

At what cost? How U.S. unconditional support for Israel fuels America's moral hegemonic decline

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Donald Trump, the 47th President of the United States, was elected on an explicit promise that the USA would no longer engage in wars. As he stood on the campaign stage before his voters, he reaffirmed his promise, presenting himself as the pacifist whose power would “stop all wars” and bring unity to an “angry, violent, and totally unpredictable” world (The Times of Israel, 2025). Yet, at this very moment, the irony imposes itself: the man who, back in 2011, publicly accused then-President Barack Obama of plotting to start a war with Iran as a political strategy to win re-election (NDTV, 2024), finds himself in the epicenter of two simultaneous conflicts. In June 2025, with recent bombings ordered in Iran and a deep involvement in Gaza, Trump's actions directly contradict the narrative he built, making him the catalyst for the very conflicts he vowed to end.

While Trump's undeniable hypocrisy does expose a glaring personal contradiction, his actions are, in fact, a symptom of a much deeper issue: the accelerated decline of U.S. moral and symbolic hegemony. The first half of the 2020s has been acutely marked by this rapid deterioration, raising critical questions among international affairs analysts about the very role the U.S. has played as a leader and protector of democracy and human rights throughout a century of hegemony. For decades, underlying inconsistencies in American foreign policy were veiled, but they are now laid bare as flagrant contradictions, revealing the severe decay of U.S. legitimacy in representing the very values it champions internationally – values that, ironically, gave rise to the institutions that sustained the International Order of the last century.

As the unipolar order gives way to a turbulent multipolar reality, the contradictions of the United States have become evident, revealing a nation caught between its global ambitions and the erosion of its influence. Its moral authority, once sustained by a self-interested construction of public opinion, is now unraveling. In essence, as in the

tale by Hans Andersen, the Emperor's Clothes — woven from the rhetoric of defending democracy and human rights — have been revealed as nothing more than an illusion. The obvious transparency of its posture marks the peak of the corrosion of its credibility as a guardian of those values in the 21st century.

Therefore, this conjunctural analysis aims to examine how the United States, by subordinating its diplomacy, its discourse, and its international positioning to the unconditional defense of Israel, finds itself trapped in an ultimate and profound legitimacy crisis — one that is most visibly unfolding in the Middle East, where the collapse of its moral authority and credibility has become undeniable (Dagher; Kaltenthaler, 2023). This collapse, however, is not an isolated phenomenon; it has global repercussions, corroding the symbolic hegemony that allowed the U.S. to present itself as a beacon of democracy. As political scientist Stephen Walt observes, the war in Gaza has made Washington's discourse on liberal norms appear “deeply hypocritical” (Diwan, 2024), making it increasingly unable to win support in the Global South. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to analyze how this but crisis is accelerating the broader decline of U.S. normative power in the international order.

The Erosion of Hegemonic Legitimacy

According to the report “Debating American Primacy in the Middle East” (2024), hegemony, from a constructivist perspective, transcends mere material power; it demands legitimacy and the consent of other international actors. Therefore, no international order can be truly hegemonic without commanding some degree of consent and the ability to mobilize shared purpose (POMEPS Studies, 2024). This foundational concept helps explain the current precipitous decline in the United States' moral standing. The U.S. is no longer seen as a benevolent and aligned leader, but rather as an actor mired in contradictions, failing to uphold the very values it ostensibly champions. This is vividly exemplified by the U.S. vetoes of five consecutive UN Security Council resolutions calling for a ceasefire in Gaza (UN News, 2025) while simultaneously providing an astounding \$17.9 billion in military aid to Israel since October 7 (Brown University, 2024), an act widely condemned as a blatant violation of international humanitarian law despite

the U.S. proclaiming that democracy and human rights are at the center of its foreign policy.

This crisis of moral legitimacy was further aggravated in March 2025, when former President Donald Trump posted an AI-generated video on his Instagram profile depicting Gaza under U.S. and Israeli control. The video, made as political satire, showcased fabricated scenes of American and Israeli flags raised over Gaza, military parades, and celebratory images mocking the suffering of Palestinians and trivializing the ongoing genocide (The Guardian, 2025).

More than a personal failure of judgment, this episode reflects a political culture that has normalized the dehumanization of Palestinian lives for political gain (Prism, 2023). And, once again, in choosing to unconditionally side with Israel, the United States has willingly decided to stain its own image before the international community — sacrificing its symbolic authority and moral credibility. This incident not only provoked widespread public condemnation but also served as irrefutable evidence that the United States is no longer capable of embodying the values it claims to represent.

The result is a superpower whose name, once associated — however imperfectly — with the defense of democracy and human rights, is now increasingly tied to double standards and complicity in systemic violence. As Giovanni Arrighi (2005) argued in the context of the Iraq war, far from laying the foundations for a second “American Century”, U.S. imperial overreach has consistently jeopardized the credibility of its military might, undermined the centrality of the dollar in the global political economy, and accelerated the emergence of alternative poles of power, particularly China. What was once a meticulously constructed image of global leadership is now collapsing into a fractured reflection of arrogance, unpredictability, and profound ethical decay — a decline not born from external threats alone but from the unsustainable contradictions of American hegemony itself. Moreover, the Arab World now stands as the most telling mirror of this moral erosion.

The Middle East: Credibility Collapse

The Israel-Palestine conflict has emerged as the detonating event that unequivocally exposed the United States'

profound crisis of legitimacy in the Middle East. For decades, Washington sought to present itself as an “evenhanded broker” in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, promoting a narrative of moderation and peacemaker against the so-called “extremists” in the region (Foreign Policy, 2024). However, in practice, this role was always compromised by a clear, if sometimes veiled, pro-Israel bias — a contradiction that, until recently, was reluctantly tolerated by many Arab partners within certain diplomatic limits. This fragile equilibrium shattered in the wake of the 2023 Israel-Hamas war. As noted by Marc Lynch, the U.S. unconditional and unapologetic support toward Israel, previously embedded within a framework of supposed balance has now evolved into “something darker and less acceptable” for Washington’s traditional Arab citizens and allies, collapsing the regional discourse of order (POMEPS Studies, 2024).

This failure to moderate Israel’s actions or even to align U.S. behavior with its own proclaimed values has precipitated what analysts call a “crisis of order” in the Middle East, stripping away any pretense of moral coherence in U.S. foreign policy. As Stephen Walt (2024) points out, while the Biden administration continues to frame global conflicts as a struggle between “democracies and autocracies”, condemning rivals like Russia, Iran, and China for violations of international norms, its unwavering support for Israel during a clear humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza makes such narratives “deeply hypocritical”.

This glaring double standard undermines U.S. credibility in the Middle East and the image of the United States as a champion of democracy and human rights now rings increasingly hollow. This sentiment is captured with brutal clarity by the Iranian Foreign Ministry, which stated that Israel’s “brutal and relentless crimes” in Gaza have fully exposed the “moral decay” of the regime’s backers (Tehran, 2024).

This discourse, while originating from a geopolitical adversary, reflects a sentiment now echoed across the broader Arab world and the Global South. The consequence is unmistakable: what remains of America’s soft power, a crucial pillar of its global influence, is collapsing at an unprecedented speed. While the U.S. has long faced criticism for its uneven foreign policy, particularly after interventions like the Iraq War, its recent actions in Gaza have served as a critical turning point. As a result, a superpower that once projected itself as the architect of international norms is now perceived across the Middle East not as a mediator, but as a complicit actor in violence — a perception shaped

not by a single event, but by a series of interventions, prolonged military occupations, and unwavering support for controversial regimes. This is not simply a diplomatic failure; it is the cumulative unraveling of the symbolic foundations upon which U.S. global hegemony was built — a collapse unfolding in real time by decisions that have alienated much of the Arab world and the Global South.

U.S. Isolation Among Its Own Western Allies

What about the rest of the world? The answer is that the erosion of American moral authority is no longer confined to the Global South or the Middle East; it is now reverberating through the very core of the transatlantic alliance. For decades, Europe and the United States maintained a relatively unified front on major geopolitical issues, but Washington's blind alignment with Israel since the 2023 war has triggered unprecedented ruptures within this long-standing coalition.

Despite maintaining their fundamental support for Israel's "right to self-defense," under the immense pressure from domestic protests and civil society, European leaders have recently adopted a tone significantly more critical of Israel than Washington (Courthouse News Service, 2025). French President Emmanuel Macron not only warned that giving Israel a "blank check" to act in Gaza would severely undermine the West's credibility in the eyes of the international community, but also took concrete steps by sending humanitarian aid to Gaza even after Israel closed its borders to such assistance, directly challenging Israeli restrictions (Euronews, 2025). Also in the United Kingdom, traditionally one of the United States' most reliable allies, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak described Israeli actions in Gaza as "intolerable and counterproductive" (Map.UK, 2024). Even Germany, historically one of Israel's loyalist defenders due to the weight of historical responsibility, saw senior government officials questioning the war's "objective" and harshly condemning Israel's continued settlement expansion in the West Bank (The Times of Israel, 2025).

These growing fissures are not merely rhetorical. They reflect a deep and widening chasm between European civil societies — where public opinion overwhelmingly opposes the war in Gaza — and governments that are increasingly reluctant to follow Washington's strict line. In this context, the Gaza war does not merely expose the hypocrisy of

American foreign policy — it weaponizes that hypocrisy against the U.S. itself, accelerating a process of reputational collapse not only in the Middle East but within the West. A superpower once seen as the role model of the liberal international order now finds itself isolated, not because of diminished military power, but because of its moral and normative bankruptcy.

Shifting Perceptions and the Rise of Alternative Powers

This legitimacy decline, as previously discussed, has been particularly severe in the Arab world. Recent opinion polls offer empirical evidence of this reputational collapse: across six Arab countries, only 7% of respondents believed the U.S. played a positive role in the conflict, while powers like China and Russia received significantly higher approval (Fikra Forum, 2023). In Jordan, trust in the U.S. has fallen to 3%; in Iraq, to 7% — both far below the trust expressed toward rival powers. Analysts point out that Washington's unconditional support for Israel has eroded any remaining perception of neutrality, leading to what has been described as an "enormous loss of soft power in the region" (Washington Institute, 2023). When asked why the West supports Israel so unwaveringly, only 8% cited the Hamas attacks of October 7. By contrast, 50% responded that it was due to hatred of Islam and Muslims, while around 30% blamed the influence of the Israeli lobby.

This perception is not merely a reflection of foreign policy outcomes but is constantly reinforced by public rhetoric from high-level U.S. officials. As reported by The Guardian (2024), Senator John Kennedy publicly stated in a Senate hearing that: —

We are not going to waste American blood or treasure to help people who hate us. They hate us because they're taught to hate us by their religion, by their leadership and by their media (The Guardian, 2024).

This blatantly Islamophobic statement, far from being an isolated slip, mirrors a broader culture of normalized dehumanization that resonates deeply with how Arab publics interpret U.S. foreign policy. It reflects a profound collapse of the normative legitimacy upon which American foreign policy was once based, a collapse that now fundamentally undermines Washington's diplomatic

credibility, its counterterrorism efforts, and its capacity to exercise soft power in the Middle East and Global South region.

The "collapse of moral leadership" and the impaired ability of America to build consensus are evident. The Abraham Accords, once hailed as a cornerstone of a U.S.-backed regional order, have failed to withstand the fallout from Gaza; Arab states that normalized ties with Israel now publicly distance themselves, and Saudi Arabia has shelved its normalization plans indefinitely. This confirms that the region's future will not be shaped by "US-brokered backroom agreements but by the realities of power on the ground" (Middle East Monitor, 2025), thereby signaling the irreversible erosion of Washington's capacity to dictate the terms of regional stability and its broader hegemonic decline.

Final Considerations

The moral weakness of the U.S. position in the Middle East today fundamentally undermines its ability to forge regional consensus and sustain its traditional role as the architect of order and peace. While historically framed as an indispensable guarantor of stability, summarized by the phrase "If Israel did not exist, the U.S. would have to invent it" (Counterpunch, 2023), this very dependency on unconditional support for Israel is now paradoxically accelerating the collapse of American moral hegemony. The fallout from Gaza has shattered Washington's most recent diplomatic frameworks, such as the Abraham Accords, while pushing key Arab states to retract or freeze normalization processes with Israel. Simultaneously, Israel's ongoing democratic deterioration further dismantles one of the central narratives long weaponized to legitimize unconditional American alignment: the myth of supporting 'the only democracy in the Middle East.' (Vox, 2023).

In conclusion, this is no longer a predicted decline; it is an observable, measurable erosion unfolding in real-time. Regional actors are asserting autonomy, openly challenging Washington's objectives, while the broader international system steadily recalibrates toward multipolarity. The Gaza war has not merely accelerated the terminal crisis of U.S. moral hegemony in the Middle East; it has laid bare the structural contradictions of an empire that can no longer sustain the illusion of moral leadership or normative legitimacy. The world that emerges from this moment is one where American dominance is no longer a given but it

is instead replaced by fragmented orders, shifting alliances, and a geopolitical landscape increasingly defined by resistance to what Washington once represented.

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