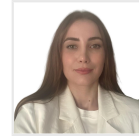




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America's 2024 Election and Europe's Middle East Dilemma

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The 2024 US presidential election will recalibrate American foreign policy in the Middle East amidst ongoing regional retrenchment. Though taking different approaches, both major presidential candidates advocate strategies that favour maintaining security engagements while (further) reducing military commitments – a strategic shift that will carry significant implications for Europe.

- The October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel has reshaped US election discourse, thrusting Middle Eastern foreign policy to the forefront and influencing each candidate's approach.
- Biden has balanced support for traditional allies with outreach to regional actors, while Trump has proposed taking a more assertive stance on Iran and leaving a lighter military footprint. Harris currently faces the challenge of developing a foreign policy standpoint that ensures regional security while addressing diplomatic concerns.
- Regardless of the election outcome, American leadership remains critical to Middle East security, especially vis-à-vis countering Iran and supporting allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. However, the United States must balance its ongoing military retrenchment with projecting power and cultivating regional alliances amid growing competition from China and Russia.
- Europe must take proactive steps to assert and protect its influence in the Middle East, rather than waiting to adjust to shifts in US engagement in the region.

Policy Implications

US and European interests in the Middle East will likely diverge further, whether under a Trump or a Harris presidency. With key stakes in stability, energy security, and migration, Europe must assert greater autonomy in its Middle East strategy. Germany, with its unique ties to Israel, could lead by adopting a more strategic and independent approach to advance regional stability.

An Early October Surprise

In the US presidential election of 2024, the proverbial “October surprise” struck early, hitting with a political intensity typically reserved for events occurring during the final months of the race. Hamas' attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 quickly escalated into a complex geopolitical conflict among key regional actors such as

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Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, with the war in Gaza and now in Southern Lebanon at the forefront. The crisis has since dominated the Middle East foreign policy discourse in the United States, compelling the presidential candidates to navigate a rapidly changing landscape as they have sought to define their foreign policy positions. US president Joe Biden, although he has withdrawn from the presidential race, continues to grapple with the ongoing crisis. In the meantime, former US president Donald Trump and current US vice president Kamala Harris, the two major contenders for president, are articulating their responses, knowing that their stances will not just impact their campaigns but also possibly shape America's future involvement in the region and its relationship with regional allies.

However, as the candidates scramble to align their tactical responses to the crisis with their voter base, they do so within the larger paradigm of a gradual US retrenchment from the Middle East (MacDonald and Parent 2024). This grand strategy realignment, which emphasises a lighter financial and military footprint to refocus on core American interests in the region, has crossed partisan lines, albeit under diametrically opposed strategic prefixes. The current two main foreign policy doctrines, President Biden's liberal internationalism – a more pragmatic version of former president Barack Obama's foreign policy approach – and the first Trump administration's militaristic protectionism, share the goal of reducing the costly military engagements abroad (Suri 2018: 211). The Biden administration does this by sharing responsibilities through cooperation with regional allies and supporting international institutions, while Trump advocates a "peace through strength" approach, favouring tough rhetoric and deterrence, combined with the occasional surgical strike, over costly military deployments (O'Brien 2024).

Yet, in times of crisis such as the current one in Gaza, the general trends in US grand strategy realignment in the Middle East often move into the background, though key foreign policy directions are accelerated by *in loco* geopolitical manoeuvres. This conflict transcends military confrontation, reflecting a gradual reordering of power in the Middle East – a process that will take time to unfold. During a presidential election, candidates' responses to such geopolitical crises offer valuable insights into their potential approaches if elected. Although the campaign rhetoric may reflect emerging priorities – whether in terms of preferences for military restraint, increased reliance on regional allies, or a shift towards diplomatic engagement – candidates often switch priorities once in office and find themselves unexpectedly constrained by the institutional path dependency of the US executive. Still, campaign discourse – particularly during a crisis – may give not only American voters but also a global audience in the Middle East, Europe, and beyond an idea of the candidate's political profile and hint at the future direction of US foreign policy.

Incumbent president Biden, facing immediate pressure to respond, swiftly condemned the October attacks, reaffirmed Israel's right to self-defence, and pledged both diplomatic and military support to Israel ([The White House 2023a](#)). However, as Israel's military response intensified and civilian casualties in Gaza mounted, the Biden administration faced growing criticism. Progressives in the Demo-

cratic Party raised concerns over the humanitarian crisis, while conservatives argued that Biden's approach was too passive vis-à-vis securing US interests. The president's balancing act – supporting Israel, while cautiously calling for restraint – exposed vulnerabilities in his foreign policy legacy, arguably risking another prolonged conflict with global repercussions. Furthermore, concerns inside Israel that the war is being prolonged to maintain Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's grip on power have further compounded pressure on the Biden administration (Olmert 2024).

Donald Trump, Biden's chief challenger, quickly seized the situation, framing it as a failure of Biden's leadership. Citing his role in the Abraham Accords, Trump characterised Biden's response to the October attacks as weak, advocating for a "peace through strength" formula that calls for a more aggressive stance while simultaneously further reducing the US military footprint in the region (Sims 2023). This narrative resonated with Trump's base, though it complicated his earlier peacebuilding initiatives (i.e. the Abraham Accords) and reflected a broader scepticism of America's involvement in protracted Middle Eastern conflicts.

Kamala Harris, the Democratic nominee, has similarly found the fallout of the October attacks difficult to navigate. While supporting Biden's policies, Harris faces the challenge of defining her own foreign policy vision, which must address Israel's security needs while also contending with the humanitarian concerns tied to Gaza (Diaz 2024). So far, she has stood firmly behind the incumbent administration's official position. If elected, the crisis will test her ability to lead on one of the most complex issues in US foreign policy, with significant implications not just for America but also for its European allies, which are watching closely as they have much to lose if stability in the Middle East further deteriorates.

The October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel has reverberated through the policy discourse in the United States and has influenced global perspectives on American leadership in the Middle East. As the conflict unfolds, each candidate's response provides insights into their broader foreign policy strategies, especially in terms of balancing US engagement with regional stability on contentious issues such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, countering Iranian regional aspirations, and maintaining the security architecture in the Gulf. This dynamic also impacts Europe's diplomatic, security, and energy priorities, as European leaders must adapt and balance strategic interests to American shifting policies while addressing immediate challenges.

The Incumbent: Joe Biden

Joe Biden's presidency revolved around the idea of restoration or, as he might put it, "building back better" (The White House 2021). Domestically, Biden inherited a deeply polarised political environment, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, economic turbulence, and the legacy of Donald Trump's administration. In foreign policy, Biden took a cue from his own "return to normal" mantra, focusing on restoring US leadership on the global stage after the tumultuous Trump years. His approach to foreign affairs has been characterised by a return to multilateralism and diplomacy, alongside a cautious continuation of the pivot away from military interventions. One of the defining moments was the withdrawal of US troops from

Afghanistan in 2021, a move – initiated by his predecessor – that ended America’s longest war but was marred by chaotic execution and humanitarian crises. The withdrawal, while popular with a war-weary public, dented Biden’s foreign policy credentials, as images of the Taliban’s swift return to power and desperate Afghan civilians dominated the media, raising questions about the administration’s strategic foresight ([McCaul 2024](#)).

In the Middle East, Biden has walked a fine line between supporting key allies and managing simmering conflicts. His administration has sought to expand the Abraham Accords while also working to revive the Iran nuclear deal – a central element of his Middle Eastern policy. However, these efforts have faced significant obstacles, with relations between the United States and Iran remaining tense and attempts at peace talks perennially stalling. Regarding the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, Biden has maintained strong support for Israel’s security but has met with renewed criticism from both regional actors, and even some members of his own party have chastised the administration for not doing enough to advance Palestinian rights.

Biden’s firm response to the October 7 attacks and his support of Israel’s right to self-defence has reaffirmed the American commitment to its ally but also reignited debates about the United States’ role in the region. As the 2024 election draws closer, Biden’s legacy will largely be judged on how well he balances this complex web of alliances, as well as on his ability to prevent further escalation in the Middle East.

The Challenger: Donald Trump

Donald Trump’s re-entry into the political scene as a 2024 presidential candidate has magnified the deep divisions within the United States. His legacy as a highly polarising figure is rooted in his unconventional leadership style, characterised by confrontational rhetoric, populist nationalism, and a rejection of the norms that traditionally guide US domestic and foreign policy. Trump’s transactional approach to the Middle East remains one of the most divisive aspects of his foreign policy legacy, and his candidacy raises significant concerns about potential US foreign policy shifts in the region.

One of the defining aspects of Trump’s Middle East policy as president was his staunch alignment with Israel. His administration’s decision to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in 2017 fundamentally reshaped US–Palestinian relations. While the move was celebrated by many of Trump’s supporters and segments of the Israeli political establishment, it was simultaneously seen as a major setback for Palestinian aspirations for statehood and international diplomatic efforts for a two-state solution. In the eyes of the Palestinians, the move also disqualified the United States as a mediator in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leadership claiming that Washington had become part of the problem rather than the solution ([Sawafta and al-Mughrabi 2018](#)). Trump’s subsequent “Deal of the Century” peace plan, unveiled in 2020, has further sidelined Palestinians, thus entrenching divisions on the issue.

A second key aspect of Trump's legacy in the Middle East was the unilateral withdrawal from the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 – a cornerstone of President Obama's diplomacy in the region. Trump's subsequent "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran then sought to force Tehran to sign a better deal and tie his own name to its legacy. The policy, however, which was characterised by severe economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation, significantly heightened tensions with Iran and arguably increased the risk of military conflict. While this approach was welcomed by Israel and some Gulf Arab states, it alienated European allies and undermined the multilateral diplomatic framework established by the JCPOA. Furthermore, the United States' targeted killing of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani in January 2020 escalated hostilities, drawing the region ever closer to the brink of war.

Despite these controversies, Trump's most notable – albeit controversial – diplomatic success in the Middle East came with the Abraham Accords, which normalised relations between Israel and several Arab states, including the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. The Emirates and Bahrain paved the way with economic and security cooperation agreements, while Sudan and Morocco, despite their geographic distance from Israel, also played important roles. Sudan's strategic location along the Red Sea evinced its maritime and security significance as it aimed to attract foreign investment. By contrast, Morocco sought to strengthen its ties with Israel and gain recognition for its claims over the Western Sahara.

These agreements were hailed as historic breakthroughs in Arab–Israeli relations, yet they also underscored the deepening regional polarisation. While the accords were celebrated in Washington and Tel Aviv, they were condemned by Palestinian leaders, who saw the agreements as a betrayal of their cause. Moreover, the accords led to heightened tensions with Iran, which viewed the normalisation of relations as part of a broader strategy to contain its influence in the region. With the current war in Gaza, the normalisation trajectory with Israel is being revisited by potential Arab signatories.

A second Trump administration's approach to the Middle East would likely re-emphasise the "peace through strength" principle, relying on maximum pressure and minimal direct engagement. If elected for a second term, Trump may be motivated by a desire to leave a legacy and pursue bolder initiatives. Given his highly personalised style of policymaking and deal-making, this approach introduces a degree of unpredictability. Regarding Iran, he may initially adopt a more hardline stance, but this could shift for tactical reasons, potentially leading to new developments in the region. Trump's strong support for Israel and his transactional relationships with Arab states, especially those in the Gulf, are likely to continue. This would further solidify the Abraham Accords' legacy and encourage other diplomatic initiatives. The prospect of Palestinian statehood under his leadership remains uncertain, as he has shown little commitment to that cause.

If Trump is elected, the probability of further escalation in the Middle East remains a distinct risk, considering the volatile situation that is unfolding. However, he might also pursue a more pragmatic approach, acknowledging the complexities at play and the costs of confrontation and intervention. This could lead to a strat-

egy that balances his aggressive discourse with calculated diplomacy, avoiding large-scale military engagement and entrenchment in prolonged conflicts such as the Syrian Civil War. Trump's preference for economic partnership and strategic alliances reflects a strategy to maintain American influence and leadership in the region at minimal cost. Enacting policy changes vis-à-vis the Middle East is notoriously complex, and despite any potential efforts of his new administration, a significant part of the existing agenda is likely to persist.

The Newcomer: Kamala Harris

Kamala Harris, the Democratic Party's nominee following Joe Biden's withdrawal in late July, faces the triple challenge of fulfilling her role in the incumbent Biden administration, countering Trump's aggressive rhetoric, and defining her own political profile.

Although the timing of Harris' candidacy is uniquely late, her triple role is not unprecedented. Recent US presidential history has seen incumbent vice presidents successfully (George H.W. Bush under the Ronald Reagan administration) and unsuccessfully (Al Gore under the Bill Clinton administration) run for their own terms. During all of these elections, including this one, the change-vs.-experience topos has been a focal point of the public debate. In the current election, this is further exacerbated by the fact that Harris' opponent, Trump, is running for his second term, thus able to draw on his own foreign policy legacy, as described above. Yet, while Harris falls short regarding high-profile foreign policy experience when compared to Biden and Trump, if elected, Harris' experience in foreign affairs as a first-term president would be unmatched since George H. W. Bush in 1989 ([Hurlburt 2024](#)).

Still, Harris' foreign policy record to date has been largely shaped by her alignment with the broader Biden administration's grand strategy: a more realist interpretation of former president Obama's brand of liberal internationalism, characterised by minimising US military and financial burden in the region by sharing responsibility with regional allies to safeguard core US interests. Yet, her direct involvement in Middle Eastern affairs has been relatively minimal. As the 2024 Democratic nominee, Harris will therefore need to demonstrate a more assertive stance on key regional issues to reassure allies and articulate a clear vision for US engagement in the Middle East.

On the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, Harris has publicly supported the Biden administration's position advocating for a two-state solution. Following the 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel, Harris stood firmly behind the administration's condemnation of Hamas and its robust support for Israel's right to defend itself ([The White House 2023b](#)). However, she has also voiced concern over the humanitarian impact of the conflict, emphasising the need for diplomacy to prevent further escalation. Her challenge now will be to balance this support for Israel with calls from parts of the Democratic Party and the international community for a more nuanced approach that also addresses Palestinian grievances.

Regarding Iran, Harris has been a vocal advocate for diplomacy, supporting efforts to revive the JCPOA to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. While

the Biden administration has struggled to bring Iran back to the negotiating table, Harris' potential presidency could signal a renewed push for diplomatic engagement, though her stance on Iran might be more aggressive than initially expected. Recently, she has voiced tough rhetoric against Tehran, surprising some analysts with her statement that Iran is America's primary adversary, referring to the recent missile attacks on Israel and Iran's growing influence in the region (CBS News 2024).

As for the Arab Gulf states, Harris is more likely to maintain a cooperative approach and potentially expand the Abraham Accords, which her administration would likely recognise as a foundation for regional stability. She has also referred to the importance of maintaining US influence in strategic areas like the Red Sea, where security is crucial for global trade and energy routes. It remains uncertain whether Harris will establish her distinct vision for the Middle East or continue the legacy of the Biden presidency. Her recent statements on Palestine indicate a reduced focus on this issue, emphasising instead her strong support for Israel, given its critical security role. This suggests that much of her policy in the region may be tactical, reactive, and oriented towards crisis management whenever potential conflicts arise.

Outlook: The Future of US Leadership in the Middle East and Its Implications for Europe

As the 2024 US elections approach, the future of US leadership in the Middle East stands at a pivotal crossroads, yet it must be understood in light of the region's enduring geopolitical realities. In line with Niccolò Machiavelli's famous political treatise, policy decisions are shaped by existing rather than ideal conditions. Regardless of whether Kamala Harris or Donald Trump assumes the presidency, US policy in the Middle East will remain constrained by the structural forces and regional dynamics that have long shaped America's approach to the region.

"Ending the forever wars" (Weisman 2024), a key narrative in recent US administrations, including the current campaign, reflects Washington's broader intention to reduce direct military involvement in the Middle East. However, full disengagement is neither feasible nor strategically prudent. America's transformative agenda for the region has repeatedly failed to bring the long-term peace and stability it promised, but abandoning the region entirely would pose significant risks. The Middle East continues to hold immense geopolitical importance, particularly concerning energy security, counterterrorism, and the containment of regional actors like Iran (Cook 2024).

Both Harris and Trump would be forced to navigate these entrenched realities. Harris is likely to continue the Biden administration's emphasis on multilateralism and alliances, albeit with a focus on recalibrating diplomatic relations in line with shifting global dynamics. Trump, by contrast, could revive a more transactional approach, potentially reducing US involvement in favour of prioritising immediate American interests. Yet, neither candidate can ignore the strategic imperatives of maintaining stability in the Gulf, countering Iranian influence, and preserving relationships with key allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia.

This transition is occurring within a broader global context, where the world order has entered a more multipolar – or multiplex – phase. The increasing influence of China and Russia in the Middle East, along with the rise of regional powers Turkey and Iran, necessitates a recalibration of US strategy. This shift towards a multipolar world reduces the dominance that American leadership once enjoyed in shaping the Middle East’s trajectory and adds complexity to its engagement in the region.

For Europe, which has often benefited from American hegemony in the Middle East, this evolving US approach is especially consequential. The European Union’s geographic proximity to the Middle East makes regional stability essential, particularly in terms of energy security and migration. The war in Ukraine has exposed Europe’s vulnerability in its energy supply, and any escalation of tensions in the Middle East could further disrupt the flow of natural resources. Moreover, ongoing conflicts, such as those in Syria and Iraq, continue to drive migration flows that directly impact Europe’s political and social fabric.

In light of this, Europe must acknowledge that while US and European interests in the Middle East often overlap, they are not always congruent. The European Union has consistently advocated for diplomacy, particularly regarding Iran and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. While Washington prioritises Israel’s security, Europe has a vested interest in promoting a two-state solution and addressing humanitarian concerns in Gaza. Similarly, Europe’s commitment to the JCPOA with Tehran contrasts with the United States’ more confrontational stance in recent years. A shift in US Middle East policy – whether towards re-engagement or further withdrawal – will affect Europe’s ability to maintain its diplomatic efforts.

Germany, given its unique historical relationship with Israel and its position inside the European Union as the main recipient of refugees from the Middle East, must reposition itself to play a proactive role in shaping European responses. As instability in Gaza and Lebanon threatens to expand into a broader regional conflict, Berlin and Brussels are well placed to offer constructive advice to Israel. This includes encouraging military restraint and addressing humanitarian crises, which could help mitigate further destabilisation. By pursuing a more assertive and independent role, both can better safeguard their own interests while contributing to regional stability.

The future of US leadership in the Middle East – whether shaped by a Harris or a Trump administration – will continue to evolve within the constraints of geopolitical realities. For Europe, this means preparing for potential shifts in US priorities through a more autonomous and proactive Middle East strategy. To assert its own influence in the Middle East, the European Union must strengthen its ties with regional actors, pursue energy diversification, and address the root causes of migration. This approach will allow Europe to, in a general sense, take a more active role on the global stage and, more specifically, reshape its relationship with its Middle Eastern partners, even as the world moves further towards a multipolar order.

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