



US POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THIRD QUARTER 2025 REPORT CARD

A Quarterly Assessment of the Trump Administration's Regional Foreign Policy

Brian Katulis

October 2025

I. Executive Summary

- President Donald Trump continued to rewrite the playbook of US foreign policy this summer and early fall, with mixed results on the global stage but producing some important openings for progress in the Middle East due to a negotiated Gaza cease-fire and hostage-release deal.
- Centerstage for the moment is the plan to end the two-year war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, articulated in a set of ideas and principles the Trump team put forward in late September and reinforced in early October with the president's trip to Israel and Egypt to mark the start of the cease-fire. Trump 2.0's policies in the Middle East have been unconventional and unpredictable, but one key element has been ongoing and extensive consultations with close US partners, particularly Israel but also important regional states like Qatar, Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The way the administration navigated tensions between two close US partners, Israel and Qatar, in the aftermath of the former's September 9 strike on Hamas targets in the latter's territory, offers an interesting test case of this new style of American statecraft.
- Trump 2.0's inclination toward an "America First" unilateralism can be seen in how it has managed most key relationships across the world, particularly in Europe and the Western Hemisphere. But that tendency has seemingly been more muted and less present in its approach to the Middle East, a region that is higher on the priority list for Trump's national security agenda than it was during the opening months of the preceding US administration.
- On the two big-ticket Middle East policy items — the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Iran — much remains unresolved and inconclusive. In two key countries in transition, Syria and Lebanon, the second Trump administration has in some ways gone



Report Card: The Trump Admin.'s Middle East Policy

Senior Fellow, Brian Katulis

	Q1	Q2	Q3
Israel and Palestine	F	F	B
Iran	B	INC	D
Enhancing the Stability of the State System	C	C	C
Counterterrorism	D	D	C
Managing Relations with Key Partners	C-	C	C-

against the grain of its own instincts and offered crucial support even as it continued to cut funding and resources to critical US national security institutions and foreign assistance programs. But it remains to be seen whether Trump 2.0 has either sufficient and relevant deployed capacity or the diplomatic dexterity to sustainably resolve any of these long-standing strategic challenges.

- Regarding Iran, the Trump team has doubled down on “maximum pressure” on the regime after the June 12-day war, which did considerable damage to that country’s nuclear and military infrastructure. But the pathway to a lasting diplomatic resolution remains elusive.
- One of the weakest links in the second Trump administration’s approach to the Middle East remains Yemen, where the Houthis continue to threaten US partners like Israel and challenge freedom of navigation in the Red Sea.
- More broadly, Trump’s overall foreign policy approach in the three-month period from August to mid-October 2025 was characterized by a frenetic set of actions on immigration, targeted military strikes against alleged drug gangs in the

Western Hemisphere, and an unconventional global economic policy that remains largely unresolved and has not yet benefited most ordinary Americans. Trump delivered a provocative and bombastic [speech](#) at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in September as his administration continued to [cut funding](#) for and create distance between America and the global organization.

- Trump’s failed efforts to end Russia’s war against Ukraine remains one of the biggest shortcomings in the early months of his second term, and America’s strategic direction on China is still unclear and ill-defined at the nine-month mark. The center of gravity in much of US policy and political debates rests closer to home, particularly with the [government shutdown](#) that began on October 1. Nevertheless, the Middle East will likely remain a priority for the Trump administration’s second term in large part because Trump sees it as a region of the world where he had a noteworthy achievement in his first term with the 2020 Abraham Accords between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco. He seeks opportunities to build on that success as well as boost mutually beneficial economic ties with key countries in the region.

- This report is part of a regular, quarterly assessment that grades the incumbent administration on five key policy areas that are central to long-standing US national security interests in the Middle East. Major long-standing interests for America in this part of the world include energy and economic security, strong relations with a network of US partners, regional stability, freedom of navigation, prevention of war, counterterrorism, containment of Iran, and non-proliferation.
- This report assesses the US government's actions over the past three months — August to mid-October 2025. It represents the independent analytical judgments of one analyst at the Middle East Institute based on his policy research and research support from key colleagues, as well as independent feedback from colleagues in a peer review process.
- **Note on grading:** The grades offered in this report card are a reflection of one analyst's assessment. The grades are based on outputs and impact, rather than inputs — meaning that the letter grade for each category indicates this analyst's assessment of how much US policy has advanced America's strategic interests and values on this particular issue over the course of this three-month period.
- The first two quarterly reports on the second Trump administration's approach to the Middle East along with analysis on its overall foreign policy approach can be found here:
 - Quarter 1, May 8, 2025: [US Policy in the Middle East: A Report Card: A Quarterly Assessment of the Trump Administration's Regional Foreign Policy](#)
 - Quarter 2, July 31, 2025: [US Policy in the Middle East: A Report Card: A Quarterly Assessment of the Trump Administration's Regional Foreign Policy](#)
- These reports are part of an ongoing effort to systematically analyze and evaluate US foreign policy

in the Middle East. It began in 2023 and includes regular biweekly assessments, *Making Sense of US Foreign Policy*, as well as four reports produced during President Joe Biden's administration:

- An initial assessment of President Biden's approach to the Middle East from 2021 to 2023, released in September 2023: [Treading Cautiously on Shifting Sands: An Assessment of Biden's Middle East Policy Approach, 2021-2023](#)
- An assessment of Biden's Middle East approach six months into the Gaza war, released in April 2024: [The Biden Administration's Middle East Policy at a Time of War: An Assessment of US Policy Six Months Into the Israel-Hamas War](#)
- An analysis of how the Biden administration handled the war from April to July 2024, released in July 2024: [The Limits of Biden's Middle East Diplomacy: An Assessment of US Policy, April-July 2024](#)
- An annual review and assessment of the Biden administration's handling of the Middle East wars in October 2024: [America's Strategic Drift in the Middle East: An Assessment of the Biden Administration's Policy One Year into the Israel-Hamas War](#)

II. Trump 2.0's Overall Foreign Policy Approach

A mixed foreign policy record as the focus remains closer to home and the Western Hemisphere. US

President Donald Trump continued to operate according to an unconventional and unpredictable foreign policy template during the late summer and early fall of 2025. His administration achieved some positive outcomes by facilitating declarations to resolve several long-standing conflicts around the world — most notably the [August agreement](#) between Armenia and Azerbaijan. But Trump continued to fall short in his aspirations of achieving lasting progress on major foreign policy agenda items, including ending Russia's war against

Ukraine and producing meaningful economic gains for America in his tariff and trade policies, particularly with China. Trump 2.0 also set its focus on targeted military operations against alleged drug trafficking from the Western Hemisphere into the United States. However, the administration spent most of its time and energy during this period preoccupied with domestic concerns: Trump [stepped up](#) harsh immigration measures and [pushed to deploy](#) National Guard troops to more US cities while a major political dispute in Congress shut down most US government operations on October 1.

Five key issues in August-October 2025 shaping Trump 2.0's overall foreign policy:

- 1. Russia's war against Ukraine.** Trump [met](#) with Russia's President Vladimir Putin at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Anchorage, Alaska, on August 15 amid great fanfare, but the meeting did not produce a clear pathway to ending the conflict. Russia continues to [attack](#) Ukraine and [probe](#) the air and cyber defenses of other European countries. The Trump administration has hinted at a shift toward more support for Ukraine without making a fundamental strategic change in policy. This approach included steps like imposing tariffs on India in retaliation for purchasing Russian oil and indications that the administration might support Ukraine's efforts to target Russian territory. In mid-October, Trump met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and demanded that Ukraine make territorial concessions to Russia. The idea of a second Trump-Putin summit this fall had [yet to materialize](#) at the time this report was published. Russia continued to [violate the airspace](#) and test the air defense capabilities of several North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries.
- 2. Aggressive immigration campaign.** Between late summer and early fall, much of America's attention was focused on domestic issues, including questions about the durability of constitutional checks and balances as well as democratic norms. Trump 2.0 continued to press the limits of executive authority on several fronts, particularly in seeking to implement its harsh

immigration campaign to arrest and deport alleged illegal immigrants without due process. Trump deployed Federal forces and National Guard troops on the streets of several US cities, including Washington, DC, ostensibly to fight crime as well as illegal immigration. The additional resources earmarked for immigration enforcement, provided by the July 2025 budget and tax law, continue to drive much of the administration's activities in the second term.

- 3. Targeted military operations against alleged drug traffickers.** The Trump administration conducted a series of [targeted military strikes](#) on the high seas in different parts of the Western Hemisphere characterized as an effort to reduce the flow of illegal drugs into the country. The strikes sparked a debate in the United States about the legality of these actions, and US military [deployments](#) in the region raised concerns that the United States might be embarking on a "regime change" policy approach to Venezuela.
- 4. Economic relations with China and protectionist trade policies in temporary limbo.** The tariffs introduced by the Trump administration in the first nine months of his administration are facing legal challenges in the courts, and the US Supreme Court is [set to rule](#) on whether they represent constitutional or legal overreach. US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer [expressed confidence](#) that the administration would win these cases but added that it would look at the possibility of the expanded use of Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act to enact tariffs if the courts rule against the president's measures. On the global economic front, the Trump team hinted it was edging toward a new deal with China, and Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping are [scheduled](#) to meet in late October on the sidelines of a regional summit in South Korea. US-China relations experienced turbulence in early October with [Beijing's policy moves](#) to tighten export controls on critical minerals in order to exert leverage over global supply chains.



Photo above: President Trump poses with the signed agreement at a world leaders' summit on ending the Gaza war on October 13, 2025, in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt. [Photo by Suzanne Plunkett - Pool/Getty Images](#).

China organized summits in late August and early September with dozens of countries and hosted leaders at its largest-ever military parade.

5. Pursuing and achieving “quick win” diplomatic agreements. In his [speech](#) at UNGA, Trump touted seven different conflicts he claimed to have resolved around the world, though some observers [question](#) the level of actual American involvement in several of them along with the depth and likely durability of these deals. During the period covered by the report, perhaps the most noteworthy agreement outside of the Middle East came on August 8, when Trump facilitated the initialing of a [17-point framework](#) peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan at the White House. Trump also secured individual deals surrounding economics, energy, and technology with each country.

What to watch for in the coming months. The Trump administration and US politics more generally will continue to focus closer to home, particularly as the prolonged government shutdown takes a toll. The US Supreme Court is poised to hand down rulings that

will have an impact on the president’s efforts to test the limits of executive authority in several areas, and the administration will seek to press forward with its harsh immigration and protectionist global economic policies. Key moments may come in Trump’s [meeting](#) with China’s leader in late October and a [planned visit](#) to Washington by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in November. Significant issues regarding the Middle East — particularly the efforts to end the Israel-Hamas war and lingering questions about Iran — will likely stay close to the top in a crowded Trump 2.0 foreign policy agenda.

III. Trump 2.0’s Middle East Approach

Israel and Palestine

- **Overall Grade for the Quarter: B**
- The grade for US policy improved this quarter from an F to a B as the Trump administration stepped up its diplomatic efforts to end the war between Israel and Hamas, resulting in an October cease-fire and



Photo above: Gaza buildings destroyed by Israel during the war with Hamas, October 7, 2025. Photo by Kobi Wolf/Bloomberg via Getty Images.

hostage and prisoner release deal, the first phase of a broader 20-point proposal. The Trump administration closely consulted with key regional partners in the runup to the October 13 summit in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, where the deal was signed.

- **What is missing in US policy.** US policy continues to underperform in large part because of the unrelenting human costs of the Gaza conflict, the lack of a robust policy component on the Palestinian front, and no meaningful measures to support Palestinian self-governance and autonomy. The commitments from other countries to longer-term elements of the 20-point plan remain vague.
- **America's core interests.** When it comes to the Middle East, of strategic importance for the United States is to advance a lasting and just peace within a two-state solution framework, facilitate wider regional integration, and enhance the security of close regional allies such as Israel, Jordan, Egypt, and partner countries in the Gulf.

Key events, August-October 2025: Cease-fire and renewed hope for a long-term diplomatic resolution as the brutal Gaza war continued and famine spread.

1. **Cease-fire and hostage-release deal.** Israel pledged to end its military campaign in Gaza in early October and began to pull back troops to defined lines. The cease-fire remained fragile through mid-October, however, as clashes continued between elements of Hamas and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), and [questions arose](#) about [the viability](#) of implementing longer-term elements of the plan, including [the notion](#) that Hamas would disarm and would not have a role in the governance of Gaza.
2. **Ongoing Israeli military operations and expanded occupation of Gaza.** Israel's Gaza military campaign had restarted in March and continued through most of this reporting period. Israeli forces launched air and ground assaults in July on Deir al-Balah, a key staging area for humanitarian aid to Palestinians. The Israeli

government's plan to take control of Gaza City was approved by the cabinet on August 8, with 60,000 reservists called up to support the operation. The Gaza City offensive proceeded apace even as Hamas reviewed the latest proposed cease-fire plan.

3. Worsening human security conditions in Gaza.

Several international sources cited the growing hunger problem among Palestinians in the Gaza Strip during this reporting period, including the [World Food Program](#), the [International Rescue Committee](#), and the [International Crisis Group](#). A [United Nations panel](#) reported that Gaza had reached Level 5 famine in August 2025, though some disputed this assessment. Israeli military operations led to the additional displacement of tens of thousands of Palestinians.

4. Ongoing violence in the West Bank and tensions in Jerusalem. The central focus remained on the Gaza war, but worrisome trends in the West Bank and Jerusalem indicated a problem for overall stability in the Palestinian territories and Israel. More than 1,000 Palestinians [have been killed](#) in the West Bank since October 7, 2023. Talk among some right-wing members of the Israeli government about annexation of the West Bank prompted pushback from the UAE and other Arab states as well a declaration of a “red line” from Trump, opposing the idea of annexation.

5. International diplomatic moves to support a two-state solution. Saudi Arabia and France co-chaired the [UN Conference on the Two-State Solution](#) on July 28-30, 2025, in an effort to rally support for Palestinian statehood. In September, UNGA [endorsed](#) the New York Declaration, which came out of the Saudi-Franco conference, and several countries, including the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Portugal, and France, [recognized](#) a Palestinian state. This symbolic recognition had little practical impact and was rejected and criticized by Israel and the United States.

Key US policy moves, August-October 2025:

1. Introducing the 20-point Gaza cease-fire plan.

Trump visited the Middle East on October 13 to mark the Gaza cease-fire. This plan was the culmination of US efforts throughout much of September, including a [20-point plan](#) introduced during a White House briefing with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on September 29. The plan consists of an international Board of Peace, chaired by President Trump, and joined by figures such as Tony Blair. The plan reflects the administration's ongoing efforts to construct a pathway to end the war in Gaza in a way that would be acceptable to both Israel and other regional states. On the sidelines of UNGA, President Trump met with key Arab and Muslim leaders to preview the principles and ideas central to this plan. The efforts overcame months of difficult Israeli-Hamas talks through the summer and early fall, complicated by Israel's September 9 military strike against Hamas leaders in Doha.

2. Opposing diplomatic recognitions of Palestinian statehood.

The United States rejected a UN resolution on a two-state solution jointly spearheaded by Saudi Arabia and France. Additionally, the American delegation voted against the adoption of the New York Declaration at UNGA 2025.

3. Isolating Palestinian leaders and people.

The Trump administration [revoked](#) visas for members of the Palestinian Authority delegation ahead of UNGA, forcing Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to speak via videoconference rather than in person. The Trump administration also revoked visas for all Palestinian passport holders, including those who were planning to come to America to receive medical treatment or study.

4. Provisioning more military aid to Israel while calling on Israel to stop combat operations in Gaza.

In the early fall, the Trump administration proposed an additional \$6 billion of aid to

Israel at a time when other countries, including European allies, were restricting or cutting such aid to Israel because of its Gaza military operations. At the same time, the Trump administration publicly called on Israel to end its military campaign in Gaza and sought to advance the 20-point plan that ultimately resulted in the current cease-fire.

- 5. Deploying US military forces to support the Gaza cease-fire.** In an important step, the Trump administration announced it would [send](#) up to 200 troops already based in the Middle East with US Central Command (CENTCOM) to help monitor the Gaza cease-fire. These forces would establish a civil-military Joint Control Center to coordinate with a possible multinational taskforce.

What to watch for in the coming months. The main question is whether the cease-fire and hostage-release deal can produce a clear pathway to a lasting end to the conflict. The current Israeli government faces many internal divisions about the way forward, as do the different Palestinian factions. Most Arab states have aligned behind a consensus in favor of a two-state solution, something currently opposed by Israel. It remains unclear whether key Arab states will deliver on proposals that they provide financial assistance and security forces to support post-war Gaza's recovery.

Iran

- **Overall Grade for the Quarter: D**
- The grade for US policy on Iran was revised from an "Incomplete" in the second quarter to a D this quarter because the Trump administration began to clarify its approach by doubling down on the maximum pressure tactics of economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation.
- **What is missing in US policy.** The status of Iran's nuclear program, its support for terrorism, and its destabilizing regional

activities remain largely unresolved — and there are few signs of any apparent US [diplomatic initiative](#) backed by security measures to address these issues.

- **America's core interests.** When it comes to the Iran file, Washington's overriding concerns are to prevent the country from obtaining a nuclear weapon and to deter its destabilizing actions in the region and world.

Key events, August-October 2025: Snapback sanctions imposed as Iran seeks to buy time.

- 1. Snapback sanctions.** Germany, France, and the United Kingdom (the so-called E3) [reimposed](#) snapback sanctions that were removed under the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. Iran threatened to cut off cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), but the regime's strategic direction remains unclear, with unpredictable regional consequences.
- 2. Iran's mixed moves on its nuclear program.** Iran enacted a new law [suspending](#) the country's cooperation with the IAEA back in July 2025. On September 7, Tehran and the IAEA [signed a new deal](#) in Cairo to continue cooperation over Iran's nuclear program. IAEA inspections of Iranian nuclear sites were reported to have [resumed](#) on September 26, despite efforts by Moscow and Beijing to delay the E3 snapback provisions.
- 3. Iran's participation in Qatar summit in mid-September.** Iran took part in an emergency [Arab-Islamic Summit](#) held on September 14 in Doha to show support for Qatar following the September 9 Israeli strikes on Hamas members in the Qatari capital.
- 4. Iran doubling down on relations with China and Russia.** Tehran continued to push against growing Western pressure to isolate it over its nuclear program. After having participated in high-level trilateral talks with China and Russia in July 2025, Iran sought Chinese and Russian



Photo above: Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian speaks during the 25th Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Tianjin, China, September 1, 2025. [Photo by Ding Haitao/Xinhua via Getty Images.](#)

diplomatic backing and economic/political support from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in September 2025, during the 25th SCO Summit. In addition, Iran and Russia signed a [\\$25 billion](#) deal to build four nuclear power plants in Iran in September, and China continued to help Iran circumvent sanctions.

Key US policy moves, August-October 2025:

- 1. Stepping up the “maximum pressure” campaign and targeted sanctions.** Throughout the summer and fall, the United States [designated and sanctioned](#) multiple entities and individuals for trading in Iranian oil, engaging in the political oppression of the Iranian people, and carrying out financial transactions and military sales prohibited by sanctions on the Iranian regime. Trump 2.0 also [publicly supported](#) the E3 snapback provisions.
- 2. Deporting Iranians.** As part of President Trump's immigration policy, the administration and Iran

[reached an agreement](#) for the US to deport hundreds of convicted Iranian criminals and Iranians who had entered the country illegally.

What to watch for in the coming months. The overall strategic direction of US policy on Iran has yet to be clarified. The [12-day war between Israel and Iran](#) in June resulted in extensive damage to the regime's nuclear infrastructure and conventional military capabilities. But Iran retains capabilities to cause regional and global instability, and it continues to offer support to key partners like the Houthis in Yemen. It will be worth monitoring Trump 2.0's discussions with China for insights into whether the US will take bigger steps to impose economic costs on Iran because of the unresolved questions with its nuclear program. It also remains to be seen whether Iranian partners attempt to destabilize or prolong existing conflicts in places like Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria.



Photo above: Syria's interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa (L) visits the polling station where members of Syrian local committees have been casting votes to select an interim parliament, October 5, 2025. [Photo by Louia Beshara/AFP via Getty Images](#).

Enhancing the Stability of the State System

- **Overall Grade for the Quarter: C**
- The overall grade for US government efforts to bolster the Middle East's state system remained unchanged due to uneven outcomes across the region, with initiatives to support transitions in Syria and Lebanon outperforming US policy in Yemen and Iraq.
- **What is missing in US policy.** US foreign policy efforts are hampered by the lack of a more comprehensive approach that involves fully staffed teams working on complicated questions related to governance, anti-corruption, and economic reform necessary for success in places like Syria and Lebanon. The heavy reliance on senior special envoys who mostly work without much input from America's national security institutions limits the full potential of US policy to advance stability in the region.
- **America's core interests.** The United States seeks a more secure regional state system, including governments capable of addressing pressing security threats and maintaining law and order, to reduce the burden on the US military presence in the Middle East.

Syria Component Grade: B-

Key events, August-October 2025:

1. **Syria's first post-war elections.** The Syrian people were given a limited voice in shaping their government through [indirect elections](#) held on October 5 to choose some members of the first parliament seated since the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024.
2. **Ongoing sectarian tensions and power clashes.** Syria witnessed [some clashes](#) between Kurdish militias and central government forces in the northern part of the country this fall, after an earlier summertime [flare-up of violence](#) involving

Druze and Arab communities was quelled. Sectarian divisions and violence represent significant obstacles for the fledgling Syrian government as different factions compete for power.

- 3. Turkey-Syria military cooperation.** The two countries signed a [memorandum of understanding](#) in August 2025, whereby Turkey agreed to provide weapons systems and logistical tools to Syria's armed forces. Ankara also pledged to continue supporting Syria's political unity and territorial integrity with additional training and technical assistance.
- 4. Syrian president's address on the global stage.** Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa addressed UNGA in September 2025 and [pledged](#) that Syria would rebuild itself, create institutions, and establish new laws guaranteeing the rights of its people, while acknowledging the restoration of relations with regional and global partners. Sharaa also discussed the threats Israel posed to regional stability through continued strikes on Syrian territory.

Key US policy moves on Syria:

- 1. Continuing to offer sanctions relief.** The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) [officially removed](#) the Syrian Sanctions Regulations from the Code of Federal Regulations on August 25, 2025. This came after the Trump administration [revoked](#) the Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) designation of al-Nusra Front, also known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), this past summer. But the efforts to repeal the 2019 Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act remained [mired in Congress](#), hampering the new Syrian government's efforts to advance the country's economic recovery.
- 2. Endeavoring to broker a security agreement between Syria and Israel.** The Trump administration also attempted to work out a deal between Israel and Syria to reduce tensions between the two countries with mixed results.

Lebanon Component Grade: B

Key events, August-October 2025:

- 1. Lebanon's pledge to disarm Hizballah.** Lebanon's cabinet tasked the army to come up with a plan for disarming Hizballah by the end of 2025.
- 2. Continued violence and instability in southern Lebanon.** IDF airstrikes and [drone strikes](#) against Hizballah [operatives](#) and [assets](#) continued in southern Lebanon despite the cease-fire.

Key moves on US policy on Lebanon:

- 1. Funding Lebanon and its military.** The Trump administration sent \$230 million in the early fall to Lebanon to help strengthen its military after the country pledged to move forward with disarming Hizballah. This important show of support came on the eve of the US government shutdown and despite the fact that the Trump administration has been cutting multiple international aid and foreign military support programs — demonstrating that Trump 2.0 places a priority on Lebanon and supporting its transition. At the same time, Washington could do more to press the Lebanese government on measures to fight corruption, enhance governance, and respond to popular concerns about the continued presence and role of Hizballah.

Yemen Component Grade: F

Key events, August-October 2025:

- 1. Ongoing strikes between the Houthis and Israel.** The Houthis in Yemen continued to target Israel, and Israel launched a number of strikes against the group, including a late August attack that [killed](#) the prime minister of the rebel-led government and other senior officials in Sanaa, the Yemeni capital. On October 16, the [Houthis confirmed](#) their military's chief of staff, Major General Mohammed al-Ghomari, was killed alongside his son and "some of his [unnamed] companions" in a strike.

2. Continued Houthi attacks on maritime routes.

The Houthis claimed responsibility for several attacks in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, including a [missile strike](#) on the Dutch-flagged cargo ship *Minervagracht* in the Gulf of Aden on September 29, 2025.

3. A deteriorating human security situation.

On September 15, the UN [issued](#) a humanitarian warning of a “surge of violence and hunger” in Yemen that threatens the starvation of millions and destabilization of the wider region. The warning highlighted the risk to aid workers in the country, with [reports](#) that a number of UN personnel had recently been detained by the Houthis. Some were subsequently released, but [more than 50 others](#) reportedly remain in Houthi custody.

Key US policy moves on Yemen:

1. **Continuing sanctions and pressure on the Houthis.** On September 11, OFAC [announced](#) new sanctions targeting individuals and entities associated with the Houthi’s illicit revenue and weapons procurement networks.
2. **Holding to the cease-fire, with no new major security or military operations.** Following the US military campaign Operation Rough Rider from March 15 to May 6 targeting Houthi military personnel and capabilities, which ended in an Omani-brokered [cease-fire](#), no progress in this area has been made. Security conditions in Yemen and in key strategic locations in the Red Sea remain tenuous.

Iraq Component Grade: D

Key events, August-October 2025:

1. **Preparations for national elections.** Iraqi voters head to the polls on November 11 to elect a 329-seat parliament, and these elections have attracted a wide and diverse field of candidates, including 37 alliances, 38 parties, and nearly 80 candidates running as independents.

Key US policy moves on Iraq:

1. **Withdrawing US military forces.** The US military [drawdown](#) in Iraq [began](#) on October 1, 2025, following an agreement with the Iraqi government in 2024. The Pentagon [cited](#) success in the US mission — together with coalition partners in the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve ([CJTF-OIR](#)) — to counter the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq as the justification for the move. Of the fewer than 2,000 US personnel that will remain in Iraq — reduced from the 2,500 stationed in the country at the start of 2025 — a majority will be [shifted](#) to Iraq’s Kurdistan region to focus on countering ISIS remnants across the border in Syria. Some 250-350 US military advisors and security personnel [will remain](#) at the Ain al-Asad Air Base.

What to watch for in the coming months. These four countries — Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen — remain a key arena for competition among regional and global forces. A successful transition and consolidation of power in Syria and Lebanon would benefit US security overall, and Trump 2.0 has moved pragmatically to offer direct support and marshal assistance from others in the region. The outcome of the elections in Iraq in November may signal the direction the country will take. Yemen remains the weakest link and one of the thorniest human security challenges in the region outside of Gaza and the West Bank. Yet despite Yemen being located at a key strategic lynchpin for global shipping, the Trump administration has largely adopted a “hands off” approach toward the country.

Counterterrorism

- **Overall Grade for the Quarter: C**
- The grade improved slightly from the previous quarter as the Trump administration stepped up operations against terrorist networks in areas of Syria and maintained a troop presence — albeit modified — in parts of Iraq and Syria to address persistent terrorism threats.
- **What is missing in US policy.** The absence of an overarching strategy to strengthen state capacity and the ongoing cutting of US resources and capabilities may impede US counterterrorism efforts in the long run.

- **America's core interests.** The United States has an interest in degrading and eliminating the capabilities of terrorist networks that pose a threat to US security and the stability of its partners.

Key events, August-October 2025: A persistent threat of terrorism in some areas.

1. Persistent though diminished terrorist threats.

Compared to the situation a decade ago, the overall picture in the broader Middle East on the counterterrorism front is much improved, but residual threats remain chronic and persistent. This is particularly true in parts of Syria, where ISIS is still a security challenge. In addition, groups like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula never stopped issuing threats against the United States.

Key US policy moves, August-October 2025:

1. Conducting military operations against leaders of terrorist networks.

US forces continued to carry out operations during this reporting period against key senior ISIS leaders, including a [raid](#) that killed Dhiya' Zawba Muslih al-Hardani and his two ISIS-affiliated sons and a strike that [killed](#) a senior ISIS member and financier responsible for attacks in Syria and Iraq in August. On September 19, CENTCOM [conducted a raid](#) in Syria that killed senior ISIS member Omar Abdul Qader, who reportedly "posed a direct threat to the US homeland."

2. Seeking to address the ISIS detainee issue. On September 26, the US military [urged](#) countries to repatriate their citizens during a UN conference on camps and places of detention in northeast Syria. Admiral Brad Cooper announced CENTCOM will establish a special Joint Repatriation Cell in northeastern Syria and underscored how "repatriating vulnerable populations before they are radicalized is not just compassion — it's a decisive blow against ISIS's ability to regenerate."

What to watch for in the coming months. Security trends in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon will shape the relative favorability of the environments in which terrorist networks operate. In turn, the fragility of the Israel-Hamas cease-fire in Gaza as well as worrisome

trends in the West Bank and Jerusalem could become additional flashpoints on the counterterrorism front for the United States.

Managing Relations with Key Partners

- **Overall Grade for the Quarter: C**

- The Trump administration's approach with key US Middle East partners remained relatively stable and steady compared with its approach toward countries in Europe and parts of Asia, like India. "Steady" does not mean President Trump did not surprise Middle Eastern governments with unpredictable zigzags; yet Washington continued to provide essential military and security support this summer and early fall to a wide range of partners in the region, from Israel to Qatar, even during very tense moments.
- **What is missing in US policy.** The United States did not and in some cases could not restrain the destabilizing actions of some of its partners during this reporting period — particularly Israel.

Key events, August-October 2025: Israeli strike at targets in a Gulf state, and the region reassessing its threat perceptions.

- 1. Israel's strike against Hamas on Qatar's territory.** On September 9, Israel [targeted Hamas leaders](#) in Doha, Qatar. After reportedly receiving only a brief notice ahead of the strike, the US could not prevent Israel's decision to target an important non-NATO ally — one that hosts America's strategic al-Udeid Air Base. This attack underscored [growing concerns](#) among many US partners in the Middle East about Israel's unpredictability and the instability that could be sparked by its military strikes around the region. It also risked undermining the security [partnerships](#) and regional security integration projects that successive US administrations and CENTCOM have sought to forge for years.
- 2. Saudi-Pakistani mutual defense pact.** Saudi Arabia and Pakistan [signed a mutual defense pact](#) on September 17, the latest indication that countries in the region with close ties to the United States

are looking for ways to diversify their security relationships at a time of uncertainty.

Key US policy moves, August-October 2025:

- 1. Offering security reassurances to Qatar.** In late September, the Trump administration took steps to reassure Qatar of its security cooperation by issuing [an executive order](#) guaranteeing bilateral US defense assistance. In late September, during Trump's fourth meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu in his second term, the US president facilitated a trilateral call with Israel and Qatar, during which the Israeli leader [expressed regret](#) for the strike on Hamas in Doha. Saudi Arabia is now [reportedly seeking](#) a similar security guarantee from the United States.
- 2. Coordinating with Gulf states on Gaza, Sudan, and Libya.** In the lead up to Trump's 20-point plan on Gaza, he and his team coordinated extensively with key partners in the region. Following talks between the US and Gulf Arab states on whether the latter could lead an interim governing structure in Gaza, key US partners, including Egypt, Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, expressed support for the Trump administration's cease-fire plan so long as it provided a pathway for Palestinian statehood. Separately, the US, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt released a joint statement calling for a three-month humanitarian truce followed by a permanent cease-fire in Sudan in September. Also that same month, the US convened a meeting between senior leaders of Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE, and the UK to discuss the security situation in Libya.

What to watch for in the coming months. The Middle East appears to be a limited and qualified rare exception to Trump 2.0's penchant and inclination toward "America First" unilateralism and occasional belligerence on the global stage. In developing his 20-point plan on Gaza and working to present a different approach to achieving a cease-fire and hostage release, Trump coordinated closely with key Middle East partners and sought to bridge

substantial divides. The US administration also discussed a template for a coordinated multilateral approach that shares burdens in rebuilding Gaza and establishing credible governance. But future obstacles are likely to materialize in efforts to implement all facets of this deal — particularly given that personnel gaps resulting from the institutional cuts Trump made in his first nine months in office to the State Department and other key institutions might degrade America's ability to achieve desired outcomes.

IV. Key Analytic Judgements

- Trump leveraged his unique personality to push through a new Gaza cease-fire.** President Trump invested considerable personal time and energy, particularly after Israel's September 9 attack on Qatar, to work with leaders in the region to secure a cease-fire that produced the release of the last living Israeli hostages in exchange for Palestinian prisoners. This was achieved in large part because Trump invested much of his time and energy in this effort, as he sees the 2020 Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between Israel and several Arab states, as a key legacy of his first term that could be taken forward to achieve wider gains for peace and stability in the Middle East in the coming years. The fact that he visited the Middle East two times in the first year and invited a wide range of leaders from the region to bilateral meetings demonstrates a much deeper commitment to the Middle East compared to the first year of his first term or throughout most of the terms of the Biden and Obama administrations.
- The administration over-relies on special envoys without sufficient connectivity and support from US national security institutions, resulting in halfway measures and insufficient follow-through.** The overly personalized approach by the US president is also reflected in his reliance on a small circle of advisors who are loyal to his agenda but lack sufficient bandwidth and capacity to implement ambitious objectives, including the 20-point plan on Gaza. Special Envoys Steve Witkoff and Tom Barrack play key roles in leading files across the Middle East as well as outside of the region, and Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Marco

Rubio is central to implementing Trump's agenda. The fact that Trump has [deployed](#) Vice President JD Vance to keep the Gaza cease-fire from collapsing is another example of this top-down approach. But the absence of working-level experts on key issues like Syria, Lebanon, and Iran hinders the potential for US policy to produce lasting results.

- **Regional partnership frameworks are necessary to get big things done.** The relative absence of formal diplomatic frameworks to coordinate policies with regional partners also limits the potential reach of US policy in the Middle East. The US military plays a significant role in most vital aspects of the country's Middle East policy, but it lacks a strong civilian and diplomatic counterpart at the working level. The second Trump administration still does not have a Senate-confirmed top Middle East diplomat in the form of an Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, and many embassies in the region lack a confirmed ambassador. Trump 2.0's move to establish a joint control center to monitor the Gaza cease-fire and coordinate the role of other countries that may get involved is a step in the right direction and serves as a potential model for other diplomatic initiatives.

V. Conclusion

From late summer to early fall of 2025, the second Trump administration remained active and engaged on several fronts in the Middle East, most notably the efforts to end the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. This investment of presidential time and energy came while the Trump administration was aggressively implementing controversial policies on the domestic front and seeking to find its way on major international issues like Russia and China. The October 1 government shutdown could have negative spillover effects on America's ability to achieve its foreign policy objectives, including in the Middle East.

Brian Katulis is Senior Fellow at the Middle East Institute.

Photo on the first page: President Donald Trump, accompanied by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (L) and other leaders after signing a Gaza cease-fire agreement on October 13, 2025, in Sharm el-Sheikh. [Photo by Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images.](#)

Acknowledgements

This report represents the independent analytical judgments of one scholar, based on his policy research and feedback from colleagues and peers, with essential research support from Athena Masthoff. The author would like to thank colleagues and peers who took time to review a draft of this report and offer comments, including Hamad Alshamlan, Jeremy Brecher, Jonathan Breibart, Jason Campbell, Matthew Czekaj, Intissar Fakir, Eryn Gold, Ross Harrison, Lucy Kurtzer-Ellenbogen, Ben Lefkowitz, Yael Lempert, Charles Lister, Daniel Mishkin, Nicholas Nassar, Kenneth Pollack, Natan Sachs, Paul Salem, Susan Saxton, Alistair Taylor, Gönül Tol, Marvin G. Weinbaum, and Rebekah Wharton.

Intellectual Independence

The Middle East Institute maintains strict intellectual independence in all of its projects and publications. MEI as an organization does not adopt or advocate positions on particular issues, nor does it accept funding that seeks to influence the opinions or conclusions of its scholars. Instead, it serves as a convener and forum for discussion and debate, and it regularly publishes and presents a variety of views. All work produced or published by MEI represents solely the opinions and views of its scholars. The views in this paper are reflective only of the author's analysis and perspective and do not necessarily represent the views of MEI.