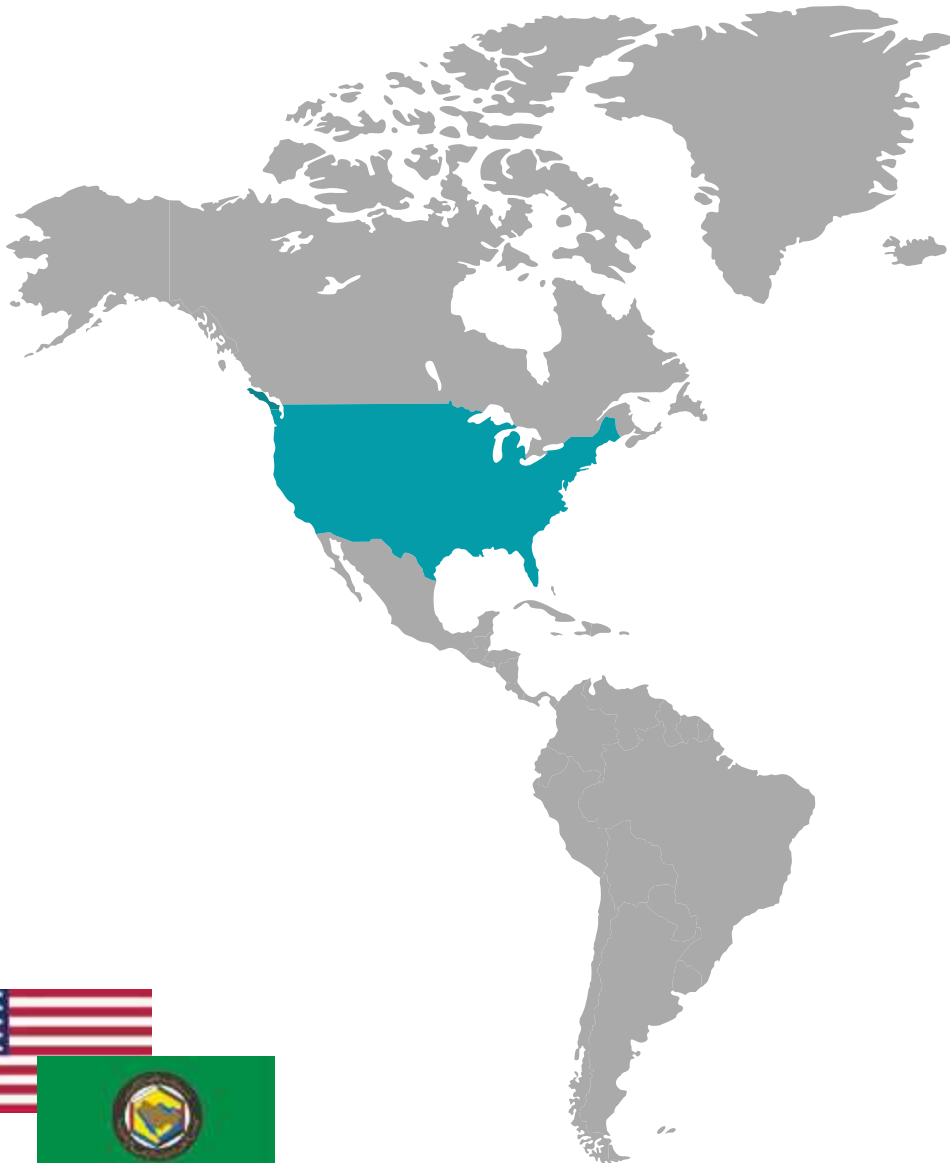




**Gulf Research Center**  
Knowledge for All

# U.S. - GCC Relations



March 2024

## 1. Key Domestic Developments

Domestic challenges and political polarization between the two major sides of the American political divide remain as stark as ever. In terms of midterm elections, voters have been split on numerous issues after suffering from high consumer prices and interest rates. There has also been deep polarization regarding crime and gun control following increased mass shootings nationwide. Democrats have pushed for stricter gun control laws and tougher regulations, such as banning assault weapons. In contrast, Republicans have fought back for their legal right to keep and bear arms under the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution. Although President Joe Biden and the Democrats promoted the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act passed in June 2022 to provide stricter gun safety laws, Republicans continue identifying mental health issues as a top cause of public shootings. Abortion was another critical topic in the midterm elections. Democrats pushed to protect the right to have an abortion, while Republicans continued to support restrictive abortion laws, eventually passing a law delegating abortion regulation to the states—a right no longer guaranteed under the US Constitution. Following the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* ruling in June 2022 overturning *Roe v. Wade*, abortion was cited as a significant contributor to voter turnout, particularly among young women, and continues to be a deeply divisive issue among American voters.

Israel's military actions in Palestine have also influenced domestic politics. President Biden continues to lose support, particularly among Arab Americans for his support for the Israeli leadership in its war effort against Gaza. Arab Americans have started an ever-growing #AbandonBiden campaign, focusing on crucial swing states during the 2020 elections, such as Minnesota, which has a large Arab/Muslim population. The dissatisfaction is not limited to Arab Americans. President Biden's approval rating has sunk to its lowest level yet, a mere 38% according to the

*Washington Post*. Increased discontent can also be witnessed across government domains. US city councils have begun to place pressure on President Biden, with about 70 US cities passing resolutions regarding the crisis in Gaza, and with most calling for a ceasefire, according to a Reuters analysis of city data. According to the report, "most of the ceasefire resolutions have passed in Democratic states like California, though at least 14 have passed in swing states like Michigan that could be decisive in Biden's re-election bid against former Republican President Donald Trump."

Other issues like ongoing discord over the southern border issues and illegal immigration continue to play a divisive role. Republicans continue to demand stricter border control and harsher immigration laws, while Democrats support easing such restrictions. The issue has grown even more controversial after the passage of an aid bill that was passed by the US Senate allocating funds for Israel and Ukraine but that did not include measures for border control as demanded by the Republicans. Opponents of the



bill argue that while the US is providing foreign aid to Israel and Ukraine, it fails to address the "most pressing issue facing [the country]," which is securing the American border with national security mandates. That the Republicans are voting against legislation providing aid to Israel on border control, is telling about how strongly the right wing views illegal immigration as a real national security threat.



### *Key US Economic and Social Data*

- GDP: \$27.97 trillion (2024)
- GDP per capita: 83.06 thousand (2024)
- Annual Growth Rate: 1.5% (2024)
- Inflation: 2.8% (2024)
- Population: 336.69 million (2024)
- Unemployment Rate: 3.8% (2024)
- Credit Rating: Standard & Poor: AA+ with stable outlook. Moody: AAA with negative outlook. Fitch: AA+ with stable outlook. DBRS: AAA with stable outlook. (2023)

## **2. US Foreign Policy**

Since October 7<sup>th</sup>, the crisis in Gaza has dominated US foreign policy. While the US has been against international calls on Israel to end its military operations, there now seems to be a gradual shift in approach as the Biden administration shows more frustration with some Israeli actions. For instance, President Biden imposed sanctions on “extremist settler violence” in the West Bank, stating that “the situation in the West Bank--in particular high levels of extremist settler violence, forced displacement of people and villages, and property destruction -- has reached intolerable levels and constitutes a serious threat to the peace, security, and stability.”

President Biden has also been increasingly critical of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s actions, stating that he thinks Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is “hurting Israel more than helping Israel,” indicating increasing tensions between the two leaders’ relationship. President Biden has been warning Israel for months that if civilian deaths in Gaza continue to rise, it will continue to lose backing from other countries. Regarding the death toll in Gaza, President Biden called it a “big mistake.” While the US president called the potential Israeli invasion of Rafah a “red

line” for him, he reiterated that the US would not cut weapons to Israel. The US also announced that it would build a floating pier to operate as a dock facility for offloading humanitarian aid to civilians in Gaza and stated that Netanyahu needs to “pay more attention to the innocent lives being lost.” The pier, which could take two months to build, would allow daily aid deliveries of approximately 2 million meals to Gaza, although the distribution of such aid is still uncertain.

The US presidential elections have sparked new debate on whether or not the US should continue providing support to Ukraine in its war with Russia. The question has been raised as to whether or not the US ought to continue providing aid to Ukraine with some arguing that we should be more concerned with domestic security issues. Presidential candidate Donald Trump went so far as to say that the US should stop supporting aid to Ukraine, as well as any NATO country that has not paid its share of 2% towards its defense. The controversial comments were seen as a green light for Russia to continue its attacks on Ukraine and any other country for that matter. It is still not certain what the future of US aid to Ukraine will be, but it was included in the same bill that has been held up by Republicans regarding aid to Israel being contingent on a solution to America’s own border control.

### *Key Foreign Policy Initiatives*

- The US announced that they will build a pier to bring aid to civilians in Gaza.
- The US signed a new security and economic agreement with Bahrain, the Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement (C-SIPA).
- The US announced the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) at the 2023 G20 Summit in India alongside Saudi Arabia and the UAE.
- The US and South Korea announced a new agreement to deter North Korea, including deploying a nuclear-armed submarine.



President Biden has faced criticism over several foreign policy initiatives. The sudden and chaotic withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, which opened the door for the Taliban to take over Kabul and seize overall political power significantly damaged US international credibility. Regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the crisis has brought forward a newfound unity in the Western alliance. Still, there are concerns that some of the steps announced by the US could lead to an increase in tensions rather than bringing the crisis to an end. This includes, for example, President Biden stating that the International Criminal Court’s arrest warrant for Russian President Putin was justified.

In the Middle East, the US welcomed the China-brokered deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran of March 2023, with US Secretary of State Blinken calling it a “positive” development. The most urgent task now for the US is to stabilize the situation in Gaza, including de-escalating tensions in the Red Sea. This entails engaging more effectively with the region and listening to their concerns, including their consistent calls to end the military operations in Gaza and warnings that unless managed immediately, the crisis will lead to even more devastating consequences.

### 3. US-GCC Fact Sheet

- US trade in goods with GCC countries. (2023, USD million):

Country	Exports	Imports	Balance
Saudi Arabia	13,873.2	15,877.0	-2,003.8
United Arab Emirates	24,857.1	6,578.6	18,278.5
Qatar	4,658.2	2,047.6	2,610.7
Oman	1,862.4	1,651.0	211.4
Bahrain	1,676.2	1,179.9	496.4
Kuwait	2,918.9	1,718.2	1,200.7

Source: US Census Bureau

### Establishment of Diplomatic Relationships

- US-GCC Diplomatic Relations: Saudi Arabia (1940 following recognition in 1931), Kuwait (1961), Bahrain (1971), United Arab Emirates (1972), Qatar (1972), and Oman (1972).

### Key Research Centers and Think Tanks

- American Enterprise Institute: <https://www.aei.org>
- Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington: <https://agsiw.org>
- Atlantic Council: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org>
- Brookings: <https://www.brookings.edu>
- Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: <https://carnegieendowment.org>
- Center for American Progress: <https://www.americanprogress.org>
- Center for Strategic and International Studies: <https://www.csis.org>
- Council on Foreign Relations: <https://www.cfr.org>
- Foreign Policy Research Institute: <https://www.fpri.org>
- Heritage Foundation: <https://www.heritage.org>
- Hudson Institute: <https://www.hudson.org>
- Middle East Institute: <https://www.mei.edu>
- Middle East Policy Council: <https://mepc.org>
- Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft: <https://quincyinst.org>
- RAND Corporation: <https://www.rand.org>



- Stimson Center: <https://www.stimson.org>
- The Century Foundation: <https://tcf.org>
- Wilson Center for International Scholars: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/>
- United States Institute of Peace: <https://www.usip.org/>
- Center for a New American Security (CNAS): <https://www.cnas.org/>
- Baker Institute for Public Policy: <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/>
- Congressional Research Service: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/>

#### *Selected Key Regional Experts*

- [Karen Young](#) (Middle East Institute)
- [Hussein Ibish](#) (Arab Gulf Institute in Washington – AGSIW)
- [David des Roches](#) (National Defense University)
- [F. Gregory Gause, III](#) (Texas A&M University)



- [Frederic Wehrey](#) (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace)
- [Anthony Cordesman](#) (Center for Strategic and International Studies – CSIS)
- [Kirsten Fontenrose](#) (The Atlantic Council)

#### **4. Key Developments in US-GCC Relations**

##### **US-GCC**

- In September 2023, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Foreign Ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council member states, and the GCC Secretary General Jasem Al-Budaiwi met in New York to strengthen consultation, coordination, and cooperation in all fields. In addition to continuing the discussion on the issues raised in the June 2023 meeting, the ministers stressed the significance of climate change and sustainability. After their meeting, they issued a joint statement calling for the completion of the demarcation of the Kuwaiti-Iraqi maritime borders “beyond marker number 162.”
- In June 2023, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Foreign Ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council member states, and the GCC Secretary General Jasem Al-Budaiwi released a joint statement following the GCC-US Ministerial Meeting in Riyadh on February 13 and 15, 2023. They discussed issues of mutual concern, such as Iran, Yemen, Israeli-Palestinian issues, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, and Ukraine. According to the Joint Statement, the Ministers affirmed their mutual determination to contribute to regional security and stability under the framework of the GCC-US Strategic Partnership. The Ministers commended the outcomes of the GCC-US working groups on integrated air and missile defense, maritime security, and Iran. They further stressed the importance of the Fourth GCC-US Trade and Investment Dialogue meeting held on March 9, 2023, also in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

- At the 2023 G20 Summit held in India, the US announced the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.
- In March 2023, the GCC announced that the member states sent a joint letter to the US condemning controversial comments made by Israel's finance minister. Furthermore, the GCC called on the US "to assume its responsibilities in responding to all measures and statements that target the Palestinian people" and "to play its role in reaching a just, comprehensive and lasting solution" to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

### US-Saudi Arabia

- In February 2024, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken made his fifth visit to the Middle East since October 7th, as he attempted to push forward a proposal by the US, Qatar, and Egypt to end the conflict and lead to the release of hostages between the two sides. The Secretary of State met with HRH Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman for continued discussions on regional coordination to achieve an enduring end to the crisis in Gaza that provides lasting peace and security for the region.
- In January 2024, HRH Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman met with US Senator Lindsey Graham at the Winter Camp in AIUla to discuss Saudi-US relations, international and regional developments, and issues of common interests. HRH also met with Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken to review ongoing efforts to reduce regional tensions, including the deterrence of Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea.
- On September 9, 2023, Saudi Arabia and the United States announced that the two countries signed an MoU on the

sidelines of the G20 conference held in New Delhi, India. The MoU established a foundation for formulating a protocol for intercontinental green transit corridors through Saudi Arabia to connect Asia with Europe by railway. According to the joint communique between the two countries, "this project aims to facilitate the transit of renewable electricity and clean hydrogen via transmission cables and pipelines as well as constructing rail linkages. It is also intended to enhance energy security, support efforts for the development of clean energy, promote digital economy through digital connectivity and transmission of data via fiber cables, and promote trade and transport of goods by rail and through ports."

- In July 2023, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met with the Crown Prince in Jeddah. The two discussed "the strategic relations between both countries and means of enhancing them across various fields" and "bilateral and regional matters."
- Antony Blinken, US Secretary of State, traveled to Saudi Arabia on June 6-8, 2023, to meet with Saudi officials, where he discussed US-Saudi strategic cooperation on regional and global issues and bilateral issues such as economic and security cooperation. The visit marked the third consecutive month a senior official from the Biden administration has paid a visit to the Kingdom following Jake Sullivan, the White House National Security Advisor, who traveled to Jeddah in May, and NSC Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Brett McGurk and Special Presidential Envoy Amos Hochstein who visited the Kingdom in April. The Secretary of State met with HRH Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to discuss shared priorities such as countering terrorism through the Global Coalition to



Defeat ISIS, achieving peace in Yemen, and deepening economic and scientific cooperation. Blinken also participated in a US-GCC Ministerial Meeting during which the US and GCC states discussed growing cooperation to promote security, stability, de-escalation, regional integration, and economic opportunities across the Middle East, particularly in finding a solution to the crisis in Sudan, ending the conflict in Yemen, and countering Iran's destabilizing behavior. Blinken also co-hosted a ministerial meeting of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS with Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister, HRH Prince Faisal bin Farhan.

### US-United Arab Emirates

- In January 2024 Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met in Abu Dhabi with UAE President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed. The two discussed the ongoing conflicts in Gaza and Sudan. They affirmed their shared vision of a more secure and prosperous region and underscored the importance of the strategic partnership between the United States and the United Arab Emirates.
- In December 2023, Vice President Kamala Harris met with President Mohammed bin Zayed of the United Arab Emirates in Dubai, UAE on the sidelines of the 28th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP28). The two officials discussed the situation in Gaza.
- Officials from the US, EU, and Great Britain visited the UAE in September 2023 due to concerns regarding shipments of goods, including computer chips, transiting the UAE to Russia. The Western officials also discussed sanctions against Russia.
- On February 28, 2023, the US and the UAE, alongside Qatar, Somalia, Türkiye, and the United Kingdom, issued a joint

statement on Somalia. It discussed Somalia's security, state-building, development, and humanitarian priorities.

- In mid-February 2023, the UAE hosted the I2U2 meeting, which included the US, India, Israel, and the UAE. The meetings focused on economic development and food security amid global climate change.
- On February 14, 2023, UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan met with Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken in Washington to discuss regional and international developments, including Palestine, the earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria, and the war in Ukraine.

### US-Qatar

- In February 2024, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with HH Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani in Doha to discuss ongoing efforts to secure the release of the hostages held by Hamas and enable an extended humanitarian pause in the conflict in Gaza.
- In January 2024, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with Qatari Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani in Washington, DC to discuss hostage negotiations between Hamas and Israel. They agreed to continue close coordination to provide increased humanitarian assistance to civilians in Gaza and to urge the protection of civilians consistent with humanitarian law.
- In September 2023, five American prisoners and five Iranian prisoners were released as part of an Iran-US prisoner swap deal brokered by Qatar. The agreement also led to the unfreezing of \$6 billion in Iranian assets held in South Korea. Following Qatar's mediating role, Qatar's Foreign Ministry suggested new

talks could be coming between Iran and the US.

- In April 2023, the US welcomed the deal between Qatar and Bahrain to resume diplomatic ties. Both countries are close US partners in the Middle East, with Bahrain hosting the US Navy's 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet.
- On February 28, 2023, the US and Qatar, alongside the UAE, Somalia, Türkiye, and the United Kingdom, issued a joint statement on Somalia. It discussed Somalia's security, state-building, development, and humanitarian priorities.

#### US-Oman

- U.S. Ambassador-at-Large to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons Cindy Dyer traveled to Muscat, Oman from January 20-23, 2024. Ambassador Dyer discussed with her Omani counterparts their endeavors to criminally investigate reports of domestic worker abuse and prosecute and convict labor traffickers, particularly those who exploit migrant workers.
- The United States and Oman held the inaugural meeting of the Subcommittee on Environmental Affairs on February 19-20, 2024, under the United States–Oman Free Trade Agreement, and the fourth meeting of the Joint Forum on Environmental Cooperation (Joint Forum) under the United States–Oman Memorandum of Understanding on Environmental Cooperation. The two countries discussed efforts to tackle the climate crisis.
- In October 2023, Oman and the US signed key agreements to bolster trade and investment.
- The US Naval Forces Central Command and US Air Forces Central (AFCENT) conducted a joint Air Operation in Maritime Surface Warfare (AOMSW)

exercise in the Gulf of Oman on 23-24 September 2023.

- In May 2023, White House Middle East coordinator Brett McGurk traveled to Oman to discuss Iran's nuclear program with Omani officials. Oman facilitated US-Iran talks as the two sides communicated indirectly through the Omani officials.

#### US-Bahrain

- In January 2024, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with Bahrain's leader, His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, in Manama. The two officials discussed the Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea and reaffirmed their shared commitment to international law and freedom of navigation through Operation Prosperity Guardian.
- In October 2023, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with Bahraini Crown Prince-Prime Minister Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa in Manama. The two discussed the crisis in Gaza and the importance of preventing the conflict from widening and maintaining stability in the region.
- As Washington continues strengthening its relations and renewing its engagement in the Gulf, the US has signed a new security and economic agreement with Bahrain in July 2023. The Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement (C-SIPA) deal aims to promote cooperation between the two countries across various fields, such as defense, security, technology, and trade, and is set as a "potential blueprint" for similar deals with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.
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- In April 2023, the US welcomed the deal between Qatar and Bahrain to resume diplomatic ties. Both countries are close US partners in the Middle East, with Qatar being home to the largest US air base in the region.
- On February 23, 2023, the US and Bahrain established a working group to operationalize unmanned systems.
- On January 15, 2023, military personnel from the US and Bahrain participated in a 10-day naval exercise. The exercise focused on maritime operations, installation defense, expeditionary operations, tactical combat, medical response, and search and rescue training.

### US-Kuwait

- In December 2023, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III met with the Kuwaiti Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, His Excellency Sheikh Ahmad Fahad Al-Ahmad Al Sabah, to convey his condolences on the passing of His Highness Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.
- In February 2023, the US approved the possible sale of military systems to Kuwait for an estimated cost of \$250 million.
- On December 11, 2022, Kuwait, the US, and Iraq completed the 2<sup>nd</sup> Joint Patrol in the Arabian Gulf to promote regional maritime security.

- In October 2022, the US State Department approved a \$3 billion deal for the National Advanced Surface-To-Air Missile System (NASAMS) and Medium Range Air Defense Systems (MRADS) to Kuwait to help the country defend itself “against regional malign actors and improve interoperability with systems operated by US forces and other Gulf countries.”

Despite initially having significant skepticism among GCC member states regarding US policy in the region, US ties with the GCC states have developed positively. The Jeddah Security and Development Summit can be seen as an example of a positive shift in US-GCC relations, with President Biden stating that the US would “remain an active, engaged partner in the Middle East” and “will not walk away and leave a vacuum to be filled by China, Russia, or Iran.” He added that the interests of the US are “closely interwoven” with the success of the Gulf region. Addressing the leaders of the GCC countries, President Biden stated that “the United States is invested in building a positive future in the region, in partnership with all of you, and...is not going anywhere.” Moreover, President Biden outlined a “new framework for the Middle East,” including economic development, military and security, and regional stability. Overall, military ties between the US and the GCC continue, as demonstrated by military sales to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE and joint military cooperation with Qatar and Bahrain.

Since the Jeddah Summit, the Biden administration has increased its engagement in the Gulf, as evidenced by high-level visits, more dialogue, and cooperation on various issues and mediation efforts. The US has also been more open to China playing a more active role in the region, specifically on the economic front. The announcements of projects and initiatives, such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor and the Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement, show continued US commitment and reassurance that Washington is



not abandoning the region, especially in the face of growing Chinese influence. The two Gulf strategic announcements by the Biden administration look more substantive than anything China offers.

The Gulf region has also been keen on playing a more decisive mediating role. This can be seen in light of the Sudan crisis as Saudi Arabia and the UAE joined the US in mediation efforts to end the conflict. Saudi Arabia has been leading the evacuation processes of its nationals and other citizens out of Sudan and hosting negotiations and peace talks between the conflicting parties. The Gulf countries also delivered substantial humanitarian aid to Türkiye and Syria following the devastating earthquakes in 2023 and assisted in Ukraine throughout the war there.

The war in Gaza, however, once again showed the region's dissatisfaction with the US' handling of the crisis. The United States remains the most consequential actor when it comes to the medium to long-term security landscape in the wider Middle East. Yet, its policies over the past decades have

been unbalanced, haphazard, and uncommitted and have threatened the long-term stability of the region. Moreover, the US has not listened to the advice of its Gulf allies throughout this period. While the US is the only external actor with a measure of influence over Israel, it has yet to use that influence effectively in ending the hostilities and promoting a more comprehensive and just political solution to the Palestinian issue. Instead of focusing on an Israel-only approach, what this would involve is a genuine engagement with all its regional allies to defuse the situation and prevent further escalation. This can best be done if there is adequate and wide-ranging engagement with the Arab world, including with the GCC states. The region now expects the US to demonstrate a real and substantive commitment to pursuing a ceasefire and two-state solution as every day this conflict remains, the threat of extremism and a widening regional conflict also increases.



## 5. Supporting Documents

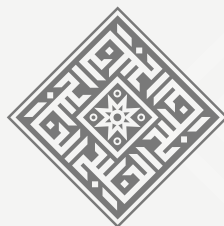
### *Araa Magazine*

- [Issue 176](#): Enhancing US-Gulf Relations and the Results of the Jeddah Security and Development Summit - August 2022.
- [Issue 167](#): The AUKUS Agreement and Its Impact on Global Alliances and the Gulf Region - October 2021.
- [Issue 159](#): The Features of Biden's Policy Towards the Middle East and the Gulf Region - February 2021.
- [Issue 153](#): US-Chinese Relations and Its Impact on the Arab Region - September 2020.
- [Issue 148](#): US-Saudi Relations Over 75 Years - April 2020.
- [Issue 132](#): The US Withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Deal: Implications and Scenarios - August 2018.

### *GRC Commentary & Analysis*

- Pressure is Adding Up, Ratings are Going Down: The US Presidential Elections in the Midst of the Gaza Crisis - [February 2024](#)
- Saudi Arabia Needs to See a New Approach from Washington - [January 2024](#)
- The US and Europe Must be More Balanced to Diffuse Middle Eastern Tensions - [October 2023](#)
- Antony Blinken's Visit and its Significance in Mending Ties with the Region - [June 2023](#)
- US-Saudi Relations: Oil & Energy - [October 2022](#)
- Jeddah Security and Development Summit Boosts US-GCC Strategic Relations - [August 2022](#)
- U.S.-GCC Changing Energy Relations - [June 2022](#)





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