security concerns, given its role in the conflict.

Prior to the visit, Secretary Blinken announced that Israel would allow humanitarian aid into Gaza, which helped to mitigate public reactions to Biden's upcoming visit²⁸. This decision reflects a strategic approach to balancing support for Israel with the pressing humanitarian needs in the region. The Biden

23 Israeli Prime Minister's Office, "PM Netanyahu's speech at UNGA in New York," September 28, 2024, <https://www.gov.il/en/pages/event-un280924>, erişim 15.12.2024.

24 Matthew Miller, US Department of State, Department Press Briefing – October 7, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/briefings/departement-press-briefing-october-7-2024/>, erişim 11.10.2024.

25 Linda J. Bilmes, William D. Hartung, and Stephen Semler, "United States Spending on Israel's Military Operations and Related U.S. Operations in the Region, October 7, 2023 – September 30, 2024" Watson Institute for International & Public Affairs, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/2024/USspendingIsrael>, erişim 06.09.2024.

26 The White House, Remarks by President Biden on the Terrorist Attacks in Israel, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/10/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-terrorist-attacks-in-israel-2/>, 10.10.2023.

27 Ynet, US takes charge of war, that will come at a cost, <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/bjptlk3bp>, 17.10.2023.

28 The White House, Remarks by President Biden on the October 7th Terrorist Attacks and the Resilience of the State of Israel and its People | Tel Aviv, Israel, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/18/>

administration's efforts underscore a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in Middle Eastern diplomacy, where military assistance and humanitarian considerations must coexist. By engaging directly with Israeli leaders and emphasizing support amidst ongoing tensions, he sought to strengthen diplomatic ties that have historically defined U. S.-Israel relations. Throughout these efforts, the United States has also shielded Israel from international criticism, which, according to some, has impeded diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict. The U.S. vetoed a United Nations resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire and a cessation of Israeli military operations. This veto ensured that no official UN position would censure Israel's actions, despite widespread international demands for accountability. Moreover, U.S. leaders have consistently portrayed Israel's military actions as essential for protecting its citizens, emphasizing Hamas as a terrorist organization. This narrative has been actively promoted in speeches at the UN and other international forums to garner support for Israel's actions and mitigate criticism. This stance aligns with the approach the United States has maintained since the 1970s. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the U.S. has used its veto power dozens of times to block resolutions censuring Israel, citing a perceived bias within the United Nations against Israel.²⁹ Notably, since 1980, the U.S. has only once permitted the Security Council to condemn Israel's settlement activities—in late 2016, when the outgoing Obama administration abstained from the vote.

The war, initially centered on the Gaza front, has also brought regional implications into sharper focus following the increased activity of Lebanon's Hezbollah along Israel's northern border. Hezbollah declared its support for Palestinian resistance against Israel and launched rocket and mortar attacks on Israeli positions near the Israel-Lebanon border. However, these attacks did not escalate into a full-scale conflict. During this period, the U.S. administration reiterated its support for Israel³⁰ and deployed additional warships and military aid to the region to help manage the heightened tensions. Since the beginning of the crisis, the United States has engaged in diplomatic efforts to establish a ceasefire between

remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-october-7th-terrorist-attacks-and-the-resilience-of-the-state-of-israel-and-its-people-tel-aviv-israel/, 18.10.2023.

29 Middle East Eye, The 43 times US has used veto power against UN resolutions on Israel, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/43-times-us-has-used-veto-power-against-un-resolutions-israel>, 19.12.2017.

30 The White House, Statement from President Joe Biden on the Death of Hassan Nasrallah, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/09/28/statement-from-president-joe-biden-on-the-death-of-hasan-nasrallah/>, 28 September 2024, erişim 10.11.2024.

Israel and Hezbollah. The U.S. has also focused on preventing Iran, a key actor in the “axis of resistance,” from playing a more direct role, which is believed to have influenced Hezbollah’s decision to refrain from entering an all-out war thus far. Despite the ceasefire agreement reached between the parties on November 27, achieving a lasting ceasefire remains highly challenging under the current circumstances. The U.S. recognizes the necessity of avoiding direct involvement in the conflict while continuing to press both sides to adhere to the framework of reducing cross-border fire in order to de-escalate tensions in the region.³¹

2.2.2. Balancing Israel with Axis of Resistance : A necessity for US?

Although the U.S.-Israel relationship remained closely cooperative during the escalation following October 7, it underwent significant revision following Israel’s military operations in Gaza.³² This shift became particularly evident after Israel’s seven-month campaign, culminating in a large-scale ground assault on the city of Rafah in Gaza on May 6. Israel’s insistence that a victory could not be achieved without capturing Rafah and neutralizing the remaining Hamas members there led to growing concerns in Washington. These developments prompted U.S. officials to confirm that the Biden Administration was “reviewing some near-term security assistance” for Israel. Specifically, a shipment of 2,000-pound and 500-pound bombs³³, previously set to be delivered, was paused due to fears regarding their potential use in Rafah, the southernmost province of Gaza. This revision of U.S. policy reflected broader concerns about the escalation of violence and the humanitarian impact of the ongoing military operations in Gaza. The Biden administration had already raised concerns several times prior to this regarding Israel’s potential for conducting a large-scale ground offensive in Rafah. In fact, President Biden himself reminded Israeli leadership of these warnings during his recent discussions with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Biden emphasized the need for caution, expressing apprehension over the impact of such operations on both the civilian population in Gaza and the broader regional

31 Daniel Byman, Seth G. Jones, and Alexander Palmer, *Escalating to War between Israel, Hezbollah, and Iran*, CSIS, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/escalating-war-between-israel-hezbollah-and-iran>, 4 October, erişim 01.01.2025.

32 Nancy A. Youssef and Gordon Lubold, “U.S. Stalls Weapons Shipment to Israel in Bid to Stop Rafah Offensive”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 May 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/u-s-paused-weapons-shipment-to-israel-over-a-possible-rafah-offensive-1074521b>, erişim 08.06.2024.

33 Department of Defense, “Pentagon Press Secretary Air Force Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder Holds a Press Briefing,” May 9, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/4013765/pentagon-press-secretary-maj-gen-pat-ryder-holds-press-briefing/>, erişim 11.11.2024.

stability.³⁴ In response, Prime Minister Netanyahu rejected the notion that the U.S. was withholding critical military aid.³⁵ He framed the Biden Administration's pause on weapon shipments as a direct consequence of American efforts to undermine the full eradication of Hamas, arguing that this reflected a broader U.S. interest in allowing Hamas to persist in some form within Gaza.³⁶ Netanyahu's statement has reflected the growing tension between Israel's operational objectives and U.S. concerns regarding the potential long-term consequences of an unrestrained military campaign in Gaza.

This highlights the delicate balancing act in U.S.-Israel relations, particularly in times of intense military conflict. The U.S. has long provided Israel with extensive military support, but this support after 7 October war not unconditional. In this instance, the U.S. sought to ensure that its ally's military actions aligned with its broader strategic goals, particularly avoiding an escalation that could exacerbate regional instability or further alienate international opinion. These developments underline the complexities of the U.S.-Israel alliance, where geopolitical considerations and humanitarian concerns intersect in a context of ongoing regional conflict. Furthermore, the Biden Administration's response signals a more nuanced approach to U.S. military assistance in the Middle East, emphasizing diplomatic engagement and strategic oversight over direct support for military actions. By intervening in the flow of arms and voicing concerns over Israel's military tactics, the U.S. sought to maintain a degree of influence over its ally's operations and underscore the importance of managing international perceptions, especially given the growing calls for accountability regarding the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

In addition to all this development, the Biden administration's request for Israel to outline a "day after" plan for Gaza³⁷ has elicited varied reactions within Israel. This demand was perceived by some, particularly on the right, as an intrusion into Israel's sovereignty and its right to shape its own security strategies, with

34 Zeke Miller and Aamer Madhani, "Biden warns Netanyahu against major Rafah offensive as divide between the 2 leaders grows", <https://apnews.com/article/biden-netanyahu-gaza-rafah-d85423ad066fe41ac5783db5bd9ecffd>, 7 May 2024, erişim 10.11.2024.

35 i24News, Netanyahu on U.S. arms shipment pause: "If we have to stand alone, we will stand alone", 09 May 2024, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel-at-war/artc-netanyahu-on-u-s-arms-shipment-pause-if-we-have-to-stand-alone-we-will-stand-alone>, erişim 11.11.2024.

36 Department of Defense, "Pentagon Press Secretary Air Force Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder Holds a Press Briefing," May 9, 2024.

37 Bernd Debusmann Jr & Tom Bateman, Biden unveils Israeli proposal to end Gaza war, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cw8860gn1nwo>, BBC, 1 June 2024, erişim 06.06.2024.

critics interpreting it as a form of pressure.³⁸ At the same time, the request sparked criticism over Israel's lack of a long-term strategy for its Gaza operations, highlighting concerns about the humanitarian and political consequences of military actions. While the Biden administration's call was seen by some as a warning for Israel to consider broader implications, others viewed it as evidence of a disconnect between U.S. and Israeli priorities, fueling frustration over the perception that Washington does not fully grasp Israel's security needs.³⁹ Additionally, the request was interpreted as a reflection of international pressure regarding the humanitarian situation in Gaza, prompting debates in Israel over whether the U.S. stance primarily serves Israel's interests or its own international reputation. The uncertainty surrounding the governance of Gaza post-Hamas was central to this discussion, intensifying the pressure on the Israeli government to formulate a comprehensive plan. This development underscored strategic differences within U.S.-Israel relations, while also generating new debates in both Israel's domestic and foreign policy spheres. The possibility of Israel fully defeating Hamas and permanently taking control of Gaza would, in the words of Barack Obama's Secretary of State John Kerry, make Israel "too strong." Kerry's statement reflects a common perspective that Israel's military strength could negatively impact the peace process. Historically, Israel's victories have reinforced a security-first approach in both domestic and foreign policies. This has led right-wing Israeli governments to adopt a more distant stance toward negotiations and concessions, such as land sharing. Israel's full takeover of Gaza could also shift its internal political dynamics, prompting the government to favor security-focused policies over peace initiatives. Such a scenario might create deviations from the two-state solution perspective, which the United States, particularly during the Obama administration, sought to maintain as a balancing framework. The perception of an "overly strong" Israel might increase its reluctance to "make peace," distancing the United States further from the prospect of achieving a two-state solution.

Former Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant stated in announcements made under the framework of the "Day After" plan that the Hamas movement would not be allowed to govern Gaza. According to the plan, the local governance

38 Eugenia Yosef, Sophie Tanno and Benjamin Brown, Two far-right Israeli ministers threaten to topple the government if it accepts Biden peace plan, 02 June 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/06/02/middleeast/israeli-ministers-biden-ceasefire-plan-intl/index.html>, erişim 08.09.2024.

39 Leon Hadar, "The 'Day After' in Gaza", Bridging the American and Israeli Visions, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/03/the-day-after-in-gaza-bridging-the-american-and-israeli-visions/>, 13 March 2024, erişim 05.06.2024.

structure proposed for the Gaza Strip will be determined based on the capacities of the existing administrative mechanisms in the region, and the appointments of individuals who will take part in governance will need to be approved by the Israeli administration. It was also stated that, unlike in the West Bank, Jewish settlements would not be established in the region, while a U.S.-led multinational force, together with the European Union and regional partners, would be responsible for the reconstruction of the area.⁴⁰

On the U.S. side, the emphasis was placed on the Palestinian Authority (PA), which is considered to have relatively more “compromising” relations compared to Hamas, taking control in the Gaza Strip similarly to its presence in the West Bank. The U.S. highlighted that Gaza should ultimately come under the governance of a “reformed” Palestinian Authority, a proposal that has been repeatedly rejected by Israeli leaders.⁴¹ The U.S. administration characterized Hamas as not only a direct threat to Israel but also an existential challenge to the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, thus undermining American efforts to promote a resolution to the Palestinian issue. However, Israel, in contrast to the U.S., assessed that the Palestinian Authority’s approach to the State of Israel has increasingly aligned with that of Hamas.

Another issue for Israel, where its objectives within U.S. policies are unclear, is the administration’s belief that the support for Palestinian statehood will create a balanced position between pro-Israel and pro-Palestine actors (especially axis of resistance) in the region. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), orchestrated by the Obama administration, was a pivotal element of U.S. strategy to address the challenges posed by the Axis of Resistance, particularly Iran’s nuclear program. This agreement aimed to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons capabilities in exchange for relief from economic sanctions, thereby addressing a core U.S. concern regarding regional stability and security. From the perspective of the U.S., the JCPOA was not only a non-proliferation effort but also a means to contain the Axis of Resistance by weakening Iran’s ability to financially and militarily support its proxies, such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and other allied militias. By curbing Iran’s nuclear ambitions and re-integrating it into

40 Tal Schneider and Jacob Magid, “Gallant’s post-war Gaza plan: Palestinians to run civil affairs with global task force”, 4 January 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/gallants-post-war-gaza-plan-palestinians-to-run-civil-affairs-with-global-task-force/>, erişim 02.01.2025.

41 Benjamin Netanyahu, Benjamin Netanyahu: Our Three Prerequisites for Peace, 25 December 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/benjamin-netanyahu-our-three-prerequisites-for-peace-gaza-israel-bff895bd>, erişim 05.01.2025.

the global economic system, the U.S. sought to limit Iran's influence, reduce its leverage over regional dynamics, and potentially moderate its behavior. However, this approach faced significant criticism domestically and internationally. Critics argued that the deal provided Iran with financial resources that could indirectly bolster its proxies, thereby strengthening the Axis of Resistance rather than containing it. The lifting of sanctions and the release of frozen assets were seen as enabling Iran to continue supporting groups that oppose U.S. and Israeli interests.⁴² With the transition to the Trump administration, U.S. policies shifted dramatically toward the "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, characterized by severe economic sanctions, military posturing, and diplomatic isolation. However, under the Biden administration, there has been a notable oscillation between Trump's aggressive stance and Biden's more measured "proportional escalation" strategy.

Unlike Trump, Biden sought to de-escalate regional tensions and adopt a more cautious approach to U.S. involvement in the Middle East. This strategy reflects a recalibration of priorities, emphasizing diplomacy and multilateral cooperation over unilateral military actions. For instance, the Biden administration significantly reduced military support for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen⁴³, signaling a desire to distance itself from a conflict that has drawn widespread international criticism. Similarly, the U.S. adopted a restrained approach to Egypt's interventions in Libya⁴⁴, opting to limit its direct military assistance and instead encourage diplomatic solutions. This objective, inherited by the Biden-Harris administration from the Obama administration, frames Iran's pursuit of a nuclear arsenal as a justified response to Israel's presumed nuclear capabilities. Likewise, Iran's ascendancy as a regional power through its network of proxy forces encircling Israel and the Sunni Arab states is perceived as a mechanism to establish a "balance of power." This U.S. approach aligns with its overarching strategic aim of maintaining the Iran-centric regional strategic equilibrium that existed as of October 6.

42 Glick, Caroline, Netanyahu's 'day after' plan, <https://www.jns.org/netanyahus-day-after-plan/>, 13.10.2024.

43 Al Jazeera, US cancels \$130m military aid for Egypt over rights concerns, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/29/us-halts-egypt-military-aid-over-rights-after-huge-arms-sale>, 29.01.2022.

44 Dent, Elizabeth; Rumley, Grant, How the U.S. Used Arms Sales to Shift Saudi Behavior, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-us-used-arms-sales-shift-saudi-behavior>, 04.09.2024.

2.2.3. Leveraging Axis of Resistance with Saudi Arabia

The United States has found itself navigating a delicate and complex diplomatic landscape in the Middle East, particularly in its engagement with its regional allies, especially following the events of October 7, 2023. Before October 7, 2023, Saudi Arabia played a significant role in shaping the Biden administration's Middle East strategy. Saudi Arabia's motivations were primarily centered on the containment of Iran, security arrangements with the United States, and the establishment of an Arab-Israeli strategic partnership. Notably, however, this initiative did not include a binding commitment to the creation of an independent Palestinian state. The Saudi position aligned closely with that of Netanyahu, who argued that Israel could achieve peace with Arab countries and integrate into the Middle East without conceding to Palestinian demands for the establishment of a Palestinian state. But the humanitarian catastrophe that followed October 7, 2023, posed significant challenges to Saudi Arabia's position. Pressure from the Arab peoples has underscored the need for the Saudis to reaffirm their commitment to the Palestinian cause.

Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia has continued to play as important a role in the US vision of the Middle East as it did before October 7. The U.S. has encouraged Saudi Arabia to take a firm, unified stance against provocations originated Axis of Resistance and to view the ongoing conflict as a test of regional unity. While Israel and the United States were under intense international pressure for their role in the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza US State of Secretary Blinken launched a major diplomatic initiative , in which the Saudis would play a leading role. According to the US authorities, the creation of a Palestinian state is the best way to thwart attacks from Iran's regional proxies, which was a common point with Saudi Arabia.

On the other hand, the vision put forward by the United States envisages mobilizing regional support for the reconstruction and governance of Gaza after the end of Israel's war with Hamas. This would form the nucleus of an independent Palestinian State under the control of a reformed Palestinian Authority. From the American perspective, strengthening Israel's security and the creation of a Palestinian state are compatible goals. However, the lack of belief in Israel regarding the viability of a two-state solution indicates potential challenges for the U.S. in transferring regional responsibilities to other actors after the Gaza War. It remains uncertain whether Israel will align with the vision proposed by the U.S. after

achieving the objectives it has pursued since the start of the war. Nevertheless, the reality that this is unlikely to occur in the short term suggests that the U.S.'s goal can only be achieved in the long term. While the U.S. might propose an alternative plan to provide security guarantees for Israel after its withdrawal from Gaza, it could also consider the possibility of establishing a government in Gaza led by Palestinian technocrats to replace Hamas. In this scenario, it is assumed that Palestinians could choose their leaders at some point in the future. In a way, if and when the war in Gaza ends and Hamas is defeated, Washington and Jerusalem would be in a position to come up with a shared vision for Gaza, including demilitarization, Palestinian autonomy, and economic reconstruction, that would be accepted by Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab states, with the objective of an independent Palestinian state remaining a long-term goal.⁴⁵

Conclusion

The American response to 7 October consisted of a high-wire balancing act, in which Washington continued to provide Israel with full diplomatic and military support in an attempt to avert broader regional conflagration, all while criticizing Israel's conduct of the war in Gaza and pressing it to allow humanitarian aid to the Palestinians there. In this process, the U.S. opted for a strategy of buck passing rather than direct intensive military intervention. In order to eliminate the risks that emerged with the October 7 process, the U.S. preferred to maintain a balance between the actors involved in the process while supporting its regional ally Israel. The U.S. approach seeks to manage tensions between Israel and the axis of resistance while avoiding excessive entanglement, thus influencing regional outcomes in ways that align with American interests.

The fact that the US strategy in the Gaza War was, in general terms, to provide or recommend humanitarian aid to Gaza, which is besieged by Israel but largely funded by the United States, suggests that the Palestinian issue was not the main focus of attention in the region. With the outbreak of the Gaza war, the US focused on the continuation of its regional interests without really addressing the root causes of instability and without proposing solutions. It aims to balance the relatively diminished US interest compared to past periods with other global strategic concerns, such as countering the rise of China and supporting Ukraine against Russia. Although the events following October 7 point to the United

45 Leon Hadar, "The "Day After" in Gaza", Bridging the American and Israeli Visions, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/03/the-day-after-in-gaza-bridging-the-american-and-israeli-visions/>, 13 March 2024, erişim 05.06.2024.

States increasingly adopting a method of delegating responsibility to other actors, the Middle East continues to be a vital area of interest, particularly when it comes to U.S. security commitments or global stability.

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