

# Strategic Setbacks: Analysis of Carter Administration's Middle East Policy

Shihao Cai<sup>#,\*</sup>, Yunkun He<sup>#</sup>, Yilin Liu<sup>#</sup>

Department of Diplomacy and Foreign Affairs Management, China Foreign Affairs University,  
Beijing, China, 100037

\*Corresponding author: CFAUcsh@163.com

<sup>#</sup>These authors contributed equally.

**Abstract.** After World War II, successive U.S. presidents have steadily advanced the U.S. strategic presence in the Middle East, but such efforts were challenged under the Carter administration. At the time of the Carter presidency, he actively promoted the Egyptian-Israeli reconciliation and further reaffirmed his support for Israel, while focusing on addressing the potential risks of oil supply and prices in the Middle East, but many of his Middle East policies did not fundamentally achieve the expected results. Despite the Egyptian-Israeli reconciliation, the Arab-Israeli conflict remains unsettled; the re-emergence of the oil crisis had once again triggered a crisis in the Western world, and the failure of the Iranian Hostage Crisis and the Islamic Revolution has destroyed a pillar of the U.S. Middle East strategy. Consequently, Carter's foreign policy is not without impediments but settles the basis for subsequent U.S. Middle East policy with inveterate impacts and the concepts of peace and democracy.

**Keywords:** Middle East, U.S. foreign policy, the Carter administration.

## 1. Introduction

The US's pursuit of global hegemony has been reflected in its military and economic strategies, with the Middle East serving as a key example of this approach. The US's dominance in the region has been maintained through a combination of military power and economic influence, making it a crucial player in the global balance of power. Uncle Sam pursues global hegemony through military and economic strategies, particularly in the Middle East, as exemplified by the policies of former President Jimmy Carter, who sought to maintain U.S. dominance in the region through a combination of military power and economic influence.

## 2. U.S. Policy: from Truman to Nixon

The U.S. Middle East strategies, starting after World War II, were primarily focused on the following issues: (1) keeping Israel safe; (2) preventing Soviet dominance in Middle East [1]; (3) Supplanting Britain's and France's geopolitical stance in the Middle East; (4) taking control of resources and seaways in the Middle East; (5) Integrating financial capital and commodity production in the Middle East into the Western economic system. To make the abovementioned requirements come true, after World War II, all previous U.S. governmental administrations have adopted a variety of foreign policies.

### 2.1. The Truman-Eisenhower period

The containment of the Soviet Union and ensuring the uninterrupted flow of oil supplies were the two principal objectives set forward by the Truman administration for US strategy in the Middle East. During the Truman-Eisenhower administration, the US made an effort to strike a balance between its obligations to Israel and the desire to preserve cordial ties with the Arab governments.

The basic U.S. Middle East policies during the Truman period were mainly the following: (1) to stop or overcome the instability of Western interests; (2) to stop Soviet penetration and expand Western influence; (3) to ensure the supply of oil and other resources; (4) to integrate the Middle East

and resist the Soviet Union; (5) to develop relations between the U.S. and countries in the Middle East; (6) to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict on the premise of ensuring Israel's security [2]. In addition, the formation of a Middle East Command was one of the Truman administration's priorities. The U.S. and Britain wanted the Middle East Command to include the Suez Canal base within a larger defense organization to prevent Soviet infiltration while maintaining Western influence in the Middle East [3].

The Eisenhower administration basically continued Truman's Middle East policy. Eisenhower steadily developed a particular strategic connection with Israel and adopted a conservative stance toward the Middle East Defense Organization in terms of practical implementation. Secretary of State Dulles promoted the establishment of the Baghdad Treaty Organization, through which he hoped to include the relevant countries in the U.S. global strategic plan. However, the Dulles plan had a limited effect due to opposition from most Middle Eastern countries and the Mutual Defense Treaty signed by the Egyptian organization, as well as conflicts over the Suez Canal.

Amid the rising national liberation movements in Asia and Africa, and to continue to contain the influence of socialist countries such as the Soviet Union in the Middle East, Eisenhower proposed to fill the vacuum left in the region after the withdrawal of Britain and France before the Soviet Union and advocated economic and military aid for some Middle Eastern countries. Abandoning the peaceful means used to contain Soviet infiltration, the Eisenhower administration also consolidated its effects in the Middle East by replicating conservative states in the region [4].

## **2.2. The Kennedy-Johnson period**

The Kennedy Administration continued this policy, seeking to improve US-Arab relations while maintaining close ties with Israel. President Kennedy recognized the importance of maintaining stability in the Middle East and sought to build closer and mightier relationships with the Arab nations through a combination of diplomatic, military, and economic initiatives. At the same time, he also committed to supporting Israel's security, recognizing the importance of the US-Israel alliance. This delicate balance of interests was a hallmark of Kennedy's Middle East policy, reflecting the complex and competing demands of American foreign policy in the region.

As the Johnson administration took office, U.S. Middle East policy maintained a "balanced strategy," concentrating on steadfast support for Israel and forging a unique bond with that country, and using Israel to combat Soviet-backed Egypt to weaken Soviet influence in the Middle East. But his balanced diplomacy was pursued on the premise that the status quo would be maintained, or that both the U.S. and Soviet Union would exercise restraint in supplying arms to the Middle East. The U.S. initially wanted Arab states to recognize Israel, but with the setback of the Arab-Israeli peace talks process and the shift in Israel's position, the U.S. shifted to support Israel's position. In addition, the Security Council Resolution 242 did add elements about the Arab-Israeli disagreement, but basically the same intention as the U.S. balanced policy, hoping to make the two sides compromise with each other through reciprocity to maintain U.S. interests and influence in the Middle East.

In the process of dynamic changes in external factors, the U.S. was unable to maintain its identity as a peace broker after this, leading to the setback of the Johnson administration's balancing policy and the Middle East peace process [5]. Johnson's impartial foreign policy was rendered unworkable by the Middle East arms race, the unbridgeable and grave divisions between the Arab and Israeli sides, and their unbending views.

## **2.3. The Nixon-Ford period**

In the 1970s, after a long period of overseas expansion, particularly during the Vietnam War, the U.S. became mired in a conflict that severely weakened its economy and threatened its ability to maintain global hegemony. Faced with the current global strategic situation, the U.S. government had to make significant adjustments to its global strategy.

America's support for Israel in the Third Middle East War sparked discontent in the Arab world [6], and the Soviet Union's presence in Egypt and its infiltration of Yemen, among others, strengthened the deployment of its military forces.

The US worked to stabilize the area and seek a peaceful resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict during the Nixon-Ford era. This was a significant shift from the more military-focused approach of previous administrations and reflected a recognition of the need for a more nuanced and diplomatic approach to the region.

Nixon doctrine was put forward in 1970. The core ideas of the Nixon Doctrine are a strategy of the balance of power and avoidance of involvement in regional conflicts [7], and the US administration engaged in a series of diplomatic initiatives, including negotiations between the parties, arms control agreements, and efforts to resolve the broader regional conflict. These efforts set the stage for President Carter's later diplomatic initiatives, which sought to promote peace and stability in the Middle East through a combination of negotiations, arms control, and economic assistance.

Overall, the essence of a series of policies under the Nixon administration was to (1) appropriately contract U.S. global strategy to reduce domestic and foreign pressures; (2) implement a strategic contraction from Asia to regain energy and redeploy foreign policy priorities; (3) moderate relations with the Soviet Union to reverse strategic passivity; (4) improve relations with China to strengthen containment; and (5) maintaining parity to ensure U.S. hegemony. This shift also affected U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. After taking office, the Carter administration continued the global thinking of its predecessor, particularly by strengthening its diplomatic commitment in the Middle East.

### **3. Carter's Middle East Policy and the Development of the Middle East Situation**

Since Carter came to office, the government has mostly relied on human rights diplomacy to restore American influence around the world. In terms of policy implementation, it has primarily inherited President Nixon's policy of détente, and it has mainly pointed the finger at the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries on human rights issues. The Carter Administration also suggested the "world peace strategy" to further advance the détente between the United States and the Soviet Union in other international regions, in conjunction with the détente with the Soviet Union and human rights diplomacy strategies. However, Carter repeatedly suffered setbacks on related issues and ultimately failed to achieve the expected goals of the policy. Against this background, the "Carter Doctrine" came out. Carter's specific Middle East operations and their objectives can be broken down into the following sections.

#### **3.1. Contributing to the reconciliation between Arab countries and Israel**

The issues of peace and war in the Middle East originated from the conflict between Arabs and Israel, so Carter regarded reconciliation as the core of Middle East issues. At that time, Egypt was the leading power in the Arab world, and Carter took the realization of Egypt-Israel reconciliation as a breakthrough in solving the Middle East issue. After the Fourth Middle East War, Egypt and Israel realized they could not gain the upper hand politically and militarily or ultimately defeat each other. The United States mediation was well received by both parties. Following his efforts at mediating, Carter summoned Israeli Prime Minister Begin and Egyptian President Sadat to a face-to-face meeting at Camp David in September 1978. After 12 days of discussion, Carter's persuasion, and pressure pressing, Sadat and Begin finally signed the "Camp David Accords". In the follow-up negotiations on specific issues, Carter continued to play the role of an active mediator. On March 26, 1979, Carter finally facilitated the signing of the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty. The treaty includes the text and three annexes. The main contents include the end of the state of war between the two sides, the establishment of normal relations between the two sides, respecting the right of the other side to live peacefully within its boundary, Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula, etc. Since then,

Carter has also admitted that during his four-year tenure (1977-1981), he spent far more energy on the Middle East issue than on other issues [8].

### 3.2. Ensuring oil security

The Middle East's huge oil reserves are another factor in the United States' interest in the region, as one of the driving forces behind U.S. involvement in the region [9]. The Fourth Middle East War started in October 1973. The Middle East's oil-producing nations cut back on production and exports in response to the West's backing for Israel, which led to the first oil shock. Due to the insufficient response of the United States and other Western countries, the Arab oil-producing countries obtained considerable profits from using oil weapons. To deal with the potential oil crisis that may occur later, when President Carter took office, Congress passed the Department of Energy Organization Act), formally establishing an administrative agency for the unified management of energy affairs, namely the Department of Energy.

Nevertheless, even so, the United States still failed to handle the impact of the second oil shock properly. From the end of 1978 to the beginning of 1979, the Islamic Revolution broke out, and Iran's domestic political struggles and social unrest led to the interruption of its domestic oil exports. Subsequently, the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War further exacerbated the negative impact of the second oil crisis.

Rutherford Poats, a U.S. National Security Council member, has suggested that the U.S. government persuade Saudi Arabia to remove "irresponsible" production caps and encourage other Gulf states to follow suit. Although Saudi Arabia still showed the willingness to reduce production, in general, the Carter administration's persuasion to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf oil-producing countries has been in constant effect. The Carter administration also shifted the focus of the oil issue to a substantial strategic oil reserve. Although most oil-producing countries still opposed the U.S. intention to purchase oil, in general, Saudi Arabia's attitude has undergone a particular change, which has helped the U.S. resume its purchase of oil for its strategic reserve [10].

### 3.3. Keeping Israel safe

Like the US, Israel is an immigrant country pursuing "democracy" and "freedom". Due to democratic parliamentary politics, Israel is regarded by the capitalist world as a "Western country" surrounded by the East and "a feudal autocratic society" [11]. To zealously defend its strategic interests, the United States must assist Israel. Also, it can lessen the negative geopolitical effects on the United States. Israel might serve as the "bridgehead" for the US to stop the Soviet Union's unremitting Middle Eastern expansion. Besides, from a foreign policy perspective, Jewish Americans have a very high status and influence in the country and always insist on influencing U.S. Congress and its government through Jewish interest groups, urging the United States to send aid to Israel. In addition to economic aid, credit, and the national debt of more than 100 billion dollars since 1949, the United States has also provided loan guarantees to Israel occasionally.

Over the years, discussions on US-Israel relations have continued. Some believe that this is a "patron-client" relationship, and some radical leftists even believe that Israel is the bridgehead or puppet of the United States in the Middle East. US-Israel relations tended to be flat for about 14 years after the founding of Israel and did not start to warm up until the Kennedy and Johnson eras. During the Nixon administration period, the US-Israel strategic cooperation established the basic framework of the US-Israel strategic cooperation for the next two decades. By the time of Carter, U.S. aid to Israel had also been steadily institutionalized as part of the Camp David Accords.

After signing the Egypt-Israel peace treaty, Israel's strategic position could have been significantly improved, as expected. The Soviet Union's assertive diplomatic stance also caused the United States to experience Cold War-related anxiety. In these conditions, the strategic alliance's importance to the American Middle East policy has also been emphasized. After President Reagan took office, he inherited this point, making the U.S.-Israel relationship evolve into a formal strategic alliance.

## **4. The Failure and Impact of Carter's Middle East Policy**

Carter's foreign policy in the Middle East has accomplished certain feats, including the historic promotion of conciliation between Egypt and Israel, further bolstering U.S. diplomatic prestige, and undertaking specific efforts to address the oil crisis. However, from the perspective of the overall U.S. strategy in the Middle East, Carter's Middle East policy has not been that effective. First, the Egyptian-Israeli rapprochement initiated by Carter did not effectively assuage the peace dynamics in the Middle East. Secondly, the Islamic Revolution and the eruption of the Iranian hostage crisis resulted in the U.S. losing Iran, a geostrategically important ally. Lastly, the Islamic revolution and the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war triggered a new round of oil crises.

### **4.1. Arab-Israeli peace issue**

Starting from the concept of human rights diplomacy, Carter endeavored to foster Arab-Israeli reconciliation and address the peace and security dilemmas in the Middle East. During his tenure, President Carter implemented several measures to tackle the Middle East conflict. He convened the Camp David talks between Israel and Egypt, which culminated in the signing of a peace accord between the two countries. In addition to bringing about a major change in Egyptian-Israeli relations, the establishment of normal diplomatic relations [12] also helped to partially lift the diplomatic embargo that Arab nations had placed on Israel. Therefore, the Camp David Accords promoted by Carter is regarded as a significant milestone in settling the conflict in the Middle East and advancing the Middle East peace process.

However, the specific provisions of the peace treaty relating to normalization and trade were of little practical significance. In the decades that followed, bilateral trade exchanges were not as close as expected due to popular radicalization and industrial levels and were mainly indirect in form through European countries. In terms of cultural exchanges and cooperation, the two sides have largely been intentionally limited to areas outside of politics or with fewer ties. Moreover, Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai also provoked official and civil opposition in Egypt [13].

Furthermore, the "dire isolation" that Egypt experienced as a result of the peace accord had a negative impact on the progress of Egyptian-Israeli ties and the Middle East peace process, undermining the effectiveness of US efforts to find a peaceful solution in the region. Specifically, Sadat's unilateral peacemaking with Israel sparked a substantial reaction in the Arab world and caused a significant rift within the Arab League. Syria, Iraq, Libya, Algeria, and the PLO publicly declared the formation of a "no peace front," and even moderate countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Tunisia, opposed Sadat's "peace initiative" and relocated the League's headquarters from Cairo to Tunisia. Although Sadat's peacemaking with Israel served as a corrective to the radical policies at play, it did not adequately address the Palestinian issue at the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict, nor did it fully consider the national and religious sentiments of the Arab nations. Consequently, the strong public opinion and national sentiments that arose from these actions were difficult to control in the short term. Ultimately, Carter's efforts to reconcile Egypt and Israel did not fundamentally resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, beyond bringing greater prestige to his government and himself.

### **4.2. The Islamic Revolution and the Iranian Hostage Crisis**

The collapse of Carter's diplomacy during the Islamic Revolution in Iran marked a complete failure of the policy to support the "dual pillars" of the Persian Gulf region. In the 1970s, the United States supported Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Persian Gulf as the "pillars" of the region, acting as proxies for U.S. oil hegemony and Middle Eastern interests, and viewing Iran as a counterbalance to Soviet influence in the region, serving as a bridgehead against Soviet interests in the Middle East. However, the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the subsequent hostage crisis in Tehran dealt a severe blow to the U.S. "dual pillars" policy in the Middle East and Carter's Middle East strategy.

Firstly, the Islamic Revolution in Iran inflicted severe damage to the U.S.-Iranian relationship, as it overthrew the pro-Western Shah of Iran and established an anti-American Islamic regime. The

subsequent Iranian hostage crisis, during which Iranian students occupied the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and detained 52 Americans for 444 days, further exacerbated the situation. This crisis not only harmed U.S.-Iranian relations but also evoked a widespread anti-American sentiment in the Muslim world [14].

Secondly, the Islamic Revolution and the Iranian hostage crisis deprived the United States of a vital ally in the Middle East in its efforts to counter Soviet influence. The loss of Iran undermined the U.S. position in the Middle East since the country had served as a "pillar" for the country there. Also endangering American interests in the region were Iran's deepening connections with the Soviet Union.

Simultaneously, the Iran hostage crisis undermined the credibility and legitimacy of the Carter administration and caused the United States to lose ground in the face of the Soviet propaganda offensive. The crisis proved a major embarrassment for the United States, as the occupation of the embassy by Iranian students was perceived as a violation of U.S. sovereignty. The U.S. response, including the failed rescue attempt, further sullied the image of the Carter administration.

Thus, the Islamic Revolution and the Iranian hostage crisis had a significant deleterious impact on the United States and the Carter administration. The loss of Iran was not only the loss of an ally but also the acquisition of a Soviet-leaning foe. The loss of a crucial ally in the Middle East, the deterioration of U.S.-Iranian relations, and the erosion of the Carter administration's credibility and legitimacy all led to a disadvantage in the U.S. propaganda war with the Soviet Union and ultimately led to Carter's downfall.

### **4.3. The Oil Crisis**

Carter's Middle East policy failure was also evident in the management of the oil crisis. The Islamic Revolution and the subsequent Iran-Iraq War triggered a new oil crisis during the Carter administration. The Islamic Revolution fundamentally disrupted Iran's domestic oil exports and increased expectations of higher oil prices in the global market. The Iran-Iraq War further exacerbated tensions in the oil market, resulting in a rapid rise in oil prices. Although Saudi Arabia proposed increasing oil production under continuous U.S. persuasion, most other oil-producing countries wanted to reduce production and raise prices. Almost all OPEC members demanded higher prices during the domestic political turmoil in Iran, resulting in a vicious cycle of oil production and sales in the oil market, causing oil prices to spiral out of control [15].

The Islamic revolution and oil crisis also caused a global wave of inflation. Paul Volcker, the Federal Reserve boss appointed by President Carter a few months before he left office, had intended a shock treatment approach to the U.S. economy. However, Chase Bank President David Rockefeller rejected his offer. Although the Fed subsequently raised its benchmark interest rate to 20% in 1980 and 1981, it still could not prevent a 2% recession in the U.S. economy in the following year, which was far more severe than in 1974. Although the oil crisis caused a smaller decline in U.S. domestic and foreign production than the first oil crisis, the economy rebounded more sluggishly and continued to stagnate for a longer period.

At the same time, in the dilemma of widening fiscal deficits, the U.S. could not afford to adopt economic policies to stimulate the rebound and had to increase taxes and cut social security costs. Moreover, the Carter administration's approach of forcing hundreds of privatizations, massive cuts in social and infrastructural facilities, and stopping public development policies in some indebted countries further damaged the U.S.'s reputation in the Third World and increased international credit instability [16].

## **5. Conclusion**

On the whole, Carter confronted an international and domestic political milieu at the outset of his presidency that aimed to transform the competitive dynamics between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Carter adopted a relatively more conciliatory foreign philosophy and policy than previous

administrations, but his misjudgment of the situation in the Middle East and his distinctive political stance ultimately undermined his efforts. Carter not only failed to establish a robust political legacy in the Middle East but also placed the U.S. strategic posture in a precarious position, providing the Soviet Union with an opportunity to expand its strategic advantage in the region. Had the Soviet Union not made the blunder of invading Afghanistan, the historical certainty may have been on another trace.

Over the past several decades, U.S. strategy in the Middle East has undergone significant changes, with each president implementing their own distinctive policies. Carter administration marked a departure from the more traditional U.S. policies of the time, particularly in its shift in focus toward human rights and the pursuit of peace.

Honestly speaking, President Carter's policies had some deficiencies. His administration encountered obstacles in resolving the Iranian hostage crisis, which ultimately led to the failure of the U.S. rescue operation and the deaths of several American service members. Yet, it was undeniable that Carter's attempts to advance peace in the region during his administration were remarkable, particularly through the Camp David Accords, which served as the framework for the 1979 peace accord between Egypt and Israel. Additionally, his administration played a pivotal role in promoting human rights and democratic values, particularly concerning Iran.

Overall, President Carter's administration marked a significant shift from the conventional U.S. policy in the Middle East, with a focus on peace and human rights. While his endeavors were not without impediments, they laid the groundwork for future U.S. policy in the region [17], particularly in promoting peace and democracy.

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