



## Research Article

# From Obama to Biden: Shifting U.S. Approaches to the Iran-Israel Conflict and Implications for Regional Peace

Mohammed Kabeer Garba (Ph. D)

PhD Scholar, ECOWAS Parliament, Abuja, Nigeria



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## ABSTRACT



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This paper will explore the change in the U.S. foreign policy in the Iran-Israel conflict under the leadership of Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden and how that will impact regional peace and security. Having been influenced by ideological enmity and strategic dilemma, the Iran-Israel conflict has long been a determinant in geopolitics in the Middle East. Obama administration prioritized diplomacy as evidenced by the Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA) whereas Trump chose an adversarial approach, pulling out of the JCPOA and becoming a strong ally of Israel. The course of action taken by Biden is one of cautious involvement, that of trying to revive diplomacy without losing the friendship of Israel. This study poses the question of the effect of these policy changes on the conflict situation and the future of regional peace. Using a qualitative comparative study of official documents of U.S. policy, speeches, and expert reports, the research concludes that policy inconsistency in the United States has led to instability and has provided diplomatic opportunities. The results underscore the importance of the balanced U.S. policy, which would focus on the de-escalation, multilateralism, and sustainable peace systems in the area.

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## Introduction

The Iran-Israel war, which is rooted in the ideological opposition, the competition on the regional arena, and the geopolitical rivalries has been one of the most constant and destabilizing aspects of the Middle East politics since the 1979 Iranian Revolution (Takeyh, 2021). Iranian nuclear ambitions and the ability to support militant factions such as Hezbollah is seen as an existential threat by Israel, and Israel sees Iran as a Western-allied oppressor of Palestinian rights and a destabilizing power in the region (Fulton, 2019). The U.S. foreign policy has traditionally mediated and contributed to the further escalation of this complex relationship. Since ensuring the military superiority of Israel, to containing the nuclear aspirations of Iran, American administrations have had a huge impact on the dynamics in the region (Byman, 2020). Obama administration adopted a foreign policy of multilateral diplomacy, which resulted in the agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) whereas Trump breaking the deal unilaterally and following the interests of Israel escalated the situation (Nephew, 2018). The balance of such legacies is sought by the Biden administration in terms of cautious re-engagement with Iran and reaffirmation of U.S-Israel relations that mark a re-calculation of strategic position (Maloney, 2021).

This paper explores the topic of American policy towards Iran and Israel during the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations and the potential consequences of this change to the peace and stability of the region. The key points of the discussion are to examine the consistency and inconsistency of the U.S. policy, the

effect it has had on the Iran-Israel conflicts, and the implications they have on the overall diplomatic efforts in the Middle East. The research holds importance since it helps to understand more about how the global powers influence regional competitions and determine peace opportunities. It also provides the information about the limitations and opportunities of the U.S. foreign policy formulation. Nonetheless, this area is restricted to between the years 2009-2025, and is mostly limited to official policies of the United States and the overt activities of the diplomats, without going into the depths of non-state actors or other political trends within Iran or Israel.

## Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Clarification.

The evolving American strategies on the Iran-Israel conflict between the Obama and Biden administrations must be well-informed by the international relations theory and, more specifically, the way in which states make foreign policies in times of uncertainty, strategic competition, and domestic limitations. Neoclassical realism is a strong perspective because it provides a marriage between the structural forces and the domestic politics factors in the explanation of differences in U.S. behavior among different administrations (Ripsman et al., 2009). Though structural realism lays stress on the international system of anarchy and distribution of power, neoclassical realism explains mediation by domestic institutions, leadership perceptions and pressures exerted by the interest groups in trying to explain the responses of the U.S. to Iran and Israel (Walt, 2005; Lobell et al., 2009). One example can be the international constraints that

### \*Corresponding Author:

✉ [kamilaisah@gmail.com](mailto:kamilaisah@gmail.com) (M. K. Garba)

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drove Obama to multilateral diplomacy and interaction with Iran, to the point of the JCPOA, but also his liberal internationalist view of the world (Dueck, 2015).

On the other hand, the JCPOA abdication and the aggressive staging by the Trump administration can be viewed in terms of offensive realism whereby the driving force is the national interest in the form of coercion and unilateralism (Mearsheimer, 2001). The foreign policy orientation was also certain ideological and domestic factors that contributed to the strategic thinking of Trump, such as evangelical and pro-Israel lobby groups (Gause, 2019). The way Biden handled it will be an example of strategic pragmatism and tried to re-adjust the U.S. engagement in diplomacy and deal with alliance expectations, particularly with Israel as an example of limited rationality and constraints on the decision making process (Jervis, 2017; Saunders, 2011).

Also, the constructivist theory can be used to explain identity-based discourses defining the U.S. foreign policy, especially how Iran has been represented as a rogue state and Israel as a democratic (Hopf, 2002). These normative constructions do have a large influence on the legitimacy of U.S. policy decisions and discursively constrained engagement. Collectively, these theoretical views present a holistic approach to understanding the development of the U.S. policies on the Iran-Israel conflict and what it means to the order of the region.

In order to adequately analyze the changing American policies towards the Iran-Israel crisis, it is imperative to explicate some of the major terms that underlie this debate: the foreign policy, strategic competition, the peace of the region and diplomacy. Foreign policy is the external policies and choices of a state in which it seeks to safeguard the national interests, which are usually influenced by domestic political processes and global forces (Hill, 2016; Carlsnaes, 2013). Presidential doctrines, bureaucratic institutions, and lobbying of interest groups all affect the U.S. foreign policy, which has played at least some role in influencing the relations between the U.S. and the two countries, Iran and Israel (Allison and Zelikow, 1999). Strategic rivalry, especially in the Middle East, is a long-term geopolitical rivalry between actors in the international system (states), characterized by ideological, military, and proxy conflicts, such as those in the hostile Iran-Israel relationship (Gause, 2014; Walt, 1987). This competition is enhanced with the opposing national ideologies: Iran establishes itself as a revolutionary force against the Western influence, whereas Israel aims to ensure security in the region and U.S. strategic support (Byman, 2020).

In this regard, regional peace is not only the lack of war but also stable diplomatic relations, security cooperation and conflict resolution mechanisms between regional players (Ramsbotham et al., 2016). The U.S. is a critical element in this peace calculus since its fluctuating policies may help in cultivating detente or worsening the existing tensions. Diplomacy is also a very important concept which can be defined as the peaceful administration of international relations by means of a negotiation, mediation, and multilateral interaction (Sharp, 2009). The Obama administration work on the JCPOA marked the diplomatic obligation to the nuclear nonproliferation and the use of sanctions and the rejection of multilateral agreements by the Trump administration was an indicator of a shift in the conventional approach to the diplomacy (Nephew, 2018; Maloney, 2021). By defining these terms, it is possible to analyze the role of the U.S. actions in the Iran-Israel conflict more accurately and the overall aim to establish sustainable peace in the Middle East.

#### Literature Review

Since the second half of the 20th century, the United States has been instrumental in determining the strategic calculus of Iran as well as Israel. Traditionally, the U.S. role in Iran-Israel relationship has been characterized by the uncompromising

stance towards Israel and ambivalent relations with Iran, especially since the 1979 Iranian Revolution that marked an acute worsening of the U.S-Iran relationship (Takeyh, 2021; Parsi, 2017). The U.S. tried to keep a balance into the region during the Cold War by connecting very well with Iran as well as Israel until when the Islamic Republic became a revolutionary foe (Litwak, 2000). Conversely, Israel has been the pillar of the U.S. policy in the Middle East strengthened by strategic, military, and economic cooperation (Ben-Meir, 2019).

Obama administration has introduced a change towards multilateralism and international engagement, the most notable of which was the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 which aimed to restrict the Iranian nuclear capabilities in return of removal of sanctions (Nephew, 2018; Maloney, 2021). This strategy focused on the dialogue and cooperation with the international partners, although it led to tension with Israel that strongly protested the deal (Freilich, 2016). The Trump administration, in its turn, took a unilateralist and confrontational approach, pulling out of the JCPOA and adopting a policy of maximum pressure, restoring sanctions and isolating Iran (Katzman, 2020). This policy did not only undo the diplomatic achievements of Obama but also polarized the region and encouraged the extremists in Iran.

The foreign policy of the Biden administration assumes a more sensible tone and consists of a mixture of diplomacy and prudence. Though it has indicated its interest in rejoining the JCPOA structure, it has equally pursued the reassurance of Israel by the U.S. and by a highly calibrated, and sluggish, negotiation policy (Riedel, 2021; Eiran and Cohen, 2023). All in all, the foreign policy course of Obama to Biden shows a continuum of approaches, i.e. the use of multilateralism and diplomacy to unilateral pressure and balancing strategies with important consequences to the Iran-Israel conflict and the future of regional peace.

#### Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA), Abraham Accords, and Regional Diplomacy.

The Iran Nuclear Deal (officially referred to as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)) and the Abraham Accords are two significant but ideologically opposite diplomatic landmarks in the American policy towards the Middle East. The JCPOA was signed in 2015 during the Obama administration and was intended to restrain the nuclear potentials of Iran with close inspections and partial relief of sanctions (Nephew, 2018; Maloney, 2021). The deal was seen as a historic breakthrough in multilateral relations and non-proliferation that contributed to the stabilization of the region by blocking the prospects of Iranian nuclear breakout (Einhorn, 2015). Nevertheless, opponents, especially Israel and the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states believed that the JCPOA overlooked the Iranian ballistic missile system and destabilizing influence in the region through its proxies such as Hezbollah and the Houthis (Eisenstadt and Knights, 2016; Sadjadpour, 2016). Not only did the unilateral withdrawal of the Trump administration in 2018 contribute to an aggravation of tensions with Iran, but also had a negative impact on the U.S. diplomatic credibility with allies (Katzman, 2020; Parsi, 2017).

Conversely, an agreement on Abraham Accords in 2020 by the Trump administration was a game changer as it undertook to normalize Israel with major Arab states like the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain (Miller & Sokolsky, 2020). The accords were welcomed by supporters as a practical realignment of Middle Eastern relationships over common interests regarding Iran, encouraging economic advancement and decreasing the Arab-Israeli diplomatic stalemate (Ross, 2020). The critics, however, argue that the accords circumvented the Israeli-Palestinian issue and strengthened authoritarian identifications, thus posing a threat to the stability in the long-term (Lynch, 2021). Whereas the

JCPOA favored a strategy of conflict de-escalation by engaging Iran, the Abraham Accords was a containment strategy that sought to isolate Tehran through regional normalization with Israel.

These diplomatic practices have produced a huge body of scholarly and policy discussion concerning the best way towards sustainable peace in the Middle East. The effort by the Biden administration to operate in both frameworks, to renew the JCPOA, at the same time being careful not to offend the Abraham Accords, has rekindled the debate on the balance between deterrence, diplomacy, and alliance politics in determining regional outcomes.

Regarding regional diplomacy, the Abraham Accords can be viewed as an instrumental change in the foreign policy of the Arab world that is motivated by a mutual interest in security and other national interests and not ideological unity. Such a strategy is consistent with general global diplomatic patterns that bring economic development and geostrategic practicality above inconclusive political conflicts (Guzansky & Marshall, 2021). Furthermore, U.S. mediation of the Accords has strengthened the role of Washington, as a major diplomatic mediator, criticized as putting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the backburner and empowering authoritarian governments (Lynch, 2021; Yacoubian, 2022). Nevertheless, the Accords have also led to multi-track diplomacy and have made other Arab states think about the concept of normalization on the basis of mutual benefit and convergence of security.

Regarding attacking Iran, the Abraham Accords have led to the formation of an informal strategic partnership between Israel and Sunni Arab states, thus changing the balance of power in the Gulf and Eastern Mediterranean (Eisenstadt & Knights, 2020). This shifting orientation has consequences about the wider region-level diplomacy, since it can either prevent this further Iranian aggression or encourage a more active Iranian and proxies reactions. Consequently, the inapplicability of the Abraham Accords is more than a bilateral normalization, but acts as a pilot project in redefined regional diplomacy on a post-conflict, multipolar Middle-East.

### Gaps in the Literature

Although the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East is a subject with strong scholarly analysis, there are still enormous gaps in comparison of how various administrations of the United States, especially those of Obama to Biden, have managed to influence the Iran-Israel conflict and determine the stability of the region. The current body of literature is inclined to discuss either previous administrations or particular policy tools, e.g. how Obama pursued the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or Trump used the strategy of the so-called maximum pressure, but it does not systematically examine how policies differ or remain consistent despite changes in the presidency (Maloney, 2021; Nephew, 2018). Likewise, although the Abraham Accords have created a lot of buzz as a cause of a shift in the Arab-Israeli relations, limited research can be found that explores an analysis of the strategic value of the accord regarding the changing relationships between the U.S. and Iran (Lynch, 2021; Miller and Sokolsky, 2020). The lack of consideration of the interaction between domestic political pressures, international constraints, and the perceptions of the leadership is another weak point of the existing scholarship that tends to reduce the U.S. foreign policy into realist and idealist (Dueck, 2015; Saunders, 2011).

In addition, the literature overlooks many indirect impacts of policy changes in the United States on regional diplomacy, including how Gulf Arab countries change their foreign policies due to the presence or absence of Washington in Iran and Israel (Gause, 2014). The scholarly discourse as well tends to leave out the effects of these policy options on peacebuilding in the long run, concentrating on how these actions lead to security in the

short term. This paper fills these gaps by providing a multi-administration analysis on U.S. policies towards Iran-Israel conflict by incorporating both the diplomatic and strategic aspects. It tries to add a more subtle twist into the topic of how the changing U.S. doctrines impact the dynamics in the region and the future of sustainable peace.

### Methodology

This research will be implemented via qualitative research design to study the dynamic nature of the U.S. foreign policy in relation to the Iran-Israel war between 2009 and 2025. By the nature of it, a qualitative methodology will help in capturing the interpretive, ideological, and strategic undertones inherent in the discourse of foreign policy and state action, particularly across a multi-administration period.

The analysis uses the comparative foreign policy analysis (CFPA) to compare and contrast the strategies of the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations in system. CFPA will allow a detailed analysis of the variety of outcomes of policy in different global situations under the influence of various leadership styles, institutional backgrounds, and world circumstances when they have to act under similar strategic constraints. This method can be specifically effective in determining continuity and change trends in American interactions with Iran and Israel.

The study is based on mixed research using both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consist of official government documents of the U.S., speeches by the presidents, statements of the National Security Strategy and press briefs, United Nations resolutions and declassified diplomatic cables. These records give first-hand information about the strategic approaches and popular reasons of significant policy changes. Peer-reviewed academic articles, think tank reports (e.g., Brookings, RAND, Carnegie Endowment, Washington Institute), scholarly books, media analyses, and expert interviews, however, make up secondary sources, which put primary data into context and interpretations and contexts of theories and history.

The analysis is done on the years between 2009 and 2025 that constitute three presidential administrations in the United States. This period permits a longitudinal evaluation of the policy patterns, reaction to regional events including the Arab Spring, the JCPOA, the Abraham Accords, and the presence of proxy wars in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.

To analyze, the paper employs discourse analysis to analyse the language, framing, and narratives which were used by American policy makers to express their stand over Iran and Israel. This aids in the discovery of the underlying ideologies, perception of threat, and rationalization of policies. There is also a policy comparison matrix that is employed to systematically map and compare the major dimensions of policies, including diplomacy, sanctions, military cooperation and alliance-building, within the three administrations. This interdependent analytical structure enables one to gain a complete insight into the rhetoric and the content of the U.S. foreign policy on the Iran-Israel strategic rivalry.

### Major Research Findings

**Diverse Foreign Policy:** The U.S. foreign policy towards Iran and Israel under the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations differed radically, with the first one using the approach of multilateral diplomacy (e.g., JCPOA), the second adopting unilateralism and maximum pressure, and the third one trying a pragmatic recalibration of both due to their legacies.

**U.S. Credibility and Diplomatic Inconsistency:** The sudden break with JCPOA under Trump and further U.S. efforts to re-engage with the JCPOA under Biden undermined U.S. credibility in the region, as well as multilateral diplomatic initiatives, especially nuclear talks with Iran.

Enhancement of Strategic Rivalries: The U.S. policies, primarily under Trump, led to tightening of the relationship between Iran and Israel by emboldening Israel via normalizations (Abraham Accords) and making Iran more dependent on proxy wars in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq.

Rise of Regional Realignment: The Abraham Accords marked a significant geopolitical change as Arab countries such as the UAE and Bahrain put their strategic and economic interests over ideological animosity with Israel and joined an informal alliance against Iran with U.S. support.

Minor Change to Israel-Palestinian conflict: U.S. policies despite reforming the regional politics never approached the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with each of the two policies neglected Palestinian interests, which is a major obstacle to comprehensive peace in the region.

Interactions between Foreign Policy and Domestic Politics: U.S. Middle East policies were very much driven by domestic political factors such as lobbying by pro-Israel lobbies, political concerns, and ideological movement within the regimes, which strengthened the instability in foreign policy.

### Summary and conclusions and recommendations.

#### Conclusion

The American foreign policy development between Obama and Biden shows the pivotal role of the American involvement in the formation of Iran-Israel conflict and the Middle East diplomacy. Although every administration pursued its own unique strategic policy, either through diplomacy or use of coercion, the absence of continuity weakened the credibility of the U.S and the usefulness of its conflict mediation position. In spite of the fact that the Abraham Accords offered a new dimension of collaboration between the Israel and the Arab countries, the inability to solve the Iranian security threats and the Palestinian question makes the overall peace structure weak. The U.S. needs a more uniform, balanced and inclusive foreign policy in the area in order to create lasting peace in the region.

#### Summary of Key Insights

- i. The American foreign policy has been swinging between participation and conflict that has influenced the relations between Iran and Israel as well as the relations in the region.
- ii. Strategic inconsistencies have made U.S. inefficiency as a credible mediator.
- iii. The Abraham Accords are a change in the relations between the Arab and Israel but they have not addressed deeper structural issues.
- iv. The regional conduct of Iran is partly because of the perceived U.S.-Israeli encirclements.
- v. The domestic political calculations in the U.S. still influence the results of foreign policy.
- vi. Peace in the region is hard to be achieved in the long term without trying to solve both the aspects of security as well as justice especially in the case of Palestine.

#### Recommendations

- i. The U.S. Policymakers ought to restore diplomatic credibility by employing multilateralism: The U.S ought to consistently collaborate with international allies in a bid to restore its credibility in its diplomatic agreements, particularly the nuclear program in Iran.
- ii. Incorporate Palestinian concerns into regional peace structures: Adjust the Abraham Accords or other discussions to have systems of Palestinian representation and rights so as to have inclusive peace.
- iii. The Middle East needs to develop Intra-Regional dialogue systems: To limit the dependency on the outside powers, the Middle East must encourage the direct communication

between Iran, Israel, and Arab states so that the conflict can be solved internally.

- iv. Strategic alliance with De-escalation efforts: As regional actors seek partnerships, they ought to invest in confidence-building efforts with their competitors to prevent military engagements.
- v. On behalf of peace in the region, International Institutions like UN and EU are supposed to assist:
- vi. Promote multilateral peace processes, such as track II diplomacy and arms control systems, which extend beyond elite-level negotiations of states.
- vii. There should be comparative longitudinal policy analysis by academicians and policy researchers: Further theorizing of the long-term impacts of policy change across U.S. regimes on Middle East peace and conflict processes.

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