

The State of the Union and the Middle East

by [Eric Feely \(/experts/eric-feely\)](#)

Feb 8, 2023

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/khtab-halt-alathad-walshrq-alawst\)](#) /

[Farsi \(/fa/policy-analysis/skhnrary-salanh-rwsay-jmhwry-amryka-w-khawrmyanh\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Eric Feely \(/experts/eric-feely\)](#)

Eric Feely is a research assistant in the Military and Security Studies Program at The Washington Institute. He can be followed on Twitter at @EricHFeely



Brief Analysis

A compendium of what the past three U.S. presidents have said—and not said—about the region in their annual speeches before Congress.

Although the Middle East has been an important part of presidential State of the Union addresses in the past, America's latest political turmoil at home and ongoing shift toward great power competition abroad have seemingly relegated regional issues to other forums. Most recently, President Biden's [February 7 speech](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/02/07/remarks-by-president-biden-in-state-of-the-union-address-2/) (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/02/07/remarks-by-president-biden-in-state-of-the-union-address-2/>) did not mention Middle East issues at all apart from indirect references to oil prices (see below) and one passing mention of terrorism. The following is a selection of statements on key regional issues by Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden. For a comprehensive list, download the PDF above.

Afghanistan

“Our purpose is clear: by preventing the Taliban from reestablishing a stranglehold over the Afghan people, we will deny al-Qaeda the safe haven that served as a launching pad for 9/11.” —President Obama, January 25, 2011

“This drawdown will continue, and by the end of next year, our war in Afghanistan will be over. Beyond 2014, America's commitment to a unified and sovereign Afghanistan will endure, but the nature of our commitment will change. We're negotiating an agreement with the Afghan government that focuses on two missions: training and equipping Afghan forces...and counterterrorism efforts that allow us to pursue the remnants of al-Qaeda and their affiliates.” —President Obama, February 12, 2013

“Along with their heroic Afghan partners, our military is no longer undermined by artificial timelines, and we no longer tell our enemies our plans.” —President Trump, January 30, 2018

“In Afghanistan, my administration is holding constructive talks with a number of Afghan groups, including the

Taliban. As we make progress in these negotiations, we will be able to reduce our troops' presence and focus on counterterrorism.” —President Trump, February 5, 2019

“American leadership means ending the forever war in Afghanistan...[Such wars] were never meant to be multigenerational undertakings of nation building...We degraded the terrorist threat of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. And after twenty years of...valor and sacrifice, it's time to bring those troops home.” —President Biden, April 28, 2021

Arab Democracy

“Recent events have shown us that what sets us apart must not just be our power—it must also be the purpose behind it. In south Sudan—with our assistance—the people were finally able to vote for independence after years of war...And we saw that same desire to be free in Tunisia...The United States of America stands with the people of Tunisia and supports the democratic aspirations of all people.” —President Obama, January 25, 2011

“As the tide of war recedes, a wave of change has washed across the Middle East and North Africa, from Tunis to Cairo, from Sanaa to Tripoli. A year ago, Qadhafi was one of the world's longest serving dictators...Today, he is gone. And in Syria, I have no doubt that the Assad regime will soon discover that the forces of change cannot be reversed and that human dignity cannot be denied. How this incredible transformation will end remains uncertain. But we have a huge stake in the outcome.” —President Obama, January 24, 2012

Iran

“[W]e support the human rights of the women marching through the streets of Iran...For America must always stand on the side of freedom and human dignity—always.” —President Obama, January 27, 2010

“[A] world that was once divided about how to deal with Iran's nuclear program now stands as one. The regime is more isolated than ever before. Its leaders are faced with crippling sanctions, and as long as they shirk their responsibilities, this pressure will not relent...America is determined to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, and I will take no options off the table to achieve that goal. But a peaceful resolution of this issue is still possible, and far better.” —President Obama, January 24, 2012

“And it is American diplomacy, backed by pressure, that has halted the progress of Iran's nuclear program and rolled back parts of that program...Iran has begun to eliminate its stockpile of higher levels of enriched uranium. It's not installing advanced centrifuges. Unprecedented inspections help the world verify every day that Iran is not building a bomb. And with our allies and partners, we're engaged in negotiations to see if we can peacefully achieve a goal we all share: preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. These negotiations will be difficult. They may not succeed. We are clear eyed about Iran's support for terrorist organizations like Hezbollah, which threatens our allies. And we're clear about the mistrust between our nations...But these negotiations don't rely on trust. Any long-term deal we agree to must be based on verifiable action that convinces us and the international community that Iran is not building a nuclear bomb...If Iran's leaders do not seize this opportunity, then I will be the first to call for more sanctions and stand ready to exercise all options to make sure Iran does not build a nuclear weapon.” — President Obama, January 28, 2014

“[N]ew sanctions passed by this Congress, at this moment in time, will all but guarantee that diplomacy fails: alienating America from its allies, making it harder to maintain sanctions, and ensuring that Iran starts up its nuclear program again...And that's why I will veto any new sanctions bill that threatens to undo this progress.” — President Obama, January 20, 2015

“I have also imposed new sanctions on entities and individuals who support Iran's ballistic missile program and reaffirmed our unbreakable alliance with the state of Israel.” —President Trump, February 28, 2017

“When the people of Iran rose up against the crimes of their corrupt dictatorship, I did not stay silent. America

stands with the people of Iran in their courageous struggle for freedom. I am asking Congress to address the fundamental flaws in the terrible Iran nuclear deal.” —President Trump, January 30, 2018

“My administration has acted decisively to confront the world’s leading state sponsor of terror: the radical regime in Iran...To ensure this corrupt dictatorship never acquires nuclear weapons, I withdrew the United States from the disastrous Iran nuclear deal. And last fall, we put in place the toughest sanctions ever imposed by us on a country. We will not avert our eyes from a regime that chants ‘Death to America’ and threatens genocide against the Jewish people.” —President Trump, February 5, 2019

“[Qasem] Soleimani was the Iranian regime’s most ruthless butcher, a monster who murdered or wounded thousands of American service members in Iraq...[and was] actively planning new attacks...And that’s why last month, at my direction, the U.S. military executed a flawless precision strike that killed Soleimani...Our message to the terrorists is clear: you will never escape American justice. If you attack our citizens, you forfeit your life.” — President Trump, February 4, 2020

“The Iranian regime must abandon its pursuit of nuclear weapons; stop spreading terror, death, and destruction; and start working for the good of its own people. Because of our powerful sanctions, the Iranian economy is doing very, very poorly. We can help them make a very good and short-time recovery. It can all go very quickly, but perhaps they are too proud or too foolish to ask for that help. We are here. Let’s see which road they choose.” —President Trump, February 4, 2020

“On Iran and North Korea—nuclear programs that present serious threats to American security and the security of the world—we’re going to be working closely with our allies to address the threats posed by both of these countries through diplomacy, as well as stern deterrence.” —President Biden, April 28, 2021

Iraq

“As we take the fight to al-Qaeda, we are responsibly leaving Iraq to its people...We will have all of our combat troops out of Iraq by the end of this August.” —President Obama, January 27, 2010

“Our brave troops have now been fighting in the Middle East for almost nineteen years. In Afghanistan and Iraq, nearly 7,000 American heroes have given their lives. More than 52,000 Americans have been badly wounded. We have spent more than \$7 trillion in fighting wars in the Middle East.” —President Trump, February 5, 2019

Israel

“To seek progress towards a secure and lasting peace between Israel and her neighbors, we have appointed an envoy to sustain our effort.” —President Obama, February 24, 2009

“Our ironclad commitment...to Israel’s security has meant the closest military cooperation...in history.” —President Obama, January 24, 2012

“American diplomacy is supporting Israelis and Palestinians as they engage in the difficult but necessary talks to end the conflict there, to achieve dignity and an independent state for Palestinians and lasting peace and security for the state of Israel, a Jewish state that knows America will always be at their side.” —President Obama, January 28, 2014

“Last month...I recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Shortly afterward, dozens of countries voted...against America’s sovereign right to make this decision. In 2016, American taxpayers generously sent those same countries more than \$20 billion in aid. That is why tonight I am asking Congress to pass legislation to help ensure American foreign-assistance dollars always serve American interests and only go to friends of America, not enemies of America.” —President Trump, January 30, 2018

“Our approach is based on principled realism, not discredited theories that have failed for decades to yield progress. For this reason, my administration recognized the true capital of Israel and proudly opened the American embassy

in Jerusalem.” —President Trump, February 5, 2019

“Last week, I announced a groundbreaking plan for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Recognizing that all past attempts have failed, we must be determined and creative in order to stabilize the region and give millions of young people the chance to realize a better future.” —President Trump, February 4, 2020

Oil

“Have you noticed Big Oil just reported its profits? Record profits. Last year, they made \$200 billion in the midst of a global energy crisis. I think it’s outrageous. Why? They invested too little of that profit to increase domestic production...We’re going to need oil for at least another decade.” —President Biden, February 7, 2023

Syria

“We also can’t try to take over and rebuild every country that falls into crisis, even if it’s done with the best of intentions. That’s not leadership; that’s a recipe for quagmire...[O]n issues of global concern, we will mobilize the world to work with us and make sure other countries pull their own weight. That’s our approach to conflicts like Syria, where we’re partnering with local forces and leading international efforts to help that broken society pursue a lasting peace.” —President Obama, January 12, 2016

“Great nations do not fight endless wars. When I took office, ISIS controlled more than 20,000 square miles in Iraq and Syria...Today, we have liberated virtually all of the territory from the grip of these bloodthirsty monsters. Now, as we work with our allies to destroy the remnants of ISIS, it is time to give our brave warriors in Syria a warm welcome home.” —President Trump, February 5, 2019

Terrorism

“We will continue to hunt down terrorists and dismantle their networks, and we reserve the right to act unilaterally, as we have done relentlessly since I took office, to take out terrorists who pose a direct threat to us and our allies. At the same time, we’ve learned some costly lessons over the last thirteen years...Instead of sending large ground forces overseas, we’re partnering with nations from South Asia to North Africa to deny safe haven to terrorists who threaten America.” —President Obama January 20, 2015

“In today’s world, we’re threatened less by evil empires and more by failing states. The Middle East is going through a transformation that will play out for a generation, rooted in conflicts that date back millennia...For more than a year, America has led a coalition of more than sixty countries to cut off ISIL’s financing, disrupt their plots, stop the flow of terrorist fighters, and stamp out their vicious ideology. With nearly 10,000 airstrikes, we’re taking out their leadership, their oil, their training camps, their weapons. We’re training, arming, and supporting forces who are steadily reclaiming territory in Iraq and Syria...Our foreign policy has to be focused on the threat from ISIL and al-Qaeda, but it can’t stop there...[I]nstability will continue for decades in many parts of the world...Some of these places may become safe havens for new terrorist networks...The world will look to us to help solve these problems, and our answer needs to be more than tough talk or calls to carpet-bomb civilians.” —President Obama January 12, 2016

“We are also taking strong measures to protect our nation from radical Islamic terrorism...[T]he vast majority of individuals convicted of terrorism and terrorism-related offenses since 9/11 came here from outside of our country...It is not compassionate, but reckless to allow uncontrolled entry from places where proper vetting cannot occur...We cannot allow a beachhead of terrorism to form inside America. We cannot allow our nation to become a sanctuary for extremists.” —President Trump, February 28, 2017

“[T]he coalition to defeat ISIS has liberated very close to 100 percent of the territory just recently held by these killers in Iraq and in Syria and in other locations as well. But there is much more work to be done...Terrorists who do things like place bombs in civilian hospitals are evil. When possible, we have no choice but to annihilate them. When

necessary, we must be able to detain and question them. But we must be clear: terrorists are not merely criminals, they are unlawful enemy combatants. And when captured overseas, they should be treated like the terrorists they are. In the past, we have foolishly released hundreds and hundreds of dangerous terrorists, only to meet them again on the battlefield, including the ISIS leader, al-Baghdadi, who we captured, who we had, who we released.” — President Trump, January 30, 2018

“[T]errorism has metastasized. The threat has evolved way beyond Afghanistan. And those of you in the intelligence committees, the foreign relations committee, the defense committees, you know well: we have to remain vigilant against the threats to the United States wherever they come from. Al-Qaeda and ISIS are in Yemen, Syria, Somalia, other places in Africa, the Middle East, and beyond.” —President Biden, April 28, 2021 ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Addressing Human Resource and Development Concerns in Iraq's Oil and Gas Sector

Apr 26, 2024

◆
Muhammed Abed Mazeel al-Aboudi

(/policy-analysis/addressing-human-resource-and-development-concerns-iraqs-oil-and-gas-sector)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Denial or Punishment? The U.S.-Israel Debate About How Best to Deter Iran

Apr 26, 2024

◆
Michael Eisenstadt

(/policy-analysis/denial-or-punishment-us-israel-debate-about-how-best-deter-iran)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Nuclear Gloss to Pakistan's Diplomacy with Iran and Saudi Arabia

Apr 25, 2024

◆
Simon Henderson

</policy-analysis/nuclear-gloss-pakistans-diplomacy-iran-and-saudi-arabia>

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](/policy-analysis/military-security)

[Proliferation \(/policy-analysis/proliferation\)](/policy-analysis/proliferation)

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](/policy-analysis/terrorism)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](/policy-analysis/iran)

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](/policy-analysis/israel)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](/policy-analysis/syria)