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Republican and Democratic Traditions in US Gulf Politics: Deciphering Trump-Biden Discrepancy

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Abstract

The U.S. Gulf policy during the presidencies of Donald Trump (2017-2021) and Joe Biden (2021-2025) differed significantly from each other, particularly in terms of rhetoric, but also showed relative continuity. How can this be explained? The main argument of this study is that answer of this question lays in understanding impact of traditions on U.S. policy. We argue that Trump's focus on transactional partnerships with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, economic pragmatism, and steadfast opposition to Iran exemplified the Jacksonian tradition. In contrast, Biden's rebalancing of ties with the Gulf states, emphasizing diplomacy, human rights, and revitalized multilateralism, particularly by increasing Qatar's participation in regional affairs, demonstrated the Wilsonian-democratic legacy. However, these divergent patterns are underpinned by a deeper pattern of bipartisan convergence, driven by structural imperatives such as ensuring energy security, containing Iran and guaranteeing Israel's security. Consequently, the Gulf region provides insight into the limits of partisanship and the resilience of strategic continuity in U.S. foreign policy.

Keywords: Democratic Tradition, Donald Trump, Joe Biden, US Gulf Policy, Republican Tradition.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In international relations studies, U.S. foreign policy in the Gulf area has long been a popular subject, typically examined through the prism of mainstream theoretical perspectives, such as realism and liberalism. Realist scholars such as Mastanduno (1997), Rosato and Schuessler (2011), Myers (1997) and Desch (1989) focus on power and national interest, whereas liberal thinkers such as Ikenberry (2011), Fukuyama (1999), Nye (2003), Smith (2000), and Lynch (2014) highlight democracy, institutions, and cooperation. Despite their contributions, these approaches frequently underestimate the long-standing importance of historical and ideological traditions that shape U.S. foreign policy choices across administrations. They particularly cannot satisfactorily explain why the U.S. Gulf strategy differed considerably between the administrations of Donald Trump and Joe Biden, particularly regarding discourse, but also demonstrated relative consistency. We argue that studies on tradition in IR provide a robust theoretical answer to this question.

We particularly draw on the existing studies by Mead (1999, pp. 5-29), McDougall (1997), Clarke and Ricketts (2017a), and Bouchet (2013) on traditions. These tradition-centred analysis pioneers argue that since the U.S.'s establishment, traditions based on identity, perception, and ideas have had an important and long-lasting effect on U.S. foreign policy.[1] In particular, they identify the Hamiltonian, Jeffersonian, Wilsonian, and Jacksonian as the four traditional archetypes that have a continuous influence on U.S. policy. The Hamiltonian approach, grounded in its legacy of promoting global free trade, holds that economic interests should be the primary focus of U.S. foreign policy. The Jeffersonian approach, on the other hand, stresses democratic principles and self-determination, arguing that the United States should prioritize advancing democracy and individual rights. The Wilsonian perspective is deeply rooted in moral ideals and contends that the United States should serve as a model of fairness, human rights, and humanitarianism. In contrast, the Jacksonian approach, based on populist principles and a willingness to use armed force, emphasizes sovereignty and security. Together, these traditionalist approaches offer valuable insights into the multidimensional nature of U.S. foreign policy and its historical continuity.

These four traditions, which had varying implications for U.S. foreign policy before 1945, became increasingly important throughout the post-World War II period. McDougall (1997), Mead (2017), and Clarke and Ricketts (2017a, 2017b), as well as Bouchet (2013), found that the foreign policy decisions of Republican and Democratic administrations during the Cold War were primarily shaped by the Wilsonian and Hamiltonian traditions. Supporters of the Wilsonian normative school emphasized moral leadership, while adherents of the Hamiltonian free-trade tradition promoted economic liberalism and globalization. Together, they helped to define the grand strategy of U.S. liberal hegemony. While both parties endorsed these traditions, their approaches differed. Democrats emphasized diplomacy,

[1] See studies examining US-Gulf policy through the lens of tradition (Korshenko, 2024, pp. 277–281; Walter, 2009).

multilateralism, and institutions, while Republicans prioritized security, unilateralism, and the projection of power. This enduring tension between the two parties' traditions is a crucial yet underexamined dimension of U.S. foreign policy in the Gulf. Despite the apparent ideological divide between the two parties, they have long converged on core structural imperatives, maintaining energy security, safeguarding Israel's survival, and containing Iran, while differing primarily in discourse and diplomatic style. This raises an important research question: to what extent do party traditions genuinely produce divergence in Gulf policy, and where do they reveal more profound continuities?

During his first presidential term (2017-2021), Donald Trump introduced a new phase of U.S. foreign policy that emphasised Jacksonian populism and isolationism. This marked a significant departure from Barack Obama's Jeffersonian approach, which aimed to reinforce the liberal international order. Under Trump, the ambition to lead the 'Liberal Order', a long-standing hallmark of U.S. global engagement, significantly waned. Even within the broader Republican foreign policy tradition, Trump's approach was exceptional, characterised by protectionism, nationalism, and scepticism towards international institutions. This shift in approach was evident in U.S. policy toward the Middle East and the Gulf, leading to significant departures from long-standing strategic practices. While the Biden administration's overarching strategic objectives were not fundamentally different from those of Donald Trump, it pursued these goals through a distinct set of instruments and normative orientations consistent with the Democratic foreign policy tradition. Embodying a shift towards the 'Liberal Internationalist' consensus, Biden's foreign policy emphasised diplomacy, promoting democracy, adhering to universal values, and revitalising alliance networks -collectively reshaping the nature of U.S. engagement in the Gulf region. Unlike Trump, who prioritised the Saudi Arabia–United Arab Emirates (UAE) alliance, Biden elevated relations with Qatar and other GCC countries that share similar foreign policy orientations.

As several scholars have observed (AlAlkim, 2021, pp. 378-401; Stevanovic, 2023, pp. 107-141), during its initial months, the Biden administration endeavored to recalibrate ties with long-standing Gulf partners by balancing pragmatic cooperation with renewed rhetorical emphasis on human rights and multilateral diplomacy. While Biden's recalibration toward a liberal internationalist framework introduced rhetorical and procedural distinctions from the Trump administration, these shifts did not fundamentally alter the underlying strategic imperatives of U.S. policy in the Gulf. Scholars analyzing U.S. Gulf policy under both administrations observe a persistent emphasis on constraining Iran, safeguarding Israel's security, and maintaining global energy stability (AlAlkim, 2021; Coates, 2025). For instance, according to analysis of Bunzel (2023), the Biden administration reinvigorated key elements of the Carter Doctrine, which historically positioned the Persian Gulf as a pillar of U.S. strategic engagement, particularly through its dual emphasis on deterring Iranian influence and maintaining a forward military presence to safeguard energy and security interests. The persistence of these strategic imperatives, despite the discursive shifts distinguishing successive administrations, does

not signify a radical inconsistency but rather refers to the systemic embeddedness of structural continuities in U.S. foreign policy that substantiates the central hypothesis of this study: U.S. policy in the Gulf is better conceptualized not through the lens of long-standing political contest between different traditions but as the outcome of a dynamic interaction between ideational traditions, embedded in historically constructed visions of America's global role, and the structural imperatives imposed by the regional and international strategic environment. By elucidating how these ideational and material forces co-produce policy behavior, the study aims to transcend superficial distinctions between Republican and Democratic administrations and uncover the path-dependent continuities that sustain and constrain U.S. conduct in the Gulf region.

This paper proceeds as follows. The first section delineates the fundamental tenets of the Republican and Democratic foreign policy traditions. The second examines how these traditions manifested themselves in both domestic and international politics during the Trump and Biden administrations. The third section analyzes the influence of these traditions on U.S. policy toward the Middle East and Gulf across the two periods, assessing the degree to which each administration's approach aligns with its respective tradition. Finally, the conclusion discusses the implications of the study's findings for understanding continuity and change in U.S. Gulf policy and highlights the potential problems of the consensus built upon anti-Iran and pro-Israel orientations. To structure its argument, this study adopts a qualitative comparative case study. The primary data consist of official presidential speeches, National Security Strategy documents, major policy statements, and several records of presidential visits to the Gulf region issued during the Trump (2017–2021) and Biden (2021–2025) administrations. Documents were selected based on their explicit engagement with U.S. international relations and, more specifically, with regional and Gulf policy. In addition to the empirical material, the study undertakes a systematic review of the relevant theoretical literature to conceptualize the role, place, and impact of political traditions in international relations and U.S. foreign policy. Methodologically, the analysis employs interpretive discourse analysis to examine how these political traditions are articulated, framed, and operationalized in foreign policy rhetoric of both administrations, particularly in relation to the Gulf region to identify similarities and differences between them.

2. REPUBLICAN AND DEMOCRATIC TRADITIONS IN US POLITICS: DIFFERENT TOOLS FOR "GRAND STRATEGY"

A longstanding consensus has prevailed among leaders of the Democratic and Republican traditions regarding the United States' "Grand Strategy" since the onset of the Cold War, until the Trump and Biden administrations. This strategy, rooted in historical traditions and recognized as the "liberal hegemony strategy," envisions the establishment of an international "liberal order" under U.S. leadership. This order is characterized by principles of open markets, human rights, representative government models, and the advancement of international institutions (Posen, 2013). Rather than adhering solely to the classical balance of power, this strategy underscores a vision where the USA

champions "human rights, democracy, and other core liberal values" on the global stage, rendering the distinction between U.S. domestic and foreign policy virtually indistinct (Bouchet, 2013; Clarke & Ricketts, 2017b; Mearsheimer & Walt, 2016; Posen, 2013). During the Cold War, the primary distinction between Republican and Democratic leaders who embraced this strategy lay in their chosen methods for preserving the role of the "liberal hegemon" or adhering to the "Liberal Internationalism" approach. Conservative Democrats sometimes endorsed Republican policies, while liberal Republicans within the Republican Party occasionally supported Democratic policies.

The Democratic Party tradition places diplomacy, cooperative efforts with allies, and cooperation with international organizations at the core of implementing this strategy. In contrast, the Republican tradition values these elements but advocates an approach in which the USA leverages its military power alongside its economic prowess, leading more allies to follow suit. Consequently, Republican leaders, emphasizing the need to bolster military power and increase defense expenditures, assumed the role of a "liberal hegemon" and placed greater emphasis on political-military issues during their tenures in office. In the 1990s, Republican leaders, operating under the "go-it-alone" approach, raised questions about international institutions, particularly the United Nations (UN), and alliance systems such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Busby & Monten, 2012). Notably, the unilateral invasion of Iraq in 2003 under the leadership of U.S. President George W. Bush stands as a significant example of this shift. The invasion, conducted by a "Coalition of the Willing" comprising the United Kingdom and other smaller allies, without receiving support from leading international political and military institutions, raised doubts about the USA's hegemonic role and its commitment to the Western order it had spearheaded since 1945. Subsequently, the Barack Obama administration, which succeeded the Bush administration in 2009, pursued a foreign policy aligned with the Democratic tradition. It put greater emphasis on "low politics" issues, particularly human rights and environmental concerns, reserving complex power elements as a last resort and adopting a policy of "leading from behind" through alliances and international institutions (Krauthammer, 2011).

Within its global political approach, the Democratic Party tradition assigns paramount importance to protecting the environment, upholding human rights, preventing nuclear proliferation, prioritizing economic competition, and championing democracy. These issues have been central to U.S. foreign policy, particularly in the post-Cold War era. The Democratic tradition views the global propagation of democracy and human rights as vital for U.S. security and underscores the role of institutions and alliances in realizing "Internationalism" in this context (Hamilton, 1992). Figures like Woodrow Wilson, who championed the League of Nations ideal with his 14 principles in 1919, and Bill Clinton, who prioritized "humanitarian intervention" in U.S. foreign policy after 1990, employed international institutions and organizations to advance these liberal objectives. Similarly, leaders such as Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy, and Jimmy Carter, all aligned with the Democratic tradition, stressed liberal values and the promotion of democracy in countering the primary Cold War threat,

"Soviet Communism." They frequently employed alliances and institutions for this purpose. In essence, Democratic leaders adopt "interventionist" policies similar to the Republican tradition but differ in the tools and discourses they employ to legitimize them (Brinkley, 1997; Keskin, 2007; Özkan, 2016).

This distinction between the Republican and Democratic Party traditions concerning means also extends to U.S. foreign policy regarding the Middle East. Both traditions accord the Middle East a crucial role in the USA's "Grand Strategy" due to its energy resources, its significance in the global power struggle, and its location as the home of Israel. During the Cold War, both traditions identified key regional policy priorities, including curtailing the influence of Egypt and its allies, who aligned with the Soviet Bloc under Gamal Abdel Nasser's leadership; securing Israel's security; and maintaining Western control over Gulf energy reserves. Notably, the Baghdad Pact, initiated by the USA in 1955 and joined by Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and England, aimed to limit Soviet influence in the Middle East, consistent with the principles of both the Republican and Democratic traditions. It sought to link regional defense to the Western alliance and safeguard U.S. interests in the region. However, there was no consensus between the two traditions regarding the methods and tools to uphold this regional policy.

With the end of the Cold War, the United States witnessed the Soviet Union's demise as both a threat and a rival. However, in a relatively short period, Russia began to reassert its influence, and China, riding a burgeoning economy, emerged as a potent global competitor. In a regional context, Iran assumed the role of adversary in the Middle East and the Gulf, becoming the focal point for containment and isolation strategies employed by successive U.S. administrations. In an effort to uphold its military presence in the Gulf, a region rich in energy reserves and capable of exerting substantial influence in global power competition, the United States sought to counter entities challenging its regional dominance (Hagel, 2004). Both the Democratic and Republican traditions converge on fundamental issues, including the need to balance Russia and, particularly, China as alternative global power centers, prevent North Korea's acquisition of nuclear capabilities, combat the scourge of global terrorism, prioritize alliances in Asia, and curtail military engagements in the Middle East and Europe.

Nevertheless, these traditions differ in the instruments and approaches used to implement these strategies. The democratic tradition places equal importance to global pandemics, racially motivated attacks, and economic disparities alongside external threats within the realm of foreign policy. It advocates policies grounded in internationalism and multilateralism. In contrast, the Republican tradition increasingly underscores the ascent of China and Russia, coupled with the security-centric foreign policy stemming from the specter of international terrorism. In this context, it adopts a more conventional and nationalist policy stance.

The years of Donald Trump's presidency, from 2017 to 2021, are considered an *exceptional period* in U.S. foreign policy, owing to the profound impact of decisions that profoundly influenced global, external, and domestic politics in the United States. On a global scale, the Trump era represented

a rupture in the consensus that persisted beyond the Cold War between the Democratic and Republican Party traditions regarding the United States' continued role as a global hegemon. Emanating from the Republican tradition, Donald Trump formulated U.S. global politics around isolationism and opposition to globalization. He not only questioned international alliance systems such as NATO and the UN, which the United States had been leading since 1945, but also defined member countries of these systems as beneficiaries of the United States' economic, political, and military power, sustaining their "free ride" positions. Such rhetoric led to profound crises in the United States' traditional and long-term European and Asian allies.

The Trump administration's relations with non-democratic regimes also prompted a reevaluation of democracy's place and significance in U.S. foreign policy (Posen, 2018). Furthermore, the administration introduced a novel approach to U.S. trade relations, departing from the conventional principle of "multilateralism" in favor of "bilateralism." This shift intensified criticism from the United States' allies regarding its global hegemonic status. This policy aimed to alleviate the United States' trade burdens, curb budget deficits, and implement a trade policy based on export principles. Implemented alongside the Trump administration, this policy had two significant consequences on the global stage. Firstly, it sparked a "trade war" between the United States and its global rival, China, as well as regional competitors. Secondly, it eroded the principles upon which the United States had grounded its hegemony since 1945, namely the globalization of free markets and democratic regimes (Rampell, 2018).

Donald Trump, notorious for his promotion of far-right ideologies in American history, achieved this status through the adoption of a populist discourse and a nationalist foreign policy stance (Smith, 2016; The New York Times, 2016). However, this transformation did not unfold without repercussions. Trump's tacit support for the January 6 storming of the White House not only worsened his support among some Republicans but also drew concern from Democrats, who perceived the values he embodied as a threat to both domestic and foreign U.S. policies (The Harvard Gazette, 2021). Within this context, the U.S. global policy during the Trump era, subject to substantial criticism, was characterized as an "illiberal" and "isolationist" challenge to the United States' Grand Strategy." This policy was further delineated as the "Trumpification" of the Republican tradition, accompanied by slogans like "America First" and "Make America Great Again" (Posen, 2018).

These tendencies, ultimately identified as "Trumpism," contributed to a widening division between the Republican and Democratic political traditions in U.S. foreign policy. They also generated significant ramifications on domestic policy. The Trump administration, notably one of the most symbolic and influential proponents of far-right principles, predominantly built its domestic policy on anti-immigration sentiments. Consequently, the construction of a border wall along the Mexican border, the epicenter of migratory movement, garnered criticism from Democrats (NBC News, 2022). The

Trump administration's lack of attention to climate concerns, in contrast to Biden's general approach reflected in his presidential campaign and speeches before he was elected, and its reluctance to exert pressure on U.S. corporations regarding emissions and environmental matters further fueled internal disapproval (BBC, 2020). Nevertheless, Democrats contended that Trump personalized both domestic and foreign policy, displaying tendencies perceived as "authoritarian" and fostering an "unfettered presidential" approach. In this context, Trump's robust relations with autocratic leaders such as Russian President Vladimir Putin, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro came under intense scrutiny and critique (The Washington Post, 2020).

Joe Biden, in response to profound criticism of a foreign policy approach that undermines global institutions and norms, launched a reconstruction of U.S. foreign policy, underscoring the statement "America is back." The Biden administration argued that Trumpism signifies both "democratic backsliding" on the domestic front and an inclination toward "illiberal hegemony" on the global stage (The White House, 2021). Consequently, it championed a process of democratization in domestic politics and the reinvigoration of the Atlantic alliance in foreign policy. Under the Biden administration, the United States entered a new era, characterized by the reactivation of democratic institutions in domestic politics and a renewed emphasis on universal values such as human rights and democracy in foreign policy. Consistent with this policy trajectory, the Biden administration preferred the intensification of its foreign relations with the European Union (EU) and Western European nations, longstanding allies of the United States, rather than countries like Russia, Hungary, and Brazil, in stark contrast to the Trump administration. On the domestic policy front, the Biden administration articulated a liberal-oriented regulatory agenda aimed at reversing discourses rooted in race, gender, and xenophobia that were prevalent during the Trump era. This required measures such as gun control restrictions, the implementation of progressive income taxation, aligned with Democratic tradition principles, and the continuation of Obamacare, designed to safeguard the health needs of low-income individuals (Rhodes, 2024).

Aligned with its overarching objective of advancing a global political paradigm steeped in liberal values and inclusivity, one of the early initiatives undertaken by the Biden administration was the restoration of Liberal Hegemony, also referred to as the United States' "Grand Strategy," which largely disappeared during the Trump era. Diverging from the Trump administration, traditional collective defense and economy-oriented alliances like NATO, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) were all reintegrated into the United States' international "Liberal" initiative. The Biden administration, while firmly upholding its "hegemonic" position and recognizing alternative power centers like Russia and China as strategic balancing factors (Biden, 2020; Hao, 2024; Rhodes, 2024), thus endeavored to restore Trans-Atlantic and Trans-Pacific alliance relations to their customary trajectory. It was particularly noteworthy that Biden viewed member states of these alliances as vital partners in the United States' global politics, in

stark contrast to the Trump administration, which regarded them as beneficiaries rather than contributors.

The Biden administration embarked on a departure from the zero-sum "new mercantilist" economic approach that characterized the Trump era. This policy shift reflects a Jacksonian foreign policy stance coupled with a "protectionist approach" to the economy. It involves a thorough reevaluation of the United States' trade relations with EU nations, China, Mexico, and several other countries, with the primary objective of safeguarding American businesses and reducing the U.S.'s import dependency in foreign trade (Hao, 2024; Mobley & Gazeley, 2025). The Jacksonian nature, characterized by its protectionist inclinations, underpins the adoption of this approach. During and after the election campaign, President Biden subjected this policy to intense scrutiny. He contended that it not only hindered American citizens' access to more affordable goods but also had detrimental implications for U.S. industry by increasing the reliance on imported raw materials, thus compromising the competitiveness of American companies. Therefore, the Biden administration, considering this policy "dangerous," lent its support to a conventional U.S. economic policy rooted in the principles of "globalism" and "internationalism." Operating on the premise that domestic policy is intricately intertwined with international developments (Brinkley, 1997; Goldgeier & Saunders, 2018; Rampell, 2018; The New York Times, 2016; Uhrmacher & Braford, 2020;), a fundamental tenet of the democratic tradition, the Biden administration acknowledged the paramount importance of a world order founded upon liberal, democratic, and universal values in ensuring the stability and security of the U.S.

3. THE DIVERGENT IMPACTS OF POLITICAL TRADITIONS ON THE USA'S GULF POLICY

In the post-Cold War era, U.S. Middle East policy was characterized by priorities including isolating Iran, ensuring Israel's security, and securing control over the region's energy resources. Under the leadership of George Bush, a prominent figure in the Republican tradition, there was an increased push for liberalization in the Middle East. However, no active policy was pursued regarding democratization, and concerns about democracy and human rights did not hinder relations with the autocratic regimes in the region. In contrast, the Bill Clinton administration, rooted in the democratic political tradition, criticized Bush's Middle East policies and shifted its focus towards democracy and human rights in the region (Carothers, 1995). Clinton thus became the first U.S. President to adopt a "democratic expansion" strategy for the Middle East. One of the most significant developments during Clinton's tenure was the leadership role played in the Oslo peace process between Palestine and Israel from 1993 to 1995, culminating in the historic peace agreement.

Subsequently, during the presidency of Republican George Bush, who assumed power in 2001, the discourse of "exporting democracy" and the "freedom agenda" gained more prominence in Middle East policy. However, the regional policy followed during this period marked a stark departure from the

Democratic tradition. Priority issues in U.S. Middle East policy involved the Iranian nuclear problem, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, a Palestine policy that took Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon into account, and containing Iran, Iraq, and Syria, defined as "rogue" states. The concept of regime change, involving the potential use of military force in alignment with the regional policy shaped by the "hawkish" faction within the United States, emerged as the primary instrument to be deployed. As a result, the Bush administration seemed to abandon principles such as multilateralism, functioning within alliance systems, and consideration of regional perspectives in favor of interventionist strategies and unilateral action (Gordon, 2003). Criticism at the national, regional, and international levels centered on the Middle East policy of the Bush era, with particular focus on allegations that Bush was overly aligned with the pro-Israel lobby, his role in the Iraq invasion, and his support for Israel's use of illegal and disproportionate force against Palestine. The close ties established between the Bush administration, guided by the Republican tradition, and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, a prominent figure in the far-right wing, along with Bush's pledge to support Israel until the cessation of "violence and terrorism" originating from Palestine, further fueled these critiques (Gordon, 2003).

In 2009, with the advent of the Barack Obama administration, reminiscent of the Clinton era, a shift occurred in regional politics, with democracy and human rights taking precedence. The administration actively advocated a bilateral resolution for the Palestinian issue, adopted a critical stance towards the Israeli government, emphasized diplomacy over complex power elements concerning the nuclear matter, and adopted a cautious approach. Nevertheless, the Obama era regional policy faced its most significant criticism for its policy of non-intervention in the face of ISIS and the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons against its own citizens. In contrast to the Bush administration, Obama, in his 2009 speech at Cairo University in Egypt, called for reform and democracy, a stance that extended to his reception of the Arab Uprisings in the Middle East in 2011 as expressions of reform, thus welcoming them. In the initial phase of the Arab Uprisings, the Obama administration prioritized "promoting democracy," resulting in the downfall of autocratic regimes led by figures such as Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia. Consequently, in contrast to Bush's interventionist and imperialistic "Freedom Agenda," the Obama administration actively supported regional reform and democratic transformation (Bouchet, 2013; Gerges, 2013).

In contrast to the Democratic tradition, the Donald Trump administration in 2016 responded firmly to the Assad regime's chemical weapons use, pursued an assertive strategy against ISIS, strengthened ties with Israel, and favored military operations as priority options in the region (Al-Monitor, 2021). Even diverging from another Republican government, the Bush administration, Trump's approach did not prioritize advancing democracy and human rights through military means. Instead, the administration fostered collaborations with authoritarian governments in the region, often driven by economic incentives, particularly in the realms of oil and arms trade. On the Iranian nuclear issue, Trump supported a military-economic isolation stance, aligning with Republican tradition.

3.1. The Implications of "The Trump Exception" on U.S. Gulf Policy

The policies pursued during the Trump era, both globally and specifically in the Gulf region, stand out as an *exception* even within its own party tradition, that is, Republican tradition. While the Middle East policy during Trump's era aligned with Republican principles such as limiting military engagements in the Middle East, taking a tough stance against Iran, and supporting Israel, it deviated from tradition and constituted a "Trump Exception" due to its relatively radical approach towards autocratic regimes in the region. Notably, the Trump era shifted away from the Republican tradition's emphasis on human rights and democracy toward a more mercantilist, profit-driven foreign policy (Karlin & Wittes, 2019). This shift was particularly evident in relations with the Gulf states, renowned for their energy resources and strong economies. Seeking to strengthen ties with the Saudi Arabia–UAE alliance, the Trump administration signaled this priority by selecting Saudi Arabia as the destination of its first comprehensive Middle East visit in May 2017. This visit unequivocally signaled the Trump administration's new approach to the Middle East and the Gulf region. During the Trump era, the deep-seated splits among Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and the extent of U.S. influence on these divisions illustrated the shifting direction of U.S. Gulf policy. Personal relationships between Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) and UAE Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ), along with Trump's chief advisor and son-in-law, Jared Kushner, introduced a personal dimension to U.S. alliance relations with these two nations. Following the escalation of long-standing tensions among GCC nations into a profound crisis on June 5, 2017, Trump unveiled his initial support for the UAE-Saudi Arabia bloc (Cook, 2020).

Trump's backing of the Saudi Arabia-UAE alliance amid the GCC polarization marked a significant departure from the more holistic approach to Gulf policy that prevailed until then. Although the United States played a mediating role in the Qatar-centered GCC crisis that erupted in 2017, there were perceptions of bias in its policy. This stance raised concerns about regime security in Qatar, which is home to the largest U.S. military base in the Middle East. Thus, Qatar sought to enhance its political, economic, and military ties with international actors, including Russia, the EU, India, and China. Simultaneously, Qatar aimed to bolster its security-focused collaboration with NATO (Daily Sabah, 2018; Daily Sabah, 2019; Gulf Times, 2018; Middle East Monitor, 2018; Sputnik, 2019). In similar vein, Qatar adopted an active engagement with Turkey during the Arab Uprisings, further strengthening its security and economic relationship with Ankara. Qatar solidified this alliance by hosting Turkey's inaugural military base in the Middle East and Gulf region (Üçağaç & Akan, 2025. pp. 502-503; Yeşilyurt & Yetim, 2020).

During the 2017 crisis, the Trump administration directed accusations against Qatar of "sponsoring terrorism" and "supporting extremist and radical ideologies." Trump administration argued that the comprehensive embargo initiated against Qatar, led by the UAE and Saudi Arabia, was a means of holding accountable those supporting radical groups. Yet, over time, the Trump administration

gradually softened its stance on the GCC rift and began emphasizing "alliance" in its rhetoric regarding Qatar. However, this shift did not deter Qatar from pursuing alternative security measures and intensifying its engagements with Iran as well (China Daily, 2017; Oktav, 2018). Subsequently, Doha administration recognized that the membership in the GCC did not suffice to ensure regime security and thus moved to bolster its alliance relations with Turkey, a key regional player and its ties with Iran.

These newfound relations between Doha and Tehran worried the Trump administration, which aimed to politically, economically, and militarily neutralize Iran in the region. The Trump administration unilaterally withdrew from the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement, which had been negotiated by Iran and the P5+1 (Five Permanent Members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany) during the Obama administration. Subsequently, it imposed far-reaching sanctions on Iran. Furthermore, departing from traditional U.S. anti-Iran policies, the Trump administration designated Iran's national army, the Revolutionary Guard, as a terrorist organization. On January 3, 2020, it authorized the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Forces, the coordinating body for Iran-linked Shiite militias associated with the Revolutionary Guard, in Baghdad. This incident, which escalated tensions between Iran and the USA to unprecedented levels, was supported by the Saudi Arabia-UAE alliance and Israel (Anadolu Agency [AA], 2020b, 2021a).

Following these events, Iran pursued a "tanker wars" strategy, reminiscent of its actions during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), issued threats against Riyadh, and launched attacks on civilian, economic, and military targets in Arabian territory, primarily through the Houthi militias. These actions posed threats to both Saudi Arabia and the UAE's energy security. Consequently, even the UAE-Saudi Arabia alliance, a former GCC ally of Trump, became apprehensive about the U.S.'s uncompromisingly anti-Iran policies. Trump's assertive stance extended not only to opposing Iran but also to radically supporting Israel. The UAE-Saudi Arabia alliance did not object to these policies; instead, it offered some support. This supportive stance even lasted when the Trump administration declared its recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital in December 2018 and announced its intention to relocate the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem. While these decisions received significant objections from various Middle Eastern countries, Saudi Arabia-UAE alliance offered only limited criticism. Their alignment with U.S. Middle East policies, particularly the "Plan of the Century," became increasingly apparent within the GCC (Ahmed et al., 2021, pp. 71-90; Thompson, 2018).

In another significant shift in regional policy, Trump declared his recognition of the Syrian Golan Heights as part of Israel in March 2019. This decision not only further escalated political and economic pressure on the Palestinian administration but also signaled a substantial change in Israel's policy regarding territorial occupations in the region. In parallel with the unveiling of the "Plan of the Century," initially mentioned in 2018 and presented in full detail in 2020, the United States sought to establish a "legitimate" foundation for Israel's occupation of Palestine (Karaca, 2020). This plan, which

proposed a fragmented and divided Palestinian state, affirmed the U.S.'s approval of Israeli occupation over the West Bank and its belief that these regions should remain under Israeli invasion (Yetim, 2020). A pivotal development within this framework was the signing of the Abraham Accords by the UAE and Bahrain in August and September 2020, respectively, aimed at "normalizing" their diplomatic relations with Israel. Saudi Arabia's silent yet favorable response to the normalization process, which Sudan and Morocco later joined, revealed that the key actors in Gulf backed Trump's staunchly anti-Iran and pro-Israel policy (AA, 2020a). In essence, during the Trump era, the Saudi Arabia-UAE alliance, significantly influenced by its crown princes, emerged as the primary supporters of U.S. policies. The Gulf nations most profoundly affected by this shift were Iraq and Iran, which faced political and military isolation, and Qatar, which faced comprehensive sanctions, heightening its security concerns.

Furthermore, the Trump administration's policy approach, which disregarded universal principles such as democracy and human rights, represented a departure from the Republican tradition. While not entirely aligned with the Republican tradition, the Trump administration assigned a limited sphere to the promotion of democracy, a prominent macro strategy of the USA (Posen, 2018, pp. 25-26). Trump's foreign policy and economic strategies, rooted in isolationism and protectionism, played pivotal roles in sidelining democratic and liberal values in bilateral relationships. In this context, the Trump administration's silence in response to the military endeavors of the UAE and Saudi Arabia alliance in Yemen, which amounted to war crimes, contributed to the perpetuation of the humanitarian crisis and its spiraling out of control. Moreover, the Trump administration's prioritization of economic interests in the region and its fostering of positive relations with autocratic regimes became two central tenets of Gulf policy during his presidency. Even in the case of Jamal Khashoggi's murder, which the CIA attributed to Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on October 2, 2018, the Trump administration maintained its support for Mohammed bin Salman, suggesting that "perhaps he was aware of the incident, perhaps not," and asserting that "the facts may never be known" (The Washington Post, 2020).

3.2. Return of Democratic Tradition and Changing Gulf Approach in the Biden Era

Following a tumultuous election process, Joseph R. Biden, the Democratic Party's candidate, assumed the presidency of the United States. His term was marked by outspoken criticisms of the domestic and foreign policies of his predecessor, Republican candidate Donald Trump. President Biden articulated a renewed commitment to engaging with allied nations, stressing that these relationships should not revolve solely around economic and military interests but also encompass humanitarian and democratic considerations. His emphasis on values aligned with the democratic tradition and steered U.S. policy towards the GCC countries towards a more comprehensive and balanced approach (Talei, 2021; AlAkim, 2021). Indicating a break from the Trump administration's foreign policy stance, President Biden prioritized dialogue with Iran, in line with the fundamental tenets of the democratic

tradition. His efforts to address the nuclear issue through diplomatic negotiations represented a pivotal shift.

In contrast, Israel, seeking to obstruct potential dialogue, escalated its political and military activities against Iran. The assassination of Muhsin Fakhrizadeh, a prominent figure in Iran's nuclear program, reportedly carried out by Israel in Tehran on November 27, 2020, further strained U.S.-Israel relations related to Iran (AA, 2020d). Three days after this incident, the death of Muslim Shehdan, a commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, in an airstrike in Deir ez-Zor province on the Syrian-Iraqi border, once again highlighted Israel and the Trump administration, which had not yet relinquished power (AA, 2020c). The Iranian government, in response to these attacks, declared its intention to retaliate in a measured and calculated manner. Meanwhile, it signaled optimism regarding the Biden administration's approach and awaited its initiatives on nuclear negotiations. Tehran preferred an initial silence in the face of Israel's attempts to disrupt the nuclear talks, anticipating that Biden might reinstate the nuclear agreement and lift the sanctions, which have imposed political, economic, and military repercussions on Iran. Still, the Biden administration did not advocate for a nuclear-armed Iran, and thus a degree of consensus exists between the Democratic and Republican traditions in U.S. politics (Erlanger, 2020; Ross, 2020; VOA News, 2020).

In stark contrast to his predecessor, the Biden administration adopted a more moderate stance on Palestine as well and voiced its opposition to Israel's annexation and occupation endeavors. President Biden expressed support for the "two-state solution" outlined in the 1993 Oslo Accords, affirming that the Trump era, characterized as an exception in U.S. foreign policy, came to a close, with democratic principles making a resurgence. This policy, which endorsed the "normalization" process with Israel, did not aim to reverse Israel's previous unlawful actions nor overturn Trump's decision on Jerusalem. Nevertheless, President Biden's plans to reopen the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) office in Washington, closed under Trump, and his purpose of establishing a U.S. consulate in East Jerusalem signaled a divergent Palestine policy compared to his predecessor (AA, 2020e; Ben-Meir, 2020; The Times of Israel, 2019). However, it is important to note that, despite these shifts, the Biden administration continued to back Israel in the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflicts, which erupted as a result of developments centered in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in May 2020.

In addition to the shifts in Israel and Iran policies resulting from adherence to the Democratic tradition, the Biden era witnessed a growing emphasis on democracy and human rights in discourse, shaping Gulf politics in notable ways. While the Saudi Arabia-UAE alliance dominated Gulf politics during the Trump era, the Biden administration ushered in a new dynamic, bringing countries like Qatar to the forefront. These nations, with their potential to mediate relations with Iran, as well as various Palestinian groups and actors engaging with the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) and active in Afghanistan, gained more prominence. Qatar's previous attempts at mediating between Iran and the

USA garnered renewed attention during the Biden presidency. Despite experiencing strained relations with the Trump administration, the humanitarian role played by the Doha government, particularly as a mediator between the U.S. and the Taliban to facilitate the end of the Afghanistan war following the U.S. withdrawal as of September 2021, significantly bolstered Qatar's standing in the eyes of the U.S. under the Biden administration. Doha's humanitarian endeavors, especially in evacuating Afghans from the country after the U.S. withdrawal, garnered increased appreciation from the Western world. Furthermore, Qatar's role as a conduit between the Taliban-led regime in Afghanistan and the international community, coupled with its joint operation of the strategically vital Kabul airport with Turkey, further solidified its strategic significance in the eyes of the U.S. With the Ukrainian war, Qatar's undeniable strategic position in terms of managing energy problem in the Western countries erupted as a result of Russian isolation became apparent and both USA and other Western capitals rushed to enhance their partnership with Doha (Al-Arabiya News, 2021; Al-Jazeera, 2021;TRT World, 2021).

Following the Biden administration's expression of concern regarding the regional crisis that emerged in the Gulf in 2017, both the UAE and, notably, Saudi Arabia began conveying positive overtures to Qatar, marking a significant shift in the landscape (Financial Times, 2020). In light of divergent views within the UAE-Saudi Arabia alliance concerning their relationships with Yemen, Iran, and Turkey, Saudi Arabia intensified its efforts to improve relations with Qatar and Turkey, especially toward the end of 2020. Apart from the rift in alliance relations with the UAE, the global changes that followed Biden's election, and the resilience of the Turkey-Qatar alliance on the regional stage, prompted the Riyadh administration to acknowledge Qatar's autonomy and recognize Turkey's influence in the Gulf.

One of the most significant outcomes of the Gulf crisis's normalization process, initiated towards the end of 2019 through "Football Diplomacy" between the blockading countries and Qatar, emerged in 2020. This protracted crisis, lasting almost 3.5 years, culminated in the Al-Ula Declaration, signed at the 41st GCC Summit held in Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia, attended by Qatar's Emir Al-Thani (AA, 2021b). Following the summit, diplomatic relations were restored among Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, and Qatar. Doha's bilateral relations, especially with Riyadh and Cairo, intensified through high-level engagements. Consequently, unlike the Trump era, the Biden administration departed from a policy of unconditional support for Israel. It framed its Iran policy around cooperation with allies and international institutions, a shift that constrained the UAE-Saudi Arabia alliance rooted in Republican tendencies. As a result, the influence of middle-range countries in the region, such as Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman, were further enhanced during the Biden administration's period. The Biden administration's designation of Qatar as an "important non-NATO ally" also played a pivotal role in shaping Gulf politics in the Biden era (Erlanger, 2020; Gardner, 2020; Siddiqui, 2020).

The Biden administration's explicit attribution of responsibility to Mohammed Bin Salman in the 2021 intelligence report concerning the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, coupled with its firm stance on "recalibrating" relations with the Riyadh administration in light of this new fact, heightened apprehensions within the Saudi leadership (The Arab Weekly, 2021). In a marked rupture from the absolute support provided to Yemen during the Trump era, the Biden administration, having delisted the Iran-backed Shiite (Zaidi) Houthis from the classified terrorist organizations, also withdrew the military-intelligence assistance previously given to Riyadh. Holding the Saudi authorities accountable for the humanitarian catastrophe and war crimes in Yemen, the Biden has in some ways distanced itself from Saudi Arabia (DW, 2021a; DW, 2021b; France 24, 2021; The New York Times, 2021). Problematic aspects similarly emerged in bilateral relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which enjoyed largely positive ties during the Trump era. The UAE's political and military overtures, particularly toward China, was under scrutiny and criticism from the Biden administration, which viewed China as a global threat. As their relations with China deepened, the Biden administration expressed concerns about the potential compromise of F-35 technology to Chinese intelligence agencies. In response, the UAE stalled its plans to purchase F-35 fighter jets (The Wall Street Journal, 2021). However, these tensions have not led to the dissolution of the United States' alliance relationships with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

4. CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the field of IR by employing a theoretical framework of traditions to understand US foreign policy in the Gulf. In particular, this approach enhances the novelty of the study by moving beyond the long-standing ideological-traditional dichotomies that dominated scholarly debates. By synthesizing ideational and structural perspectives, it demonstrates that U.S. policy - particularly in the Gulf- is best conceptualized as the outcome of an enduring interaction between historically embedded traditions and the geopolitical imperatives of a volatile regional environment. The qualitative findings suggest that while each administration may recalibrate its rhetoric and policy instruments, the more profound strategic logic guiding U.S. engagement remains remarkably consistent.

Our findings demonstrate that the Hamiltonian and Wilsonian legacies, embedded within Republican and Democratic parties, consistently guided U.S. strategy, balancing economic leadership, normative influence, and the projection of global power. While these traditions diverge in their tactical emphases, Republicans privileging hard power and unilateral action, Democrats emphasizing multilateral diplomacy and normative instruments, they converge on core strategic objectives such as energy security, Israel's protection, and preventing nuclear proliferation in Iran. Therefore, it appears that, within their broader global strategies, both traditions seek to sustain a largely similar Middle Eastern approach despite differences in discourse and tactical orientation. In other words, both the radicalized Republican tradition, namely its Jacksonian version as exemplified by the Trump administration, and the Democratic return to a Wilsonian orientation under the Biden administration

adopted a broadly pro-Israel and anti-Iran regional posture. This continuity persisted despite Trump's more radical rhetorical positioning toward these pillars of traditional U.S. regional policy, and was reflected in differentiated alliance configurations and patterns of bilateral engagement with Gulf actors. Overall, the findings of this manuscript suggest that a degree of strategic alignment across competing traditions of U.S. politics is likely to endure in future periods.

In this sense, the study's key strength lies in its novel approach to conceptualizing U.S. Gulf policy as a result of the interplay between long-standing traditions and current geopolitical challenges. It reveals how deviations, exemplified by the Trump administration's populist "America First" approach, illustrated the flexibility and limits of established traditions, while the Biden administration's recalibration demonstrated the restoration of normative engagement and alliance-centered diplomacy. By foregrounding the interaction of historical legacies and structural constraints, this research provides new analytical tools for understanding how continuity and adaptation coexist in great-power foreign policy, offering a alternative to reductionist accounts that overemphasize ideologic change or temporary leadership styles. In this regard, the research brings a deep understanding to simplistic explanations that frame policy shifts merely as reflections of partisan turnover, demonstrating instead the path-dependent continuity that underpins U.S. behavior in the Gulf. Future research could therefore extend this insight by conducting comparative and multi-level analyses of U.S. policy in other geostrategic regions -such as the Indo-Pacific or the Horn of Africa- to test whether similar ideational-structural dynamics inform broader patterns of American global engagement. Additionally, incorporating critical geopolitics and historical institutionalism could refine our understanding of how enduring traditions, institutional inertia, and shifting global power hierarchies interact to sustain continuity amid change. In doing so, this line of research not only enriches theoretical debates within IR but also contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how great powers adapt -yet remain constrained- within an evolving global order.

However, the study is not without limitations. Its analytical focus on U.S. strategic conduct may inadvertently downplay the growing agency of Gulf states, whose pragmatic diplomacy and regional hedging strategies increasingly shape the parameters of U.S. engagement. Furthermore, reliance on secondary sources, while allowing for historical and theoretical depth, limits the empirical depth achievable through systematic content analysis, elite interviews, or archival research. Ultimately, this research enriches IR scholarship by demonstrating the value of bridging ideational/tradition-based and structural analysis to explain complex foreign policy behavior. It underscores the persistence of strategic logic and the place of established traditions amid shifting leadership and global dynamics, while offering a robust foundation for future studies exploring how tradition, norms, and material constraints shape the conduct of great powers.

This study does not require ethics committee approval.

The authors declare that the study was conducted in accordance with research and publication ethics.

The authors confirm that no part of the study was generated, either wholly or in part, using Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools.

The authors declare that there are no financial conflicts of interest involving any institution, organization, or individual associated with this article. Additionally, there are no conflicts of interest among the authors.

The authors declare that they contributed equally to all processes of the research.

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