



The Spiral of Militarization in US Policy Towards the Middle East

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The National Security Strategy of the United States (US) released in October 2022 acknowledges that “We have too often defaulted to military-centric policies underpinned by an unrealistic faith in force.”¹ Nevertheless, the Biden Administration’s response to the Gaza-Israel conflict that broke out on October 7, 2023 has relied on an “unrealistic faith” in both the ability of the Israeli military to eliminate Hamas and the capacity of US military deployments in the Red Sea, Iraq, and the Eastern Mediterranean to prevent regional escalation.² While US policymakers since the late 1970s have sought to frame the US approach towards the Arab-Israeli conflict and Palestinian self-determination in terms of a peace process based on negotiations, the US has consistently backed and funded Israel’s militarized approach towards the Palestinians, denying them rights and sovereignty.

This current US approach to the Middle East, focused on the coercive power of military force rather than negotiations and diplomacy, is a product of the spiral of militarization in US policy towards the region since the late Cold War. While the United States, since its founding, has frequently deployed force to advance its foreign policy interests, over the past four decades, US policy towards the Middle East has witnessed continual but shifting forms of militarization. From the 1980 Carter Doctrine and the “dual containment” of Iraq and Iran in the 1990s through the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the US has responded to perceived threats with an increased reliance on the projection of diverse forms of coercion and military force. Even when US policymakers, such as Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump, have sought to reduce the US military footprint in the region, the US ended up intensifying its reliance on the use of force through different means, such as targeted assassinations, drone warfare, and expanded military aid and security guarantees to allies.

How can we explain this ongoing spiral of militarization?

The current phase of US militarism is rooted in the experience of the Cold War and its ongoing legacies. Across the second half of the twentieth century, the US developed a strategy of militarized containment of the Soviet Union at a global scale. With the end of the Cold War, policymakers and scholars debated rival possible grand strategies for the United States, ranging from isolationism to primacy.³ Around the same time, in the mid-1990s, many US college students enrolled in an “Introduction to International Relations” class were taught a debate about the future of post-Cold War geopolitics framed with reference to the rival visions of Francis Fukuyama’s liberal “The End of History?,” Samuel Huntington’s realist “The Clash of Civilizations?,” and Robert Kaplan’s neo-Malthusian

1 Joseph Biden, National Security Strategy (Washington DC: The White House, 2022), 42.

2 Michael “Erik” Kurilla, “Two Visions for The Future of the Central Region,” Statement to The Senate Armed Services Committee, March 7, 2024. Available at: <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/24.pdf>.

3 See Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, “Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy,” *International Security* 21, no. 3 (1996): 5–53.



“The Coming Anarchy.”⁴ These studies, however, proved poor guides to the patterns of conflict of the post-Cold War era. Those students would have been much better prepared if they had instead read the introduction to Cynthia Enloe’s *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War* (1993).⁵ The militarism of the US and other states, Enloe argues, was unlikely to diminish as militarism had become embedded in the US and societies worldwide through ideas, practices, and institutions defined by militarized masculinity. Enloe explains how “the Cold War depended on a deeply militarized understanding of identity and security.”⁶ The collapse of the Soviet Union as a strategic threat to the US would do little to change these understandings and shift the US towards a less militarized grand strategy. Enloe correctly foresaw, “It may prove harder to uproot those ideas than it was to dismantle a wall.”⁷ Enloe shows how militarism can become deeply rooted in all aspects of culture and everyday lives. She notes that “Militarization relies on distinct notions about masculinity” and “ideas about enemies.”⁸

This memo builds from Enloe’s insights and outlines factors that have sustained the spiral of militarization in US policy with a focus on the Middle East. These include 1) exaggerated threat perception, 2) declining US political leverage abroad, 3) the workings of a policy and political economy “iron triangle,” 4) US interests and policy defined by militarized masculinity, and 5) technological change and the ongoing blurring of distinctions between peace and war. While these factors suggest seemingly overwhelming pressures for militarization, they also help define the multiple areas where the struggle against militarization needs to be fought and demilitarized alternative approaches fostered.

1) Exaggerated Threat Perception

In pursuit of a global strategy of “liberal hegemony” that emerged at the end of the Cold War, US militarism has been sustained by the notion that US security requires the maintenance of US global dominance to ward off potential threats and shape global governance institutions.⁹ Moreover, as Thomas Wright observes, “the Middle East is an exception in the U.S.-led liberal order” as “there was nothing liberal about the U.S.-led regional order in the Middle East.”¹⁰ Rejecting military strategies based on containment and deterrence as well as those reliant primarily on diplomacy and negotiations, this understanding of US security has led to an exaggerated perception of threats in the Middle East in efforts to impose a hegemonic order in the region. The results were most starkly exhibited in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the US, which led to the Bush Doctrine calling on the US to go to war against “enemies” even before their ability to threaten the US

4 Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest*, no. 16 (1989): 3–18; Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22–49; Robert D. Kaplan, “The Coming Anarchy,” *Atlantic Monthly* (February 1994): 44–76.

5 Cynthia Enloe, *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

6 Enloe, *The Morning After*, 3.

7 Enloe, *The Morning After*, 5.

8 Enloe, *The Morning After*, 3, 7.

9 Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); G. John Ikenberry, “The end of liberal international order?,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 1, (2018): 7–23.

10 Thomas Wright, *All Measures Short of War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 99.



had fully materialized.¹¹ This approach led to prolonged, violent occupations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Moreover, the launch of the global war on terror worked to define a wide range of presumed security challenges the US faced as “terrorism,” racializing and dehumanizing the sources of threats the US faced. As Monica Duffy Toft and Sidita Kushi explain in their study of the expanding militarization in US foreign policy since its founding, it has been the “dehumanization of the ‘other’ that ultimately led to a habit of leading with armed force.”¹²

As we can see in the context of the ongoing conflict in Gaza, dehumanization suggests an ‘irrational’ enemy cannot be deterred or negotiated with, which erases the normative constraints on the use of force. At the same time, US policymakers have increasingly securitized both domestic and foreign policy areas, including immigration, border management, internet governance, and space. Most recently, the US securitization of China’s economic ties to the Middle East may be replacing past notions of “energy security” and terrorist threats, driving expanding US security commitments to Saudi Arabia and other states in the Gulf.¹³

2) Declining US Political Leverage Abroad

In the early post-Cold War era, the US had considerable political leverage across much of the Middle East. While focusing its military deployments towards the containment of Iraq and Iran and expanding arms transfers to its allies across the region, the US sought to use its political leverage to guide Arab states towards closer relations with Israel. But as the vision for a US-led regional order declined in the late 1990s, the US responded by deploying a massive amount of military power into the region and sustaining prolonged occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, along with maintaining permanent military installations across the region. The experience of the US invasion of Iraq and the global war on terror helped produce the notion, as Rosa Brooks observes, that “Americans increasingly treat the military as an all-purpose tool for fixing anything that happens to be broken.”¹⁴ One consequence of this trend was that as US political leverage in the Middle East decreased from the early days of the post-Cold War era, the US has increasingly relied on military and coercive tools to regain political leverage and reshape regional geopolitics. Even when, for example, President Barack Obama sought to reduce the US military footprint in the Middle East and revitalize US tools for diplomacy, the result was that the US became more reliant on a different set of coercive tools, such as private military and security contractors, drone strikes, the use of special forces, and ever-larger packages of arms sales and military aid as well as security guarantees to regional allies.¹⁵

US policy towards Israel in the context of the 2023-24 Gaza war, its struggle to broker a normalization agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia, and even the effort to gain

11 George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington DC: The White House, 2002).

12 Monica Duffy Toft and Sidita Kushi, *Dying by the Sword: The Militarization of US Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 7.

13 Waleed Hazbun, “China the United States and the Reconfiguration of Middle East Geopolitics: New Possibilities for Conflict and Order,” in Demir, Firat, and Van Jackson (eds.), *The Global South in an Era of Great Power Competition* (Security in Context Report 24-01, 2024), 16–22.

14 Rosa Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 20.

15 Andrew Bacevich, “An Education in Statecraft,” *The Nation*, Jan. 2, 2017, p. 30.



Turkish approval of NATO expansion in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine exemplify the diminishing US political leverage and its consequences. The US over-reliance on coercive military force, arms sales, and military aid has restrained it from using the withholding of such deployments, sales, or aid as effective tools for negotiations. Meanwhile, since the late 2000s, many US allies in the Middle East have expressed increasingly divergent interests from the US, while seeking increased strategic autonomy. For example, Israel opposed the 2014 Iran nuclear deal and US calls for a settlement freeze, Gulf Arab states suppressed democratic movements during the Arab uprisings and have sought economic ties with China in the face of US objections, and Turkey moved away from close ties with Israel then began working more closely with Russia. As a result, the US has offered expanded security guarantees and weapons sales to align US partners closer to US policy goals. Meanwhile, growing popular anger across the Arab world towards the US backing of Israel's destruction of Gaza and its rejection of a two-state solution has led regional states to prioritize regime survival, leading to increased domestic repression. When the US and its allies tolerate this repression, or worse, support it, they only increase the risk of another wave of popular Arab protests and uprisings.¹⁶

3) The Policy and Political Economy “Iron Triangle”

The extent of the militarization of US Middle East policy is reflected in the influence of the US military's Central Command (CENTCOM), which directs US military operations and activities across the Middle East. Military affairs analyst Micah Zenko notes that CENTCOM is “the most powerful and substantial US government actor in the Middle East.”¹⁷ Even when diplomatic ties are strained or disrupted between the US and regional states, CENTCOM and ongoing military-to-military ties often sustain consistency in US policy. This dynamic is reinforced by the economic linkages between arms sales, private contractors, and logistics firms that form an “iron triangle” with the Pentagon and the US Congress.¹⁸ This triangle is extended transnationally by the circulation of former military officers as formal and informal advisors to governments and militaries in the region as well as within private firms and think tanks with close ties to policymakers. Moreover, the militarized nature of US Middle East policy is encouraged by the interest regional states have in US security commitments, which also help protect their regimes from domestic threats. These states often work to increase US security commitments by maintaining political pressure and influence in Washington through direct lobbying, support for think tanks, and indirect economic leverage through arms purchases.

4) US Policy Defined by Militarized Masculinity

As Enloe and other feminist IR scholars have shown, as US foreign policy becomes more militarized, it also becomes more gendered masculine.¹⁹ Coercive military tools are understood in terms of a gendered, hierarchical relationship with other tools, such as

16 Marc Lynch, “The Coming Arab Backlash,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 22, 2024. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/coming-arab-backlash>.

17 Micah Zenko, “US Military Policy in the Middle East: An Appraisal,” Chatham House Research Paper, October 2018, p. 6. Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-10-18-us-military-policy-middle-east-zenko.pdf>.

18 Gordon Adams, *The Politics of Defense Contracting: The Iron Triangle* (Piscataway NJ: Transaction, 1981).



diplomacy and negotiations. As Enloe notes in reference to United Nations and other diplomatic efforts to address US fears about an Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction program during the run-up to the US invasion of Iraq, “Bush administration repeatedly cast doubt on the credibility of mere diplomats. The powerful strand of American political culture that values manly shows of overt strength over allegedly ‘softer’ or more feminized demonstrations of patient, careful negotiations had become even more dominant in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001.”²⁰ This gendering of the foreign policy discourse and practice represents a major structural barrier to de-militarization and feeds the spiral of militarization across multiple aspects of US policymaking. A culture of militarized masculinity is deeply embedded in much of US popular culture and everyday life (from sporting events to school curriculums). At the same time, while much official and popular discourse in the US about the Middle East feminizes the peoples and states of the region, drawing on Orientalist tropes and justifying external savior narratives, Arab and Israeli societies have also highly militarized cultures of masculinity that help generate diverse forms of organized and unorganized violence.

5) The Blurring of Peace and War

Lastly, we might ask: Might the realization of peace in the future serve as the catalyst for demilitarization? As noted above, the end of the Cold War failed to restrain militarism but led to new forms and expressions of militarism. Worse, today the blurring of peace and war makes the unwinding of the spiral of militarization more of a challenge. This blurring has many dimensions. The post 9/11 global war on terror, in effect, led to what geographer Derek Gregory refers to as “the everywhere war” lacking temporal or spatial limits and defining “the pervasive matrix within which social life is constituted.”²¹ US society has also witnessed the militarization of domestic society and everyday life. Military technology and practices have come to shape not only domestic policing practices but also the fields of transportation, logistics, and education. In other words, everyday life in “peacetime” is imbued with militarism. The US global war on terror and more recently the US approach to geopolitical rivalry (with China, Iran, Russia, and others) have led to the development of diverse tools and policies short of kinetic military action such that current policies are securitized in the expectation of future wars. For example, US policymakers fear that economic ties between China and US Arab allies in the Gulf will lead to Chinese pressure to limit US access, basing, and overflight capacities in the region.²² The expansion of cyberwar, the use of AI technologies in weapons systems and disinformation campaigns, and the expectation that future wars will see the deployment of distributed and super-fast lethal tools have given rise to several ongoing hybrid, grey, and shadow wars that already define domestic and foreign non-military policies such that the US is constantly in

19 Laura Sjoberg and J. Ann Tickner, “Feminist Perspectives on International Relations,” in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth Simmons, (eds.) *The Handbook of International Relations* (London: Sage 2013), 170–194.

20 Cynthia Enloe, *Globalization & Militarism* (Lanham: Roman & Littlefield, 2007), 50.

21 Derek Gregory, “The everywhere war,” *The Geographical Journal* 177, no. 3 (2011): 239.

22 See Hazbun, “China the United States and the Reconfiguration of Middle East Geopolitics,” 20.



competition with a diverse set of rivals, some viewed as existential threats.²³ As a result, historian Mary Dudziak has observed “wartime has become the only time we have.”²⁴

The Challenge of Demilitarization

Created in 2010, the Costs of War Project at Brown University has sought to document and calculate the direct and indirect human, economic, and environmental costs of the US wars launched since 9/11.²⁵ The numbers are staggering. While many in the US public viewed the costs of the Iraq war as contributing to and/or worsening the “Great Recession” from 2007 to 2009, these mounting costs have failed to limit US militarism. Instead, they have led to forms of warfare that are less visible to the US public and result in fewer direct American casualties.²⁶

The challenge of demilitarization requires broad, diverse efforts to unwind the multiple forces driving the spiral of militarization outlined here. The US needs to rethink its grand strategy, vision for global order, and understanding of US interests in ways that contribute to threat deflation and alternative security arrangements. With more modest goals, the US might be able to navigate global politics with reduced leverage by accepting that it can satisfy its security needs through negotiations and diplomacy with less resort to military force and coercive tools.

Decreasing the demand for military tools and capacities might help deflate the iron triangle connecting US policymaking to the economics of arms manufacturing and arms sales abroad. Seeing US interests served by patient, careful negotiations, might erode the culture of militarized masculinity that drives much of US policy. Lastly, realizing that the US and the world face pressing, global threats like climate change and economic inequality might redirect efforts to innovate with technology and AI, and collectively work to confront the forces that threaten humanity, thereby remaking a less militarized global society.

23 National Intelligence Council, “Global Trends: The Future of the Battlefield,” (April 2021), Available at: <https://www.dni.gov/files/images/globalTrends/GT2040/NIC-2021-02493--Future-of-the-Battlefield--Un sourced--14May21.pdf>.

24 Cited in Brooks, *How Everything Became War*, 352.

25 Costs of War Project, “Summary of Findings,” (Brown University, 2024). Available at: <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/summary>.

26 Steve Niva, “Disappearing Violence: JSOC and the Pentagon's new cartography of networked warfare,” *Security Dialogue* 44, no. 3 (2013): 185–202.



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Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive
Security in the Middle East



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PRISME

Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive
Security in the Middle East

PRISME Initiative

PRISME aims to redefine the conception of “security” in the Middle East and North Africa, as the starting point for strategic relations between MENA countries and their European and North American partners. It does so in pursuit of effective, collaborative approaches to ensuring a more peaceful and stable future. To this end, PRISME sponsors dialogue and debate between foreign policy professionals across diverse backgrounds and perspectives. These include individuals in governments, thinktanks and academic institutions located in the MENA region, Europe and North America, with a specific focus on engaging young and emerging thinkers and practitioners. Its goal is to re-define security in the Middle East, broadening the definitions of what it looks like, for whom, how it can be achieved, and how outside actors can contribute to it.

SALAM Project

SALAM (Sustaining Alternative Links beyond Arms and the Military) proposes to rethink the centrality of the arms trade in international relations with and among Middle East & North Africa (MENA) countries.

It fosters and amplifies ideas from a network of scholars and practitioners working in and with the Middle East. Issues they will address include the arms trade’s advertised role in cementing bilateral and multilateral ties between North America, Europe and the MENA region; the opportunity costs of over- or sole reliance on weaponry as security; and alternative modes of engagement that might redefine a shared strategic agenda.