HEGEMONY OF THE UNITED STATES AND WARS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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ABSTRACT

The Middle East is a region of paramount importance in US foreign policy. Consequently, this study endeavors to scrutinize the foreign policy strategies implemented by the US in its dealings with the Middle East and assess whether these strategies contribute to preserving its hegemonic status in the global order. Employing a qualitative methodology, the study heavily relies on secondary data. A comprehensive literature survey forms the basis of information collection, with subsequent analysis conducted within a theoretical framework. The Hegemonic Stability Theory, Realism, Offensive Realism, and Offense-Defense Theory serve as the primary theoretical lenses for data analysis. Notably, the study places a spotlight on US foreign policy towards key Middle Eastern players such as Iran, Iraq, and the Israel-Palestine conflict. The findings of the study indicate that US foreign policy strategies vis-à-vis the Middle East effectively serve the purpose of safeguarding its hegemonic position in the global order. However, it is essential to acknowledge that these strategies, while achieving their intended goals, have a detrimental impact on the perception of the US as a benevolent hegemon. The study illuminates the intricate dynamics between power projection and global image management in the realm of international relations, particularly concerning the Middle East.

INTRODUCTION

The increasingly destructive nature of warfare, exemplified by the two world wars (War I and WII), compelled states to contemplate collective action to preserve peace and security (Af Jochnick & Normand, 2017). The aftermath of these wars left nations grappling with depressed living standards, recurring economic challenges, and deplorable socio-political conditions. In response, the United Nations (UN) was established to address these issues. The member states entrusted the Security Council with the primary responsibility of upholding international peace and security, thereby limiting their sovereign right to use force independently. While member states did not completely relinquish their national interests for a comprehensive internationalism, there was an effort to redefine national interest in light of growing interdependence within the framework of an international organization.

The founding members of the United Nations, convening in San Francisco in 1945, were determined to create an institution more effective than its predecessor, the League of Nations, in maintaining global peace and security (Baehr, 2013). Equipped with greater powers than the League Council, the Security Council mandated members to enforce its decisions regarding the use of armed forces against aggressors.

However, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a US-led unipolar world have significantly altered the functioning of this body. Structural reforms and the organization's shortcomings have been subjects of scrutiny for many years.

The Cold War played a pivotal role in influencing the UN's operations, relying on the convergence of political will among member states. In the present era of unipolarity dominated by US hegemony, the performance of the UN has been notably affected.

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Despite its primary responsibility for maintaining peace and security, the UN has proven insufficient in executing its expanded tasks, as the sole superpower, the United States, has not granted it the autonomy to do so. The end of bipolarity has witnessed instances where US actions have been legitimized by the UN.

Following the conclusion of the Cold War, Krauthammer asserted that America's strength and will were crucial for leading a unipolar world, openly establishing and enforcing the rules of world order. This perspective, as presented in The Unipolar Moment (1991), marked the ascendancy of the United States as the unequivocal superpower on the global stage. With the collapse of the mighty Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the geopolitical landscape cleared the way for the United States to assume the role of a hegemon, providing political leadership globally (Bozdaglioglu, 2013). In subsequent years, the dominance of the U.S. intensified, enabling it to exert influence over the internal politics of other nations (Beyer, 2007).

Hegemony, derived from the Greek term Hegemonia, denotes 'leadership.' In the realm of international relations, it implies the 'dominance of one state over others' (Gilpin, 2004). A hegemon, in the context of international politics, is a leader or ruler presiding over other states in the international community. The preeminent power, as a hegemon, should possess the capability, will, and commitment to enforce the rules of the international system, fostering a mutually beneficial environment for major states. The hegemon's capability typically rests on a robust economy, technological prowess, political stability, and military strength. In the post-Cold War era, the U.S. earned the label of a hegemonic power, owing to its growing economy, technological dominance, political stability, and formidable military power.

John Ikenberry aptly pointed out the U.S.'s preponderance, declaring it a "global unipolar power with unprecedented military and geopolitical capacities" (2005: 359). Despite the physical distance between the U.S. and the Middle East, the region holds a crucial position in U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. has consistently wielded its influence over the internal politics of many Middle Eastern countries to secure its national interests. These interests, as outlined by Pelletreau, encompass achieving Arab-Israeli peace, supporting Israel's security, preventing conflicts, ensuring the free flow of oil from the Gulf, countering terrorism, and containing rogue regimes (1996: 429-432).

Through strategic foreign policies and interventions in the Middle East, the U.S. has tactically expanded its presence in the region, thereby reinforcing its hegemonic status in global politics. Successive U.S. administrations have pursued various policies to safeguard its interests in the Middle East, such as involvement in Gulf Wars, unwavering support for Israel, engagement in the Israel-Palestine conflict, and efforts to suppress challenging powers in the region since the 1990s.

The impact of U.S. foreign policies and strategies on its hegemony in the Middle East is a subject of ongoing debate in the field of international relations, with specialists holding diverse opinions on whether these strategies effectively safeguard U.S. hegemony in global politics.

HEGEMONY

Gilpin (1981) defines hegemony as one state achieving preeminence over others in the international system, while Keohane (1984) characterizes it as a situation where a state becomes powerful enough and is willing to enforce essential rules governing international relations. In political terms, hegemony implies a state's dominance in the international political system, while in economic terms, it signifies a state's control over raw materials, capital sources, markets, and competitive advantages in producing highly valued goods (Keohane, 1984). Antonio Gramsci, on the other hand, sees hegemony as a relationship based on consent through political and ideological leadership, emphasizing the importance of consensus (Beyer, 2007: 1 & 2). Gramsci later incorporates coercion into the concept of hegemony, highlighting that force without leadership or consensus amounts to dictatorship (Beyer, 2007).

Hegemony is rooted in material factors that result in the dominance of power. A state holding such a position engages with other states in the system not only through the lens of power balances but also through shared norms and a system of rules that serves as a framework for interstate relations. Despite the constant presence of conflict in international society, the pursuit of particularistic interests is a common practice. However, the international society establishes a normative framework that limits and moderates the actions of the hegemon. This normative framework shapes the hegemon's inclination towards orderly and peaceful interstate relations, minimizing its reliance on sheer power.

The role of a hegemon in the international community is closely tied to legitimacy, which involves external recognition of the hegemon's right to primacy. While states acknowledge the hegemon's power, they develop expectations beyond the notion that the hegemon can act as it pleases solely due to its capabilities. Instead, the primacy of the hegemon is reflected in the belief that, while possessing special rights not available to other members of the international society, it also bears a set of duties towards those members. The legitimacy of a hegemon's position is contingent upon its commitment to the collective.

For a hegemon to maintain legitimacy, it must pursue goals that serve the collective and offer a strategy aligned with the fundamental principles of the international society, such as sovereignty and non-intervention. The realization of these goals should be translated into concrete measures. While states may be inclined to cooperate with the United States within the hegemonic system, the extent of collaboration depends heavily on the case-specific legitimacy of the goals promoted and the acceptability of the means employed to achieve them.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, Krauthammer (1991) declared the emergence of a unipolar world with the United States as the unchallenged superpower. Contrary to assumptions that the post-Cold War era would lead to multipolarity, Krauthammer asserted the absence of any power capable of rivaling the U.S. (1991: 24). Layne (2006) attributes U.S. hegemony to its preeminence in military and economic power and the lack of a formidable challenger after the Soviet Union's collapse. Layne suggests that the U.S. has actively sought to maintain a unipolar world by preventing the emergence of competing powers (2006).

AMERICAN HEGEMONY

In contemporary times, the visualization of the concept of peace is intricately linked to an understanding of the nuances inherent in the hegemonic system. The Gulf crisis serves as a stark illustration of how the United States, as a hegemonic power, has compromised the foundational principles of the UN system, effectively hijacking the idea of collective security. The notion of collective security hinges on the shared interest of states in security matters, with a focus on protecting the territorial integrity of fellow states and resolving interstate disputes through international governance, wherein all member states have direct representation. Three guiding principles encapsulate the concept of collective security. Firstly, coercive occupation and violation of a state's sovereignty by another state must be condemned, necessitating collective assistance to the victimized state after a resolution by the international body. Secondly, diplomatic solutions should be sought for settling interstate disputes instead of resorting to armed conflicts. Collective security, rooted in international law, views unprovoked aggression as barbaric and hostile to the global community, aiming to prevent conflicts and ensure world peace.

The essence of Collective Security lies in combining the strength of member states to organize international force and security, alleviating concerns about national security (Sarooshi, 1999). This collaborative strength serves as a guarantee for the security of each member, promoting the use of peaceful methods and fostering trust among nations. An effective collective security system is characterized by the prohibition of the use of force by all states under all circumstances. In principle, it ensures security for all states and acts as a collective deterrent against aggression, without partiality towards aggressors or victims. This involves the immediate identification of aggressors in an institutionalized manner.

Despite these guiding principles enshrined in the United Nations, the United States, as a hegemonic force, has employed means that diverge from UN principles in pursuit of its interests during the Gulf crisis. The control exerted by the United States over the international security mechanism was evident in the declaration of war against Iraq by the U.S. President, bypassing the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The U.S. deployed troops into the Gulf even before presenting the Kuwait case for deliberation by the Security Council. Consequently, Security Council resolutions served to legitimize American actions, showcasing a departure from the intended principles.

While the influence of the United States as a hegemonic force diminished between 1991 and the second invasion of Iraq in 2003, the U.S. adopted a policy of direct coercion to compensate for these deficiencies (Lee, 2010). The post-Cold War era saw the United States, with economic influence and military prowess, assume the role of the global collective security watchdog after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The focus shifted from Europe to the Middle East, with considerations of regional importance, including religious, strategic, and economic factors. This shift in focus towards the Middle East, particularly due to concerns over oil, proximity to Russia, and the geopolitical importance of the region, led to the manipulation of the United Nations during the Persian Gulf crisis to safeguard U.S. economic interests. The unfolding of events from the first Gulf War onwards illustrates the evolving nature of the UN system in the post-Soviet phase, marked by instances where the U.S. either propelled the Security Council forward or undermined its efforts based on its own vested interests.

The 9/11 attacks on the United States brought about a significant shift in U.S. objectives and perceptions of terrorism, prompting a global war on terrorism. The focus extended beyond headline-catching military actions to encompass efforts to deny terrorists access to weapons of mass destruction, combat terrorism financing, and strengthen border controls. The subsequent invasion of Afghanistan garnered international support, with the UN endorsing the use of force against Afghanistan. However, variations in the level of international cooperation across different spheres of action during the war on terrorism raise questions. States' inclination to collaborate in this war and the extent of cooperation depend on case-specific legitimacy and considerations of national interest.

The Iraq War, which followed the Afghanistan invasion, witnessed the U.S. engaging in military actions without a clear UN mandate, emphasizing a unilateral approach.

The U.S. justified its actions by asserting the need for preemptive action against perceived threats, such as weapons of mass destruction and alleged connections between Saddam Hussein's regime and terrorists. The unilateral stance of the United States, including its refusal to sign international agreements like the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, showcased a trend of bypassing the UN system and acting in its own interests.

The engagement of the U.S. with the UN Security Council on various issues, including sanctions, illustrated the Council's authority and its use as a tool for managing international conflict. However, the selective enforcement and humanitarian implications of sanctions regimes faced criticism. The post-Cold War era saw the United States adopting a unilateralist approach, defying the UN system, and pursuing its own agenda. The prevailing trend of unilateralism, exemplified by the U.S. reluctance to involve the UN in post-war Iraq, raises concerns about the unchecked power of a superpower and the need for a revitalized normative and institutional framework. The double standards employed by major powers, evident in their selective interventions based on strategic interests, highlight the challenges facing the UN in maintaining a balanced and unbiased approach.

The defiance and bypassing of the UN system by the United States have become characteristic of its diplomacy in the post-Soviet era. Unilateral actions, such as the invasion of Iraq, underscore the potential threats posed by unchecked unilateralism. The fear persists that this trend may continue, posing a significant threat to global stability in the post-Cold War era. The international community needs to address these challenges to prevent the erosion of the UN's effectiveness and promote a more collaborative and inclusive approach to international security and peacekeeping.

The debate surrounding the notion of the United States as a benevolent hegemon remains a subject of discussion. The United States positions itself as nonimperialist and benevolent, highlighting principles of fairness, restraint, and the promotion of human freedom (Allison, 2007). Nevertheless, critics contend that the perception of benevolence is subjective, as some observers interpret U.S. actions as arrogant and unilateral (Huntington, 1999). The 9/11 terrorist attacks briefly challenged U.S. hegemony, raising doubts about its capacity to safeguard the world. However, the subsequent War on Terror, as noted by Krauthammer (cited in Allison, 2007: 96), served to reinforce U.S. hegemony by demonstrating its military prowess and economic resilience. Posen (2003) suggests that the events of 9/11 provided a domestic foundation for U.S. hegemonic foreign policy.

US FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE MIDDLE EAST AND ITS IMPACT ON US HEGEMONY

Between 1945 and 1980, the United States formulated its primary foreign policy objectives in the Middle East (Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2002). The Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union and the emergence of a robust Pan-Arab movement in West Asia marked this period. The geopolitical spheres of influence were identified, and their strategic and economic significance thoroughly evaluated. The United States assumed a pivotal role in the Arab world, primarily focusing on policing functions to control communism, maintain law and order, and intervene in conflicts.

U.S. interests in West Asia were notably centered on strategic positioning for global security, international order, and the containment of Soviet influence. The American approach was envisaged by Arab nationalists as supportive of a strong, free, and progressive Arab world. Long-term U.S. objectives included limiting Soviet influence, ensuring the mutual and acceptable recycling of petro-dollars, and addressing economic interests such as market access and cooperation for the development of the region.

A core belief among American policymakers was the advocacy for global freedom of access to world resources, with West Asia hosting over sixty percent of the world's proven oil reserves. U.S. interests in the region primarily revolved around securing access to oil supplies, markets for American goods, and investment opportunities. The protection of corporate interests, especially those of American oil companies, played a paramount role, influencing governmental actions to safeguard property rights. The late 1940s witnessed significant developments favoring American-based multinational oil corporations, particularly in the Middle East. Transactions, such as Exxon and Mobil acquiring a substantial stake in the Saudi oil company Aramco in 1947, and subsequent agreements with the Saudi government, aimed to ensure the orderly entry of Saudi oil into the world economy. The rise in oil output and revenue dramatically elevated the role of the oil sector in the Middle East economies.

As the U.S. sought to promote modernization while countering Soviet influence, various foreign policy options were pursued from the Truman Doctrine to Reagan's threat of force. These options underscored the consistent perception of the Middle East as vital to U.S. national interests, emphasizing stability and preventing threats to the region. Presidents from Truman to Reagan realized the need to define the Middle East as crucial to U.S. national security and strategic interests. Containment of communism, based on military,

political, and ideological factors, shaped U.S. policy. Truman's presidency saw a shift in policy toward Palestine, driven by concerns about Soviet dominance in the region. The U.S. implemented foreign aid programs, with military assistance being a significant component.

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed internal social revolutionary changes, peace between Arab states and Israel, and evolving U.S. policies. The Nixon administration emphasized peace initiatives, while the Carter administration focused on energy, the Palestinian conflict, and Gulf security (Cai et al, 2023). The Iranian experience revealed potential long-term drawbacks to the U.S. policy of arming oil-rich Arab countries. By the 1980s, the U.S. reordered its policy objectives in response to Soviet expansion, the Iranian revolution, and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The Reagan administration sought to exploit new opportunities arising from geopolitical shifts in the region. U.S. foreign policy in the Arab world during this period was one facet of a broader set of bilateral and multilateral relationships with the Arab nations.

In summary, the U.S. foreign policy plays a crucial role in maintaining relations and securing national interests globally. The Middle East holds strategic importance for the U.S., and its foreign policies aim not only to preserve preeminence in the region but also to safeguard U.S. hegemony worldwide. Examining U.S. foreign policy towards Iran, Iraq, Israel, and Palestine provides insights into the interplay between regional strategies and global hegemonic goals.

IRAN

Iran holds strategic importance in the Gulf region for the United States due to historical significance, geographical location, and economic and technological development (Khan, 2011; Cordesman & Al-Rodhan, 2006). As the second-largest and most populous country in the Gulf, Iran's adjacency to the Strait of Hormuz grants it control over crucial sea lines vital for Western access to Gulf oil. Additionally, possessing 11.1% of the world's oil reserves and 15.3% of natural gas reserves underscores Iran's significance on the global energy stage (Cordesman & Al-Rodhan, 2006).

Theoretical perspectives, such as offensive realism and offense-defense theory, offer frameworks for analyzing US foreign policy towards Iran. Offensive realism posits that states, compelled by the anarchic nature of the international system, seek security and power, with an inclination toward hegemony (Mearsheimer, 2013). In offense-defense theory, states pursue self-help measures, encompassing unilateral acquisition of economic, military, or technological capabilities for defensive or offensive purposes (Lynn-Jones, 1995). Evaluating US-Iran relations through these lenses allows an examination of their impact on US hegemony.

The historical trajectory of US-Iran relations dates back to the Cold War era, driven by the need to contain communist influence in the Gulf. The 'twin pillar' policy designated Iran and Saudi Arabia as US surrogates for regional security after the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in 1971 (Khan, 2011). Close ties were maintained with Shah Pahlavi, ensuring protection of US interests despite his regime's internal challenges. The US intervened in 1953, orchestrating a coup to preserve friendly leadership and secure access to Iranian oil. The 1979 Islamic Revolution marked a turning point, souring relations and shaping US policies. To counter the revolution's influence, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was formed in 1981, emphasizing political, economic, and military containment of both Iran and Iraq (Khan, 2011). The Iran-Iraq war further saw US support for Iraq to diminish Iran's power.

Post-Cold War, the 'dual containment' policy targeted both Iran and Iraq, emphasizing isolation economically, politically, and militarily (Indyk, 1999). The aim was to prevent the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction by Iran. However, the 9/11 attacks strained relations, with Iran included in the 'Axis of Evil,' and the revelation of Iran's nuclear program intensified concerns. Iran's growing power post-US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq led to efforts to contain it through strengthened ties with Arab countries and military presence in the Gulf.

While Iran's power has grown, it lacks the military strength to seriously challenge the US. The US missile defense systems and encirclement of Iran's territory by allied or US-friendly states bolster this deterrent (Khan, 2011). Neighboring states express reluctance to support Iran in the event of US intervention, seeking to counterbalance Iran's nuclear capabilities.

In conclusion, US foreign policy towards Iran serves to safeguard US hegemony. The theoretical frameworks of offensive realism and offense-defense theory help analyze the strategic calculations behind US actions. Despite Iran's regional influence, it lacks the capability to shift the balance of power significantly, affirming the effectiveness of US strategies in preserving its hegemony.

IRAQ

Over the course of centuries, various indicators pointed to the existence of substantial oil reserves in the Arabian Peninsula and its surroundings. Accounts from travelers and references in Arabic literature often made mention of dark oily substances. The discovery of oil in Egypt in 1869 and the prolific Masjid-i-Suleiman well in Persia in 1908 marked significant milestones. Three decades later, the first highly productive oil well in Kuwait was uncovered (Black, 2020). These discoveries, along with numerous others in the region, solidified the

Middle East, encompassing Kuwait, Persia (Iran), Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and neighboring states, as a focal point for foreign imperial ambitions for an extended period. The escalating global demand for energy in a shrinking world made it evident that the oil-rich nations of the Middle East could not avoid the predatory intentions of powerful Western nations.

British interest in the region dates back to the seventeenth century, driven by commercial, maritime, and strategic considerations. The British East India Company established a presence in Basra in 1739, and a British residency became permanent in Baghdad in 1798. The period from 1834 to 1914 witnessed a substantial expansion of British involvement in Mesopotamia (Bose & Jalal, 2022). Telegraph lines connected Basra and Baghdad with Bombay, Constantinople, and Tehran, and by 1800, Britain had a resident in Basra and a consulate in Baghdad. The establishment of an agency of the East India Company in Basra conferred advantages to the British, a position further strengthened by King William IV's personal interest, leading to concessions for British-owned vessels to utilize Iraqi waterways for trade. Telegraph lines and postal services were also introduced (Ahmadi, 2018).

By the early twentieth century, Britain secured concessions from nominally independent Iran for the exploration and extraction of Iranian oil, with William Knox D'Arcy playing a pivotal role. The Anglo-Persian (later Iranian) Oil Company, founded by Knox, drilled its inaugural oil well at Masjid-i-Suleiman in 1908. Concurrently, oil had been discovered in Azerbaijan (Czarist Russian-controlled Iran) in 1842, with the first oil refinery in Baku built in 1863. U.S. interest in the Middle East was influenced by Britain's Balfour Declaration of 1917 and Anglo-French plans for the division of the Ottoman Empire. President Woodrow Wilson's commission in 1919, led by Charles R. Crane and Dr. Henry Churchill King, revealed Arab opposition to Jewish settlement in Palestine (Haddad & Rostam-Kolayi, 2013).

In 1933, the U.S. initiated deals with King Abdul Aziz of Arabia, marking the commencement of American involvement in Saudi Arabian oil. Following World War II, the U.S. developed a keen interest in Iraqi oil (Abedin, 2002). The reconstructed Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) had 23.5 percent ownership each by British, Dutch, and French companies, and jointly by two U.S. oil corporations. U.S. companies started making inroads into Iraqi oil. By 1943, the U.S., aware of its role in supplying energy to the Allies, realized the strategic importance of Middle East oil. In 1945, President Roosevelt hosted the Saudi King, sealing a deal that marked the beginning of U.S. influence in Saudi Arabian oil. The post-World War II era saw the U.S. increasingly preoccupied with Middle East oil, particularly as the Cold War intensified. By the early 1970s, five major companies dominated the global oil industry, with Exxon Mobil, a U.S.-based entity, standing out as the largest (Pollack, 2002).

In essence, the U.S. interest in the Middle East was motivated by strategic considerations, securing energy resources, and maintaining a position of dominance in the global oil industry. Thus, Iraq, owing to its strategic location, abundant natural energy resources, access to water, and fertile soil, holds considerable importance in the foreign policy strategies of major global powers. Its historical significance for civilizations like the Romans, Persians, Muslims, Mongols, and the British persists, and presently, Iraq's affairs remain a critical aspect of the United States' national security agenda. According to the hegemonic stability theory, international system stability is achieved through the presence of a dominant power, or hegemon, which, in its benevolence, provides collective public goods such as peace and security. The U.S. played a significant role as a benevolent hegemon during the Iraq-Kuwait war in 1990.

The invasion of Kuwait by Iraq prompted global condemnation, and the U.S., seizing the opportunity, assumed its hegemonic role in the Middle East and internationally. The U.S. promptly aligned with the United Nations Security Council to demand Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait, deploying troops in Saudi Arabia and building an international coalition to liberate Kuwait from Saddam Hussein's control. Following the Gulf War victory in 1991, the U.S. was hailed as a benevolent hegemon that ensures international system stability and security. Its foreign policy towards Iraq during the early and mid-1990s played a crucial role in reaffirming U.S. hegemony in the Middle East and the world order (Layne, 2009). The purported existence of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq has long been a matter of global concern. During Saddam Hussein's regime, he exhibited a blatant disregard for peace and regional security. In 1980, Iraq invaded Iran, sparking the Iran-Iraq War, which lasted until 1988. Hussein resorted to chemical weapons in at least 10 instances during the conflict, including attacks on civilians. On June 19, 1981, the Security Council strongly condemned Israel's destruction of Iraq's nuclear reactor at Osiraq, alleging it was intended for nuclear weapons preparation—an ironic stance given later events but consistent with Cold War-era notions of sovereignty and aggression (Singh & Thakur, 2007).

In 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait, leading to the Persian Gulf War. Subsequently, Iraq repeatedly violated 16 UNSC resolutions from 1990 to 2002. The Iraq Survey Group interviewed regime officials who claimed Hussein retained weapon scientists with plans to revive Iraq's WMD programme post-inspections, including nuclear weapons. The perception that Saddam supported terrorists and the WMD theory intensified the focus on Iraq.

After the Gulf War, Saddam suppressed uprisings in the north and south. By 1991, Iraq's possession of WMD was widely seen as a threat to the region, exacerbated by Saddam's earlier use of chemical weapons in Halabja in 1988. Reports indicated a significant loss of life among Kurds and Shiites.

In 2000, human rights groups documented the indoctrination of children into fighting forces, including the Ashbal Saddam. The UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) were tasked with overseeing the monitoring and verification system. Richard Butler, UNSCOM Executive Chairman since 1997, alleged Iraq possessed biological weapons and missiles capable of harming Tel Aviv. Kofi Annan mediated between the Council and Iraq, but the U.S. showed little appreciation. Questions arose about UNSCOM's work and integrity (Rai & Chomsky, 2002). In 1998, UNSCOM's final report declared Iraq non-compliant. The standoff continued, leading to Operation Desert Fox in 1998 and subsequent air strikes. The U.S. sacrificed UNSCOM to protect sanctions. Resolution 1154 emphasised consequences for non-compliance.

In 2002, Iraq allowed inspection teams back, leading to Resolution 1441 in November, providing a last opportunity for disarmament. The U.S. asserted a need for "serious consequences" if Iraq didn't comply. Inspections resumed, but the U.S. administration, perceiving an inadequate containment policy post-9/11, aimed for regime change (Powell, 2003). The inability to secure a second UN resolution in 2003 marked a turning point. The Bush administration's impatience led to an unauthorised attack on Iraq, despite lacking international support and clear evidence of imminent threats or WMDs. The subsequent events underscored the complexities and controversies surrounding the Iraq War.

Post-Gulf War, Iraq's non-compliance with UN resolutions regarding weapons of mass destruction and human rights issues led the U.S. to view Saddam Hussein's regime as a threat. The 9/11 terrorist attacks prompted a policy shift towards Iraq, resulting in coercive diplomacy. In 2003, Operation Iraqi Freedom was launched, aiming to end Saddam Hussein's rule, eliminate Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, expel terrorists, provide humanitarian aid, and secure Iraq's oil fields (Bassil, 2012). However, the controversial invasion, marked by the inability to prove the existence of Iraqi WMDs, raised questions about the true motives behind the U.S. engagement.

The primary motive, upon scrutiny, appeared to be the preservation of U.S. dominance over Gulf oil. Concerns over dependence on Middle Eastern oil, especially from Saudi Arabia, and the shifting balance of power led to Iraq's invasion. Additionally, the U.S. aimed to counter the threat posed by Iraq to its freedom of action in the Gulf and its ally Israel.

Despite facing criticism and challenges to its credibility, the U.S. invasion aimed at reasserting its hegemony in the Middle East, showcasing military prowess, and subduing a defiant Iraq. While the invasion showcased U.S. military might, it failed to establish stability in Iraq, witnessing sectarian disputes and violence post-Saddam Hussein. Nonetheless, the U.S. demonstrated that its military capabilities remained unchallenged, and no other global actor possessed the capacity or willingness to contest U.S. preponderance.

In conclusion, the U.S. foreign policy strategies towards Iraq have facilitated the assertion of U.S. hegemonic status in the Middle East and the world order. Despite achieving preeminence, the U.S. invasion in 2003 resulted in a decline in the credibility of U.S. leadership and the perceived benevolence of its hegemony.

ISRAEL-PALESTINE

Since the seventh century, following the establishment of Islam, the Middle East has been a primary arena for conflicts between Arab and Muslim communities. Initially localized, these conflicts evolved into more widespread and international dimensions, particularly with the active involvement of Western and European powers since the 19th century. Understanding the current situation requires consideration of over a millennium of historical context and the past two centuries of political and military interference by European powers, and more recently, the United States and its allies in the region.

The Arab-Israeli conflict emerged in the region long before the United Nations and other international bodies recognized the state of Israel. In the era of global interconnectedness, conflicts in any part of the world have repercussions elsewhere. Given its multifaceted nature, the Middle East problem has implications for numerous countries in the region and beyond. From 1977 to 2000, Israeli perceptions of Arabs shifted from viewing them as a single, unified entity opposed to Israel to a more nuanced perspective distinguishing between different Arab nations (Reiter, 2009). However, after 2000, there was a return to the idea of a unified Muslim coalition aiming to destroy Israel. Negative stereotyping of Palestinians also increased, with a growing perception of them as violent and dishonest. The period after 2000 saw a resurgence of old perceptions of victimhood within Israeli society, intensified by the second intifada. The majority of Israeli Jews attributed the eruption of violence to the Palestinians and perceived them as primarily responsible for the strained relations. The feeling of victimization was accentuated by repeated suicide bombings, leading to a pervasive sense of victimhood among Israeli Jews.

In June 2007, marking 40 years under Israeli occupation, Palestinians faced significant

challenges, including the denial of democratic rights, human rights abuses, economic restrictions, and displacement. Efforts towards a two-state settlement in 1988 faced opposition from the Israeli government and received support from the U.S., aligning with a historical pattern of backing Israeli positions (Azoulay & Ophir, 2012). Hamas, considered a terrorist organization by Israel and the U.S., has played a prominent role in Palestinian politics. While expressing an uncompromising stance towards Israel, Hamas has at times indicated a willingness to negotiate a prolonged truce based on 1967 borders. Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter conveyed Hamas's readiness to accept Israel's right to exist as a neighbor, urging direct negotiations between Israel and Hamas for sustainable peace. It's crucial to note that views on these complex issues vary, and the information provided here presents a broad overview of historical events and perspectives.

The Israel-Palestine dynamics have held considerable importance in America's Middle East policy since the United Nations' 1947 partition plan that led to the establishment of Israel. The United States has maintained a steadfast alliance with Israel from its inception, being the first country to accord Israel de facto recognition upon its declaration of independence in 1948 (Reich, 2014). Over the years, this alliance has encompassed military and financial aid, trade agreements, and economic and scientific collaborations. During the Cold War, the U.S. strategically aligned with Israel to counter Soviet influence in the Middle East, utilizing diplomatic, economic, and military avenues to secure Israel's support against the Soviet bloc. U.S. foreign policy towards Palestine predominantly centers on providing assistance to the Palestinian Authority (PA) to combat terrorism within PA-controlled areas and uphold civil security. The creation of the U.S. Security Coordinator (USSC) for Israel and the Palestinian Authority in 2005 exemplifies these efforts, focusing on reforming, training, and equipping PA security forces.

In accordance with the hegemonic stability theory, a benevolent hegemon contributes public goods, such as security, to maintain stability in the international system. Stability in the Middle East aligns with vital U.S. interests, particularly ensuring continuous access to the region's oil resources. Thus, acting as a benevolent hegemon, the U.S. endeavors to broker peace between Arabs and Israelis and between Israelis and Palestinians. Notable diplomatic milestones include President Jimmy Carter's role in the Camp David Accord in 1978 and the Madrid peace conference in 1990, where successful negotiations involving Israel, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinians transpired. The U.S. has consistently mediated in the prolonged Israel-Palestine conflict, even hosting the Israeli-Palestinian summit at Camp David in 2000, though a final peace settlement was not reached.

Despite these mediation efforts, the U.S.'s perceived partiality towards Israel has adversely impacted its image as a benevolent hegemon. The U.S. has refrained from implementing policies to deter Israel's nuclear capabilities and has shown leniency towards Israeli actions that violated Lebanon's sovereignty. Continuous military support to Israel, favoritism in financial aid, and maintaining Israel's military superiority over Arab neighbors have further cast doubts on the U.S.'s impartiality. Consequently, the U.S.'s credibility as an unbiased mediator has suffered.

However, Palestinians, despite recognizing the U.S.'s partiality, have not contested its role as an honest broker. This reluctance stems from a global acknowledgment that challenging the U.S.'s military prowess is impractical. Despite the tarnished credibility, the U.S. continues to wield hegemonic influence in the Middle East and globally. While the U.S.'s foreign policies and strategies towards Israel and Palestine aim to safeguard its hegemony, the benevolence associated with hegemony is becoming increasingly detached from the U.S. narrative, challenging the traditional Gramscian notion of hegemony as a relation built on consensus and ideological leadership rather than domination by force.

CONCLUSION

The primary objective of this study is to assess whether the foreign policy strategies employed by the United States in the Middle Eastern region contribute to the preservation of U.S. hegemony in the global order. The Middle East holds enduring strategic significance in U.S. policies, prompting multifaceted interests in countries such as Iran, Iraq, Israel, and Palestine. To achieve these interests, successive U.S. administrations implement diverse foreign policy strategies.

In the case of Iran, U.S. foreign policy primarily focuses on containing Iran's expanding influence and mitigating the perceived threat of nuclear weapons. Through these policies, the United States has effectively addressed its critical interests while concurrently upholding its hegemonic position. In Iraq, following the Gulf War in 1991, the U.S. was initially viewed as a benevolent hegemon contributing to international stability. However, the unilateral actions and the 2003 invasion, coupled with the failure to substantiate the existence of weapons of mass destruction, led to a decline in U.S. credibility. Despite these challenges, U.S. hegemony remains unchallenged. The United States consistently demonstrates steadfast support for Israel, revealing that its primary objective is not merely fostering peace and security in the Middle East but empowering Israel to act as a counterbalance to Arab powers in the region.

Consequently, it can be inferred that U.S. foreign policy strategies in the Middle East effectively contribute to the preservation of U.S. hegemony in the global order. Nonetheless, these strategies have repercussions on the credibility and perception of the United States as a benevolent hegemonic power.

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