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THE UNITED STATES AT 250

A Mediterranean Perspective

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With America's 250th anniversary, there will be many analyses of the country's history from domestic and international perspectives. But the meaning of the American story should also be assessed in key regional settings, from Asia to Latin America, and in transatlantic terms. In this vein, it is worth exploring the U.S. engagement in and with the Mediterranean world, one of the first places of U.S. international activism, and a setting where diverse aspects of U.S. foreign policy have been on full display. The Mediterranean experience offers a window into the evolution and the future of the U.S.'s international role.

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250 YEARS OF PRESENCE

Many will find it surprising that the U.S. has had a diplomatic, commercial, and military presence in the Mediterranean since the earliest days of the Republic, indeed before its founding if one includes the activities of shipowners prior to the War of Independence. This engagement parallels U.S. commercial activities in China and elsewhere in Asia, and illustrates how the U.S. has long been an actor in distant waters far beyond the Western Hemisphere. The founders of the Republic would not have used the term 'power projection', but a global conception of U.S. interests, at least in terms of trade and trade protection, has been part of the national outlook from the start. This awareness has included specific interests in southern Europe, North Africa, and the Levant.

U.S. economic and security interests in the Mediterranean have been closely intertwined. From 1801 to 1805, and again in 1815-1816, the U.S. intervened to suppress piracy along the Barbary Coast, with actions against Tripoli and Algiers. These interventions unfolded against a backdrop of keen commercial competition with Britain and France in Mediterranean markets. The early years of the Republic were also a period of U.S. diplomatic activism in the region, including a treaty with the Kingdom of Morocco in 1786 (Morocco was the first country to recognize the U.S. as an independent state in 1777), and the establishment of consulates in Madeira (1790) and Ponta Delgada in the Azores (1795)—the world's oldest continuously operating U.S. consulate.

These early ties with Southern Europe and the Maghreb developed at a turbulent time in Atlantic affairs, during which revolutionary political movements spread around the Atlantic basin, alongside a progressive northward shift of the Atlantic center of gravity. The Mediterranean world was an integral part of this north-south nexus in political and economic terms. U.S. involvement in the region also had a notable Eastern Mediterranean dimension, including popular support for the Greek war of independence. The Ottoman Empire was also a focus of U.S. commercial interests through the so-called 'Turkey trade'. From the mid-nineteenth century until well into the twentieth century, U.S. petroleum product exports were a major element in the country's trade with southern Europe and Türkiye. With the recent rise of Atlantic energy production, including U.S. gas exports to Europe through southern European terminals, this hydrocarbon connection has come full circle.

CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS REFLECTIONS

The U.S. is famously a nation of immigrants. Many of these immigrants came from southern Europe, especially from about 1880 to 1925¹. Their integration into U.S. society was troubled but steady, and since the Second World War these communities have enjoyed considerable prosperity and political influence. In a country with lobbies for almost everything, U.S. policy toward the Mediterranean, especially the Eastern Mediterranean, has been affected by the efforts of diaspora groups and straightforward cultural affinity.

Beyond politics, the U.S. has been shaped by the presence of Mediterranean communities and the dispersion of tastes in everything from cuisine to music. The Mediterranean has long been a key pole in the U.S. food scene. In recent decades, Mediterranean influences in the U.S. have gone beyond their well-established southern European roots. Turkish, North

1. Some six million Italians, Greeks, and Spaniards arrived in the U.S. in the most active years of southern European migration. See Elijah Alperin and Jeanne Batalova, 'European Immigrants in the United States', *Spotlight*, Migration Policy Institute, August 1, 2018.

African, and Levantine influences are now a visible part of the U.S. cultural landscape². In a very real sense, these have become core elements in an American-Mediterranean connection that is as much about people-to-people and cultural ties, as foreign and security policy interests.

These ties based on diasporas, tourism, trade, and investment have also become more fluid. Migration flows have become a two-way street, driven by economic development, shifting immigration policies and technology. In the post-COVID-19 environment, some U.S. 'digital nomads' have looked to Mediterranean countries as a destination, and affluent professionals and retirees—many with family ties to the region—have established residence across the Atlantic.

Religion has also exerted a strong and historic influence. U.S. Catholicism, Islam, Judaism and Orthodoxy are not just the result of Mediterranean migration, of course. But the Mediterranean dimension is there and meaningful. A very different but significant connection arose from the activity of American Protestant missionaries around the Mediterranean since the early nineteenth century. As in the U.S. engagement with China, these missionary activities in Türkiye, Southeastern Europe, and elsewhere have left a notable legacy, not least in terms of educational institutions³. They have also played a role in awareness of the Mediterranean in the U.S. long after the heyday of missionary activity abroad. This author has had numerous encounters with Americans well outside foreign-policy circles, with family ties to Türkiye or the Balkans based on past missionary activity.

Israel has a special, durable, and complicated place in this Mediterranean-U.S. relationship. The U.S. was among the first countries to recognize Israel (the Soviet Union was actually the first in 1948). The U.S. has been consistently supportive of Israel in foreign and security policy, and the countries are increasingly important partners in technology and defense. The Jewish state continues to enjoy strong support among U.S. political elites.

But the relationship has not been easy to manage. Without question, the Gaza experience and its aftermath have eroded support for Israel among the U.S. public, especially with younger Americans. The administration of George H.W. Bush was keen to develop stronger energy and defense industrial partnerships with the Arab Gulf states, and this inevitably affected the bilateral relationship with Israel. Fundamentally, support for Israel has been a bi-partisan article of faith in the U.S., literally so in the case of America's evangelicals. It has never been a straightforward matter of support from the Jewish-American community alone. Indeed, this community has been increasingly divided in its support for Israel during Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's time in office.

In different ways, the administrations of former President Joe Biden and President Donald Trump have been heirs to this traditional relationship with Israel. Biden and Netanyahu differed, especially with regard to the notion of a two-state solution, which the Biden administration and most of the American foreign-policy establishment supported. President Trump has been far more indulgent of the Netanyahu approach, including his government's hawkish posture toward Gaza and Lebanon, and the expansion of settlements in the West Bank. But Trump also shares the U.S. tradition of seeing Middle East peace as a leading diplomatic prize. His administration continues to regard the 2020 Abraham Accords as a model to be sustained and, if possible, extended. Given the extraordinary foreign-policy

2. For example, Yotam Ottolenghi's Mediterranean-inspired cookbooks regularly top the list of most popular indexes in this sector.

3. The influence of missionary activity on U.S. engagement in the Mediterranean and the Levant was even more evident from the vantage point of experts writing 100 years ago. See, for example, Edward Mead Earle, 'American Missions in the Near East', *Foreign Affairs*, April 1929.

activism of Trump in his second term, his international legacy may be profoundly influenced by developments in Israel and the wider Mediterranean neighborhood.

TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION—AND FRICTION

Over the long sweep of U.S. engagement in the Mediterranean, the country's power has sometimes been applied directly and sometimes as an over-the-horizon influence. U.S. behavior in the region has reflected broader tendencies in the country's foreign policy, including its frequently noted realist and idealist strains. The Mediterranean has rarely if ever been at the center of American interest in global terms. But it has been a consistent place of U.S. engagement based on stakes in nearby regions, and the demands of crisis management.

Having entered the First World War only in 1917, the U.S. played no role in the earlier operations in the Eastern Mediterranean, although it was present to assist with the evacuation of refugees from the Aegean coast during the conflict between Greece and Türkiye after the war. Washington's focus on self-determination as a guiding principle for the immediate post-war order had particularly significant implications for the strategic environment in the Balkans and the Adriatic, where Wilsonian principles supported nationalist forces after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. This approach has been a durable feature of American policy toward the region. Concerns over human rights and the 'responsibility to protect' were key elements in Washington's interventions in the Balkans in the 1990s.

Anti-colonial impulses have been a significant feature of U.S. policy toward the Mediterranean, and a significant source of friction with European partners since the interwar period. Post-war U.S. administrations took a dim view of French and British attempts to defend their colonial prerogatives in the Middle East and North Africa. Despite mounting Cold War imperatives, Washington was careful to exclude French Algeria from NATO's area of responsibility. The Suez crisis of 1956 saw the U.S. distaste for British and French policy toward the region on full display, with the Eisenhower administration making it clear that Paris and London could not count on U.S. support if Moscow chose to intervene on behalf of the Nasser regime in Egypt. The Suez episode may have been an example of American idealism or realism, or perhaps a bit of both. Without question, it was a transatlantic crisis precipitated by a Mediterranean dispute. It reflected U.S. distrust of European motives and decision-making. It would not be the last time transatlantic partners were divided by Mediterranean developments. The list of cases is long, from Suez through the struggle over Algerian independence, from the resupply of Israel in 1967 and 1973, to differences over Gaza and now, somewhat further afield, Iran.

Beyond these visible disputes, the U.S. and its European partners have more often been aligned with regard to security policies affecting the Mediterranean, north and south. This has certainly been the case in counter-terrorism, including the struggles against radical left-wing groups in southern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, Iranian proxies in Lebanon and elsewhere, Al-Qaeda, and ISIS. The same can be said about coalition action against specific regimes, whether that of former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, or Libya's Muammar Gaddafi. For roughly fifteen years following the 11 September 2001 attacks in the U.S., NATO maintained a joint naval operation in the Mediterranean (Active Endeavour) designed to back-fill for U.S. forces deployed to the Gulf.

The aspirational, idealist strain in U.S. foreign policy was evident in the post-Second World War European Recovery Plan—the Marshall Plan—which provided financial assistance across Western Europe and encouraged early efforts at European integration. Marshall Plan

assistance to Greece and Italy had particularly important consequences for the economic recovery of those relatively underdeveloped economies. It also illustrated the more strategic aspects of the Marshall Plan, driven by a U.S. desire to shape the political landscape in southern Europe against the backdrop of a deepening ideological and geopolitical competition with the Soviet Union. A tendency to focus on the nexus of prosperity, democracy promotion, and security has been a central feature of U.S. engagement with the world since 1945. It can be argued that it has deep roots in the U.S.'s own developmental trajectory since the early years of the Republic. The U.S. desire to export this model in some fashion continues to shape the country's international behavior. At base, it is a belief in the transformative nature of markets and the significance of doing things at scale; the idea that some aspects of American exceptionalism are transferable⁴.

The tougher, realist side of U.S. foreign policy has also left a lasting legacy across the Mediterranean. Cold War imperatives inspired the Marshall Plan, but they also led to decades of support for authoritarian regimes in Portugal, Spain, Greece, and Türkiye. It is easy to dismiss this experience as a feature of the past, yet public opinion around southern Europe has inherited negative perceptions about this history. It continues to fuel anti-Americanism in many quarters. Portugal was an exception given Washington's decision to favor the country's transition to democracy in the 'carnation revolution' of 1974—but it was a close-run thing. Anti-Americanism in Greece, which persisted for decades, has waned significantly in recent years, encouraged by successive governments of the left and the center-right. One factor in this public-opinion shift was Washington's acknowledgement of America's misguided support for the colonels' regime of the late-1960s and early 1970s⁵.

A MEDITERRANEAN POWER BY ANOTHER NAME

One of the defining characteristics of U.S. policy in and around the Mediterranean has been the absence of a specific Mediterranean vocabulary. On both sides of the Mediterranean, and across Europe, it is common to find official bodies with a specific 'Mediterranean' mandate. Institutes, programs, and experts on contemporary Mediterranean affairs abound. Despite its long engagement in the Mediterranean, the U.S. has produced few Mediterraneanists in the Braudelian sense of the term⁶. Intellectually and bureaucratically, the U.S. has tended to divide this geographical space quite firmly into distinct northern and southern elements: European and Eurasian affairs on the one hand, the Middle East and North Africa on the other. To some extent, U.S. military commands such as EUCOM and AFRICOM have developed cross-cutting areas of responsibility. The only command with an explicit Mediterranean mandate is the Sixth Fleet within NAVFAC (United States Naval Forces Europe and Africa), headquartered in Naples.

The result has been a persistent lack of an explicit U.S.-Mediterranean policy perspective, and a paucity of cross-cutting conversations about the Mediterranean as a strategic space in its own right. As a consequence, it has been difficult for U.S. officials and experts to engage on Mediterranean issues with counterparts on both sides of the Mediterranean, including in NATO and U.S.-EU settings. Few U.S. strategists think about the region as a

4. For an excellent discussion of this phenomenon today, including its negative aspects, see Kori Schake, *Contending with American Exceptionalism* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2026).

5. Notably in President Bill Clinton's November 20, 1999, speech in Athens, reflecting on the failure of the U.S. to support Greek democracy when it was challenged by the military junta.

6. That is, taking account of developments and connections around the sea as a whole. See Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

whole, even though the U.S. has superb experts on Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. To some extent, this mirrors the situation in the Atlantic basin, where, with a few exceptions, U.S. policy and analysis is either transatlantic in the traditional sense, or focused on West Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Oddly, this has not been the case in the much larger Asia-Pacific space, where pan-regional perspectives abound.

DRIVERS OF STRATEGY AND ENGAGEMENT

U.S. interest in the Mediterranean has long been a fluid mix of four elements:

First, since the Second World War, key aspects of the U.S. presence and policy have been driven by European security concerns. The Mediterranean has never been a primary theater in U.S. strategic thinking⁷, but at times it has been a point of secondary interest, most notably during the Cold War and more recently in the context of counter-terrorism and missile defense⁸. Against the backdrop of the Ukraine war, NATO's focus has clearly been in the East. But the U.S. naval and air presence in the south, in the Mediterranean, is now larger than it has been for decades.

Second, U.S. interest in the Mediterranean has long been shaped by the region's role as a place of connection, politically and operationally, to nearby areas of strategic importance. In this context, the Mediterranean Sea has been critical to power projection in contested areas such as the Red Sea, the Gulf, and the Sahel. Increasingly, this interest includes the protection of infrastructure for connectivity, from ports to undersea energy and digital links. The conflict in the Gulf between the U.S. and Israel and Iran has complicated planning for many connectivity projects, but initiatives such as IMEC (India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor), supported by Washington, have stretched the notion of Mediterranean connectivity to the Indian Ocean. If the initiative evolves over the next decades, it is likely to reinforce the U.S. interest in the Mediterranean as a strategic link to the Indo-Pacific.

Washington has also been a strong supporter of the Three Seas Initiative that links the Baltic, the Black Sea, and the Adriatic. The initiative focuses on energy, logistics, and digital connectivity, including the implications for military mobility. While not a Mediterranean project *per se*, the initiative is firmly in the tradition of Mediterranean interest based on wider regional linkages.

Third, the U.S. has been drawn into Mediterranean affairs based on its interest in crisis management across a region with many actual and potential flashpoints. This was true in the early nineteenth century and it remains true today. Examples of this crisis-driven engagement abound, from North Africa to the Balkans, from Lebanon to the precarious relations between two American allies, Greece and Türkiye, in the Eastern Mediterranean. This has not just, or even primarily, been about military intervention, although there have been many cases of this over the centuries, particularly since the end of the Cold War. Diplomatic engagement and political leadership have also been prominent features of Washington's regional policy. When Athens and Ankara stood on the brink of conflict during the Imia/Kardak crisis of 1996, Washington's diplomatic efforts, led by then Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke, played a key role in defusing a clash between two NATO allies.

7. U.S. forces played a key role in Operation Torch, the Allied landings in North Africa in 1942, largely because this was a logical place to carry the battle to Axis forces in the early stages of the Second World War. Despite costly campaigns in North Africa and Italy, Roosevelt and America's wartime military leaders never shared the British enthusiasm for Mediterranean operations, which they perceived merely as an adjunct to more consequential operations in Western Europe.

8. During the conflict with Iran in 2026, at least three attempts have been made to target U.S. forces at Turkish bases. All have been intercepted by missile defense assets—presumably American—afloat in the Mediterranean.

The U.S. may not frame its policies in explicitly Mediterranean terms, but policymakers are keenly aware of the proliferation of ongoing and potential conflicts in the region. These have imposed their own demands on U.S. strategy. They have also offered opportunities for conflict resolution and settlement, however elusive. Different U.S. administrations have been drawn to leadership in the Middle East peace process, sometimes at the cost of considerable political credibility. In less striking ways, multiple administrations have also tried to facilitate diplomacy around the Cyprus dispute. Even the Trump administration, while disavowing conventional peace-process diplomacy, has seen the Arab-Israeli conflict in its various dimensions as an area for activism. Whatever the outlook on this front, U.S. presidents have been drawn to the challenge, with consequences for the Mediterranean. The idea that the U.S. is uniquely capable of bringing settlements to violent conflicts, whether in the Balkans or the Levant, is arguably another part of the U.S.'s self-described exceptionalism. Optimism has been a hallmark of the U.S. outlook and strategy in this and other regional settings.

A fourth and very durable interest is economic. Commerce and the protection of U.S. trade and investment have been key facets of U.S. engagement from the start. At times, as during the Cold War or the war on terrorism, this interest has been overshadowed by security concerns and animating conflicts. But the economic element has never been absent for a nation that tends toward the primacy of economics in its perceptions and policies.

In some specific settings around the Mediterranean, U.S. influence is now very much directed toward projects at the nexus of investment, infrastructure, and geopolitics. With official support, Chevron and ExxonMobil have been particularly active in developing offshore energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean. These investments have been focused on Israel, Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt, and have been accompanied by U.S. support for a variety of regional forums aimed at strengthening energy security cooperation in the region⁹. Both the Biden and Trump administrations have promoted energy infrastructure and port-development projects for Southeastern Europe, including LNG facilities in Alexandroupoli in northern Greece to facilitate the import of U.S. gas and reduce regional reliance on Russian supplies. Indeed, much of the growing U.S. supply of LNG to Europe and adjacent markets is now shipped to west, central, and Eastern Mediterranean ports. With the construction of new LNG terminals, Morocco is also part of this expanding Atlantic-Mediterranean energy nexus.

Large-scale U.S. official development assistance (ODA) has traditionally been viewed as a significant instrument of U.S. soft power and a contributor to U.S. geopolitical interests. Southern Mediterranean countries such as Egypt have been recipients of significant development assistance. The closure of USAID under the second Trump administration and reductions in traditional ODA spending have been accompanied by a focus on trade and investment in lieu of direct assistance, especially in the Middle East and Africa. Whether or not this shift proves durable, U.S. behavior in this sphere has long been influenced by both philanthropic and market-oriented views. The tension between these ideological tendencies is not unique to the U.S., but it is especially pronounced in today's Washington.

9. Most notably the '3+1' initiative involving Israel, Greece, and Cyprus with the U.S., and the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, which includes Egypt.

WILL THE U.S. REMAIN A MEDITERRANEAN POWER?

After some 250 years of presence, much of it as a strategic arbiter, it is worth asking whether the U.S. is likely to remain a Mediterranean power. This analysis suggests that the U.S. will indeed remain a power in and around the Mediterranean. Links to the European balance, connections to other regions, crisis management, and economic interest will continue to matter when seen from Washington. But the scale and nature of U.S. engagement will surely evolve, driven by changes across the Mediterranean and shifts in U.S. strategic priorities. The steady rise in demands in the Indo-Pacific will continue to draw U.S. attention, while fueling a shift of strategy and resources away from Europe. Proposals on U.S. rapid response commitments within NATO seem to signal a reduction of naval presence in the North Atlantic and Mediterranean¹⁰. Yet regional crises have a way of drawing U.S. attention and forces back to the region. And, as noted, military force posture is hardly the only measure of U.S. engagement around the Mediterranean.

The U.S. may well remain present and engaged, but this may come against a backdrop of increased presence and competition from other powers, not least China. Chinese commercial and political engagement around the Mediterranean has grown steadily in recent years. There is also considerable scope for Europe to become more active in the Mediterranean in security, diplomatic, and economic terms. NATO is likely to become a more European alliance in the years ahead, including in terms of its southern strategy and posture. And a more assertive and autonomous EU may find a natural vocation in the Mediterranean as a key part of its own 'near abroad'. On a national basis, countries such as Italy are already emphasizing trans-Mediterranean links to Africa and to the 'Indo-Mediterranean'. More European activism and greater assertiveness across the southern Mediterranean could reinforce an American tendency to focus on other regions, at least in security terms.

The durability and diversity of the U.S.'s ties to the Mediterranean are striking. But this presence does not exist in a vacuum. A changing Mediterranean and its evolving place in the global scene will continue to shape the nature and relevance of U.S. involvement. The U.S.'s own trajectory as a society and as a global power will continue to have a profound influence on the country's regional engagement. After a quarter of a millennium, these historical tendencies—and current pressures—are on full display in the U.S.'s Mediterranean experience.

10. Anne-Sylvaine Chassany and Henry Foy, 'US Plans to Cut NATO's Rapid Response Force', *Financial Times*, June 5, 2026, p.2.

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