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Title

The United States and the European Union Policies toward the Middle East Issues of Instability (2003-2016):

The Iraq War and the Iranian Nuclear Crisis

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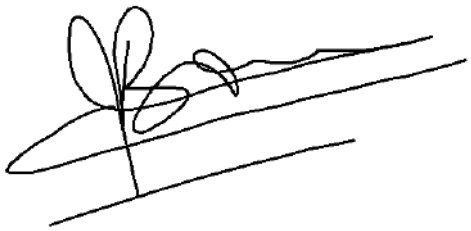
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Statement of Authorship

I hereby declare that the present work, entitled "The United States and the European Union Policies toward the Middle East Issues of Instability (2003-2016): The Iraq War and the Iranian Nuclear Crisis", supervised by Prof. ELAGGOUNE Abdelhak from the University of 8 Mai 1945-Guelma, is entirely my original work. This thesis reflects the results of my own research, and all sources used have been fully acknowledged. I confirm that this thesis has not been submitted previously for any degree, diploma, or qualification at any other institution. Furthermore, I certify that this work is free from plagiarism and represents the outcome of my own research, except where properly cited.

Signature of Boulmaiz Amel



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Finally, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to my colleague, Dr GOUASMIA Saadia, for her encouragement and cooperation throughout the completion of this thesis. Her contribution is gratefully acknowledged and sincerely appreciated.

Dedication

This work is lovingly dedicated to my family.

To the spirit of my father, whose strength guides me. To my lively mother, whose love and support inspire me. Your sacrifices and belief made this achievement possible.

To my husband, whose patience, encouragement, and steady presence gave me the confidence to continue even in the most challenging times. Thank you for standing beside me throughout this journey.

To my sons and daughters, who inspire me every day with their curiosity, resilience, and joy. You are the reason I strive to be better, and I hope this accomplishment shows you that perseverance truly matters.

And to my brothers and sisters, whose kindness, encouragement, and constant support have always reminded me that I am never alone.

This accomplishment is as much yours as it is mine.

Abstract

This thesis explores the policies of the United States and the European Union toward key issues of instability in the Middle East between 2003 and 2016, with particular focus on the Iraq War and the Iranian nuclear crisis. It analyzes the patterns of divergence and convergence that defined transatlantic foreign policy toward the Middle East during these focal years. Through employing a qualitative, comparative case study design, the thesis reveals how both players formulated and implemented their strategies in response to shared security challenges, including two key issue areas: Iraq and Iran. The findings reveal that the United States and the European Union often pursued differing policies due to contrasts in strategic culture, foreign policy systems, and perceptions of regional threats. The Iraq War revealed deep transatlantic splits, driven by US unilateralism and EU internal divisions, ultimately weakening Western influence and contributing to long term regional instability. Conversely, the Iranian nuclear crisis illustrated the potential for transatlantic cooperation, particularly as the E3 and later the P5+1 played a chief diplomatic role. Shifts in US strategy under the Obama administration largely made convergence possible, conforming American policy with established EU preferences for multilateral diplomacy. This research fills a gap in fully understanding the complex forces shaping US and EU policy choices and assesses their implications for the future of the Middle East, international diplomacy, and transatlantic relations. It contributes to academic scholarship by offering an integrated theoretical and empirical analysis of transatlantic foreign policy in two critical arenas of Middle Eastern geopolitics. Overall, it provides a key reference for understanding transatlantic relations, Western involvement in the Middle East, and the conditions under which great-power cooperation can alleviate or intensify regional instability.

Keywords: US- EU- foreign policy-the Middle East-instability-convergence-divergence- Iraq-Iran

Summary in French

Résumé

Cette thèse explore les politiques des États-Unis et de l'Union européenne à l'égard des principaux problèmes d'instabilité au Moyen-Orient entre 2003 et 2016, en se concentrant particulièrement sur la guerre en Irak et la crise nucléaire iranienne. Elle examine les forces de rapprochement et de rupture qui ont produit l'action extérieure transatlantique à l'égard du Moyen-Orient au cours de cette période. En utilisant une conception d'étude de cas comparative et qualitative, la thèse démontre comment les deux acteurs ont formulé et exécuté leurs stratégies en réponse à des défis de sécurité partagés, en Irak et en Iran. Les résultats révèlent que les États-Unis et l'Union européenne ont souvent poursuivi des stratégies différentes en raison de contrastes dans leurs cultures stratégiques, leurs systèmes de politique étrangère et leurs perceptions des menaces régionales. Le conflit irakien a révélé d'importants désaccords entre les partenaires transatlantiques, accentués par la posture unilatérale des États-Unis et les discordes au sein de l'Union européenne, ce qui a fortement fragilisé l'influence occidentale et favorisé l'instabilité régionale. À l'inverse, la crise nucléaire iranienne a illustré le potentiel de coopération transatlantique, en particulier lorsque l'E3 et plus tard le P5+1 ont joué un rôle diplomatique capital. Les modifications dans la stratégie américaine sous la présidence d'Obama ont largement rendu possible la convergence, alignant la politique américaine avec les options durables de l'UE pour la diplomatie multilatérale. Ce travail vise à pallier un manque dans l'analyse des mécanismes complexes influençant les décisions politiques des États-Unis et de l'Union européenne, tout en examinant leurs répercussions sur l'évolution du Moyen-Orient, la diplomatie mondiale et le partenariat transatlantique. Il enrichit la littérature scientifique par une approche combinant cadres théoriques et données empiriques appliquée à deux domaines stratégiques de la géopolitique moyen-orientale. Dans l'ensemble, il fournit une référence vitale pour comprendre les relations transatlantiques, l'action occidental au Moyen-Orient, et les conditions dans lesquelles la coopération des grandes puissances peut atténuer ou exacerber l'instabilité régionale.

Mots-clés : États-Unis - UE - politique étrangère - Moyen-Orient - instabilité - convergence- divergence- Irak-Iran

Summary in Arabic

ملخص

تتناول هذه الأطروحة سياسات الولايات المتحدة والاتحاد الأوروبي تجاه القضايا الرئيسية للاستقرار في الشرق الأوسط بين عامي 2003 و2016، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على حرب العراق وأزمة البرنامج النووي الإيراني. يحلل هذا البحث أنماط الاختلاف والتقارب التي ميزت السياسة الخارجية عبر الأطلسي تجاه الشرق الأوسط خلال هذه السنوات الحاسمة. ومن خلال استخدام تصميم دراسة حالة نوعية ومقارنة، تفصل الرسالة كيفية صياغة كلا الفاعلين وتنفيذ لاستراتيجياتهما استجابة للتحديات الأمنية المشتركة، بما في ذلك القضيتين الرئيستين في المنطقة لكل من العراق وإيران. تكشف النتائج الرئيسية للبحث أن الولايات المتحدة والاتحاد الأوروبي غالبًا ما تبنيان استراتيجيات متباينة نتيجة الاختلافات في الثقافة الاستراتيجية، وأنظمة السياسة الخارجية، والتصورات المتعلقة بالتهديدات الإقليمية. لقد كشفت حرب العراق عن تباينات عميقة في العلاقات عبر الأطلسي، ناجمة عن الانفراد الأمريكي والانقسامات الداخلية في الاتحاد الأوروبي، مما أدى في النهاية إلى إضعاف النفوذ الغربي والإسهام في عدم الاستقرار الإقليمي المستمر. في المقابل، أظهرت أزمة البرنامج النووي الإيراني إمكانية التعاون عبر الأطلسي، خصوصًا عندما لعبت دول E3 ولاحقًا مجموعة P5+1دورًا دبلوماسيًا مركزيًا .لقد مكنت التحولات في الاستراتيجية الأمريكية خلال إدارة الرئيس أوباما من تحقيق تقارب كبير، بما يتماشى مع خيارات الاتحاد الأوروبي الدائمة للدبلوماسية متعددة الأطراف. يسد هذا البحث فجوة في الفهم الكامل للديناميكية المعقدة التي تشكل خيارات السياسات الأمريكية والأوروبية، ويقيّم آثارها على مستقبل الشرق الأوسط، والدبلوماسية الدولية، والعلاقات عبر الأطلسي. يساهم هذا البحث في اثراء الدراسات الأكاديمية من خلال تقديم تحليل نظري وتطبيقي متكامل للسياسة الخارجية عبر الأطلسي في مجالين حاسمين من الجغرافيا السياسية للشرق الأوسط. وبشكل عام، يوفر مرجعًا أساسيًا لفهم العلاقات عبر الأطلسي، والمشاركة الغربية في الشرق الأوسط، والظروف التي يمكن أن يساهم فيها التعاون بين القوى الكبرى في التخفيف من أو تفاقم عدم الاستقرار الإقليمي.

الكلمات المفتاحية :الولايات المتحدة، الاتحاد الأوروبي، السياسة الخارجية، الشرق الأوسط، عدم الاستقرار، التقارب، الاختلاف، العراق، إيران

List of Acronyms

Acronyms	Meaning
AQI	al-Qaeda in Iraq
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CFSP	The Common Foreign and Security Policy
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CISADA	Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act
CJTF-OIR	Combined Joint Task Force—Operation Inherent Resolve
COIN	counterinsurgency
CPA	Coalition Provisional Authority
CSDP	Security and Defense Policy
CTS	Counter Terrorism Service
CTS	Counter Terrorism Service
ECHO	EU Humanitarian Office
ECSC	European Coal and Steel Community
ECTC	European Counter-Terrorism Centre
EEAS	European External Action Service
EEC	European Economic Community
EIDHR	European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights
EMP	Euro-Mediterranean Partnership
ENP	European Neighborhood Policy
ESDP	European Security and Defense Policy
ETA	Euskadi Ta Askatasuna

EU	European Union
EU-3	France, Germany, and the UK
EUAM Iraq	EU Advisory Mission in Iraq
Euratom	European Atomic Energy Community
FATF	Financial Action Task Force
FPA	Foreign Policy Analysis
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
INSTEX	Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges
IR	International Relations
IRA	Irish Republican Army
IRRF	Iraq Relief and Reconstruction Fund
ISF	Iraqi Security Forces
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NIE	National Intelligence Estimate
NPT	Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty
NSC	National Security Council
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
P5+1	United States, Russia, China, France, United Kingdom + Germany
PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces
PNAC	Project for the New American Century

RAN	Radicalization Awareness Network
SCIRI	Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq
SIGIR	Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction
SOF	Special Operations Forces
SOFA	Status of Forces Agreement
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNMOVIC	United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission.
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
US	United States
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

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Introduction

Topic Introduction

The United States-European Union (EU) relationship is one of the most significant partnerships in international geopolitics, grounded in mutual democratic principles, economic objectives, and security considerations. While there has been considerable alignment between the US and the EU in their foreign policies, differences in institutional structures, national priorities, and approaches to international issues can lead to divergent strategies, particularly in complex regions like the Middle East.

This geopolitically pivotal region, with its longstanding history of instability, political volatility, and high level significance, has remained a central focus of both the United States and the European Union's foreign policy. The United States, as a superpower, and the European Union, as a prominent political and economic entity, have both been extensively engaged in Middle Eastern affairs, albeit from distinct perspectives and with differing priorities. From military interventions to diplomatic negotiations, their roles in the region have significantly influenced the broader worldwide environment. Significant issues, including the Iraq War and the Iranian Nuclear Crisis, marked the period spanning from 2003 to 2016, providing a crucial context for analyzing the development of US-EU relations and the influence of their policies on regional stability.

Contextual Background

The beginning of the twenty-first century marked a radical period in the foreign affairs of the Middle East, as the region became a central arena for great-power involvement, security competition, and persistent instability, attracting the attention of international actors, namely the US and the EU. Within this context, the Middle East was overwhelmed by the growing number of security threats and disputes following the September 11, 2001 attacks, including the nexus of

terrorism and weapons of mass destruction in addition to the intensification of nuclear nonproliferation disputes centered on Iran.

Thus, the aforementioned crises compelled major powers to redefine their essential priorities, interests, and perceptions in the Middle East, a process further accelerated by the 2003 invasion of Iraq. As such, the 2003 invasion of Iraq was a watershed moment, generating unprecedented breaks within the transatlantic alliance. The United States adopted a militarized, unilateral approach justified through its post-9/11 security doctrine, whereas the European Union struggled to articulate a unified position due to deep divisions among member states.

Parallel to the Iraq crisis, Iran's nuclear program emerged as one of the most significant security challenges of the early 21st century. Iran's pursuit of nuclear technology, whether for civilian or potential military purposes, raised concerns over proliferation, power projection, and the balanced outcome of the Middle East. As a result, a complex diplomatic struggle emerged, involving multilateral negotiations, economic sanctions, and competing approaches to coercion and dialogue. While the United States tended to adopt a more confrontational and sanctions-driven strategy, the European Union highlighted diplomacy, consensus-building, and institutional commitment. This divergence underlined broader differences in transatlantic foreign policy orientations and revealed fundamental tensions within the Western alliance regarding how to manage crises in the Middle East. Ultimately, these dynamics intensely altered regional power calculations and compelled both the US and the EU to reassess their actions in the Middle East.

Through an analysis of the complex interplay between US and EU policies toward Iraq and Iran between 2003 and 2016, this thesis elucidates the fundamental and logical determinants shaping transatlantic foreign policy, while clarifying the significance of Middle Eastern instability within this framework. By focusing on this critical point in time, the study aims to provide the analytical tools necessary to interpret the divergent, and at times convergent, policy trajectories pursued by

the United States and the European Union during this period. In doing so, it exemplifies the broader implications of these policies for regional stability and the evolution of the transatlantic alliance.

The Importance of this Research Work

This thesis demonstrates how the United States and the European Union addressed the complex challenges of instability in the Middle East, specifically through their respective policies regarding the Iraq War and the Iranian Nuclear Crisis. By examining their responses, this work aims to offer a clearer understanding of how the foreign policy strategies of the US and the EU have both converged and diverged in response to regional instability. The major importance of this study lies in its endeavor to explore the fundamental motivations behind the US and the EU strategies, the mechanisms they used to address these crises, and the wider implications of their actions for both the Middle East and the international community.

Literature Review and Research Gap

The study begins with a comprehensive review of academic and policy-oriented literature on US-EU relations, transatlantic foreign policy, and Western involvement in the Middle East. This review situates the thesis within key scholarly debates in neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, constructivism, and Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). It also identifies gaps in the literature, particularly the absence of systematic comparative analysis of Iraq and Iran as contrasting cases of transatlantic divergence and convergence. Besides, the literature review provides the theoretical foundations that inform the analytical framework and research questions. Sources include academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, think-tank reports, and official analyses produced by governmental and international institutions.

Indeed, the academic literature presents a broad compilation that critically examines the complexities of transatlantic relations, Middle Eastern geopolitics, and US-EU foreign policies in

the Middle East, particularly in Iraq and Iran. Scholars have approached these topics through multiple theoretical and methodological perspectives, producing a fragmented yet considerable body of work. As such, this body of scholarship emphasizes the region's geopolitical significance while illuminating the complex subtleties that inform and shape American and European involvement in the area.

That said, a volume edited by John Peterson and Mark A. Pollack entitled "*Europe, America, Bush: Transatlantic Relations in the Twenty First Century*" argues that George W. Bush's presidency, particularly post-9/11 and during the Iraq War, damaged transatlantic relations through unilateral policies and political divergences. However, economic ties, NATO cooperation, and shared crucial goals ensured continuity in the alliance. Kaye Dassa Dalia, through *"Bound to Cooperate? Transatlantic Policy in the Middle East"*, highlights that US-EU cooperation in the Middle East is driven less by shared values than by mutual dependence created by regional instability and interlinked security interests. She shows that divergences in approach and tools, US hard power versus EU diplomatic and economic tools, persist and often limit consistency.

Moreover, David M. Andrews's edition of "*The Atlantic Alliance under Stress: US European Relations after Iraq"* meticulously examines the tensions on transatlantic relations following the 2003 Iraq War. He observes how disagreements over the invasion and policy priorities challenged political and diplomatic ties. Despite these tensions, institutional structures like NATO helped sustain the alliance. Similarly, Robert Kagan, in "*Of Paradise and Power*" contrasts the political cultures of Europe and the United States, arguing that differences in values, historical experiences, and approaches to power shape divergent foreign policy behaviors. He underlines that Europe tends toward diplomacy and multilateralism, while the US gives precedence to military strength and unilateral action.

Greg Caplan further added to this sphere in "*Transatlantic Relations and the Middle East: Partnership or Rivalry*" by identifying and analyzing the obstacles as well as the opportunities for transatlantic cooperation in the greater Middle East. The thesis also explores how differing essential priorities, political cultures, and tactics to regional crises outline the transatlantic relationship, revealing a complex mix of partnership and rivalry.

Not only that, a number of studies delved into the sphere of key issue areas of Iraq and Iran. For instance, Phebe Marr in "*The Modern History of Iraq"* traces Iraq's development from the early 20th century to the 21st century, examining political, social, and economic changes. It highlights how colonial legacies, internal divisions, and foreign interventions shaped state formation and national identity. Enayatollah Yazdani and Rizwan Hussain in *"United States' Policy towards Iran after the Islamic Revolution: An Iranian Perspective"* posit US policy toward Iran after 1979 from an Iranian perspective. They argue that the US pursued antagonistic containment to counter Iran's independent regional role. Whereas, Adebahr Cornelius' "*Europe and Iran: The Nuclear Deal and Beyond"* scrutinizes Europe's role in negotiating and sustaining the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA) and its broader foreign policy toward Iran. He argues that while Europe lacks the coercive power of the US, it has relied on diplomacy, economic incentives, and multilateral commitment to influence Iran.

Statement of the Problem

From 2003 to 2016, the landscape of international politics in the Middle East experienced deep instability, significantly shaped by two pivotal events: The Iraq War and the Iranian Nuclear Crisis. While distinct in their origins, dynamics, and outcomes, these crises serve as revealing case studies of the transatlantic alliance's capacities and limitations in addressing complex regional problems. Moreover, they not only emphasized the region's continuing instability but also represented significant challenges to international powers, particularly the United States and

the European Union, which were deeply involved in efforts to maintain regional security and political stability. The nature of their involvement during this period was shaped by a confluence of diverse interests, security concerns, and diplomatic strategies.

The impetus for this research work arises from the complexity and diversity of US and EU diplomatic actions in the Middle East during this period. Both actors implemented a range of policies that reflected their respective foreign policy frameworks while also revealing divergent, yet occasionally overlapping, approaches to securing their interests in the region. The United States focused on military intervention, unilateral action, and hard power prominence, driven by security imperatives and geopolitical objectives. In contrast, the European Union emphasized multilateral cooperation, diplomatic engagement, and soft power tools, including economic sanctions and peace-building initiatives, as primary means of tackling regional crises. This divergence was not merely vital but indicative of deeper differences in strategic cultures, political ideologies, and foreign policy priorities.

Despite far-reaching scholarly attention to particular developments during this period, such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the rise of ISIS, and the negotiation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a remarkable gap persists in the literature. Extensive comparative studies examining US and EU policies toward the Middle East, particularly with reference to the Iraq War and the Iranian nuclear issue between 2003 and 2016, remain limited. Existing research often deals with these crises in isolation, neglecting the interlocked nature of US-EU relations and the broader context in which both actors operated amid an increasingly unstable regional background. Accordingly, a complete examination of US and EU diplomatic courses during this period is essential to understanding the complexities of their actions and their long-term effects on regional stability.

Therefore, the central problem tackled in this study is twofold. First, it seeks to analyze and compare US and EU policies toward the Iraq War and the Iranian nuclear crisis, with particular emphasis on the essential objectives, security concerns, and political motivations shaping their approaches. By identifying both convergence and divergence in these policies, the study aims to provide a refined understanding of Western actions in the Middle East during a critical period of instability. Second, it evaluates the effectiveness of these policies in promoting regional stability, considering both their immediate consequences and their broader implications for transatlantic diplomatic involvement.

This thesis thus aims to address existing paucities in the literature by offering a broad and amalgamated analysis of Western foreign policy toward the Middle East, with particular reference to the Iraq War and the Iranian Nuclear Crisis during a period of intensified precariousness. In doing so, it seeks to deepen understanding of the complex forces at work shaping US and EU policy choices and to evaluate their implications for the future of the Middle East, international diplomacy, and transatlantic relations.

Research Objectives

The leading objective of this thesis is to analyze and explain the patterns of convergence and divergence in United States and European Union foreign policies toward instability in the Middle East between 2003 and 2016, with detailed reference to Iraq and Iran. By examining how each actor articulated, put into practice, and defended its policies during this period, the research study contributes to a multifaceted understanding of transatlantic foreign policy conduct and alliance politics in a post-Cold War and post-9/11 international system.

More specifically, the thesis pursues the following interrelated research objectives:

1. To examine the theoretical and conceptual foundations of transatlantic foreign policy, drawing on International Relations theory and Foreign Policy Analysis in order to explain cooperation and divergence between the United States and the European Union.
2. To trace the evolution of US-EU relations and their respective approaches to the Middle East, situating Iraq and Iran within a broader historical and institutional context of transatlantic interaction.
3. To analyze United States foreign policy toward Iraq and Iran between 2003 and 2016, focusing on policy design, decision-making processes, vital objectives, and the use of military, diplomatic, and economic devices.
4. To examine European Union foreign policy toward Iraq and Iran during the same period, with particular attention to governmental constraints, internal divisions, controlling obligations, and the EU role as a diplomatic and multilateral actor.
5. To identify the key factors driving divergence in US and EU policies, especially in the case of the Iraq War, including threat perceptions, strategic culture, official design, and power irregularities.
6. To explain the conditions under which US and EU policies converged, as demonstrated by cooperation in the Iranian nuclear negotiations and the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).
7. To measure the impact of US and EU policies on Middle Eastern instability, including their consequences for state fragility, sectarian division, regional power balances, and the emergence of non-state actors.
8. To evaluate the consequences of these policy choices for the transatlantic alliance, determining whether divergence represents alliance breakdown or a structural and enduring feature of transatlantic relations.

Through these goals, the thesis aims to provide an all-inclusive, theoretically well-versed, and empirically founded explanation of Western involvement in the Middle East during a period of intensified insecurity.

Scope of the Research Objectives

The range of this research is purposefully defined to ensure analytical precision, empirical depth, and theoretical consistency.

Temporal Scope

The study covers the period from 2003 to 2016, beginning with the US-led invasion of Iraq and concluding with the enactment phase of the JCPOA. This specified period encapsulates a critical phase in Middle Eastern geopolitics and transatlantic relations, incorporating the post-9/11 security environment, the War on Terror, the undermining of Iraq, the rise of transnational terrorism, and renewed diplomatic involvement in Iran's nuclear program.

Geographical Scope

The geographical focus of the thesis is the Middle East, with particular emphasis on Iraq and Iran as case studies. These two states were selected because they represent distinct yet interconnected sources of regional instability and because they occasioned contrasting policy responses from the United States and the European Union. Broader regional underlying forces are addressed where relevant, but the analysis remains concentrated on these two cases.

Participant Scope

The thesis focuses on two primary players:

- The United States, considered as a sovereign state with centralized foreign policy authority, worldwide military capabilities, and a dominant role in shaping regional security underlying forces.

- The European Union, examined as a supranational foreign policy actor characterized by shared sovereignty, institutional division, and consensus-based decision-making. Internal EU dynamic forces, including member-state divisions and institutional evolution, are considered insofar as they affect the EU collective foreign policy behavior.

Thematic Scope

The research concentrates on:

- Foreign policy decision-making
- Alliance politics and transatlantic relations
- Security and instability
- Strategic culture and threat perception
- Institutional constraints and multilateralism

The thesis does not aim to provide a complete history of Middle Eastern conflicts, nor does it analyze domestic political developments in Iraq or Iran beyond what is necessary to understand US and EU policy choices.

Analytical Scope

The study adopts a comparative, explanatory, and non-normative approach. While policy insinuations are discussed, the thesis does not seek to offer authoritative recommendations. Instead, it focuses on explaining models of behavior and their consequences within clearly defined scope conditions.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

This thesis is guided by the following main questions and hypotheses:

Research Questions

1. How did the United States and the European Union conceive and carry out their policies toward Iraq and Iran between 2003 and 2016?

2. What were the implications of these policies for regional instability and the transatlantic relationship?

3. What theoretical and official factors influenced US and EU decision-making toward the Middle East?

4. Why did US and EU policies diverge considerably in the case of Iraq after 2003?

5. How and why did their approaches converge in the Iranian nuclear negotiations culminating in the JCPOA?

6. What influence did internal political dynamics, threat perceptions, and strategic cultures exert in shaping these divergences and convergences?

7. How did the outcomes of US and EU policies affect broader Middle Eastern stability, particularly regarding sectarian breakup, regional rivalries, and the rise of ISIS?

8. To what degree did the US and EU policies, implemented during this period, reinforce or undermine the transatlantic alliance?

Research Hypotheses

On the basis of the aforementioned questions, it is hypothesized that:

RH1. From 2003 to 2016, the United States and the European Union formulated and executed their policies toward Iraq and Iran in accordance with distinct national interests, historical experiences and planned priorities. The United States preferred unilateral security interest, focusing on regime change in Iraq and containment, while the EU emphasized diplomatic action and multilateral involvement.

RH2. Within the defined timeframe, the policies of the US and EU toward Iraq and Iran significantly contributed to regional instability by shaping political vacuums, facilitating the rise of non-state actors, altering regional power balances, and affecting Western credibility, thereby complicating transatlantic relations due to contradictory approaches.

RH3. US and EU decision-making regarding Iraq and Iran was shaped by a combination of institutional limitations, domestic political dynamic forces, threat perceptions, and conceptual backgrounds, leading to different policy approaches.

RH4. The divergence in US and EU policies toward Iraq following 2003 due to differing threat perceptions. As the US viewed Iraq as an immediate security threat to its international position, the EU prioritized stability and humanitarian concerns, resulting in contrasting military and diplomatic responses.

RH5. The approaches of the United States and the European Union converged during the Iranian nuclear negotiations due to shared security concerns, international pressure, and coordinated diplomatic efforts, which created incentives for a unified policy outcome, culminating in the JCPOA.

RH6. Internal political forces at work, threat perceptions, and strategic cultures significantly influenced US and EU policies in the Middle East. The US adopted a more militaristic and security-oriented approach, while the EU policy was characterized by a long-term emphasis on diplomacy, multilateralism, and regional stability.

RH7. Throughout the delineated period, US and EU policies toward Iraq and Iran had greatly contributed to Middle Eastern instability by fostering sectarian disintegration, deepening regional rivalries, and unintentionally assisting the rise of ISIS.

RH8. US and EU policies during this period strained the transatlantic alliance due to divergent approaches to Iraq, but their eventual cooperation on the JCPOA in 2015 offered a moment of genuine partnership, thereby strengthening the alliance.

The Thesis Contribution

Despite the breadth of existing scholarship, a careful examination reveals several discernible gaps in the study of transatlantic foreign policy. The literature appears hesitant to engage in an

efficient comparative analysis of US and EU policies, often treating them in isolation rather than contrasting their approaches across cases. Moreover, few works successfully integrate international relations theory, foreign policy analysis, and regional studies into a consistent analytical framework. The dual crises of Iraq and Iran, which unfolded simultaneously and shaped transatlantic relations, are seldom examined totally, leaving the interplay between these cases underexplored. Likewise, while policy decisions are frequently scrutinized, their cumulative implications for Middle East stability remain inadequately addressed.

Finally, the internal division of the European Union, its institutional and structural constraints influencing foreign policy, remains underdeveloped as an explanatory variable. The present thesis is thoroughly constructed to connect these gaps, offering a wide-ranging, theoretically founded, and empirically rich comparative analysis of US-EU policies toward Iraq and Iran between 2003 and 2016. By clarifying the underlying logic and main imperatives shaping policy decisions, measuring up the complex range of challenges encountered, and assessing the deliberate moves devised by both players, the thesis makes a significant contribution to knowledge and yields an important aid to the understanding of the subject with which it deals.

Research Methodology

The research methodology for this thesis is qualitative, theory-guided, and comparative in nature. It is designed to explain patterns of convergence and divergence in United States and European Union foreign policies toward major sources of instability in the Middle East between 2003 and 2016.

Documentary and Archival Research

The study relies extensively on documentary research to reconstruct policy positions, decision-making processes, and official narratives. Primary sources include declassified government documents, policy strategies, diplomatic statements, speeches by senior political leaders,

European Union Council conclusions, European External Action Service (EEAS) communications, and United Nations resolutions and reports.

These materials provide direct insight into how US and EU policymakers defined threats, justified policy choices, and articulated their respective approaches to Iraq and Iran during the period under study.

Comparative Case Study Design

The core research design is a comparative case study structured around two principal cases: The Iraq War (2003-2016) and the Iranian nuclear crisis culminating in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (2003-2016). The cases are selected according to a most-similar systems design. In both cases, the same actors, the United States and the European Union, operate within the same regional context and confront overlapping security concerns, including terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and regional instability.

Despite these shared conditions, the cases produced contrasting outcomes: pronounced transatlantic divergence in Iraq and significant convergence in Iran. This design enables systematic comparison and strengthens causal inference regarding the conditions under which transatlantic cooperation succeeds or fails.

Comparative Analysis

Comparative analysis is employed to assess similarities and differences in US and EU policies across the two cases. The comparison focuses on policy objectives, crucial priorities, policy instruments, decision-making structures, and interpretations of instability and threat. This method facilitates the identification of recurring patterns and explains variation in transatlantic behavior across issue areas.

Process Tracing

Process tracing is used to identify causal instruments linking structural conditions, institutional arrangements, and conceptual factors to particular policy outcomes. By rebuilding sequences of events and key decision points, the study explains how divergence emerged in the Iraq case and how convergence developed in the Iranian nuclear negotiations. This method strengthens causal explanation by moving beyond relationship toward the identification of decision-making pathways.

Policy and Discourse Analysis

Policy analysis is employed to evaluate the coherence, implementation, and consequences of US and EU policies toward Iraq and Iran. This involves examining how policy instruments were selected and coordinated and how they shaped regional and transatlantic dynamics. Discourse analysis complements this approach by examining how policymakers outlined security, instability, legitimacy, multilateralism, and the use of force. Analysis of official rhetoric and deliberately crafted narratives is used to depict underlying assumptions and strategic cultures that informed policy choices.

Justification of Methodological Choices

A qualitative methodology is appropriate because the research seeks explanation rather than measurement and focuses on institutions, ideas, strategic cultures, and decision-making processes that cannot be adequately measured through quantitative indicators alone. The comparative case study design allows for contextual depth and theoretical refinement, while process tracing strengthens causal inference.

Thesis Structure

The thesis is composed of a general introduction, five chapters, and a general conclusion. Chapter One, entitled “Perspectives on Transatlantic Foreign Policy,” establishes the analytical

foundations of the study. It situates the research within the broader literature of International Relations and Foreign Policy Analysis, engaging with neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, and constructivism as complementary explanatory frameworks. The chapter further examines the role of institutional structures, strategic cultures, and decision-making processes in shaping United States and European Union foreign policies. By explaining significant concepts such as instability, legitimacy, multilateralism, and strategic culture, this chapter provides the conceptual tools necessary for the empirical analysis that follows.

Chapter Two, entitled "Evolution of US-EU Relations and Middle East Policies," traces the historical development of transatlantic relations in relation to the Middle East from the end of the Cold War through the post-9/11 period. The chapter highlights how shifting power dynamics, evolving security priorities, and major international events, most notably the September 11 attacks and the War on Terror, reshaped US and EU engrossment in the region. Particular attention is devoted to the emergence of the Middle East as a central arena of both cooperation and contestation within the transatlantic partnership, thereby exploring the Iraq and Iran cases examined in subsequent chapters.

Entitled "United States Policy toward Iraq and Iran (2003-2016)," Chapter Three offers a detailed examination of American foreign policy responses to two of the most consequential challenges to regional stability during the period under study. In the case of Iraq, the chapter analyzes the transition from containment to regime change and military intervention, emphasizing the influence of post-9/11 security doctrines, executive authority, and strategic culture on decision-making. With regard to Iran, the chapter traces the evolution of US policy from coercive isolation and sanctions toward conditional diplomatic concern, culminating in participation in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. These cases illustrate the logic, ambitions, and limitations of US policies for managing instability in the Middle East.

Chapter Four, entitled “European Union Policy toward Iraq and Iran (2003-2016),” examines the European Union’s approach to the same regional challenges, with particular emphasis on institutional constraints, internal divisions, and standardized commitments. In relation to Iraq, the chapter explores the EU opposition to unilateral military intervention, the internal fragmentation revealed by the 2003 crisis, and the Union’s subsequent engagement through humanitarian assistance, governance support, and rule-of-law missions. In the case of Iran, the chapter focuses on the EU leading diplomatic role in the nuclear negotiations, particularly through (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom) the E3 and later the European External Action Service, highlighting the Union’s function as a mediator within the United States, Russia, China, France, United Kingdom + Germany, known as the (P5+1) framework. The analysis demonstrates how the EU preference for multilateralism and normative power shaped its responses to regional instability.

Chapter Five, entitled “Comparative Analysis and Implications for Transatlantic Relations,” synthesizes the findings of the preceding chapters through a well-thought-out comparison of US and EU policies toward Iraq and Iran. It identifies patterns of divergence and convergence, assessing how differences in strategic culture, institutional design, and threat perception influenced policy outcomes and regional stability. The chapter further examines the implications of these findings for transatlantic alliance unity and Western engagement in the Middle East, underlining how the Iraq War strained the partnership while cooperation on the Iranian nuclear issue demonstrated the potential for functional complementarity between American and European approaches.

These chapters provide an all-inclusive analysis of United States and European Union policies toward key sources of instability in the Middle East between 2003 and 2016. By combining theoretical understanding with detailed empirical investigation, the thesis offers a refined

perception of the conditions under which transatlantic cooperation diverges or converges in one of the world's most unstable regions.

Chapter One

Perspectives on Transatlantic Foreign Policy

Understanding why the US and the EU often cooperate yet frequently diverge in their Middle East policies requires more than a description of events. It demands a deeper examination of the theoretical and institutional foundations that shape how both actors perceive the international system and define their core objectives. This chapter therefore establishes the conceptual framework for the thesis by situating US-EU relations within major International Relations (IR) theories, examining the internal dynamics of foreign policy decision-making, and exploring how identities, norms, and strategic cultures produce durable patterns of convergence and divergence.

The first task of the chapter is to outline how neorealism, neoliberalism, and constructivism each illuminate different aspects of the transatlantic relationship. Realist approaches highlight the role of power asymmetries, shifting polarity, and changing security environments in explaining alliance cohesion during the Cold War and growing divergence after 1991. Liberal perspectives draw attention to institutional cooperation, economic interdependence, and democratic values that help sustain the alliance despite recurrent disagreements. Constructivist insights reveal how identities, historical narratives, and normative commitments shape foreign policy preferences, particularly in relation to intervention, multilateralism, and order-building. Taken together, these structures provide the analytical perspectives through which the evolution of US-EU relations in the Middle East can be more systematically understood.

The chapter then turns to Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), which examines how internal institutional structures, domestic politics, and decision-making processes generate distinct foreign policy styles. The comparison between the US, a centralized federal state with a powerful executive, and the EU, a multi-level, consensus-driven system, helps explain why similar interests may produce different strategies. While Washington is structurally capable of rapid,

hard-power-oriented action, Brussels operates within a more fragmented institutional setting that favors diplomatic, economic, and rule-based instruments.

These institutional distinctions are complemented by deeper conceptual differences. The United States' strategic culture, shaped by exceptionalism, international leadership, and military primacy, contrasts with the EU identity as a civilian and normative power committed to multilateralism and conflict prevention. Such identities shape foreign policy preferences and affect how each actor interprets concepts such as legitimacy, stability, and the appropriate use of force.

Finally, the chapter examines how interests and threat perceptions vary across the Atlantic. Although the US and EU share several core concerns, regional stability, counterterrorism, Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) nonproliferation, and energy security, their priorities diverge on issues such as Israel's security, migration, and the broader geopolitical role of the Middle East. These differences are reinforced by contrasting assessments of regional instability, rooted in different geographic positions, historical experiences, and societal vulnerabilities.

These theoretical and institutional foundations provide the necessary analytical tools for understanding the patterns of cooperation and conflict explored in later chapters. They show that transatlantic disagreements in the Middle East are not random or sporadic but stem from deeper structural and cultural differences that shape how each actor understands and responds to the region.

1.1. Underlying Foundations

Any study of US-EU relations in the Middle East must rest on a solid theoretical foundation. Foreign policy decisions are never made in a vacuum; they are shaped by deeper assumptions about how the international system works, what motivates states and other actors, and which factors matter most in explaining cooperation and conflict. International Research (IR) theory

offers conceptual tools for making sense of these dynamics, allowing us to move beyond purely descriptive accounts of events and instead identify broader patterns, logics, and underlying mechanisms.

For this thesis, theory serves two main purposes. First, it provides insights through which transatlantic relations can be interpreted: neorealism highlights the importance of power and the distribution of capabilities; neoliberalism underscores the role of institutions, interdependence, and shared values; and constructivism draws attention to ideas, norms, and identities. Taken together, these perspectives help explain both moments of close agreement between Washington and Brussels and episodes of sharp disagreement, particularly in relation to the Middle East. Second, theory guides the analysis of how foreign policy is actually made. Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) complements systemic IR theories by focusing on decision-making processes, domestic politics, and institutional structures, which are crucial for understanding why actors with similar interests sometimes espouse different approaches.

This part therefore lays the foundation for the empirical chapters that follow. It begins by outlining three major IR theories, neorealism, neoliberalism, and constructivism, and assessing how each interprets the evolution of the transatlantic relationship. It then turns to foreign policy and Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), clarifying what is meant by foreign policy in this thesis and how FPA helps reveal the internal underlying forces of US and EU decision-making. Together, these theoretical and analytical tools provide the structure through which US-EU relations in the Middle East will be examined in subsequent chapters.

1.1.1. Major International Relations Theories and Transatlantic Relations

Understanding US-European relations, both historically and in the contemporary Middle East, requires drawing on several major theoretical perspectives of IR. While no single theory fully captures the complexity of transatlantic dynamics, neorealism, neoliberalism, and constructivism

each provide distinct and valuable insights. During the Cold War, realist frameworks dominated explanations of the US-European alliance, underlining power, security, and bipolarity. After 1991, as new forms of cooperation and disagreement emerged, liberal and constructivist approaches became more prominent in illuminating the persistence of institutional cooperation and the growing role of identities and norms. For the purposes of this thesis, these three theoretical perspectives, neorealism, neoliberalism, and constructivism, form the primary analytical foundation.

1.1.1.1. Neorealism

Neorealism, or structural realism, builds on the classical realist tradition traced to Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Hans Morgenthau (Burchill et al. 30). Classical realism emphasizes power-seeking behavior rooted in human nature, but neorealism, most notably articulated by Kenneth Waltz in *Theory of International Politics* (1979), shifts the focus to the structure of the international system. As Weber explains, Waltz's aim was to move realism away from assumptions about human nature and toward "the international system rather than human nature" (qtd. in Weber 16).

The essential assumptions of neorealism are well established. States are the primary actors in an anarchic system; their overriding goal is survival; and the distribution of power shapes both stability and conflict. Great-power rivalry is essential to international politics, and states may resort to force to defend their security and preserve national interest (Hobson 18). Two main constituents of neorealism, offensive and defensive, explain different patterns of conduct. Offensive neorealists argue that anarchy pushes states to expand their power whenever possible (Rose 149), while defensive neorealists contend that states expand only when they perceive threats, preferring strategies that maintain security rather than maximize dominance (149).

Transatlantic relations during the Cold War are often explained through realist concepts such as balancing and bandwagoning. Europe, economically devastated after World War II, lacked the capacity to balance against the US and instead bandwagoned with it (Walt, *"the Origins of Alliances"* 18-19). The bipolar structure of the Cold War created shared interests and a common threat, the Soviet Union, around which a stable alliance was built and institutionalized through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

The collapse of the Soviet Union removed this shared threat, raising questions about the alliance's future. As the US emerged as the sole superpower, neorealists predicted that Europe would either balance US power or seek greater autonomy. Although traditional "hard balancing" did not occur because the US posed no direct military threat, forms of "soft balancing" emerged. Robert J. Art argues that initiatives such as the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) reflect European efforts, particularly by France and Germany, to enhance the capacity to act independently (180).

Tensions deepened during the 2003 Iraq War, which exposed divergent transatlantic perspectives on the lawfulness of force. Kagan famously concluded that Europeans and Americans "do not occupy the same world" (3). While the US views military power as essential to tackle international threats, Europe, shaped by its postwar experience, shows partiality toward diplomacy, negotiation, and multilateralism (27-37).

Neorealism also uses polarity to explain changing transatlantic dynamics. Bipolarity during the Cold War produced predictability and alliance cohesion (Hollis and Smith 103). Unipolarity after 1991 enabled greater US freedom of action, which Europe occasionally regarded as unilateral and destabilizing. As Goldstein and Pevehouse observe, a dominant hegemon can reduce major conflict but may also generate resentment and balancing tendencies (82).

Consequently, Europe's pursuit of deeper integration, including economic and institutional consolidation, can be understood as a response to structural changes in the international system. The disappearance of a common adversary, combined with differing political cultures and threat perceptions, has produced a more complex and at times contentious transatlantic relationship in the post-Cold War era.

1.1.1.2. Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism developed partly in response to neorealism, challenging its negativity regarding cooperation. Sometimes described as a refined form of classical liberalism, neoliberalism presents a more optimistic view of international politics, rooted in reason, rationality, and the belief that conflict is avoidable (Burchill et al. 55).

Neoliberal theory emphasizes three central ideas. First, international institutions and economic interdependence reduce the likelihood of war by creating shared interests and facilitating cooperation. Second, democracies rarely fight each other, a claim known as the "democratic peace thesis," which helps explain the enduring partnership between the US and Europe. Third, multilateralism is both possible and desirable because institutions allow states to pursue long-term cooperation even in an anarchic system (Forsberg and Graeme 26).

Within this context, scholars distinguish between defensive neoliberalism, which promotes democracy through peaceful expansion, and offensive neoliberalism, which asserts that democracy may be advanced through forcible means (Miller 33). This distinction helps explain why the transatlantic alliance supported peaceful democratic enlargement in Eastern Europe in the 1990s but was also divided over more coercive strategies such as the Iraq War.

Neoliberalism argues that transatlantic cooperation continues not because of a shared external threat but because of shared values, political identities, and institutional memberships. As Simoni notes, the resilience of the US-European alliance is embedded in "security and economic

interests, norms, values, political identities and membership in public institutions" (24). NATO, the EU-US partnership, and overlapping participation in international organizations reinforce institutional ties and help manage disputes (26).

Neoliberals acknowledge that conflicts can arise, for example, over Middle Eastern interventions or trade issues, but interpret these tensions as temporary. Shifts in political leadership or domestic preferences may produce disagreements, yet the underlying fabric of cooperation remains strong due to mutual benefits and institutional frameworks. In contrast to neorealism, neoliberalism therefore explains the persistence of transatlantic cooperation after the Cold War as an expression of shared liberal values, deep economic interdependence, and the stabilizing effects of international institutions.

1.1.1.3. Constructivism

Constructivism emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s alongside other significant approaches such as feminism, postmodernism, and critical theory. It occupies a "middle ground" between rational choice theory and post-positivist approaches (Wendt 393). The foundational text of constructivism is Alexander Wendt's "Anarchy is what States Make of it," which challenges the realist postulation that anarchy inevitably produces antagonism. Instead, Wendt argues that state identities and interests are socially fabricated: anarchy has no inherent logic but takes on the meaning states collectively assign to it (400). Constructivism thus emphasizes ideas, norms, and identities as drivers of foreign policy. Political culture, elite beliefs, and historical narratives shape state preferences as much as material capabilities. Security dilemmas and competitive behavior arise not from structural anarchy alone but from the way states interpret others' intentions.

This perspective provides a powerful insight for understanding post-Cold War transatlantic relations. For example, US foreign policy under President George W. Bush was heavily

influenced by neoconservative beliefs about American exceptionalism, moral obligation, and the need to confront authoritarian regimes. These ideas contributed to unilateral action after 9/11 and culminated in the 2003 Iraq War, which deeply strained relations with European allies. From a constructivist viewpoint, the crisis stemmed not only from material interests but also from conflicting identities, norms, and leadership styles (Lauterbach 79).

While constructivism enhances our understanding of conceptual and normative dynamics, critics argue that its focus on individual action and identity can make it difficult to provide systematic predictions about the international system. Nonetheless, constructivism complements neorealism and neoliberalism by explaining how shared values, collective memory, and identity shape cooperation and conflict across the Atlantic.

Each International Relations (IR) theory highpoints different dimensions of transatlantic relations. Neorealism gives emphasis to general structure, polarity, and power distribution, which explain alliance cohesion during the Cold War and growing divergence afterward. Neoliberalism highlights shared norms, institutions, and economic interdependence, offering insight into why the alliance persists despite disagreements. Constructivism illuminates how identities, political cultures, and elite beliefs shape foreign policy choices and contribute to transatlantic tensions, especially concerning the Middle East. These theories provide a more complete understanding of US-European relations than any single perspective alone. A multidimensional theoretical approach is therefore essential for analyzing the evolution of transatlantic policy toward the Middle East.

1.2. Foreign Policy and Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA)

Foreign policy encompasses the actions, strategies, and decisions through which states, or international actors like the European Union, pursue their interests and shape their external environment. Christopher Hill defines foreign policy as “the sum of official external relations

conducted by an independent actor (usually a state) in international relations" (3). This definition highlights three components: an actor capable of external action, a set of deliberate and formalized policies, and an international environment in which actors seek security, influence, and prosperity. Foreign policy thus includes diplomacy, economic governance, sanctions, alliance-building, crisis intervention, and multilateral engagement (4). It is a decisive and purposeful process rather than a collection of isolated actions.

FPA emerged in the mid-20th century as a response to the limitations of systemic theories such as classical realism and neorealism. Rather than treating states as unitary rational actors, FPA examines the internal processes through which foreign policy decisions are made. Valerie Hudson aptly describes FPA as an "actor-specific theory… based on the premise that the causes of foreign policy lie primarily at the level of individual and group decision-making" (6). FPA grew out of scholarship on decision-making, bureaucratic politics, group psychology, and cognitive processes. It developed partly in response to major foreign policy failures which showed that domestic factors, bureaucratic conflict, and misperceptions significantly shape state behavior (Hudson and Vore 209).

FPA rests on several fundamental assumptions that explain how and why states behave differently in similar international situations. First, FPA emphasizes that agency matters. Leaders and decision-making bodies interpret threats subjectively, meaning they select from multiple possible responses rather than reacting in a purely mechanical way. Their interpretations and choices shape the direction of foreign policy (Alden and Aran 1-3).

A second major assumption is that domestic politics play a significant role in shaping foreign policy outcomes. Factors such as public opinion, interest groups, partisan competition, and the actions of various bureaucratic agencies all influence how decisions are made and which options are considered viable (Kaarbo 2-8). Third, FPA hypothesizes that perception and misperception

deeply affect decision making. Leaders do not rely solely on objective conditions; instead, they act according to their beliefs, cognitive biases, and mental shortcuts. These perceptions can lead to misunderstandings or miscalculations in international affairs (16).

Finally, FPA treats foreign policy as an ongoing process rather than a single moment of choice. Negotiation, bureaucratic bargaining, and institutional constraints continually shape policy outcomes, making foreign policy the result of complex exchanges and evolving considerations (Smith et al. 81-84). These suppositions emphasize why states facing the same international challenge may nevertheless adopt very different foreign policy responses.

FPA is particularly valuable for analyzing the US and EU because both actors have complex, multi-layered decision-making systems. In the US, foreign policy reflects the interplay between the presidency, Congress, the State Department, the Pentagon, intelligence agencies, and domestic ideological shifts. In the EU, foreign policy formation is even more complex, involving supranational institutions (European Council, Council of Ministers, Commission, EEAS) and the diverse preferences of 27 member states (Smith*, "Europe's Foreign…"*21-24).

These institutional differences, combined with contrasting political cultures and historical experiences, help explain why the US and EU, despite shared interests and values, frequently adopt divergent policies in the Middle East. By focusing on decision-making processes, institutional constraints, and domestic influences, FPA provides essential perceptions into the origins of transatlantic disagreement and cooperation.

1.2.1. Institutional Structures of Foreign Policy

Understanding how foreign policy is organized within different political systems is essential for explaining why international actors facing similar external challenges often adopt divergent strategies. Institutional structures determine who participates in foreign policy decision-making, how authority is distributed, and what constrictions shape policy outcomes. It is therefore

important to examine the formal frameworks through which the European Union and the United States formulate and implement foreign policy. By explaining the evolution and central institutions of the EU foreign policy system and contrasting them with the constitutional foundations of US foreign policy, the analysis provides the institutional context needed to assess why transatlantic approaches, particularly in regions such as the Middle East, frequently come together yet at times diverge.

1.2.2. The EU Foreign Policy System

For the purposes of this thesis, understanding the European Union's foreign policy system is essential for explaining how and why its external actions sometimes converge with, and sometimes diverge from, those of the United States. The EU is a complex and evolving international actor whose foreign policy is shaped by a wide range of institutions, procedures, and member state preferences. Before examining how the EU takes foreign policy decisions, it is necessary to trace briefly its evolution as an international actor and outline its institutional framework.

1.2.2.1. Evolution of the EU as an International Actor

The EU is a unique international organization. As McIver notes, it is not a federation of states like the US but a system of common multinational institutions created by sovereign states, each of which has yielded part of its sovereignty to allow binding decisions to be made at the European level on matters of shared interest (McIver 3).

European integration began in the aftermath of the Second World War, when political leaders concluded that deep economic and political cooperation was the only way to secure lasting peace on the continent. In 1952, six states, France, Germany, Italy, and the three Benelux countries, created the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), which entered into force on 23 July 1952 (Gerven 24). This was followed by the Treaties of Rome of 25 March 1957, in force from 1

January 1958, which established the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom) with the goal of building a common market based on the free movement of goods, workers, and services (Ruttley 235).

To implement common policies, the Treaty of Rome created four key institutions: A Council with legislative authority, a Commission with executive power, a European Parliament as representative assembly, and a Court of Justice to ensure the legality of Community acts (Ruttley 235). Through the 1970s and 1980s, the European Community expanded as new states joined, and its economic success transformed it into a significant actor in international economic affairs. This success, combined with external shocks such as the 1973 oil crisis, pushed the Community to pay greater attention to its international role and to regions such as the Middle East (Reisen 38).

The Single European Act of 1986, in force from 1 July 1987, expanded integration by outspreading qualified majority voting, strengthening the European Parliament's powers, and giving it veto rights over accession and association agreements (Bedman 127). A decisive step followed with the Maastricht Treaty, negotiated in 1991, signed in 1992, and in force since November 1993. Maastricht created the EU and introduced a three-pillar structure: The European Community, the CFSP, and Justice and Home Affairs. It also increased Parliament's powers, widened the use of qualified majority voting, and set the foundations for a single currency (Smith *"Europe's Foreign…"* 26; Gerven 9).

Further reforms came with the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997, which adapted and strengthened EU policies in areas such as the free movement of persons, judicial cooperation, and foreign policy. The Nice Treaty, in force from 2003, addressed institutional questions such as Council voting, Commission composition, and Parliament seats (Gerven 10). Finally, the Lisbon Treaty, signed on 13 December 2007 and in force from 1 December 2009, created a permanent President

of the European Council and introduced new structures designed to make the EU a more coherent and effective international player (McIver 6).

The EU thus represents the latest stage in a long integration process that began with six states and now includes a much larger membership. It rests on a series of binding treaties and increasingly harmonized laws and policies in economic, social, and political fields. Alongside a customs' union and single market, it has progressively developed a CFSP and cooperation in Justice and Home Affairs, laying the foundation for a more visible and unified international presence.

1.2.2.2. Main Institutions (European Council, Council, Commission, Parliament, EEAS)

The EU is widely regarded as the most advanced example of voluntary institutionalized political integration in the world (Lister 74). Member states remain sovereign, but they merge parts of their sovereignty to pursue common policies through shared institutions. At the EU level, the main institutions involved in decision-making are the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Council, and the Council of Ministers (Council of the European Union), complemented by bodies such as the Court of Justice and the European Central Bank.

The European Commission is often described as the "guardian of the treaties." It represents the interests of the Union as a whole, has the exclusive right of legislative initiative in most policy areas, and functions as the EU executive arm. Composed of 27 Commissioners, each responsible for a policy portfolio, it is organized into Directorates-General (DGs) covering sectors such as Economic and Financial Affairs, Agriculture, Enlargement, and External Relations, along with internal and general services like Budget, Translation, and the Secretariat-General (Archer 36). No legislative act can be adopted at the EU level unless the Commission has formally proposed it, and it plays a leading role in implementing policies, ensuring acquiescence

with EU law, and representing the Union externally, particularly in trade, where it is the sole negotiator (Carbone 11-13).

The European Council sits at the top of the EU political system. It brings together heads of state or government and the President of the Commission in regular summit meetings. Its principal function is to provide the Union with general political direction and priorities. It usually decides by consensus, although qualified majority voting applies in cases such as electing its President or appointing the Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (Gerven 15). In foreign policy, it sets the broad basic guidelines, including on security and defense.

The Council of Ministers (Council of the European Union) represents member state governments and is a central decision-making body. It meets in different configurations of national ministers (foreign affairs, finance, agriculture, etc.) and shares legislative power with the Parliament. It discusses, amends, and adopts legislation, coordinates member state policies, and defines and implements key aspects of EU foreign policy (Popescu 27).

The European Parliament represents EU citizens and is directly elected for five-year terms. It has 751 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), with seats roughly proportional to population. Although it cannot formally initiate legislation, it shares legislative authority with the Council under the ordinary legislative procedure, can amend or reject proposed laws, and must give consent to important international agreements and the appointment of the Commission (Archer 38).

Other institutions contribute to the EU functioning. The Court of Justice interprets EU law with binding authority, the Court of Auditors supervises financial management, and the European Central Bank manages the euro and monetary policy. Advisory bodies represent economic, social, and regional interests (Archick 3). The EEAS, created by Lisbon, serves as the EU

diplomatic service, but its detailed discussion follows in the analysis of Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and external action.

1.2.2.3. The Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)

Treaties not only define EU institutions but also set objectives and decision-making rules. Of particular relevance is the Maastricht Treaty of 1993, which transformed the European Community into the EU and created the CFSP as a second pillar alongside the European Community and cooperation in Justice and Home Affairs (Archer 47). The CFSP provided a common framework for foreign and security policy, enabling member states to undertake joint actions and coordinate strategies where they could reach consensus.

Under the CFSP, institutions play differentiated roles. The European Council sets overall foreign policy guidelines and can adopt common strategies in areas of vital interest. The Council of Ministers adopts common positions and joint actions, sometimes acting on Commission proposals. The Commission itself can propose initiatives in foreign affairs, especially when they intersect with its competences. Decisions on common strategies and major initiatives usually require unanimity, whereas implementing measures can often be adopted by qualified majority (Smith, “Europe’s Foreign…” 38).

The CFSP has allowed the EU to act jointly on a variety of issues, including the Middle East. For example, member states have agreed on joint actions such as the 1994 initiative on the Middle East peace process, signaling that the EU seeks to exert a coherent influence on regional developments (Brian 103). Although defense remains primarily a national competence, the CFSP and subsequent developments in the ESDP have strengthened the EU ambition to shape international security through crisis management missions, diplomatic initiatives, and support for peace processes.

1.2.2.4. Decision-Making Processes and Constraints

EU decision-making is complex, involving institutions that represent state governments, citizens, and various societal interests. Different legal instruments, regulations, directives, decisions (binding) and recommendations, opinions (non-binding), are based on specific treaty provisions, known as legal bases, and are adopted through different procedures (Archer 56). While older procedures such as Consultation and Consent still exist, giving the Parliament a limited or veto-based role, the Ordinary Legislative Procedure now governs most legislation. Under this procedure, the Parliament and the Council share legislative power, and a proposal from the Commission can only become law if it is approved by both institutions. Parliament can accept, amend, or reject the proposal; if it ultimately rejects it, the Council cannot adopt it (Archer 52-53).

In foreign policy, decision-making is even more inhibited by the need for consensus and sensitivity to national sovereignty. Treaty reforms and enlargements since the 1950s have created a multilayered institutional system in which authority is distributed among the Commission, Parliament, European Council, Council of Ministers, and various agencies. As Popescu argues, the "messiness" of EU policy-making makes simple descriptions difficult, as numerous actors participate in different roles throughout the policy cycle.

Despite this complexity, member states launched the CFSP precisely to enhance their collective weight in international affairs and to give the EU a more credible international role. Over time, the EU has become not only a major economic actor but also an increasingly visible political actor, using its institutional machinery to promote common positions on issues such as the Middle East peace process, Iran's nuclear program, and regional stabilization. Yet institutional constraints, consensus requirements, overlapping competences, and the continued sovereignty of member states, still limit the speed and coherence of EU foreign policy.

1.2.3. The US Foreign Policy System

In contrast to the EU treaty-based, evolving political system, the US is a consolidated nation-state governed by one of the world's oldest written constitution. Its political development includes more than two centuries of federal experience and a civil war, and its constitutional framework has shaped a distinct foreign policy decision-making system.

1.2.3.1. Constitutional Foundations

The US Constitution rests on six basic principles: popular sovereignty, limited government, federalism, checks and balances, judicial review, and the separation of powers (Davidson et al. 225). The separation of powers divides the federal government into three branches, legislative, executive, and judicial, each with its own powers and responsibilities. Decisions are made at both federal and state levels, but in foreign policy the key actors are the President, Congress, and the Supreme Court.

The Constitution distributes foreign policy powers between the executive and legislative branches. Article I enumerates Congress's powers, including the regulation of foreign commerce and the power to declare war. Article II outlines the President's powers, including making treaties (with Senate consent), appointing ambassadors, and serving as commander-in-chief. The judiciary exercises judicial review and can strike down unconstitutional legislation. Foreign policy is thus the product of a shared and sometimes contested process among the branches (Henkin 112).

1.2.3.2. The Executive Branch and Foreign Policy

Article II grants the President authority to conduct foreign relations: to negotiate treaties, appoint ambassadors (with Senate approval), receive foreign envoys, and command the armed forces. Over time, presidential power in foreign policy has expanded, partly due to the practical need for rapid action and partly because presidents increasingly use executive agreements, which

do not require prior Senate ratification, to manage external relations (McKeever and Davies 182-83).

The President is supported by a network of executive actors. The Department of State manages diplomacy and represents the US abroad; the Department of Defense oversees military policy; the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) gathers intelligence; and the National Security Council (NSC) coordinates national security policy. The NSC, headed by the National Security Adviser, has become especially influential, advising the President on foreign and security issues. It usually includes the President, Vice President, Secretaries of State and Defense, the CIA Director, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and other senior officials (Vile 196).

1.2.3.3. Congress and Foreign Policy Oversight

Congress is bicameral, consisting of the House of Representatives (435 members, two-year terms) and the Senate (100 members, six-year terms). It wields substantial foreign policy authority. The President negotiates treaties, but they must be ratified with the Senate's advice and consent. Ambassadorial appointments also require Senate confirmation. Congress regulates foreign commerce and, crucially, holds the power to declare war under Article I, Section 8, Clause 11 (Grimmett, "Foreign Policy…").

Beyond formal powers, Congress exercises oversight through hearings, investigations, funding decisions, and the confirmation of key foreign policy officials. The Senate's power to approve treaties and high-level appointments gives individual senators significant influence. The House of Representatives, while less directly involved in treaty ratification, plays a central role in authorizing and appropriating funds for foreign operations and aid (Vile 121).

The balance between presidential and congressional power in foreign affairs has fluctuated historically. Periods of strong presidential leadership (such as during World War I or after 9/11) have alternated with periods of heightened congressional assertiveness, as seen in the rejection of

the League of Nations or post-Vietnam constraints. After the 11 September 2001 attacks, Congress granted the President broad authority to use force, marking a shift toward executive dominance in security policy (Vile 146, 270).

Foreign policy is also shaped by bureaucratic institutions beyond the core constitutional branches. Departments and agencies, including State, Defense, CIA, and others, bring their own organizational interests, cultures, and expertise to the decision-making process. This bureaucratic politics dimension complicates the simple division of powers and underscores that US foreign policy outcomes often result from negotiations and compromises among multiple actors, not merely from presidential directives (Allison and Zelikow 57).

1.2.4. Comparative Assessment of US and EU Decision-Making Systems

If foreign policy expresses how international actors define and pursue their interests, institutional structures determine who makes these choices, how they are made, and under what constraints. The way foreign policy is organized and decided in a political system is therefore crucial for understanding why actors facing similar external challenges, such as the US and the EU in the Middle East, often respond in different ways. Institutions distribute authority, shape access to information, structure internal bargaining, and mediate the influence of domestic actors.

For the purposes of this thesis, examining the institutional foundations of US and EU foreign policy is essential for three reasons. First, it clarifies the formal roles of key organs, such as the European Council, the Council, the Commission, the European Parliament and the EEAS on the EU side, and the Presidency, Congress, and core executive agencies on the US side. Second, it highlights the contrast between a supranational, treaty-based polity with shared sovereignty (the EU) and a constitutionally unified federal state (the US). Third, it shows how varying degrees of centralization, different balances between hard and soft power, and divergent geographic

orientations (international vs. predominantly regional) shape each actor's capacity to formulate and implement foreign policy.

It is necessary, therefore, to proceed in three steps. First, one has to analyze the evolution and institutional architecture of the EU foreign policy system, with particular attention to the CFSP and the constraints of consensus-based decision-making. Then, there is a need to outline the US constitutional framework and the main institutions involved in American foreign policy, including the Presidency, Congress, and key bureaucratic actors. Finally, it is essential to offer a comparative assessment of both systems, emphasizing how their structural differences generate distinct foreign policy styles and have important implications for transatlantic cooperation in the Middle East and beyond.

1.2.4.1. Centralization vs. Fragmentation

A comparative view of the US and EU systems reveals both similarities and important differences. In both, decision-making authority is distributed across multiple institutions rather than concentrated in a single executive. In the EU, executive authority is shared between the Commission and the Council of Ministers, while legislative power is divided between the Council and Parliament (Sbragia 21). In the US, the executive, legislative, and judicial branches share authority, with the Presidency and Congress especially intertwined in foreign policy.

However, the degree of centralization differs. The US federal government can compel states in ways that the EU cannot coerce member states. Since the Second World War, Washington has steadily increased its power at the expense of state governments. By contrast, EU member state governments remain powerful and are directly represented as governments in the Council of Ministers and European Council; they retain significant autonomy in many policy areas (Sbragia 31).

1.2.4.2. Hard Power vs. Soft Power Capacities

Another contrast lies in capabilities. The US possesses unmatched military power and international force projection capabilities, underpinned by a large defense budget and international network of bases (United States Department of Defense, "National Defense Strategy"). The EU, despite some progress in security and defense, remains primarily a "civilian power," relying more on economic, diplomatic, and regulatory instruments (Duchêne 35). This difference in hard power versus soft power capacities shapes how each actor responds to international crises and influences the relative importance of their institutional tools.

1.2.4.3. Global vs. Regional Scope

The US foreign policy outlook is worldwide. As Archer notes, the United States, as the sole remaining superpower, acts as a leading actor in world politics, focusing on worldwide security and fundamental issues (99). The EU, while increasingly active internationally, maintains a predominantly regional focus on its immediate neighborhood and on internal integration. This divergence is reflected in the post-Cold War era: the US has concentrated on international threats such as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and "rogue states," whereas the EU has focused on European enlargement, border security, migration, and internal consolidation (Daalder).

1.2.4.4. Implications for Transatlantic Cooperation

These structural and capability differences contribute directly to diverging foreign policy agendas and instruments. As Kagan observes, the US and Europe increasingly differ in setting priorities, defining threats, and fashioning foreign and defense policies (qtd. in Howorth, *"Foreign and Defense…"* 13). The US is prepared to use military force unilaterally when it deems necessary, sometimes outside multilateral frameworks; European states prefer political, diplomatic, and economic tools and place significant trust in international institutions and legal regimes (Pollack, "Unilateral America…" 115).

This divergence became particularly visible after 9/11, when the George W. Bush administration adopted a “war on terror” framework and a more unilateral foreign policy, including withdrawal from multilateral agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol and the International Criminal Court. European governments, by contrast, favored multilateral, institutional approaches to emerging security threats. These differing agendas and instruments have generated recurring tensions over Middle Eastern policy, including Iraq, Iran, and broader regional security issues.

1.3. Identities, Norms, and Strategic Cultures

Foreign policy is shaped not only by institutions and material capabilities but also by the deeper ideas through which political actors understand themselves and interpret the international environment. Identity, norms, and strategic culture constitute this conceptual basis. They influence how actors define their interests, perceive threats, and select the instruments they consider legitimate or effective. As constructivist scholars argue, these shared understandings are not merely reflections of material power but are constitutive of foreign policy conduct itself, shaping preferences and expectations over time.

For the US and the EU, the role of identity and strategic culture is particularly significant. Despite both actors being dominant leaders of the liberal international order, they often approach international issues, from military intervention to diplomacy, multilateralism, and the use of economic instruments, through very different views. These differences are especially perceptible in their respective policies toward the Middle East, where transatlantic disagreements have frequently been imbedded not in conflicting interests, but in contrasting normative orientations and historically entrenched worldviews.

Understanding these divergences requires examining how the US and EU have developed distinct foreign policy identities. The United States’ self-image as an exceptional nation with

worldwide responsibilities has fostered a strategic culture centered on hard power, military primacy, and willingness to act unilaterally when necessary. The EU, by contrast, emerged from a postwar context that refuses power politics in favor of integration, consensus-building, and multilateral cooperation. Its identity as a "civilian" and "normative" power shapes its preference for diplomacy, economic tools, and rule-based commitment.

That said, one has to examine the conceptual foundations of US and EU foreign policy in three steps. First, to analyze the historical evolution of American foreign policy identity and its strategic culture built around exceptionalism, liberal hegemony, and military superiority. Second, to explore the EU identity as a civilian and normative actor rooted in multilateralism and the rejection of force. Finally, to compare the two strategic cultures to illuminate how these deeply embedded ideas contribute to divergent transatlantic approaches to the Middle East.

1.3.1. US Foreign Policy Identity and Strategic Culture

American foreign policy identity has long been shaped by the idea of national exceptionalism, the belief that the US has a unique mission to defend liberty and promote democracy. This notion, entrenched in early republican ideology, presents the US as morally distinct and internationally responsible (McCrisken 15-17). After World War II, this self-image evolved into a hegemonic identity: The US cast itself as leader of the "free world," charged with protecting liberal order against authoritarian threats (Brands 42). During the Cold War, this identity justified worldwide commitments, alliance networks, and repeated interventions.

This historical self-understanding underpins what scholars' term liberal hegemony, a grand strategy that combines military preponderance, extensive alliances, and support for democracy and open markets (Ikenberry, "America's Imperial …" 56-59). From this perspective, the US views itself as the foremost supporter of international stability and often regards hard power as necessary to enforce norms, especially in relation to terrorism, "rogue states," and WMD.

The US strategic culture favors hard power and sees military force as a legitimate and often effective tool of foreign policy. With the world's most technologically advanced military, American leaders perceive the use of force as credible for achieving political objectives (Gray 144-46). This orientation helps explain interventions such as Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003), and numerous counterterrorism operations in the Middle East. As Posen argues, US grand strategy relies on "command of the commons," the ability to project power internationally (Posen 11).

A belief in international leadership sometimes translates into unilateral tendencies. Kagan maintains that the US often feels responsible for shaping international order and therefore prefers to act independently when multilateral mechanisms appear too slow or constraining (Kagan 28-30). This unilateral impulse was evident in the 2003 Iraq War, US rejection of the Kyoto Protocol, and skepticism toward the International Criminal Court. Together, these practices reflect an identity as a liberal hegemon that relies on coercive, internationally oriented hard power to manage instability.

1.3.2. The EU as a Civilian and Norms-based Power

The EU foreign policy identity developed from Europe's distressing experience of two world wars. Determined to prevent future conflict, European states built a political culture emphasizing restraint, integration, and multilateralism. The EU institutional complexity, lack of a unified military command, and reliance on consensus make it structurally different from a traditional military power (Duchêne 45-47).

François Duchêne superbly characterized the European Community as a "civilian power" that seeks to achieve its objectives primarily through non-military means such as diplomacy, trade, and development assistance (19). This identity persists in today's EU. Its external action relies heavily on economic diplomacy, conflict prevention, mediation, institution-building, and

humanitarian and development aid. In regions like the Middle East and North Africa, the EU underscores stabilization, governance reform, and socio-economic support.

Ian Manners argues that the EU also functions as a "normative power," promoting values such as human rights, democracy, rule of law, and multilateral cooperation (240-43). This normative orientation is visible in EU support for a Two-State Solution in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, leadership in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiations with Iran, and consistent advocacy of international law and diplomatic conflict resolution. It generates a strong preference for peaceful, rule-based approaches to regional crises.

The EU strategic culture is deeply multilateral and institution-centered. Howorth notes that its default reflex is to act through coalitions and international organizations such as the UN, NATO, and OSCE ("*Security and Defense…"* 71-73). Institutional constraints reinforce this: the need for consensus among 27 member states, limited military integration, and fragmentation between EU and national foreign policies all restrict rapid, forceful action. These constraints have encouraged the development of sophisticated diplomatic, economic, and regulatory tools, consolidating the EU identity as a civilian and normative actor.

1.3.3. Comparing US and EU Strategic Cultures

The US and the EU diverge significantly in their approaches to the use of force and international law. US strategic culture emphasizes deterrence, dominance, and readiness to deploy military power (Gray 144), while the EU stresses legal frameworks, norms, and negotiated solutions (Howorth, "*Security and Defense …"* 72-73). These differences feed into contrasting attitudes toward multilateralism. The EU instinct is to embed action in multilateral institutions and legal regimes; the US is more willing to act unilaterally or through ad hoc coalitions if multilateral mechanisms appear ineffective or restrictive (Kagan 28-30).

These divergent identities and strategic cultures help explain differing responses to crises such as the Iraq War, Iran's nuclear program, and broader Middle Eastern conflicts. The US favored regime change in Iraq and applied coercive pressure on Iran; the EU preferred containment in Iraq, diplomatic engagement with Iran, and viewed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as fundamental to regional stability. From 2003 to 2016, such identity-driven differences repeatedly shaped US-EU policy disagreements, revealing how deeply embedded ideas and norms guide foreign policy on both sides of the Atlantic.

1.4. Interests, Perceptions, and Regional Priorities

While material capabilities and institutional structures shape what international actors can do, their concrete conduct in specific regions is largely determined by what they want to achieve and how they perceive the environment in which they operate. In the Middle East, the US and the EU often confront similar developments, conflict, terrorism, WMD proliferation, energy volatility, state fragility, yet they do not always interpret these phenomena in the same way or assign them the same priority. Understanding the pattern of US-EU cooperation and divergence therefore requires going beyond abstract theory and examining the substantive interests, perceived threats, and regional priorities that guide their actions.

In this regard, it is imperative to focus on three closely related dimensions. First, to analyze US and EU interests in the Middle East, distinguishing between areas of convergence, such as stability, counterterrorism, nonproliferation, and energy security, and those where priorities diverge, including Israel's security, migration and neighborhood stability, and questions of regional hegemony. Second, to explore how Washington and Brussels construct and rank threats, showing that differences in historical experience, geography, and domestic politics shape their interpretations of terrorism, "rogue states," WMD, regional conflicts, and the Israeli–Palestinian issue. Third, to examine the concept of "instability" in the Middle Eastern context, unpacking its

multiple dimensions, state weakness, regional rivalries, non-state actors, WMD, external intervention, and socio-economic fragility, and explaining why this instability matters differently for US and EU policymakers.

These elements provide the empirical and conceptual connection between the earlier theoretical and identity-focused discussion and the subsequent analysis of concrete transatlantic comportment in the Middle East. They show that even where interests are broadly shared, divergent perceptions and regional priorities can generate contrasting policy choices and recurrent tensions in US-EU relations.

1.4.1. US and EU Interests in the Middle East

Understanding the interests of the US and the EU in the Middle East is essential for analyzing their long-term strategies and for determining whether their policy divergences arise from fundamentally different priorities or from differing assessments of how best to pursue broadly similar goals. The Middle East remains a region of high geopolitical significance, affecting political, economic, and security interests across the transatlantic sphere. While Washington and Brussels differ in levels of action and strategic attitude, both have historically highlighted security and energy concerns in their regional policies. As Blackwill and Stürmer argue, the Greater Middle East has long been "a gateway to trade in the East, the birthplace of Christianity and, more recently, as a primary energy supplier to the West" (2).

Although their strategies diverge, many analysts agree that the US and EU share a set of core interests in the region. Satloff contends that "nowhere are American and European strategic interests in fundamental conflict" (34). The following subsections outline areas of shared interest as well as the specific priorities that generate divergences.

1.4.1.1. Shared Interests

Both the US and the EU view regional stability in the Middle East as a core intended interest rather than a secondary or peripheral concern. Instability in this region tends to have direct and immediate spillover effects: it fuels extremist narratives, generates refugee flows, disrupts trade routes, and contributes to energy market volatility. These dynamics do not remain contained within the Middle East but resonate across the Euro-Atlantic area, affecting the internal security, social cohesion, and economic performance of both actors. In this sense, stability is not merely a normative aspiration; it is an essential condition for safeguarding their own domestic resilience (Perthes 86)

For both the US and the EU, stability also has a systemic dimension. A relatively predictable Middle East reduces the likelihood of sudden shocks, such as abrupt regime collapse, regional wars, or transnational crises, that can force excessive high level modifications. The maintenance of stable state structures, even if imperfect, is therefore seen as a way of containing potential chaos that might otherwise require substantial diplomatic, financial, or security-related attention. Because crises in the Middle East can quickly become international issues, both actors treat the region as a central variable in the broader stability of the international system (Perthes 86).

In addition, stability in the Middle East is closely connected to the protection of economic interests, particularly trade and investment, which are important components of both US and EU prosperity. Continued instability discourages foreign investment, disrupts supply chains, and undermines market confidence, with knock-on effects felt in European and American economies. This reinforces the perception in Washington and Brussels that stability in the Middle East is not a matter of distant concern but a question linked to their own long-term security and economic well-being.

The rise and transformation of transnational extremist groups have made counterterrorism a shared and enduring interest for both the US and the EU. Terrorist organizations rooted in or operating through the Middle East have demonstrated the capacity to project violence far beyond the region's borders. Attacks in North America and Europe, as well as against Western interests worldwide, have shown that developments in the Middle East can translate directly into threats to the safety of US and European citizens. As a result, both actors perceive the region as a crucial arena in which the foundations of their own internal security are partly determined (Weinberg and Perliger 55).

Counterterrorism is also linked to the protection of their political systems and societal cohesion. Extensive terrorist attacks have the potential to create a rift in domestic politics, strengthen extremist movements, and erode public trust in institutions. For both Washington and Brussels, reducing the space in which extremist networks can recruit, plan, and propagate their ideology is therefore an interest that extends beyond physical security. It touches on the preservation of liberal democratic values, the protection of pluralistic societies, and the prevention of social fragmentation within their own territories (Byman, *The Five Front War* 45).

Furthermore, terrorism is understood as a challenge to their broader international roles and reputations. Both the US and the EU present themselves as defenders of a rules-based international order and as protectors of their populations. Allowing Middle Eastern-based terrorist organizations to operate with impunity would undermine their credibility in these roles. Thus, counterterrorism is not only a defensive interest but also an integral part of how they sustain their international standing and justify their international engagement (Byman, *The Five Front War* 128).

The prevention of WMD proliferation in the Middle East is another major shared interest. For both the US and the EU, the spread of nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons in a region

already characterized by deep rivalries and frequent conflicts is seen as a serious threat to regional and international security. A Middle East in which multiple states or non-state actors possess WMD would be more disposed to coercive politics, miscalculation, and potentially catastrophic escalation. Non-Proliferation is thus a core interest because it directly affects the risk of large-scale warfare and the stability of the international security architecture (Delpech 3).

From a transatlantic perspective, proliferation in the Middle East also carries important implications for alliance commitments and extended deterrence. The US and European states are intertwined through NATO and other security arrangements; any proliferation crisis in the Middle East could generate debates about the credibility of security guarantees, the role of nuclear deterrence, and the potential need for new defensive positions. Both actors therefore have an interest in maintaining the integrity of the nonproliferation regime so as to avoid pressures for further nuclearization or arms races that could challenge international norms (Delpech 5).

Moreover, the nonproliferation interest is closely linked to their broader commitment to a rules-based international order. The US and the EU both support international standards that restrict the development and use of WMD, and they view adherence to these values as essential for international predictability and trust. Violations in the Middle East, if left unchecked, could destroy these rules more widely and create precedents for other regions. As a result, preventing WMD proliferation in the Middle East is seen not only as a regional concern but also as a pillar of their wider vision of international security (Delpech 15).

Energy security constitutes an enduring and fundamental interest for both the US and the EU. The Middle East and North Africa contain some of the world's largest reserves of oil and gas, and the stability of energy supplies from this region has historically underpinned Western economic growth. Even though their levels of dependence differ, both actors recognize that major disruptions to energy flows from the Middle East would have immediate and potentially severe

consequences for worldwide markets and, by extension, for their own economies (Van der Linde).

For the EU, the link between the Middle East and energy security is particularly direct. Many member states rely on imports from the region for a substantial share of their oil and gas needs, which makes the availability, price, and safe transport of these resources a vital interest (Van der Linde). Energy security is therefore not only about physical supply but also about price stability and predictability. Sudden spikes in energy prices can pressure national budgets, aggravate economic inequality, and stimulate political discontent. This creates a clear incentive for the EU to be attentive to developments in the Middle East that could affect production, transit routes, or investor confidence.

Although the US has significantly reduced its direct dependence on Middle Eastern imports, due in large part to domestic production, it remains deeply embedded in an interconnected international energy market. Sharp disturbances in Middle Eastern supply would still drive up world prices, with immediate repercussions for American consumers and industries. Thus, even in an era of greater energy self-sufficiency, Washington retains a strong interest in the broader stability and reliability of Middle Eastern energy exports (Gholz and Press 453-85).

Beyond purely economic observations, energy security also has significant consequences. Control over or access to energy resources and transit routes shapes the balance of influence among regional and international actors. For both the US and the EU, ensuring that no antagonistic power can influence energy dominance in the Middle East to threaten their economic or political interests is a key component of their deliberate process of evaluating options, risks, and potential consequences to make informed, long-term decisions. In this way, energy security links together market stability, geopolitical influence, and the broader resilience of the transatlantic community (Gholz and Press 463-75).

1.4.1.2. Divergent Interests and Priorities

For the United States, Israel's security constitutes a uniquely important national interest shaped by layers of historical, cultural, religious, and mutually beneficial relationship. The US-Israel liaison is often described as a "special relationship," rooted not only in long-term cooperation but also in a powerful sense of shared identity and values that resonates deeply within American political culture (Satloff 10-11; Mearsheimer and Walt 35). This enduring sympathy reinforces US perceptions of Israel as a critical democratic ally in an otherwise explosive region. As a result, safeguarding Israel's security is woven into broader US conceptions of regional stability, counterterrorism, and the defense of like-minded partners.

The EU, by contrast, also recognizes the importance of Israel's security, but places this interest within a more complex normative and geopolitical framework. The EU proximity to the region, combined with its strong commitment to international law and human rights, leads Brussels to place significant emphasis on Palestinian rights and the need for a negotiated two-state solution. This twofold commitment reflects Europe's broader normative identity and contributes to a more balanced, or, from Washington's viewpoint, sometimes overly cautious, approach. The result is a structural divergence in emphasis: while both sides value stability and security in the Levant, the US gives preference to Israel's security as a foremost regional interest, whereas the EU interprets long-term peace as inseparable from addressing Palestinian ambitions (Gowan and Brantner 7).

Migration dynamics illustrate another major structural divergence in US and EU interests. For the European Union, geographic proximity to the Middle East and North Africa means that regional crises have immediate demographic and social repercussions. Conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Libya have produced large-scale displacement, directly affecting European societies through increased refugee inflows, pressure on welfare systems, and intensified political debates over

identity, integration, and social cohesion (Boswell and Geddes 44). Migration has thus become a central EU interest not simply as a humanitarian concern but as a matter affecting internal political stability, electoral dynamics, and the functioning of the Schengen system.

This makes the stabilization of Europe's southern neighborhood, socially, politically, and economically, an essential component of European far-sighted thinking. Any regional developments that engender displacement, whether through conflict or state failure, are perceived as potential challenges to Europe's internal stability. For these reasons, partnerships with Middle Eastern and North African states on migration management and long-term stability have risen to the forefront of EU priorities (Collett and Ahad 9).

By contrast, the US is geographically protected from Middle Eastern migration flows. US migration patterns originate primarily from Latin America rather than the Middle East, meaning that displacement from the region does not carry the same direct social or political consequences (Passel and Cohn 3). As a result, while Washington is attentive to refugee issues in a broader humanitarian sense, migration does not occupy a central place among its core regional interests. This asymmetry contributes significantly to divergent transatlantic priorities.

Another major divergence lies in how the US and the EU conceive their geopolitical roles in the Middle East. For the United States, the region has long been integral to maintaining international preeminence. Washington views the Middle East through the view of broader international power balances, seeking to prevent any adversarial actor, whether the Soviet Union during the Cold War or regional challengers such as Iran, from gaining dominance or threatening US influence (Brands 88). This interest is tied to maintaining calculated access, protecting maritime routes, and ensuring that the region does not fall under the command of powers hostile to broader American international objectives. At a deeper level, the US sees stability in the

Middle East as essential to sustaining the credibility of its international leadership and preserving favorable power dynamics internationally.

The EU, by contrast, does not view the Middle East as a theater for geopolitical competition in the same way. Lacking hegemonic ambitions, the EU frames its interests around maintaining stability in its immediate neighborhood rather than projecting dominance. Europe's emphasis lies in preventing security spillovers, such as terrorism, radicalization, and large-scale migration, from destabilizing its internal cohesion (Balfour et al. 5). In this perspective, the Middle East matters predominantly because developments there affect Europe's security environment, not because the region is fundamental to European aspirations for international influence. These differing horizons, international for the US and regional for the EU, create structural divergences in priorities and interpretations of what constitutes the most pressing interests in the Middle East.

1.4.2. Divergent Threat Perceptions

Although the US and EU frequently recognize the same broad categories of risk in the Middle East, terrorism, WMD proliferation, failing states, and long-running conflicts, their deeper interpretations of these threats diverge significantly. These divergences echo contrasting historical experiences, geographic realities, political cultures, and essential traditions. As Clawson notes, in the early 2000s Washington gave preeminence to counterterrorism and WMD proliferation, while Europe viewed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the essential driver of regional instability (127). These differing priorities illustrate how threat perception is shaped as much by identity and context as by objective assessments of danger.

1.4.2.1. Terrorism

For the US, the trauma of the 9/11 attacks produced a profound reorientation of national security priorities and permanently elevated terrorism to the top tier of perceived threats. The feeling of defenselessness created by the attacks reinforced a conviction that terrorism must be

addressed at its point of origin and that threats emerging from the Middle East could have catastrophic consequences for American society (Bacevich 47). Thus, terrorism became viewed not only as a foreign threat but as a direct challenge to national survival and international leadership.

The European Union also regards terrorism as a serious concern, but its interpretation is shaped by different experiences. European societies have long been exposed to domestic forms of terrorism, from the Irish Republican Army (IRA) to Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) to far-right networks, leading to a more differentiated understanding of the phenomenon. Moreover, concerns about social cohesion, radicalization within immigrant communities, and judicial frameworks shape European thinking. As a result, the EU tends to assume terrorism more as a hybrid challenge involving security, societal integration, and long-term structural factors (Ortega 156-58). These distinct historical, social, and geographic contexts help explain why terrorism, although a shared threat, is perceived differently on the two sides of the Atlantic.

1.4.2.2. "Rogue States" and Weapons of Mass Destruction

Washington traditionally interprets states such as Iraq, Iran, and Syria through a high-stakes security lens. These states are seen as potential sources of existential danger because of their pursuit of WMD and their alleged connections to terrorism (Litwak 1-3). This perception reflects an American strategic culture that emphasizes worst-case scenarios and highlights preventing confrontational states from acquiring capabilities that could defy US security or international authority.

The EU approaches these same states with a different conceptual agenda. For Brussels, even hostile regimes are embedded within networks of international norms and institutions that can be used as channels for influence and constraint. The EU preference for diplomatic engagement and conditionality reflects a belief that dialogue and negotiated frameworks reduce long-term risks

and maintain stability (Delpech 3). Europe's proximity to the Middle East also encourages more watchful interpretations of escalation risks. Consequently, while the US and EU agree that WMD-seeking states are a major concern, they understand the nature and magnitude of that threat in different ways.

1.4.2.3. Regional Conflicts and Governance Failures

Europe tends to view unresolved conflicts and governance failures, such as weak state institutions, authoritarian practices, and socio-economic inequality, as primary sources of instability in the Middle East. These structural issues are seen as underlying drivers that make societies vulnerable to extremism, violence, and mass displacement. This perspective stems from Europe's commitment to conflict prevention, social stability, and the belief that durable peace requires addressing root causes (Howorth, "*Security and Defense …*" 120).

The US confesses these structural challenges but gives greater weight to hard security threats and confrontational state conduct. From the US perspective, preventing antagonistic actors from acquiring capabilities that threaten American interests is often more imperative than addressing governance failures (United States Department of Defense, "2022 National Defense Strategy"). As a result, while both actors recognize similar problems, they rank them differently in terms of calculated importance.

1.4.2.4. The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

The EU interprets the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a central driver of regional instability and believes that its resolution is essential for broader Middle Eastern peace. This reflects Europe's post-colonial sensitivities, its reliance on international law, and its commitment to negotiated solutions. The conflict is thus viewed not only as a humanitarian or political issue but as a symbolically important challenge with extensive regional repercussions.

The United States, however, has traditionally outlined the conflict primarily through the perception of Israeli security and alliance politics. American core thinking tends to consider the conflict as one of several regional disputes rather than the cornerstone of stability. This difference in arrangement reflects broader divergences in identity, regional ties, and historical experiences (Satloff 10; Kaye, "*Mind the Gap"* 21).

1.4.2.5. Domestic Political and Historical Drivers

Historical legacies and domestic contexts play a major role in shaping transatlantic divergence. Europe's long history in the region, including its colonial past and complex interactions with Middle Eastern societies, creates a strong normative preference for caution, diplomacy, and sensitivity to regional grievances (Kaye, "*Mind the Gap"* 20; Zielonka 231). These historical experiences continue to influence public opinion, elite discourse, and institutional approaches across the EU.

The US, by contrast, lacks a colonial past in the Middle East but has developed a deeply rooted considered relationship with Israel and assumed a greater regional role as European influence declined after World War II (Andersen et al. 285; Vatikiotis 59). This shift placed the US as the primary Western actor in Middle Eastern geopolitics, shaping its threat perceptions and forward-looking approach.

Geography adds another layer of divergence: Europe's proximity to the region exposes it directly to refugee flows, economic shocks, and extremisation risks, whereas the US is protected by physical distance (Archick 2-3). These differing structural conditions create distinct interpretations of the same regional environment, reinforcing longstanding differences in transatlantic threat assessments.

1.5. Understanding Instability in the Middle East

"Instability" is widely used in transatlantic debates, yet the concept carries a broad and multidimensional meaning. In scholarly analysis, it refers not simply to intermittent crises or temporary disruptions but to enduring political, social, and economic patterns that weaken state capacity, fuel conflict, and prevent durable order. It denotes a condition in which states struggle to maintain authority, societies remain vulnerable to fragmentation, and regional dynamics repeatedly generate tension and insecurity. As Hinnebusch explains, Middle Eastern instability originates in "the weakness of states, the incoherence of regional order, persistent conflicts, and the intervention of external powers" (3). His formulation captures the interconnected nature of these challenges, which collectively destroy political resilience and deepen the region's structural instability.

1.5.1. State Weakness and Authoritarianism

State weakness lies at the heart of regional instability. Many Middle Eastern governments lack the institutional depth, bureaucratic capacity, and broad legitimacy needed to manage societal demands or provide consistent public goods. Institutions are often highly centralized yet administratively weak, dependent on support networks rather than professional governance. Gause notes that these regimes face "permanent domestic challenges that make them insecure internally and externally" (8). This insecurity stems from the narrow bases of political legitimacy typical of authoritarian systems, where rulers rely heavily on coercion and elite bargains instead of inclusive political processes.

Such weakness increases vulnerability to internal conflict because populations excluded from political participation may turn to oppositional movements, sectarian mobilization, or armed resistance. Moreover, weak institutions create opportunities for external actors to manipulate domestic politics, exploit divisions, or support rival parties. The snowballing effect is a persistent

inability of states to maintain stability, adapt to social pressures, or mediate conflicts, making state weakness both a cause and a symptom of broader instability (Crenshaw 387).

1.5.2. Regional Rivalries

Instability also emerges from the region's dense network of interlocking rivalries. The Middle East is characterized by a range of intersecting clashes, Arab-Israeli tensions, intra-Gulf rivalries, Kurdish territorial claims, and competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia for regional influence. These rivalries create an environment in which domestic and regional security concerns merge, generating what Buzan and Wæver describe as "regional security complexes," where threats easily spill across borders and the security of one state is tightly intertwined with that of its neighbors (187).

Because these rivalries are often rooted in competing national identities, sectarian memberships, historical grievances, and power inequalities, they become self-reinforcing. Actions taken by one state to enhance its security may be interpreted by others as threatening, leading to cycles of mistrust, military buildup, and proxy competition (Buzan and Wæver 188). This dynamic prevents the emergence of a cohesive regional order and contributes to a chronic condition of insecurity that permeates both interstate and domestic politics throughout the region.

1.5.3. Terrorism and Non-State Actors

Terrorism and non-state armed actors represent another major source of instability, bourgeoning in environments marked by weak governance, sectarian division, and socio-economic deprivation. Groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) exploit power vacuums and deep societal divides, presenting themselves as alternatives to failing state institutions. As Hoffman explains, such organizations are "products of structural conditions that allow militant networks to flourish and challenge state authority" (87-88).

These groups do more than perpetrate violence, they reshape political landscapes by undermining state sovereignty, redrawing territorial control, and mobilizing transnational ideologies. Their operations go beyond borders, linking unrelated conflict zones and drawing in regional and international players who seek to contain or defeat them. Terrorist organizations thus play a double destabilizing role: they challenge the authority of existing states and serve as facilitators for broader geopolitical contestation (Crenshaw 387).

1.5.4. Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction

Concerns over WMD add another layer to Middle Eastern instability. Nuclear and chemical weapons programs, whether actual, aspiring, or suspected, intensify perceptions of threat and aggravate regional competition. The controversies surrounding Iraq's alleged WMD prior to 2003, Iran's nuclear ambitions, and Syria's use of chemical weapons illustrate how WMD issues intensify regional suspicion. Kibaroglu highlights that these programs "reinforce regional insecurity and external intervention" (226).

The mere possibility of WMD capability can modify regional calculations, prompting neighboring states to pursue countermeasures or external alliances. The resulting security dilemmas inhibit cooperation and harmonization, contribute to arms races, and make miscalculation more dangerous. Thus, WMD proliferation is not only a technical challenge but a political one, amplifying existing rivalries and undermining the prospects for long-term stability (Krepon and Gagné 112).

1.5.5. External Intervention

External intervention, historical and contemporary, has profoundly shaped regional instability. From the legacies of European colonialism to Cold War competition and the more recent involvement of the US and Russia, outside powers have consistently influenced political trajectories in the Middle East. According to Gerges, great-power involvement has "amplified

existing conflicts and introduced new layers of geopolitical rivalry" ("*the New Middle East* ... 41-43").

External actors often align with local factions, provide military or financial support, or impose geopolitical agendas that may be at odds with local political forces at work. Such interventions frequently establish authoritarian leaders, worsen sectarian polarization, or transform domestic disputes into proxy struggles among external rivals. Over time, this arrangement has weakened regional autonomy and contributed to a persistent sense of explosiveness and insecurity.

1.5.6. Socio-Economic Fragility

Finally, socio-economic fragility constitutes a primary driver of instability. The region suffers from chronically high unemployment, particularly among youth, combined with rapid demographic growth, resource constraints, and total corruption. These conditions create a deep divergence between societal expectations and available opportunities. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) highlights that "the mismatch between demographic growth and economic opportunity creates structural pressures that fuel unrest" (United Nations Development Program (UNDP*)*14-16).

Economic stagnation erodes public trust in state institutions, fosters resentment toward ruling elites, and provides fertile ground for extremist recruitment. Inequality and uneven development further aggravate tensions between regions, communities, and social groups. Without inclusive economic structures or effective social safety nets, socio-economic fragility becomes a constant source of political volatility, intensifying other drivers of instability (Piazza 340).

1.5.7. Why does Instability Matter for US-EU Policy?

Although both the US and the EU consider Middle Eastern instability a major high-priority concern, they posit its nature in fundamentally different ways. The US tends to view instability primarily through a hard-security lens, concentrated on terrorism, WMD proliferation, and hostile

state behavior. These issues are seen as immediate threats to national security and worldwide leadership. The EU, however, adopts a more all-inclusive understanding that emphasizes underlying socio-economic and political conditions, including governance failures, human development, and structural inequalities (Tocci 6-9).

These divergent opinions shape not only analytical frameworks but also the ranking of interests on each side of the Atlantic. For Washington, instability is threatening because it may empower adversaries or undermine regional balances. For Brussels, instability is dangerous because it produces spillover effects, migration, radicalization, trade disruption, that directly affect European societies. These differing perceptions help explain why US and EU approaches often diverge, even when they share similar broad concerns. Instability thus functions as both a shared challenge and a source of transatlantic divergence, reflecting the deeper structural and basic differences that shape how each actor interprets the Middle East.

This chapter has outlined the theoretical foundations necessary for analyzing US-EU relations in the Middle East, indicating that transatlantic cooperation and divergence cannot be understood without examining the deeper structures, identities, and interests that drive foreign policy. Neorealism, neoliberalism, and constructivism each highlight different dimensions of the transatlantic relationship, from shifts in international power and the role of institutions to the influence of norms and identities. Together, they offer a multidimensional perspective that helps explain why the alliance remains resistant despite frequent tensions.

Foreign Policy Analysis further shows that differences in policy outcomes are often engrained not in divergent interests alone but in contrasting institutional systems and decision-making processes. The United States' centralized, executive-driven structure facilitates decisive action, particularly the use of military force, while the EU fragmented, consensus-based system

encourages gradual, diplomatic, and rule-governed approaches. These official realities shape the range of available policy tools and constrain the speed and scale of regional involvement.

The chapter also demonstrated that identities and strategic cultures exert significant influence on each actor's foreign policy comportment. The US tradition of exceptionalism, international leadership, and military primacy contrasts sharply with the EU postwar commitment to multilateralism, civilian instruments, and normative diplomacy. These differing worldviews influence how each understands the legitimacy of intervention, the importance of international law, and the best strategies for achieving regional stability.

Finally, US and EU interests and threat perceptions in the Middle East, while corresponding in broad terms, differ in emphasis and priority. Shared concerns such as terrorism, WMD proliferation, and regional instability coexist with deeply embedded divergences over Israel's security, migration pressures, and the geopolitical significance of the region. Their interpretations of instability also differ: Washington tends to focus on immediate security threats, whereas Brussels places greater weight on structural socio-economic and governance factors.

By connecting theory, institutions, identity, and interests, this chapter provides the analytical foundation for the empirical analysis that follows. It reveals that transatlantic relations in the Middle East are shaped by enduring structural forces rather than temporary political disagreements. The next chapters will build on this outline to examine how these forces at work play out in concrete policy areas, illuminating both the limits and the possibilities of US-EU cooperation in one of the world's most volatile regions.

Chapter Two

Evolution of US-EU Relations and Middle East Policies

The evolution of US-European relations is basic to understanding contemporary international politics and, more specifically, Western involvement in the Middle East. Although the transatlantic partnership is often associated with the governmental structure that emerged after 1945, its roots extend far deeper into the political, social, and essential transformations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Over time, a relationship initially defined by strategic distance, divergent priorities, and competing identities gradually developed into one of the most enduring alliances of the modern era. This chapter traces that evolution, examining the forces that shaped transatlantic cooperation and the periodic tensions that complicated it.

The first half of the chapter explores how historical dynamics, from early neutrality to the world wars, the Marshall Plan, NATO, and the Cold War, progressively established cooperation while exposing the limits of organizational design. It highlights not only moments of profound unity but also episodes of intra-alliance discord, including disputes over sovereignty, military intervention, and the appropriate balance between American leadership and European autonomy. These tensions persisted into the post-Cold War period, as new international challenges, shifting regional priorities, and institutional developments in the European Union created both opportunities for collaboration and friction over the use of force, multilateralism, and the nature of worldwide order.

The second half of the chapter situates these transformations within the broader context of US-EU engrossment in the Middle East, a region where transatlantic cooperation has long been tested, redefined, and, at times, deeply strained. From Cold War rivalries to post-Cold War diplomatic initiatives, the War on Terror, and the Arab uprisings, the Middle East has served as both a catalyst for transatlantic solidarity and an arena of pronounced intentional deviation. By

examining how the United States and Europe have understood and navigated the region's security dilemmas, political disturbances, and normative challenges, the chapter reveals how structural differences in threat perception, policy instruments, and strategic culture have shaped the course of the partnership.

Together, the historical developments surveyed in this chapter illuminate the broader deliberate, institutional, and conceptual practicalities that inform US and EU policies toward Iraq and Iran in the period 2003-2016. They demonstrate that transatlantic relations are neither static nor linear, but instead characterized by periodic cycles of convergence and divergence shaped by international context, domestic politics, and shifting regional landscapes. Understanding this complex evolution is essential for appreciating how Iraq and Iran came to function as key arenas in which transatlantic cooperation was forged, contested, and reimagined.

2.1. Historical Development of US-European Relations

The relationship between the United States and Europe has undergone a profound transformation over the past two centuries, evolving from distant and often distrustful interactions into one of the most enduring and established partnerships in modern international politics. Far from emerging fully formed in the aftermath of the Second World War, the transatlantic partnership developed gradually, shaped by shifting power dynamics, ideological affinities, geopolitical crises, and the steady construction of political, economic, and security institutions. Understanding this historical evolution is essential for grasping the broader context within which contemporary US-EU cooperation, and conflict, develops.

In its earliest stages, US-European relations were marked by a combination of fundamental attentiveness, limited involvement, and slowly expanding societal connections. The United States' origins in anti-colonial struggle and its commitment to avoiding the rivalries of the European great powers encouraged a foreign policy imbedded in separation rather than

partnership. Yet over time, migration, commerce, and shared cultural ties joined the two sides of the Atlantic more closely together, gradually eroding strict notions of neutrality (O'Sullivan).

The First and Second World Wars fundamentally transformed this course. American intervention in both conflicts demonstrated the impossibility of remaining isolated from European security affairs, while the shared struggle against fascism laid the foundations for a long-term significant position. After 1945, the emergence of the Cold War created unprecedented incentives for institutionalized cooperation. Through the Marshall Plan, NATO, and a solid network of diplomatic agreements, the United States and Western Europe established a collective response to the Soviet threat and created the liberal order that shaped international politics for decades (O'Sullivan).

Yet the transatlantic relationship has never been free of friction. Throughout the Cold War, disagreements over strategy, autonomy, and international leadership occasionally strained the alliance. The end of bipolarity in 1989 further transformed the partnership, removing the common Soviet antagonist and opening space for new patterns of cooperation as well as new sources of disagreement. In the 1990s and early 2000s, differences over multilateralism, the use of force, and approaches to emerging threats, most dramatically illustrated by the 2003 Iraq War, revealed deeper divergences in strategic culture between the United States and Europe (Jones 67-68).

At the same time, successive crises, from the Balkan wars to the War on Terror and the rise of new international powers, demonstrated the continuing relevance of the transatlantic bond. Even at moments of acute strain, the United States and Europe repeatedly returned to cooperation, driven by shared democratic values, economic interdependence, and overlapping security interests (Lieber 47).

What follows traces the major historical phases of US-European relations, from their early origins through the post-1945 alliance structure, intra-alliance tensions during the Cold War,

post-Cold War readjustments, and the challenges and recalibrations of the War on Terror and the Obama era. By examining these transformations, it becomes possible to understand not only how the partnership evolved but also why it remains a central, if contested, pillar of international order.

2.1.1. Early Foundations and Pre-1945 Background

Although the modern transatlantic partnership is commonly associated with the post-1945 liberal order, the origins of US-European relations stretch much further back and were shaped by a complex mixture of conflict, calculated thoughtfulness, and gradually deepening societal ties. The early relationship was defined by both physical and ideological distance. According to Reynolds the US emerged from violent struggles against European colonial powers, particularly Britain and Spain, before declaring independence in 1776 (24). The memory of colonial domination, combined with the weakness of the new republic, produced a foreign policy totally prepared to avoid European predicaments. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, successive US administrations adhered to neutrality and focused on continental expansion rather than Old World diplomacy.

Yet even as political leaders sought to maintain deliberate separation, the two sides of the Atlantic grew increasingly interconnected. Large-scale migration from Northern and Western Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century, and later from Southern and Eastern Europe during the migration surge of the 1880s, implanted extensive human, cultural, and economic relationships between the continents. By 1900, immigrants made up nearly 15 percent of the US population (Davidson et al. 548-49). These demographic shifts fostered transatlantic networks of commerce, ideas, and identity, gradually blurring the boundaries between domestic and foreign concerns. As a result, sustaining a strict policy of neutrality became ever more challenging,

particularly as European conflicts threatened American economic interests and diaspora communities.

The outbreak of the First World War marked a turning point in the United States' role in European security affairs. Although Washington initially reaffirmed neutrality, German submarine warfare, combined with growing US financial and material support for the Allied powers, drew the country into the conflict by 1917 (Davidson et al. 644). This step represented not only a calculated shift but also the beginning of a broader debate over America's international responsibilities. The interwar years revealed the tension between traditional isolationist sentiment and emerging recognition of international interconnectedness.

The Second World War further strengthened this planned convergence and demolished the remaining illusions that the United States could remain isolated from international instability. President Franklin D. Roosevelt argued that American security was inseparable from worldwide security and that US democratic values could not survive in an increasingly unfriendly ideological environment (Reynolds 52). Public opinion, initially cautious about foreign obligations, shifted steadily in favor of greater involvement as the threat posed by fascist expansion became undeniable (127). By war's end, the formation of the United Nations in 1945 represented not only a shared action to preventing another calamitous conflict but also the emergence of a new structure for US-European cooperation. This fixed the groundwork for the founded transatlantic order that would take shape in the decades to come.

2.1.2. Post-1945 Order: Marshall Plan, NATO, and the Cold War Alliance

The end of the Second World War brought profound geopolitical variations that reshaped the foundations of US-European relations. In contrast to its traditional reluctance to be involved deeply in European affairs, the United States emerged from the war with both the capacity and willingness to assume international leadership. With much of Europe in ruins and the Soviet

Union expanding its political influence, Washington concluded that stability on the continent was essential to both regional recovery and the defense of liberal democratic values. This considered reorientation became validated with President Truman's announcement of the Truman Doctrine in March 1947, pledging US support for "free peoples resisting attempted subjugation" (qtd. in Sloan 16). As Cowles and Egan note, the doctrine marked a decisive shift toward long-term American commitment to European security and inaugurated a new era of containment (3).

Europe's situation in the immediate postwar years expanded the urgency of American commitment. Physical destruction, fragile governments, and widespread economic disruption threatened to undermine political stability across the continent. In response, the United States launched the European Recovery Program, better known as the Marshall Plan, in 1947. By providing large-scale financial aid and technical assistance, the initiative aimed not only to revive European economies but also to prevent the political extremism and social unrest that often accompany extended economic crisis (Burghardt 7).

Beyond its material benefits, the Marshall Plan encouraged unprecedented cooperation among European states by requiring coordinated planning and transparency in economic reconstruction. As Brzezinski observes, Washington believed that a more integrated Europe, even if it became a significant economic competitor, would ultimately reinforce international stability and strengthen the Western community (15). Thus, the Marshall Plan helped lay the institutional and ideological groundwork for the modern transatlantic partnership (Cowles and Egan 3).

Parallel to economic recovery, European states and the United States expanded their security cooperation. Deeply aware of the Soviet threat, several Western European governments undertook early steps toward collective defense, including the Dunkirk Treaty of 1947 and the Brussels Treaty of 1948. These measures signaled Europe's commitment to pursuing regional security through joint action (Cambridge and Golino 2). In the United States, the passage of the

Vandenberg Resolution in 1948 marked a significant political turning point, as it formally endorsed American participation in peacetime alliances for the first time in national history (Sloan 18). This move paved the way for multilateral negotiations culminating in the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in April 1949. NATO instituted the US-European security partnership, providing a framework for collective defense and becoming the cornerstone of the postwar transatlantic order (Cowles and Egan 3-4).

Throughout the Cold War, the alliance withstood a series of political disagreements and calculated divergences. France's decision to withdraw from NATO's integrated command structure in 1966, for example, exposed tensions over sovereignty and US dominance, while disputes over the Vietnam War and Middle East crises revealed differing national priorities and public sentiments. Nevertheless, NATO survived these challenges and evolved into the longest-standing and most successful alliance in modern history (Hitchcock 53). Its flexibility underscored the strength of shared interests, institutional mechanisms, and a collective commitment to safeguarding Western security.

2.1.3. Transatlantic Alliance Tensions during the Cold War

Cold War cooperation did not eliminate disagreements within the transatlantic partnership. Instead, the alliance experienced recurring frictions that stemmed from divergent national interests, shifting power dynamics, and competing visions of Western leadership. These strains did not fundamentally undermine US-European cooperation, but they highlighted the complexity of maintaining cohesion within a broad, multi-state security coalition.

The 1956 Suez Crisis represented the most serious disagreement of the early postwar period and exposed deep divisions between the United States and its European allies. After Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal, Britain and France, joined by Israel, launched a coordinated military intervention to regain control of the vital waterway. The United States, however, viewed the

operation as destabilizing and feared that the crisis would provide the Soviet Union with an opportunity to expand influence in the Middle East. Washington therefore condemned the intervention and exerted forceful diplomatic and financial pressure on London and Paris to withdraw (Thies 203-11). The crisis delivered a clear message about the postwar balance of power: Britain, recognizing its diminished worldwide role, concluded that its foreign policy henceforth required close orientation to the United States (Thies 215), while France, annoyed by US power, accelerated efforts to promote European tactical autonomy and strengthen intra-European cooperation (Cowles and Egan 6).

French President Charles de Gaulle became the leading supporter of this autonomous European vision. Highly unconvinced of American leadership and suspecting the lopsidedness embedded in NATO, de Gaulle publicly questioned the wisdom of relying on US protection, famously asserting, “If I governed France, I would abandon NATO” (qtd. in Sulzberger 198). Upon assuming office in 1958, he moved swiftly to translate these ideas into policy.

President de Gaulle’s veto of British entry into the European Economic Community in 1963 emphasized concerns that London’s close ties with Washington would dilute Europe’s independence. De Gaulle’s criticisms of US policy in Vietnam and, most radically, his decision to withdraw France from NATO’s integrated military command in 1966 revealed a long-standing determination to reassert French sovereignty and reduce reliance on US forward-looking leadership (Hitchcock 66). These actions showed a broader European debate regarding the proper balance between American support and European self-determination.

Additional tensions reappeared during the 1973 Middle East War, when the United States conducted a major airlift to resupply Israel without fully consulting its European allies. Many European governments, already thoughtful to their energy dependence on Arab oil, condemned Washington for failing to coordinate strategy. In the aftermath, several European states launched

the Euro-Arab Dialogue, aimed at deepening economic relations with Arab partners and cultivating a more balanced position on regional issues (Musu and Wallace 100). Yet even amid these disagreements, Europe did not fundamentally challenge US strategic leadership in the Middle East. As Musu and Wallace emphasize, Washington consistently defined Western objectives in the region, while European states typically contributed political backing or financial assistance rather than shaping overall strategy (100).

Despite these differences, the transatlantic alliance proved remarkably resistant. Shared opposition to the Soviet Union acted as a powerful unifying force, preventing disagreements from escalating into lasting rifts and preserving the cohesion of the broader Western bloc. By the end of the Cold War, the alliance had withstood multiple crises, each one revealing not only the depth of internal tensions but also the enduring forward planning that attached the United States and Europe together.

2.1.4. Post-Cold War Reorientation

The breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1989 ushered in a fundamentally new era for US-European relations. With the bipolar structure of the international system disbanded, the United States emerged as the unchallenged international superpower, while Western Europe accelerated its long-standing project of political and economic integration. This process culminated in the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, which formally established the European Union and laid the groundwork for deeper institutional coherence on foreign and security policy (Yacoubian 25). The disappearance of the common Soviet threat therefore created both opportunities for renewed cooperation and incentives for Europe to pursue a more autonomous international role.

In this transmuted environment, the nature of international security challenges changed radically. Rather than facing a single, overarching antagonist, Western states confronted a spectrum of dispersed and often transnational threats, including the proliferation of weapons of

mass destruction, regional and ethnic conflicts, terrorism, and the behavior of so-called “rogue states” (Burghardt 11). These developments required new policy tools and widened the geographic scope of Western defensive concerns. At the same time, the United States and Europe began to diverge in their regional priorities. Washington increasingly oriented its foreign and defense policy toward the Middle East, driven by concerns about energy security, terrorism, and the containment of antagonistic regimes. Europe, by contrast, focused on its immediate periphery, emphasizing stability operations and conflict management in Africa, the Balkans, and the Caucasus.

This repositioning produced a slow yet noticeable rise in transatlantic frictions. Confident in its unequaled military and economic power, the United States grew more comfortable with unilateral decision-making and expressed skepticism toward international institutions that might limit its freedom of action (Duke 3). Europe, meanwhile, sought to enhance its collective political agency through the development of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and later the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). Many scholars interpreted ESDP’s creation as a form of soft balancing, a strategy aimed not at direct confrontation but at increasing Europe’s capacity to operate independently of the United States when necessary (Posen 149; Joffe 177). These institutional developments reflected an underlying desire among European states to shape international outcomes more independently in a post-bipolar world.

Concrete disagreements soon highlighted the widening gap in major preferences and policy approaches. During the Bosnian conflict (1992-1995), US frustration with Europe’s inability to manage the crisis independently contrasted with European concerns about American dominance in shaping NATO operations. Later disputes over the International Criminal Court (2000) underscored transatlantic differences on sovereignty, legal norms, and the role of multilateral institutions. Divergent approaches to so-called “rogue states”, including Iraq, Iran, and North

Korea, further exposed contrasting threat perceptions and diplomatic strategies. By the late 1990s, these recurring tensions suggested that the end of the Cold War had brought not simply a reorientation of US-European relations, but the emergence of deeper structural differences that would become increasingly pronounced in the early twenty-first century (Daalder and O'Hanlon 112).

2.1.5 The "War on Terror" Era

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 initially prompted a powerful wave of political solidarity across the Atlantic. European governments expressed full support for the United States, and the American-led military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 received broad approval throughout Europe. Yet, despite this early unity, the attacks did not recreate the cohesive sense of shared purpose that had defined the Cold War era. As a result, 9/11 ultimately reinforced long-standing disagreements between the United States and Europe, eventually leading to a complete transatlantic crisis.

Rather than consolidating the alliance, the War on Terror soon emerged as a new source of division. As Mowle observes, there is "no strategic consensus on terrorism" capable of replacing the unifying logic of Soviet containment that once held the alliance together (9). The George W. Bush administration's reaction to 9/11 intensified these divergences. Following his "Axis of Evil" speech and Washington's growing willingness to consider unilateral military action against states suspected of supporting terrorism or pursuing weapons of mass destruction, European governments grew gradually doubtful of the United States' unilateralist stance. In contrast to Washington's emphasis on pre-emption and the use of force, Europe continued to give preference to diplomacy, economic assistance, peacekeeping, and support for democratic governance (Nelson 51).

Many observers argue that the change of administration in Washington in 2001 further strained transatlantic relations. The release of the 2002 *National Security Strategy*, widely known as the Bush Doctrine, marked a turning point. As Kirshner notes, this document offered the philosophical and core logic for the invasion of Iraq and represented "a fundamental shift from foundations upon which US foreign policy has been based since World War II" (1). The first major expression of this shift was President George W. Bush's declaration of an international "War on Terror," which authorized pre-emptive action against so-called rogue states before they acquired the capability to threaten the US. The 2003 invasion of Iraq became the most visible personification of this unilateralist approach.

These developments shook transatlantic relations. The Middle East became the principal ground in which these conflicts played out. Kirshner argues that the Bush Doctrine, applied in the context of the Iraq War, would likely produce "a more dangerous, less stable Middle East, and one more hostile toward the United States," warning that American claims to permanent supremacy would invite political balancing and resistance (10). The decision to invade Iraq not only overwrought relations between the United States and several European states but also created deep splits within Europe itself. Over time, Europe began to divide into two distinct camps. The Europeanist camp, led by France and Germany, opposed and criticized US policy toward Iraq, while the Atlanticist camp, represented by Britain, Italy, and Poland, offered strong support for Washington's position (Webster). These divisions would reappear throughout the early twenty-first century.

More broadly, the 9/11 attacks highlighted deep differences between American and European understandings of terrorism, weapons proliferation, and appropriate foreign policy tools. The United States approached the emerging threats unilaterally and relied heavily on hard power, guided by the belief that overwhelming American military and political capabilities enabled it to

act independently. As Krauthammer observes, “An unprecedentedly dominant United States … is in the unique position of being able to fashion its own foreign policy,” and the Bush administration sought to “reassert American freedom of action” (5-17). Europe, by contrast, remained committed to a world foreign policy rooted in multilateral collaboration, diplomacy, and economic and political instruments for addressing terrorism, halting weapons proliferation, and managing international crises (Daalder).

Nonetheless, despite the sharp policy divides that followed the Iraq invasion, the second George W. Bush administration made efforts to repair US-European relations. These efforts included strong American support for NATO enlargement, crucial partnerships with the Czech Republic and Poland, and the cultivation of improved relations with key European leaders such as French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. The United States and the EU also found common ground on a number of issues, including promoting democracy, human rights, and stability in the Middle East, Southeastern Europe, and Central Asia, as well as collaborating on other international initiatives (Lightfoot 291).

In the long run, the War on Terror era underscored the imperative for renewed transatlantic cooperation. As Tarifa notes, the US and Europe share a unique commitment to democratic values and liberal political traditions, meaning that their collaboration remains essential for shaping a peaceful international order. He argues that “if these two agree on what the basic rules and institutions of international order should be, there is real chance of establishing a fair and stable international order” (55). The challenge, therefore, is not merely to manage disagreements but to cultivate a shared core vision capable of guiding the transatlantic partnership in an increasingly complex international environment.

2.1.6 The Obama Administration and Pragmatic Adjustment

The arrival of President Obama to the White House, and his determination to reverse what he viewed as the policy mistakes of the George W. Bush administration, was initially received with considerable optimism in Europe (Cox 75). Obama's obvious different attitude, combined with an agenda that emphasized collaboration and cooperation with US allies, signaled a projected shift toward multilateralism as the most effective means of ensuring both American and international security. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted in January 2009, the United States had "no closer allies than the Europeans" (qtd. in Cox 75). Under Obama's leadership, many European governments hoped for a new chapter of common understanding, revived cooperation, and sincere improvement in US-EU relations.

In practical terms, the Obama administration embraced the idea that resolving international crises required deeper engagement with international institutions and closer coordination with partners. Consequently, Obama distanced US foreign policy from the unilateralist tendencies of the previous administration and instead adopted a multilateral and conciliatory strategy. His willingness to revive efforts to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, deal diplomatically with Cuba and Iran, and give precedence to domestic renewal over excessive foreign intervention demonstrated a clear departure from the George W. Bush era (Lightfoot 294).

Obama's commitment to reshaping American foreign policy became evident almost immediately. On his second day in office, he issued a series of executive orders authorizing the closure of the Guantanamo Bay detention facility and prohibiting the use of torture in interrogations, symbolic steps intended to restore US standing and conform policy to legal and moral norms (Lightfoot 291-92). At the same time, US Vice President Joe Biden emphasized that the administration would expect more from its European partners. In a 2009 speech at the Munich Security Conference, Biden affirmed that while the transatlantic alliance remained central,

Europe would be encouraged to assume greater responsibility for managing its regional security (292). In this sense, the Obama administration sought both to rebuild trust and to encourage Europe to take on more leadership in addressing conflicts within and beyond the continent (293).

Obama's rhetoric and early actions resounded strongly among European leaders, who viewed him as a president genuinely committed to renewing transatlantic convergence. Indeed, the tone of US-EU dialogue noticeably improved after his election. Yet despite this renewed enthusiasm, Obama soon announced a significant tactical shift: America's primary security priorities were reorienting toward the Asia-Pacific region, a stratagem widely known as the "Pivot to Asia." Driven largely by the rapid economic rise of emerging markets such as the BRIC states, this pivot marked a readjustment of US geopolitical emphasis. Analysts such as Cox argued that in a world where economic power is shifting eastward, the transatlantic relationship risked becoming less central, or even increasingly irrelevant, in US international strategy (76).

In practice, US attention to Asia did not indicate a fundamental split with Europe. Rather, as Dimitrova notes, these developments revealed that the transatlantic partnership had not undergone a profound transformation but remained characterized by recurring cycles of convergence and divergence (1). Obama adopted a pragmatic approach to European relations, seeking to preserve the practicality of the transatlantic partnership during moments of economic and security strain. Economically, the United States and the EU continued to represent the world's largest economic partnership during Obama's presidency (Matera 60). In security affairs, the transatlantic alliance remained indispensable, particularly in addressing serious crises that required coordinated responses, such as the upheavals of the Arab Spring and NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya (74).

US-EU relations during the Obama era reflected the broader historical pattern of fluctuations that has long characterized the transatlantic partnership. Tensions, rather than being anomalies,

have been a recurring feature of the relationship. Despite numerous areas of cooperation, it remains difficult to conclude that US-EU relations consistently function in a positive or harmonious manner. While American administrations have constantly emphasized the importance of the transatlantic relationship for enhancing US security, stability, and international influence, structural differences persist. The divergent responses of the United States and the European Union to the Iraq War, especially in the aftermath of 9/11, serve as a clear example of a broadening rift. These differences, existing in contrasting approaches to Middle Eastern policy and the appropriate instruments of foreign policy, continue to shape the evolution of the transatlantic relationship.

2.2. Historical Context of US-EU Involvement in the Middle East

The Middle East has long been one of the most significant arenas for US-European collaboration, shaping and testing the transatlantic partnership since the mid-twentieth century. Whereas the previous part traced the broad historical evolution of US-European relations, the Middle East provides a more precise continuum through which to observe how shared interests, divergent priorities, and competing strategic cultures have interacted in practice. For both the United States and Europe, the region has carried a unique blend of hard security imperatives, energy security, access to maritime trade routes, regional conflicts, and terrorism, alongside broader normative aspirations related to political reform, human rights, and the promotion of a rules-based international order. Consequently, the Middle East has served not only as a stage for Western calculated involvement but also as a recurring source of transatlantic tension and debate.

Importantly, US-EU inclination toward the Middle East has been anything but static. During the Cold War, regional dynamics were shaped by decolonization, the geopolitics of superpower rivalry, and the gradual transfer of influence from disappearing European empires to an increasingly dominant United States. After the Cold War, new European initiatives, such as the

Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the European Neighborhood Policy, sought to inaugurate a more coherent and autonomous EU role, even as Washington continued to lead in military and security affairs. Pivotal events such as the 1990-1991 Gulf War, the attacks of 11 September 2001, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the Arab uprisings of 2010-2011 further exposed both the possibilities and the limits of transatlantic cooperation within this complex regional environment.

At this point, it therefore important to situate US-EU involvement in the Middle East within its broader historical context. This could be done by outlining the tactical significance of the region in US and European thinking, before examining the respective roles of the United States and European powers during the Cold War. Then one has to trace the emergence of a more coherent EU policy framework after 1993, analyze key patterns of convergence and divergence in the pre-9/11 era, and assess how the War on Terror and the Arab uprisings reshaped transatlantic dynamics. Together, these subsections provide the essential analytical foundation for understanding US and EU policies toward Iraq and Iran between 2003 and 2016, where long-standing structural tendencies within the transatlantic partnership became especially visible.

2.2.1. The Significance of the Middle East in Transatlantic Thinking

The Middle East has long held an essential place in both US and European crucial thinking. Its significance stems from a collection of interrelated factors: vast energy reserves critical to international markets, maritime trade routes linking Europe and Asia, geographic proximity to Europe's southern periphery, and the region's great symbolic and religious importance for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. As Kaye explains, the Middle East has historically functioned as both a "gateway" to broader geopolitical arenas and a focal point of great-power competition, ensuring that it remains a persistent preoccupation for Western policymakers ("*Bound to…"* 179-80). These considerations have continually reinforced the region's uniqueness in transatlantic deliberate planning.

From a transatlantic perspective, the Middle East has also served as a crucial arena in which Western influence, credibility, and order-building efforts are tested. For both the United States and Europe, the region represents a complex environment where traditional geopolitical interests intersect with broader normative aspirations. Securing energy flows, safeguarding access to major sea lanes, countering hostile state and non-state actors, and preventing regional instability have long been fundamental Western objectives. At the same time, policymakers have sought, though not always successfully, to promote political reform, stability, and the principles of a rules-based international order in a region marked by persistent conflict, authoritarian governance, and deep social divides.

This twofold imperative, balancing material interests with normative ambitions, has ensured that the Middle East occupies a unique position in transatlantic relations. As Marr observes, US and European involvement in the region has continually revealed both the possibilities and the limitations of Western influence, serving as a barometer of cooperation and tension within the broader transatlantic partnership (*The United States* 212). At different moments, the Middle East has reinforced unity between the allies, while at others it has exposed diverging priorities, policy instruments, and strategic cultures. Accordingly, the region remains not only a vital geopolitical arena but also a defining range through which the evolution of US-EU relations can be understood.

2.2.2. US and European Roles in the Middle East during the Cold War

In the early Cold War decades, the gradual withdrawal of European colonial powers and the simultaneous rise of the US fundamentally reshaped Western presence in the Middle East. Britain and France, long the dominant external actors in the region, began retreating from direct colonial rule after the Second World War. Their decline created a geopolitical vacuum, prompting London and Paris to shift toward cultivating economic, political, and security partnerships with key

Middle Eastern states rather than exercising direct control. This transition allowed the United States to step into the role of principal Western power, especially as Washington came to view the Middle East as basically indispensable within the international Cold War conflict (Roberson 9).

For the United States, Cold War policy in the Middle East was designed around three mutually reinforcing components: access to oil, containment of Soviet influence, and the construction of durable regional alliances. The region's energy resources were crucial not only for international economic stability but also for the economic recovery of Europe, making Middle Eastern security central to the wider Western project of reconstruction and growth (Kaye, "*Mind the Gap"* 9). Meanwhile, the developing Soviet ties with Arab states such as Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, many of which lined up with anti-Western ideologies, transformed the region into a critical arena of superpower rivalry (Aslim 87-88).

Washington reacted with a series of assertive policies. These included the 1953 coup in Iran, coordinated with British support, which removed Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and put back the Shah (Lynch, *"The United States*…" 6). The US also consolidated benecial partnerships with Saudi Arabia and pre-1979 Iran, while expanding political, military, and ideological support for Israel. Such policies entrenched American predominance in the region but at the same time generated resentment among many Arab states, particularly in the aftermath of the 1956 Suez Crisis and the 1967 Six-Day War, events that highlighted the depth of Arab-Israeli conflict and further complicated US relations across the Arab world (Aslim 88; Halabi 79).

European states, for their part, sought to reajust their role in a post-colonial environment. With the era of direct rule ending, they attempted to maintain influence through diplomatic action, trade, technical assistance, and political dialogue. The 1973 oil crisis intensely exposed Europe's vulnerability to Middle Eastern geopolitics, serving as a catalyst for more coordinated European

initiatives. One such effort was the Euro-Arab Dialogue, launched in 1973, which aimed to strengthen economic cooperation and communicate a more balanced European stance on the Arab-Israeli conflict ("Europe's Role" 1). Despite these ambitions, European diplomacy often remained dominated by US leadership, particularly in major Arab-Israeli peace efforts such as the 1978 Camp David Accords, where Washington played the decisive role (Europe's Role 1; Musu and Wallace 100).

The Cold War era established a configuration in which the United States acted as the dominant security actor in the Middle East, while Europe played a complementary, though sometimes divergent, role focused on diplomacy, economic relations, and long-term political involvement. These changing aspects laid the foundations for many of the transatlantic hostilities and cooperative frameworks that would shape US-EU Middle East relations in the decades that followed.

2.2.3. The Emergence of a More Coherent EU Role

While European political action in the Middle East during the Cold War was largely fragmented and driven by individual national agendas, the post-Cold War period witnessed the gradual emergence of a more coherent and ascertained European approach. The end of superpower bipolarity created new diplomatic space for Europe to formulate a collective foreign policy vision, while the deepening of European integration, particularly after the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993, enabled the European Community, and later the European Union, to develop common agendas for addressing problems in its southern neighborhood (Yacoubian 25). This change marked a shift from nationally driven policies toward a more unified external position ingrained in common principles and considered objectives.

A major milestone in this evolution was the inauguration of the 1995 Barcelona Process and the establishment of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP). These initiatives represented the

most ambitious attempt up to that point to involve Middle Eastern and Mediterranean states through an arranged structure of political dialogue, economic cooperation, and socio-cultural exchange. Reflecting the EU norms-based orientation, the EMP emphasized soft power instruments such as conditionality, multilateral discussion, and gradual integration into wider European economic and political structures. The fundamental reason was clear: sustainable stability in the region required more than security cooperation, it depended on long-term political reform, economic development, and greater regional interdependence (Youngs, "*The EU and the Arab…*"112).

From 2004 onward, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP's) objectives were expanded and partially rearranged through the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and the creation of the Union for the Mediterranean. These instruments sought to deepen bilateral dealings with southern Mediterranean states while providing new incentives for political and economic liberalization. The EU outlined these policies as mutually beneficial partnerships designed to reduce regional instability, promote modernized governance, and strengthen economic ties. The ENP's action plans, in particular, aimed to embed Middle Eastern partners in a rules-based structure emphasizing modernization, regulatory conformity, and cooperation across sectors ranging from trade to migration management (Yacoubian 9-25).

Essential to this evolving strategy was the EU growing emphasis on political reform, human rights, and civil society development as essential building blocks for long-term regional stability. Instruments such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) directed support toward civil society organizations, human rights defenders, and actors seeking to advance accountability and participatory governance (Yacoubian 9). These tools, while lacking the forcible authority of US military power, exemplified a distinctly European approach anchored in normative influence, economic cooperation, and legal frameworks.

The post-Cold War period marked a significant shift in European interest with the Middle East. Whereas earlier policies had been shaped primarily by national interests and colonial legacies, the emergence of a more coherent EU strategy exhibited a broader transformation in Europe's worldwide identity. Increasingly, the EU sought to define its role not through military power but through sustained political dialogue, economic partnership, and norm-based diplomacy, an approach that continues to shape its involvement in the region today.

2.2.4 Post-Cold War and Pre-9/11 Convergence and Divergence

In the aftermath of the Cold War, US–European interest in the Middle East demonstrated a mixture of cooperation and divergence, with both sides conforming to major core objectives while maintaining distinct policy preferences and operational approaches. The 1990-1991 Gulf War illustrated a moment of exceptional transatlantic convergence. European states joined the US-led coalition to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait, indicating shared concerns regarding territorial expansionism, the security of international energy supplies, and the preservation of regional stability (Halabi 79). While the United States contributed the vast majority of military assets and assumed command of coalition operations, European partners provided meaningful, though more limited, military contributions alongside essential political and diplomatic support. This episode demonstrated the continued ability of the transatlantic alliance to rally collectively in response to major security threats in the post-Cold War environment.

Yet even during this period of cooperation, organizational differences in tactical outlook were already evident. Washington's response to the Gulf War consolidated its preference for a stance of overwhelming military dominance in the region. The United States strengthened its forward presence in the Gulf, expanded access to regional bases, and pursued durable security arrangements aimed at ensuring the uninterrupted flow of energy resources and deterring hostile actors (Marr, *The United States* 212). This attitude mirrored a broader American conviction that

stability in the Middle East required sustained, direct military action and a readiness to impose order when necessary.

European states, by contrast, increasingly preferred economic and political instruments of influence. Their post-Cold War Middle East policies highlighted trade agreements, association frameworks, political dialogue, and regional cooperation initiatives. Even when supporting sanctions against Iraq or other so-called "rogue states," European governments tended to promote adjusted involvement and multilateral diplomacy rather than the open-ended militarization favored by Washington (Kaye, "*Mind the Gap"* 9). The emphasis on economic integration, institution-building, and negotiated solutions highlighted the emergence of a typically European approach inherent in soft power and long-term stabilization rather than coercive force.

By the late 1990s, disagreements over the appropriate balance between the use of hard power or the use of soft power had become more pronounced. The US policy of "dual containment," the scope and intensity of sanctions on Iraq, and differing approaches toward Iran revealed that transatlantic unity on Middle Eastern policy was increasingly conditional (Brzezinski et al. 22). While these issues anticipated the deeper divisions that would emerge after 9/11, they did not fundamentally undermine cooperation. Instead, the overall pattern of the pre-9/11 era was characterized by functional complementarity: American military predominance functioned alongside European diplomatic activism and economic commitment. Both sides remained dedicated to core shared objectives, maintaining regional stability, protecting energy supplies, and limiting the influence of destabilizing actors, even as their preferred methods and planned assumptions diverged (Buzan and Wæver 187).

2.2.5. Post-9/11 Transatlantic Political Action

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 marked a remarkable turning point in transatlantic political action in the Middle East. In the immediate aftermath, European solidarity with the

United States reached unprecedented levels. NATO mentioned Article 5 for the first time in its history, declaring the attack on the United States an attack on all its members. Major European capitals expressed explicit support; *Le Monde* famously declared, “Nous sommes tous Américains” (“We Are All Americans”).

Yet this moment of unity proved fragile. As the George W. Bush administration pronounced a broader “War on Terror,” European reservations quickly surfaced. The Bush Doctrine, anchored in pre-emption, unilateralism, and a strong assertion of US national interests, stood in sharp contrast to Europe’s normative preference for multilateralism, international law, and collective decision-making (Hyde-Price 11). The January 2002 “Axis of Evil” speech, which linked Iraq, Iran, and North Korea to terrorism and the pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, reinforced the growing divergence in threat assessments and tactical priorities between Washington and many European governments (Musu and Wallace 110). These principles were confirmed in the 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States of America, which explicitly contained the possibility of preventive use of force (Hyde-Price 11; Kirshner 10).

The 2003 Iraq War brought these differences into unambiguous relief. Although some European states, most notably the United Kingdom, Italy, and Poland, joined the US-led coalition, others, particularly France and Germany, strongly opposed the intervention. Their objections centered on questions of legality, the absence of a clear United Nations mandate, concerns that the invasion would dislocate the region, and fears that it might incite Saddam Hussein to deploy chemical weapons (Andrews 35-45). The Iraq crisis thus illustrated a deeper divergence in transatlantic strategic culture: whereas the United States leaned heavily on hard power, coercion, and unilateral action, most European governments emphasized diplomacy, legitimacy through multilateral institutions, and incremental engagement.

Disagreements extended beyond Iraq to other regional issues. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the United States maintained strong political, and ideological support for Israel, conveyed through military assistance and diplomatic backing in international forums. The EU, by contrast, adopted a more balanced stance, insisting on a negotiated two-state solution and becoming one of the largest financial supporters of Palestinian institutions and civil society. This highlighted Europe's preference for legal frameworks, multilateral mediation, and state-building initiatives (Caplan 12).

Iran's nuclear program provided another clear point of contrast. While Washington relied heavily on sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and, at times, implicit threats of force, the EU pursued sustained negotiations, positioning itself as the chief diplomatic actor in the talks that ultimately produced the 2015 JCPOA (Dimitrova 4). The episode demonstrated the EU willingness to manage regional security challenges through diplomacy rather than coercion.

Democracy promotion further uncovered transatlantic differences. Although both actors rhetorically endorsed democratization as a way to address extremism and authoritarian stagnation, their methods differed sharply. Under President George W. Bush, democracy promotion was often linked to forceful regime change, as seen in Afghanistan and Iraq, efforts that resulted in insurgencies, sectarian conflict, and reduced regional stability (Halabi 110-11). The EU, in contrast, relied on non-military instruments such as the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), emphasizing gradual change, conditionality, institution-building, and support for civil society (Yacoubian 9).

The post-9/11 era deepened existing organizational differences in transatlantic approaches to the Middle East. While cooperation persisted in counterterrorism and some diplomatic initiatives,

divergences in strategic culture, particularly regarding the use of force, the role of international law, and models of regional involvement, became increasingly noticeable.

2.2.6. The Arab Uprisings and the Limits of Convergence

The Arab uprisings that began in late 2010 presented a new and complex test for US-EU political activism in the Middle East. At the outset, both Washington and Brussels expressed strong rhetorical support for the movements, considering them as legitimate demands for dignity, political accountability, and democratic governance. Public statements highlighted the importance of human rights and wide-ranging politics, echoing long-standing Western normative commitments and earlier efforts to encourage political reform across the region (Malmvig and Christina 44-45).

Yet as the uprisings outspread, the limits of this initial convergence rapidly became visible. The transitions proved highly uneven, and in many cases, they descended into violence, authoritarian downturn, or prolonged civil conflict (Lynch, "*The New Arab…"* 45). Libya became the most prominent example of early transatlantic cooperation. Under a NATO mandate, the United States and several European states intervened to enforce a no-fly zone and protect civilians in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1973. Although the intervention succeeded in preventing mass atrocities and contributed to the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, the aftermath revealed serious shortcomings: neither the United States nor the EU had prepared adequately for post-conflict stabilization, state-building, or political reconstruction (Chivvis 112). The resulting power vacuum contributed to persistent instability and a proliferation of armed groups, underscoring the challenges of translating military action into sustainable political outcomes.

Syria revealed another dimension of the limits of convergence. Western responses were disjointed, cautious, and constrained by fears of escalation, particularly as the conflict drew in

regional powers and international actors such as Russia and Iran. Neither Washington nor Brussels was willing, or able, to decisively shape the trajectory of the war. The United States oscillated between calls for Bashar al-Assad's removal and reluctance to commit substantial military forces, while the EU principally applied sanctions and humanitarian assistance (Heydemann 333-36.). The Syrian crisis underscored the sharp disparity between Western declaratory policy and actual capacity or willingness to intervene.

In Egypt, the transatlantic partners similarly struggled to maintain a coherent and principled position. Both initially welcomed the downfall of President Hosni Mubarak and supported aspirations for democratic governance. However, as political turmoil deepened and the military reasserted control, both Washington and Brussels increasingly highlighted stability, counterterrorism cooperation, and regional security partnerships over democratic transformation. This ambivalence reflected a long-standing tension between values and interests in Western policy toward Egypt and the broader Middle East (Malmvig and Christina 44-45).

Across these cases, the Arab uprisings highlighted a persistent feature of US-EU Middle East involvement: a combination of shared broad objectives, regional stability, counterterrorism, human rights, and secure energy flows, paired with differing policy tools and degrees of commitment. The United States continued to possess and occasionally deploy superior military and political influence, often acting through key alliances with Israel and Gulf monarchies. The EU, in contrast, relied primarily on diplomatic action, economic instruments, and normative structures, reflecting its broader foreign policy identity and institutional constraints.

From the end of the Second World War through the post-9/11 era, US-EU interest in the Middle East has oscillated between episodes of cooperation and recurring moments of calculated divergence. While both sides have converged on shared interests such as counterterrorism, energy security, and the need for regional stability, disagreements over the use of force, the uniqueness

of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, approaches to Iran, and the nature of democracy promotion have repeatedly tested transatlantic cohesion. These historical underlying forces form the essential backdrop for analyzing US and EU policies toward Iraq and Iran in the period 2003-2016, where these patterns of convergence and divergence became even more pronounced.

2.3. Key Issues of Regional Instability: Iraq and Iran (2003-2016)

Throughout history, the Middle East has been shaped by a multitude of forces, geopolitical rivalries, external interventions, regime instability, and social fragmentation, that have contributed to persistent instability. Its important location, rich energy resources, and profound cultural and religious diversity have made the region both vital to international politics and highly vulnerable to conflict. The 9/11 attacks and the subsequent US-led War on Terror further intensified international attention on the Middle East, reinforcing its image as one of the world's most unstable and fragmented regions. Most significantly, the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003 marked a turbulent turning point, initiating extensive political, social, and economic upheaval not only within Iraq but also across the wider region, including Iran and neighboring states.

This study focuses on the period between 2003 and 2016, during which Iraq and Iran constituted major arenas of regional instability. Understanding this period requires an appreciation of the deep interconnection between domestic political crises, shifting regional power balances, and the involvement of external actors. The disbanding of Iraq's Ba'athist regime, the emergence of Iran as a regional power, the rise of non-state armed groups, and the intensification of sectarian divides collectively reshaped the Middle Eastern order.

2.3.1. Iraq in the Post-2003 Regional Order

Broadly speaking, the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 created a profound political vacuum. Previously suppressed sectarian tensions resurfaced, non-state actors expanded

their influence, and Iran found new opportunities to project power by cultivating alliances with militias and political parties in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. At the same time, Iran's pursuit of its nuclear program heightened regional and international concern, placing Tehran in direct confrontation with Western powers and key Middle Eastern states (Tripp 152).

The US-led invasion in March 2003 rapidly defeated Iraqi forces, culminating in Saddam Hussein's capture in December 2003. However, the dismantling of the regime did not bring stability. Instead, the policies implemented by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), particularly the dissolution of the Iraqi army and the sweeping De-Ba'athification program, proved deeply undermining. Intended to remove the foundations of the former regime and pave the way for democratic governance, these measures eliminated the state's administrative and military core without providing feasible alternatives. As tens of thousands of civil servants, military officers, and professionals were suddenly excluded from public life, Iraq's state apparatus collapsed (Pfiffner 76-77).

The resulting vacuum enabled the rise of armed groups across sectarian lines. Sunni insurgent net, Shia militias, and jihadist organizations such as al-Qaeda in Iraq emerged as powerful actors, contending violently for influence (Marr, *The Modern History* 274). The February 2006 bombing of the al-Askari shrine in Samarra triggered a devastating wave of sectarian reprisals, plunging Iraq into one of the deadliest phases of civil conflict (Costel 85-86). By late 2006, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government struggled to assert control amid widespread violence and disintegration (Stover et al. 6-7).

In response to escalating violence, the United States launched the "surge" in 2007, deploying an additional 30,000 troops to reinforce security in key areas. This shift in strategy coincided with the Sunni "Awakening" movement, through which Sunni tribal leaders who had previously resisted US forces turned against al-Qaeda in Iraq and allied themselves with American troops

(Rayburn 210). Together, these developments significantly reduced violence and restored a measure of stability.

However, these gains remained conditional on political inclusion. The US-Iraqi agreement to integrate Sunni fighters into national security forces was only partially fulfilled. As the US withdrew its troops in 2011, Iraq's underlying political and sectarian sharp divisions remained unresolved. After 2011, expanding Sunni discontent became a catalyst for renewed instability. The Shia-dominated government led by al-Maliki failed to incorporate the Sunni factions that had fought against jihadist groups, and widespread arrests, political exclusion, and perceived discrimination fueled mass protests across Sunni-majority provinces (Sky 212). This environment of marginalization and resentment provided fertile ground for jihadist reorganization.

By 2013-2014, ISIS, embryonic of al-Qaeda in Iraq under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, exploited this instability. The Syrian civil war and Iraq's weak state structures enabled ISIS to capture extensive territory. In June 2014, the group seized Mosul and expanded across northern and western Iraq, declaring a self-styled "caliphate" spanning Iraq and Syria. ISIS's ruthless rule, marked by executions, enslavement, and cultural destruction, deepened societal suffering and exacerbated regional security threats (McCants 132). In response, President Barack Obama launched the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS in 2014, bringing together NATO, EU member states, Arab League partners, and regional actors. Through airstrikes, training missions, and military assistance, the coalition helped liberate Ramadi (2015), Fallujah (2016), and later Mosul (2017) (Wasser et al. 45).

During this period of turmoil, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) pursued greater autonomy, culminating in its 2017 independence referendum. Baghdad responded with a military offensive that reasserted federal control over disputed territories, including Kirkuk. The failed

referendum deepened mistrust between Baghdad and Erbil and reinforced Iraq's fragmented political landscape (Saeed, "Baghdad Squeezes Kurdistan").

Although ISIS's territorial defeat marked a significant milestone, Iraq remained institutionally fragile. Militia networks continued to exercise immense power, ethno-sectarian divides persisted, and the country faced severe economic and humanitarian challenges (Wasser et al. 134). The instability of post-2003 Iraq can be traced fundamentally to the political order established in the aftermath of the US-led invasion. While the intervention was justified by Washington as a step toward democratization and long-term regional transformation, it produced far-reaching unintended consequences: weakened state institutions, intensified sectarianism, regional spillovers, and expanded opportunities for Iran and non-state actors (Davis 230). These forces at work form the foundation for the next chapter, which will critically examine the principal dimensions of US involvement in Iraq between 2003 and 2016, and the ways in which American policies shaped Iraq's trajectory and the wider Middle Eastern order.

2.3.2. Iran's Evolving Regional Role

Developments in Iraq after 2003 overwhelmingly reshaped Iran's position within the regional balance of power. Prior to the US-led invasion, Saddam Hussein's Iraq had functioned as a formidable geopolitical counterweight to Iran, most notably during the brutal eight-year Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). The removal of Saddam not only eliminated Iran's most persistent military rival but also created an opportunity for Tehran to expand its influence westward. With a Shiʿa-majority population and long-standing connections to Iraqi religious networks and political movements, many of which had taken refuge in Iran during the Ba'athist period, Tehran was uniquely positioned to cultivate influence over the emerging post-2003 Iraqi political order. This realignment marked one of the most significant geopolitical consequences of the US invasion.

From roughly 2003 to 2005, Iran exploited the post-invasion vacuum to expand its regional reach and reposition itself as a central player in Middle Eastern politics. It strengthened ties with Iraqi Shiʿa political factions, including the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Dawa Party, and developed extensive relationships with emerging militias such as the Badr Organization and, later, elements of what would become the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Beyond Iraq, Iran reinforced its long-standing partnership with Hezbollah in Lebanon, deepened its constructive alliance with the Assad regime in Syria, and continued to support Palestinian factions that opposed the peace process. Through these interlocking networks, Iran sought to counterbalance Sunni powers, especially Saudi Arabia, and challenge US supremacy in the region (Hussain and Ahmed 29-30).

This period coincided with mounting international concern over Iran's nuclear program. Revelations in 2002 about undisclosed facilities at Natanz and Arak heightened fears that Tehran was pursuing nuclear weapons capability under the guise of a civilian program. Although Iran insisted that its activities were peaceful, the discovery triggered US and EU pressure, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) investigations, and the first rounds of sanctions aimed at restraining Iran's technological and military ambitions (Zaborowski 69).

The emergence of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president in 2005 inaugurated a second, more confrontational phase in Iran's regional and international posture. Domestically, Ahmadinejad adopted a populist agenda characterized by economic mismanagement, inflationary pressures, and tightening political control (Takeyh 112). These conditions eventually produced widespread discontent, culminating in the 2009 Green Movement, the largest protest wave since the 1979 revolution. Demonstrators challenged the legitimacy of Ahmadinejad's reelection and demanded political reform, only to face harsh state repression (Hashemi and Postel 130).

Internationally, Ahmadinejad's inflammatory rhetoric, such as denying the Holocaust and calling for Israel to "disappear from the map", heightened anxieties among Western governments and regional states (Hussain 33). During his presidency, Iran accelerated uranium enrichment, expanded ballistic missile capabilities, and refused to fully comply with international monitoring mechanisms. In response, the US, the EU, and the UN gradually imposed some of the most extensive sanctions regimes in contemporary history. According to the *Iran Country Report*, by the early 2010s these restrictions, combined with internal governance failures, pushed the Iranian economy toward severe contraction, marked by currency devaluation, restricted access to international markets, and rising unemployment.

This period also saw Iran deepen its regional alliances. Its support for Hezbollah remained unwavering, and its cooperation with the Assad regime became increasingly important as Syria descended into civil war after 2011. Iran's growing role in Iraq's post-2003 political landscape, including its ties to various Shiʿa militias that emerged in response to sectarian conflict and later to ISIS, further solidified Tehran's influence across the Levant and the Gulf (Levitt 145).

The election of Hassan Rouhani in 2013 opened a third phase characterized by diplomatic engagement and attempts at reintegration into the international community. Rouhani's administration, backed by a technocratic and pragmatist coalition, sought to mitigate Iran's economic crisis and ease international tensions by negotiating limits on the nuclear program (Maloney, "*Iran's Political…"* 210). This diplomatic shift resulted in the JCPOA in 2015, in which Iran agreed to restrict enrichment levels, reduce centrifuge numbers, and allow intrusive inspections in exchange for sanctions relief (Iran Country Report).

The JCPOA was foreshadowed by many as a breakthrough for diplomacy and as a potential foundation for Iran's gradual re-entry into international economic systems. However, the agreement did not resolve the deeper structural tensions within Iran's political establishment.

Rivalries between hardliners, who viewed the nuclear deal with suspicion, and moderates, who sought normalization and economic recovery, limited the scope of domestic reforms and perpetuated internal instability ("JCPOA and Iran's Internal Factional Battles").

Regionally, despite periods of diplomatic commitment, Iran continued to project power through its network of proxy forces and aligned militias. Its involvement in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen reinforced the perception, especially in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel, that Tehran sought regional hegemony at their expense. This dynamic contributed to escalating sectarian narratives, intensified regional competition, and a deepening rivalry between Iran and the Gulf states (Hinnebusch 74; Levitt 120; Mansour and Jabar 12).

These paths show how Iran functioned simultaneously as both a driver and a product of regional instability between 2003 and 2016. Domestically, factional politics, recurring economic crises, and persistent social grievances created internal pressures that shaped Tehran's foreign policy choices. Regionally, Iran's support for armed non-state actors and its alliances with embattled regimes helped sustain its influence but also generated wider insecurity across the Middle East (Hashemi and Postel 145).

Internationally, Iran's nuclear ambitions provoked sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and repeated confrontations with Western states. These developments directly overlapped with US and EU significant concerns, further entangling Iran's domestic and regional policies with international dynamic forces. Therefore, Iran's evolving role during this period cannot be understood in isolation; it was deeply intertwined with developments in post-2003 Iraq, broader shifts in Middle Eastern power balances, and continually fluctuating patterns of international engagement and coercion (Parsi 65).

2.3.3. Iraq and Iran as Shaping Areas for Transatlantic Relations

Iraq and Iran occupy a uniquely significant place within transatlantic calculated debates because instability in these two states has disproportionate implications for US and EU security, energy, and political interests. Far from being merely sites of regional turmoil, Iraq and Iran function as structuring arenas, spaces in which broader geopolitical transformations, competing core norms, and transatlantic disagreements become amplified and exposed. Their internal dynamics and regional roles shape not only Middle Eastern politics but also the way the United States and the European Union define their interests, project power, and negotiate their shared role in international governance (Gause 112).

Both countries lie at the center of the Middle East's wider security architecture, meaning that instability within their borders produces direct and often immediate spillover effects for Western states. In Iraq, the post-2003 collapse of state institutions and the subsequent rise of ISIS created major security concerns for both the United States and Europe. The emergence of ISIS-inspired terrorist networks, the movement of thousands of foreign fighters, and heightened radicalization risks generated shared vulnerabilities across the Atlantic.

Europe was particularly affected by the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts, which contributed to large-scale waves of displacement and migration, placing intense pressure on asylum systems, border management structures, and domestic political cohesion (European Commission, "Managing *the Refugee…1-9*"). Iran's influence, by contrast, is tied more explicitly to regional power balances and calculated deterrence. Tehran's support for armed proxies, its expanding ballistic missile program, and its alliances with actors in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen have raised longstanding concerns in Washington and European capitals about potential escalation in the Gulf (Tripp 152), the stability of Israel, and the security of maritime routes essential to international commerce (Gowan and Brantner 7). Iran's nuclear program further heightened these

apprehensions by challenging the international nonproliferation regime and raising the specter of broader nuclear competition in the Middle East, with significant implications for NATO, EU external security, and international stability (Kile 45).

Energy underlying forces further underscore the importance of Iraq and Iran for transatlantic relations. Both states hold vast oil and gas reserves that make them central actors in international energy markets. Instability in either country can produce fluctuations in international oil prices, disrupt supply chains, and generate broader economic shocks. Although the United States has reduced its direct dependence on Middle Eastern oil, it remains vulnerable to disruptions that influence international price structures (Blackwill and Stürmer 2). For the European Union, the stakes are even higher due to its basic dependence on imported energy and its reliance on secure Gulf shipping routes. Political crises in Iraq, sanctions on Iran, or tensions in crucial passage points such as the Strait of Hormuz all translate into tangible economic and political pressures for European states (Cook and Roshandel 66).

Beyond security and energy concerns, Iraq and Iran have also served as significant testing grounds for US-EU cooperation and divergence. Iraq represents one of the most manifest examples of a transatlantic disagreement. The 2003 invasion exposed fundamental differences in strategic culture: The United States demonstrated a willingness to use unilateral and pre-emptive force, while the European Union emphasized multilateralism, international law, and long-term institution-building. This discrepancy produced one of the most serious strains in transatlantic relations since the Cold War. Yet Iraq also became a spot of renewed cooperation during the campaign against ISIS, illustrating how deep disagreements can give way to realistic coalition when shared security interests demand collective action (Kagan 1-14).

Iran, meanwhile, highlights understated but equally significant transatlantic differences. While both the US and the EU opposed nuclear proliferation, their preferred policy instruments

diverged sharply. The EU championed diplomacy and negotiated constraints, assuming a leading role in the P5+1 talks, while US policy fluctuated between forcible pressure, sanctions, and periods of pact. These contrasts reflect deeper differences in strategic identity, with the EU favoring normative power and legal frameworks, and the US blending power projection with occasional diplomatic efforts (Kagan 14-30)

For these reasons, Iraq and Iran function not only as epicenters of regional instability but also as analytical tools through which the nature of the transatlantic partnership becomes visible. The ways in which the United States and the European Union interpret and respond to instability in these two areas reveal fundamental divergences, and occasional convergences, in threat perception, strategic culture, foreign policy instruments, attitudes toward multilateralism, and visions of regional order. These factors explain both the periodic crises and the recurring moments of cooperation that have shaped US-EU relations since 2003. Accordingly, the following chapters examine in greater detail how US and EU policies toward Iraq and Iran between 2003 and 2016 reflected these broader structural underlying forces and how instability in these two states consecutively strained and strengthened the transatlantic relationship.

This chapter has shown that the evolution of US-European relations is a story of both enduring partnership and persistent friction, shaped by historical shifts in power, identity, and strategic interest. From the early foundations of transatlantic interchange through the institutional consolidation of the post-1945 order, the Cold War's moments of unity and discord, and the reorientation that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, the partnership has repeatedly adapted to new geopolitical realities. These adaptations were neither smooth nor uniform; rather, they reflected deeper structural dynamics, differences in strategic culture, preferred policy instruments, and visions of international order, that continue to shape Western foreign policy today.

The chapter's examination of the Middle East further underscores this complexity. The region has long served as a test for transatlantic cooperation and a stage upon which competing Western approaches to security, diplomacy, and political reform are revealed. Whether in response to the Gulf War, the rise of "rogue states," the War on Terror, or the Arab uprisings, US and European policies have alternated between convergence and divergence. These patterns demonstrate the inherent challenge of sustaining a cohesive transatlantic strategy in a region marked by instability, entrenched conflicts, and rapidly shifting power dynamics.

At the same time, the historical record demonstrates that despite continuing friction, the United States and Europe remain constrained by shared interests, energy security, counterterrorism, nonproliferation, and the desire for a stable regional order, as well as by deeper normative commitments to multilateral cooperation and liberal democratic values. Yet the ways in which each actor seeks to pursue these interests often diverge, producing contrasting approaches to the use of force, diplomacy, and regional engagement.

The views developed in this chapter provide the essential foundation for analyzing transatlantic policy toward Iraq and Iran between 2003 and 2016. These two states not only exemplify the region's instability but also function as structuring grounds in which the basic assumptions, policy preferences, and normative commitments of the United States and the European Union are clearly pronounced, and greatly tested. As the next chapters will reveal, Iraq and Iran illuminate the essential features of the transatlantic relationship: moments of deep rupture, instances of pragmatic cooperation, and, ultimately, the complex interplay between shared objectives and divergent strategic cultures.

Chapter Three

US Policy toward Iraq and Iran (2003-2016)

This chapter is divided into two major parts, each examining a distinct yet interconnected dimension of US policy in the Middle East between 2003 and 2016. The first part analyzes US policy toward Iraq, tracing its evolution from the 2003 invasion through the challenges of nation-building, deliberate withdrawal, and the eventual re-manifestation against ISIS. It explores how shifting American objectives, combined with deep internal divisions within Iraq, produced both short-term military successes and long-term political instability.

The second part deals with US policy toward Iran, outlining the transformation from decades of containment and sanctions to the diplomatic efforts that resulted in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). By examining these two cases together, the chapter highlights how US strategies, ranging from military intervention to multilateral diplomacy, sought to manage threats and reshape regional dynamics, while also revealing the limitations of American power amid complex political, ideological, and institutional realities.

3.1. US Policy toward Iraq (2003-2016)

From 2003 to 2016, Iraq became the focal point for the United States' attempt to redefine its foreign policy after 9/11. What began as a unilateral intervention justified by counter proliferation and democratization quickly turned into a long, complex involvement marked by insurgency, sectarian conflict, state-building struggles, and eventual US withdrawal, followed by a reluctant return. This period revealed the limits of American military power, the challenges of top-down regime change, and the unintended consequences of trying to reshape a deeply divided society. US policy evolved in three phases. From 2003 to 2008, the US focused on overthrowing Saddam Hussein and rebuilding Iraq, but early decisions and the collapse of state institutions fueled insurgency and sectarian violence. Between 2009 and 2013, the US attempted planned

detachment, withdrawing forces while hoping to preserve influence, yet Iraq's political system deteriorated and security worsened. From 2014 to 2016, the rise of ISIS forced renewed US military involvement, now launched around counterterrorism rather than democratization.

Through these phases, US strategy shifted repeatedly, constrained by internal Iraqi dynamics, elite rivalries, sectarian fragmentation, and weak institutions. Hence, it is vital to examine how intervention, withdrawal, and later counterterrorism efforts reshaped Iraq's political and security order, highlighting Iraq as both a testing ground and an advisory warning for American efforts to reorganize the Middle East in the twenty-first century.

3.1.1. Military Intervention and Nation-Building (2003–2008)

The first phase of US involvement in Iraq, spanning from 2003 to 2008, represents one of the most significant and debated periods in modern American foreign policy. Defined by unilateral military intervention, contested fundamental motives, and deeply flawed attempts at postwar reconstruction, this era exposed deep hostilities between American ambitions and the complex realities of Iraqi society. It was during these years that the consequences of the US decision to remove Saddam Hussein, taken without broad international legitimacy and based on problematic assumptions, began to unfold, reshaping Iraq's political dynamics and changing the balance of power in the Middle East.

Beyond the military campaign itself, this phase comprised the collapse of the Ba'athist state, the emergence of rebellious movements, the rise of sectarian militias, and the struggle to establish new governance institutions under occupation. The blunders of early US policy, combined with unanswered structural weaknesses inside Iraq, generated extensive instability. This environment not only intensified anti-American sentiment but also enabled transnational jihadist networks to take root, ultimately providing the causes for civil conflict and future threats such as al-Qaeda in

Iraq (AQI) and later ISIS. Scholars widely agree that the 2003-2008 period forms the foundation upon which the next decade of Iraq's chaos was built (Biddle 4).

3.1.1.1. The Unilateral Approach

The decision to invade Iraq was not a sudden development but part of a broader planned course initiated soon after the attacks of September 11, 2001. President George W. Bush instructed Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to prepare war plans as early as November 2001, indicating that regime change in Iraq had become a principal objective (Smith et al. 158). By early 2003, senior officials within the administration had reached agreement that Saddam Hussein's removal was necessary to eliminate what they regarded as looming security threats, particularly the suspected presence of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). On March 17, 2003, President George W. Bush issued a 48-hour ultimatum demanding that Saddam Hussein and his sons leave Iraq, an unmistakable sign to the military action that began on March 19 with the bombing of Baghdad.

The invasion marked a critical moment in contemporary international relations. It was widely criticized as a unilateral move executed without explicit authorization from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), despite uttered international opposition. The absence of a multilateral mandate led many states, including longstanding US allies such as France and Germany, to distance themselves from the operation. The George W. Bush administration's decision thus represented a key departure from the multilateral principles that had traditionally guided US foreign policy (Ikenberry, "Illusions of Empire…" 150).

International reactions reflected not only concern about the legality of the intervention but also fear that the US was redefining international norms around preemptive war. Analysts argued that by sidestepping the UNSC, the US weakened collective security devices and set a precedent that other states might later exploit (Glennon 110). Besides, international public opinion radically

shifted; large-scale protests erupted across Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, making the Iraq War one of the most widely opposed military interventions of the early 21st century (Johnstone 813-38).

Preemptively, the unilateral decision hindered American efforts to secure international cooperation in postwar Iraq. Coalition forces eventually included British, Australian, and a limited number of other countries, but the overwhelming share of responsibility remained with the United States. This imbalance constrained legitimacy and operational capacity, magnifying the costs and political burdens of occupation (Baltrusaitis 1-13).

Critics later argued that the isolation of the US resulted not merely from diplomatic disagreements but from a broader perception that Washington was pursuing hegemonic objectives: reshaping the Middle East through regime change, asserting military dominance, and advancing ideological goals tied to the War on Terror. As many observers noted, the US appeared to be giving preference to unilateral action over international legal norms, thereby contributing to the damage of international governance structures and raising concerns about the future stability of international order. This unilateral approach eventually shaped the early years of the occupation. Without strong multilateral support, the US lacked the political legality and institutional backing needed for a successful reconstruction. The result was a series of governance failures, tactical blunders, and escalating violence that would define the ensuing years of conflict (Hinnebusch 12).

3.1.1.2. Official and Ulterior Motives

The motivations behind the 2003 US invasion of Iraq have generated extensive scholarly debate. Although the George W. Bush administration defined the war around security, morality, and democratization, research suggests a more complex rationale. Official claims concentrated on alleged WMDs and ties between Saddam Hussein and terrorist groups, yet inconsistent

intelligence, postwar findings, and shifting rhetoric led many to question these explanations. Critics further argue that economic and geostrategic interests, especially involving oil and US regional dominance, influenced the decision to invade.

The George W. Bush administration publicly justified the war on three reasons: WMD threats, Saddam Hussein's supposed terrorist links, and democratization. The fear of WMD proliferation, based on later questioned intelligence, formed the chief narrative. President Bush insisted that Iraq posed a national security threat, citing Saddam's past chemical weapons use and potential cooperation with al-Qaeda (Bush, "Transcript of Bush's…"). Senior officials, including Cheney, Powell, and Rice, reinforced claims that Iraq was pursuing nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. Powell's 2003 UN presentation, later described by him as a "blot", played a major role in securing international support (Arms Control Association, "Intelligence and Arms").

By 2004, investigations confirmed that Iraq had no active WMD programs and no operational links to al-Qaeda. Duelfer's Iraq Survey Group report made this clear (BBC News), damaging US credibility and provoking debate over whether intelligence had been misjudged or shaped to fit policy. As the WMD reasoning collapsed, the administration highlighted regime change and democratization, arguing that a democratic Iraq would transform regional politics and curtail extremism (Jervis 367). Yet Iraq's societal breakup and postwar instability undermined these goals, exposing the limits of externally imposed regime change (Galen 5).

Many analysts uphold that deeper economic and geopolitical concerns were also vital. Iraq's vast oil reserves and key location made it significant to US grand strategy. Scholars argue that control over Iraq's oil infrastructure offered economic and geopolitical advantages, enhancing US clout in regional and international energy markets. Neoconservative thinkers associated with the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) viewed removing Saddam as a way to expand American influence, react to Iran, and reshape the regional balance of power. The establishment

of long-term US bases strengthened perceptions that Washington sought to reinforce its presence (Cramer and Thrall 170-71).

Post-2003 reforms further support this interpretation. Iraq's previously state-controlled oil sector was opened to foreign investment, with US firms securing major contracts (Yulianti et al. 423). Oil played a fundamental role in US judicious thinking, offering a form of power that shaped international markets (Nye 63). Planning documents highlighted restoring oil production to fund reconstruction and integrate Iraq into international markets, while the CPA advanced liberalization policies in conformity to US preferences. High-ranking officials later acknowledged oil as a significant factor (Mahdi 137).

Beyond oil, many scholars argue that consolidating American hegemony was crucial to the invasion. Removing Saddam enabled the US to establish long-term military bases, watch rivals, and influence regional politics (Abumbe et al. 235). This approach aligned with post-Cold War strategies urging the US to reshape key regions and dissuade adversaries (Kagan 16). Containing Iran was particularly important: Washington supported factions it believed could oppose Iranian influence, though the invasion ultimately strengthened Tehran. US bases also served counterterrorism, intelligence, and deterrence roles (Biddle 62-64).

The invasion additionally reassured allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia of continued US commitment to regional stability. For Israel, Saddam's removal eliminated a longstanding adversary; for Saudi Arabia, US presence helped balance Iran. Overall, the Iraq War reflected not only security and humanitarian rhetoric but also a calculated effort to maintain American dominance in a region fundamental to US international power (Abumbe et al. 236).

3.1.1.3. Immediate Repercussions

The near aftermath of the 2003 invasion exposed the shortcomings of US planning for postwar Iraq. Although the military campaign removed Saddam Hussein rapidly, the George W. Bush

government had underrated the challenges of securing and governing a country with deep sectarian, ethnic, and political cleavages. The notion that Iraq would change easily into a stable, democratic order proved deeply flawed. As several scholars argue, the administration failed to anticipate the collapse of state authority and the scale of instability that would follow the removal of an authoritarian regime that had maintained control through strong institutions (Diamond).

One of the most substantial early decisions was the Coalition Provisional Authority's (CPA) enactment of De-Ba'athification and the dissolution of the Iraqi army. These actions removed hundreds of thousands of civil servants, military personnel, and bureaucrats from their positions, effectively dismantling Iraq's governing institutions. The sudden unemployment of trained soldiers and officials contributed considerably to the emergence of armed resistance and fueled resentment toward the occupying forces. Scholars such as James Dobbins note that the disbanding of the Iraqi army eliminated not only a potential partner in restoring order but also a key source of livelihood for many Iraqi families, thereby accelerating the move toward insecurity (Dobbins et al. 1-7).

The decision also created a power emptiness that was rapidly filled by militias, tribal networks, and insurgent groups. Former Ba'athists, estranged by the political removals, joined nationalist and Islamist factions opposing the occupation. At the same time, Shia militias such as the Mahdi Army strengthened power, while Kurdish forces expanded their influence in the north. This shattering of authority contributed to Iraq's rapid descent into chaos, as no centralized force existed to ensure stability or enforce rule of law (Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* 134).

In addition, prevalent plundering, a breakdown of public order, and the failure to restore essential services created a security vacuum that insurgent groups exploited. Raiding of government buildings, infrastructure, and cultural institutions began almost immediately after the fall of Baghdad, undermining both state capacity and public confidence in the occupation's

ability to provide rudimentary security. As insurgency intensified by 2004, Iraq descended into a cycle of violence involving former regime loyalists, nationalist rebels, sectarian militias, and foreign jihadists. This environment enabled groups such as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) to gain a foothold, further destabilizing the country and transforming local protests into a broader sectarian conflict (Tripp 87).

The consequences of these early blunders moved across the region, undermining US legitimacy, weakening international support, and emboldening rival actors who viewed American strategy as aimless. Iran, in particular, exploited the instability by expanding its political and paramilitary influence inside Iraq, while Syria became a transit point for foreign fighters entering the conflict. The vacuum created by the collapse of Iraqi state institutions thus reshaped regional security dynamics, contributing to long-term instability that would later result in the rise of ISIS (Nasr 112).

More broadly, the failure to stabilize Iraq in the immediate postwar period increased international criticism of US foreign policy. International observers argued that the invasion had not only lacked legal legitimacy but had also been carried out with inadequate planning and insufficient understanding of Iraq's political fabric. These criticisms diminished US diplomatic influence and contributed to declining international confidence in American leadership. Ultimately, the immediate repercussions of the 2003 invasion revealed the deep mistakes embedded in the US approach to Iraq. Early tactical errors, particularly those involving the dissolution of state institutions and the failure to provide security, set the stage for prolonged conflict, regional destabilization, and the damage of US standing, all of which continued to affect American foreign policy for years to come (Byman, *The Five Front War* 145).

3.1.1.4. Nation-Building Failures

The US approach to nation-building in Iraq was hindered by unrealistic assumptions, insufficient resources, and a lack of coherent long-term strategy. The George W. Bush administration initially believed that Iraq would move efficiently to democratic governance and free-market reforms. Instead, the CPA's widespread changes, including privatization initiatives, political reorganization, and constitutional engineering, proved deeply undermining. These measures were based on the assumption that dismantling Iraq's statist economic model and authoritarian political edifices would foster rapid democratization and economic recovery. However, scholars argue that such policies ignored Iraq's historically centralized political system, its reliance on state institutions, and the absence of functioning civil society networks capable of sustaining democratic governance (Dawisha 87).

The US concept of a rapid political transition also misjudged the complexities of constitution writing. The 2005 constitution, prepared under intense time pressure and amid deteriorating security conditions, deep-seated ethnic and sectarian divisions instead of adopting a unified national identity. Critics contend that the constitution instituted federalism without adequate consensus, empowering Kurdish and Shia factions while alienating Sunni Arabs who viewed the new political order as exclusionary (Rayburn 210). This imbalance hindered the emergence of legitimate, inclusive state institutions and contributed to long-term political division.

US reconstruction efforts were further undermined by corruption, mismanagement, and security challenges. Billions of dollars allocated for infrastructure projects were lost or wasted due to inadequate control and the difficulty of realizing development plans amid ongoing violence (Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, SIGIR). The lack of coordination between civilian and military agencies, combined with the rapid renewal of personnel, resulted in repeated failures to complete projects and diminished public trust. Scholars have described this

period as one of the most inefficient reconstruction efforts in modern US history, highlighting the absence of clear goals, or unified leadership (Flibbert 72; Chandrasekaran 45).

Moreover, the privatization of security functions magnified governance failures. Private contractors, or the mercenary army, such as Blackwater assumed extensive roles in policing, logistics, and civilian protection, often operating with limited supervision and legal accountability. Prominent incidents, including the 2007 Nisour Square shooting, undermined Iraqi confidence in the occupation and further eroded the legitimacy of American nation-building efforts (Scahill 123).

Most analytically, American policymakers underestimated the depth of sectarian divisions within Iraq. The empowerment of Shia political parties and Kurdish groups, combined with the relegation of Sunni Arabs, aggravated common tensions and contributed directly to the outbreak of sectarian civil war between 2006 and 2007 (Nasr 156). The downfall of national authority enabled Shia militias, Sunni insurgents, and Kurdish security forces to expand their influence, transforming political competition into violent confrontation. Scholars widely agree that the breakdown of national institutions and the failure to create all-encompassing political structures played a critical role in the escalation of sectarian conflict (Wimmer 88).

By 2007, it had become evident that the US could not achieve its ambitious nation-building objectives under existing conditions. The failure to establish security, legitimacy, and functioning governance structures forced a notable shift in US policy. The Bush administration recognized that a new approach, focused on counterinsurgency, community engagement, and political reconciliation, was necessary to prevent Iraq from collapsing entirely. This realization set the stage for the 2007 surge and a fundamental reorientation of American military and political priorities in Iraq.

3.1.1.5. Counterinsurgency and the 2007 Surge

Faced with escalating sectarian violence and a deteriorating security situation, the US adopted a new counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy under the leadership of General David Petraeus. The 2007 Surge involved deploying an additional 20,000-30,000 US troops to Iraq, with a renewed focus on protecting civilians, associating with local communities, and undoing insurgent networks. This marked a significant retreat from earlier US tactics, which had emphasized rapid withdrawal, force protection, and the training of Iraqi forces over direct involvement. Instead, the new policy contained core COIN principles articulated in the US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual, co-authored by Petraeus, which stressed population security, intelligence-driven operations, and the integration of political and military efforts.

A key element of the strategy was supporting the Sunni Awakening (Sahwa) movement, in which Sunni tribal leaders turned against al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). This cooperation significantly reduced violence in Sunni-majority areas and helped undermine extremist organizational structures. The Awakening Councils, also known as the Sons of Iraq, played a crucial role in stabilizing Anbar Province, once considered the focal point of Sunni insurrection. By mobilizing tens of thousands of local fighters, the US shifted the balance of power on the ground, weakening AQI's networks and reorienting Sunni political calculations (Mansoor 156).

The Surge succeeded temporarily in reducing sectarian killings, improving security in urban centers, and strengthening Iraqi Security Forces. The bipartisan Iraq Study Group (Baker-Hamilton Report, 2006) had recommended such a shift years earlier, emphasizing political reconciliation and regional diplomacy alongside military action. The combination of increased troop levels, enhanced intelligence, fortified checkpoints, and urban "clear-hold-build" strategies led to a remarkable decline in violence by late 2007. Major cities like Baghdad and Baqubah saw improved stability, enabling some degree of civic activity and economic revival (Biddle et al. 13).

However, the success of the Surge had important organizational limitations. Scholars note that the US military could suppress violence but could not resolve the underlying political breakup that fueled it. The Iraqi government, led by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, failed to implement meaningful reforms that would integrate Sunnis into national institutions or curb sectarian abuses within state security forces. Without political settlement, the gains remained heavily dependent on continued US involvement (Katzman, *Iraq: Politics, Elections, and Benchmarks 3*).

Nevertheless, the gains of the Surge remained fragile. While violence decreased, deeper political compromises, especially between Sunni and Shia factions, failed to occur. As many specialists note, the Surge "won time but not the peace," and many unresolved tensions later facilitated the rise of ISIS after 2011. The sidelining of Sunni communities, combined with Baghdad's failure to incorporate Sahwa fighters into regular security forces, created resentment that AQI's successor organization, ISIS, would later exploit. Moreover, the temporary nature of the Surge meant that once the US withdrew, the fragile security architecture it had built quickly eroded (Alaaldin 5).

Thus, the period from 2003 to 2008 illustrates the deep difficulties of transforming military success into sustainable political outcomes. The shortcomings of early postwar planning, combined with inconsistent planned objectives, set the stage for the turbulence that would define Iraq's subsequent decade. The 2007 Surge demonstrated that while COIN strategies can reduce violence, they cannot substitute for long-lasting political settlements, an insight that would become increasingly obvious as Iraq descended into renewed conflict and extremism in the years that followed.

3.1.2. US Planned Withdrawal (2009-2013)

The period between 2009 and 2013 represents a pivotal phase in the evolution of US policy toward Iraq. Following years of direct military occupation, counterinsurgency strategies, and

state-building efforts, the Obama administration administered a decisive transition toward withdrawal. Hence, it is vital to examine the rationale behind the US withdrawal, the structural weaknesses that emerged within Iraq during and after this process, and the resulting erosion of American power. As will be demonstrated, the implementation of the 2008 Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), combined with intensifying political breakup and sectarian polarization within Iraq, contributed to a broader security void that finally facilitated the rise of ISIS. The 2009-2013 period, however, constitutes a turning point whereby US strategy shifted from active intervention to constrained management of instability, an approach that proved insufficient to prevent the rapid deterioration of the Iraqi state.

3.1.2.1. Obama's Rationale and the Implementation of the SOFA Agreement

Barack Obama entered office in January 2009 amid widespread public exhaustion with the Iraq War, which had by then become characteristically representative of perceived American overreach and excessive military confusion abroad. Obama's commitment to ending the conflict shaped his administration's foreign policy priorities from the outset. His guiding principle emphasized planned restraint, a reduction of US involvement in "forever wars," and a renewed focus on domestic recovery following the 2008 financial crisis (Sanger 78). This reorientation matched with the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) signed in 2008 between the George W. Bush administration and the Iraqi government, which authorized the withdrawal of all US combat forces by December 2011 (Katzman, *Iraq: Politics, Elections, and Benchmarks 4*).

Obama inherited the SOFA agenda, but he also embraced it as a political and calculated move. The administration understood that sustaining large-scale military operations in Iraq was untenable in the long term, given declining congressional support and the financial burdens associated with prolonged deployment. At the same time, concerns persisted regarding Iraq's

political instability and the possibility that withdrawal might undermine the security environment (Tardelli 20).

To deal with these predicaments, the Obama administration adopted a gradual withdrawal scheme intended to provide Iraqi security forces with the space and responsibility to assume full operational control. Between 2009 and 2011, US troops were progressively removed from population centers, and the American military presence evolved into a largely advisory and training role. By December 2011, the US announced the achievement of its withdrawal, marking the formal end of Operation Iraqi Freedom and the beginning of a new diplomatic phase (Tardelli 21).

However, this process was complicated by failed negotiations over a remaining US force. Pentagon officials and regional analysts advocated maintaining a limited contingent to support counterterrorism operations and provide political guidance to Iraqi leaders (Katzman, *Iraq: Politics, Elections, and Benchmarks 4*). Yet disputes over legal protection for US personnel and deepening Iraqi political divisions destroyed the prospect of an extended presence. The withdrawal, though consistent with SOFA, thus unfolded with fewer protections than anticipated, leaving the Iraqi state defenseless to internal and external threatening pressures.

3.1.2.2. Political Division and the Emerging Security Vacuum

The US departure took place within an Iraqi political environment characterized by institutional instability, sectarian breakup, and deteriorating elite unity. Under Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, the central government increasingly demonstrated authoritarian tendencies that undermined efforts to establish an all-encompassing and pluralistic political system. Maliki consolidated power through loyalist networks within the security forces, employed de-Baathification laws to downgrade political rivals, and presided over the suppression of Sunni protests and opposition movements (Dougherty, “De-Ba’thification in Iraq”).

This monopolization of authority produced profound sectarian complaints, particularly among the Sunni population, who perceived themselves as excluded from national decision-making. The arrest and persecution of prominent Sunni figures aggravated hostilities and contributed to widespread dissatisfaction with the post-2003 political order. As Sunni communities grew alienated from the state, insurgent groups found new opportunities to expand their recruitment networks. The withdrawal of US troops magnified these underlying forces. Despite years of training, the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) suffered from corruption, factionalism, and uneven operational capacity. The absence of American on-the-ground supervision reduced encouragements for administrative discipline and professionalization. By 2012-2013, the ISF was increasingly politicized and deeply split, with key units loyal to Maliki rather than to the state as a whole (Dhabian).

Concurrently, the regional environment deteriorated. The outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 generated unprecedented cross-border flows of fighters, weapons, and ideological currents. The conflict created ungoverned spaces along the Iraqi-Syrian frontier, which insurgent organizations, including the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the precursor to ISIS, exploited to regroup and expand (Fronczak 6). By 2013, ISI had transformed as the ISIS, indicating its growing territorial ambitions and transnational aspirations.

In short, the combination of sectarian governance, institutional weakness, and regional upheaval created a security emptiness that the US withdrawal was unable to alleviate. The weak stability achieved during the 2007-2008 surge proved unsustainable without continued political reconciliation, an outcome that neither Iraqi elites nor the US government succeeded in advancing.

3.1.2.3. Limits of US Power after Withdrawal

Following the 2011 withdrawal, the US retained diplomatic, economic, and limited security instruments for influencing Iraqi politics. Yet the absence of troops sharply curtailed Washington's capacity to shape developments on the ground. Although the US continued to provide arms transfers, intelligence sharing, and high-level political involvement, these tools lacked the forcible or alleviating power previously afforded by a military presence (Katzman, *Iraq: Politics, Elections, and Benchmarks 4*).

The Maliki government increasingly resisted American recommendations, especially those urging political extensiveness and national reconciliation. With growing Iranian influence, manifested in Tehran's partnerships with Shi'a militias, political parties, and security institutions, the Iraqi leadership had premeditated alternatives that diminished its dependence on Washington (Pollack, *Unthinkable 174*). Iran's role in Iraq deepened the factional character of state institutions and further constrained US weight.

This loss of influence became unquestionably visible with the ascent of ISIS. By early 2014, ISIS had captured significant territory across northern Iraq, culminating in the capture of Mosul in June. The rapid collapse of the ISF demonstrated the severe structural decline that had occurred since the US withdrawal and underscored the limits of Washington's ability to shape Iraqi security outcomes distantly. Only after this remarkable crisis did the Obama administration re-engage militarily through the establishment of an international coalition under Operation Inherent Resolve (Goldenberg et al.).

The 2009-2013 period thus marks a critical interval in which US detachment produced an environment that weakened American influence at a time when Iraqi politics were becoming increasingly unstable. The withdrawal fulfilled domestic political objectives but left the US with diminished means of responding to the consequential challenges that soon emerged.

3.1.3. US Counterterrorism and the Fight against ISIS (2014-2016)

The rise of ISIS in 2013-2014 created one of the harshest security crises in the post-2003 Middle East. Its rapid expansion, including the capture of Mosul and the declaration of a caliphate under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, destabilized Iraqi state sovereignty and regional stability. The collapse of the Iraqi Security Forces and the resurgence of jihadist extremism forced the US to reconsider its post-2011 withdrawal. Although Obama had completed the US exit in 2011, the scale of the threat led to a renewed but limited intervention in 2014. Accordingly, it is vital to examine US re-involvement, the formation of the coalition under Operation Inherent Resolve, and the military, economic, and political measures used to counter ISIS from 2014 to 2016.

3.1.3.1. Obama's Re-involvement: Considered Readjustment after the Fall of Mosul

The fall of Mosul in June 2014 constituted a reflective major shock for the Obama administration. The swift disintegration of the ISF, despite years of US investment in training and equipping Iraqi forces, revealed the depth of organizational deterioration within Iraq's security apparatus, including politicization, corruption, and persistent sectarian breakup (Dhabian). ISIS's ability to seize and hold large areas of territory across northern Iraq and eastern Syria transformed it into a quasi-state with substantial operational capacity. Its control over resources, recruitment networks, and logistics infrastructure represented a level of threat far greater than earlier rebellious groups in Iraq.

Although Obama had campaigned on ending the Iraq War, the impressive escalation of violence and the humanitarian devastation unfolding in northern Iraq forced a reassessment of US tactical position. In public statements, Obama emphasized that ISIS posed not only a regional danger but also a international threat capable of destabilizing allies and instigating attacks beyond the Middle East (Goldenberg et al.). Nevertheless, he remained unwilling to reintroduce large-scale US ground forces. Instead, his administration sought an approach that would reverse ISIS's

territorial gains, support local partners without re-assuming direct combat responsibility, and prevent long-term US military entanglement.

This rearrangement began in August 2014, when Obama authorized limited airstrikes to halt ISIS advances, prevent the genocide of Yazidi civilians in Sinjar, and protect US personnel in Erbil. These narrowly defined actions quickly transformed into a broader and sustained military campaign founded on multilateral cooperation. Obama's recommencement thus represented a well-thought out shift, one that aimed to confront a rapidly growing threat while avoiding the mistakes and political burdens associated with renewed occupation (Lambeth 87).

3.1.3.2. Coalition Building and the Launch of Operation Inherent Resolve

As the severity of the ISIS threat became evident, the Obama administration sought to build an extensive international coalition to share operational, political, and financial responsibilities. In September 2014, the US announced the establishment of a coalition comprising more than seventy states and institutions, including NATO members, Arab governments, and key regional actors such as Jordan, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. This partnership was given the responsibility to undertake coordinated military, intelligence, financial, and ideological initiatives aimed at weakening ISIS (Goldenberg et al.).

On October 17, 2014, the US Department of Defense formally created the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) to administer the multinational campaign. The mission sought to support Iraqi and Kurdish forces through training, equipment provision, and advisory programs, conduct precision airstrikes against ISIS leadership and infrastructure, deliver humanitarian assistance to displaced communities, and disrupt ISIS's transnational networks. The operation extended in gradual stages intended to damage ISIS's operational capabilities, deny the organization further territorial expansion, support crucial actions such as the liberation of Mosul and Raqqa, and finally secure liberated territories to prevent future

resurgence (Fronczak 9). This organized approach reflected a recognition that defeating a hybrid organization like ISIS required sustained, coordinated, and multi-layered military operations.

A key component of the coalition strategy was the emphasis on regional and local actors assuming primary responsibility for ground operations. Kurdish Peshmerga forces, Iraq's Counter Terrorism Service (CTS), and Sunni tribal fighters were placed as the principal combat partners on the ground, while Arab states contributed to the early phases of air operations and intelligence coordination. This burden-sharing pattern served several political and considered purposes. It allowed the US to avoid deploying ground combat troops, thereby conforming to domestic political constraints. It also increased the legitimacy of the campaign within the broader Middle East and underscored the principle that long-term defeat of ISIS required local ownership of security operations (Martini et al. 41-47)**.**

Nevertheless, the reliance on diverse and often competing local actors introduced complexities that influenced the cohesion and pace of the campaign. Divergent political agendas among Iraqi factions, tensions between Kurdish and Arab forces, and the involvement of Iran-backed militias illustrated the complicated internal landscape within which US stratagem operated (Brady and Byman, "Burden-Sharing").

3.1.3.3. Military, Economic, and Political Tools of the US Counter-ISIS Policy

The US counter-ISIS approach was intentionally multidimensional. While airpower, intelligence, and military assistance constituted the operational core of OIR, Obama's administration recognized that ISIS's strength stemmed from its hybrid nature as both a territorial entity and a transnational ideological movement. As such, defeating the organization required efforts that targeted its financial networks, administrative capacity, and ideological appeal, as well as the political grievances that had enabled its emergence (Gerges, "ISIS*: A History*" 145).

Militarily, the campaign relied on sustained air operations designed to destroy ISIS infrastructure, abolish command nodes, and disrupt logistical routes. US military advisers were deployed to assist Iraqi and Kurdish forces with planning, targeting, and battlefield coordination, while Special Operations Forces (SOF) conducted precision raids and intelligence missions. The Iraqi Train and Equip Fund (ITEF) provided material support to partner forces, strengthening their operational capacity. By 2016, these combined efforts had crippled ISIS oil facilities, weakened its financial base, and enabled partner forces to achieve major battlefield victories. Iraqi CTS units, supported by US advisers, played a crucial role in urban operations in Ramadi and Fallujah, while Kurdish Peshmerga forces secured key areas in northern Iraq, including Sinjar (Costantini and O'Driscoll 785-807**)**.

Despite these successes, the military strategy faced extraordinary limitations, particularly in Syria, where disintegrated opposition groups and competing geopolitical interests complicated US efforts. The growing reliance on the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition dominated by Kurdish elements, generated friction with Turkey and underscored the complex trade-offs inherent in US coalition-building. ISIS's status as a quasi-state allowed it to generate substantial revenue from oil smuggling, extortion, taxation, kidnapping, and illicit trade in antiquities.

To counter these income sources, the US Treasury Department, working closely with coalition partners, implemented sanctions, financial monitoring initiatives, and targeted airstrikes on ISIS oil convoys in operations such as "Tidal Wave II." These measures significantly reduced the group's financial resources by 2016 (Lambeth 128). The financial degradation constrained ISIS's ability to pay fighters, purchase weapons, and administer territory, accelerating the damage of its governance structures.

The Obama administration acknowledged that a sustainable victory over ISIS required addressing the political environment that had allowed the group to flourish, particularly the

widespread Sunni disregarding under former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. To alleviate these conditions, the US supported leadership change in Baghdad, encouraged the formation of a more encompassing government under Haider al-Abadi, and backed reconciliation efforts among local communities (Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State* 134).

Washington also strengthened administrative capacity in liberated areas to prevent power vacuums that ISIS could exploit. A related dimension of the strategy focused on countering ISIS's ideological appeal. This involved online counter-propaganda campaigns, support for moderate religious messaging, and efforts to prevent extremist recruitment and foreign fighter flows. Although the impact of these initiatives was uneven and difficult to measure, they reflected the broader recognition that military operations alone could not eliminate the appeal of jihadist ideology or resolve the underlying socio-political grievances driving radicalism (Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State* 134).

3.1.4. Assessment of US Iraq Policy

At this point, it is necessary to provide an internal assessment of US policy in Iraq from the withdrawal period (2009-2013) through the counter-ISIS campaign (2014-2016). Across these years, American strategy shifted noticeably, from withdrawal and the end of direct military occupation to renewed, though limited, involvement once ISIS emerged as a major threat. The core question is whether Washington's interventions ultimately achieved their stated objectives within Iraq itself. To answer this query, one has to evaluate the degree to which US goals were met, identify the principal successes and failures that unfolded inside Iraq, and examine the constraints, miscalculations, and long-term structural challenges that continue to shape Iraq's political and security environment.

3.1.4.1. Did US Interventions Achieve their Stated Objectives?

US policy during this period was designed around two overarching aims: ensuring Iraq's internal stability and political cohesion after the 2011 withdrawal, and preventing the re-emergence of extremist organizations such as ISIS. The record shows that these objectives were achieved only in part and often in ways that revealed significant gaps in policy and implementation.

The Obama administration wanted to execute a responsible withdrawal that safeguarded Iraq's internal stability while maintaining sufficient American influence to support political cohesion and prevent state collapse (Tardelli 21). Although the withdrawal succeeded in meeting domestic political expectations within the US and temporarily affirmed Iraqi sovereignty, the overall objective of ensuring long-term internal stability was not fully realized.

After 2011, Iraq experienced mounting political shattering, driven largely by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's consolidation of power, his exclusion of Sunni political actors, and his increasing politicization of Iraq's security institutions. These developments revealed that US diplomatic influence was insufficient to manage internal political dynamic forces, particularly in the absence of a residual US military presence. Washington's inability to secure agreement for such a force further diminished its influence and limited its capacity to shape Iraq's post-withdrawal course (Sky 212).

The rise of ISIS in 2013-2014 confirmed that the US failed to prevent the reappearance of extremist groups inside Iraq. Although the counter-ISIS campaign from 2014 to 2016 ultimately succeeded in weakening the organization and dismantling its territorial control (Fronczak 9; Goldenberg et al.), this success emerged only after ISIS had already taken advantage of the severe internal vulnerabilities that followed the US withdrawal.

The campaign therefore represented a reactive intervention rather than a preemptive plan designed to prevent extremist resurgence. US policy in 2009-2011 had not adequately accounted for deteriorating political cohesion, growing Sunni marginalization, and institutional fragility, all of which enabled ISIS to recover, expand, and threaten the Iraqi state. While the US achieved its military objective of defeating ISIS as a governing body, the group's rise exposed the shortcomings of earlier disengagement policies and the weakness of Iraq's internal stability.

3.1.4.2. US Successes and Failures in Iraq

When assessed strictly within Iraq's domestic context, United States' policy produced outcomes that were mixed and often uneven. Successes tended to emerge primarily in the military sphere after 2014, while failures were most visible in the political and organizational domains, especially during and immediately after the withdrawal period.

One of the most significant achievements was the military obliteration of ISIS between 2014 and 2016. Operation Inherent Resolve enabled Iraqi and Kurdish forces to reverse ISIS's territorial gains and retake critical cities such as Tikrit, Ramadi, and Fallujah. US airpower, intelligence, and operational coordination were essential to these victories, helping to restore territorial integrity and stabilize major population centers (Goldenberg et al.).

Another success was the strengthening of select Iraqi institutions, most notably the Counter Terrorism Service (CTS), which emerged as one of the most capable and resistant forces in the campaign against ISIS. US support also enhanced the capabilities of Kurdish Peshmerga forces, enabling them to defend key areas and contribute to the broader coalition effort (Lambeth 143). A third notable success was the US role in facilitating Iraq's political transition in 2014. Through diplomatic pressure and coalition coordination, Washington played a part in replacing Maliki with Haider al-Abadi. Abadi's leadership improved relations with Sunni communities and introduced a modest degree of political stability that had been absent in the final years of Maliki's

tenure. This political shift helped create more favorable conditions for the anti-ISIS campaign (Mansour and Jabar 76).

Despite these gains, US policy also exhibited substantial shortcomings. The most significant failure was the inadequacy of institution-building during and after withdrawal. Although the US invested billions in reconstruction and training programs, Iraqi state institutions, particularly the ISF, proved unable to function independently once American forces departed. Endemic corruption, weak leadership, and sectarian awareness raising undermined the effectiveness of these institutions and contributed directly to their collapse in the face of ISIS's 2014 offensive (Mansour and Jabar 177). Another major failure was the inability to prevent the entrenchment of sectarian governance under Maliki. US leverage proved insufficient to constrain Maliki's authoritarian tendencies or to protect Sunni political participation. His exclusion of Sunni leaders and communities contributed to widespread disillusionment and created fertile conditions for ISIS recruitment, thereby undermining national cohesion (177).

Finally, the US reliance on local partners with divergent political agendas, Kurdish forces, Sunni tribal fighters, and Shi'a militias often backed by Iran, intensified Iraq's internal divisions. While these groups were fundamental to military operations, their competition for power complicated post-conflict stabilization and deepened existing divisions within the Iraqi state.

3.1.4.3. Limits, Miscalculations, and Long-Term Challenges

The limitations of US policy in Iraq were shaped not only by tactical choices but also by structural constraints, analytical miscalculations, and enduring challenges within Iraq's political and institutional landscape. Several restrictions severely constrained Washington's ability to influence Iraq's internal forces at work. The absence of US troops after 2011 sharply reduced American power, particularly as Maliki consolidated control over key institutions and marginalized Sunni actors (Dodge, *Iraq: From War* 88).

Iraqi leaders also activated sovereignty-based arguments to resist US pressure, especially concerning immunity for American forces, while internal political rivalries frequently surpassed US calculated priorities. Additionally, Iran's deep and growing influence over Iraqi political factions and security institutions posed a major constraint, undermining American-backed initiatives that sought to promote all-encompassing governance and institutional reform (Dodge, *Iraq: From War* 88).

Significant errors further weakened US policy effectiveness. Policymakers underestimated the weakness of Iraqi institutions and overemphasized their capacity to function autonomously once the US military left. The perceived stability of 2011 masked underlying organizational weaknesses and unresolved sectarian tensions. Washington also placed excessive confidence in the readiness and cohesiveness of the ISF, an assumption invalidated by their collapse in Mosul in 2014. Moreover, US diplomats underestimated the extent to which Maliki's sectarian governance was fueling extremism within Sunni communities and undermining Iraq's internal political order (Dhabian).

The long-term challenges that emerged during this period continue to influence Iraq's political and security environment. Weak governance, widespread corruption, and limited state capacity undermine public faith and impede institutional reform. Persistent sectarian and ethnic divisions, many intensified by the fight against ISIS, complicate efforts to build national cohesion.

Iraq's reliance on foreign security players, whether American or Iranian, reflects ongoing deficiencies in internal capacity. Economic weaknesses, heightened by conflict and fluctuations in international oil prices, limit the state's capacity to provide services and pursue reconstruction. Finally, unsettled political grievances and institutional weaknesses contribute to the persistent danger of extremist reappearance (Dodge, *Iraq: From War* 129). These enduring problems highlight that while US interventions produced important short-term gains, particularly in the

military sphere, they failed to resolve the deeper structural problems that have shaped Iraq's post-2003 trajectory.

The evolution of US policy toward Iraq from 2003 to 2016 demonstrates the multifaceted difficulties inherent in attempting to remake a broken state through external intervention, rapid withdrawal, and selective re-involvement. Across these thirteen years, American policy produced outcomes that often fell short of stated objectives while generating far-reaching and long-term consequences inside Iraq.

The initial phase of military intervention and nation-building revealed the operational limitations of regime change as a foreign policy tool. Although the US succeeded in removing Saddam Hussein, the rapid break up of state institutions, combined with inadequate planning for postwar authority, released forces of division that neither US officials nor Iraqi elites were prepared to manage. Insurgency, sectarian divergence, and the collapse of national cohesion emerged not as unavoidable consequences of intervention, but as direct outcomes of policy miscalculations, institutional weaknesses, and the failure to construct a large-scale political order (Dodge, *Iraq: From War*).

The subsequent period of withdrawal exposed the contradictions at the heart of American policy. Having assumed responsibility for rebuilding Iraq's political landscape, the US nonetheless lacked the political will and domestic support necessary to sustain long-term involvement. The 2011 withdrawal fulfilled an important domestic demand but left behind a weak and deeply divided state. As sectarian governance hardened under Nouri al-Maliki, and as institutions weakened through corruption and politicization, the conditions for the re-emergence of violent extremism began to coalesce. The rise of ISIS was thus not an unexpected development but the culmination of unresolved structural weaknesses that had been developing since the earliest years of the occupation (Mansour and Jabar 177).

The final stage of re-engagement between 2014 and 2016 illustrated both the possibilities and the limits of US influence when intervention is shaped primarily by counterterrorism rather than state-building. Operation Inherent Resolve succeeded in destroying ISIS and restoring significant territorial control to Iraqi forces, demonstrating that targeted military assistance could produce decisive operational gains. Yet this success did not settle the deeper political drivers of conflict. Iraq remained characterized by factionalism, institutional fragility, and competing sources of external influence—conditions that continued to constrain the prospects for sustainable stability long after ISIS's territorial defeat (Dodge, *Iraq: From War 176*).

Across all three phases, a consistent theme emerges: US policy in Iraq was most effective in achieving short-term military objectives but far less successful in shaping the long-term political and institutional foundations of the Iraqi state. The intervention demolished the old order without establishing a feasible alternative; the withdrawal removed American control at a moment when Iraqi politics required sustained support; and the counter-ISIS campaign, while militarily decisive, did not fundamentally alter Iraq's organizational weaknesses.

Ultimately, the US experience in Iraq from 2003 to 2016 underscores the limits of external power in reconstructing societies broken by authoritarianism, war, and sectarian divides. It highlights the necessity of matching military strategy with political realities on the ground and the inherent risks of departure in contexts where institutions remain weak and causes of distress unresolved. The legacy of this period continues to shape Iraq's political course and remains vital to understanding the broader challenges of US policy in the Middle East.

3.2. Historical Context of US Policy toward Iran before 2003

US policy toward Iran has shifted radically over the past century, moving from early commercial ties to a close Cold War partnership with the Pahlavi monarchy, and then to deep hostility after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The revolution and ensuing hostage crisis ended

beneficial cooperation and established the sanctions-based containment framework that shaped relations for decades. That said, it is imperative to trace US policy from the pre-revolutionary era through the Obama administration's nuclear diplomacy, showing how Washington moved from alliance to confrontation and relied on sanctions, isolation, and regional balancing to counter Iran's influence.

While successive administrations shared goals, limiting Iran's regional power, curbing support for militant groups, and preventing nuclear weapons, they pursued these aims through varying combinations of pressure, secret action, and negotiation. At its essence, the analysis asks how effectively US policy constrained Iran or shaped its nuclear ambitions. By assessing the limits of sanctions, the challenges of diplomacy, and the role of Iranian domestic politics, it explains why the deadlock endured for decades and why a step forward became possible only with the 2015 JCPOA, amid a broader background of persistent suspicion.

3.2.1. Historical Overview of US-Iran Relations

At this juncture, a concise historical overview of US-Iran relations is needed. It traces the shift from close cooperation under the Shah to deep hostility after the 1979 Islamic Revolution and examines how successive US administrations, from Reagan to Clinton, developed policies of containment, sanctions, and limited engagement in response to Iran's regional behavior and emerging nuclear program.

3.2.1.1. Pre-Revolution and US-Shah Cooperation

The US involvement in Iran evolved significantly over the 20th century. Early missionary and diplomatic contacts in the 19th century were gradually replaced by diplomatic and economic interests, especially after the discovery of oil in 1908, which attracted Western, initially British, and increasingly American, attention to Iran's vast natural resources. A decisive shift occurred during the Second World War. In August 1941, Anglo-Soviet forces invaded Iran, prompting the

US to regard the country as a critical ally in the struggle against the Axis powers. Washington deployed around 30,000 troops to defend Allied supply routes and provided significant economic assistance, thereby inaugurating a far more direct and militarized American role in Iran (Cook and Roshandel 15).

This wartime intervention laid the foundations for closer ties with the Pahlavi monarchy and facilitated the consolidation of US power under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. At the same time, growing American and British dominance over Iran's oil resources provoked mounting opposition from nationalist forces. Led by Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, these forces wanted to end foreign control of the country's oil industry. Mossadegh's decision to nationalize the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1951 directly challenged British economic interests and, in the broader Cold War context, alarmed Washington as well. His perceived openness to cooperation with the Communist Tudeh Party heightened US fears that Iran might move into the Soviet sphere of influence (Lenczowski 32-37).

In response, British and American intelligence services cooperated to organize a hidden operation, Operation Ajax, in 1953. The CIA and British intelligence arranged protests, provoked unrest, and corrupted officials, resulting in a military coup on 19 August 1953 that overthrew Mossadegh and restored the Shah, who had briefly escaped, as the principal leader of Iran's political system (Cook and Roshandel 16-18). Although the British played a crucial role in deposing Mossadegh, the US emerged as the principal long-term beneficiary. The Shah became a staunch pro-Western ally throughout the Cold War, and the coup marked a turning point that strengthened deep US involvement in Iran until the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

In the post-coup era, US-Iranian relations entered a period of close cooperation, particularly in the important economic and nuclear fields. Washington transferred economic and military assistance to Iran and played a crucial role in building the country's early nuclear infrastructure.

Under President Eisenhower, Iran embraced the Eisenhower Doctrine in 1957, firmly backing US efforts to contain Soviet influence. The same period saw the launch of the "Atoms for Peace" initiative, under which the US and Iran signed a 1957 agreement on the peaceful use of atomic energy (Bill 118-19).

Iran received enriched uranium, technical assistance, and research reactor technology; US funding also supported the establishment of the Tehran Nuclear Research Center, completed in 1967 with a five-megawatt research reactor. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), created under the Atoms for Peace framework, helped reinforce this cooperation and provided an international structure for civilian nuclear development (Bill 119-20).

Subsequent administrations adjusted the balance between support and restraint but, overall, the Shah's Iran remained a key US ally. The Nixon Doctrine and the "twin pillar" policy in the early 1970s further elevated Iran's role as the security mainstay of the Persian Gulf, with Saudi Arabia as the economic leader (Morgan 4). Iran's increasing oil revenues after the 1973 oil crisis enabled large-scale purchases of advanced US weaponry and nuclear technology, including multi-billion-dollar deals for nuclear reactors (Schmitz 82; Yazdani and Hussain 269). Even when nuclear cooperation incited domestic criticism in the US, especially under Ford and Carter, Washington continued to view Iran as a respected client state. This collaboration persisted until the 1979 Islamic Revolution rapidly transformed the relationship.

3.2.1.2. Post-Revolution Split: The Islamic Revolution and the Hostage Crisis

The 1979 Islamic Revolution profoundly changed US-Iranian relations. The overthrow of the Shah and the establishment of the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini ended the pro-Western monarchy that had been closely linked to Washington for decades. The new regime denounced the Shah's policies as corrupt, authoritarian, and excessively dependent on foreign, particularly American, support. The revolution thus indicated not merely a change in

leadership, but a denunciation of the entire US-backed order in Iran, including its nuclear policy, which had been deeply connected with Western assistance and modernization.

The split reached its most dramatic expression in the US embassy hostage crisis. In November 1979, Iranian students captured the American embassy in Tehran and took US diplomats and staff hostage, holding them for 444 days. This episode constituted a decisive turning point in US-Iran relations and had deep, lasting consequences on mutual views and policy choices (Wise 10). For many in the US, the crisis denoted Iran's hostility and unpredictability; for the new Iranian leadership, it served as an expression of resistance to foreign meddling and the legacy of the 1953 coup.

In response, the Carter administration adopted a series of punitive measures. Washington imposed an economic embargo, froze Iranian assets in the US, and annulled visa privileges for Iranian nationals. Militarily, it launched Operation Eagle Claw, a special-forces mission designed to rescue the hostages by attacking the embassy and evacuating the captives to an American carrier task force in the Arabian Sea. The operation failed, resulting in aircraft losses and American casualties, and further embarrassed the Carter administration (Yazdani and Hussain 270).

Diplomatic efforts to secure the hostages' release constantly hindered, and no full resolution was achieved before the end of Carter's presidency. In the end, a settlement was reached only as Carter left office on 20 January 1981, through the Algiers Accords, which provided the framework for freeing the hostages and unfreezing certain Iranian assets (Wise 11). Yet, despite the success of the Accords in ending the immediate crisis, they did not restore mutual confidence.

Instead, the hostage episode ingrained deep mistrust in Washington and Tehran alike. For US policymakers, the crisis confirmed fears about Iran's revolutionary radicalism and helped stereotype the image of Iran as a hostile, unreliable actor. For the Islamic Republic, the memory

of US support for the Shah and the 1953 coup, combined with the new sanctions, reinforced suspicion of American intentions.

As a consequence, the hostage crisis marked the beginning of decades of antagonism, characterized by recurring disputes over Iran's regional influence and, increasingly, over its nuclear ambitions. Even after the hostages were released, US-Iranian relations remained cumbersome, and the foundations of US suspicion, anchored in both the revolution and the embassy seizure, continued to shape policy (Wise 11).

3.2.1.3. From Pact to Hostility: Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Bill Clinton

In the decades following the Iranian revolution, US policy toward Iran shifted from pre-1979 cooperation to a pattern of confrontation, containment, and intermittent, often secret, dealing. The Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Clinton administrations all confronted the twofold challenge of Iran's regional behavior and its nuclear ambitions, and each contributed to an evolving agenda of sanctions and "dual containment."

3.2.1.3.1. The Reagan Administration

When President Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, he inherited a deeply overwrought relationship shaped by the hostage crisis and the ideological clash between the United States and the Islamic Republic. The broader Cold War context outlined President Reagan's Iran policy: Washington's vital priority was to limit Soviet influence in the Middle East while also containing the spread of Khomeini's revolutionary ideology (Bill 307).

A defining element of Reagan's approach was US support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). By backing Saddam Hussein's regime, politically and, at times, indirectly militarily, Ronald Reagan sought to counterbalance Iran and prevent it from dominating the Gulf. The war intensified mutual hostility, while attacks on US interests in Lebanon and elsewhere reinforced Washington's view of Iran as a sponsor of terrorism. In 1984, the Reagan

administration formally labeled Iran as a "state sponsor of terrorism," making this perception official and legalizing additional sanctions and diplomatic isolation (Sabatini).

At the same time, the administration grew increasingly apprehensive about Iran's nuclear intentions. Although Iran's nuclear program had been effectively suspended in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, Tehran revived it in the 1980s, insisting that it was for peaceful purposes (Noi 80). Washington feared that nuclear technology could be diverted to military ends. In response, the Reagan administration avoided direct negotiations and instead relied on diplomatic pressure and export controls to restrict Iran's access to dual-use technologies. The 1986 multilateral embargo was central to this strategy, aiming to prevent European and Asian states from supplying Iran with equipment that could contribute to nuclear weapons development (Sabatini).

Yet these efforts did not completely terminate Iran's nuclear ambitions. Tehran managed to circumvent some controls and exploit arms channels for its broader security requirements. This policy resulted in the Iran-Contra affair of 1986, in which US officials secretly facilitated arms sales to Iran, passing through Israel, in exchange for assistance in freeing American hostages held by Hezbollah in Lebanon. Incomes from these sales were diverted to fund the Contra rebels in Nicaragua, in violation of US law (Hoff).

Despite congressional prohibitions on arms transfers to state sponsors of terrorism, figures such as Oliver North, working with the CIA under William Casey, pursued this hidden policy, revealing deep contradictions in US strategy (Bill 308). The scandal highlighted the tension between public calls for containment and private attempts at transactional dealing, further complicating US-Iran relations.

3.2.1.3.2. The George H. W. Bush Administration

President George H. W. Bush initially indicated a willingness to improve relations with Iran. In his 1989 inaugural address, he declared that "goodwill begets goodwill," suggesting that positive Iranian actions might be met with US reciprocity (qtd. in Mattair 65). Tehran responded with a number of gestures: President Rafsanjani facilitated the release of US hostages held by pro-Iranian groups in Lebanon and moderated anti-Western rhetoric, including a public denunciation of terrorism in a Friday sermon on 20 December 1991 (Ansari 131).

Despite these moves, the George H. W. Bush administration did not significantly modify its policy. It neither released Iranian assets frozen since 1979 nor eased unilateral sanctions in a meaningful way (Mattair 65). Analysts argued that the persistent shadow of the Iran-Contra scandal, combined with Iran's continued involvement in assassinations of dissidents abroad, made Washington cautious of deeper commitment (Ansari 132). Thus, the relationship remained largely stagnant, with minimal substantive progress.

On the nuclear front, US officials grew increasingly concerned that Iran might be following a course similar to Iraq's, secretly pursuing nuclear weapons. Reports indicated that Iran was seeking nuclear technology from the Soviet Union, China, and Pakistan (Mann, "Iran's Nuclear…"). In March 1990, Tehran signed a protocol with the Soviet Union to complete the Bushehr nuclear plant and to build additional reactors (Bahgat 310).

After the Soviet breakdown, cooperation with Russia expanded, including a 1992 agreement that provided fuel-fabrication technology and uranium-enrichment instruments. The United States attempted to counter this move by exerting pressure on Moscow, using threats, selective sanctions, and offers of economic incentives, but those efforts achieved only limited success. Iran's nuclear program continued to benefit from Russian support throughout the early 1990s (Bahgat 310).

3.2.1.3.3. The Clinton Administration

When President Bill Clinton took office in 1993, he faced a relationship with Iran shaped by long-standing animosity, Iran's support for militant groups, and mounting concern over its nuclear program. Although the election of reformist President Mohammad Khatami in Iran later opened limited prospects for dialogue, US policymakers largely concluded that containment, rather than collaboration, was the most practical approach (Freedman).

Clinton's policy became closely associated with "dual containment," which sought simultaneously to constrain both Iran and Iraq. Under this strategy, the US expanded its military presence in the Gulf and strengthened security ties with regional allies such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey (Noi 81). A key component of dual containment vis-à-vis Iran was the use of strong economic sanctions to restrain Tehran's nuclear ambitions and reduce its capacity to fund activities deemed undermining or supportive of terrorism.

President Clinton issued an executive order banning all US trade and investment with Iran and, in 1996, signed the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA), imposing penalties on foreign companies investing more than $20 million annually in Iran's oil and gas sectors (Freedman). However, these unilateral measures faced significant resistance from European allies and other major powers, many of whom sought to maintain economic ties with Iran (Noi 81). As a result, the overall impact of US sanctions was weakened. Iran continued to advance its nuclear program, with Russian and Chinese cooperation playing an especially important role, including work on the Bushehr reactor (81).

Ultimately, Clinton's approach of economic isolation and dual containment slowed but did not halt Iran's nuclear progress. It hardened Iranian suspicion and left unresolved the underlying security and political issues at the heart of the disagreement. These dynamics set the stage for

continued friction and placed the nuclear question at the middle of US-Iran relations as George W. Bush assumed office in 2001.

3.2.1.4. Assessing US Policy on Iran's Nuclear Program from Reagan to Clinton

Across the Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Clinton administrations, US policy toward Iran can be described by a recurring pattern of confrontation, containment, and occasional secret collaboration. Although these policies were supposedly designed to limit Iran's regional influence and prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons, they often produced unintended consequences. Rather than moderating Iranian comportment, they tended to empower hardliners, deepen mistrust, and push Tehran toward greater self-reliance in its nuclear endeavors.

Containment remained the chief thread running through these decades: Washington relied on diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, and planned isolation to slow Iran's nuclear progress. Yet multiple factors hindered the effectiveness of this approach. Under Reagan, the attempt to isolate Iran was undermined by the contradictions of the Iran-Contra affair, in which the US secretly supplied arms to an establishment it publicly condemned, thereby damaging its credibility (Hoff).

Under George H. W. Bush, relations remained largely stagnant. Despite sanctions and efforts to dissuade Russia and China from cooperating with Iran, foreign assistance to Tehran's nuclear program continued, particularly in relation to the Bushehr reactor (Reardon 13; Bahgat 310; Huang 12). President Clinton's imposition of sweeping economic sanctions, including ILSA, faced strong international resistance; without broad multilateral enforcement, many European and other states maintained commercial relations with Iran, limiting the sanctions' impact and enabling Tehran to advance its nuclear capabilities (Yazdani and Hussain 278; Noi 81).

Beyond sanctions and pressure, analysts have argued that the US largely avoided sustained, direct diplomatic collaboration with Iran, preferring isolation over negotiation (Maloney,

"America and Iran ..."). This absence of a political channel reduced the prospects for addressing Iran's security concerns and contributed to a phase of mutual suspicion. As a result, US policies did not resolve the underlying motives of Iran's nuclear ambitions. Instead, they helped establish a confrontational process that persisted into the 2000s and shaped subsequent debates over how to deal with Iran's nuclear program.

From the revolution through the end of the Clinton era, US policy toward Iran's nuclear program was marked by continuity in its reliance on containment and sanctions, but inconsistency in its execution and limited success in achieving long-term significant goals. This historical context is essential for understanding the subsequent evolution of US policy between 2003 and 2016, when the nuclear issue became even more dominant, and contentious, in bilateral and international diplomacy.

3.2.2. US Policy toward Iran (2003-2016)

US policy toward Iran between 2003 and 2016 outspread against the background of major regional upheavals, rising nuclear anxieties, and shifting American preferences in the Middle East. During this period, Washington faced a multifaceted challenge: how to contain a revolutionary state that combined ideological opposition to the US with pragmatic efforts to expand its regional influence and advance its nuclear capabilities. The George H. W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations inherited different geopolitical contexts but met similar dilemmas, balancing powerful pressure with diplomatic dealing, coordinating with European and international partners, and tackling the broader consequences of the Iraq War and the evolving regional security environment.

For better understanding, it is vital to trace the evolution of US strategy across these years, beginning with the Bush administration's post-9/11 reassessment of Iran, the emergence of the nuclear crisis in 2002-2003, and the shift from timid cooperation to open hostility. Next, it is

essential to explore how Washington adopted increasingly assertive measures, including multilateral sanctions, financial isolation, and demands for full transparency of Iran's nuclear activities. Finally, it is important to examine how the Obama administration readjusted US policy through a combination of increased pressure and renewed diplomacy, facilitating the negotiations that resulted in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. Together, these developments illustrate the persistent difficulties the US faced in shaping Iranian conduct and the evolving policies it employed over more than a decade of confrontation and negotiation.

3.2.2.1. The Early George W. Bush Administration (2001-2005)

The election of George W. Bush in 2000 initially brought no major change in US main concern toward Iran. In the early months of his presidency, Iran was not at the focus of Washington's foreign policy agenda, and its nuclear program attracted relatively limited attention. This situation changed radically after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. The 9/11 attacks, which claimed nearly 3,000 American lives, inflicted an unprecedented security crisis on the US and basically reshaped its foreign policy orientation. In response, the George W. Bush administration launched a broad "war on terror," including military action in Afghanistan, sweeping counterterrorism measures, and a redefinition of Washington's international diplomatic stance (Keys).

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, US-Iranian relations entered a rare, brief period of calculated convergence. Iran expressed sympathy for the American people, and President Mohammad Khatami publicly condemned the attacks, conveying condolences on behalf of the Iranian people and the Islamic Republic (Douglass and Hays 59). This tone of solidarity, though limited, created an opening for pragmatic cooperation.

As a long-standing opponent of the Taliban, Iran quietly supported the US intervention in Afghanistan, providing intelligence on Taliban and al-Qaeda positions and facilitating contact

with the Northern Alliance. Both sides also participated in the "Geneva Contact Group," a diplomatic forum that helped coordinate post-Taliban political provisions. This cooperation extended to broader regional discussions and marked an exceptional moment of limited collaboration between two states otherwise locked in decades of antagonism (Douglass and Hays 59).

However, this unconfirmed convergence proved short-lived. By early 2002, several developments eroded the possibility of sustained rapprochement. US administrators accused Iran of smuggling arms to Palestinian groups after the interception of the Karine A ship, of offering sanctuary to fleeing Taliban and al-Qaeda elements, and of pursuing an increasingly advanced nuclear program (Zaborowski 65-66). Against this backdrop, President George W. Bush delivered his 29 January 2002 State of the Union address, in which he denounced Iran, alongside Iraq and North Korea, as part of an "Axis of Evil."

In this speech, George W. Bush condemned Iran as a key threat to international security, citing its support for terrorism, pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, and defiance of international norms. The "Axis of Evil" formulation signaled a decisive shift: Washington no longer treated Iran as a potential partner against common threats but as a fundamental opponent of US interests. As Stephen Hadley later observed, this speech effectively ended "perhaps the most significant public engagement with Iran since the 1979 revolution" (qtd. in Saghaye Biriya 42).

The nuclear issue moved to the middle of this antagonistic denunciation in 2002. In August of that year, the opposition group Mujahedin-e-Khalq revealed the existence of two undeclared nuclear facilities: a uranium enrichment site at Natanz and a heavy-water facility at Arak. Iran acknowledged the facilities in early 2003 but insisted they were purely for peaceful purposes. The revelations, however, transformed international perceptions of Iran's nuclear program, shifting it from a nominally civilian effort under suspicion to a potential secret weapons project

(Zaborowski 69). The fact that these facilities had been developed outside full IAEA transparency raised serious concerns about violations of Iran's Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) commitments and prompted what became a constant nuclear crisis.

In response, the IAEA increased pressure on Tehran, demanding greater access to nuclear sites, extensive explanation of past activities, and an interruption of uranium enrichment. Under threat of referral to the UN Security Council, Iran entered negotiations with the so-called EU-3 (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany). These talks generated the Tehran Statement in 2003, in which Iran agreed to cooperate fully with the IAEA, willingly suspend enrichment, and provisionally implement the Additional Protocol, granting inspectors broader access. The Paris Agreement of 2004 codified these obligations and tied Iran's suspension of enrichment to EU-3 promises of economic and political cooperation, including support for civilian nuclear energy (Singh 107).

Yet these arrangements proved weak. By 2005, Iran declared that it would resume enrichment, arguing that the EU-3 had failed to deliver meaningful economic and security benefits in return for Iranian compromises. Tehran presented this move as a response to inadequate diplomatic collaboration and unfulfilled promises, describing the continuation as a defense of its rights rather than a rejection of dialogue (Ogultarhan 119). For Washington, however, Iran's decision confirmed doubts about Tehran's intentions and reinforced the perception that Iran was unwilling to abide by its commitments, thereby paving the way for a more assertive US policy.

3.2.2.2. George W. Bush's Approach (2005-2008)

Iran's resumption of enrichment in 2005 marked a turning point in US policy. Up to that point, Washington had adopted a largely doubtful but somewhat detached stance, supporting European diplomacy but refusing to engage directly with Iran. Once Iran restarted its program, the George

W. Bush administration began to play a much more active role, building a policy that combined support for multilateral negotiations with a growing emphasis on forcible measures.

Initially, the US backed the EU-3 efforts to craft a comprehensive incentives package. In August 2005, Britain, France, and Germany offered Iran long-term political, economic, and civilian nuclear cooperation in exchange for a continued termination to enrichment (Singh 107-08). Washington also endorsed a Russian proposal to supply enriched fuel for Iran's Bushehr reactor on the condition that Moscow would take back spent fuel, limiting proliferation risks (Hadley). These initiatives aimed to offer Iran a dignified path to civilian nuclear energy while closing off the route to weapons-usable material.

In 2006, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice indicated a further shift by announcing that the US would join EU-3 negotiations if Iran agreed to interrupt all enrichment-related activities. This move allied Washington more closely with the emerging P5+1 framework (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany), which offered Iran a broad package of economic and technological incentives in return for verifiable limits on the nuclear program. EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana held multiple rounds of talks with Iranian negotiator Ali Larijani in an attempt to find common ground. However, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's confrontational rhetoric and Iran's refusal to stop enrichment weakened these efforts (Hadley). Even symbolic steps, such as President George W. Bush's decision in 2008 to send Under Secretary of State William Burns to a Geneva meeting, failed to change Tehran's position, and the incentives on offer did not persuade Iran to suspend its activities (Pollock).

As diplomacy stalled, the emphasis shifted increasingly to forcible diplomacy. The US and its European allies successfully pushed the IAEA Board of Governors to transfer Iran's file to the UN Security Council, which then adopted a series of resolutions: 1737 (December 2006), 1747 (March 2007), 1803 (March 2008), and 1835 (September 2008). These resolutions imposed

escalating sanctions, targeting individuals, entities, and sectors associated with Iran's nuclear and missile activities, including asset freezes, travel bans, and restrictions on arms transfers (Hadley).

Within the George W. Bush administration, this sanctions-based approach generated internal debate. Neoconservative voices preferred military strikes or even regime-change policies, while key cabinet members such as Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates advocated for diplomacy and sanctions over direct military confrontation (Saghaye Biriya 47-48). President George W. Bush eventually endorsed the latter course, opting for multilateral pressure rather than open conflict.

Alongside UN measures, Washington adopted unilateral sanctions aimed at main leaders of the Iranian state. The US selected the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and several state-owned banks for sanctions, seeking to disrupt their access to international financial markets and weaken what it regarded as the regime's powerful backbone (Hadley). The Treasury Department launched a worldwide campaign warning foreign financial institutions of the reputational and legal risks of dealing with Iran, especially in connection with proliferation or terrorism financing. As a result, more than 90 major international banks reportedly curtailed their ties with Iran, and many multinational corporations withdrew Iranian contracts. Organizations such as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and the OECD also issued advisories against doing business with Iranian financial institutions, deepening Iran's isolation (Hadley).

However, the coherence of this pressure policy was shaken by the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE). Released on 3 December 2007, the NIE concluded that Iran had stopped its nuclear weapons program in 2003, casting doubt on the imminence of the threat that had been essential to the case for escalating sanctions (Singh 109). The report significantly complicated US efforts to persuade allies to carry additional punitive measures, undercutting the narrative of an imminent crisis and weakening domestic and international support for further escalation. At the

same time, it did not resolve concerns about the expansion of Iran's enrichment infrastructure, which continued to advance.

By 2008, the limitations of the sanction's policy were increasingly apparent. Iran had endured considerable economic costs yet continued with its nuclear program, particularly enrichment. The international context also constrained US power: the war in Iraq, tensions with Russia over Georgia, and the emerging international financial crisis reduced inclination to confrontation. High oil prices, meanwhile, augmented Iran's revenues and alleviated some of the impact of sanctions (Singh 109). Analysts such as Kenneth Pollack argued that this combination of pressure and calculated mistakes may have hardened Iran's determination rather than restricted it, as Tehran conceived its nuclear advance as a matter of sovereignty and resistance (*Unthinkable*, 297).

In the end, George W. Bush left office with Iran's nuclear deadlock unresolved. Despite an extensive sanctions system and attempts at limited diplomacy, Iran continued to expand its program and assert a more confident regional position. US military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq had removed two of Iran's principal antagonists, Saddam Hussein and the Taliban, possibly shifting the regional balance of power in Tehran's favor, as commentators like David Ignatius noted. The nuclear impasse persisted, preparing the conditions for a different approach under Barack Obama.

3.2.2.3. Obama's Diplomatic Turn (2009-2016)

Obama's presidency marked a major shift in US policy toward Iran, moving from the primarily tough approach of previous administrations to a policy that combined contact with sustained pressure. Confronted with an expanding nuclear program and the limits of sanctions alone, the administration sought to test whether diplomacy could meaningfully reshape Iran's conduct. Early contact, covert talks, and closer coordination with international partners paved the way for more serious negotiations. Yet deep suspicion, domestic constraints, and regional

frictions complicated progress. Accordingly, it is vital to examine how these underlying forces shaped Obama's double-sided policy and ultimately enabled the JCPOA negotiations.

3.2.2.3.1. Symbolic Offers and the Double-sided Policy (2009-2012)

Barack Obama entered office determined to accommodate US policy toward Iran. Aware that decades of non-recognition, threats, and isolation had failed to resolve the nuclear dispute, he advocated for collaboration and direct diplomacy. During his 2008 campaign, Obama stressed the need for talks "without preconditions," recognized Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) , and indicated a willingness to deviate the confrontational attitude of the George W. Bush years. This change formed part of a broader policy to reduce anti-American sentiment in the Muslim world and tackle security challenges through dialogue where possible.

Soon after taking office, President Obama launched a series of exemplary preludes. On 20 March 2009, he released a Nowruz (Persian New Year) video address to the Iranian people and leadership, calling for a "new beginning" based on mutual respect. This message was followed by major speeches in Prague, Ankara, and Cairo, where he restated the themes of cooperation and mutual interest. These gestures sought to suggest a genuine opening for dialogue and to test whether Tehran would respond positively (Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance* 182).

Behind the scenes, President Obama also took part in discreet diplomatic messaging. Beginning in May 2009, he sent several confidential letters to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, expressing US willingness to settle the nuclear issue peacefully if Iran demonstrated serious intent and acted in accordance with international obligations. Khamenei's responses reflected deep skepticism, demanding conditions such as sanctions relief, unfreezing of assets, and an end to US support for Israel. In contrast, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad rarely adopted

a more tactical openness to talks, underlining internal divisions between hardline and pragmatic factions in Iran (Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance* 182).

At the multilateral level, President Obama's team pursued a double-sided strategy: simultaneous cooperation and pressure. A key opportunity arose when Iran requested IAEA assistance in supplying fuel for the aging Tehran Research Reactor (TRR) in June 2009. The US and its partners used this request to open high-level talks, including an October 2009 meeting that produced a physical exchange of fuel types' proposal: Iran would ship a large portion of its low-enriched uranium abroad in exchange for reactor fuel. This would have reduced Iran's stock and built confidence. However, Tehran eventually rejected the deal, and its counterproposals were judged insufficient by the P5+1, leading to another round of UN sanctions (Takeyh 86).

As Iran continued to expand enrichment, President Obama increasingly reinforced the strong-arm side of the parallel paths. In July 2010, he signed the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (CISADA), which intensely escalated US economic pressure by targeting Iran's energy sector and financial links. The administration also allegedly authorized cyber operations against Iran's nuclear facilities. The most noteworthy of these was the Stuxnet attack, developed jointly with Israel, which damaged centrifuges at Natanz and marked a defining moment in the use of cyber tools as devices of statecraft (Maloney, "*Iran's Political…"* 167).

Despite this combination of contact and pressure, Obama's first term generated only limited progress. Iran continued to enrich uranium and strengthen its regional role, causing anxiety among US allies and Gulf states. Still, Obama maintained that diplomacy remained essential, and in his 2012 UN General Assembly talk he emphasized that while time for negotiations was not unlimited, the US preferred a peaceful solution to the nuclear dispute.

An important development during this period was the emergence of a secret Oman network. Sultan Qaboos of Oman facilitated confidential talks between US and Iranian officials beginning

in 2012, even before the election of Hassan Rouhani. These discussions built trust, clarified red lines, and laid the foundation for the more formal negotiations that would follow (Mann 200). Although public advancements were limited before 2013, this unofficial contact proved decisive in shaping the path to an all-inclusive agreement.

3.2.2.3.2. The JCPOA Negotiations (2013-2015)

By the time of Hassan Rouhani's election in 2013, both Washington and Tehran faced strong motivations to resolve the nuclear stalemate. Years of sanctions had inflicted deep damage on Iran's economy, while the US and its partners were increasingly concerned that Iran was approaching a "breakout" capability. At the same time, old tools, sanctions and isolation, had failed to stop Iran's program. President Obama faced a severe choice: accept a nuclear-capable Iran or pursue a rigorous diplomatic effort to restraint and reverse its nuclear activities (Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance* 136).

Building on the foundation laid by the Oman channel, formal negotiations intensified under the P5+1 framework (the US, United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, and Germany, with the EU). These talks ended with the JCPOA, agreed in 2015. Under the JCPOA, Iran accepted broad constraints on its nuclear program in exchange for phased sanctions relief. It agreed to reduce its stock of enriched uranium by roughly 98 percent, dismantle about two thirds of its installed centrifuges, cap enrichment levels, and redesign its heavy-water reactor at Arak (Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance* 136).

The agreement also established an intrusive inspection and monitoring system by the IAEA, granting inspectors access to key facilities and supply chains. In return, the US, EU, and UN committed to lifting or suspending nuclear-related sanctions, opening the door for Iran's partial reintegration into the international economy. While non-nuclear US sanctions related to terrorism and human rights remained in place, the JCPOA promised significant economic relief and

indicated a potential opening for broader collaboration over time (Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance* 137).

President Obama defended the agreement on tactical grounds. He consistently argued and even warned that a nuclear-armed Iran would be strongly threatening, risking a regional nuclear arms race and intensifying the likelihood of conflict (qtd.in Mann 180). Diplomacy, backed by force, was presented as the only convincing means of verifiably limiting Iran's nuclear program and avoiding war. Analysts such as Parsi have stressed that earlier reliance on sanctions and threats had often empowered Iranian hardliners rather than moderating them, reinforcing Tehran's resolve to pursue nuclear capabilities as a symbol of sovereignty and deterrence (*Treacherous Alliance* 236).

In this sense, President Obama's approach represented a significant deviation from previous US approaches. Rather than centering completely on isolation and pressure, his administration used a combination of sanctions and sustained diplomacy to reach a negotiated settlement with Iran. The JCPOA did not resolve all disputes between the two countries, nor did it tackle all aspects of Iran's regional conduct. However, it temporarily appeased the most dangerous dimension of the crisis, unrestrained nuclear escalation, and showed a different pattern of US dealing with adversaries, one that would remain a crucial point of debate in subsequent years.

3.2.2.4. Assessment of US Iran Policy

From 2003 to 2016, US policy toward Iran shifted among sanctions, diplomacy, and limited cooperation, yet consistently faced the same obstacles: Iran's deep mistrust of the West, its fragmented politics, and the vital role of nuclear capability in its security approach. For Tehran, nuclear development provided deterrence, prestige, and bargaining power. The interaction of these factors, external pressure, diplomatic efforts, and Iran's internal underlying forces, ultimately created the conditions that made the 2015 JCPOA possible.

3.2.2.4.1. Effectiveness of Sanctions

Sanctions constituted the principal instrument of US policy for more than a decade, yet their effectiveness varied considerably over time. Under the George W. Bush administration, sanctions were largely unilateral and lacked the multilateral coordination necessary to impose decisive economic hardship. While these measures succeeded in restricting Iranian access to certain financial systems and in showing international concern, they did not prevent Tehran from expanding its enrichment capacity from a few hundred centrifuges to several thousand by the end of the decade (Özcan and Özdamar 92).

Iran's substantial oil revenues during this period provided financial protection, and the leadership delineated Western pressure as an attack on national sovereignty, transforming nuclear noncooperation into an emblem of revolutionary resistance (Maloney, "*Iran's Political…"* 215). As a consequence, early sanctions served more as a political warning than as an effective constraint on nuclear development.

The landscape shifted significantly under the Obama administration, when sanctions became far more wide-ranging, internationally organized, and economically damaging. Legislation such as the CISADA in 2010 and the imposition of an EU oil embargo in 2012 sharply reduced Iran's revenue flows, severely restricted its access to international banking networks, and contributed to a rapid devaluation of its currency. These procedures produced inflation, rising unemployment, and widespread economic disturbance (Takeyh 203). Although sanctions did not force Iran into ending enrichment altogether, they greatly altered the cost-benefit calculations of Iranian elites. The growing economic crisis supported the position of pragmatists who argued that continued conflict with the West was untenable and that insightful negotiations were necessary to alleviate the economy.

Sanctions were effective only when deployed alongside diplomatic avenues. On their own, they did not achieve the premeditated objective of halting Iran's nuclear progress. Their true impact lay in reshaping internal Iranian debates and creating incentives for compromise. Thus, sanctions were a necessary component of US policy but insufficient by themselves; their value became fully apparent only when combined with reliable diplomatic cooperation and international agreement.

3.2.2.4.2. Successes and Limits of Diplomacy

Diplomacy emerged as a critical complement to powerful measures, particularly during the Obama administration, which placed extraordinary emphasis on communication. Diplomatic efforts succeeded in opening communication channels, reducing mutual misperceptions, and fostering multilateral unity through the P5+1 structure. The framework of the P5+1 was crucial to this success, as it ensured that Iran faced a unified negotiating bloc backed by international legitimacy.

President Obama's inclination to communicate directly with Iran, both publicly through initiatives such as the 2009 Nowruz message and privately through the secret Oman channel, helped break enduring diplomatic taboos and allowed for sincere exchanges away from domestic political scrutiny (Parsi, *A Single Roll of the Dice 245*). Moreover, the administration's dual-track approach, which combined pressure and contact, demonstrated that diplomacy could be reinforced rather than undermined by sanctions.

Despite these achievements, diplomacy remained inhibited by deep-seated suspicion. Shifting political incentives, and domestic pressures in both Iran and the US decades of hostility, dating back to the 1979 Revolution and subsequent crises, created deep suspicion of US intentions within Iran. Hardline factions, including segments of the IRGC, viewed negotiations as a threat to revolutionary identity and sought to undermine diplomatic overtures. In the US, congressional

skepticism and calls for additional sanctions hampered the administration's flexibility and sometimes threatened to interrupt negotiations. Likewise, incompatible early red lines, such as the George W. Bush administration's insistence on a complete suspension of enrichment and Iran's refusal to surrender what it viewed as a sovereign right, prevented diplomatic progress for much of the 2000s (Takeyh 245).

Diplomacy thus succeeded only under a unique coordination of political conditions that emerged after 2013. Where earlier efforts failed due to unbending positions and domestic constraints, the convergence of economic pressure, political change in Tehran, and international unity created a narrow window through which negotiations could advance. The JCPOA was the product of this exceptional moment rather than the inevitable outcome of sustained diplomacy (Vaez and Sadjadpour 5).

3.2.2.4.3. Iranian Internal Politics and Constraints

Internal political forces at work within Iran played a decisive role in shaping both the country's nuclear posture and its willingness to engage in negotiations. The Islamic Republic's twofold-power structure, in which elected institutions cohabit with powerful unelected bodies, created a complex and often contradictory policymaking environment. The Supreme Leader holds ultimate authority on matters of national security and foreign policy, while the IRGC exerts significant influence over Iran's military capabilities, economic networks, and ideological direction. This system fosters internal competition, where factions differ not only in ideology but also in their tactical visions for Iran's future (Buchta 45).

During the Ahmadinejad presidency (2005-2013), hardline factions dominated the political scene. Ahmadinejad's provocative rhetoric and uncompromising stance transformed the nuclear program into a nationalist symbol and limited the scope for diplomatic cooperation. At the same time, sanctions created economic opportunities for IRGC-linked networks through smuggling and

sanctions avoidance, further reducing incentives for policy moderation. By the early 2010s, however, the cumulative economic damage inflicted by international sanctions began to weaken the political authority of hardliners. Declining state revenues threatened the backing systems essential to regime stability, while inflation and unemployment increased public dissatisfaction. These pressures provided an opening for pragmatic groups advocating economic stability through diplomacy (Maloney, "*Iran's Political…"* 215).

Rouhani's election in 2013 reflected a planned change rather than an ideological transformation: the leadership recognized that Iran could not maintain economic viability without sanctions relief. Although the Supreme Leader remained wary of US intentions, he permitted contact because a controlled negotiation process offered economic benefits without requiring total submission. Even after Rouhani's election, internal constraints continued to shape the outlines of any potential agreement. Iran would not dismantle its enrichment infrastructure, abandon its scientific achievements, or accept conditions that publicly humiliated the regime. The JCPOA ultimately adjusted these constraints through a model that allowed Iran to retain limited enrichment capabilities under strict verification mechanisms (Parsi, *Losing an Enemy 234)*.

3.2.2.4.4. Why was the JCPOA Possible in 2015?

The JCPOA emerged not as a true culmination of prior diplomatic efforts but as the result of an extraordinary convergence of political, economic, and geopolitical factors. By 2013, sanctions had reached their maximum effectiveness, producing one of the most severe economic crises in Iran's post-revolutionary history. Falling oil revenues, currency collapse, and restricted financial access convinced the leadership that continued confrontation was untenable. This level of economic burden had not existed during earlier diplomatic attempts, which explains why Iran had previously rejected compromises that later became acceptable (Parsi, *Losing an Enemy 120)*.

At the same time, the US approach experienced a fundamental change. Unlike the George W. Bush administration, which maintained rigid preconditions for talks, President Obama recognized Iran's right to peaceful enrichment under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and expressed willingness to negotiate directly. This reassured Tehran that the US sought a diplomatic resolution rather than regime change. The move created diplomatic opening in which negotiation could proceed credibly (Vaez and Sadjadpour 6).

Multilateral unity also contributed to the success of diplomacy. Throughout 2013-2015, the P5+1 maintained an unusually cohesive position, with Russia and China supporting both sanctions and negotiations despite broader frictions with the US. This deprived Iran of the ability to exploit discords among major powers, a strategy it had previously employed. Regional instability further increased the necessity for a negotiated solution. With Syria in civil war, Iraq disrupted by the rise of ISIS, and sectarian conflicts intensifying, both Washington and Tehran recognized the risks of further escalation. The JCPOA thus offered a soothing mechanism amid a rapidly deteriorating regional environment (Vaez and Sadjadpour 6).

Finally, leadership alliance was crucial. Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif brought diplomatic expertise and political will to the negotiating table, while President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry were devoted to pursuing an accord despite domestic resistance. The secret Oman network facilitated trust-building and allowed negotiators to explore compromises before presenting them in a public multilateral setting. These factors created a narrow but powerful window through which both sides concluded that a negotiated agreement was preferable to continued clash. The JCPOA was therefore the product of meeting pressures and opportunities, rather than an inevitable or natural progression in US-Iran relations (Parsi, *Losing an Enemy 125).*

US policy toward Iran between 2003 and 2016 produced a combination of successes and shortcomings. Sanctions produced significant economic stress but achieved significant results only when combined with reliable diplomacy. Diplomatic initiatives succeeded when coordinated with favorable internal underlying forces in Iran and unified international support, but faltered in the face of suspicion or domestic political restraints. In the end, the JCPOA was made possible by an exceptional concordance of political will, economic incentives, and geopolitical necessity. Its achievement underscores not only the complexity of influencing Iran's nuclear course but also the importance of integrating tough and diplomatic tools within a broader, coherent policy.

The evolution of US policy toward Iraq and Iran from 2003 to 2016 illustrates the complexities and contradictions of American involvement in the Middle East. In Iraq, the US succeeded in toppling Saddam Hussein and later dismantling ISIS's territorial control, yet it struggled to establish durable political institutions or prevent the rise of sectarian governance. The development of post-2003 Iraq, marked by insurgency, division, and frequent instability, underscored the limits of external state-building and revealed how quickly security gains can crumble without all-encompassing governance.

Meanwhile, US policy toward Iran demonstrated both the constraints of pressure-based approaches and the potential of sustained diplomacy. Although decades of sanctions and isolation failed to end Iran's nuclear progress, the shift toward negotiations under the Obama administration produced the JCPOA, the most significant happening in US-Iran relations in a generation. The cases of Iraq and Iran highlight a chief tension in US policy: military strength can change regimes and defeat armed groups, but long-term stability depends on political legitimacy, institutional resilience, and diplomatic involvement.

Chapter Four

European Union Policy toward Iraq and Iran (2003-2016)

The period between 2003 and 2016 represents a formative episode in the evolution of the EU external action, particularly with regard to its involvement in the Middle East and its response to two of the most complex and consequential crises of the early twenty-first century: the US-led invasion of Iraq and the intensifying concerns surrounding the Islamic Republic of Iran's nuclear program. These dual challenges served as serious tests of the EU diplomatic capacity, internal cohesion, and its broader aspirations to function as a normative player in the international system. The Iraq conflict, in particular, uncovered the deep-seated divisions among EU Member States concerning the use of force, transatlantic coalition, and loyalty to international law. These fractures not only compromised the credibility of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) but also exposed the structural limitations of the EU ability to project a unified voice on matters of international security and crisis management.

In contrast, the Iran nuclear issue, while equally troubling, provided a significant opportunity for the EU to formulate and conduct a foreign policy founded in diplomacy, multilateralism, and legal norms. The emergence of the EU-3 (France, Germany, and the UK) as key diplomatic interlocutors with Iran in 2003 marked the beginning of a sustained European effort to resolve the nuclear impasse through negotiation rather than confrontation.

Over time, this initiative evolved into the broader P5+1 framework, which included the five permanent members of the UNSC plus Germany, with the EU acting as coordinator and mediator. Through this process, the EU sought not only to prevent nuclear proliferation in one of the world's most unstable regions, but also to demonstrate its capacity to conduct complex diplomatic involvements and to reinforce the supremacy of international institutions and verification mechanisms, such as the IAEA.

This chapter undertakes a critical analysis of the EU role in the Iran nuclear negotiations from the inception of the EU-3 initiative in 2003 to the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 and its early implementation through 2016. It explores the political and governmental dynamic forces that shaped the EU approach, including its reliance on multilateral diplomacy, its use of sanctions as both intimidating tools and incentives, and its persistent emphasis on nonproliferation and international law.

Besides, the chapter evaluates the broader implications of the EU diplomacy, highlighting its relative successes in avoiding military escalation and achieving a broad nuclear agreement, as well as the inherent limitations of its foreign policy architecture, particularly in the absence of cohesive autonomy. By situating the Iran case within the broader context of EU external action, the chapter offers insight into the evolving identity of the EU as an international diplomatic actor and assesses the extent to which it can effectively contribute to international peace and security through civilian, multilateral means.

4.1. European Union Policy toward Iraq (2003-2016)

The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq constituted a pivotal moment in the evolution of the CFSP, testing the Union's internal coherence and external credibility in the face of a major international crisis. Widely regarded as one of the most splitting foreign policy events in post-Cold War history, the Iraq War revealed the deep limits of the EU collective action mechanisms and underscored the enduring influence of national sovereignty in foreign policy decision-making. While the EU wished to act as a unified significant actor on the international stage, its response to the Iraq crisis revealed deep splits among Member States, impacted by divergent threat perceptions, historical orientations, and normative commitments.

First, it is crucial to explore the EU response to the Iraq War in a multi-phased analysis that moves from the breakdown of consensus in the pre-invasion period, through the diplomatic

readjustments of the immediate aftermath, to the Union's evolving role in Iraq's post-conflict reconstruction. Drawing on insights from norms-based institutionalism, strategic culture, and multilateral diplomacy, the analysis highlights both the structural constraints of inter-governments orientation and the adaptive capacities embedded within the EU external action agenda. Particular attention is paid to the internal divisions among Member States, the sidelining of multinational institutions like the High Representative for CFSP, and the broader implications of this episode for EU foreign policy identity and strategic autonomy.

Through this examination, the aim to assess the Iraq War as an ordeal for EU foreign policy, one that revealed foundational weaknesses but also stimulated important institutional reforms, including the emergence of more coherent post-crisis involvement approaches. In doing so, it offers a lens into the EU ongoing struggle to balance national sovereignty with collective action, and normative ambitions with geopolitical realities, in the complex arena of international security governance.

4.1.1. The European Union's Response to the Iraq War

The 2003 Iraq War marked a critical turning point in the evolution of the EU CFSP, exposing the weak foundations of the EU collective external action and challenging its aspirations for planned coherence on the international stage. The US-led invasion of Iraq not only triggered one of the most contentious and consequential foreign policy debates of the post-Cold War era but also shattered the internal compromise within the EU at a moment when the Union was seeking to define itself as a credible international actor.

Divergent positions among Member States, ranging from definite opposition to active support for military intervention, revealed deep cleavages in national strategic cultures, historical positions, and normative obligations. This disunity significantly undermined the EU ability to

present a unified standpoint, diminishing both its external credibility and the institutional authority of the CFSP structure.

Accordingly, the EU response to the Iraq crisis has to be examined in two distinct yet interconnected phases: the initial breakdown of consensus in the lead-up to the invasion, and the subsequent efforts to restore diplomatic and institutional cohesion in the post-invasion period. This examination allows to explore how the Iraq War exposed the limitations of the EU intergovernmental foreign policy structures, while simultaneously causing a period of reflection, normative readjustment, and calculated adaptation.

Through an analysis of Member State behavior, institutional reactions, and evolving multilateral involvements, particularly via the United Nations, it is possible to evaluate how the Iraq episode shaped the EU broader foreign policy path. Ultimately, the Union's experience with Iraq underscores both the enduring question of internal disunion and the capacity for post-crisis learning and repositioning within the EU external action system.

4.1.1.1. EU Opposition to the 2003 Iraq Invasion and Internal Divisions among Member States

The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq displayed deep and highly far-reaching divisions within the EU, calling into question the Union's ambitions for a coherent and unified foreign policy under the CFSP structure. While the EU had long struggled to present itself as a cohesive international player, the Iraq crisis illuminated the insubstantiality of this ambition, laying bare the competing geopolitical orientations, strategic cultures, and normative obligations of its Member States.

At the heart of the division was a fundamental disagreement over the legitimacy and significant wisdom of military intervention in Iraq. The fracture lines that emerged were not merely a reflection of temporary political divergences but indicated deeper operational breaches within the Union. Scholars and commentators often described this split in terms of competing two

categories: “Old Europe” versus “New Europe,” “Atlanticist” versus “Europeanist” positions, and the divergent strategic cultures of key players such as the UK, France, and Germany (Calleo 32).

Germany and France, the traditional leaders of European integration, emerged as the most vociferous and principled opponents of the invasion. Their anti-war posture was not limited to skepticism about US motives but extended to definite opposition even under potential UN authorization (Lewis 435). In the German case, this position was particularly influenced by domestic political considerations, as Chancellor Gerhard Schröder’s Social Democratic Party influenced a strong anti-war standpoint during the 2002 federal election campaign, a move that echoed deeply with a war-averse electorate (Stahl et al., 422).

In blatant contrast, several Central and Eastern European candidate and new Member States, as well as long-standing Atlanticist allies such as the UK, Poland, and Spain, openly supported US policy. This backing was manifested in two noticeable incidents: the “Letter of the Eight,” published in January 2003, and the “Vilnius Ten” letter issued shortly thereafter. These declarations, signed by leaders from several EU and NATO aspirant countries, presented public backing to Washington and indirectly endorsed the legitimacy of the coming invasion (Lewis 436-38). Critically, these initiatives circumvented established EU consultative procedures, undermining the norms of agreement and coordination that underpin the CFSP (Smith, *“European Union…”* 101).

The consequences of these unilateral actions were not merely procedural but deeply political. They reflected a loss of confidence in the EU foreign policy mechanisms and exposed the extent to which external actors, particularly the US, could exploit intra-EU divisions. The European Parliament, representing the multinational voice of the Union, did vote to oppose the war, highlighting the divergence between institutional positions and Member State behavior (Lewis

436). Yet this figurative resolution had little practical effect, as the principal intergovernmental actors overlooked collective EU channels.

The sidelining of the EU CFSP High Representative, Javier Solana, during this critical period further demonstrated the marginalization of common foreign policy mechanisms. Solana, who had previously played a central role in EU diplomacy in the Balkans, was noticeably absent from the decision-making processes surrounding Iraq. Member States preferred to act unilaterally or within alternative coalitions of the willing, thereby diminishing the EU capacity to respond with a unified voice (Allen and Smith 95).

Perhaps the most visible institutional failure came with the extraordinary EU summit in February 2003. Intended as a forum to create a common European position on Iraq, the summit instead revealed the depth of internal discord. The resulting Council Conclusions offered only a weak endorsement of the UN disarmament process and failed to articulate any fundamental policy consensus among Member States. Analysts such as Peterson described the episode as one that "mocked the geopolitical vision of European unity," highlighting the emblematic and practical failure of the EU to act collectively during one of the most far-reaching foreign policy crises of the post-Cold War era (*Europe, America, Iraq* 11).

The 2003 Iraq crisis had deep repercussions on the EU international role and its internal coherence. First, it revealed the limits of normative and institutional integration in the realm of foreign policy. Unlike trade or competition policy, foreign and security policy remains intergovernmental and thus subject to the diplomatic calculations of national governments. Second, the crisis demonstrated the enduring influence of the transatlantic relationship, particularly for Central and Eastern European states, many of whom viewed the US as the ultimate guarantor of their security. Third, the episode highlighted a credibility gap between the EU rhetorical ambitions of calculated autonomy and its practical capabilities.

In the long term, the Iraq War served as a warning tale for the EU foreign policy ambitions. It forced a re-evaluation of the CFSP and accelerated institutional reforms, such as the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the post of High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy under the Lisbon Treaty. Nonetheless, the legacy of Iraq continues to shape debates over EU well thought out autonomy, burden-sharing, and the relationship between national sovereignty and collective action in foreign affairs.

4.1.1.2. The EU Diplomatic Efforts before, during, and after the Invasion of Iraq

Despite the collapse of compromise among EU Member States during the propaganda to the 2003 Iraq War, the Union began to pursue a process of gradual diplomatic and institutional recovery both during and after the conflict. This evolution, though progressive and sensitive in nature, reflected deeper commitments, based on norms, embedded in EU foreign policy frameworks and marked a significant readjustment in response to a crisis that had severely undermined the credibility of the CFSP.

As war became imminent in early 2003 and ultimately commenced on 20 March, the EU adopted a largely moderate and cautious stance. With Member States unable to agree on the legitimacy of the US-led invasion, the Union chose to operate within the framework of international legality, notably through the UN. At the European Council meeting of 20-21 March 2003, the EU emphasized the need to uphold international humanitarian norms and recommended the continuation of the UN' "Oil-for-Food" program to alleviate civilian suffering in Iraq (Youngs, "Europe and Iraq" 2). Remarkably, for leading opponents of the war such as Germany and France, this approach was deliberately made to avoid any impression of sanctioning what they viewed as an illegal and unilateral use of force (*Verbatim Report of Proceedings*).

Yet, as the immediate phase of military conflict shifted into post-invasion occupation, diplomatic designs within the EU began to change. Between March and June 2003, Member

States cautiously moved toward a more coherent position regarding Iraq's reconstruction, demonstrating what scholars of norms-based institutionalism describe as "normative entrapment" and "cooperative bargaining" (Lewis 432-33). According to this perspective, once Member States had committed rhetorically and institutionally to foundational EU values, such as democracy promotion, human rights, and the rule of law, they became increasingly forced by those same normative structures. Even Member States initially opposed to any EU role in post-war Iraq eventually found themselves morally and politically compelled to support reconstruction efforts, particularly as the humanitarian crisis deepened and the risks of regional instability grew (Pace 1046).

A major reason of this shift was the increasing participation of the UN, which provided a pathway for reluctant Member States to justify involvement without abandoning their previous opposition to the war itself. The passage of UNSC Resolution (UNSCR) 1483 on 22 May 2003 was influential in this regard. By recognizing the authority of the Coalition Provisional Authority and delineating a multilateral agenda for Iraq's recovery, UNSCR 1483 offered political protection for EU Member States to support aid and reconstruction under the rule of UN legitimacy (UNSC Res. 1483).

Diplomatic coordination among Member States also improved in this period. A symbolic yet fundamental turning point came in May 2003 during an informal cruise meeting of EU foreign ministers in the Greek isles. This gathering, though unofficial, fostered an atmosphere advantageous to renewed consensus-building and reaffirmed the importance of CFSP mechanisms in tackling international crises (Menon and Lipkin 225). The meeting laid the foundation for more formal calculated planning and directly contributed to the formulation of the European Security Strategy (ESS), adopted later that year.

By the time of the June 2003 Thessaloniki European Council Summit, the EU had succeeded in formulating a common position on Iraq's reconstruction. The summit conclusions included a pledge to provide wide-ranging assistance for rebuilding Iraq and made both the European Commission and the High Representative for CFSP responsible to develop coordinated aid strategies (European Commission, "*Communication from …"*). This marked a significant, if belated, step toward restoring institutional coherence and reasserting the EU identity as a principled international actor.

The EU evolving diplomatic position during and after the Iraq War reveals several key changing aspects of its foreign policy conduct. First, it highlights the Union's tendency to retreat to multilateral and norm-based agendas during moments of significant incapacity. Rather than attempting to act as a unified geopolitical power in the face of internal dissent, the EU reverted to a humanitarian and legitimacy-based approach, privileging the role of the UN as a vehicle for action. This reliance on international institutions is characteristic of the EU "soft power" orientation and underscores the limits of its hard power capabilities and calculated autonomy.

Second, the gradual emergence of consensus in the post-invasion phase reflects the normative institutionalist perception that identity and values can shape foreign policy outcomes independently of initial national preferences. Member States were not simply pursuing material interests, but also responding to internally assumed norms of democratic governance, humanitarian assistance, and legal order, standards that had become formalized within the EU political culture.

Third, the Iraq crisis and its aftermath caused important reforms in EU far-sighted thinking. The diplomatic motivation from mid-2003 ultimately contributed to the drafting of the European Security Strategy, published in December 2003. This document represented a significant step in

expressing a shared vision for EU external action, including commitments to effective multilateralism, conflict prevention, and the strengthening of international institutions.

While the EU initial response to the Iraq War revealed deep and threatening divisions, its subsequent diplomatic efforts demonstrated a capacity for institutional learning and normative resistance. The episode became a constructive experience that underscored both the structural limitations and the distinctive strengths of EU foreign policy, particularly its ability to recover from crisis by reaffirming its foundational identity as a promoter of multilateralism, legality, and peacebuilding.

4.1.1.3. The EU Role in the Post-Invasion Period: Humanitarian Aid and Reconstruction

Following the controversial US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the EU found itself traversing a complex diplomatic and humanitarian landscape marked by fragmentation, insecurity, and political reconstruction. Although the EU had been deeply divided over the legitimacy of the invasion itself, it gradually converged around a post-conflict commitment strategy based on humanitarian assistance, reconstruction, and institutional support. This approach conformed with the EU broader foreign policy identity as a normative power that favors multilateralism, rule of law, and civilian instruments in international crises.

At the outset, the EU adopted a cautious attitude, avoiding any explicit endorsement of the military intervention while recognizing the urgent need for humanitarian relief. The European Council, meeting on 20-21 March 2003, emphasized the importance of respecting international law and highlighted the continuation of the UN “Oil-for-Food” program to ensure civilian access to basic goods. The Union's insistence on international legality reflected the position of key Member States, particularly France and Germany, who had opposed the invasion and were unwilling to validate it in retrospective (“Presidency Conclusions” 33). Nonetheless, the escalating humanitarian crisis in Iraq compelled the EU to assume a more positive role.

The turning point for EU participation came with the adoption of UNSC Resolution 1483 in May 2003. This resolution provided international legal recognition to the post-invasion occupation authorities and called upon the international community to contribute in the reconstruction of Iraq. Unfavorably, the resolution enabled EU Member States, including those previously opposed to the war, to defend participation in reconstruction efforts under the umbrella of multilateral legitimacy (UN Security Council, *Resolution 1483*). As such, UNSCR 1483 served as a diplomatic channel, allowing the EU to match its normative preferences with the practical necessities of post-war stability.

In response, the EU launched a multi-dimensional aid program focusing on humanitarian relief, administrative reform, and capacity-building. Between 2003 and 2007, the European Commission allocated over €830 million in assistance to Iraq, primarily through the Rapid Reaction Mechanism and the EU Humanitarian Office (ECHO). These funds supported emergency health services, food distribution, water sanitation, and education programs targeting helpless populations, particularly displaced persons and war-affected communities (European External Action Service, “The EU and Iraq”). By emphasizing non-military forms of support, the EU maintained its normative distinction from US-led operations while contributing to stability and security on the ground.

Beyond immediate humanitarian concerns, the EU played an important role in supporting the political and institutional reconstruction of Iraq. In coordination with the UN and the World Bank, the EU contributed to the International Reconstruction Fund Facility for Iraq (IRFFI) and co-directed donor conferences in Madrid and Brussels. These efforts were aimed at promoting good governance, rule of law, and public sector reform. Specific EU programs focused on training Iraqi civil servants, strengthening judicial institutions, and assisting in electoral

processes, including support for the 2005 constitutional referendum and parliamentary elections (Pace 1049).

Moreover, the European Union Integrated Rule of Law Mission in Iraq (EUJUST LEX) program, launched in 2005, emerged as a leading EU initiative in Iraq. Coordinated by the Council of the EU, EUJUST LEX was a rule-of-law mission designed to train Iraqi judges, police officers, and prison staff in human rights, legal ethics, and judicial administration. Though relatively modest in scale compared to military deployments, the mission represented the EU civilian-focused approach to security and its commitment to long-term state-building. As one of the first civilian crisis management operations under the EU Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), EUJUST LEX also demonstrated the Union's growing institutional capacity to project influence beyond its borders (Christova 425).

Despite these achievements, the EU impact in Iraq remained inhibited by several structural and political limitations. The lack of a unified considered vision among Member States, the continuing security instability in Iraq, and the dominance of US military and political authority limited the scope of EU initiatives. Moreover, the EU reliance on soft power instruments, though normatively consistent with its external identity, often fell short of tackling the deep-rooted instability and sectarian breakup that plagued Iraq's post-war transition (Smith, *"European Union…"*109). Nonetheless, the EU loyalty to multilateralism, humanitarian principles, and institutional rebuilding contributed to a modest but symbolically significant presence in the broader reconstruction landscape.

The EU role in post-2003 Iraq demonstrated its efforts to balance normative aspirations with pragmatic participation. While internally divided over the origins of the conflict, the Union ultimately converged around a civilian-centered stratagem that reflected its identity as an international actor faithful to peacebuilding, human rights, and the rule of law. This phase of

involvement, though limited in geopolitical influence, reaffirmed the EU distinctive contribution to post-conflict management and provided a platform for further institutional development in EU crisis response mechanisms.

4.1.2. EU Involvement in Iraq Post-2003: Maintaining Stability, Democratization, and Security

The EU taking part in Iraq's post-invasion stability marked a decisive moment in the evolution of its external action approach, particularly in the domain of civilian crisis running and multilateral diplomacy. While the 2003 Iraq War initially revealed sharp divisions among EU Member States, most markedly between pro-intervention actors such as the UK and Poland, and anti-war states such as France and Germany, the subsequent instability in Iraq compelled the Union to readjust its position. Recognizing the long-term implications of a failed Iraqi state for regional and international security, the EU slowly assumed a positive role focused on institutional support, humanitarian recovery, and rule-of-law promotion, while intentionally avoiding direct military adventure.

A key factor behind this transformation was UNSC Resolution 1483 (2003), which bestowed multilateral legitimacy on Iraq's post-war reconstruction and created an opening for previously reluctant EU Member States to participate under UN-sanctioned agenda. This resolution facilitated the EU entry into security efforts without requiring validation of the US-led invasion itself. Within this context, the EU collaborated both bilaterally with NATO and multilaterally through the UN to advance security sector reform, promote democratic governance, and provide humanitarian aid. Particularly, the establishment of the EUJUST LEX mission in 2005, which aimed to train Iraqi legal professionals in human rights and judicial standards, embodied the EU preference for a civilian-led post-conflict recovery.

What comes next explores how the EU, operating within the parameters of its Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) and through collaboration with international organizations, sought to assert its role as a maintaining stability actor in Iraq. It examines the EU practical contributions, such as training missions and capacity-building programs, as well as its broader calculated repositioning in as a consequence internal disunity. In the end, the Union's post-war participation in Iraq illustrates both the limits and the possibilities of a multilateral, civilian-driven approach to international security challenges, an approach that remains vital to the EU external identity in the twenty-first century.

4.1.2.1. The EU Role in Restoring Stability in Iraq: Cooperation with the UN and NATO

The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq marked a defining moment in international politics and produced significant discord within the EU. Member states were deeply divided over the legitimacy and necessity of military intervention, with the UK, Spain, and Italy supporting the war, while France and Germany were firmly opposed. These divisions severely hindered the EU capacity to act unitedly in the initial phase of the conflict and undermined the credibility of its CFSP. However, as the post-conflict encounters of maintaining stability in Iraq became more apparent, the EU shifted from passive shattering to constructive participation.

A decisive turning point in this policy shift was the adoption of UNSC Resolution 1483 in May 2003. The resolution recognized the Coalition Provisional Authority and called for international efforts to support Iraq's reconstruction, providing essential legal and political legitimacy for international participation. For previously reluctant EU member states such as France and Germany, the resolution offered a diplomatic compromise, allowing them to participate within a UN-endorsed multilateral framework (UN Security Council, *Resolution 1483*). This facilitated a readjustment of European foreign policy and enabled the EU to proclaim a role in restoring Iraq's stability without endorsing the invasion itself.

Although the EU did not assume a fighting role like NATO or US forces, it became increasingly active in civilian components of post-conflict reconstruction. The EU supported NATO's military training mission in Iraq while launching its own initiatives under the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), later incorporated into the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). A leading initiative was the EUJUST LEX mission, established in 2005 to strengthen the rule of law by training Iraqi judges, police officers, and penitentiary staff. By 2009, over 800 personnel had been trained, contributing to the development of Iraq's legal and institutional capacity (Lewis 433).

Beyond effective activities, the EU response to the Iraq crisis marked a deeper change in its strategy. The split caused by the Iraq War encouraged internal reflection and informal diplomacy among EU policymakers. A representative step toward restoring unity occurred at the May 2003 informal ministerial meeting in the Greek isles, where foreign policy leaders worked to reestablish compromise on multilateralism and collective action. These efforts resulted in the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS), which articulated the EU resolve to become an international player defender of democracy, rule of law, and multilateral cooperation (Eisenstadt et al. 126). While the EU was not a key military actor in Iraq, its civilian-led activities revealed a commitment to stability through legal, institutional, and conventional means. The experience also served as a test for redefining EU foreign policy after a period of serious internal disunity.

4.1.2.2. Promoting Democratic Reforms and Governance: The EU Norms-based Participation

Following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, the EU increasingly outlined its action in Iraq as a conventional mission founded on democratic transition, institutional reform, and human rights. This orientation was not merely a pragmatic response to a failed state, but a thoughtful

expression of the EU identity as a “normative power”, one that seeks to spread liberal democratic values rather than display military force (Pace 1046).

Despite initial resistance from key member states, the EU steadily converged around a shared participation in post-conflict reconstruction. Lewis highlights the concept of “normative entrapment”, whereby member states opposed to the invasion became compelled by institutional customs and shared values to support EU-led democratization efforts (441-42). This phenomenon illustrates how internal coherence in foreign policy can emerge even in the wake of foundational disagreements.

To support Iraq’s democratic development, the EU adopted a multidimensional approach involving both technical and political tools:

- Technical Assistance and Capacity-Building: The EU provided significant resources for training civil servants, enhancing bureaucratic transparency, and supporting public administration reform. These efforts were designed to foster state-building from the base up and ensure the long-term sustainability of Iraq’s institutions.
- Support for Constitutional Reform and Civil Society: The EU played a role in facilitating wide-ranging political dialogue and constitutional reflection. In parallel, it invested in developing Iraq’s civil society, supporting NGOs, independent media, and human rights defenders, as part of a broader policy to strengthen democratic accountability.
- Multilateralism and Legitimacy: A significant characteristic of the EU approach was its strict obedience to multilateral networks, particularly those coordinated through the UN. By embedding its efforts within internationally recognized structures, the EU sought to distance itself from the unilateralism of the US-led invasion and instead champion international law and cooperative peacebuilding (Pace 1046).

These essential objectives were institutionalized in the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament (COM (2006) 283 final). This commission delineated the EU dedication to enhancing governance, public administration, and civil society involvement in Iraq (Lewis 439-40). Basically, Iraq became a test case for the EU ability to translate its conventional ambitions into concrete policy. While the context was fraught with political vulnerabilities and security challenges, the EU managed to proclaim itself as a non-military actor capable of contributing meaningfully to democratic transition.

4.1.2.3. Counterterrorism and the Fight against Violent Extremism: A Civilian Security Paradigm

Though predominantly civilian in its involvement, the EU increasingly recognized that long-term political and social stability in Iraq required a wide-ranging plan to confront terrorism and violent extremism. The insurrection in Iraq and the emergence of jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda in Iraq and, later, the Islamic State (ISIS), highlighted the security risks stemming from weak governance and failed state structures. The EU thus sketched its contribution in Iraq not only as a humanitarian initiative but also as a measured investment in international security (Al Rachid and Ghanem 2).

Rather than taking part directly in military operations, the EU adopted a soft-power, risk aversion approach. Initiatives such as EUJUST LEX, while formally rule-of-law missions, played an indirect but essential role in counter-terrorism. By enhancing the professionalism, independence, and capacity of Iraq's legal system, the mission helped build a judicial environment capable of tackling terrorism-related crimes through due process, thereby restoring public trust and reducing the space for impunity (Eisenstadt et al.126).

In addition, far-reaching reconstruction and governance programs were designated as structural tools to counter fanaticism. Development assistance and institutional reform were

understood as instruments for tackling the root causes of radicalism, such as poverty, exclusion, corruption, and the erosion of state legitimacy (Peterson, *America as a European Power* 619). By fostering participatory governance and supporting economic recovery, the EU aimed to undermine extremist plans and offer Iraqi communities reliable, non-violent alternatives.

These policies were embedded in the EU comprehensive security doctrine, as laid out in the 2003 European Security Strategy, which emphasized the interdependence of security, development, and governance (Menon 634). Iraq, in this context, served as a corroborating field for the EU all-encompassing approach to security, one that favors political and institutional strength over military force. Decisively, the EU emphasis on multilateralism and institutional reform also contributed to transatlantic rapprochement in the years following the invasion. While diverging from the US armed model, the EU remained committed to combating extremism in ways consistent with its normative identity and international role (Crowe, *EU-US Relations*).

The European Union's post-2003 participation in Iraq represents a case of significant adaptation and normative strength assertion in a complex international environment. Despite initial internal divisions over the invasion, the EU gradually evolved into a coherent player in Iraq's overall stability, democratization, and counterterrorism efforts. By taking advantage of its relative strengths in civilian crisis management, rule-of-law promotion, and multilateral diplomacy, the EU demonstrated the feasibility of a non-military, values-driven approach to foreign policy (Sánchez Cobaleda et al. 18).

Through missions like EUJUST LEX, calculated use of multilateral institutions, and long-term investment in governance and civil society, the EU contributed to Iraq's reconstruction in ways that conformed with its broader vision as an international conventional power. While problems remain, Iraq offered an early example of the EU ability to manage post-conflict situations using

tools of soft power, diplomacy, and institutional capacity-building, hallmarks of the Union's evolving international approach (Van Veen et al. 7-12).

4.1.2.4. European Union's Response to ISIS's Rise (2014-2016)

The quick preeminence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) following its territorial conquests in 2014 indicated a serious watershed moment in EU security policy. This period triggered a significant change in the EU counterterrorism stratagem, revealing both conceptual and structural limitations in its existing structures. ISIS constituted a new and a coordinated hostile act combining military/non-military, overt/covert tactics, which Mohamedou describes as "post-modern political violence", a phenomenon that challenged conventional classifications of terrorism or insurgency (45). The group's simultaneous mastery of territorial control and international digital propaganda underscored the inadequacy of traditional security models and compelled European policymakers to adopt a more forceful and multi-dimensional tactic.

A key aspect of the EU response involved focusing resources to stop extremism and prevent foreign fighter recruitment. This effort emerged as a direct response to the alarming number of EU nationals, estimated in the thousands, who traveled to ISIS-held territories to join the group's ranks. This period marked a moment of calculated reorientation, as responsive counterterrorism measures were increasingly complemented by preventive structures intended to tackle the fundamental advocates of radicalism (Mohamedou 47).

Officially, this reorientation was manifested in several legislative and operational initiatives. The establishment of the European Counter-Terrorism Centre (ECTC) within Europol served to enhance intelligence coordination, while the tightening of Schengen border controls denoted a shift toward safeguarding intra-European mobility. These developments indicated the EU growing recognition of ISIS as both an external geopolitical player and an internal security challenge. The necessity to prevent the recurring movement of extremists between Europe and

Middle Eastern conflict zones necessitated a reassessment of the threat landscape, confusing traditional boundaries between domestic and foreign policy (Wensink et al. 5).

Preventive measures also obtained official acceptance through the expansion of the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN), which received increased funding and an extended authorization. RAN's initiatives included community-based programs, educational outreach, and local projects to combat fanaticism. These efforts supported the theoretical argument that ISIS exploited grievances, particularly those inherent in post-colonial disruptions and sociopolitical exclusion, which required responses that went beyond powerful force (Wensink et al. 22). Thus, the EU evolving counterterrorism position during this period was not only conventional but began to embrace a more complementary, strength-based model of security governance.

Parallel to its internal security readjustments, the EU also sought to deal with the conditions that had enabled ISIS's rise in Iraq, particularly following the collapse of national security structures after the US withdrawal in 2011. The fragmentation of the Iraqi army and the complete exclusion of Sunni populations from post-2003 governance structures laid the foundation for ISIS's reappearance. As Malcolm Nance documents in *The Terrorists of Iraq*, ISIS, building on the legacy of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), deliberately embedded itself within marginalized Sunni tribal networks, exploiting sectarian fissures and governance vacuums (132).

In response, the EU adopted a non-combat role that focused on institutional capacity building and governance support, with a strong emphasis on civilian and rule-of-law components. Rather than deploying troops, the EU concentrated its efforts on training security personnel, advising on judicial and legislative reform, and enhancing law enforcement capabilities. These initiatives were largely facilitated through bilateral programs involving key member states such as Germany, France, and Italy, which provided personalized support based on local needs and regional underlying forces (Sánchez Cobaleda et.al 18).

During this period, there was also a critical need for intelligence-sharing and interagency coordination. Nance notes that the perceived risk posed by returning foreign fighters accelerated the integration of EU-wide counterterrorism databases and surveillance mechanisms ("Defeating ISIS…" 210). Collaborative agendas with organizations such as INTERPOL and Europol were instrumental in monitoring cross-border movements and chasing individuals suspected of radical affiliations. Besides, EU experts were deployed to assist in police training, legal institution strengthening, and the promotion of human rights-based approaches to security, contributions that, although less visible than military interventions, played a vital role in reinforcing the legitimacy and resistance of the Iraqi state apparatus (212-13).

The EU multifaceted approach combined internal security with external state-building, illustrating a planned dualism that was both reactive and preventive. This combined response outline was founded in the recognition that the fight against ISIS could not be won solely on military terms, but required tackling the underlying political, institutional, and socio-cultural conditions that enabled such movements to develop and succeed.

4.1.3. EU Repositioning after US Withdrawal: 2017 Onwards

The period following the gradual withdrawal of US military forces from Iraq, beginning in 2017, represented a significant turning point in the European Union's calculated involvement in the region. Confronted with a power emptiness, a weak Iraqi state, and the remaining threat posed by non-state actors such as ISIS, the EU was compelled to reassess and accommodate its role, not as a military player, but as a normative power relying on civilian expertise, rule-of-law promotion, and multilateral cooperation. This adaptation was not only a practical response to regional instability but also a broader calculated readjustment shaped by the EU long-standing preference for soft power and its growing desire for tactical autonomy in an evolving international order.

In view of that, it is vital to examine how the EU responded to new security, governance, and diplomatic challenges in Iraq during the post-2017 period by deepening its civilian-led contribution and reshaping its foreign policy tools. This can be done by highlighting three interlinked basic forces: First, the implementation of "civilian-first" security strategies through initiatives like the EU Advisory Mission in Iraq (EUAM Iraq); second, the pursuit of strategic autonomy in light of declining US influence and shifting transatlantic relations; and third, the Union's efforts to tackle structural weaknesses in Iraq's political and administrative systems as a means of preventing the resurgence of extremist violence.

The analysis of the EU evolving role in Iraq illustrates how the Union sought to assert itself not through force, but through institution-building, normative diplomacy, and long-term stability structures. It also reveals that this phase of involvement exposes both the ambitions and constraints of the EU external action, particularly as it attempts to cope with a post-American international landscape while remaining faithful to its identity as a civilian power committed to multilateralism, governance, and resilience.

4.1.3.1. Civilian-First Security Approaches

The gradual reduction of US military presence in Iraq beginning in 2017 marked a pivotal moment for the EU calculated involvement in the region. Confronted with the vacuum left by the US, the EU adopted a more prominent role, albeit through distinctly civilian-led methods. Unlike Washington's emphasis on active military operations, the EU pursued a resilience-centered, governance-based approach to stability. This divergence stemmed from the EU normative identity, shaped by its post-colonial empathy and its preference for soft-power preference, particularly in weak or post-conflict contexts (European Council, *EUAM Iraq*).

This orientation occurred institutionally through the utilization of Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) missions, most notably the EU Advisory Mission in Iraq (EUAM Iraq).

Designed to function through political advising and civilian capacity-building rather than military enforcement, EUAM Iraq illustrated the EU emphasis on training police forces, reforming the judiciary, and fostering all-encompassing governance structures. These operations were not only practical, given Europe's limited hard-power capabilities, but also ideological, reflecting a broader belief in development and state-building as tools for preventing radicalism (European Union Advisory Mission in Iraq, *About Us*).

Moreover, this approach unreservedly challenged the dominant counterterrorism narrative that locates violence exclusively in extremist ideology. Instead, European Union policy depicted terrorism and insurgency as symptoms of profounder fundamental failures, namely, the destruction of state legitimacy, deficiency of social cohesion, and persistent governance vacuums. By addressing these root reasons, the European Union sought to encourage long-term resistance, hoping to protect defenseless states against future insurgent threats (European Union Advisory Mission in Iraq, *About Us*).

4.1.3.2. Transatlantic Partnership and the Pursuit of Strategic Autonomy

The EU post-2017 repositioning must also be understood within the broader geostrategic context of declining US international hegemony. Chomsky and Prashad, in *The Withdrawal*, interpret the EU increasing involvement in Iraq as indicative of a wider effort to assert strategic autonomy in a multipolar world. Faced with an American withdrawal from leadership roles in the Middle East, the EU encountered a dilemma: continue as a subordinate partner in US-led missions, or develop independent capacities for crisis management and regional stability (Chomsky and Prashad 87).

While the EU officially endorsed US policy objectives, it simultaneously began investing in structures that could enable more independent action. Instruments such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defense Fund were intended to foster greater

military cooperation and capability development among member states (Chomsky and Prashad 90-112). However, Chomsky and Prashad remain skeptical of these initiatives' effectiveness, arguing that they were largely symbolic. Deep-seated divisions among member states, combined with persistent reluctance to combine sovereignty on defense matters, continued to restrain operational unity (115).

Nevertheless, the momentum toward strategic autonomy was sustained by key political developments, including Brexit and persistent doubts about US reliability under the Trump administration. These factors collectively propelled a more serious consideration of EU-led responses to regional crises, albeit within the limits of a developing common defense policy.

4.1.3.3. Tackling Security Vacuums and Governance Weakness

Despite ISIS's formal territorial defeat by 2017, the group rapidly adapted to its new circumstances, reverting to uneven warfare tactics across Iraq's rural and peripheral regions. Malcolm Nance emphasizes that ISIS retained a principal operational capacity, carrying out ambushes, bombings, and assassinations, particularly in areas characterized by weak governance and uncontrolled borders (Nance, *Defeating ISIS*, 299). These rebellious tactics exposed the limits of traditional counterinsurgency models and underscored the importance of handling the underlying structural forces of instability.

The EU response, therefore, continued to emphasize peacebuilding support, with a renewed accent on decentralization, anti-corruption measures, and rebuilding public faith in local institutions. These efforts were not merely ambitious but essential, as failure to deal with Iraq's governance instability risked paving the way for the resurgence of groups like "ISIS 2.0" or similarly radical entities. Peace consolidation, in this context, required an all-embracing and locally driven approach firmly embedded in structural change, rather than imposed (Mohamedou 223-25).

The EU emphasis on local empowerment and political reform mirrored this understanding. Although slower and less noticeable than military operations, these interventions were designed to lay the foundation for lasting stability, built upon the conviction that only vigorous, accountable governance could provide a durable protection against radicalism.

4.1.4. Assessing the EU Policy Effectiveness

As the European Union's involvement in Iraq evolved from fixing immediate damage to building resilience and preventing future crises, questions surrounding the effectiveness, coherence, and strength of its foreign policy approach have become increasingly noticeable. While the EU has demonstrated a strong, principled dedication to governance reform, human rights, and multilateral cooperation, the implementation of these principles on the ground has revealed significant limitations. Thus, a reflective assessment of the EU post-ISIS strategy in Iraq will be offered, with a particular focus on the tension between ideals and outcomes.

Relying on insights from both policy specialists and academic critiques, the following analysis identifies two interrelated challenges. First, it examines the EU struggle to balance governance promotion with related sensitivity, highlighting the risks of deploying technocratic solutions in weak or disputed environments. Second, it considers the institutional and structural constraints that continue to hamper the EU calculated responsiveness, particularly the consensus-driven nature of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), resource breakup, and limited civil-military coordination. These considerations highlight the gap that often exists between the EU chief vision and its operational execution. They also serve as a reminder that the effectiveness of the Union's external action will depend not only on its normative ambitions but also on its ability to adapt, coordinate, and innovate in the face of complex and rapidly evolving security environments.

4.1.4.1. Balancing Governance and Security

While the EU focus on governance reform and institutional capacity-building has been generally admired for its long-term foresight, scholars have raised concerns about its practical effectiveness. Rosenblatt, in his inquiry of extremist recruitment strategies, argues that terrorist organizations such as ISIS deliberately target regions where state institutions have either collapsed or lost legitimacy (16). The EU approach of rebuilding these institutions is thus highly relevant, but, as Rosenblatt warns, it must be initiated in local context. Imposing technocratic governance models without accounting for local political forces at work can involuntarily generate new legitimacy crises, undermining the very goals they seek to achieve (17). This vision raises broader questions about the adaptability of EU interventions. While the EU excels in long-term planning and conventional policy agendas, its capacity to rapidly adjust to local realities, and to ensure that its governance models appeal to local populations, remains a significant challenge.

4.1.4.2. Structural Restrictions and Institutional Confines

A more fundamental critique of the EU role in crisis response emerges from Chomsky and Prashad's broader analysis of European strategic culture. They argue that the EU foreign and security policies remain structurally constrained by the consensus-driven nature of its decision-making apparatus, particularly under the CFSP (150-53). This requirement for unanimity often leads to delays, policy dilution, and incoherence, factors that are particularly detrimental in fast-moving security environments. Moreover, the authors highlight that many EU missions suffer from mandate division, under-resourcing, and limited compatibility between civilian and military instruments. As a result, while the EU may articulate comprehensive and principled missions, the practical implementation of those missions often falls short due to bureaucratic inertia and lack of coordination across agencies and member states.

While the European Union has articulated a distinct and principled approach to post-ISIS stability, highlighting governance, resilience, and soft-power commitment, its ability to translate core vision into operational effectiveness remains uneven. Tackling this breach will be essential if the EU is to play a credible and autonomous role in future crisis management efforts.

The Iraq crisis of 2003 served as a harsh, absolute, and undeniable test for the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, revealing fundamental weaknesses in internal cohesion and tactical autonomy. The deep divisions among Member States over the legitimacy of the US-led invasion not only undermined the EU collective authority but also relegated its institutional mechanisms, including the High Representative for CFSP. Yet, from this initial disunity emerged a gradual process of diplomatic and normative recovery. The EU post-invasion involvement, embedded in multilateralism, humanitarian assistance, and civilian capacity-building, reflected its identity as a conventional power dedicated to the principles of legality, reconstruction, and state-building.

The development of missions such as EUJUST LEX and sustained cooperation with the UN illustrated the EU evolving role as a civilian security actor. While it lacked a military impact, the Union capitalized on its strengths in governance support, rule of law, and institutional reform to contribute meaningfully to Iraq's stability. The crisis ultimately initiated important calculated reflections within the EU, leading to initiatives like the European Security Strategy and laying the groundwork for future external action tools.

The Iraq experience underscored the limitations of the EU foreign policy apparatus but also demonstrated its ability to learn, adapt, and propel influence through non-military means. It highlighted the enduring tension between national sovereignty and collective action, while reinforcing the EU normative commitment to multilateral diplomacy and post-conflict reconstruction.

4.2. EU Policy toward Iran (2003-2016)

The European Union's dealing with Iran between 2003 and 2016 offers an illuminating case study of the EU evolution as a diplomatic actor in international security. Triggered by concerns over Iran's nuclear ambitions, the EU approach developed across multiple phases, from the ad hoc diplomacy of the EU-3 to its established role within the P5+1 negotiations that resulted in the 2015 JCPOA. Unlike the forcible strategies often favored by great powers, the EU pursued a strategy rooted in multilateralism, legal diplomacy, and negotiated reciprocity.

Building on what has been said earlier, it is vital to trace the course of the European Union's involvement, highlighting the considered motivations, institutional mechanisms, and normative identity that shaped its policy adoptions. It is also crucial to evaluate how the EU sought to balance power politics with rule-based international involvement in one of the most complex nuclear negotiations of the post-Cold War era. From initial diplomatic propositions to the landmark JCPOA agreement, the EU role reflects both the possibilities and constraints of soft power in high-stakes international governance.

4.2.1. The EU-3 Initiative (2003-2006)

The development of the EU-3 initiative in the early 2000s marked a critical turning point in the EU approach to nuclear nonproliferation and international security governance. In the wake of alarming revelations concerning Iran's secret nuclear activities, and amid the broader geopolitical outcome of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, France, Germany, and the UK undertook an exceptional diplomatic effort to defuse a potentially threatening nuclear crisis. Although not formally authorized by the institutional structures of the EU, the EU-3 initiative constituted a pragmatic response to the limitations of existing multilateral mechanisms and to the perceived unilateralism of American foreign policy at the time. It denoted an important experiment in European foreign policy leadership, attempting to reconcile traditional allegiances

to diplomacy and international law with the pragmatic imperatives of regional stability and nonproliferation.

It is, therefore, important to examine the political, premeditated, and conventional forces behind the formation of the EU-3, emphasizing its double objective: to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons capability and to emphasize a European alternative to military force. Likewise, it is also imperative to explore how this unplanned diplomatic pattern laid the groundwork for a more organized EU role in subsequent multilateral negotiations, setting in motion a decade-long involvement that would result in the JCPOA in 2015. By focusing on the EU-3 period (2003-2006), this analysis highlights a constructive phase in which the EU began to shape a distinctive international security identity, one that privileges dialogue, incentives, and legal multilateralism over confrontation and unilateral pressure.

The formation of the EU-3, comprising Germany, France, and the UK, marked a significant and meaningful shift in the EU approach to international security and nonproliferation diplomacy. This three distinct parties' alliance emerged in direct response to the alarming revelations in 2002 that Iran had undeclared nuclear enrichment facilities at Natanz and Arak, in violation of its safeguards obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). These revelations, confirmed by the IAEA, intensified international fears that Iran was secretly pursuing the capacity to develop nuclear weapons under the pretext of a civilian energy program (Huang 4).

Diagnosing the limitations of existing mechanisms to contain the probable proliferation crisis, the EU-3 assumed a forward-thinking diplomatic role. Their cooperative initiative was not formally authorized by the broader EU apparatus but nonetheless represented a concerted European foreign policy effort. The exigence of the situation was compounded by the geopolitical climate following the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, which had profoundly undermined the Middle East and exposed the weakness of unilateral approaches to international

security. The EU-3 sought to distinguish European diplomacy from the antagonistic position adopted by the US under the George W. Bush government, especially its emphasis on pre-emptive military action (Fitzpatrick 93).

The motivation behind the EU-3 initiative was thus twofold. First, there was a genuine concern about the risk of nuclear proliferation and its implications for both regional and international stability. Second, European leaders were determined to prevent another military intervention in the Middle East, fearing that such an outcome would not only worsen regional insecurity but also further put an end to the norms of international law and multilateral diplomacy. The Iraq War had created a significant division in transatlantic relations and stimulated European efforts to assert a more independent and normative-based foreign policy identity (Denza 124).

In this context, the EU-3 outlined their diplomatic involvement with Iran as a multilateral alternative to forceful measures, emphasizing dialogue, negotiation, and reciprocal commitments. Their strategy sought to integrate Iran into a rules-based international order by offering political recognition and economic incentives in exchange for certifiable constraints on its nuclear program. This initiative also demonstrated the EU growing ambition to act as an international security actor, particularly in domains where soft power and negotiation could be more effective than military coercion. Although initially operating outside the formal CFSP structures, the EU-3 set a precedent for what would later evolve into a more entrenched EU role in nuclear diplomacy, especially following the Lisbon Treaty reforms (Bowen and Moran 27). Thus, the formation of the EU-3 not only tackled an urgent nonproliferation test but also reflected a broader readjustment of European strategic identity, situating diplomacy and multilateral contribution at the center of its response to one of the most critical security dilemmas of the post-Cold War era.

The EU-3 initiative from 2003 to 2006 remains as a defining moment in the path of European diplomatic participation, particularly in the domain of nuclear nonproliferation. While the immediate results of the EU-3's negotiations with Iran were limited and ultimately insufficient to end Tehran's nuclear advances, the effort itself represented a decisive reassertion of European action in a rapidly evolving international security environment. It demonstrated that a coalition of key EU Member States could respond collectively and preventively to international crises, even in the absence of a fully unified institutional basis under the CFSP. More importantly, the EU-3 approach offered a model for future EU external action, one that emphasized preventive diplomacy, international legitimacy, and negotiated interchange as viable alternatives to force and militarization (Alcaro 3).

Despite its eventual incorporation into the broader P5+1 outline, the EU-3 initiative left a lasting impression on the structure and tenets of EU foreign policy. It provided the foundation for the EU later formalized role in international nuclear diplomacy and indicated a commitment to helpful multilateralism during a period when international standards were under considerable strain. As such, the EU-3 phase was not merely a prelude to subsequent negotiations, but a fundamental diplomatic effort that reflected the EU evolving identity as a prescriptive and significant actor on the international arena (Alcaro 4).

4.2.2. Shift to the P5+1 Format (2006-2012)

The changeover from the EU-3 structure to the P5+1 format in 2006 represented a crucial expansion in the international community's efforts to deal with the Iranian nuclear crisis. Prompted by Iran's decision to resume uranium enrichment despite prior diplomatic agreements, this shift underscored both the limitations of the EU-3's informal mechanisms and the growing need of multilateral coordination. The transfer of the Iranian nuclear file to the UNSC marked a key moment, formalizing the crisis as a matter of international peace and security and thereby

necessitating the involvement of all five permanent members of the Security Council, along with Germany. This enlarged arrangement, known as the P5+1, sought to consolidate diplomatic power, enhance legitimacy, and prevent Iran from exploiting geopolitical divisions among major international powers.

Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the rise, structure, and functioning logic of the P5+1 structure, with particular attention to the EU evolving role as a diplomatic coordinator. It also considers the impact of successive rounds of UN sanctions and parallel EU-led measures, which collectively aimed to compel Iran back to the negotiating table while preserving the option for peaceful resolution. The official continuity of EU diplomacy, manifested in the work of High Representatives Javier Solana and later Catherine Ashton, demonstrates the Union's determination to maintain crucial influence within an increasingly complex and antagonistic multilateral process. By placing the P5+1 within the broader context of international nonproliferation diplomacy, this part of the thesis highlights both the expanded international dimensions of the Iranian nuclear issue and the deepening integration of the EU into the architecture of international crisis management.

The failure of the EU-3 negotiations to stop Iran's uranium enrichment activities in 2006 denoted a key shift in the international response to the Iranian nuclear issue. With Iran resuming its irritable nuclear work, the matter was formally transferred to the UNSC. This attribution led to the establishment of the P5+1 structure, comprising the five permanent members of the Security Council, the US, the UK, France, Russia, and China, alongside Germany, which retained a seat due to its chief role in the EU-3. The inclusion of the US, previously absent from direct negotiations, was mostly substantial. As the principal designer of the international sanctions' regime, the US brought significant political power and economic pressure to the multilateral effort (Bowen and Moran 27).

The planned rationale behind the P5+1 was to secure a broad-based international agreement that would lend legitimacy and effectiveness to negotiations, while also deterring Iran from exploiting divisions among international powers. The participation of both Western and non-Western actors, particularly Russia and China, was intended to reduce Iran's assertions of Western prejudice and build a cohesive diplomatic front. The ultimate goal of the P5+1 was to negotiate a broad agreement subject to verification that would limit Iran's nuclear program and ensure its solely peaceful nature, thus reinforcing the international non-proliferation regime (Meier 20).

Despite the change to the P5+1 structure, the EU retained a chief diplomatic role, primarily through its selected High Representative for Foreign Affairs. Javier Solana, who had led the EU-3's efforts, continued to act as the coordinator of P5+1 talks until 2009. Solana's efforts were helpful in maintaining diplomatic strength during a period of escalating tensions and mutual distrust. His approach emphasized increasing confidence-building measures, aimed at preserving dialogue and preventing diplomatic collapse amid Iran's hardening nuclear stance (Denza 134).

The formal changes introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009 changed the EU foreign policy agenda, leading to the appointment of Catherine Ashton as the first High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Ashton inherited a highly multifaceted negotiation landscape, yet her leadership was decisive in sustaining EU participation. Though criticized at times for lacking boldness, Ashton effectively preserved unity among the P5+1 members and defended the EU role as a nonaligned facilitator. Her tenure prepared the foundation for the eventual diplomatic breakthroughs that followed, demonstrating the EU capacity for unified and reliable leadership in international nuclear diplomacy (Meier 15).

Between 2006 and 2010, the international community imposed a progressive sanctions regime against Iran through a series of UN Security Council resolutions, namely Resolutions 1696, 1737,

1747, and 1929. These resolutions gradually restricted Iran's access to nuclear technology, banned arms transfers, and froze assets linked to proliferation-sensitive entities, including those associated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) ("Fitzpatrick Joins"). The UN punishments sent a clear signal of international resolve and were planned to increase the costs of Iran's non-compliance while preserving the option for a diplomatic resolution.

At the same time, the EU implemented its own one-sided sanctions, which in many respects were more severe and broad than those required by the UN. Beginning in 2010, the EU imposed a ban on Iranian oil imports, cut access to European financial systems, and prohibited dealings with key Iranian banks and commercial institutions. Perhaps the key measure was the 2012 EU-led initiative to remove Iranian banks from the SWIFT network, which severely curtailed Iran's ability to conduct international transactions (Bowen and Moran 52). These efforts revealed the EU increasing willingness to employ economic diplomacy in support of nonproliferation objectives, showing that its diplomatic involvement was backed by practical enforcement capabilities.

Rather than moderating its nuclear stance, Iran increased its activities in noncompliance of international pressure. Between 2006 and 2012, Iran expanded its centrifuge installations, increased its accumulation of enriched uranium, and began producing uranium enriched to 20% purity, a level that brought it significantly closer to highly enriched material. These happenings intensified international concerns and provoked fears that Iran was moving beyond a civilian program toward the technical beginning of nuclear weapons capability.

Iranian officials planned these actions as a sovereign response to what they viewed as unlawful and politically motivated sanctions. The provocative language of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, combined with Iran's gradually limited cooperation with the IAEA, further deepened distrust. The IAEA repeatedly informed cases of concealment, hindered access, and

evidence suggesting possible military features to Iran's program (Huang 6). These interactions considerably impeded diplomatic efforts and firmly established the nuclear issue as a persistent international security challenge.

The shift to the P5+1 framework marked a major evolution in the international response to Iran's nuclear ambitions, elevating the issue to the highest levels of multilateral diplomacy and integrating a broader variety of political and vital interests into the negotiation procedure. This extension, while enhancing the coalition's international legitimacy, also introduced new difficulties that required careful coordination and continued diplomatic effort. The EU sustained involvement, through the office of the High Representative, ensured a degree of reliability of the set processes during a period marked by rising tensions, deepening mistrust, and intensifying sanctions.

Despite the endorsement of increasingly strict international and unilateral sanctions, Iran did not concede in its nuclear quests during this phase, instead it advanced its enrichment capabilities and reduced its cooperation with the IAEA. As such, the P5+1 period was characterized more by calculated positioning than by substantive breakthroughs. Nonetheless, it laid the essential basis for renewed diplomacy under a different Iranian leadership after 2013. The EU role in preserving a diplomatic pathway throughout this unstable period, often amid diverging priorities within the P5+1, echoed its broader attachment to multilateral governance and its emerging identity as a persistent, if not always dominant, force in international security diplomacy.

4.2.3. The Evolution of the EU Relations with Iran (2013-2015)

The period between 2013 and 2015 indicated a critical turning point in the lingering diplomatic deadlock over Iran's nuclear program. This phase, often referred to as the era of "renewed momentum," was inaugurated by the election of President Hassan Rouhani in June 2013, an event that showed a shift in Iran's foreign policy orientation and revived the

expectations for meaningful dealings with the international community. Rouhani's campaign, founded on promises of economic recovery and international re-involvement, mirrored both elite and popular dissatisfaction with the hostile policies of his predecessor. His presidency opened a decisive window for diplomacy, offering the P5+1, and particularly the EU, an opportunity to take advantage of a rare convergence of political will and the imperative for achieving high-level, long-term goals.

In this logic, one needs to explore how the internal political changes in Tehran interacted with evolving diplomatic plans within the P5+1, leading to the negotiation of the Joint Plan of Action (JPA) in 2013 and the eventual design of an all-inclusive agreement. Fundamental to this process was the EU mediating role, which matured considerably in terms of both governmental leadership and calculated strategy. With the transition to High Representative Federica Mogherini in 2014, the EU reaffirmed its pledge to multilateral negotiation, international law, and economic regulation as tools of crisis resolution. Through detailed analysis of the negotiation underlying forces, mediation mechanisms, and internal coalition management, the aim is to demonstrate how shifting geopolitical conditions and EU diplomacy together laid the foundation for the JCPOA in 2015.

The election of Hassan Rouhani in June 2013 indicated a vital shift in Iran's foreign policy orientation and marked the beginning of a new phase in nuclear diplomacy. Rouhani, a pragmatic moderate and former nuclear negotiator, campaigned on a platform built on economic recovery through international contribution and a departure from the aggressive speech of his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. His victory represented a broader collective demand for reintegration into the international economy and a discharge from the broad sanctions regime that had severely weakened Iran's economic strength (Moaveni, "Rouhani's First Year.").

Rouhani's presidency was remarkable for his vital decision to highlight diplomacy with the West as a means to restore the Islamic Republic internationally and rebuild economic credibility at home. His administration rapidly re-established contact with the P5+1 agenda, initiating a series of high-level negotiations aimed at resolving the decade-long nuclear standoff. The shift in tone and approach on Iran's part was both tactical and ideological, reflecting a belief among Iranian elites that sustained conflict with the international community was not viable in the long term. In this environment, the EU role as a neutral diplomatic player became more vital and more effective (Kahl and Nader, "Before Piling").

The post-election diplomatic setting created conditions favorable to significant negotiations. Within months of Rouhani's inauguration, Iran and the P5+1 reached the Joint Plan of Action (JPA) in November 2013 in Geneva. This interim agreement served as both a confidence-building measure and a technical agenda for a future inclusive deal. Iran agreed to limit its uranium enrichment at 5% purity, dilute or convert its stockpile of 20%-enriched uranium, stop progress on the Arak heavy-water reactor, and allow increased checking by the IAEA. In return, the international community offered limited sanctions relief, including access to some of Iran's frozen assets and the easing of restrictions on petrochemical exports and motorized imports (Magri and Perteghella 82).

At the EU level, a major institutional transition occurred with the appointment of Federica Mogherini as the new High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in late 2014, succeeding Catherine Ashton. Mogherini inherited the EU facilitator role during a sensitive and complex negotiation period. Her diplomatic leadership, though initially tested by her relative inexperience in the nuclear file, contributed to the continuity and credibility of the EU mediating presence. Mogherini stressed a values-based, multidimensional foreign policy, reinforcing the EU vow to negotiated outcomes over forced plans (Troszczyńska van Genderen 1-4).

During this period of renewed ambition, the EU mediation plans advanced notably, both in its technical complexity and its geopolitical intricacy. The EU worked to reconcile the deep distrust between the US and Iran, an event shaped by decades of ideological antagonism and geopolitical rivalry. As the only party perceived as politically neutral by both sides, the EU operated as a channel for indirect assurances, confidence-building messages, and a decision-making process focusing on achieving widespread agreement. Its chief function was not simply about moving resources or managing operating details, but rather a vital, high-level decision aimed at achieving a long-term goal, ensuring that gradual settlements were upheld and misunderstandings reduced (Seeberg 1-9).

A crucial dimension of the EU method was its focus on economic normalization as both the carrot and the credibility mechanism. The Union made it clear that the gradual lifting of sanctions, particularly those targeting Iran's oil exports, banking sector, and international trade, would only occur in response to proven Iranian compliance. This clarity provided political capital for the Rouhani administration and helped mount the negotiations in terms of economic opportunity and legal reintegration, rather than political surrender. The EU capacity to coordinate its own sanctions policy in parallel with UN and US agendas further enhanced the coherence of this approach (Magri and Perteghella 85).

Equally vital was the EU effectiveness in maintaining unity within the P5+1, a partnership that included states with often divergent geopolitical interests. By employing a consensus-oriented model of negotiation, the EU helped manage frictions between Western members, who favored more rapid sanctions relief, and more prudent players like Russia and China. This unity was vital in maintaining force and reliability through multiple rounds of expanded talks (Scobell and Swanström, "The China-Russia").

The diplomatic repositioning between 2013 and 2015 represented a moment of crucial readjustment for all parties involved in the Iranian nuclear dispute. The election of Hassan Rouhani offered the international community an opening to resume with Iran through renewed dialogue, while the EU steady presence as a neutral and capable facilitator allowed for the transformation of cautious optimism into concrete diplomatic progress. The Joint Plan of Action (2013) served not only as a confidence-building measure but also as a demonstration of the political feasibility and mutual interest behind a long-term resolution. The gradual concessions, reciprocal incentives, and rigorous verification arrangements adopted during this phase were decisive in shaping the design of the JCPOA (Allen, "Europe's Role").

For the European Union, this period highlighted its growing sophistication as a diplomatic player. By maintaining intra-coalition compromise, strengthening the divergence gap between Iran and the United States, and anchoring the negotiation process in lawful and technical precision, the EU significantly enhanced its credibility as an international mediator. The developments of 2013-2015 therefore illustrate not only a transformation in Iran's attitude, but also the consolidation of the EU identity as a pragmatic yet principled player in the international security order. The culmination of these efforts in the JCPOA would go on to define the most ambitious nonproliferation agreement of the post-Cold War era, creating the conditions for both its implementation and the challenges that would follow.

4.2.4. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)

The signing of the JCPOA on 14 July 2015 represented a momentous result of over a decade of intensive and often fragile diplomacy surrounding Iran's nuclear program. Emerging from a complex and evolving negotiation process between Iran and the P5+1 powers, coordinated and facilitated by the EU, the JCPOA stood as the most ambitious multilateral non-proliferation agreement in a generation. It sought to impose obligatory, verifiable restrictions on Iran's nuclear

capabilities in exchange for progressive sanctions relief, thereby resolving one of the most persistent international security challenges of the post-Cold War era through legal and diplomatic means.

Thus, what follows is an examination of the structure, content, and diplomatic significance of the JCPOA, with particular emphasis on the role of the EU in finalizing and formally establishing the agreement. Likewise, it is necessary to explore the technical limitations imposed on Iran's nuclear program, the verification mechanisms established through the IAEA, and the ordering of economic incentives offered by the international community. In addition, there is need to assess the diplomatic maneuvering that enabled the successful conclusion of the deal, especially under the leadership of High Representative Federica Mogherini, whose ability to preserve unity within the P5+1 and maintain methodical coherence was helpful in the JCPOA's adoption. In so doing, this chapter positions the agreement as a testament to the potential of rules-based international diplomacy and a standard for EU-led conflict resolution.

After over a decade of intensifying diplomatic activity, economic pressure, and regional insecurity, the JCPOA, signed on July 14, 2015, represented a seminal moment in the international effort to control Iran's nuclear ambitions. Negotiated between Iran and the P5+1 (the US, the UK, France, Russia, China, and Germany), with the EU acting as a critical facilitator, the JCPOA sought to impose broad, verifiable restrictions on Iran's nuclear program in exchange for progressive bans relief (Huang 3).

The agreement enforced a multidimensional limitation regime on Iran's nuclear activities. Iran agreed to limit its uranium enrichment at 3.67% purity, well below the edge required for weapons' development, and to reduce its enriched uranium store to 300 kilograms, a fraction of its pre-agreement levels. It also committed to operating no more than 5,060 IR-1 centrifuges at the Natanz facility, and to convert the Fordow enrichment plant into a research center with no

fissile material activity. The Arak heavy-water reactor was to be remodeled to eliminate its plutonium production potential. Vital to the JCPOA was the enforcement of a rigorous verification regime, supervised by the IAEA, including continuous monitoring, access to declared nuclear sites, and a structure for resolving access disputes regarding undeclared facilities under the Additional Protocol ("IAEA Report Confirms").

In exchange, the P5+1 pledged to the gradual lifting of nuclear-related sanctions, conditional on verified Iranian obedience. Sanctions relief would proceed through multiple levels, with initial measures implemented on "Adoption Day" and more substantial relief following the IAEA's certification of compliance on "Implementation Day." The JCPOA thus linked diplomatic progress to technical verification, embodying a conditionality-based nonproliferation model (Chen Zak and Sabet 58).

Throughout the final negotiation phase, the EU played an indispensable role in reducing divides, maintaining diplomatic coherence, and administering procedural mechanisms. High Representative Federica Mogherini, who had assumed the role in late 2014, became a key figure in directing the process toward conclusion. Under her guidance, the EU served not merely as a logistical coordinator but as an architype actor, devoted to multilateral diplomacy, legal predictability, and peaceful conflict resolution ("Remarks by Federica Mogherini").

From a concrete perspective, Mogherini oversaw multiple high-stakes negotiation rounds in Vienna, Lausanne, and Geneva, often mediating between deeply mistrustful parties and resolving moments of near-breakdown. The EU credibility as a neutral negotiator, neither a direct belligerent nor an ideologically participant resistant to compromise, enabled it to operate as a facilitator of conciliation, particularly between the US and Iran, whose bilateral tensions threatened to disrupt progress (Margi and Perteghella 8).

In organizational terms, the EU also assumed a structural role in implementing the agreement. It was designated as the Chair of the JCPOA Joint Commission, a multilateral body established to supervise compliance, resolve disputes, and coordinate technical clarifications. This function reinforced the EU broader foreign policy ambition of inserting diplomatic agreements within resilient governance structures, a symbol of its external action strategy ("Resolution 2231 (2015) on Iran Nuclear Issue"). The Union's emphasis on process continuity and collective decision-making was influential in managing the complex web of political, legal, and technical issues that emerged during implementation planning.

The JCPOA was rapidly validated by the international community through the passage of UNSC Resolution 2231 on July 20, 2015. This resolution gave the agreement a compulsory international legal structure and sketched the mechanism for lifting UN sanctions upon verification of Iran's conformity. It also provided the foundation for a "snapback" tool, allowing the spontaneous renewal of sanctions in the event of factual non-compliance, a key demand of skeptical parties ("Resolution 2231 (2015) on Iran Nuclear Issue").

On Implementation Day (January 16, 2016), following the IAEA's confirmation that Iran had met its initial obligations, the EU moved promptly to lift its nuclear-related sanctions. This included the removal of restrictions on oil exports, financial services, shipping, and insurance, as well as asset freezes on major Iranian institutions. The EU rapid and coordinated response highlighted its obligation to reciprocity and rules-based diplomacy, distinguishing its approach from unilateral or strong paradigms favored by some international actors (Margi and Perteghella 101).

Moreover, the EU energetically encouraged European businesses and financial institutions to return to Iran, indicating its broader intention to support Iran's reintegration into the international economy. This marked not only a pragmatic implementation phase but also a basic reorientation,

emphasizing the use of economic restoration as a soothing device within a nonproliferation framework (European External Action Service, “Iran Deal”). While challenges remained, particularly regarding the enforcement of US economic restrictions against Iranian individuals, the EU position during this phase reaffirmed its role as both a guarantor and a beneficiary of diplomatic progress.

The JCPOA denoted a defining moment in multilateral diplomacy, demonstrating that persistent negotiation, built on technical capability, international law, and institutional coordination, can succeed even in contexts characterized by deep geopolitical suspicion. By securing Iran’s obligation to rigorous and verifiable nuclear restraints, while offering a structured path for its economic reintegration, the agreement not only resolved an enduring proliferation crisis but also reinforced the legitimacy of the international nonproliferation regime (European External Action Service, “Iran Deal”). The crucial role of the EU in coordinating and formally embedding the agreement underscored its evolution from a supporting diplomatic participant to a core guarantor of complex international agreements.

Under the administration of Federica Mogherini, the EU was able to confirm its conventional approach to diplomacy, combining neutrality, legal consistency, and multilateral accord with considered pragmatism. The Union’s designation as Chair of the JCPOA’s Joint Commission further formalized its arbitrating function and gave it an enduring role in the agreement’s implementation. While subsequent political developments would question the durability of the JCPOA, the 2015 accord nonetheless demonstrated the EU capacity to act as a credible and effective facilitator in international security affairs. As such, the JCPOA stands as both a political breakthrough and a defining moment in the evolution of the EU external action capabilities (“JCPOA: Chair’s Statement”).

4.2.5. Impact and Evaluation of the EU Role

The EU involvement in the Iranian nuclear negotiations from 2003 to 2016 offers a compelling case study in the evolution of its role as an international political actor. Over the course of more than a decade, the EU evolved from a roughly coordinated group of major Member States, the EU-3, into a vital institutional helper within the multilateral P5+1 structure. This path not only reflects the Union's growing political capabilities but also underscores its value-based dedication to multilateralism, legal mediation, and peaceful conflict resolution. As both a negotiator and a coordinator, the EU sought to resolve one of the most perilous nuclear proliferation crises of the post-Cold War era without resorting to force or military confrontation.

In this respect, it is essential to evaluate the increasing impact of the EU political approach across the major phases of the Iran nuclear dossier: the initial EU-3 initiative, the expansion into the P5+1 coalition, and the negotiation and implementation of the JCPOA. Similarly, it is vital to explore both the Union's outstanding achievements, such as maintaining diplomatic cohesion, ensuring verification mechanisms, and avoiding war, and its enduring limitations, particularly its structural dependence on US support and its constrained enforcement capacity. By assessing these underlying forces, a critical reflection on the EU performance and the broader implications for its future as a significant agent in international security governance is provided.

The EU participation in the Iran nuclear negotiations from 2003 to 2016 constitutes a remarkable achievement in international mediation, particularly in its capacity to help avert the emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran through peaceful, rules-based dealings rather than force or military intervention. Acting initially through the EU-3 and later within the broader P5+1 structure, the EU played a decisive role in transforming a potential proliferation crisis into a negotiated political outcome, resulting in the 2015 JCPOA. The latter inflicted concrete, verifiable constraints on Iran's nuclear activities and subjected the country to an unprecedented

inspection regime under the IAEA, thereby achieving the EU essential aim, that of safeguarding nonproliferation without causing chaos the region (Cronberg 2).

Moreover, the negotiation process significantly elevated the EU international political stature. Traditionally viewed as a secondary player in high-stakes security negotiations, the EU effectively placed itself as a neutral negotiator and a key institution for multilateral mediation. Through the leadership of successive High Representatives, Javier Solana, Catherine Ashton, and Federica Mogherini, the EU showed the aptitude to sustain dialogue, mediate between rivals, and facilitate compromise within a highly varied political coalition. These efforts reinforced the EU value-based identity as a defender of multilateralism and international relations, and offered a concrete example of its ability to influence results in complex international security settings (Cronberg 14).

Despite these successes, the EU influence was confined by several structural limitations, chief among them its reliance on the political positioning of the US. Although the EU served as the official coordinator and administrator of the JCPOA process, it lacked the execution power and international economic weight possessed by Washington. The US' role was indispensable in applying the most impactful sanctions and providing reliable assurances to Iran regarding sanctions relief. Accordingly, the viability of EU-led negotiation was largely reliant on the continuity of US involvement (Dolzikova, "How US Sanctions").

This helplessness was blatantly revealed in May 2018, when US President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA, despite continued Iranian acquiescence as proved by the IAEA. The EU response, focused on the institution of the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX), aimed to preserve the economic benefits of the deal and protect European firms from US secondary bans. However, INSTEX remained largely symbolic and ineffective, revealing the EU limited ability to prevent US external economic pressure (Irish and Alkousaa,

"Skirting US Sanctions"). This incidence revealed the weakness of EU diplomatic gains when unaided by hard power or autonomous economic enforcement mechanisms.

The EU involvement in the Iran nuclear file provides a rich case study in both the potential and constraints of European international relations. One of the most major lessons is the efficacy of multilateral, structured political channels in managing high-risk power tensions. The JCPOA negotiations confirmed that sustained participation, supported by international law, verification mechanisms, and calculated compromise, can succeed even in persistent confrontational situations. This model stands in contrast to unilateralism or force, which often engender instability or hostile response (Aftalion 2-12).

Equally important, however, is the recognition that diplomatic effectiveness requires resilient and independent instruments of influence. The EU ability to coordinate sanctions in close collaboration with the UN and the US gave it initial credibility during the negotiation phase. Yet, the post-2016 collapse of transatlantic agreement highlighted the need for institutional independence in executing foreign policy obligations. The EU failure to protect the JCPOA from external political interference underscores the importance of building resilient instruments for policy continuity, particularly in the face of shifting alliances and reactionary policies (Cronberg 6).

Looking forward, the Iran case suggests that the European Union must develop policy independence, not only in economic instruments such as financial infrastructure and energy security, but also in its international political position. Only by reducing overdependence on US policy compatibility can the EU fully realize its ambitions as a coherent and capable international participant in conflict resolution and international governance.

The Iran nuclear consultations represent one of the most significant and informative episodes in the EU foreign policy history. The EU ability to help negotiate and uphold the JCPOA, a

breakthrough political agreement, affirmed its potential to contribute meaningfully to international conflict resolution through civilian power and multilateral arrangement. Through its emphasis on literal adherence to laws, verification, and consensus-building, the EU successfully exploited its value-based identity to promote stability, while reinforcing the international nonproliferation regime ("Iran Blames EU"). Its coordinating role, especially during difficult moments of geopolitical mistrust, revealed that the EU can offer institutional continuity and diplomatic credibility in settings where more deeply divided powers face restraints.

Nevertheless, the collapse of transatlantic alliance following the 2018 US withdrawal from the JCPOA revealed the frailty of EU diplomatic gains and exposed the structural constraints of its external action machine. Despite its moral and procedural authority, the EU lacked the economic and political autonomy to enforce or preserve the agreement in the face of unilateral disruption ("Iran Blames EU"). This limitation underscores the need for the EU to deepen its essential capabilities and reinforce its resilience against external shocks. Looking forward, the Iran case serves both as a proof to what EU diplomacy can achieve under favorable conditions and as an instructive lesson on the imperative of developing the hard-power tools and institutional independence necessary to sustain its foreign policy ambitions in a multipolar world.

The EU dealings with the Iranian nuclear question from 2003 to 2016 constitutes a significant episode in the evolution of its foreign and security policy, manifesting both the potential and the constraints of the EU as an international political actor. The path from the initial EU-3 initiative to the completion of the JCPOA underscores the Union's long-standing obligation to multilateralism, diplomatic negotiation, and the safeguarding of international nonproliferation standards. Through its continued coordination efforts, facilitation of dialogue, and institutional leadership within the P5+1 structure, the EU demonstrated its capacity to play a vital role in resolving one of the most urgent and prolonged proliferation crises of the post-Cold War era. The

avoidance of military conflict, the enforcing of evidence-based restrictions on Iran's nuclear activities, and the establishment of a vigorous checking rule under the IAEA all point to the efficacy of the EU diplomatic model, one depending on laws, consensus-building, and conventional legitimacy.

At the same time, the Iran case also draws attention to the organizational curbs that continue to shape, and in many cases, hamper, the EU ability to act independently and effectively in international matters. While the JCPOA was generally welcomed as a diplomatic success, its subsequent disruption following the unilateral withdrawal of the US in 2018 revealed the weakness of the agreement and the EU limited ability to protect its foreign policy achievements from unpredictable events. The Union's efforts to maintain the agreement, most notably through the creation of the INSTEX proved insufficient to counter the economic and political weight of US secondary sanctions, thereby revealing the EU dependence on transatlantic coordination and its lack of independent enforcement tools. This incident highlighted a broader problem facing the EU: the strain between its ambition to be a moral, independent player and the real-world restrictions generated by geopolitical irregularities and internal institutional breakup.

In a broader logical appreciation, the EU experience in the Iran nuclear negotiations illustrates the double nature of its international identity. On one hand, the Union has demonstrated that it can serve as a credible and effective mediator in complex, high-stakes negotiations, particularly when its value-based strengths and institutional continuity are capitalized within a multilateral agenda. On the other hand, the case reveals that without significant autonomy, strong enforcement tools, and consistent internal compromise, the EU political gains remain open to setback. Going forward, the Iran file offers both a precedent and a warning story.

It confirms the value of mediation and multilateral involvement in managing international security threats, but also indicates the urgent need for the EU to deepen its capabilities, political,

economic, and institutional, if it is to maintain its role as an international political power. In this regard, the Iran nuclear dossier stands not only as a breakthrough in EU foreign policy but also as an incentive for rethinking the forms and requirements of European consultancy entity in an unstable international system.

Between 2003 and 2016, the EU involvement in Iraq and Iran revealed the intricate interplay between its conventional objectives and organizational confines as an international actor. The Iraq War exposed the deep splits within the EU, revealing the weakness of its CFSP and the lasting supremacy of national sovereignty in foreign policymaking. The initial failure to present a unified response to the 2003 invasion highlighted the problems of building agreement among Member States with differing strategic cultures and transatlantic reliabilities. However, the post-invasion period demonstrated the EU capacity for adjustment of standards and modification of strategies. Through humanitarian aid, rule-of-law missions like EUJUST LEX, and an obligation to multilateral reconstruction efforts, the EU gradually repositioned itself as a civilian power focused on governance, reinforcement, and capacity-building.

In contrast, the Iran nuclear crisis presented the EU with an important occasion to demonstrate unified leadership embedded in diplomacy and legal multilateralism. From the formation of the EU-3 in 2003 to its chief role in the P5+1 structure, the EU steadily pursued a rules-based approach to nonproliferation, resulting in the momentous Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. The EU sustained mediating role, especially through its High Representatives, emphasized its growing authority in running high-stakes negotiations and maintaining political coherence amid geopolitical frictions. Despite limitations in enforcement and dependence on transatlantic shared commitment, the EU role in the Iran question denoted a significant success in its quest to become a value-based and key actor on the international stage.

The Iraq and Iran cases reveal the EU double identity: one shaped by internal breakup and event-driven learning in Iraq, and the other defined by righteous, active diplomacy in Iran. While the Union's efforts have often been constrained by structural and political obstacles, these episodes underscore its capacity to recover from tactical setbacks, adapt institutionally, and uphold multilateral standards in pursuit of worldwide security. As such, the period from 2003 to 2016 represents a pivotal phase in the evolution of the EU external action, underlining both its potential and its persistent weaknesses in an increasingly multipolar world.

Chapter Five

Comparative Analysis and Policy Implications (2003-2016)

This chapter undertakes a methodical and analytical comparison of the effectiveness, coherence, and implications of the foreign policies pursued by the US and the EU toward Iraq and Iran between 2003 and 2016. The analysis illuminates how divergent strategic cultures, official structures, and values-based orientations shaped their respective approaches to two of the most consequential crises in the contemporary Middle East. Beyond evaluating policy performance, the chapter endeavors to reveal how the underlying viewpoints of power, legitimacy, and governance influenced the formulation, implementation, and outcomes of transatlantic involvement in the region.

Methodologically, the chapter adopts a comparative analytical basis designed around four major aspects: objectives, instruments, outcomes, and regional impacts. This structure enables a coherent and multidimensional assessment of US and EU policies, facilitating an understanding of how each participant defined its tactical goals, selected the means to pursue them, and responded to evolving regional underlying forces. Through this approach, the chapter also measures the degree of policy coherence and evaluates the extent to which both players made their actions in agreement with international standards, multilateral principles, and long-term stability imperatives.

The time-based and geopolitical context of 2003-2016 provides an essential background for this chapter. The period commences with the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which marked a turning point in the post-Cold War international order and triggered continuing debates over the legitimacy of intervention and unilateralism. It further contains the escalation of the Iranian nuclear crisis, culminating in the 2015 JCPOA, as well as the deep and lasting consequences of change of the Arab Spring and the emergence of non-state threats such as the Islamic State of

Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Together, these developments redefined the principal context in which both Washington and Brussels operated, convincing each to bring together its international ambitions with fluctuating regional realities and evolving conceptions of multilateral action.

5.1. Comparative Background of US and EU Policies

The first part of this chapter establishes an analytical foundation for comparing the foreign policy orientations of the US and the EU. It delineates the theoretical factors through which both players pursue similar international goals, security, democracy promotion, energy stability, and counter-proliferation, while employing divergent instruments and codes of conduct. By examining their respective enduring beliefs and formal rules, this context illuminates how conflicting political beliefs and decision-making processes have produced dissimilar models of international involvement on either side of the Atlantic.

5.1.1. Underlying Principles and Core Concepts

The comparative assessment of US and EU foreign policy performance is best understood through a combination of three theoretical traditions within international relations: neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, and constructivism. Each offers a distinct perspective for interpreting the inconsistencies and intermittent convergences between American and European calculated actions in the post-Cold War international order (Burchill et al. 56).

From a neorealist perspective, the foreign policy of the US reflects the structural imperatives of an anarchic international system dominated by power disparities. As the leading international country, Washington has consistently sought to preserve its hegemonic status through deterrence, coercive diplomacy, and unilateral intervention when necessary. This stance is in accordance with the broader realist assumption that material capabilities, rather than values or institutions, constitute the major determinants of state conduct (Kitchen 80-91). The US reliance on military

superiority and premeditated autonomy thus reveals a logic of self-help consistent with its dominant role in maintaining international stability.

By contrast, the European Union's collective conduct is more effectively explained through neoliberal institutionalism, which emphasizes the role of institutions, cooperation, and interdependence in lessening the security dilemma and fostering cooperation. The EU, as a complex political and principles-based entity, approaches international governance through the construction of multilateral mechanisms designed to regulate interstate relations, enhance predictability, and promote shared interests. In this sense, Europe's reliance on international law, diplomacy, and development assistance reflects a belief in treaty-based cooperation as the foundation for stability and legitimacy in international affairs (Sahlin 13).

Constructivism further enriches this comparative background by illuminating the conceptual and standard-based extents of foreign policy. As Ian Manners argues in his theory of "Normative Power Europe," the EU defines itself not through strong-arm capacity but through the forecast of conventional values, and rules that shape the performance of others. Its diplomacy is informed by identity, principle, and law, rather than material advantage. Similarly, the US foreign policy can be viewed through the constructivist perspective as an extension of its distinctive self-conception, the belief that it bears a moral responsibility to safeguard freedom and democracy worldwide. This conceptual foundation validates unilateral action and interventionism under the pretext of international values. Thus, whereas realism and institutionalism account for structural and procedural differences, constructivism reveals the deeper cultural and normative divergences that underpin transatlantic policy (250).

These theoretical standpoints allow for an integrated understanding of transatlantic relations: neorealism explains the US reliance on the use of force and hegemonic maintenance; neoliberal institutionalism elucidates the EU preference for collective governance and multilateralism; and

constructivism clarifies how differing identities and standards shape the moral foundations of both actors' external conduct.

5.1.2. Basic Criteria Used to Evaluate Similarities and Differences

Both actors pursue similar international goals, security, democracy, and nonproliferation, but diverge in instruments (US forceful autonomy vs. EU multilateral diplomacy). The comparative assessment of US and EU foreign policies rests on three interrelated proportions: their objectives, policy instruments, and shared principles. Both actors pronounced broadly similar foreign policy objectives, namely the pursuit of security, democracy promotion, energy security, and counter-proliferation. These shared goals reflected a mutual obligation to safeguarding the liberal international order and ensuring stability in regions of paramount concern. Nevertheless, while the predominant ends appeared convergent, the means and principles through which these actors sought to achieve them diverged sharply (Zakharchenko).

In terms of policy instruments, the US preferred the use of military intervention, tough diplomacy, and unilateral action as key instruments for advancing its interests. Washington's calculated approach was rooted in the belief that the deployment of force and the maintenance of hegemonic dominance were indispensable to preserving international order. Sanctions and limited diplomacy often served as supplementary tools to pressure opponents and reinforce deterrence (Kagan 53). By contrast, the EU pursued a clearly different path, relying on interaction and dialogue, economic penalties, development aid, and multilateral cooperation as major tools of diplomacy. The EU use of conditional aid and official dialogue was underpinned by the conviction that long-term stability is best achieved through integration, law, and mutual dependency rather than force (Manners 244).

These differences were further amplified by the players' values and principles' orientations. The US foreign policy has traditionally been shaped by a unilateralist and power-centric

worldview, emphasizing national sovereignty, executive flexibility, and the legitimacy of pre-emptive action when core interests are at stake (Kagan 15). Conversely, the EU has defined itself through a multilateralist and principle-based beliefs, anchored in international law, collective security arrangements, and principles of influence. Whereas Washington's policy reasoning was driven by power-based pragmatism, Brussels' approach reflected a belief in principle-based interaction, a diplomacy of conventional standards rather than force (Hill and Smith 30). This divergence in the moral and operational basics of external action forms a structural fault line between the transatlantic partners and illustrates the broader divide between realist and liberal-institutionalist worldviews.

The divergence also extends to the question of legitimacy. For the US, legality derives largely from capacity and responsibility, the belief that hegemonic power entails a duty to act in defense of international stability, even in the absence of worldwide consent. For the EU, legitimacy rests on legality, consent, and the authority of international institutions (Ikenberry, "America's Imperial…" 52). This distinction summarizes the essence of transatlantic divergence: while both claim to uphold a liberal order, they differ fundamentally in their understanding of what constitutes legitimate and effective action within it.

5.1.3. Growing Differences in US-EU Approaches to Security, Force, and Foreign Policy

The US operates through hard power and executive responsiveness, while the EU highlights legality, consensus, and value-based influence. The contrast between US and EU foreign policy behavior is rooted in fundamentally different strategic cultures, shaped by historical experience, institutional design, and self-perception as international actors. The US has long exhibited itself as a hard-power hegemon, deriving influence from unparalleled military capabilities, technological superiority, and a willingness to employ force preemptively in defense of national interests. As Kagan observes in his work: *"Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the*

New World Order", the American worldview rests on an "assertive realism" that perceives the use of coercion as a legitimate instrument for sustaining a favorable balance of power and deterring potential challengers (27-37). This hard-power positioning reflects both structural capacity and ideological conviction: the belief that leadership entails responsibility for enforcing order, even in the absence of unanimous international consent.

In contrast, the EU evolved as a civilian and values-based power, defined less by powerful strength and more by its ability to spread norms, promote governance standards, and foster cooperative interdependence among states. Through instruments such as enlargement, neighborhood policies, and development assistance, the EU harnessed its economic and institutional resources to shape international behavior in accordance with legal and ethical principles (Lister 74). Its approach emphasized legitimacy, persuasion, and soft-power appeal over military compulsion. As Joseph Nye explains, soft power operates through attraction rather than coercion, enabling actors to shape preferences and behaviors through credibility and example rather than through force (31).

However, the EU institutional and structural arrangement imposed fundamental limitations on its calculated coherence. The intergovernmental nature of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the requirement for unanimity in the European Council, and the coexistence of supranational and national interests often inhibited decisive action. Divided authority and competing national priorities weakened the Union's capacity for unified considered response (Hill 310). In contrast, the US constitutional structure, characterized by a powerful executive and centralized command over defense and diplomacy, enabled more swift, coherent, and responsive policy formation (McMaster 134).

These dissimilarities reveal a persistent transatlantic unevenness in the logic and practice of foreign policy. The US continues to define leadership through the exhibition of power and the

capacity for decisive, often unilateral action, whereas the EU privileges legitimacy, consensus, and value-based influence as the basis of its external responsibility. The resulting divergence is not merely procedural but structural, originating from contradictory conceptions of authority, planned purpose, and the appropriate means of securing international order.

5.1.4. Methodological Limitations

While this comparative outline provides an analytical foundation, it remains constrained by several methodological questions. Foremost among these is the structural imbalance between the two transatlantic players. The US behaves as a sovereign state with centralized decision-making authority and unmatched military capabilities, while the EU represents a composite actor whose external action depends on intergovernmental compromise and shared institutional competences (Hill 305-28). This divergence complicates direct comparison and necessitates analytical attention to avoid overstating parallels or equivalences.

Moreover, the criteria by which policy effectiveness is measured vary significantly. American success is often evaluated through perceptible significant outcomes, deterrence, regime change, or the preservation of geopolitical equilibrium (Kagan 31), whereas European accomplishment is typically assessed through legitimacy, stability, and value-based influence. These differing standards reflect not only material disparities but also distinct conceptions of what constitutes power and achievement in international relations (Manners 236). Recognizing these variances allows for a more refined and theoretically based assessment of transatlantic foreign policy behavior, one that describes both the structural realities and the values-based complexities that define Western involvement in international affairs.

5.2. Comparative Analysis: Iraq Policy (2003-2016)

The Iraq War provides a significant perspective through which to examine the contrasting calculated rationalities and policy practices of the US and the EU. As both participants

confronted the challenges of regime change, post-conflict reconstruction, and regional instability, their responses revealed fundamentally different understandings of legitimacy, power, and international responsibility. What comes next compares their respective objectives, instruments, and outcomes in Iraq between 2003 and 2016, highlighting how divergent policy options and institutional constraints shaped the effectiveness of transatlantic involvement.

5.2.1. High-level Priorities and Essential Motivations

The Iraq conflict of 2003-2016 represents a pivotal moment for examining the divergent calculated reasons of US and EU foreign policy. The US approach was shaped by a combination of security imperatives, counterterrorism objectives, and regime change ambitions. In the wake of the September 11 attacks, the George W. Bush administration articulated an international policy under the "War on Terror" doctrine, depicting Iraq as both a direct security threat and a testing ground for democratic change in the Middle East. The National Security Strategy of 2002 explicitly justified pre-emptive action against perceived threats, asserting that "America will act against emerging dangers before they are fully formed" (The White House).

Within this plan, the invasion of Iraq was presented as a preventive measure to eliminate alleged WMDs, remove Saddam Hussein's regime, and establish a democratic state that would accelerate liberal change across the region (Haine 105). This justification reflected the neorealist judgement of preemptive intervention and the assertion of US hegemonic responsibility, whereby unilateral action was considered legitimate when multilateral agreement proved beyond reach.

In the months preceding the invasion, US diplomacy at the United Nations became increasingly contentious. Resolution 1441 (November 2002) granted Iraq a "final opportunity" to conform to disarmament obligations but did not authorize the automatic use of force. When inspections by the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission. (UNMOVIC) failed to discover irrefutable evidence of WMDs, the George W. Bush

administration advanced the argument that Saddam's regime posed a latent and intolerable threat. Secretary of State Colin Powell's presentation before the Security Council in February 2003, in which satellite imagery and intelligence reports were used to demonstrate Iraq's supposed violations, failed to convince several key allies and further split the transatlantic society (McLain 254).

The EU position, by contrast, was entrenched in a fundamentally different interpretation of international responsibility and legality. The European Union, consistent with its obligation to multilateralism, rejected the notion that pre-emptive war could be legitimate without unequivocal authorization from the U.N. Security Council (Hill and Smith 30). The EU viewed Iraq not as an imminent military threat but as a governance challenge that required political containment and long-term institutional involvement (Gordon and Shapiro 87).

However, this compromise was fractured along national lines: France and Germany strongly opposed the invasion on legal and moral grounds, emphasizing adherence to international law and the primacy of multilateral decision-making. President Jacques Chirac and Chancellor Gerhard Schröder constructed their obstruction as a defense of the U.N.-based order against unilateral interventionism (Malone 142). In contrast, the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, and several Central and Eastern European states conformed with Washington in what became known as the "Coalition of the Willing," arguing that transatlantic solidarity and the containment of proliferation threats justified participation (Daalder and Lindsay 150).

The debates within the European Council during early 2003 revealed the limits of the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The split between "Old Europe" and "New Europe," as described by US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, uncovered divergent historical experiences, security dependencies, and perceptions of legitimacy among member states (Calleo 32). The resulting breakup weakened the Union's collective capacity to

influence decision-making at the international level, demonstrating the friction between national sovereignty and supranational coordination within European foreign policy structures.

5.2.2. Policy Implementation and Tools

The divergence in calculated motivations translated directly into contrasting policy instruments and modes of implementation. The US intervention was basically military-led, characterized by a doctrine of rapid regime removal and forced stability. Following the fall of Baghdad in April 2003, the US-dominated CPA assumed administrative control over Iraq. The CPA's far-reaching measures, including de-Baathification, the dismissal of the Iraqi army, and the establishment of transitional institutions, showed Washington's conviction that political transformation could be engineered through occupation and centralized control. The plan combined direct governance with an ambitious project of nation-building intended to conform Iraq's institutions with Western democratic models. However, these actions undermined the Iraqi state's administrative capacity and powered widespread resentment, accelerating the breakdown of security and governance (Zinn 85-86).

In financial terms, the US mobilized enormous resources through the Iraq Relief and Reconstruction Fund (IRRF), which allocated approximately $21 billion between 2003 and 2006 for rebuilding infrastructure, restoring utilities, and supporting political transition. Yet, mismanagement, corruption, and a deteriorating security environment significantly reduced the effectiveness of these expenditures ("Iraq: Insecurity and Corruption"). Reconstruction projects were often hampered by attacks on contractors and a lack of coordination between military and civilian agencies, revealing the organizational weaknesses of a unilateral approach to state-building.

In contrast, the EU involvement in Iraq was designed around diplomacy, humanitarian assistance, and institutional reform. The EU sought to diminish the humanitarian consequences of

the conflict and to strengthen governance through non-military means. Since 2014, the Union and its member states provided more than €1 billion in combined humanitarian and development assistance. The 2005 establishment of EUJUST LEX, the EU first rule-of-law mission outside its territory, marked a crucial step in European post-conflict involvement. The program trained over 4800 Iraqi judges, police officers, and penitentiary officials, contributing to the skill enhancement of Iraq's justice and security sectors (Council of the European Union. "*Iraq: Integrated Rule"").*

Despite these efforts, the EU involvement remained limited by internal divisions and institutional breakup. The European Commission, the Council, and individual member states frequently pursued overlapping or disconnected initiatives (Gordon and Shapiro 112). Coordination with the US was minimal, as Washington's dominance over the CPA left little room for European participation in the design of post-war governance structures (Malone 142). Many European governments remained politically reluctant to deepen participation in what was widely perceived as an illegitimate war, resulting in a limited contribution (Everts 140). The EU Security Strategy of December 2003, while recognizing Iraq as a test case for international order, implicitly distanced the European Union from the rationality of preventive war, emphasizing instead the necessity of "effective multilateralism" and the preeminence of international law.

5.2.3. Public Opinion and Media Perceptions

Public opinion and media discourse further illustrate the transatlantic divide over Iraq. In the US, the initial public support for the invasion was high, over 70 percent of Americans approved military action in early 2003 (Pew Research Center. "Public Attitudes Toward the War in Iraq"), indicating the influence of post-9/11 security narratives and the administration's describing of the war as a moral obligation. However, as evidence of WMD absence emerged and the human and financial costs escalated, domestic support declined sharply, reaching below 40 percent by 2005. The media, initially conformed with the government's language, gradually turned critical,

exposing inconsistencies in intelligence claims and highlighting the humanitarian loss of the conflict.

In Europe, public opinion was tremendously opposed to the war. Mass demonstrations took place in major cities across France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom, marking one of the largest transnational peace deployments in modern history. European media outlets portrayed the invasion as a violation of international legality and a demonstration of US unilateralism (Golan, Manor, and Arceneaux 1665). This standards-based divide at the societal level reinforced political divisions within Europe and deepened suspicion toward American international leadership. The conflicting public narratives in both societies thus reflected their broader strategic cultures: American exceptionalism and European legalism.

5.2.4. Outcomes and Effectiveness

The consequences of US and EU policy in Iraq underscore the limitations of both models when pursued in isolation. The US approach, despite its early military success, failed to secure lasting political stability. The rapid collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime created a power vacuum that facilitated the intense division of society and insurgent buildup. The dissolution of state institutions and inadequate post-war planning led to enduring instability, resulting in the reappearance of violent extremism and the emergence of ISIS by 2014. Efforts to enforce democracy through force produced a failing state dependent on external security guarantees, revealing the limits of unilateral interventionism.

The EU involvement, though consistent with its values-based and legalist beliefs, achieved only partial success. Its emphasis on judicial reform, governance training, and humanitarian relief contributed to the steady strengthening of civil institutions, yet these initiatives lacked sufficient scale and political influence to reshape Iraq's significant structures. The EU marginal position in

the post-war governance context reduced its authentic leadership and influence, rendering its contributions largely expert-driven rather than revolutionary (Gordon and Shapiro 112).

From a transatlantic perspective, the Iraq case revealed the ineffectiveness of US-EU cooperation in managing complex state-building situations. Divergent strategic cultures, the US preference for hard power and decisive intervention versus the EU commitment to multilateralism and soft-power tools, produced mutual mistrust and policy incoherence (Daalder and Lindsay 154). The absence of a coordinated reconstruction agenda prevented the synchronization of security and governance efforts, allowing instability to continue. Consequently, Iraq became both a symbol of transatlantic disunity and a vehicle for European reassessment of its foreign policy identity (Howorth, "*Security and Defence …"* 87). The war deepened Europe's insistence on multilateral legitimacy and its pursuit of strategic autonomy in future crises.

The Iraq experience from 2003 to 2016 demonstrates how contradictory calculated objectives, policy instruments, and institutional constraints led the United States and the European Union down divergent pathways toward shared nonetheless unrealized objectives. The United States relied on intimidating power to reconstruct order; the European Union sought to restore legitimacy through law and assistance. Both approaches, in their incoherence, fell short of producing a stable, democratic Iraq, highlighting the enduring challenges of balancing hard and soft power within the transatlantic approach.

5.3. Comparative Analysis: Iran Policy (2003-2016)

The Iranian nuclear issue between 2003 and 2016 offers an enlightening comparison of US and EU foreign policy conduct, illustrating how differing strategic cultures and diplomatic viewpoints shaped their responses to a shared proliferation challenge. While both actors sought to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons and to preserve regional stability, they diverged

sharply in their preferred instruments and norms-based agendas. The US emphasized containment, forcible diplomacy, and the use of sanctions to restrain Iran's planned ambitions, whereas the EU highlighted dialogue, involvement, and multilateral negotiation as pathways to obedience.

Accordingly, it is necessary to analyze how these contrasting approaches evolved from confrontation to limited convergence under the P5+1 structure, resulting in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Similarly, it also essential to evaluate the far-reaching implications of the Iran case for transatlantic cooperation, crisis management, and the interchange between power and legitimacy in contemporary diplomacy.

5.3.1. Diplomatic Approaches and Long-term Goals

The evolution of Iran policy between 2003 and 2016 illustrates a fundamental divergence in US and EU approaches to diplomacy, security, and international involvement. The US adopted a posture of containment and forcible diplomacy, seeking to constrain Iran's regional influence and freeze its nuclear ambitions through isolation and punishing measures. Under the "axis of evil" doctrine articulated by the George W. Bush administration, Iran was depicted as both a proliferator and a state sponsor of terrorism, justifying a policy that combined economic sanctions and diplomatic exclusion. Washington's containment policy aimed not only to impede nuclear advancement but also to curtail Iran's ability to extend power in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq and the Levant (Maloney, "*Iran's Political…"* 112). This approach reflected a broader neorealist analysis founded on threat perception and hegemonic maintenance.

Conversely, the EU pursued a policy of dialogue, engagement, and multilateral negotiation. Led by the E3 (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom), the EU sought to integrate Iran into diplomatic and economic agendas that could moderate its conduct through incentives rather than extortion. Brussels regarded Iran less as an existential threat and more as a complex diplomatic

challenge requiring inclusion in international establishments to ensure compliance and transparency (Huang 4). This approach reflected the EU self-conception as a values-based power, emphasizing diplomacy, rule-following, and multilateral legality as tools for conflict resolution. While the US viewed pressure as essential to deterrence, the EU believed that sustained involvement offered the most viable path toward de-escalation and regional stability.

5.3.2. Chronology and Diplomatic Evolution (2003-2016)

The sequence of the Iranian nuclear negotiations between 2003 and 2016 advanced in several different phases that display the steady convergence of transatlantic approaches and the EU growing diplomatic role. The October 2003 Tehran Declaration evidenced the first chief diplomatic breakthrough, when the E3 (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom) secured Iran's voluntary agreement to suspend uranium enrichment and allow enhanced inspections by the IAEA (Huang 4). This represented a significant success for European preventive diplomacy and established the E3 as trustworthy interlocutors capable of balancing firmness with dialogue.

Building on this impetus, the November 2004 Paris Agreement reaffirmed Iran's obligation to maintain suspension while negotiations continued toward a long-term arrangement recognizing Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy. However, disagreements over sequencing and guarantees of reciprocal benefits soon eroded trust. Iranian negotiators, increasingly pressured by domestic officials, accused the E3 of offering inadequate incentives and yielding to US demands for total suspension. By 2006, the E3 process failed as Iran resumed enrichment, provoking the EU and the US to refer the matter to the U.N. Security Council. The Council subsequently adopted a series of resolutions, 1696 (2006), 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), and 1929 (2010), inflicting sanctions targeting Iran's financial, military, and nuclear sectors (Singh 107-19). The transfer also marked the creation of the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the US, and

Germany) as a unified diplomatic forum, indicating the structuring of transatlantic coordination under a multilateral umbrella.

The election of Barack Obama in 2008 inaugurated a shift toward involvement. The US administration validated direct participation in multilateral talks and offered standardized sanctions relief in exchange for verifiable constraints on Iran's nuclear program. The EEAS, under the leadership of Catherine Ashton (2009-2014), played a crucial mediating role, ensuring continuity of dialogue and maintaining diplomatic balance among parties with divergent interests. Ashton's emphasis on confidence-building and steady reciprocity helped sustain negotiations despite periodic crises (Adebahr 76).

The process resulted in the JCPOA, signed in July 2015 under the auspices of Ashton's successor, Federica Mogherini, who coordinated the final negotiating phase. The agreement required Iran to decrease its number of centrifuges, cap enrichment levels at 3.67%, and bestow the IAEA unprecedented access, in exchange for progressive and scheduled sanctions relief ("IAEA Report Confirms"). For the European Union, this outcome validated its obligation to diplomacy and multilateralism; for the United States, it demonstrated the effectiveness of combining forcible power with negotiated compromise.

5.3.3. The E3 and the EU as Intermediaries

Within this multilateral context, the E3 played differentiated but complementary roles. France emphasized strict verification and the nonproliferation norm, advocating a firm stance toward Tehran. Germany, driven by economic pragmatism and non-confrontational diplomacy, favored involvement and confidence-building. The United Kingdom oscillated between conformity with US strategy and adherence to European consensus, acting as a channel between Washington and Brussels (Adebahr 76). Together, the E3 embodied the European synthesis of values-based

persuasion and pragmatic diplomacy, which became formalized under the EU collective foreign policy structures.

The EEAS transformed the EU from a supporting actor into a undisputable diplomatic power. Ashton's approach of inclusive mediation emphasized "process legitimacy", ensuring all parties perceived negotiations as fair and reciprocal. Mogherini, in turn, advanced the EU normative image by framing the JCPOA as a multilateral achievement essential to "collective security through diplomacy" (Adebahr 117). This sustained mediation not only balanced US assertiveness and Iranian skepticism but also managed great-power rivalries within the P5+1, notably between Russia, China, and Western members. The EU coordination capacity thus underscored its evolving role as an international moderator rooted in persuasion and legal process rather than pressure.

5.3.4. Domestic Underlying Forces in Iran

Iran's internal political landscape profoundly influenced its negotiation posture. The period from 2003 to 2016 was characterized by oscillation between reformist pragmatism and hardline resistance. Under President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), reformists endorsed involvement with the E3 as a means to secure economic integration and international legitimacy (Kaya and Şartepe 3). This approach led to the Tehran and Paris agreements but also provoked criticism from conservative factions, who viewed the suspension of enrichment as a surrender to Western pressure. The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) denoted a resurgence of hardline noncooperation. His administration reasserted Iran's "right to enrichment" as a matter of national sovereignty, accelerating nuclear activities and rejecting perceived Western double standards (Perletta 35-45). Sanctions and diplomatic isolation during this period reinforced nationalist narratives and strengthened the Revolutionary Guard's economic and political influence.

The victory of Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021), a former nuclear negotiator himself, returned a pragmatic tone to Iranian diplomacy. Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif took advantage of the opening created by Obama's outreach to pursue the JCPOA, describing it domestically as a triumph of resistance and negotiation (Maloney, "Twenty Questions"). Nevertheless, opposition from conservative groups persisted, with hardliners denouncing Western intentions and questioning the benefits of involvement. This internal contestation underscored the fragility of compliance and the deep ambivalence within Iran's elite toward the West.

5.3.5. Sanctions, Pressure, and Humanitarian Consequences

The restrictive measures imposed on Iran represented a complex interplay of forceful instruments and economic negotiation. The UNSC resolutions between 2006 and 2010 progressively expanded restrictions to include arms embargoes, asset freezes, and bans on nuclear-related trade. The US, through the 1996 Iran Sanctions Act and subsequent legislation, implemented unilateral and secondary sanctions targeting Iran's energy, banking, and shipping sectors, effectively discouraging international companies from doing business with Tehran (Joyner 57).

The EU initially maintained a more watchful approach, focusing on directed measures against entities linked to the nuclear program. However, by 2012, the EU had imposed comprehensive bans, including an oil embargo and the disconnection of Iranian banks from the SWIFT financial network. These measures exerted significant pressure, causing Iran's oil exports to drop by nearly 50% and leading to severe inflation and currency devaluation (Popescu 29). While sanctions achieved their calculated aim of bringing Iran back to the negotiating table, they also produced substantial humanitarian costs, reducing access to medicine, raising unemployment, and deepening socioeconomic hardship among ordinary citizens.

The sanctions' measures thus revealed both the potential and the peril of forceful diplomacy. For the United States, restrictions functioned as influence; for the European Union, they were instruments of conditionality, to be lifted upon corroborated obedience. The combination of American pressure and European involvement ultimately created the dual-track approach that paved the way for the JCPOA.

5.3.6. Multilateral Complexity: The Role of Russia and China

The involvement of Russia and China within the P5+1 added further layers of difficulty to the negotiations. Moscow, while occasionally in agreement with Western positions, sought to preserve its vital relationship with Tehran as a counterbalance to US influence in the region. Russia's support for Iran's civilian nuclear development, including the Bushehr reactor, was accompanied by resistance to excessively retaliatory sanctions. Beijing, similarly, emphasized energy cooperation and regional stability over confrontation, frequently advocating for diplomatic flexibility and opposing regime-change narratives (Bowen and Moran 27).

The inclusion of these powers underscored the inherently multipolar character of twenty-first-century diplomacy. The EU ability to maintain cohesion within such a heterogeneous coalition attested to its trustworthiness as a mediator. By accommodating Russian and Chinese concerns while sustaining Western unity, the EU helped ensure the P5+1 remained a viable platform for negotiation (Meier 8). The Iran case thus demonstrated the potential for multilateral mechanisms to function effectively when reinforced by institutional leadership and values-based consensus.

5.3.7. Outcomes and Long-term Effects

The JCPOA represented a groundbreaking achievement in non-proliferation diplomacy and a temporary restoration of transatlantic unity. The agreement effectively froze Iran's nuclear program and subjected enrichment activities to intrusive international inspections. For the US, the agreement validated a pragmatic fusion of sanctions and diplomacy, demonstrating that sustained

pressure could force negotiation (Huang 3). For the EU, it symbolized the triumph of multilateral participation over unilateral pressure. The EU supportive role enhanced its international standing as a credible mediator capable of reducing great-power divides.

However, the permanence of this achievement was undermined by enduring structural and political asymmetries. The US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, though beyond the temporal scope of this analysis, exposed the vulnerability of agreements resting on political consensus rather than rule-based coordination (Hoobler, "Assessing Transatlantic Fallout"). It exposed the EU limited ability to preserve international accords without American participation, reigniting debates within Europe over calculated autonomy and the need for independent enforcement mechanisms.

In analytical terms, the Iran case emphasizes the insubstantial balance between sanctions and diplomacy as instruments of collective security. The US-EU experience demonstrated that sanctions alone cannot produce sustainable compliance without a parallel diplomatic track, just as dialogue without reliable enforcement risks ineffectiveness. The JCPOA demonstrated the potential of cooperative crisis management when forceful and norms-based approaches are harmonized, yet it also highlighted the vulnerability of such cooperation to domestic political shifts on either side of the Atlantic.

Ultimately, the Iran experience offers enduring lessons for transatlantic relations and international governance. It revealed that shared objectives do not automatically produce planned unity; effective coordination depends on reconciling the US reliance on coercive pressure with the EU obligation to conventional involvement. When these approaches converge, as under President Obama, the result can be diplomatic breakthroughs. When they diverge, as later events showed, the transatlantic partnership risks breakup. Thus, the Iran case stands as both a testament

to the potential and a warning of the vulnerability of cooperative diplomacy in an evolving multipolar world.

5.4. Transatlantic Relations and Policy Coordination

The evolution of transatlantic relations between 2003 and 2016 reflects both the resilience and fragility of cooperation between the United States and the European Union. Despite a shared commitment to international security, democracy promotion, and the maintenance of international order, their coordination was often strained by divergent strategic cultures, institutional preferences, and perceptions of legitimacy. The Iraq War, the management of the Iranian nuclear crisis, and broader debates over NATO's role and EU tactical autonomy exposed the structural tensions underlying the partnership. At the same time, these episodes demonstrated the enduring necessity of transatlantic coordination in confronting complex security questions.

That said, it is imperative to examine the patterns of convergence and divergence that defined US-EU relations in the post-Iraq War context, analyzing how differing interpretations of multilateralism, intervention, and the use of force shaped transatlantic decision-making. It is equally vital to assess the official mechanisms, ranging from NATO and UN structures to ad hoc coalitions, summits, and EU treaty reforms, that mediated cooperation. Finally, it is necessary to consider how major episodes such as the Iraq War and the Iran nuclear negotiations alternately strained and regenerated the transatlantic partnership, revealing the enduring friction between unilateral power and collective legitimacy in Western foreign policy.

5.4.1. Convergences and Divergences

From 2003 to 2016, US-EU relations were characterized by a complex interplay of considered convergence and political divergence. Both entities shared fundamental objectives: combating international terrorism, preventing nuclear proliferation, and promoting the stabilization of unstable or post-conflict states. These shared main concern reflected a common commitment to

preserving the liberal international order and confronting transnational security threats (Gordon and Shapiro 145). Yet, beneath this far-reaching consensus lay persistent apprehensions over the means, legitimacy, and formal agendas of international involvement.

For the US, multilateralism was primarily contributory, a mechanism to mobilize support and legitimacy for action when compatible with US interests. Washington interpreted alliances such as NATO, or ad hoc coalitions, as flexible tools for validating intervention and boosting power, especially in the post-September 11 context. The US approach emphasized pragmatism and leadership, embedded in the conviction that forceful capacity remained the ultimate guarantor of international order (Pollack, "Unilateral America…" 115). This attitude reflected a broader American strategic culture, described by Kagan as one in which the US sees itself as the actor responsible for "doing" and enforcing order, while others deliberate and constrain (Kagan 23).

Conversely, the EU adopted a perfectionist and methodical conception of multilateralism, insisting that only the United Nations Security Council could confer the legitimacy necessary for the use of force. For Brussels, adherence to international law and collective authorization was not a constraint but a cornerstone of international management. This rules-based split shaped the transatlantic disputes over Iraq, Libya, and broader security policy. Where the US saw intervention as a necessary tool for defending international stability, the EU viewed unilateralism as a threatening force that undermined the very legitimacy of the liberal order it sought to uphold (Manners 249). These differing interpretations of multilateralism and rightfulness formed the core of transatlantic conflict throughout the period.

The divergence was particularly evident when comparing the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations. Under George W. Bush, Washington's approach was characterized by forceful unilateralism and a willingness to bypass multilateral forums when they impeded action, as seen in the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Daalder and Lindsay 112). Transatlantic dialogue existed

but was often subordinated to US calculated necessities, with European concerns over legality and long-term stability receiving limited consideration (Gordon and Shapiro137).

Under Barack Obama, however, US policy toward Europe shifted toward a more cooperative and institutionally founded stance. The Obama administration placed greater emphasis on consultation, burden-sharing, and multilateral diplomacy, particularly in the management of the Iran nuclear crisis and in NATO operations in Afghanistan and Libya (Daalder and Lindsay 137). This change did not remove structural variabilities, but it did alleviate perceptions of US unilateralism and reopen space for liberal institutionalist forms of cooperation, closer to the model outlined by Keohane, in which institutions structure and constrain power rather than merely reflect it (78). Therefore, the period from 2003 to 2016 was categorized by a persistent tension: structural convergence on goals, but recurring divergence over methods, legitimacy, and the proper balance between unilateral leadership and institutionalized cooperation.

5.4.2. Official Mechanisms of Coordination

Administrative instruments played a vital role in structuring transatlantic coordination, even amid political disagreement. NATO remained the leading structure, serving as both a defense alliance and a political forum for consensus-building. However, the early 2000s exposed the alliance's internal strain, as European states questioned the legitimacy of NATO-led or US-led interventions conducted without clear UN orders.

The Iraq War, in particular, demonstrated how NATO could be ethically divided even as it remained militarily indispensable. Some allies, such as the United Kingdom and several Central and Eastern European states, supported US policy and emphasized solidarity within the alliance; others, such as France and Germany, opposed the war and resisted NATO's use as an instrument for authorizing a conflict they considered contrary to international law (Wallander 720). The

resulting tensions weakened NATO's political cohesion and raised questions about its role as a community of shared values versus a flexible coalition of convenience (Rynning 54).

At the same time, the alliance began to adapt to new security realities through missions in Afghanistan, counterterrorism operations, and debates over burden-sharing and rapid deployment capabilities. These developments highlighted the enduring relevance of NATO as a military structure while underscoring its vulnerability to political fracture. The Iraq experience thus served as a catalyst for debates over NATO's future direction, including the balance between out-of-area operations and territorial defense, and the appropriate degree of conformity with US international strategy (Yost 112).

On the European side, the Union sought to develop greater strategic autonomy through the CFSP and the institutional reforms codified in the Lisbon Treaty (2009). Lisbon represented a turning point in the EU external relations architecture, introducing the post of High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who simultaneously served as Vice-President of the Commission, and establishing the EEAS. These innovations were designed to enhance coherence in EU external action by unifying diplomatic representation and improving coordination among member states and multinational institutions (Popescu and Balfour 6).

The Lisbon reforms were also intended to tackle long-standing deficiencies in EU foreign policy consistency identified by scholars who emphasized the gap between Europe's normative ambitions and its institutional capacity to act decisively (Popescu and Balfour 7). By consolidating diplomatic functions and strengthening the High Representative's role, the EU sought to present a more unified voice in international negotiations, as later demonstrated in its leadership of the Iran nuclear talks. However, unanimity requirements in CFSP decision-making and the persistence of divergent national interests continued to limit the Union's ability to act with the speed and cohesion characteristic of a unitary state.

Together with these formal structures, a dense web of ad hoc coordination mechanisms emerged to manage specific crises and sustain functional cooperation. Regular EU-US summits, the Transatlantic Dialogue, and high-level meetings in the G7 and G20 provided forums in which leaders could conform positions on issues ranging from counterterrorism to financial regulation and regional conflicts. The P5+1 structure on Iran was a particularly striking example of how established consultation could reconcile American forceful strength with European diplomatic expertise. Under the Obama administration, transatlantic coordination deepened through pragmatic involvement and renewed emphasis on multilateral diplomacy (Pollack and Shaffer 87). This period denoted a partial renewal of trust after years of friction, as the US and EU rediscovered complementarity between American hard power and European soft power.

From a theoretical perspective, these institutional arrangements illustrate the dynamics highlighted by multilateralism: even in the presence of power irregularities, institutions can structure expectations, reduce transaction costs, and provide platforms for sustained cooperation. Keohane's argument that institutions matter most when states anticipate future interactions is particularly evident in the Iran negotiations, where repeated diplomatic rounds under an agreed agenda allowed trust and compromise to develop gradually (Keohane 81).

5.4.3. Impact on the Transatlantic Alliance

The impact of these underlying forces on the broader transatlantic alliance was deep and ambivalent. The Iraq War (2003) constituted a watershed moment, exposing the limits of European influence over US calculated decision-making and manifesting the perception of US unilateralism versus EU multilateralism. As Kagan notes, the episode underscored the cultural and crucial divide between an America that "acts" and a Europe that "deliberates," revealing deep variabilities in power, worldview, and political will (45). The conflict fissured transatlantic trust and prompted a period of tactical self-analysis within Europe, accelerating debates over

sovereignty, legitimacy, and the future of NATO's political role. For many European policymakers, Iraq confirmed the need to develop autonomous capabilities and a more coherent foreign policy identity in order to avoid being marginalized in critical security decisions (Daalder).

On the contrary, the Iran nuclear negotiations (2009-2015) offered a contrasting element, a moment of sincere renewed partnership that demonstrated the potential for reconciliation through common leadership. The joint success of the P5+1 negotiations and the JCPOA illustrated how US- EU cooperation could combine forceful and norms-based instruments within an effective multilateral structure. The EU role as mediator and the US shift toward diplomacy under President Obama re-approved the idea of transatlantic coordination based on complementarity rather than hierarchy (Adebahr 112). In this respect, the Iran case partially justified the liberal institutionalist claim that institutions and norms can channel power in beneficial directions, even when underlying inconsistencies persist.

At the same time, the vulnerability of these achievements became evident when subsequent political changes in Washington led to the US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, revealing the weakness of transatlantic cooperation to domestic shifts and the absence of fully existing mechanisms for ensuring policy continuity. The EU inability to preserve the agreement without US participation renewed debates about strategic autonomy and highlighted the persistent dependence of European security on American economic and military power (Alcaro 10).

Thus, the period from 2003 to 2016 was characterized by a clash of separation and rapprochement. The Iraq War symbolized the breakdown of transatlantic compromise and the crisis of legitimacy in Western interventionism, while the Iran deal embodied the restoration of mutual trust through diplomacy. NATO's internal rifts, the Lisbon Treaty's reforms of EU foreign policy, and the contrast between the George W. Bush and Obama administrations'

involvement styles all contributed to reshaping the parameters of the transatlantic relationship (Belal 52). This alternation revealed a fundamental truth of transatlantic relations: that cooperation between the US and the EU remains both necessary and liable, sustained only when their strategic cultures and official mechanisms can be reconciled in pursuit of common goals.

5.5. Broader Consequences on Middle East Stability

The divergent policies of the US and the EU between 2003 and 2016 produced far-reaching implications for the political and security landscape of the Middle East. While both transatlantic partners sought to promote stability, counter extremism, and support governance reform, the incoherence between US militarized interventionism and the EU conventional, development-oriented approach contributed to an increasingly uneven regional order.

In view of that, it is crucial to examine the broader geopolitical, institutional, and humanitarian consequences of Western involvement in the Middle East, focusing on how the Iraq intervention, the Arab Spring uprisings, the rise of ISIS, and the ever-changing influence of external powers reshaped the balance of power and views of Western credibility. It is also significant to evaluate how the US and the EU, through divergent instruments, hard power and soft power, attempted to manage the aftermath of conflict, tackle humanitarian crises, and maintain international norms in a region marked by instability and fundamental transformation.

5.5.1. Regional Consequences of Intervention and Political Upheaval

The US-led invasion of Iraq and subsequent interventions between 2003 and 2016 greatly altered the geopolitical design of the Middle East. The annihilation of Iraq's political and military institutions destroyed the delicate balance of power that had long controlled regional stability, creating a vacuum that regional and non-state actors rapidly filled. The collapse of centralized authority intensified sectarian breakup, pitting Sunni and Shia communities against one another and transforming Iraq into a battleground for broader ideological and geopolitical rivalries

(Perthes 86). These developments reverberated across the region, fueling proxy conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon as Iran and Saudi Arabia competed for influence under the pretext of sectarian solidarity.

The Arab Spring uprisings (2011-2013) added a new layer of complexity to regional underlying forces. Initially viewed by Western powers as a democratic awakening consistent with liberal values, the revolutions ultimately exposed deep societal fractures and the limits of external influence. The US and the EU adopted careful and often incoherent approaches, supporting change in Tunisia and Egypt while hesitating or intervening selectively in Libya and Syria.

The US backed the NATO-led intervention in Libya under the "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine but later faced criticism for its lack of post-conflict planning. The EU, meanwhile, emphasized dialogue, electoral assistance, and humanitarian support but struggled to coordinate member state responses. The Arab Spring also highlighted a broader "crisis of coherence" within Europe, where values and interests frequently clashed (Youngs, "The EU and the Arab…" 88). The mixed Western reactions underscored the persistent divide between US pragmatism and European idealism, as well as their shared inability to affect sustainable transitions in the region.

5.5.2. The Rise of ISIS (2013-2016): Military, Ideological, and Humanitarian Dimensions

The power vacuums left by weakened states created fertile ground for radical movements. The rise of the ISIS represented the most direct and devastating unintended consequence of Western intervention. Emerging from the leftovers of al-Qaeda in Iraq, ISIS exploited sectarian divisions, porous borders, and state collapse to establish a self-proclaimed caliphate spanning large parts of Iraq and Syria by 2014. At its peak, ISIS controlled territory the size of the United Kingdom and governed an estimated eight million people (Gerges, "ISIS: A History" 12).

From a military perspective, the US led the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, launching more than 14,000 airstrikes between 2014 and 2016 and deploying approximately 5,000 US troops in

advisory roles (Goldstein and Pevehouse 82). The EU contributed through training missions in Iraq, intelligence-sharing, and humanitarian assistance rather than direct combat. However, EU member states such as France and the United Kingdom participated in targeted air operations, reflecting a partial convergence of hard-power involvement.

On the ideological front, ISIS's propaganda and recruitment campaigns exposed vulnerabilities in Western counter-radicalization efforts. The group's sophisticated use of social media and narrative composition, depicting itself as a defender of Sunni identity against Western and Shia domination, undermined both US and EU messaging. The EU responded by launching the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) in 2011, aimed at coordinating preventive measures across member states, while the US strengthened online counter-narratives through the State Department's Global Engagement Center (Winter 114).

The humanitarian impact of ISIS's rise was disastrous. Between 2013 and 2016, an estimated 10 million people were displaced across Iraq and Syria, with over five million refugees seeking asylum in neighboring countries and Europe. The EU provided more than €9.4 billion in humanitarian and resilience assistance to the Syrian crisis by 2016, becoming the world's largest donor (UNHCR 7). The US contributed approximately $5.9 billion in humanitarian aid during the same period (van Veen et al. 41). These efforts, though extensive, remained responsive, highlighting the absence of a coherent approach linking security, reconstruction, and governance.

5.5.3. Regional Actors and the New Balance of Power

The instability unleashed by Western interventions and regional revolts fundamentally reshaped the balance of power among Middle Eastern states. Iran emerged as one of the principal beneficiaries of post-2003 transformations. The fall of Saddam Hussein removed a key rival and opened a vital corridor through Iraq to Syria and Lebanon. Tehran consolidated influence through its alliances with Shia militias, the Syrian regime, and Hezbollah, positioning itself as a regional

power with transnational reach. Iran's interventions in Syria and Iraq after 2014, under the pretext of combating ISIS, further established its regional presence and vindicated the expansion of the IRGC abroad (Hashemi and Postel 134).

Saudi Arabia, perceiving Iran's rise as an existential threat, intensified its own countermeasures. Riyadh's strategy combined military activism with ideological mobilization, as seen in its intervention in Yemen (2015) and its support for Sunni factions in Syria. The result was an increasingly separated regional order structured around a Saudi-Iranian rivalry that reflected the broader Sunni-Shia divide (Al-Rasheed 182). Meanwhile, Turkey pursued a balancing act shaped by both security concerns and regional ambition.

Initially promoting a "zero problems with neighbors" policy, Ankara's approach shifted after the Syrian conflict erupted. Confronted with Kurdish empowerment along its southern border and the arrival of more than three million Syrian refugees, Turkey oscillated between cooperation and competition with both Western and regional actors (Kirişci 40). Its military incursions in northern Syria and engagement in Libya underscored its emergence as an autonomous power seeking to redefine regional hierarchies. The interplay of these regional powers weakened the coherence of Western influence. While the US and EU maintained extensive diplomatic and military involvement, their capacity to dictate regional outcomes diminished as Middle Eastern actors asserted greater action within a multipolar environment.

5.5.4. Quantitative Dimensions and Humanitarian Fallout

The increasing human and material costs of the Middle East's instability between 2003 and 2016 were overwhelming. According to UN estimations, regional conflicts during this period resulted in over 500,000 civilian deaths, 15 million refugees, and over 20 million internally displaced persons across Iraq, Syria, and Yemen (UNHCR 7). The US spent more than $2 trillion on military operations in Iraq and Syria combined (Watson Institute, "Costs of War"), while the

EU allocated more than €20 billion in humanitarian, development, and stability maintenance aid across the broader MENA region (European Commission, "North Africa…").

These statistics underscore the disproportionate reliance on short-term crisis management rather than long-term structural transformation. The EU humanitarian emphasis and the US military expenditure highlight the contrasting manners of Western participation. While both contributed to alleviating immediate suffering, neither succeeded in establishing durable peace or all-encompassing governance. Furthermore, the refugee flood into Europe after 2015, peaking at over one million arrivals in a single year, displayed the domestic political consequences of Middle Eastern instability for the West itself, stimulating populist and anti-immigration movements that damaged internal unity within the EU (de Vries 482).

5.5.5. Loss of Western Credibility and the Rise of Multipolar Influence

The snowballing effect of these crises was a deep harm of Western credibility in the Middle East. The Iraq War questioned Western claims to moral leadership, while inconsistent responses to the Arab Spring, the Syrian civil war, and Israeli-Palestinian frictions reinforced perceptions of hypocrisy and selective involvement (Lynch, "The New Arab …" 104). Even as the US and EU sought to promote liberal standards, their inability to prevent state collapse or sustain reconstruction efforts weakened their appeal to traditional norms.

In this vacuum, Russia and China expanded their influence through differentiated approaches. Russia's 2015 military intervention in Syria redefined the regional power balance, demonstrating Moscow's capacity to deploy force and protect allied regimes where the West hesitated. By securing a permanent military presence in Tartus and Hmeimim, Russia positioned itself as a guarantor of regional order on its own terms (Zygar 57).

China, though less militarily involved, deepened its economic presence through the Belt and Road Initiative, expanding infrastructure, trade, and energy partnerships across the Gulf and

North Africa. Beijing's preference for non-interference and economic diplomacy contrasted with Western conditionality, appealing to regional governments seeking stability without external moral scrutiny (Eisenman and Shinn 132).

The emergence of this multipolar environment has reshaped the international context of Western policy. The EU and US, once uncontested in establishing the norms-based agenda, now operate in a geopolitical landscape where legitimacy is diffuse and influence is contested. The transatlantic partners' challenge is thus twofold: to restore credibility through consistency and coordination, and to adapt to a system in which persuasion must replace dominance as the basis for leadership (Haass 88).

The period between 2003 and 2016 thus denotes a turning point in the interaction between Western interventionism and Middle Eastern transformation. The region's instability uncovered the limits of both the American hard-power model and the European soft power model, revealing that neither force nor persuasion alone could bring durable order (Walt, "The Hell of Good Intentions" 112). The Arab Spring demonstrated that domestic legitimacy cannot be externally manufactured (Lynch, "The New Arab…" 180); the rise of ISIS exposed the perils of state collapse (Gerges, "ISIS*: A History" 145*); and the growing influence of Russia and China indicated the end of Western monopoly over regional governance (Allison 802).

From a theoretical standpoint, these developments reaffirm the insights of both neorealism and constructivism: material power remains decisive in shaping outcomes, yet perceptions, norms, and legitimacy define their sustainability. The US and the EU, despite shared objectives, failed to coordinate their instruments effectively, resulting in parallel but disconnected policies. Their experience in the Middle East reveals not only the enduring necessity of transatlantic cooperation but also the urgent need to readjust it for a multipolar world.

5.6. Lessons Learned and Theoretical Reflections

The comparative study of US and EU foreign policy between 2003 and 2016 yields significant insights into the theoretical foundations and practical effectiveness of transatlantic involvement. Examining the Iraq and Iran cases through the viewpoints of neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, and constructivism reveals how material power, institutional interdependence, and norms-based identity each molded divergent calculated behaviors and outcomes. Thus, it is crucial to revisit these theoretical frameworks to interpret the structural and conceptual factors of policy divergence, before evaluating the comparative effectiveness of US and EU approaches in terms of coherence, legitimacy, and sustainability. In doing so, one can connect empirical findings to broader debates in international relations theory and assess what these lessons imply for the future of Western coordination in international security governance.

5.6.1. Reconsidering the Theoretical Perspectives

The comparative analysis of US and EU foreign policy behavior between 2003 and 2016 underscores the explanatory value of various international relations theories, neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, and constructivism, in interpreting the evolution of transatlantic forces at work. Each agenda reveals distinct aspects of the divergence and convergence between the two transatlantic partners, as well as the constraints shaping their respective policy outcomes.

From a neorealist perspective, the US preference for unilateralism and reliance on tough power can be understood as a natural extension of total power variabilities within the international order. As the preeminent international actor, the US sought to preserve its hegemonic position and freedom of calculated action, even at the expense of multilateral legitimacy (Walt, “the Origins of Alliances” 30). The EU, lacking comparable military capabilities and unified decision-making structures, exhibited what neorealism would interpret as balancing behavior, seeking to restrain unilateral power through international institutions and

legal standards (Hill and Smith 34). The unevenness of material power thus produced contrasting approaches: one rooted in dominance and deterrence, the other in institutional constraint and collective governance.

By contrast, neoliberal institutionalism provides a framework for understanding the durability of transatlantic cooperation despite persistent pressures. It highlights how institutional interdependence, dense networks of economic and diplomatic ties, and shared commitments to liberal conventions facilitated continued involvement even in periods of political discord (Keohane 72). As Simoni observes, the existence of structures such as NATO, the UN Security Council, and the P5+1 created structural incentives for dialogue and policy conformity, ensuring that disagreement did not translate into complete separation (Simoni 24). From this vantage point, the Iran negotiations demonstrate the capacity of institutionalized cooperation to mediate power disparities and sustain order through mutual constraint rather than unilateral enforcement.

Finally, constructivism offers insight into the norms-based and conceptual dimensions of transatlantic relations. The EU self-conception as a civilian or values-based power, anchored in the promotion of law, dialogue, and multilateralism, contrasts sharply with the US exceptionalist beliefs, which legitimize unilateral intervention in pursuit of international security and democratic transformation (Wendt 400).

These identity-based narratives shaped not only policy preferences but also perceptions of legitimacy and moral responsibility. The Iraq War, for instance, revealed the clash between America's self-assigned role as the guarantor of international order and Europe's emphasis on legality and restraint. Conversely, the Iran nuclear diplomacy demonstrated how mutual recognition of standards, law, dialogue, verification, enabled temporary convergence. Thus, constructivism complements the material and institutional explanations of realism and liberalism

by foregrounding the power of identity, values, and discourse in structuring transatlantic involvement.

These three theoretical perspectives suggest that transatlantic relations cannot be reduced to power competition, nor to institutional cooperation alone. They are instead best understood as the product of an evolving interaction between material capabilities, institutional structures, and self-understandings.

5.6.2. Foreign Policy Effectiveness

The comparative assessment of transatlantic foreign policy effectiveness in the Iraq and Iran cases can be evaluated across three key criteria: coherence, legitimacy, and sustainability. These dimensions collectively measure not only the capacity to achieve planned objectives but also the degree to which those objectives conform with international standards and undergo over time.

Coherence refers to the consistency and coordination of policy instruments and planned objectives across actors and institutions. In the Iraq case, coherence was profoundly lacking. The US pursued regime change through unilateral military intervention, while the EU was divided between coalition participation and principled opposition. This division harmed the credibility of Western policy, producing functioning inefficiency. By contrast, in the Iran case, transatlantic coherence was significantly stronger. The establishment of the P5+1 structure institutionalized coordination, conforming US sanctions influence with EU-led diplomacy. The JCPOA represented a synthesis of American hard power and European soft power, demonstrating the potential of integrated approaches to complex crises (Gordon and Shapiro 112).

Legitimacy concerns the extent to which policies are embedded in international law and accepted by the international community. The Iraq War represented the slow damage of legitimacy, as the absence of a UN command and the failure to discover weapons of mass destruction delegitimized Western claims to moral and legal authority. The Iran negotiations,

however, restored a measure of legitimacy through their multilateral character, verification mechanisms, and adherence to UN structures. The contrast underscores how legitimacy functions not merely as an ethical dimension but as a crucial asset that enhances compliance, partnership, and sustainability (Goldstein and Pevehouse 82).

Sustainability measures the endurance of policy outcomes and their capacity to foster stable structures of order. The Iraq intervention generated instability, insurgency, and the rise of ISIS, consequences that undermined the very objectives it sought to achieve. The Iran agreement, by contrast, produced a verifiable restriction on nuclear proliferation for several years and temporarily strengthened transatlantic unity (Adebahr 195). Although later disrupted by US withdrawal in 2018, the JCPOA demonstrated that diplomacy built on reciprocity and institutional monitoring can produce more enduring results than forcible regime change.

These findings suggest that the effectiveness of transatlantic foreign policy depends on the integration of power, legitimacy, and cooperation within a coherent designed structure. The Iraq case exemplified the drawbacks of unilateralism and incoherence; the Iran case illustrated the potential of multilateralism to reconcile divergent interests and restore conventional authority. Thus, the comparative experience between 2003 and 2016 affirms that sustainable foreign policy outcomes arise not from dominance or ideology alone but from the careful balancing of material power with institutional trust and norms-based legitimacy.

5.6.3. Power, Legitimacy, and the Synthesis of Hard and Soft Power

One of the significant lessons of the Iraq and Iran cases is the complex relationship between power and legitimacy in transatlantic strategy. The US, endowed with superior military capabilities, relied primarily on hard power to shape outcomes, through invasion, strong diplomacy, and expansive sanctions (Art 57). The EU, restricted militarily but rich in economic

and standards-based resources, relied instead on soft power, diplomacy, conditionality, and legal frameworks (Lister 74).

In Iraq, American hard power achieved rapid regime change but failed to generate legitimate and sustainable political order (Gordon and Trainor 155). The perception that the war lacked legal foundations and was based on flawed intelligence undermined international support and fueled regional instability (International Crisis Group 5). European objections, entrenched in international law and multilateral norms, did little to alter US behavior but did preserve the EU normative trustworthiness. Yet Europe's limited hard-power capabilities and internal divisions meant that it could not realistically offer an alternative policy or assume responsibility for security provision (Gordon and Shapiro 142).

In Iran, by contrast, the synthesis of hard and soft power proved more effective. US-led sanctions, which inflicted significant economic costs on Tehran, would likely not have produced a lasting diplomatic outcome without the EU mediating role and norms-based legitimacy. The P5+1 process demonstrated that intimidating instruments and dealings based on conventional norms are not mutually absolute but can be reciprocally reinforcing when embedded in a multilateral agenda. The EU, acting through the EEAS and the High Representative, translated the pressure generated by sanctions into sound negotiating power, while the US provided the material deterrent underpinning Iranian incentives to compromise (Simoni 24).

These experiences suggest that transatlantic strategy is most effective when American hard power is tempered and channeled by European soft power, and when both are embedded in institutional settings that confer legitimacy. Realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism converge on this point: material capabilities are necessary but not sufficient; institutions and norms shape the conditions under which power can be effectively and legitimately exercised (Wendt 400; Keohane 81).

5.6.4. Independent Action Capacity and the Post-2016 Context

Although the main focus of this study is the period 2003-2016, subsequent developments, particularly the Trump administration's foreign policy, highlight the vulnerability of transatlantic achievements and give added relevance to debates over European independent capability. The US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 and the reimposition of unilateral sanctions on Iran weakened the essential diplomatic achievement of US-EU cooperation during the Obama era. It uncovered the organizational unevenness whereby European security and economic choices remain heavily inhibited by US power, especially in the financial and sanctions domains (Hoobler, "Assessing Transatlantic Fallout").

European attempts to preserve the JCPOA through mechanisms such as INSTEX and reaffirmations of support for the agreement in EU Council conclusions revealed both the Union's norms-based firmness and its material limitations. While European governments insisted that Iran was complying with its obligations, they were unable to provide sufficient economic relief to counterweigh US secondary sanctions. This failure increased internal debates over the need to develop independent financial instruments, defense capabilities, and crisis running tools, collectively described as strategic autonomy (Hoobler, "Assessing Transatlantic Fallout").

From a theoretical standpoint, these developments underline neorealist claims about the continuing preeminence of material power: despite its normative and institutional assets, the EU remains vulnerable to US economic and security influence. At the same time, they support liberal institutionalist and constructivist concerns about the importance of trust, reliability, and identity in alliance politics. The Trump administration's skepticism toward multilateralism and open questioning of NATO's value undermined confidence in US obligations and reinforced Europe's desire to diversify its planned options (Testoni 1-17).

The post-2016 context thus strengthens the fundamental lesson of the 2003-2016 period: transatlantic collaboration cannot be taken for granted. It must be continually renewed through institutional adaptation, norms-based dialogue, and a readjustment of responsibilities that more closely reflect the evolving distribution of power and legitimacy in a multipolar system.

The comparative evaluation of US and EU policies toward Iraq and Iran between 2003 and 2016 reveals a complex interplay of divergence, adaptation, and conditional convergence within transatlantic foreign policy. The Iraq intervention showed the operational and conceptual divergences between the two actors: the US privileging hard power, calculated dominance, and unilateral action; the EU emphasizing legality, multilateralism, and restraint based on established norms. The consequential discord not only undermined the coherence and legitimacy of Western involvement but also generated enduring instability that redefined regional perceptions of Western influence. Conversely, the Iran nuclear negotiations demonstrated that beneficial complementarity, when American forceful pressure is combined with European diplomatic mediation, can produce outcomes that are both effective and legitimate within a multilateral framework.

Across both cases, the findings underscore that the effectiveness of foreign policy cannot be measured solely by immediate outcomes or material capabilities but must also be assessed in terms of constructive coherence, normative legitimacy, and long-term sustainability. The US achieved successes through forceful intervention but often at the expense of long-lasting stability and moral authority. The EU, by contrast, upheld the supremacy of international law and multilateral diplomacy, yet its limited coherence constrained its capacity for decisive influence. The comparative experience thus affirms that lasting effectiveness in international action derives from the balanced integration of power and principle, force and consensus.

Ultimately, the transatlantic experience between 2003 and 2016 illustrates both the indispensability and the instability of US-EU cooperation in managing complex regional crises. It demonstrates that neither unilateral dominance nor purely conventional diplomacy serves in dealing with the multifaceted challenges of the Middle East. A workable and reliable Western approach requires the reconciliation of American planned assertiveness with European normative legitimacy, anchored in shared values, institutional coordination, and respect for international law. Only through such amalgamation can transatlantic partners effectively contribute to the preservation of international order and the promotion of stability within an increasingly plural and contested international system.

Conclusion

This research endeavor set out to tackle a fundamental and persistent challenge in transatlantic foreign policy: why the United States and the European Union, despite common values, intersecting strategic interests, and extensive institutional connections, have consistently diverged in their reactions to significant sources of instability in the Middle East. The period between 2003 and 2016 was selected because it represents a formative phase in both Middle Eastern geopolitics and US-EU relations, characterized by deep regional upheaval and by significant transformations in the international system following the end of the Cold War and the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. During this period, the Middle East became a principal arena in which the cohesion, credibility, and planned coherence of the transatlantic alliance were repeatedly tested.

The Iraq War and the Iranian nuclear problem were chosen as the primary practical instances because they represent two diverse but interrelated forms of regional instability, and they induced extraordinarily different reactions from Washington and Brussels. Together, these cases enable a methodical examination of how US and EU policies were developed and implemented, why divergence emerged sharply in some contexts while convergence developed in others, and what the broader insinuations of these decisions were for regional stability and transatlantic relations.

Beyond the empirical focus on Iraq and Iran, the thesis dealt with a broader theoretical question in international relations and Foreign Policy Analysis: how players in the same alliance, confronted with similar external threats, and committed to a common international order can make fundamentally different foreign policy decisions. This study's essential statement is that patterns of transatlantic convergence and divergence cannot be effectively explained by episodic events, leadership personalities, or short-term calculated considerations.

As an alternative, US and EU foreign policies toward Middle Eastern instability were fashioned by the interaction of three deeply embedded factors: structural power imbalances in the

international system, institutional decision-making constraints within each player, and conceptual agendas shaping threat perception, legitimacy, and the appropriate use of policy tools. These forces reinforced one another, producing enduring disagreement in the case of Iraq and conditional cooperation in the case of Iran.

The findings of this thesis as a whole show that US and EU foreign policy in relation to the eventful Middle East during the period under study was governed by an ordered and predictable logic rather than a set of unplanned or just reactive reactions. This reasoning becomes evident when the evolution of transatlantic relations is considered alongside actor-specific policy choices and their comparative consequences.

The analysis of US policy regarding Iraq and Iran illustrates that American foreign policy during the analyzed period was influenced by a strategic culture that emphasizes military superiority, preemption, and the preservation of credibility, especially following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. A highly centralized foreign policy decision-making structure, particularly regarding national security, bolstered this calculated approach. The post-9/11 security context inflated fears and urgency, incentivizing worst-case threat scenarios and easing the political and traditional bases for employing force. In this environment, the United States favored action that was decisive and sometimes deemed military intervention or forceful pressure as appropriate and suitable tools to handle instability.

In Iraq, this strategic culture manifested as a stratagem focused on regime change by military intervention. The George W. Bush administration characterized Saddam Hussein's government as an immediate and intolerable threat, associating apprehensions with weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, and the reliability of American international leadership. This depiction privileged speed and decisiveness over deliberation and reduced the perceived necessity of broad multilateral authorization. While diplomatic engagement and UN inspections were initially

pursued, they were ultimately subordinated to a unilateral or coalition-based military plan once they were deemed insufficient to neutralize the perceived threat. The design and execution of US policy in Iraq thus reflected an approach in which military force was not merely one option among many, but the dominant instrument for achieving calculated objectives.

The United States originally avoided direct military action in Iran's affairs in favor of a policy that combined economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and deterrence. The nuclear program in Iran was portrayed as a major threat to proliferation, but not one that necessitated the imminent use of force to overthrow the Iranian government. The problems and threats of long-term coercion, meanwhile, become increasingly obvious with time. US policymakers began to reevaluate the situation after considering the regional ramifications of conflict, the possible costs of military escalation, and the resiliency of the Iranian government. This reevaluation was particularly evident during the Obama administration, which increasingly viewed conditional involvement and negotiated restraint as viable means of tackling the nuclear issue without causing broader instability. The shift toward diplomacy did not represent an abandonment of coercive tools, but rather their incorporation into a broader strategy that combined pressure with negotiation.

In contrast to the US approach, the examination of European Union policy reveals a foreign policy orientation shaped by institutional fragmentation, norms-based obligations to multilateralism, and a strong preference for diplomatic and economic instruments over the use of military force. The EU foreign policy system, characterized by shared sovereignty and consensus-based decision-making, inherently limits the capacity for rapid, forced action. At the same time, these institutional limitations reinforce a policy style that emphasizes negotiation, legal structures, and long-term conflict management. European strategic culture, informed by

historical experience and post-war integration, tends to view the use of force as a last resort and gives priority to legitimacy derived from international law and multilateral authorization.

In the Iraq case, these characteristics hindered the EU ability to act coherently and contributed to strong opposition to unilateral military intervention. Although EU member states were internally divided, with some supporting the US-led invasion and others strongly opposing it, the dominant stance at the EU level favored containment, inspections, and diplomacy. The EU questioned both the immediacy of the Iraqi threat and the planned wisdom of regime change, expressing concern that military intervention would aggravate regional instability rather than resolve it. Institutional division within the EU further limited its capacity to influence US decision-making once the choice for war had been made, reinforcing a form of divergence rather than coordination.

The Iranian nuclear crisis, however, illustrates how the same characteristics enabled the EU to assume a leading diplomatic role under different conditions. Drawing on its experience with multilateral negotiation and consensus-building, the EU acted as a chief mediator between Iran and the international community. Through the E3/EU arrangement, European officials perceived involvement with Iran as a means of integrating it into a rules-based international order while reducing reasons for escalation. The EU ability to offer economic inducements, coupled with its perceived credibility, allowed it to sustain diplomatic momentum even during periods of heightened hostility.

Over time, these differing US and EU approaches converged into a coordinated approach that combined American powerful influence with European diplomatic engagement. US economic sanctions significantly increased the costs of non-compliance for Iran, while EU diplomacy provided legitimacy, continuity, and an institutional basis for negotiation. This convergence culminated in the JCPOA, which represented a rare instance of effective transatlantic

coordination in the administration of Middle Eastern instability. Importantly, this outcome did not require identical policy preferences or unified leadership. Instead, it rested on a division of labor that allowed each partner to operate in accordance with its relative strengths.

The analysis of policy proposal and execution in Iraq and Iran demonstrates that US and EU foreign policy approaches are shaped by deeply embedded strategic cultures and institutional structures. While these differences often produce divergence, they can also generate complementary forms of cooperation under appropriate conditions. Understanding this process is essential for explaining both the failures and successes of transatlantic involvement in the Middle East during the period under study.

The findings of this thesis show that US and EU policies toward Iraq and Iran were not only responses to preexisting instability in the Middle East but also active forces shaping the Middle Eastern scene. In each case, Western involvement in the region shaped political interplay and security landscapes as well as regional power relationships in ways that yielded different results that help explain exactly how external intervention affects regional stability.

In the case of Iraq, the US-led intervention had far-reaching consequences that extended well beyond the immediate objective of regime change. The annihilating of the Iraqi state apparatus, most notably through the demobilization of the army and the de-Baathification of political institutions, created a deep governance void. This downfall of state authority undermined basic security provision, eroded administrative capacity, and weakened the social contract between the state and society. Rather than facilitating a stable political transition, the intervention broke existing institutional structures and removed key instruments for managing social and political conflict.

This institutional breakdown contributed directly to the intensification of sectarian breakup. The reconfiguration of Iraq's political system along ethno-sectarian lines, combined with the

absence of effective state control, intensified communal competition and grievance mobilization. These underlying forces transformed Iraq into a site of prolonged internal conflict, generating cycles of violence that were difficult to contain. The destabilization of Iraq also altered regional power balances, particularly by increasing Iran's influence in Iraqi political and security affairs and reshaping deliberate calculations across the Middle East.

One of the most significant unintended consequences of the Iraq War was the rise and consolidation of non-state armed groups, most notably the Islamic State. The destruction of territorial authority, combined with sectarian divisions and regional repercussions from adjacent conflicts, established favorable conditions for the proliferation of extremist organizations. These groups did not remain limited to Iraq but extended their influence across borders, thereby fostering broader regional instability, facilitating transnational terrorism, and aggravating humanitarian crises. In this context, the Iraq intervention converted local instability into a broader regional and international security concern.

From a transatlantic perspective, the Iraq case demonstrates how unilateral military intervention, undertaken without sustained multilateral coordination and legitimacy, can generate forms of instability that are more scattered, enduring, and difficult to control than the original threat. The EU warnings regarding the long-term consequences of regime change, although politically disregarded at the time, were confirmed in the subsequent regional breaking up. The Iraq War thus serves as a critical example of how external attempts to impose order through force can instead produce total instability.

By contrast, the dealing with the Iranian nuclear crisis produced a significantly different impact on regional stability. Rather than triggering institutional collapse or violent escalation, the diplomatic process resulting in the JCPOA diminished one critical dimension of instability by restraining Iran's nuclear activities and embedding them within a vigorous verification system.

By reducing uncertainty surrounding Iran's nuclear intentions and capabilities, the agreement lowered the immediate risk of military confrontation, either between Iran and regional rivals or between Iran and external powers.

Although the JCPOA did not address the pre-existing regional rivalries, ideological differences, or proxy conflicts, the agreement demonstrated the stabilizing role of uninterrupted involvement and cooperation. The JCPOA removed the most dangerous escalation mechanism, nuclear proliferation, from an already unstable regional environment. In effect, the JCPOA reduced the incentives for preemptive military strikes and the pressures for nuclear deterrence and proliferation in the region.

The Iran case also highlights how coordinated US–EU policies can shape regional outcomes through indirect but significant instruments. US economic punitive measures created material incentives for negotiation, while EU diplomacy provided legitimacy, continuity, and an organized structure for involvement. This combination allowed external players to influence regional stability without resorting to force. Decisively, the stabilizing effects of the JCPOA were conditional rather than conclusive, underscoring that diplomatic agreements can manage specific dimensions of instability even if they do not tackle all underlying sources of conflict.

The Iraq and Iran cases confirm a principal finding of this thesis: Western policies toward the Middle East function not only as responses to instability but as powerful drivers of regional outcomes. Military interventions, forceful strategies, and diplomatic structures shape political courses, redistribute power, and influence the emergence or containment of violence. The conflicting outcomes observed in Iraq and Iran demonstrate that the choice of policy instruments, particularly the balance between force and diplomacy, and the degree of multilateral coordination, has decisive implications for regional stability.

These findings also emphasize a broader implication for transatlantic involvement in the Middle East. Instability is not simply an external condition to be managed; it is often co-produced through interaction between regional forces at work and external policy choices. Understanding how US and EU strategies contribute to the initiation, transformation, or alleviation of instability is therefore essential for explaining both the successes and failures of Western political activities in the region during the period under study.

Throughout all chapters, the study shows that US and EU decision-making was shaped by an interaction of structural, institutional, and conceptual factors. US unipolar power enabled unilateral action and reduced dependence on allied consent, while EU institutional limits restricted forceful capacity but enhanced diplomatic credibility. Conceptual differences, particularly divergent strategic cultures and understandings of legitimacy, shaped how instability was defined and which policy tools were considered appropriate. These factors together explain why similar calculated interests produced divergent policy choices.

The sharp divergence between US and EU policies toward Iraq after 2003 illuminates how contrasting threat perceptions, strategic cultures, and institutional capacities can overwhelm shared interests within the transatlantic alliance. For the United States, the post-9/11 security environment transformed Iraq into an emblematically and intentionally urgent threat. The George W. Bush administration depicted Saddam Hussein's regime through a worst-case security logic that blended counterterrorism, WMD proliferation, and the credibility of American international leadership. Within this context, preemptive military action was not only justified but deemed necessary to prevent future threats and exhibit US determination. Executive dominance in US foreign policy decision-making further facilitated rapid recourse to unilateral force.

The European Union, by contrast, approached Iraq through a fundamentally different explanatory view. European policymakers questioned both the immediacy of the Iraqi threat and

the foundation of facts for military intervention, emphasizing instead the primacy of international law, UN authorization, and the long-term consequences of regime change for regional stability. The EU collective memory of war, combined with its rule-based obligation to multilateralism and conflict prevention, produced strong resistance to preventive war as a legitimate policy instrument. Institutional division within the EU further limited the possibility of a unified forceful response, reinforcing reliance on diplomacy and containment.

These discrepancies were compounded by unbalanced power relations and institutional discrepancies. While the United States possessed the military capabilities and centralized authority to act decisively, the EU lacked both the hard-power instruments and the political cohesion necessary to shape the outcome once the US chose war. The Iraq crisis thus revealed a fundamental rift within the transatlantic alliance: when high-intensity security crises involve the unilateral use of force, shared values and institutional ties are insufficient to prevent division.

In contrast to Iraq, the Iranian nuclear negotiations demonstrate how transatlantic convergence becomes possible when shared security concerns are implanted within a multilateral institutional structure that accommodates differentiated but complementary roles. Both the US and the EU identified Iran's nuclear program as a significant proliferation danger with possibly disrupting consequences for the Middle East and the international nonproliferation system. Unlike Iraq, however, this threat was interpreted through a rationality that prioritized containment, verification, and negotiated restraint rather than regime change.

The EU undertook a leading diplomatic role, exploiting its norms-based credibility, experience in multilateral negotiation, and official ties to Iran to keep diplomatic channels open. Acting through the E3/EU arrangement, European officials viewed involvement as a means of integrating Iran into a rules-based order while reducing incentives for escalation. The United States, particularly after 2009, complemented this approach by providing forceful influence

through extensive economic sanctions, which significantly increased the costs of non-compliance for Tehran.

This division of efforts proved mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory. EU diplomacy provided legitimacy and continuity, while US economic power supplied enforcement capacity. The JCPOA thus clarifies that effective transatlantic cooperation does not require identical policy instruments or unified leadership. Instead, it depends on coordination across different forms of power, diplomatic, economic, and organizational, within a common structure. The Iran case therefore represents a model of functional complementarity that contrasts sharply with the zero-sum dynamics observed in Iraq.

The thesis further demonstrates that internal political forces and strategic cultures played a decisive role in shaping US and EU policy outcomes across both cases. In the United States, a centralized political system, reinforced by executive dominance in national security and a post-9/11 atmosphere of heightened threat perception, facilitated assertive and unilateral action. The American strategic culture, rooted in exceptionalism, military primacy, and international responsibility, lessened norms-based and political barriers to the use of force, particularly when credibility and deterrence were perceived to be at stake.

In the European Union, foreign policy was shaped by a very different set of internal constrictions. Decision-making division, the requirement for consensus among member states, and strong public opposition to military intervention limited the scope for strong action. At the same time, these restrictions enhanced the EU capacity for sustained diplomatic involvement, economic control, and multilateral coordination. The EU strategic culture, emphasizing legality, compromise, and long-term stabilization, favored gradual and negotiated solutions over rapid, force-based responses.

These internal dynamics help explain why coordination challenges persist even when objectives correspond. Divergence is not merely the product of external disagreement but is deeply rooted in how each actor organizes power, processes threats, and authorizes foreign policy action. As such, transatlantic frictions should be understood as organizational rather than occasional, reflecting enduring differences in political systems and deliberate worldviews.

Finally, the study shows that US and EU policies toward Iraq and Iran concurrently strained and reinforced the transatlantic alliance, underscoring its dual character as both resilient and contested. The Iraq War revealed the limits of alliance cohesion in high-stakes security crises involving the unilateral use of force. It undermined trust, divided public opinion, and exposed deep disagreements over legitimacy and authority within the liberal international order. In this sense, Iraq marked a low point in transatlantic relations and challenged assumptions about automatic participation.

By contrast, cooperation on Iran demonstrated the alliance's capacity for adaptation and renewal. Through long standing multilateralism and role differentiation, the US and EU were able to translate shared interests into coordinated policy despite persistent differences in strategic culture. This episode highlights the alliance's potential to function not as a rigid coalition but as a flexible partnership capable of combining diverse strengths.

These findings suggest that divergence and cooperation coexist as operational characteristics of the transatlantic relationship rather than indicators of decline or cohesion alone. The alliance is most vulnerable when confronted with rapid, high-intensity military decisions and most effective when operating through multilateral frameworks that allow for complementary contributions. Realizing this duality is essential for assessing the future of US-EU cooperation in the Middle East and beyond.

This thesis makes a substantive contribution to International Relations theory by refining and integrating realist, liberal, and constructivist accounts of alliance behavior, while demonstrating the added value of Foreign Policy Analysis for explaining variation within alliances. Rather than privileging a single theoretical framework, the study shows that transatlantic foreign policy behavior toward Middle Eastern instability can only be fully understood through an approach that captures the interaction between power structures, institutional arrangements, and conceptual factors.

From a realist perspective, the thesis advances existing debates on alliance politics under conditions of Unipolarity. Conventional realist accounts often assume that power unevenness within alliances produces either automatic cohesion under hegemonic leadership or balancing behavior by weaker allies. This study challenges such assumptions by demonstrating that Unipolarity generates differentiated autonomy within alliances. The United States' structural dominance enabled unilateral action and reduced its reliance on allied agreement, particularly in high-security contexts such as Iraq. At the same time, the European Union was not simply relegated or pressured, but exercised autonomy through alternative policy tools, especially diplomacy and multilateral action. This finding refines realist understandings of alliance hierarchy by showing that power unevenness produces divergence as a structural outcome rather than an aberration or breakdown.

The thesis also contributes to neoliberal institutionalist theory by clarifying the conditional role of institutions in sustaining cooperation. Rather than considering institutions as either obligatory constraints or irrelevant arenas, the study shows that institutional effectiveness depends on their conformity with dominant actors' core incentives. The contrast between Iraq and Iran illustrates this interplay clearly. In Iraq, institutional structures failed to constrain unilateral action because they conflicted with US security priorities. In the Iranian nuclear case,

by contrast, multilateral institutions facilitated cooperation because they provided mechanisms that reconciled US hard power objectives with EU diplomatic preferences. This conditional understanding of institutions advances liberal theory by specifying when and how institutions matter in unequal alliances.

Constructivist knowledge is strengthened by the thesis's empirical demonstration of the role of strategic culture, identity, and norms in shaping foreign policy conduct. The study shows that US and EU conceptions of instability, legitimacy, and appropriate action were not merely rhetorical but deeply embedded in their strategic cultures. For the United States, instability was primarily understood through a hard-security perception emphasizing terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and credibility. For the European Union, instability was conceived more holistically, covering governance failures, humanitarian costs, and long-term regional order. These conceptual differences shaped threat insight and policy choice and help explain why transatlantic officials often disagreed not only on solutions but on the nature of the problem itself. In doing so, the thesis moves constructivist arguments beyond concept by basing them in organized comparative analysis.

A vital theoretical contribution of this study lies in its integration of Foreign Policy Analysis with International Relations theory. While international theories account for external pressures, they often under-theorize how such pressures are filtered through domestic institutions and decision-making processes. By incorporating Foreign Policy Analysis, the thesis reveals how internal political structures reconcile structural restrictions. The centralized, executive-driven foreign policy system of the United States enabled rapid and forceful responses but enabled unilateralism, while the EU disjointed and consensus-based system inhibited forced action but encouraged negotiation and rule-based participation. This integration overpasses the long-

standing split between total and actor-centered explanations and provides a more complete account of alliance conduct.

More broadly, the thesis contributes to theoretical debates about the nature of alliances in contemporary international politics. It demonstrates that cooperation and conflict are not mutually exclusive outcomes but coexisting features of lasting alliances. Transatlantic divergence should therefore not be interpreted as alliance failure, nor should periods of convergence be seen as evidence of full calculated conformity. Instead, the study views alliances as negotiated and contested relationships in which power, institutions, and ideas interact to produce varying policy outcomes across issue areas and over time.

These theoretical contributions advance understanding of alliance politics, foreign policy divergence, and cooperation under conditions of power disparity and persistent instability. By refining existing theories and integrating them within a single analytical basis, the thesis not only explains US and EU behavior in the Middle East but also offers conceptual tools applicable to the study of other alliances and regions in contemporary International Relations.

Methodically, this thesis demonstrates the analytical value of theory-guided qualitative research for examining complex foreign policy behavior in unbalanced alliances. By combining International Relations theory with Foreign Policy Analysis, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts of policy outcomes and instead identifies the underlying mechanisms through which decisions are made, justified, and implemented. The use of a comparative case study design enables methodical analysis across similar considered contexts while preserving sensitivity to institutional, historical, and conceptual dissimilarity. This approach is particularly well suited to research questions concerned with explaining how and why policy divergence and convergence occur, rather than merely detailing their existence.

The paired case-study design, focusing on the Iraq War and the Iranian nuclear crisis, represents a deliberate organizational choice that enhances cause and effect analysis. Both cases involve the same main actors, the same regional setting, and corresponding security concerns, yet they produced markedly different outcomes in terms of transatlantic cooperation. By holding these contextual factors constant, the thesis is able to isolate the influence of institutional structures, strategic cultures, and decision-making processes on policy outcomes. This pattern strengthens the explanatory power of the analysis and demonstrates the utility of comparative qualitative methods in foreign policy research.

Process tracing or sequence analysis plays a vital role in uncovering the causal pathways linking structural conditions, official constraints, and conceptual structures to real policy choices. Through careful reconstruction of decision-making sequences, diplomatic interactions, and institutional responses, the study identifies how specific devices, such as threat defining and legitimacy assessments shaped US and EU policy performance. This method allows the thesis to move beyond correlation and to provide a more detailed account of causation, illustrating how similar pressures can generate divergent responses within allied actors.

Factually, the thesis contributes to the literature by offering an integrated analysis of two major crises that are often examined in isolation. By analyzing Iraq and Iran within a single comparative context, the study reveals how these cases interacted over time to shape both regional underlying forces and transatlantic relations. This integrated perspective highlights the cumulative effects of Western involvement in the Middle East and avoids treating each crisis as analytically self-contained. In doing so, the thesis contributes to a more general understanding of Middle Eastern instability and Western foreign policy.

The study also makes a significant empirical contribution by highlighting the European Union as a distinct and significant foreign policy player. While existing scholarship often portrays the

EU as secondary to US power or focuses on its internal divisions, this thesis demonstrates that the EU exercised meaningful influence through diplomatic leadership, official mediation, and values-based involvement, particularly in the Iranian nuclear negotiations. By tracing EU policy performance alongside that of the United States, the study challenges assumptions about European marginality and emphasizes the importance of institutional and conventional power in shaping international outcomes.

Furthermore, the thesis contributes factually by demonstrating how external interventions can become drivers of instability rather than solutions to it. The analysis of Iraq illuminates how regime change and state collapse generated long-term regional consequences, while the Iran case shows how negotiated solutions can moderate specific security risks without resolving underlying rivalries. These findings offer empirically founded insights into the unintended consequences of foreign policy choices and contribute to broader debates on intervention, stability, and regional order.

The methodological and empirical contributions of this thesis extend beyond the specific cases examined. The research design and analytical structure provide a standardized model for studying alliance politics, foreign policy divergence, and cooperation in other regions and periods. By combining theoretical integration with detailed empirical analysis, the thesis demonstrates how qualitative methods can produce vigorous and generalizable insights into the functioning of alliances in contemporary international politics.

The results of this thesis carry important implications for the study of transatlantic relations, foreign policy analysis, and broader debates in International Relations. Analytically, the study demonstrates that effective transatlantic involvement in the Middle East depends less on policy uniformity than on functional complementarity between US and EU capabilities, instruments, and

strategic cultures. Attempts to enforce a single, unified approach across fundamentally different political and institutional systems are likely to generate friction rather than cohesion.

Instead, the Iraq and Iran cases demonstrate that cooperation is most effective when each player is able to operate in accordance with its relative strengths: US coercive force and security capabilities on the one hand, and EU diplomatic, economic, and normative instruments on the other. This insight challenges conventional assumptions that alliance effectiveness requires consensus at all levels and suggests that managed divergence can coexist with meaningful cooperation.

From the perspective of foreign policy analysis, the findings underscore the importance of institutional design and decision-making structures in shaping policy outcomes. The contrast between the centralized, executive-driven US foreign policy system and the EU disjointed, consensus-based structure helps explain why similar interests repeatedly translated into different approaches. This has broader implications for how scholars and policymakers assess coordination within complex alliances. Rather than viewing divergence as a failure of political will or leadership, the study suggests it should be understood as an operational outcome of institutional and conceptual differences embedded within the transatlantic relationship.

At the level of International Relations theory, the findings reinforce the need for analytical approaches that move beyond single-theory explanations. The interaction of power unevenness, institutions, and ideas observed in this study indicates that no single theoretical background can fully account for alliance behavior in contemporary international politics. The thesis thus supports approaches that combine thorough, institutional, and actor-centered perspectives when analyzing foreign policy in unbalanced alliances. More broadly, the study contributes to ongoing debates about the nature of alliances under unipolar and post-unipolar conditions, demonstrating

that cohesion and conflict are not mutually exclusive but are often produced simultaneously within enduring partnerships.

At the same time, this study is subject to several limitations that define the scope conditions under which its conclusions apply. Empirically, the thesis focuses on two cases, Iraq and Iran, within a specific regional and temporal context. While these cases are analytically rich and theoretically significant, they do not embrace the full range of transatlantic involvement in the Middle East. Other arenas, such as Syria, Libya, Yemen, or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, may display different patterns of cooperation and divergence due to variations in threat perception, institutional involvement, and regional forces. Consequently, the findings should not be generalized uncritically beyond cases involving high-security issues, uneven power relations, and existing alliance structures.

The temporal scope of the study, ending in 2016, represents another important limitation. Subsequent developments, including shifts in US foreign policy approaches, debates over European strategic autonomy, and evolving regional power underlying forces, may have altered some of the patterns identified in this thesis. While these changes do not undermine the core analytical context, they suggest that the conclusions are most applicable to the specific historical context examined. Additionally, the reliance on publicly available documents and secondary sources, while methodologically justified, limits access to internal deliberations that might further illuminate decision-making processes.

These limitations, however, also point toward fruitful avenues for future research. One promising direction would be to apply the analytical background to other regions where transatlantic cooperation and divergence play a significant role, such as Eastern Europe, the Sahel, or the Indo-Pacific. Comparative analysis across regions could help determine whether the

patterns of functional complementarity identified here represent a broader feature of transatlantic relations or are specific to the Middle Eastern context.

Future research could also extend the time-based scope beyond 2016 to examine how transatlantic relations have evolved in response to renewed great-power competition, shifting US involvement with multilateral institutions, and the EU efforts to enhance strategic autonomy. Such work would allow scholars to assess the resilience of the convergence and divergence patterns identified in this study and to explore how changes in the international system reshape alliance behavior over time.

Methodologically, future studies could complement the qualitative approach employed here with elite interviews, archival research, or mixed-method designs to deepen understanding of internal decision-making processes. Greater access to primary sources could help clarify how competing governmental preferences and strategic cultures are negotiated within alliance settings. Together, these possibilities of inquiry underscore that this thesis does not close the debate on transatlantic foreign policy, but rather opens a research agenda for examining how alliances function in an international system characterized by persistent instability, power imbalance, and contested legitimacy.

In conclusion, this thesis establishes that US and EU policies toward Middle Eastern instability between 2003 and 2016 were shaped by persistent operational, institutional, and conceptual underlying forces. Understanding these forces is essential not only for explaining past divergences over Iraq and convergences over Iran, but also for understanding how alliances function in an international system where instability, power disproportion, and contested legality remain significant characteristics of international politics.

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