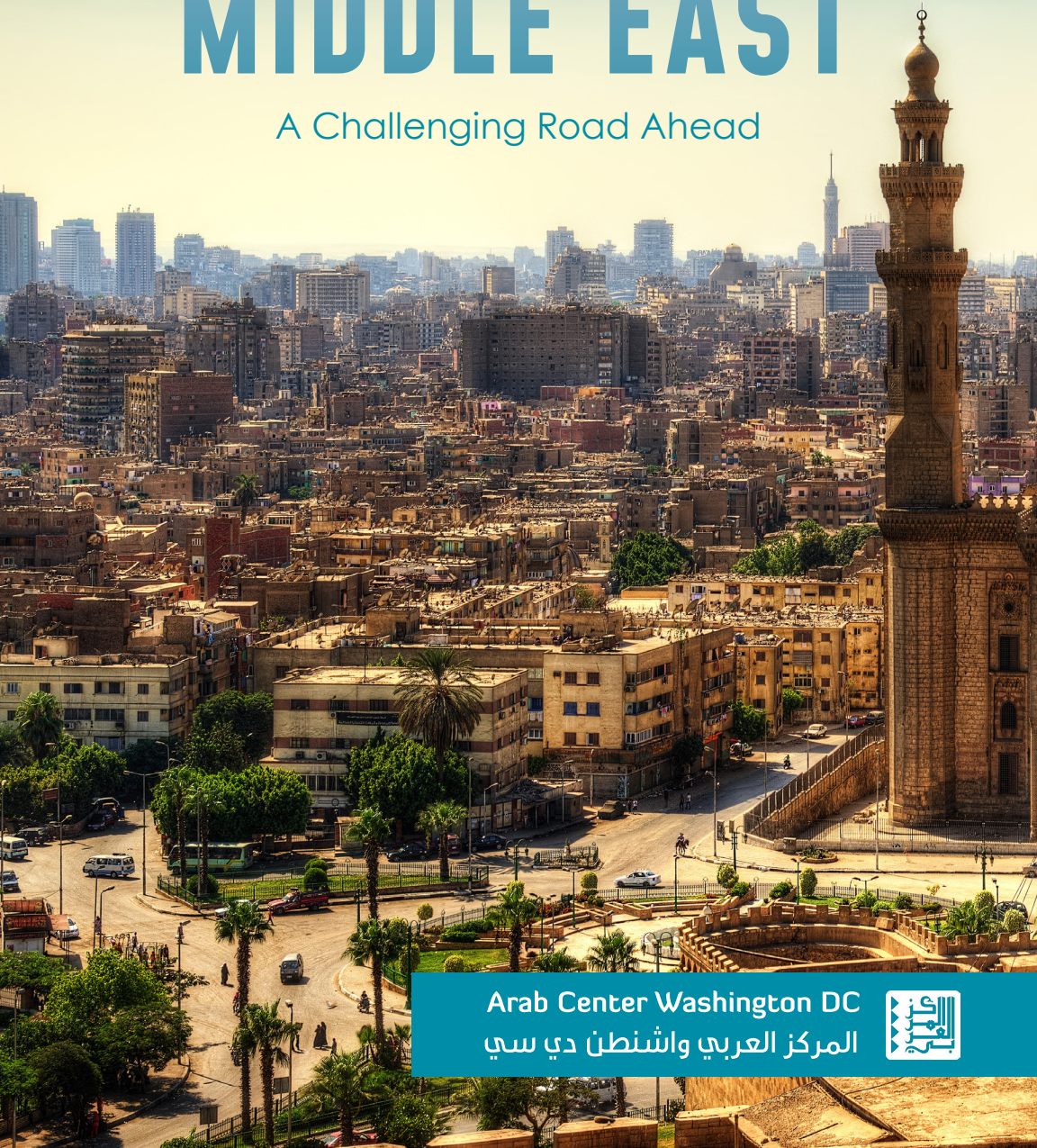


BIDEN

AND THE

MIDDLE EAST

A Challenging Road Ahead



Arab Center Washington DC
المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي



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Introduction

Khalil E. Jahshan

Since his election on November 3, 2020, President-elect Joe Biden has been purposefully focusing on selecting his senior cabinet members and key personnel for the new administration as they prepare for inauguration day on January 20, 2021. His transition team in Washington has also been steadfastly drafting the general domestic and foreign policy guidelines and options for the next four years. In light of the magnitude and severity of the challenges confronting Biden, domestic and foreign alike, the incoming 46th president of the United States would certainly like to effect a smooth launch for his presidency by rallying the admittedly divided nation behind his policies as he hits the road running without much controversy, delay, or hesitation.

Although it is somewhat premature to predict in great detail the specific orientation and policies to be embraced and championed by the Biden-Harris Administration, some general trends appear to be taking shape between now and Spring 2021. First and foremost, the domestic health and economic crises the administration has inherited are destined to occupy an inordinate share of its agenda and time. Thus, foreign policy might not necessarily be at the top of its priorities, at least for its first year in office. Second, the new administration displays a totally different concept of American leadership than that exhibited by its predecessor. Biden

is expected to immediately distance himself from Trump's inward-looking and nationalistic "America First" vision in its various chaotic and disruptive incarnations and replace it, as promised, with the "America is back" mantra. Third, "The world according to Joe Biden," as expressed by Barbara Plett Usher of the BBC, "is a much more traditional take on America's role and interests, grounded in international institutions ... and based on shared western democratic values." Fourth, the Biden team seems adamant about divorcing itself from Trump's frequent tendency to confuse allies and enemies, to the dissatisfaction of both and to the detriment of US national interests.

Therefore, as Thomas Wright of the Lowy Institute predicted in his excellent essay entitled "The Point of No Return: The 2020 Election and the Crisis of American Foreign Policy," Biden "will seek to undo much of what Donald Trump has wrought—he will quickly rejoin the Paris Agreement on climate change, he will try to revive the Iran nuclear deal, he will work with other nations on combatting COVID-19, and he will resume US support for its allies."

These trends are borne out by any thorough review of Biden's public statements and personnel appointments for clues as to the parameters of his future foreign policy, in general, and his Middle East policy, in particular. Although the bulk of public attention by the media and policy think tanks has focused on the US approach by the Biden presidency to China, Russia, North Korea, NATO, Venezuela, and Iran, significant consideration has also been given to the Middle East largely due to the myriad of unconventional and chaotic policies toward the region implemented by the Trump Administration. The new administration knows full well that it faces a herculean task ahead of having to clean up widespread damage inflicted on this unsettled area of the world.

Will the Biden Administration have sufficient domestic support and tranquility to focus on key foreign policy objectives left undone by the outgoing administration? Will the Middle East specifically gain adequate attention from the 46th US president? Considering the abundance of regional conflicts, what aspect of Middle East policy will the new administration opt to tackle first? Will Biden as president deal with the Middle East on its own merits or will he view the region through the traditional Israeli prism, or as a function of his Iran policy? Will the incoming administration reassess the biased approach adopted by its predecessor in

dealing with Gulf Arab allies? Considering his experiences as a senator and as Obama's vice president, will Biden opt to engage seriously in the pursuit of a comprehensive and just solution to the Palestine question? Will the issues of democracy and human rights in the Middle East regain their center stage status, which was lost during the Trump years? How will Biden deal with Middle Eastern authoritarian leaders befriended by the outgoing president?

These are admittedly general questions, but they do pertain to specific countries and situations in the Middle East that have been central to the mission of Arab Center Washington DC since its inception in 2014. To offer the most comprehensive and credible set of answers possible to these and other related questions, ACW has enlisted its resident and non-resident fellows and invited other scholars with unmatched expertise in US foreign policy and Middle East affairs to highlight the specific challenges facing the Biden Administration after inauguration. These various cases and issues were grouped according to the following four general categories:

1. **Topical areas:** The United States in the Middle East, Biden's foreign policy, US decision-making, and democracy and human rights.
2. **Eastern Mediterranean issues:** Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Turkey.
3. **The Gulf:** GCC, Iran, Iraq, and Yemen.
4. **East and North Africa:** Egypt, Libya, Sudan, Tunisia, and Northwest African states.

One last note: the articles herein were written during November and December 2020 with an eye to a general evaluation of conditions in the Middle East. They address both the potential impact of the situation in the region on the incoming Biden Administration as well as the Biden team's possible or desired responses. Thus, these analyses are not time- or event-bound. For this reason, the editors have added minimal updates in the form of footnotes to reflect changed circumstances related to the issues discussed.

On behalf of Arab Center Washington DC, I would like to extend our sincere gratitude and appreciation to all the contributors and editors of this volume, which was assembled and completed under the difficult

circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, telecommunicating and remote work, and the turbulent post-election reporting process. Due to these constraints, the document will be disseminated at this time in the format of an ebook rather than a hard copy. It is our hope that you will find these papers informative and intellectually stimulating as the United States and Middle East countries continue to adjust to the political fallout from an eventful and unusual 2020.

SECTION I

BIDEN'S PREFERENCES AND GENERAL MIDDLE EAST CONCERNS

1. A Prognosis for American Involvement in the Middle East

Kenneth Katzman

2. The Biden Administration's Foreign Policy: Key Features and Likely Changes

Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

3. The Biden Administration and US Foreign Policy Decision-Making

Joe Macaron

4. Democracy and Human Rights in the Middle East: The Biden Agenda

Charles W. Dunne

1

A Prognosis for American Involvement in the Middle East

Kenneth Katzman

November 13, 2020

There is little doubt that the American approach to the Middle East has been undergoing significant change and will continue to do so. This trend might represent the outcome of the American public's cost-benefit analysis of US military interventions and the expenditure of US diplomatic and economic resources. That calculation has evidently caused a significant domestic public opinion shift against major new military interventions in the region. In taking account of the evolving sentiment on US policy in the Middle East, the incoming Biden Administration might alter it marginally but not dramatically. Yet, there remain potential threats to US vital interests as well as unexpected events that will generate headlines and interest-group activism. These might compel any administration to undertake significant policy responses, including military action.

Decline of US Public Support for Large-scale Regional Intervention

The American public's willingness to support extensive US involvement in the region eroded significantly following the decision of the George W. Bush Administration to initiate a major military invasion of Iraq to overthrow the regime of President Saddam Hussein. Not only did the prime justification for the invasion—the ending of retained weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs—prove false, but the invasion

The overthrow of Saddam Hussein arguably strengthened Iran's influence in Iraq and paved the way for Iranian gains in the broader region. In addition, the intervention produced political backlash in Iraq that led, ultimately, to the creation of insurgent groups that evolved into the Islamic State terrorist organization.

cost over 4,500 US military deaths without improving the US strategic position in the region in any significant way. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein arguably strengthened Iran's influence in Iraq and paved the way for Iranian gains in the broader region. In addition, the intervention produced political backlash in Iraq that led, ultimately, to the creation of insurgent groups that evolved into the Islamic State terrorist organization. There also seems to be American public disap-

pointment that direct military involvement for nearly 20 years has failed to defeat the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, which hosted the masterminds of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. Although successive administrations have sought to limit the influence of Russia and China, there appears to have been some degree of recognition that these two powers have expanded and will continue to augment their influence in the region.

Other trends have accelerated the shift in domestic public thinking. As a prominent example, American dependence on hydrocarbon imports from the region has declined dramatically over the past decade. In 2018, in large part on the strength of the domestic industry of hydraulic fracturing ("fracking")—a technique designed to recover gas and oil from shale rock—the United States emerged as the world's top oil producer. Still, most experts assess that fossil fuels will remain a significant staple of the global economy, despite the emphasis on increasing the use of renewable energy sources. Threats to the exportation of hydrocarbon products from the Gulf will likely remain an American national security priority for at least several decades.

As another example, the United States has expended significant diplomatic energy over the past 40 years to try to broker a permanent settlement between Israelis and Palestinians. Yet the effort, while helping to produce Palestinian autonomy, has not resolved that conflict to date—perhaps

making American diplomacy seem fruitless and incapable of breaking the impasse. The difficulty of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ostensibly was a factor in the Trump Administration's decision to focus, instead, on brokering normalization agreements between Israel and those Arab states with which Israel had not already signed peace treaties. The efforts culminated in the [September 2020 normalization agreements](#) between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.¹

Implications for Policy Going Forward

Military presence and intervention

Evolving US attitudes on policy in the region might potentially act to constrain future policy options. American Middle East policy generally [did not seem to factor prominently](#) in the 2020 presidential election, and there was little debate during the 2020 presidential campaign about the Trump Administration's [drawdown of US forces](#) from Iraq and Afghanistan. The Trump Administration's decision to reduce direct US military involvement in those countries appears, at least in part, to be a product of the public perceptions discussed above.

However, it is evident that there is a broad consensus for continued vigilance, including the use of military operations, to counter terrorist groups that operate in and from the region as well as deter and punish users of WMDs. Despite the public perception that the post-September 11 US involvement in Afghanistan has [gone on too long](#), the memory of the attacks still looms large in public consciousness. There has

A question for the incoming Biden Administration and for others in the future is how to reconcile the apparent consensus for military disengagement from the region with the requirements of basing Special Operations and other forces that might need to be within quick striking distance of identified terrorist high value targets.

¹ Two other Arab states, Sudan and Morocco, followed suit in announcing their intention to normalize relations with Israel on October 23 and December 10, respectively.

been no measurable public sentiment to relax American vigilance against Al-Qaeda and against one of its descendants, the so-called Islamic State. A question for the incoming Biden Administration and for others in the future is how to [reconcile the apparent consensus](#) for military disengagement from the region with the requirements of basing Special Operations and other forces that might need to be within quick striking distance of identified terrorist high value targets. There also seems to be little dissent within the United States on the use of force against actors who use or threaten the use of WMDs. The Trump Administration took some action against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for its use of chemical weapons against the Syrian people. The [strikes, carried out mostly by cruise missiles](#), came despite the decisions by both the Obama and Trump Administrations not to take action that is directly intended to bring about the overthrow of the Assad regime. Those decisions appeared to reflect [reticence in the US public and political establishment](#) for significant military actions that aimed to alter the power structure of the region.

The Iran factor

One issue on which there is potential for enduring consensus is the need to address the multiplicity of perceived threats to American interests posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran, although there is not necessarily agreement on the employment of various policy tools to blunt that threat. Broadly, some—including members of the Trump Administration—have sought to [pressure Iran into significant concessions](#) on many of the fronts where Washington and Tehran are at odds. Foremost among them are Iran's nuclear program and its interventions throughout the region that are seen as threats to US allies such as Israel and the Gulf Arab monarchies. The Obama Administration sought to [both engage and pressure Iran](#) to reach common ground on the most pressing issue, its nuclear program, and perhaps later expand that breakthrough into a comprehensive solution that accommodates American regional interests and values. In a [September 13 editorial](#), candidate Biden stated an intent to rejoin the 2015 multilateral Iran nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), in essence returning to the Obama Administration strategy on Iran. Whether the Iran nuclear accord can be translated into a broad United States-Iran accommodation of each other's interests is a proposition that, to date, has not been tested.

No matter the policy differences on the accord, Iran's nuclear program stands as one factor that arguably could prompt major American or other military action against Iran. There has long been a tacit consensus within the United States and among US allies in the region that [Iran must not be allowed to acquire a nuclear weapon](#). It can be argued that there would be sufficient American public support for military action should Iran approach that threshold. US action against Iran's nuclear program could potentially [touch off a broader and extended US-Iran conflict](#); indeed, the prospect of Tehran wielding a nuclear weapons capability is widely considered too destabilizing for the United States and its partners, such as Israel or the Gulf Arab states, to tolerate.

The United States and Israel

There have been few indicators, if any, of a significant shift in American public opinion on the need for an enduring and close partnership between the United States and Israel. However, there might not be a consensus on the policy tools that should be used to try to achieve a final political settlement between Israel and the Palestinians; in the past, some of these tools have involved criticizing Israeli policies and/or [placing conditions on some US benefits](#) for and transactions with Israel. The Trump Administration departed from the American tradition of attempting to play [the role of "honest broker"](#) between Israelis and Palestinians, especially when it [recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital](#) and moved the American embassy there, and [acknowledged Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights](#).

Anti-Iran axis

The administration also constructed an anti-Iran ["axis" consisting of Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates](#) (UAE), and other Sunni Arab states and de-emphasized US relations with the Palestinian Authority. The coalition was an outgrowth of the Trump Administration's affinity for Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) and UAE de facto leader Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan as pillars of US Iran policy and Trump Administration efforts to devolve security responsibility to regional players. The Trump policy also muted American concerns about the human rights records of the two regimes and their controversial interventions in Yemen, Libya, and elsewhere. It is not clear that there is US public support for an enduring tilt toward the two monarchies, especially

In the near term, Biden and his team might not continue “business as usual” with MbS until there is greater accountability for his role in the October 2018 killing of Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul.

if doing so requires downplaying their flaws and their flouting of many professed American values. In the near term, Biden and his team **might not continue “business as usual”** with MbS until there is greater accountability for his role in the October 2018 killing of Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul. There is a possibility for Biden’s admin-

istration to closely scrutinize potential weapons sales to the Gulf states, including canceling the Trump Administration’s proposed sale of the advanced **F-35 stealth fighter to the UAE**. The sale was announced several weeks after the September normalization of relations between the UAE and Israel. Further, Biden and other future presidents might return to the traditional US stance of attempting to broker an Israeli-Palestinian peace rather than adopt the Trump Administration’s policy of arranging peace deals between Israel and Arab states without first securing an Israeli-Palestinian accord.

Future Outlook

It can be argued that the Middle East region will continue to diminish in the constellation of American foreign policy priorities. There do not appear to be any easily identifiable factors or trends that would reverse the sharp public aversion in the United States to future large-scale military interventions in the region, especially in cases where vital national security interests do not appear threatened or the US homeland has not been attacked. Nevertheless, the region is vast and complex; the **history of US involvement there** cannot be erased, nor can the potential of major threats be ignored. It can also be argued that there is public support for small-scale interventions such as counterterrorism or counter-proliferation missions; however, such actions have the potential to escalate into unforeseen larger-scale and dangerous engagements.

A major unknown that has the potential to cloud the trajectory of American Middle East policy in the coming decades is the relationship

between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Tehran has long frustrated Washington's efforts to stabilize the region and to secure the interests of the United States and its partners. Despite the Trump Administration's "maximum pressure" campaign, it can be argued that Iran's overall strategic capabilities are growing and not diminishing. Iran's missile capabilities have been used to unexpectedly [devastating effect against Saudi Arabia](#) within the past 18 months, and the United Nations' ban on Iran's acquisitions of major military systems [expired in October 2020](#). Whereas Iran's power in no way approaches the strategic capabilities of such global US rivals as Russia or China, there are any number of scenarios in which Iran could potentially test the apparent American consensus to try to avoid new major military confrontations in the Middle East.

This article is written in a personal capacity and does not represent the views of the Congressional Research Service or the Library of Congress.

2

The Biden Administration's Foreign Policy: Key Features and Likely Changes

ACRPS Unit for Political Studies²

Having won the American presidential election, and despite incumbent President Donald Trump's refusal to concede, Democratic candidate and President-elect Joe Biden will be inaugurated on January 20. He will face the difficult task of restoring US credibility and global influence.

Biden's Approach to Foreign Policy

Biden presented the framework for his foreign policy in an [expanded article](#) he published in *Foreign Affairs*, in April 2020, titled "Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy after Trump." According to Biden, the United States is the only country that possesses the military, economic, and value system, as well as the ability to mobilize the "free world," to lead globally. But first, the United States must regain its credibility and influence among its opponents and allies alike. Biden's understanding contradicts Trump's chaotic and inconsistent approach to foreign policy and failure to support basic democratic principles around the world. Trump's policies have led to the decline of the United States'

² An [earlier version of this article](#) was published on November 19, 2020 by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) in Doha, Qatar.

standing, undermined its democratic alliances, and weakened its ability to mobilize to meet challenges.

Biden claims that Trump has abandoned allies and shown weakness in front of opponents, in the process eroding the United States' ability to face national security challenges vis-à-vis North Korea, Iran, Syria, Afghanistan, Venezuela, and others. He also accuses the outgoing president of waging unwise trade wars against both friends and foes, to the detriment of the interests of the American people. Biden believes that the challenges facing the United States and the world, from climate change and mass migration to cyber threats and infectious diseases, are becoming more complex and urgent, and that the next president will have to salvage America's reputation and rebuild confidence in its leadership in order to meet the new challenges as soon as possible.

Biden further explains his team's [foreign policy agenda](#) on his website with an essay titled "The Power of America's Example: The Biden Plan for Leading the Democratic World to Meet the Challenges of the 21st Century." When it comes to defending vital US interests, although Biden stresses that he will not "hesitate to protect the American people, including when necessary, by using force," he continues that "the use of force should be our last resort, not the first. It should be used only to defend U.S. vital interests, when the objective is clear and achievable, and with the informed consent of the American people." Accordingly, he asserts that his administration will stop support for "the Saudi-led war in Yemen" because it does not fall within the priorities of the United States.

Biden believes it is necessary to end the "forever wars" in Afghanistan and the Middle East that have cost the United States "untold blood and

Biden believes it is necessary to end the "forever wars" in Afghanistan and the Middle East that have cost the United States "untold blood and treasure," and to focus instead on specific military missions.

treasure," and to focus instead on specific military missions, with small numbers of special forces, and by providing intelligence and logistical support to allied forces to address the threats of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. He states that the United States is required to focus on combating terrorism, but that remaining "entrenched

in unwinnable conflicts only drains our capacity to lead on other issues that require our attention, and it prevents us from rebuilding the other instruments of American power.” Biden calls for buttressing diplomacy as a tool for leading allies through international institutions and alliances, such as NATO, and “strengthening cooperation with democratic partners beyond North America and Europe by reaching out to our partners in Asia to fortify our collective capabilities and integrating our friends in Latin America and Africa.” He affirms that the United States, under his administration, will return to its role as a leading force in laying the foundations for international relations by drafting agreements and revitalizing the institutions that regulate the connections and interactions between states and enhance collective security and prosperity.

Expected Foreign Policy Features under the Biden Administration

Based on this doctrine, Biden pledges to return to active engagement in important international issues. This requires, first of all, reforming the relationship with allies, improving the image of the United States, and restoring the “power” of its “example.” Hence, his administration will reemphasize the importance of NATO, as part of its efforts to contain Russia, while insisting on the need for its members to [increase their defense spending](#). Washington will also rejoin the Paris climate agreement and the World Health Organization, from which the Trump Administration has withdrawn. Biden’s administration will follow a different pattern of relations with the states that Washington describes as authoritarian, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and there will be a renewed focus on human rights and freedoms. But it is unclear to what extent it will go to champion these values or how it will balance between criticism and pressure in these areas and in strategic relations with allies. Will it suffice to reverse Trump’s policy, or will the Biden team also learn from the mistakes of the Obama Administration? The Biden Administration will return to dealing with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict within the traditional US approach based on the two-state solution. Finally, Biden will cancel the ban Trump placed on citizens of a number of Muslim-majority countries traveling to the United States.

There are four main US policy issues that may see modifications under Biden’s Administration.

1. Israel and Palestine

Biden does not hide his absolute bias in favor of Israel, and the special part of his [foreign policy program](#) explicitly states that the US “commitment to Israel’s security, its qualitative military edge, its right to defend itself, and the 2016 Memorandum of Understanding is ironclad.”

Biden does not hide his absolute bias in favor of Israel, and the special part of his foreign policy program explicitly states that the US “commitment to Israel’s security, its qualitative military edge, its right to defend itself, and the 2016 Memorandum of Understanding is ironclad.”

The Democratic Party’s national platform refused to describe the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967 as “occupied,” despite talk of a two-state solution. However, the government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will find itself faced with a different approach from the one it got used to in the Trump era.³ This includes a return to the traditional US policy that any solu-

tion to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict should be negotiated, based on the “land for peace” equation and the two-state solution.

The Trump Administration has worked over the past four years to try to resolve the central issues of the conflict—including Jerusalem, refugees, sovereignty, land, and settlements—in favor of Israel. It imposed a fait accompli that precluded the need to enter into negotiations with the Palestinians. When the Palestinians refused, Trump punished them by cutting off funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), then halting development and humanitarian aid to them, closing the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) office in Washington, and working to marginalize them in the context of specific Arab-Israeli normalization agreements that were signed under the title of the “Abraham Accords.”

Biden will not work to move the US embassy from Jerusalem back to Tel Aviv, but he will reopen the US consulate in East Jerusalem that will resume its role as a channel of communication with the Palestinians.

³ The Netanyahu government [collapsed](#) on December 23 and new elections will be held in March 2021.

He also opposes the decision to annex lands in the West Bank and build new settlements or expand the existing ones without an agreement with the Palestinians. His administration will reopen the PLO office in Washington. At the same time, it may encourage the continued strengthening and expansion of relations between Israel and Arab countries before resolving the Palestine issue, but not with Trump's enthusiasm and without blackmail—as happened with Sudan, where normalization with Israel was a condition for removing Sudan from the list of states sponsoring terrorism and for canceling sanctions on the country.

2. Iran

President-elect Biden has insisted that his administration is ready to reinstate the nuclear deal with Iran if Tehran is willing to abide by its terms and conditions. But he has also stressed that he will continue to take a stronger approach toward Iran's other destabilizing activities in the region. He believes that there is a smart—rather than self-defeating—way to confront the threat that Iran poses to US interests. Although Biden considers Qassem Soleimani—the former commander of the Quds Force whom the Trump Administration assassinated in early 2020—to have been a dangerous person, he says that Soleimani's killing has reinforced Iran's determination to evade the strict restrictions stipulated by the nuclear agreement.

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Biden may have an opportunity to reach a new agreement with Iran, taking advantage of the difficult conditions in Tehran due to the harsh sanctions imposed on it by the Trump Administration. But this will not be easy, due to the severely weakened position of the agreement's advocates in Iran because it failed to produce significant improvements. Furthermore, the conservatives are expected to win the Iranian presidential elections scheduled for June 2021.

3. China

The relationship with China, as America's geopolitical rival, poses the most prominent strategic dilemma for any US administration. China is in

Biden does not deny the existence of major challenges in the relationship with China, but he believes that the Trump Administration has managed the relationship recklessly.

competition with the United States economically and technologically. It threatens US global hegemony as it consolidates its control over the South China Sea, continues to build its military strength, and extends its influence in East Asia and in many other regions of the world. Under the Trump Administration, relations between the two countries

deteriorated to their lowest point. Some believe that the United States and China have entered a new cold war phase, especially in light of the escalating disputes over trade, tariffs, piracy of American technology, tensions with Hong Kong and Taiwan, and the status of Uighur Muslims. The fact that Trump continues to accuse Beijing of responsibility for the spread of the COVID-19 virus has strained relations further. Instead of weakening China, Trump's rhetoric may have actually emboldened Beijing as a result of his administration's abandonment of its absolute support for allies in East Asia and flirtation with the leader of North Korea. And whatever Trump claims, even the trade imbalance with China **has not changed**.

Biden does not deny the existence of major challenges in the relationship with China, but he believes that the Trump Administration has managed the relationship recklessly. This is because during the last four years, the United States has isolated itself from its closest allies and partners, such as Canada and the European Union, by declaring trade wars with them like it did with China, thus weakening the United States' **capacity to confront and contain** the latter. Biden **stresses** that the United States must be strict with China, but the most effective way to do so is by using a carrot-and-stick strategy and building a united front of allies and partners of the United States to confront human rights violations in China. This can be done while seeking cooperation with Beijing on issues where interests converge, such as climate change, nonproliferation of nuclear weapons in North Korea and Iran, and global health security. Biden's approach is based on the fact that the United States alone represents a large share of global GDP, and when US economic power combines with the economic strength of other western and Asian democracies, such as Japan

and South Korea, **China will not be able to ignore** more than half of the global economy.

4. Russia

Biden has always insisted that he will take a more hawkish stance with Russia than Trump, who admired Russian President Vladimir Putin and repeatedly questioned US intelligence about Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. The Obama Administration, in which Biden was vice president, imposed harsh sanctions on Moscow over its annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. Biden **emphasizes the need** to “impose real costs on Russia for its violations of international norms and stand with Russian civil society, which has bravely stood up time and again against President Vladimir Putin’s kleptocratic authoritarian system.”

Biden believes that strengthening the military capabilities of NATO will be necessary to confront “Russian aggression.” Although many observers expected the escalation of tension between Washington and Moscow under the Biden Administration, nuclear arms control may be one of

Biden believes that strengthening the military capabilities of NATO will be necessary to confront “Russian aggression.”

the areas for cooperation between the two parties. This is because the **START treaty** signed in 2010 expires in February 2021. Biden **believes** that this treaty is “an anchor of strategic stability between the United States and Russia.” Therefore, there will not be a return to the cold war but rather to a more militant policy with Russia and a greater commitment to the security of allies.

Conclusion

Biden’s goal of restoring the United States’ reputation and confidence among its allies will not be an easy task. International divisions run deep and the suspicions of Washington’s allies about an international order centered around the United States are growing. Many in Europe see close economic relations with China as equally important to those with the United States. In reality, it is unimaginable that the United States today can contain two great powers such as Russia and China on its own, especially in

light of European hesitation. What is even more important is the damage caused by Trump to the reputation and credibility of the United States as the most important and longest standing democracy in the world. Indeed, the deep chasm in American society and its political institutions has been exposed by the recent presidential elections.

3

The Biden Administration and US Foreign Policy Decision-Making

Joe Macaron

December 15, 2020

President-elect Joe Biden's incoming administration will have a lasting impact on the American foreign policy decision-making process, most notably when it comes to the Middle East. President Donald Trump's White House marginalized both the Department of Defense and the Department of State and undermined national security interagency dynamics. The Biden Administration is expected to restore this institutional aspect of the US bureaucracy, which does come with its own set of disadvantages.

Despite a tumultuous transition period leading to the January 20, 2021 inauguration, the Biden transition team is in full preparation mode to take over at a time when staff morale remains low at the Pentagon and the Department of State after four years of tension with and neglect by the White House. Meanwhile, Biden has selected his core national security team, most notably long-time advisor Antony Blinken as secretary of state, retired General Lloyd Austin as defense secretary, and Jake Sullivan as White House national security advisor. In this context, three main questions arise: How did the departing Trump Administration undermine these key national security agencies? What might the incoming Biden Administration do differently? What impact might this shift have on American foreign policy in the Middle East?

Trump and the “Deep State”

Since taking the oath of office in January 2017, President Trump has publicly shown disdain for the Washington establishment. This was clearly reflected in his governing record regarding federal staff turnovers, proposed budget cuts, and lack of interagency processes. As of December 4, the [total turnover](#) among members of President Trump’s executive office was 91 percent, compared to 71 percent during the Obama Administration and 63 percent during the George W. Bush Administration. Meanwhile, the total turnover at the cabinet level was at 11, compared to three under Obama and two under Bush.

Trump has gradually installed loyalists after purging leaders in both the Pentagon and State Department’s civilian hierarchies.

During former Secretary of State [Rex Tillerson’s tenure](#), “60 percent of the State Department’s top-ranking career diplomats resigned and new applications to join the foreign service fell by half.” In October 2020, Trump issued an [executive order](#) giving himself wide authority to hire and fire federal employees in a final attempt to reshape the federal bureau-

cracy. Biden is now expected to rescind the order. Since the US election on November 3rd, Trump has [fired four top officials](#) at the Pentagon, including Defense Secretary Mark Esper who, in June, disagreed with him on using active-duty troops to quell street protests during the country’s racial tensions. On the other hand, on December 10, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [forced the early exit](#) of the State Department’s Acting Inspector General Matthew Klimow, who had replaced the original watchdog Steve Linick, himself fired in May. Trump has gradually installed loyalists after purging leaders in both the Pentagon and State Department’s civilian hierarchies.

The State Department has long struggled for relevance, most notably in the past four years and even after Secretary Pompeo took over in April 2018. Pompeo’s own clout increased in the Trump Administration rather than in the agency he leads; *The New Yorker* even [called him](#) the “Secretary of Trump.” Despite the Trump Administration’s proposed cuts to the State Department’s foreign operations annual budget, to nearly \$40 billion, Congress has pushed back in a bipartisan fashion to maintain a level of spending above \$54 billion. The significant damage, however, was

rather policy oriented, given that Trump conducted a self-centered and turbulent foreign policy via his inner circle and Twitter handle, which marginalized career diplomats doing their job on the ground and undermined the interagency process.

Moreover, civil-military relations have been strained during Trump's presidency. The circumstances behind the exit of former Defense Secretary James Mattis, himself a retired general, were [difficult for the Pentagon](#) after the latter challenged Trump's abrupt decision in December 2018 to pull American troops out of Syria. While Trump ultimately did not withdraw from Syria, he has [ongoing plans](#) to significantly cut the number of US troops deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq before leaving office, a move that was long rejected by US military leaders. Trump [has ordered](#) the pull-out of American troops in Somalia and their relocation to Kenya at the beginning of 2021. [He said](#) in September that US soldiers are "in love" with him but "the top people in the Pentagon probably aren't, because they want to do nothing but fight wars so that all of those wonderful companies that make the bombs and make the planes and make everything else stay happy." However, his administration's actions [reflect a militarized federal budget](#). According to [an analysis](#) by *The Washington Post*, the White House Office of Management and Budget projected that military spending for the 2021 fiscal year, compared to 2016 levels, would increase by 29 percent (or some \$164 billion).⁴ Trump also [boasted](#) about the technology and job growth factor of the US military complex during his military sales pitches with some Middle East leaders.

What Biden Might Do Differently: Back to the Interagency Process

Following his win, President-elect Biden [announced](#) that "America is back" and affirmed that "we've been through a lot of damage done over the last four years, in my view. We need to rebuild our institutions." His national security appointments came as no surprise, with both Blinken and Sullivan as former Biden advisors and Obama Administration veterans. Michèle Flournoy, who co-founded with Blinken a political strategy

⁴ The House of Representatives and Senate [passed](#) a \$740 billion National Defense Authorization Act with veto-proof majorities. However, President Trump [vetoed](#) the bill on December 23, prompting the House on December 28, and the Senate on January 1, 2021, to overwhelmingly [override](#) his veto.

firm ([WestExec Advisors](#)), was considered for the top Pentagon job but not chosen, [apparently](#) because of her ties with consulting and investment firms (Blinken [reportedly](#) had similar ties) as well as because of her endorsement, as undersecretary of defense in 2009, of the surge of US troops in Afghanistan, which Biden rejected.

The president-elect seems keen to have a team with whose views he feels comfortable and with whom he prefers to work.

The president-elect seems keen to have a team with whose views he feels comfortable and with whom he prefers to work. Blinken and Sullivan are known to have a close relationship, and the latter was selected as White House national security advisor because of his track record of seeking

compromise and his inclusive approach. Biden is a believer in the interagency process of consultation across concerned federal agencies and he seems to bet on Sullivan to revive this national security practice. It is noteworthy that the role of former Secretary of State John Kerry as a cabinet level climate czar, with offices in both the State Department and the White House, might complicate the interagency process given the wide portfolio Biden has given to Kerry. It remains unclear how successfully the young Sullivan can assume that leadership role in managing this complicated process and the different personalities involved.

Biden made a rare move of writing an op-ed for [The Atlantic](#) defending his choice of the first African American, General Lloyd Austin, to lead the Pentagon. The recently retired general will need a waiver from Congress to become defense secretary since he has not been out of uniform for the required seven years. Some in Washington are concerned about having a trend of recently retired generals running the Pentagon and how this might impact civil-military relations. Only twice before has Congress granted such a waiver, for George Marshall in the 1940s and James Mattis in 2017. *The Wall Street Journal's* editorial board [called Austin](#) "another General of Defense." Biden came to know Austin from the White House briefing rooms during the Obama Administration when he was leading the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) and overseeing Middle East operations against the so-called Islamic State. Austin was once [described](#) as "the invisible man" due to his low profile

approach in dealing with the media and in public engagement. Another [connection](#) between the two men is that Biden's late son, Beau, once served as an attorney on Austin's military staff in Iraq.

Implications for the Middle East

It became evident recently that the Trump Administration is setting the stage to force new regional dynamics in the final stretch of Trump's presidency, before Biden takes over, with [increasing pressure](#) on Iran, [new sanctions](#) on Turkey, and a series of Arab-Israeli [normalization deals](#). Pompeo [told Fox News](#) about Biden's national security appointments: "I know some of these folks, they took a very different view, they lived in a bit of a fantasy world. They led from behind, they appeased. I hope they will choose a different course."

It is true that members of the Biden team come with their own background and experiences that will shape their views on the Middle East. Sullivan played a key role in paving the way for the Iran nuclear deal in 2015. Blinken contributed to shaping the umbrella of over 60 countries to combat the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and was [called Biden's "alter ego"](#); he [believes](#) that "as geopolitical competition intensifies, we must supplement diplomacy with deterrence." In a [speech in June 2015](#), he said that "American leadership has a unique ability to mobilize others and to make a difference."

In September 2015, when serving as CENTCOM commander, Austin was against the growing consensus in Washington to establish no-fly zones in Syria; he [told the Senate Armed Services Committee](#) that "it will take a ground force to be able to protect the refugees if we do that. I don't see the force available to be able to protect them currently ... So I would not recommend it at this point in time." The late Senator John McCain was [critical of Austin's views](#), saying to him that "I have never seen a hearing that is as divorced from the reality of every outside expert and what you are saying." Austin believes in the traditional use of American power by maintaining military deployments overseas. He said the following during an [interview in 2018](#): "I believe we should be doing all we can to preserve our current forward presence to the greatest extent possible rather than cede ground and regional partnerships."

If they are both confirmed by the US Senate, Blinken is expected to have some interventionist inclinations when needed while Austin is most likely reserved on the potential use of US military power.

If they are both confirmed by the US Senate, Blinken is expected to have some interventionist inclinations when needed while Austin is most likely reserved on the potential use of US military power. Sullivan would thoroughly engage these debates while having the close ear of President Biden.

Austin's highest priority would be the protection of US soldiers in the battlefield, mainly in the Middle East. However, given his combat experience in counterinsurgency, there are those who question whether he can maneuver the challenges of deterring traditional foes like Russia and China. This should not be a disqualifying challenge, however, given that he will run an agency and a team that will be well versed in these daunting issues.

The assumption that Biden's will be a third Obama term might not be entirely accurate, even with Obama veterans serving in the next administration. There were lessons learned in the past four years and Trump has created new dynamics in the Middle East that will be hard for the Biden Administration not to acknowledge. Most importantly, Middle East leaders will have to navigate this diversity in the interagency process instead of going through a presidential advisor like Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner. This bureaucratic shift is a return to the inherent institutional rivalry in Washington, which means that the US decision-making process will be thorough and slower compared to Trump's impulsive governing style.

4

Democracy and Human Rights in the Middle East: The Biden Agenda

Charles W. Dunne

November 25, 2020

As news that former Vice President Joe Biden had won the American presidential election began to circulate on Saturday, November 7, messages of congratulations soon began pouring in from US friends and allies around the globe. But the world's authoritarian states—including several in the Middle East—were not quick off the mark. Saudi Arabia and its crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), [waited over 24 hours](#) to offer congratulations to President-elect Biden and his running mate Kamala Harris, even as the Saudi prince made time to congratulate the leader of Tanzania on his reelection. President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt offered his own [anodyne congratulations](#) late Saturday evening. The Chinese government brought up the rear with [felicitations on November 13](#) as Moscow remained [noncommittal as of November 24](#).⁵

There is ample reason for the reticence of authoritarian leaders as they contemplate a Joe Biden presidency. The president-elect [has pledged](#) to reinforce democratic norms in the United States while advancing them abroad, and fundamental human rights—freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and freedom from torture among them—“will be at the core of U.S. foreign policy.” So will “rallying the free world to push

⁵ Russia [congratulated](#) Biden on December 15 following the Electoral College vote.

back against rising authoritarianism,” as Biden himself has [stated](#). Antony Blinken, Biden’s nominee for secretary of state, has a [well-established reputation](#) for supporting the promotion of democracy and human rights in American foreign policy; the choice for US ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, has served as a board member of the National Endowment for Democracy.

No wonder Middle East autocrats are worried.

Defending Democracy: A Daunting Task Ahead

According to [Freedom House](#), global democracy has been in retreat for 14 straight years. In addition, 25 of the 41 established democracies around the world have suffered net declines. President-elect Biden aims to start pushing back by [holding](#) a “Summit for Democracy” sometime in his first year in office. The summit event would convene the world’s democratic states to consider measures to “strengthen our democratic institutions, honestly confront the challenge of nations that are backsliding, and forge a common agenda....” The summit would also include civil society and

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the private sector, both to expand the range of stakeholders in democratic advancement and establish a holistic approach that recognizes the vital role nongovernmental actors have to play. (In the case of social media companies, the summit would help [bring pressure to ensure](#) their “algorithms

and platforms are not empowering the surveillance state” or spreading misinformation and incitement to violence and extremism.) The meeting would aim to extract new commitments from those present to take action in three main areas: “(1) fighting corruption; (2) defending against authoritarianism, including election security; (3) advancing human rights in their own nations and abroad.”

In fact, not only are these three interlinked elements likely to constitute the main themes of the Summit for Democracy, but they would also form the basis of a comprehensive agenda to defend democracy and advance human rights worldwide. Indeed, they could have major effects in the Middle East.

Combatting a Crisis of Corruption

According to the [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime](#), corruption costs developing countries \$1.26 trillion per year. This has a host of negative economic impacts and is deeply intertwined with human rights abuses by damaging rule of law, denying access to justice and political voice, and fostering a culture of impunity. In the Middle East, as Transparency International has [documented](#), the perception and experience of corruption in people's daily lives is widespread and its effects on both local and national governance are pernicious. A recent [public opinion survey](#) conducted by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Doha, Qatar, revealed that a full 91 percent of Arabs believe that corruption (ranging from limited to widespread) exists in their countries. As many as 59 percent believe that politicians and senior state employees contribute to the spread of financial and administrative corruption.

The United States government has taken note. Most recently, Trump's own Treasury Department sanctioned Lebanese politician [Gebran Bassil](#), calling his large-scale corruption emblematic of a problem that has undermined Lebanon's social and political stability and led the country to the brink of collapse.

Although Biden himself has said little about endemic corruption in the Middle East, the president-elect's global anti-corruption agenda could hardly ignore the region. According to the Financial Action Task Force, for example, the UAE is a major hub of international [money laundering](#) that any serious regional anti-corruption strategy would need to address. In Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's "anti-corruption" drive in 2017 did little to get at the root causes of corruption in the kingdom, where it remains a serious problem; instead, the drive spawned a [host of human rights abuses](#). That, too, should be considered carefully as part of a regional plan to defeat corruption.

Authoritarian Governance

With regard to defending against authoritarianism, Biden appears focused primarily on pushing back against Russia and China, which have had a good run during the Trump years as they undermined confidence in democracy while scoring diplomatic and economic successes in many

In the Middle East, the Biden Administration is unlikely to take the issue head-on. The president-elect's foreign policy team would likely signal support for general democratic principles and back meaningful, if gradual, political reform.

parts of the world, the Middle East included. The Biden Administration will cooperate with allies to develop tangible strategies to counter these gains and shore up faltering democracies, especially in eastern Europe.

In the Middle East, the Biden Administration is unlikely to take the issue head-on. The president-elect's foreign policy team would likely signal support for general democratic principles and back meaningful, if

gradual, political reform, while steering clear of a more robust push for democratization along the lines of President George W. Bush's "[Freedom Agenda](#)." Elections, when held, will be applauded, if they are modestly free and fair, but there will be no rash demands for quick elections in post-conflict or transitioning states. In general, the Biden Administration is likely to indulge in quiet encouragement of democratic reform in the Middle East, expressed through careful public messaging, enhanced ties with civil society and political activists, and restored budgetary support for US democracy and governance initiatives.

Human Rights: A Sharp Break with the Last Four Years

The Biden Administration's human rights agenda in the Middle East, by contrast with its approach to democratization in the region, is likely to be sharper and have more immediate effects. Saudi Arabia and Egypt are two countries that will soon be in the spotlight.

Biden referred to [Saudi Arabia as a "pariah"](#) in a primary debate during the presidential campaign last year, promising to "make them pay the price" for the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, including a potential ban on US arms sales. While Biden appreciates the strategic value of the US-Saudi relationship, he and his team have indicated the need to place it on a more "realistic" footing, including a more honest appraisal of and response to the kingdom's deepening repression and human rights abuses. Biden has [made clear](#) that unlike Trump—who refused to condemn the Khashoggi murder and [vetoed legislation](#) aimed at cutting off the weapons

pipeline to Saudi Arabia because of the ruinous war in Yemen—he will ascertain that under his administration “America will never again check its principles at the door just to buy oil or sell weapons ... But America needs to insist on responsible Saudi actions and impose consequences for reckless ones.”

Biden is likely to keep Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman at arm’s length diplomatically. He will factor in human rights standards to a significant extent as his administration considers the value of the bilateral strategic relationship. Riyadh’s involvement in Yemen will be an early focus. Biden’s foreign policy team will likely revisit US support for the conflict, specifically arms sales and resupply, as well as other forms of support the United States has provided, **including** targeting information and aerial refueling for Saudi warplanes.

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Egypt will find itself in roughly the same boat. Once Trump’s “**favorite dictator**,” President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi will no longer benefit from a close relationship with the White House. Egypt’s sharply deteriorating human rights situation will come under greater scrutiny and Biden will be more inclined to withhold at least portions of military aid in response. The Biden Administration is also likely to undertake a review of the overall strategic relationship, including military assistance; Biden advisors have indicated that Cairo can **no longer expect** a “blank check” given the increasing repression during the Sisi years. These changes will be reflected in how the president talks about Egypt, in Sisi’s access to the Oval Office (or lack thereof), and in increased skepticism among US officials as to the future of bilateral security ties.

Once a Senator, Always a Senator

No one, however, should expect the Biden Administration to suddenly abandon relationships with long-time allies in the Middle East, which have served US security interests relatively well over the years.

Biden remains a cautious centrist Democrat. As former chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and vice president to the hyper-careful Barack Obama, he will not become an agent of radical change overnight. Indeed, some observers have characterized the incoming administration as a potential Obama “third term.”

Biden may make some splashy early moves to signal a new approach, such as reversing Trump’s “Muslim ban” on travel to the United States, seeking to rejoin the United Nations Human Rights Council, and [lifting sanctions](#) against officials of the International Criminal Court. But he will probably remain squarely in the middle of a Washington consensus that prioritizes cooperation with Middle East autocracies on security, military, and counterterrorism issues, and which often ignores many of their internal abuses in the belief that this is an acceptable cost of doing business. The strength of Biden’s commitment to a different path forward remains to be seen.

What Would a New Strategy Look Like?

If Biden wants to pay more than lip service to democratic ideals and human rights in the Middle East, he should do more than just reevaluate long-standing relationships with Egypt and Saudi Arabia and other countries of the region, perhaps trimming arms sales here and there to send a message. If it is serious in pursuing such an agenda, the Biden Administration should adopt a new strategy that would signal strongly that the era of cozy accommodation with autocrats is over.

Here are several steps the Biden Administration would do well to take.

Ensure a consistent message from all departments of the Executive Branch on human rights.

Convincing governments in the Middle East that the United States is serious about supporting democratization and human rights in the region is much more than a matter of a few rhetorical salvos from the president. Biden must make sure that, in addition to the State Department and USAID, the Department of Defense and the intelligence community are communicating similar messages to their vast and influential networks of contacts throughout the region, or at least not undermining them by focusing solely on traditional themes of security and stability. Other

Executive Branch agencies need to follow suit.

Make common cause with Congress.

Considerable bipartisan support exists for human rights and democracy on Capitol Hill; the

Biden Administration should harness it to advance its goals in the Middle East. The Trump Administration has ignored Congress by consistently seeking to cut funding for Middle East democracy, human rights, and governance (DRG) programming. Its budget proposal for FY21 “continues the trend of securitizing U.S. aid” to the region, as the [Project on Middle East Democracy](#) has noted, proposing \$5.46 billion for security assistance, or 83.4 percent of the total request for the Middle East—while democracy assistance accounts for only 2.9 percent of the total. As in past years, Congress is prepared to restore the funding for the DRG programs that Trump has deleted. The Biden Administration should take a different tack, expanding this funding while reversing Trump’s effort to “securitize” aid to the Middle East.

Biden could also employ members of the Senate and House of Representatives of both parties as personal envoys on key human rights issues from time to time, asking them to raise these issues when traveling to the region and meeting foreign officials in Washington. Bipartisanship in this area could have the salubrious effect of building trust between the president and Congress in other areas as well.

Address the serious issue of political prisoners.

President Ronald Reagan famously [met Russian refuseniks](#) at the US ambassador’s Moscow residence during a US-Soviet summit in 1988 and publicly called on then-premier Mikhail Gorbachev to release all those imprisoned for their political or religious beliefs. President Biden could make a similar impact by taking up the case of the thousands of [political prisoners](#) held by regimes throughout the region. Their continued detention not only silences independent critical voices but has deleterious economic and social effects as well.

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In addition to making the release of political prisoners a cornerstone of his human rights policy in the Middle East, the new president should make an effort to highlight the most egregious individual cases publicly and to governments. Biden himself is no stranger to this tactic, having advocated personally as a senator on behalf of imprisoned former Egyptian human rights activist and presidential candidate Ayman Nour, and more recently speaking out (as a candidate) against the detention of relatives of the US-based Egyptian activist Mohamad Soltan.⁶

As president, Biden could make a good start by demanding the freedom of [Gasser Abdel-Razek](#), the executive director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, and of his staff who were arrested and jailed earlier this month. (The nominee for the position of secretary of state, Antony Blinken, recently [criticized](#) their detention.)⁷ Biden should also insist on the release of [Loujain al-Hathloul](#), the Saudi women's rights activist. Imprisoned in 2018 and subjected to torture, her fate has been ignored by the Trump Administration, even though Trump son-in-law

If Biden hopes to revitalize Palestinian-Israeli negotiations along with prospects for a two-state solution, he also needs to address the plight of some 355 Palestinians held by Israel in administrative detention.

Jared Kushner's close ties to MbS could have played a role in pushing for her release.⁸ [Nasrin Sotoudeh](#), the Iranian human rights lawyer sentenced last year to 38 years in prison, is another case the administration should take up as a matter of urgency.⁹ And if Biden hopes to revitalize Palestinian-Israeli negotiations along with prospects for a two-state solution, he also needs to address the plight of some [355 Palestinians](#) held

⁶ Following public pressure and news of Biden's election, Egypt [released](#) five of Soltan's relatives on November 9, 2020.

⁷ Abdel-Razek and his two colleagues were [released](#) on December 3rd.

⁸ Al-Hathloul was [transferred](#) to a special anti-terrorism court on November 27 and [sentenced](#) to five years and eight months in prison for "incitement to change the kingdom's ruling regime and cooperating with individuals and entities to carry out a foreign agenda."

⁹ After being released temporarily for health reasons, Sotoudeh was [ordered back](#) to prison on December 2nd.

by Israel in [administrative detention](#), meaning without trial and without having been convicted of or charged with a crime. There are, unfortunately, many other examples.

Apply US laws to human rights abusers in the Middle East.

The [Global Magnitsky Act](#), which authorizes the US government to impose visa bans and targeted sanctions on officials and private citizens thought to be responsible for human rights violations overseas, should be applied more regularly in the Middle East. Doing so, or even talking publicly about doing so, would send a powerful message. The Biden Administration should also exercise the [Leahy Law](#), which prohibits American support to foreign military units that grossly violate human rights. The incoming administration must also respect and reinforce the integrity of the arms sales notification process to Congress, which the Trump Administration has [ignored or abused](#). All of these steps would command significant bipartisan support.

Bent but Not Broken

The rise of populist authoritarianism in the United States, the effort to overturn the results of the presidential election, and the assault on basic democratic norms will inspire few to believe in American commitment to democracy or human rights going forward. Restoring American leadership on these issues requires a long and painstaking process of rebuilding trust and credibility, both domestically and internationally. By dint of ideology and expertise, the Biden Administration is well-suited to doing so. As he makes the case through words and actions in the Middle East, President Biden can go a long way to reestablishing the reputation of the United States as the world's most ardent defender of freedom and inalienable rights.

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5

Biden Has a New Opportunity in Syria

Radwan Ziadeh

December 7, 2020

The exceptional nature of the 2020 American presidential election, held in the shadow of the coronavirus pandemic that has so far killed over a quarter million Americans,¹⁰ gave little chance to both the incumbent President Donald Trump and his challenger, former Vice President Joe Biden, to discuss foreign policy challenges. Instead, in campaign gatherings, Trump lauded what he considered his accomplishments in the Middle East such as destroying the so-called Islamic State and killing its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, moving the American embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, and recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Syrian Golan Heights. For his part, Biden confined himself to his headquarters and held mostly virtual public gatherings in which he hardly brought up foreign policy matters.

Trump did not discuss Syria much except to describe it in 2019 merely as a place of “[sand and death](#).” He subsequently saw no strategic value in the country for the United States and thus wanted to withdraw American forces from there. But pressure from the Department of Defense forced him to leave a residual force—as he explained it—to “[take the oil](#).” By contrast, Biden made no public statements about Syria that would commit

¹⁰ As of January 13, 2021, the number of deaths in the United States due to the coronavirus has [surpassed 380,000](#).

him to a specific policy, prompting questions about how his administration is likely to deal with the country that is approaching the end of an entire decade of civil war.

Two Different Perspectives

There appear to be two perspectives as to what a Biden policy would be like in Syria. The first believes that he is likely to repeat the [Obama Administration's approach](#) and points to the number of officials Biden has drawn from its ranks to help devise his policies toward the Middle East. These were important officials in his presidential campaign, such as Antony Blinken, whom he [tapped to be his secretary of state](#). They are isolationists who advocate withdrawing from the Middle East, and specifically from Syria, while continuing to deploy drones against terrorists and extremists. In effect, they reason, the United States should not pursue its political or military engagement in a failed region that is divided along sectarian lines, as former President Barack Obama recently wrote in his new memoir, *A Promised Land*.

Former Obama officials criticized the Democratic president's policy in Syria and Biden may have another opportunity to correct its shortcomings.

The second perspective advises that President-elect Biden should not behave as if he is a [carbon copy of Obama](#). While it is true that Biden served as Obama's vice president for eight years, the final decisions were made by the president, be they regarding the number of American troops or their

deployment in the Middle East. It would thus be folly, adherents contend, to assume that Biden will repeat Obama's policies, especially with regard to the Iranian nuclear program and whether it gets prioritized over the Syrian crisis. Former Obama officials criticized the Democratic president's policy in Syria and Biden may have another opportunity to correct its shortcomings. In other words, holders of this perspective [expect positive changes](#) in how the new president is likely to deal with the continuing morass in Syria.

Whatever perspective wins in the coming administration's deliberations on Syria, there are serious decisions that President-elect Biden

will have to make about many of the issues left behind by the Obama Administration (and continued during Trump's). Whether he gives Syria priority or relegates it to a secondary status, there are specific concerns Biden will have to address during his term in office.

American Forces in Syria

The United States deploys [some 600 soldiers](#) in Syria's east, an oil-rich and strategic location formerly controlled by the so-called Islamic State. The US military has allowed the Kurdish-controlled Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to exploit the area's resources to finance their operations in the region. In 2019, President Trump declared that he wanted to [withdraw American soldiers](#) from there, only to change his mind and allow them to stay. The year before, the president had said that regional states, especially those in the Gulf, would finance the SDF's operations. Indeed, Saudi Arabia [contributed](#) some \$100 million for that purpose.

The decision to finance the SDF angered Turkey, which shares a 600-mile border with Syria and considers any intervention to assist the SDF—which is affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), viewed as a terrorist organization by Ankara—to be a direct threat to Turkey's security and stability. That led to a political dispute between Washington and Ankara that almost resulted in economic sanctions on Turkey, a principal actor within NATO. An added complication was Turkey's [acquisition](#) of the Russian S-400 missile defense system to which the United States has objected—and that is despite the system's existence in Greece, another NATO country.

Considering the complications on the ground, as president, Biden may simply preserve the status quo of US forces in Syria and perhaps increase the number of troops by a few hundred. The Islamic State appears to be active again in the Syrian desert and it may be unthinkable that Biden would repeat Obama's original mistake of withdrawing forces from Iraq before ridding that country of the organization. Such a calculation is buttressed by the fact that

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the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad is unconcerned about fighting the Islamic State and is instead preparing a military campaign against what is left of the Syrian opposition in Idlib province.

At any rate, the presence of American forces in Syria should be part of a strategic plan with clear objectives, not a mere demand by President Trump about taking the country's oil. This plan should also receive the support and endorsement of American allies in NATO. Such a coalescence of parties would give the United States leverage in negotiations with Russia about a political transition. It would also pressure President Bashar al-Assad to accept the 2015 UN Security Council [Resolution 2254](#) that stipulates a peaceful transition and independent and fair presidential and parliamentary elections under United Nations supervision. It is thus incumbent upon the Biden Administration to augment American forces in Syria and link them to a strategic plan to allow for a peaceful resolution of the war there.

Political Transition in Syria

There should be no expectation that Russia will change its policy in Syria. It only pretends to support a political resolution of the war while simultaneously helping Assad militarily on the ground against opposition forces and defending him in the UN Security Council. Russia has used its veto power [some 15 times](#) on Syria, mostly to protect Assad against accusations of war crimes and crimes against humanity. It recently [tried to organize](#) a conference on repatriating Syrian refugees but that fell by the wayside because conditions are not conducive to their safe return. Indeed, Biden should realize that Russia's position will not change so long as President Vladimir Putin remains in power. If anything became clear over the last few years of Russia's involvement in Syria, it is that the Russian and Syrian regimes are similar in that they both espouse strict authoritarian and social control.

Many Syrians will be disappointed that the new American president will not be more interventionist in Syria than his predecessors. They hope that Biden will make Syria [a priority](#) in his Middle East policy, which would help the political transition to a democratic and pluralistic system become a reality. Such an approach, they reason, will facilitate the return

of internally displaced persons and refugees to their homes and villages voluntarily and safely.

This is perhaps where Biden can be a decisive leader who is different from the reticent Obama and the neglectful Trump, both of whom ignored the political transition that was needed and concentrated instead on fighting the

Islamic State. In this respect, the United States can use its political and diplomatic arsenal to build and rebuild the “[Friends of Syria Coalition](#),” thus increasing pressure on Russia and the Syrian regime to accept Resolution 2254. Biden’s opening here, and following the failure of the [Geneva](#) and [Astana](#) rounds of negotiations, could be to push for UN-supervised presidential and parliamentary elections. Such a step is the surest way to ensure the creation of a representative government that can exercise authority over all of Syria and eliminate all foreign militias operating in the country, especially those supported by Iran.

Simultaneously, the United States should vigorously activate the [Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act of 2019](#) by imposing sanctions on Russian companies and economic concerns that violate human rights in Syria, in addition to targeting Syrian, Iranian, and other persons and companies. It is important that Russia pay for its crimes in Syria and rethink its continued support for Bashar al-Assad. It is clear that the country is becoming a failed state that cannot secure basic commodities for its people like cooking oil, gas, bread, fuel, water, and electricity.

Many Syrians will be disappointed that the new American president will not be more interventionist in Syria than his predecessors. They hope that Biden will make Syria a priority in his Middle East policy.

American-Turkish Relations

The new president must make a decision about [American-Turkish relations](#), especially those affecting Syria. If, as expected, he were to adopt a hard-line position with Russia, which has a large military presence in the country, he might have to do the same with Turkey, whose forces operate in the north following previous military incursions that facilitated the expulsion of Kurdish forces. Indeed, the United States must decide who is going to be its ally in Syria: Russia, as the case has been with President

Trump, or Turkey, which is trying to protect the northwestern province of Idlib and its environs against a Russian-Syrian offensive. Such a choice is likely to determine how Biden pursues his involvement in Syria for years to come.

There should be no doubt that American-Turkish relations have suffered from serious difficulties over the last few years. While Trump was able to maintain a personal relationship with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Biden is likely to prefer institutional relationships that are built on mutual interests and cooperation. This, in turn, is likely to augment both the American and Turkish positions in Syria.

What may be an obstacle in the way to better US-Turkey relations is the ultimate fate of the Syrian Democratic Forces.

On the other hand, what may be an obstacle in the way to better US-Turkey relations is the ultimate fate of the Syrian Democratic Forces. Turkey is keen on ending the SDF's presence on the Syrian-Turkish border, as was evident in its "[Operation Olive Branch](#)" that

forced the SDF to withdraw toward Raqqa and Qamishli and the surrounding areas adjoining American troops. The SDF does not enjoy much popular support in its predominantly Arab areas of operation, which is a source of concern for its American supporters. Still, the SDF has strong bipartisan support in the US Congress as an American ally against the Islamic State. This is likely to put the Biden Administration in a bind and make the new president's already difficult choices on a future strategy in Syria even more complicated.

It Is All Contingent

These considerations regarding what to expect from a Biden policy toward Syria are obviously contingent on the importance Syria will enjoy in his administration's foreign policy formulations and how it will be prioritized among the responsible officials. It should be remembered that Biden's primary focus will most likely be domestic, especially in how he addresses the coronavirus pandemic and its economic repercussions. But it is hoped that he will consider Syria as a priority in the Middle East because of its compelling humanitarian, military, and political dimensions.

Simultaneously, there should be no doubt that American policy toward Syria will be part of—and related to—how the Biden Administration approaches Russia and Iran, arguably the two most important players in Syria. Equally important are the political proclivities of the coterie of officials Biden chooses to lead his foreign and national security policies. Overall, it is hoped that Biden will be independent in how he looks at Syria and not be bogged down by Obama's and Trump's approaches. It is critical for the United States to engage seriously in trying to secure a peaceful resolution that can end 10 years of a destructive civil war in Syria.

6

Lebanon and the Biden Administration: Détente or More Sanctions?

Diana Moukalled

December 8, 2020

In 2009, when he was vice president to Barack Obama, President-elect Joe Biden [visited Lebanon](#) for a few days. He was then the highest ranking American official to visit the country since the end of its civil war in 1990. His mission was to explore the possibilities of a strategic change following the upcoming parliamentary elections at that time. More specifically, Biden sought to look into the potential for limiting Iran's influence in Lebanon by helping the political front opposed to the role of the Islamic Republic.

During that visit, Biden met Lebanon's politicians and the leadership of the Lebanese army, which the United States aids with generous military and financial assistance. Supporting the army and the forces of the [March 14 Coalition](#) was then considered a sure way of helping the Lebanese state stand up to and confront the illegitimate armed militias, principally that of Hezbollah. Eleven years later, Biden is preparing to become president while Lebanon experiences dramatic change. The country has sunk in the regional quagmire as Iran becomes more entrenched in Lebanese affairs and institutions. It has become a [failed state](#) and it is governed by a corrupt and maleficent [class of politicians and financiers](#).

What Biden Will See in Lebanon

The “half” of Lebanon that Biden visited in 2009—the March 14 Coalition that opposed Iran—today is divided and broken; it is but a memory of itself. Furthermore, Biden’s victory in the presidential election has not been welcomed by many of the group’s components who, in fact, were relying on President Donald Trump’s uncompromising policy toward Iran and on additional sanctions on Hezbollah and its Lebanese allies.

When he enters the White House, Biden will find that Lebanon is going through one of its most disastrous episodes of political, economic, and social trouble. Lebanon today suffers from its worst financial collapse in history and from political and economic crises that were exacerbated by the horrendous explosion at the Port of Beirut on August 4, 2020, that killed and maimed thousands of people. It is well known that responsibility for the explosion falls squarely on the shoulders of neglectful bureaucratic and political elites who, months later, *have yet to face* necessary sanctions.

Corruption in Lebanon was not the decisive factor in how the Trump Administration dealt with the country; instead, Trump’s hard-line policy toward some factions in Lebanon was dictated by his bloody battle with Iran.

To be sure, the explosion and the prior organized heist of the bank deposits of ordinary Lebanese show the nefariousness of the dominant political class in the country. Any American administration should take this reality into serious consideration in its dealings with Lebanon. Bolstering Lebanon’s corrupt and guilty political class will not bring security or stability, for

the failed state status will be a danger to Lebanon and the region. What would be worrisome is for the Biden Administration to ignore the current political and economic reality in Lebanon, as the Trump Administration did over the last few years. Corruption in Lebanon was not the decisive factor in how the Trump Administration dealt with the country; instead, Trump’s hard-line policy toward some factions in Lebanon was dictated by his bloody battle with Iran and the complete allegiance of the factions it supports. In other words, as Lebanon continues to suffer from its

troubles, it is in danger of being merely a byproduct of how the new Biden Administration will deal with Iran.

While Lebanon is a small state that may not figure prominently in the Biden Administration's policy toward the Middle East, it continues to be the meeting place of many important regional crosscutting currents. For example, Saad Hariri's difficulty in forming a new government since he [was designated](#) as prime minister in October is only a reflection of the mutual local and regional influences on the country. Many domestic actors are beholden to each other and to regional powers while the latter have their own preferences in how they use the Lebanese crisis as leverage in negotiations inside or outside the region, as the case is today with Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States.

There indeed is a state of dereliction of duty by the Lebanese polity that has allowed people's savings to be wasted while the dominant political class continues to rule the country and protect its own interests. Hezbollah holds sway in the country while the Lebanese army, which had been the darling of the United States for decades, stands accused of crimes against activists, protesters, and refugees. Indeed, military intelligence has become beholden to President Michel Aoun and his ally Hezbollah. The general liberties and rights for which Lebanon was known in the region are disappearing as security forces and state institutions [threaten activists and journalists](#) with physical harassment or persecution.

The new Biden Administration should be well aware of this grim picture of Lebanon, which in effect led to the October 2019 protests that raised the overarching slogan "all means all" against the entire ruling class—intimating that they should all resign or be ousted from power. What weakened the protest movement and blunted its reform agenda was an unforgiving combination of financial and economic collapse,

If he is to address Lebanon's problems, Biden would have to pay attention to the dual scourges of the corrupt political class and its dominant regional connection, two realities that presently defy easy answers.

sectarian polarization and division, the coronavirus pandemic, and a well-armed militia, Hezbollah. To be sure, if he is to address Lebanon's

problems, Biden would have to pay attention to the dual scourges of the corrupt political class and its dominant regional connection, two realities that presently defy easy answers.

Syria and Israel

As a border state with Syria, Lebanon has not been able to escape the repercussions of the civil war raging there. Almost 900,000 Syrians are registered as refugees in Lebanon; unofficially, however, the number is much higher. Lebanon's political factions have practically split along the lines of supporters and opponents to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, depending on their relationship with Hezbollah, which since 2012 has thrown its military might behind the Assad regime. In fact, the Hezbollah-Syria relationship has inextricably linked Lebanon's fate to that of Syria, complicating the Biden Administration's potential plan of action for Beirut. It is hoped that this approach can try to separate Biden's policy toward Lebanon from Syria as well as focus on assisting the forces of change in the Lebanese capital.

A complicating factor today is that of the Lebanese-Israeli negotiations to demarcate maritime and land borders between Lebanon and Israel. It has become obvious that after many years of hesitation and reluctance, Lebanon chose to take this step in an effort to placate the Trump Administration through its representative, David Schenker. In this matter, Lebanon is of great importance to any American administration, Republican or Democratic, since the negotiations can easily be seen as another opportunity for Arab normalization with Israel. In this, the Trump Administration may have an advantage because it has shown no qualms about applying whatever pressures at its disposal on Lebanon to do what it wants. In Biden's case, dealing with Lebanon will be related to how he addresses relations with Syria, Israel, and Iran.

The Issue of Sanctions

It should be understood at the outset that imposing sanctions on Lebanon by the Trump Administration has had an impact that was totally separated from internal conditions in the country. What sanctions were able to accomplish was to force Lebanon to sit at the negotiating

table with Israel to reach agreement on demarcating maritime borders, and that is despite Hezbollah's influence on politics and the party's close relations with Iran. Neither should the impact of imposing sanctions on President Aoun's son-in-law and former foreign minister, Gebran Bassil, be discounted.

What Lebanese negotiators are trying to do is to exploit the negotiations with Israel to [raise hope](#) that the discovery of gas deposits in the disputed areas will ease Lebanon's economic troubles. Indeed, some politicians have declared that the country will reap billions of dollars annually if an agreement were reached. Others have been more skeptical since other possible areas of exploration have not yielded what was hoped to be plentiful gas resources. Even if gas were available and an agreement were inked with Israel, everyone believes that its economic impact would not be felt for at least a decade because of the need for infrastructure improvements, storage facilities, and distribution networks. That is clearly not deterring President Aoun's supporters from spreading an erroneous impression that gas revenues will be sufficient to repay Lebanon's debts and improve its financial and economic well-being—all without having to address the urgent issue of political and economic reforms, without which Lebanon has no hope of coming out of its troubles.

On the other hand, offering concessions to Israel in the ongoing maritime negotiations does not necessarily mean that imposing sanctions is a winning strategy. In fact, the economic impact of sanctions has been borne by the overwhelming majority of Lebanese who already are suffering from a corrupt political and economic system.

Here, the most crucial question regarding the Biden Administration's policy toward Lebanon is whether it will continue to deal with the country as a sanctioned polity. The answer has serious and disturbing repercussions. Continuing with sanctions will only deepen the current economic and financial collapse. Making sanctions comprehensive and increasing their bite would be adding insult to

Making sanctions comprehensive and increasing their bite would be adding insult to injury to an entire population that would be collectively punished for the actions of its corrupt leaders.

injury to an entire population that would be collectively punished for the actions of its corrupt leaders. Although there are some in Lebanon who feel comfortable with sanctions on the unscrupulous few who are responsible for the dire circumstances, the fact remains that these corrupt individuals are capable of escaping the effect, especially since the Lebanese justice system has proven ineffective, lazy, compromised, and incompetent to prosecute those responsible for the country's problems.

Biden and Hezbollah

There obviously was no love lost between Hezbollah and President Trump, although Party General Secretary Hassan Nasrallah broadcast his doubt that there is any difference between the incumbent president and his successor. But the reality is that Nasrallah and Iran see Biden's election as a positive development because of their conviction that Democrats, in general, are more amenable to a reconciliatory policy toward Tehran, one that could help revive the 2015 nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

On the other hand, and alongside this Hezbollah-Iran reassurance in Biden's election, there is real trepidation in the region about a return to Obama's previous policy that was akin to a complete withdrawal from the Middle East and its abandonment to autocrats and their local allies and proxies. In fact, that is what happened since the start of the Arab Spring when Iran, Russia, and Turkey, all authoritarian states, became the real actors and many devastating wars gripped the region. These autocratic states benefited from the American withdrawal during Obama's tenure and Trump's coddling of dictators.

It behooves Biden to end Trump's populist approach to the region, but also to avoid Obama's retrenchment.

Putin's Russia has also become a pivotal actor, expanding its influence over a number of states in the Middle East. In all likelihood, a dispute between the United States and Russia in the future will reflect negatively on stability overall as well as in Lebanon. This is why it behooves Biden

to end Trump's populist approach to the region, but also to avoid Obama's retrenchment. By doing both, Biden may be able to bring Lebanon to the

attention of the international community in order to help the country both embark on needed reforms and address Hezbollah's weapons and status as a state-within-a-state. This marriage between corruption and Hezbollah's illegal status as an armed militia has to be annulled if Lebanon's long-term interests are to be preserved and augmented.

Biden Has to Prove Himself

Many in the Middle East hoped for a Biden win in the election because of Trump's attack on values and norms, but that does not make the president-elect ideal. His administration, like many others before it—including Trump's—can accommodate itself to uncomfortable conditions in the Middle East. With Lebanon becoming a less attractive ally to the United States because of its troubles, it is easy to see Lebanon being subsumed by a policy that focuses on confronting Iran instead of addressing its domestic reforms.

What the last few years in Lebanon have shown is that the country has become intricately intertwined with the American response to the practices and policies of Hezbollah and Iran. Indeed, many Lebanese politicians shamelessly linked their preference for Trump in the American elections because of his declared position on both. No one really knows how Biden, in the end, will deal with Lebanon, but his approach will most assuredly try to balance American interests in the country with the well-being of the Lebanese in a less corrupt political and economic system. The hope is that this approach will take precedence over the next few years.

7

Will Biden Help to Restore Jordan's Position in the Middle East?

Curtis R. Ryan

December 7, 2020

Jordan's relations with the United States are almost as old as the kingdom itself, with the country enjoying a generally strengthening relationship over the years ... until the arrival of the Trump Administration in 2017. In the four-year period since then, policy differences multiplied, with Jordan repeatedly on the outside looking in. Yet, at the same time, key aspects of the long-standing strategic relationship remained unchanged. Extensive American foreign military and economic assistance continued. But Jordanians at both the state and society levels felt increasingly neglected, marginalized, and at times ignored, even as the strategic and economic aspects of the relationship appeared to proceed apace.

In Jordan, and indeed in many Arab countries, there was a palpable [sense of relief](#) that the Trump years would soon be over and that US Middle East policy might change, even if only incrementally. Jordan's King Abdullah II was among the first Arab leaders to speak with President-elect Joe Biden. This might not seem particularly noteworthy at first blush, but Jordan is not a geopolitical heavyweight like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or the United Arab Emirates. While each of these three Arab states enjoyed particularly warm relations with the Trump White House, Jordan was left for four years in an uncomfortable and unaccustomed position of seemingly

benign neglect. Jordanian kings were used to closer relations—both nationally and even at a personal level—with American presidents.

Despite this cooling of relations at the highest and even interpersonal levels, the strategic aspects of American-Jordanian relations remained strong and unchanged. In 2019, [US aid to Jordan](#) reached \$1.5 billion, with \$1.082 billion in economic aid via the US Agency for International Development and \$425 million in military aid. A Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2018 committed the United States to contributing \$6.375 billion to Jordan over a five-year period, and the United States had given additional funding to Jordan to help the kingdom deal with Syrian refugees and, more recently, with the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, Jordan also remains a “[Major non-NATO Ally](#),” further enhancing its military relations not only with the United States but also with the member states of the entire NATO alliance. For the last 20 years, the

Strategic cooperation and aid, therefore, remained strong in US-Jordanian relations, but significant policy differences emerged during the Trump years, dampening the overall sense of the relationship.

kingdom has also maintained a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States, the first FTA for the United States with any Arab country. Strategic cooperation and aid, therefore, remained strong in US-Jordanian relations, but significant policy differences emerged during the Trump years, dampening the overall sense of the relationship.

Jordan and the Trump Effect

Although the Trump Administration did not create a major rift in US-Jordanian relations, it did at times make the relationship—especially as viewed from the Jordanian side—profoundly difficult. In other words, Jordan had not changed its positions, but the United States had. The sticking point was a series of specific policy differences in which the Trump Administration ignored Jordanian concerns and proceeded with controversial moves, each a major departure from decades of American policy, and all to the chagrin and frustration of Jordanian officials. These included US recognition of Israel’s annexation of the Golan Heights as well as the decision to move the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. The

Trump Administration also cut off aid from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, the main organization supporting Palestinian refugees, severely impacting the lives of Palestinian refugees, including those in Jordan, and leaving the Jordanian government to scramble in an effort to find alternative funding sources. In each of the cases, Jordan had opposed the US policy move and had strongly advised against it, but to no avail. And every time, Jordan's influence appeared to be weaker to the point of irrelevance.

Jordanian officials and the Jordanian public alike were united in their opposition to the Trump/Kushner proposed peace plan between Israel and Palestine, especially as [various proposals](#) leaked such as a potential confederation between Jordan and the still-not-sovereign Palestinian territories. The alarm level in Jordan was so extensive that the Trump moves managed to re-ignite long-standing Jordanian fears regarding the idea of *watan badeel* (the alternative homeland) or the “Jordan Option”—scenarios in which Jordan would become a de facto Palestinian state or through which the Palestinian issue would, one way or another, be “solved” at Jordan's expense. Of course, all these scenarios were nonstarters for Jordan, in the views of both government and opposition.

For these reasons, many Jordanians hoped that a Biden presidency would mean the termination of these [ill-informed experiments](#) and an end to the ignominy of any version of the Trump peace proposal. But the very fears themselves had underscored another Jordanian concern: that the kingdom was becoming sidelined in the region by a White House that had put a premium on relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt—with cordial and proper relations with Jordan, but no more than that. Many Jordanian policy-makers felt that an emergent alignment (if not a formal alliance) between the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia was marginalizing the Hashemite Kingdom in the foreign policies of all three states. Jordan had previously created for itself a key role as regional intermediary and go-between for Israel and Jordan's Gulf allies. The closeness of US-Israeli-Saudi relations—and their apparent prioritization of an anti-Iran front—seemed to threaten Jordan's long-standing regional role. Moreover, actual US policies under Trump only reinforced that impression, discounting Jordanians and Palestinians alike and contributing to the increasingly [cold peace](#) between Jordan and Israel.

The Abraham Accords seemed to sideline Jordan once again; Jordanians openly discussed whether Jordan's unique geopolitical position and standing might be in jeopardy.

This is also true of the series of normalization agreements—what the Trump administration referred to as the Abraham Accords—between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, and Israel and Bahrain. Jordan did not oppose these accords, but it did not applaud them, either. After all, the kingdom

has maintained its own peace treaty with the State of Israel since 1994, so the Jordanians were careful not to openly criticize their Gulf allies. Nonetheless, they appeared to be startled as Gulf allies seemingly abandoned the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative by making separate deals without solving the core issue of the Palestinians' right to a state of their own. The Abraham Accords seemed to sideline Jordan once again; Jordanians openly discussed whether Jordan's unique geopolitical position and standing might be in jeopardy, and whether Jordan's important diplomatic role as mediator and force for moderation might no longer be valued by the United States.

Even more pressing was Jordan's historically **unique role as protector** of the Muslim and Christian holy places in Jerusalem. That responsibility is enshrined even within the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty. But Jordanians were concerned that an outgoing Trump Administration and the Netanyahu government in Israel might shift this role from Jordan to Saudi Arabia in exchange for Saudi-Israeli normalization. The Hashemites in Jordan, contrary to the views of their many critics, take this duty very seriously. The fear, then, was that the United States might go along with a major policy shift, potentially abrogating some of Jordan's historical roles and especially its guardianship of the al-Aqsa Mosque on the Haram al-Sharif (the Noble Sanctuary) in Jerusalem.

Domestic and Regional Pressures

In addition to foreign policy concerns, the kingdom, meanwhile, faces severe domestic and regional pressures that threaten the security of the state itself. Like most countries of the region, Jordan was deeply affected by the waves of protests that started at the end of 2010 and came to be

known as the Arab Spring. Unlike Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, or Yemen, the [Jordanian version](#) of the Arab Spring did not lead to regime change, a coup d'état, civil war, or external military intervention. But it did include waves of protests, sometimes in the thousands, demanding greater political change, an end to corruption in public life, and help for Jordanians suffering from severe economic hardship.

These waves continued, rising and falling, long after the regional Arab Spring itself waned. In 2018, [protesters returned](#) to the streets in massive numbers across the country, in a nightly series of demonstrations during the month of Ramadan, to protest against tax increases, corruption, and perceived indifference by the government regarding the daily hardships of ordinary Jordanians. These protests succeeded in bringing down the government of Prime Minister Hani al-Mulki and in seeing the rise of a reformist administration under Prime Minister Omar al-Razzaz. Other protests continued, including a nationwide teachers' strike in 2019. By the time Razzaz resigned in October 2020 to pave the way for new elections, many Jordanians were deeply disappointed in the latest government and disillusioned with the political process as a whole. Parliament remained weak and largely ineffective, and prime ministers and governments came and went with a similar lack of effect, though they provided a kind of buffer between monarchy and society. This does not mean, however, that many or most Jordanians were in any way placated. To the contrary, Jordanian elections (for the lower house of parliament) have seen a steady drop in an always-low voter turnout.

Somewhat surprisingly, Jordan continued with plans for its most recent elections—in November 2020—despite a [massive surge](#) in COVID-19 cases across the country. Jordan had initially pursued the most extensive set of lockdown procedures of any Middle Eastern country, a program that had even appeared to be wildly successful. But the winter saw the return of the coronavirus, this time with far more disturbing numbers of infections and deaths. Yet the elections continued, with [voter turnout dropping](#) from 36 percent in 2016 to a mere 29 percent in 2020. Political scientists criticized the elections for producing another weak parliament that was not particularly representative of Jordanian society—and certainly not of the Jordanian opposition—and also for being “one of the least democratic elections in Jordan's recent history.”

For the state, security must come first in the context of the region in turmoil, civil wars and insurgencies across multiple borders, and terrorist threats from both without and within.

The Jordanian state has tended to prioritize state and regime security, first, economic stabilization second, and political reform perhaps a distant third. For the state, security must come first in the context of the region in turmoil, civil wars and insurgencies across multiple borders, and terrorist threats

from both without and within. In fact, Jordan has seen a rise in home-grown extremism, especially from the so-called Islamic State, including attacks in Irbid and Karak in 2016. But opposition figures and reform advocates are always quick to point out that Jordan's security concerns, while real, are also a constant in political life. They therefore reject the idea that security and counterterrorism should be allowed to override concerns with political and economic reform. The failure to achieve more real and lasting political inclusion and economic equality, activists often argue, is what actually constitutes Jordan's greatest national security threat.

Resetting US-Jordanian Relations

Both regime and opposition hope for a reset in US-Jordanian relations under a Biden Administration. The state is looking to maintain and expand its already-extensive strategic relationship, including US economic and military assistance, as Jordan sees itself as a frontline state in any war on terror and as a stalwart ally of the United States. Many in the Jordanian opposition, in contrast, see American geopolitical priorities as reinforcing autocracy and undermining reform and liberalization, regardless of US rhetoric or pronouncements to the contrary. While some Jordanian activists oppose any heavy US role outright, others hope for a different kind of reset: away from securitization and toward support for more genuine reform and change within the kingdom.

For the Biden era in US-Jordanian relations, Jordanians at both government and opposition levels are simply looking to be heard and appreciated by the United States. They also hope for a more balanced American foreign policy, one that [embraces a two-state solution](#) to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and values a Jordanian role in the peace process and

in regional stability. But the kingdom is also beset by chronic fiscal crises, massive unemployment amid a staggeringly high cost of living, a terrifying surge in COVID-19 cases, and continued domestic and regional political pressures. The [economic crisis](#), even without the hardships wrought by the coronavirus pandemic, is particularly dire, with national debt reaching 97.4 percent of GDP in 2019 and unemployment as high as 23 percent in 2020 (and likely far higher among youth). Jordan's needs, in short, are many.

At a state-to-state level, in some measure, Jordanian officials hope to see the incoming Biden Administration expand US aid to the kingdom as it continues to deal with fiscal crises, unemployment, refugees, and COVID-19. They also would like to see a Biden foreign policy team that will prioritize and value Jordan, once again, as a key component and concern in American Middle East policy. Jordanian officials often argue that the US-Jordanian alliance has now lasted for approximately 70 years, but for Jordan at least, the need for US support has never been greater.

8

Biden and Correcting the Course of Relations with Palestine

Zaha Hassan

December 4, 2020

Palestinians let out a collective sigh of relief following confirmation that former Vice President Joe Biden won the US presidential election. Though the Palestinian Authority (PA) leadership waited a day to send congratulations to the president-elect, it wasted little time in signaling to him and his foreign policy team that it is keen to reestablish bilateral relations with the United States. The gestures included one toward Israel, to allow the resumption of security cooperation; another was regarding the PA's legal reforms of its social welfare payment system to prisoners and families of those killed in political violence. Biden's foreign policy team is also keen to restore diplomatic channels with the PA and to support humanitarian relief and other economic assistance.

Laying the Groundwork before a Biden Victory

A month ahead of the US presidential election, when it seemed likely that Biden might win the presidency, the PA sent a letter to the head of Israel's military administration in the occupied West Bank about resuming coordination. In the letter, the PA asked for assurances as to whether Israel would recommit to the Oslo Accords, which had established the architecture for Palestinian-Israeli security cooperation and placed the responsibility on Israel for collecting PA clearance taxes. The Israeli military

commander responded to the October letter of inquiry (but only after the election was called for Biden), pointing out that it was the Palestinians who had stopped implementing the agreement. In fact, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas [had announced](#) in May 2020 that Palestinians would no longer be bound by the Oslo Accords because Israel's new governing coalition had agreed to move forward with officially annexing parts of the West Bank. The Israeli commander's positive reply regarding the effectiveness of the prior agreements means [security coordination will resume](#) and clearance revenues—which the PA had [refused to accept](#) in June, also due to Israel's looming annexation—would be delivered to the PA even if Israel is likely to continue to make [deductions](#) from the total it owes.

There is no doubt that the incoming Biden Administration will welcome a return of Palestinian-Israeli security cooperation.

There is no doubt that the incoming Biden Administration will welcome a return of Palestinian-Israeli security cooperation. It will also be pleased to know that the PA's financial health is on the mend, given the [financial collapse](#) it was facing after months of foregoing the clearance revenues, which amount to approximately 60–65 percent of its budget.

Perhaps even more welcome was the [PA announcement](#) that it intended to amend the [Prisoners and Freed Persons' Law](#)¹¹ and related decrees and regulations that guaranteed social welfare payments and benefits for current Palestinian prisoners and those released from Israeli jails as well as for the families of those killed in political violence. The revisions to the laws establishing the welfare system are meant to bring the PA into compliance with various pieces of US federal legislation that required the cessation of US assistance to Palestinians. This also triggered jurisdiction for previously dismissed civil damage claims against the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the PA related to political violence dating back to the second intifada.

¹¹ Source is in Arabic.

Restoring Relations in the Shadow of Trump and Arab Normalization

Certainly, Palestinians are justified in feeling that they averted a disaster with the election of Joe Biden. A second-term Trump Administration would have continued to seriously challenge the Palestinian national movement and compromise the PA's capacity to govern, particularly as the [COVID-19 cases are now breaking records in the West Bank and Gaza](#), eroding the Palestinian economy and bringing the [health care system](#) to its knees. Normalization deals between Israel and the Arab and Muslim worlds would have proceeded expeditiously, with the United States providing diplomatic or financial incentives or, in the case of the Emirati-Israeli normalization, offering commercial sales of sophisticated weapons previously reserved in the region only for Israel.

Moreover, the Trump Administration would have maintained pressure on Gulf Arab countries to withhold assistance to the PA, including budgetary support and loans. The administration's policies of delegitimizing Palestinian nationhood and sovereignty on the land and those aimed at blurring distinctions between Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory would have also continued. The rush by the outgoing administration to get certain high value items crossed off its Israel to-do list is notable: US-Israel bilateral [cooperation agreements](#) may now be applied in the West Bank settlements; civil society-led efforts to challenge Israeli human rights violations are now officially [designated as anti-Semitic](#); and Israeli settlement products produced on Palestinian land and/or with expropriated Palestinian natural resources may be [labeled "Made in Israel."](#)

Further, the Trump Administration would have pressed forward with the economic component of the [Peace to Prosperity plan](#) and encouraged bilateral business deals between Israel and Arab countries. These would have integrated Israel and its settlement enterprise into the region and stepped over the national aspirations of Palestinians. The "[Abraham Fund](#)," a direct product of United Arab Emirates-Israel normalization which envisions the United States, Israel, and the UAE mobilizing a \$3 billion private sector-led fund toward joint ventures and regional economic cooperation, mirrors the Peace to Prosperity plan's economic component. The difference, however, is that it does not mention Palestinians or bother to even pay lip service to their state-building efforts. Given that the UAE has concluded trade deals with Israeli settler enterprises in the

Syrian Golan Heights, it is unlikely to be deterred by international law in conducting business with West Bank settlers involved in exploiting occupied Palestinian land or natural resources.

The Promise and Potential of a Biden Administration

But would the Biden Administration be the life preserver that the Palestinian national movement and the PA need or want? The answer is maybe. The Biden campaign has promised to prioritize reopening a PLO mission in Washington, DC and a consulate in Jerusalem to deal with

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Palestinian affairs, one not controlled by the US embassy in Israel and that provides some affirmation of Palestinian national aspirations and rights in Jerusalem. The PLO and the PA have been in conversation with Biden's advisors and are interested in putting together a team to work with the administration to get around US restric-

tions, following the void left by the passing of Chief Negotiator Saeb Erekat who had maintained close relationships forged over decades with US officials and interlocutors. Immediate measures that the incoming administration can take are restoring aid to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which recently **announced it had run out of money**, and encouraging—**rather than discouraging**—Arab countries to resume assistance to Palestinians.

What is less clear is what President Biden's position will be on some of the byproducts of Arab-Israeli normalization which threaten to undermine the United States' preferred political outcome of a negotiated, two-state solution. The Biden campaign has promised to **urge Arab states to take "bolder steps"** toward normalization with Israel. But how bold might these "bolder steps" be? **Biden supported the UAE-Israel normalization deal** while also giving credit to the Obama-Biden Administration for its efforts to advance Israel's integration into the region. However, Antony Blinken, head of the Biden campaign foreign policy team who is tapped to be secretary of state, **expressed concern** about some aspects of the deal but

left uncertain how a Biden Administration will view Arab states conducting business with the illegal Israeli settlements. Besides trading with Israeli settlement companies in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, an area that the Trump Administration has recognized as Israeli sovereign territory, the so-called Abraham Accords have spurred the UAE to join Israel in a project in the Wadi Joz neighborhood of occupied East Jerusalem, one that would force out Palestinian businesses in favor of developing a “[Silicon Wadi](#)” and touristic projects. The UAE has also invited settlers from the occupied West Bank to join the first commercial flight from Tel Aviv to Dubai to establish trade ties; in addition, Israeli and Emirati chambers of commerce are in the process of [conducting a joint study](#) on how to expand these relations.

The principal motivating force for Israel in normalizing with the Arab world is clearly neither the need for security cooperation against common adversaries like Iran nor a desire to make peace after years of war. Israeli-Arab cooperation against Iran has been ongoing for some time and Israel was never in a state of belligerency with Gulf Arab countries—they did not need peace agreements with Israel. What is fundamentally animating the normalization efforts is an Israeli

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Though the UAE is ground zero for testing Israel’s normalization agenda, Saudi Arabia is the latter’s crown jewel for determining success. The kingdom figured prominently in the economic component of the Trump Administration’s Peace to Prosperity plan in terms of securing Bahrain as the site for the plan’s grand unveiling, defining the specific projects for regional integration, and serving as a funding source. But even prior to the plan’s release, Saudi Arabia had shown openness to having

Israeli businesses involved in its futuristic Neom city and 2030 development plans. The audacious though [unconfirmed meeting](#) between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Neom signals that both sides want to move forward and will not be a deterred much longer by Arab public opinion opposing their initiative.

Recommended Actions for a Biden Administration

How will the Biden Administration reconcile its support for Israeli-Arab normalization if it will come at the cost of Palestinian-Israeli peace? No doubt, balancing support for normalization between Arab countries and Israel while also supporting the prospects for a two-state solution will be challenging. The incoming administration should act swiftly to restate its commitment to international law with respect to Israeli settlement construction and to UN Security Council resolutions, and particularly [Resolution 2334](#), which calls on third-party states to differentiate in their dealings between Israel and the occupied territories. The Obama Administration abstained from using its veto to kill the resolution toward the end of its term. Given the state of the Palestine/Israel peace file in 2020, Biden should affirmatively assert his support.

The administration should also recommit to the 1978 State Department legal opinion of the Carter Administration, which [Secretary of State Mike Pompeo disavowed](#) in 2019, stating that settlements in the occupied territories are inconsistent with international law. Further, it should conduct an interagency assessment of US compliance with the legal opinion in bilateral agreements with Israel and in federal law and administrative rules and regulations. Any recommitment to international law would require the new administration to reverse both the recent extension of the US-Israel bilateral cooperation agreements to the occupied West Bank and the labeling of products from Israeli settlements from the West Bank's Area C as "Made in Israel." But the administration should also act to amend the Clinton Administration's extension of the US-Israel Free Trade Agreement to the West Bank and Gaza so that Israeli settler products do not enjoy duty-free treatment in the United States.

The incoming administration can also use its influence with others to help restore respect for international law and multilateral institutions

while also voting in favor of UN resolutions that uphold human rights and call on Israel to refrain from conduct contravening its obligations as an occupying power. It should make clear to Israel, and to Arab governments wishing to engage in regional economic development projects with it, that US political and material support for such endeavors will depend on their compliance with the rights of Palestinians, the extent to which they differentiate between Israel

[The incoming administration] should make clear to Israel, and to Arab governments wishing to engage in regional economic development projects with it, that US political and material support for such endeavors will depend on their compliance with the rights of Palestinians.

and occupied territories, and if they further Palestinian-Israeli peace. Washington should also work with allies and multilateral mechanisms to ensure that development assistance to Palestinians and agreements with Israel properly distinguish between Israel's sovereign territory and the land its military occupies. Similarly, any federal legislation to provide grants and/or loans for joint enterprises between Israelis and Palestinians should be restricted so that Palestinian land and natural resources are not exploited by settlers and settlement enterprises are not allowed to benefit.

An Opportunity Ahead

The Biden Administration has an opportunity to reset US-Israeli bilateral relations and reimagine peacemaking in 2021 after a Trump Administration legacy that sought to marginalize international law and multilateral institutions. Constructive engagement will demand a paradigm shift in how the United States deals with Israel and the Palestinians, and especially in the extent to which it upholds international law. Biden's efforts to support economic development, humanitarian relief, and national rights for Palestinians while facilitating further normalization for Israel with other Arab states will determine the success of his administration's engagement with the Palestine/Israel long-running peace project.

9

Biden and Israel: The Constraints Are Plentiful

Yousef Munayyer

December 4, 2020

As inauguration nears and President-elect Joe Biden assembles his cabinet and broader domestic and foreign policy teams, they collectively stare at four years of damage done by a Trump Administration that often seemed hell-bent on reversing every step taken by the Obama-Biden Administration. The project of beginning to address this damage is an ambitious one on all fronts. While some changes can be made immediately by executive order, which the Biden camp has promised it would utilize, many more possible modifications and reversals will take far greater time and effort. A [recent assessment](#) reviewed some of the damage done during the Trump Administration's tenure regarding Israel/Palestine. This paper will consider the various obstacles facing a Biden Administration in its effort to undo some of that damage.

A Different Starting Point

While a Biden Administration might seem to some like a continuation of President Barack Obama's presidency (or some version of its "[third term](#)"), the truth is that even though Biden seems to be bringing back many former team figures into his cabinet, the world in 2020 is a very different one than that Obama found when he took office in 2009.

On the day that Barack Obama was elected in 2008, [Israel broke a cease-fire](#), kicking off an escalation that led to a then-unprecedented bombardment of the occupied and besieged Gaza Strip. The mass destruction wrought by the Israeli military left close to 1,500 dead, half of whom were civilians. The [22-day campaign](#), which featured multiple massacres and war crimes, captivated the attention of the world in the very last days of the George W. Bush Administration, whose Middle East peace effort stalled after the [2007 Annapolis Conference](#). It became clear that on top of dealing with the dual American quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan left over by the Bush Administration, Obama would have to make Israel/Palestine a priority. While he appointed former Senator George Mitchell as a special envoy almost immediately, Israeli elections and government formation meant they had to take a wait-and-see approach for several months. During this time, President Obama began unfurling his approach to the Arab and Muslim worlds, one that sought detente with Iran and recognized Palestinian suffering.

Biden finds a completely different situation today. There has not been a hot conflict in Israel/Palestine since the 2015 Israeli war on Gaza, and while the violence of military occupation has been consistent daily, it has not risen to the level of dominating global headlines in some time. Unlike 2008, the Arab world is still reeling today from the destructive repression of the Arab Spring, which led to civil war in some states and intensified policies of repression and control in others. The human rights and humanitarian crises these have created led to another other set of challenges in the region which demand attention. Arab leaders are also in a different place today than they were in 2008 relative to Israel, with several regimes having normalized relations with it, weakening the leverage of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. At present, there is very little pressure being applied on the incoming Biden Administration—not from Israel/Palestine, the Arab countries, or the international community—to engage immediately in that conflict.

The Partners

In 2009, as the Obama Administration was coming into office, Israel was in the middle of elections. The faction formerly led by former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, which had previously participated

in negotiations with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, ended up winning the most seats when the Kadima Party, led by former Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, secured 29 mandates. Failing to put together a coalition, however, Kadima handed over the reins of power to a Benjamin Netanyahu-led Likud government, which has ruled in one form or another since that time. Israeli politics has persisted in its rightward movement and Netanyahu has continued to be a very well-known figure in US administrations, [particularly among Democrats](#), whom he has found every way to alienate. This dynamic was even more pronounced in the last five years as Netanyahu directly attacked Barack Obama and cozied up with Donald Trump.

Biden will, in all likelihood, make overtures to Netanyahu again, and while the beginning of the Biden Administration may well see another Israeli election,¹² there is little reason to believe the Israeli electorate will return anything but a right-wing government. Netanyahu will argue, as he has consistently and persuasively made the case to Israeli voters, that he and only he is capable of best handling the relationship with Washington, milking the Republicans for the most he can get and holding off the pressure from Democrats. To be sure, Biden will not find a useful partner in Netanyahu, neither before nor after an election.

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The prospects are not much better in Abbas. Now in his 86th year, the aging Palestinian president lacks legitimacy, credibility, and strategy. Recently, [he lost a close confidant in Saeb Erekat, who died from COVID-19](#) and who was instrumental in navigating the Palestinian relationship with Washington and the world. Abbas went from trying to embrace Trump at the outset of his term to cutting off all relations with him after Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital; and since the election,

¹² Netanyahu's government [collapsed](#) on December 23 when the Knesset voted to dissolve itself, setting the stage for a fourth general election in two years.

Abbas has hurried to return to security coordination with the Israelis. He shows [no strategic vision](#) beyond hoping to race back to the very status quo from which Palestinians suffer. It is clear that neither Netanyahu nor Abbas will give Biden an incentive to create positive change.

Political Capital

The incoming Biden Administration already faces a full slate of difficult agenda items and a domestic arena so rife with partisanship that every effort it will make will likely be opposed. Even Biden's cabinet appointees might be held up for weeks or months if the Senate remains in Republican hands and chooses an obstructionist path. In 2015, [collusion between Netanyahu and then Republican House Speaker John Boehner](#) led to an unprecedented politicization of American diplomacy when Republicans aligned with the Israeli prime minister to oppose the Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). This only got worse in the Trump years and will be one of the immediate challenges facing Biden's foreign policy efforts.

Even if the Israeli prime minister would have preferred not to see the JCPOA come to fruition, he would certainly accept it over being pressured to actually make concessions on his colonial project in the occupied West Bank.

At some point during his administration, President Obama determined he could seriously pursue either an Iran or an Israel/Palestine diplomacy, but not both, in large part because of the limited political capital he had. This was probably to Netanyahu's liking. Even if the Israeli prime minister would have preferred not to see the JCPOA come to fruition, he would certainly accept it over being pressured to actually make concessions on his colo-

onial project in the occupied West Bank. Will Biden agree to disagree with Netanyahu, as Obama did, putting the Palestinian issue aside and focusing instead on Iran? It sure looks as if that will be the case. The incoming Biden Administration, while it has committed to rejoining the JCPOA, seems set for a shaky start. It would have been easy for Biden or his named national security appointees to put out a statement condemning the recent [assassination of Iran's top nuclear scientist](#), widely suspected to have been

carried out by Israel, but instead there has been silence from the Biden camp. Not even a vague statement recommitting to diplomacy was issued.

This suggests that either the Biden foreign policy team is backing away from the diplomatic objective or, if in pursuit of it, they have calculated that staying silent ahead of the politicized confirmation hearings is the prudent approach. Neither of these choices bodes well for Iran diplomacy and indicates that the Biden Administration is already wary of just how little political capital it has when coming up against pro-Netanyahu forces in the United States and abroad. If the JCPOA is the primary objective, they will be even less willing to spend political capital on Israel and Palestine.

Taking on Congress

Even if the Biden Administration decides it wants to do the bare minimum to address some of the changes Trump made on Israel/Palestine, it will have to deal with Congress—where it is likely to confront opposition. Such resistance will come not only from Republicans, who have increasingly sought to use Israel as a political football, but from moderate Democrats who seek to position themselves as pro-Israel. This comes at a moment when many Democrats are increasingly being branded as anti-Semitic by their opponents if they display any openness to considering Palestinian rights.

Perhaps the simplest of all reversals on Palestine that Biden can make to address some of the Trump damage is to reestablish relations with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). How exactly that would happen is tricky and most likely runs through Congress. Presidents have sought waivers to permit the PLO to keep an office in Washington, DC, but this became impossible as legislation changed to tighten restrictions if the PLO took its case to the International Criminal Court or pursued additional steps at the United Nations. After the Palestinians moved toward the ICC upon learning of Trump's intention to recognize Jerusalem as Israeli, the White House could no longer legally seek this waiver. Further, Congress passed the [Anti-Terrorism Clarification Act](#) in 2018 which would subject the PLO to legal vulnerability in civil suits in the United States if it reopened its office. This would allow a wide range of pro-Israel legal outfits the opportunity to file endless and costly suits against it. There are ways to work around this, as [Lara Friedman has suggested](#), arguing that Biden

could declare Congress's restrictions unconstitutional, since foreign relations are the purview of the Executive; however, doing so would require a direct confrontation with the very Israel lobby actors who worked to implement the barriers that Biden would be trying to circumvent. There is no evidence to suggest that Biden wants such a confrontation or that he would consider the outcome worth the cost.

The Peace Process Approach

The fact that the peace process is in shambles is a further limitation on the Biden Administration. Trump spent four years burying the dead corpse of the peace process, making it impossible to even pretend it still exists. Previous administrations have claimed to shape their tactics within that broader peace process strategy, pushing the parties or holding off on pushing them based on whether it would advance the diplomatic process at the moment. But with diplomacy so far in the rearview mirror, all that remains is the disincentive of domestic political costs—until a different vision emerges. Neither the Biden Administration, nor Netanyahu, nor Abbas seem willing or capable of providing that alternative vision. Instead, what is left is the status quo. The Biden Administration's tactic, absent any alternatives, can only be expected to advance that tired and worn out vision.

Expect Little

For a variety of reasons—and primarily Biden's domestic agenda and his limited political capital—the incoming president is very unlikely to create much change in Israel/Palestine policy. Even in areas where he may have disagreed with Trump's policies and perhaps was inclined to reverse them, he is going to run up against opposition every step of the way. Absent some crisis on the ground or in the region which reorients the entire picture, changes leadership, or makes the costs of the status quo unbearable, the incoming Biden Administration might occasionally sound different from Trump's when speaking about Israel/Palestine. But it will not be taking steps to fundamentally alter what Trump has left in place. If change in US policy on Israel/Palestine is to come in the Biden years, it will not be initiated from inside the White House.

What Awaits US-Turkey Relations in the Biden Era?

Mustafa Gurbuz

December 9, 2020

A few weeks before the November elections, a video clip of then-presidential candidate Joe Biden [went viral](#) in Turkey and caused a stir inside the Turkish government. The footage included scenes from Biden's private meeting with members of the editorial board of *The New York Times*, who asked about future relations with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan if Biden wins the election. Calling the Turkish president an "autocrat," Biden [suggested](#) that Turkey's opposition should receive US support to defeat Erdoğan in the next presidential elections in 2023 and added his frustration with President Donald Trump's policy toward the Syrian Kurds. He stated that "The last thing I would've done is yielded to him with regard to the Kurds. The absolute last thing." Biden also expressed his concern about American nuclear weapons in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) air bases in Turkey as Erdoğan's cozy relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin moved toward a dangerous stage, following Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defense system.

As a response, the Turkish president's communications director [criticized](#) Biden's "pure ignorance, arrogance and hypocrisy" with a threat: "You will pay the price!" On the other side, Biden did not avoid using similarly belligerent language. "Unlike President Trump," he [claimed](#), "I know what it takes to negotiate with Erdoğan. If I were

Unlike Trump's transactional dealings with Erdoğan, Biden's restoration of institutional dynamics will have a major impact on US-Turkey relations.

president, I would make him pay a heavy price for what he has done." Given this backdrop, it was not surprising that Erdoğan was the last NATO leader to congratulate Biden on his electoral victory.

It is well known in Washington that harsh words in presidential campaigns often hit the wall of strategic calculus when the winner actually occupies the White House. Yet, unlike Trump's transactional dealings with Erdoğan, Biden's restoration of institutional dynamics will have a major impact on US-Turkey relations. Trump has effectively shielded potential punitive actions by the US Congress against the Erdoğan regime, as the Turkish president [enjoyed most frequent access](#) to him and with special treatment. Under the Biden presidency, Erdoğan will face a range of contentious issues including the Russian defense systems and an ongoing federal case against the Turkish state bank for evading Iran sanctions. In the next few years, there is likely to be a set of high priority agenda items in the Biden Administration between Turkey and the United States.

Turkey-Russia Relations and the Future of NATO

Perhaps the most significant foreign policy concern for the Biden Administration will be reviving America's traditional alliances that were undermined by Trump's policies. After his presidential win, Biden [highlighted](#) the significance of NATO with a pledge of "enduring commitment" to the military alliance. The long silence of Trump's White House over Ankara-Moscow cooperation that could weaken NATO has frustrated European diplomats, who [began to perceive Turkey](#) as "the elephant in the room" when discussing NATO's future.

Turkey's purchase of the S-400 sophisticated Russian anti-aircraft system [raised](#) alarms in the US Congress. Despite intense pressures from Washington and the removal of Turkey from the F-35 fighter jet program, the Turkish government recently [tested the Russian missile system](#) to show its firm decision to honor the agreement with Moscow. As a result, an earlier congressional bill that demanded sanctions against Turkey over its S-400 procurement has now been [accepted in the final version](#)

of the must-pass annual defense bill, which mandates the president sanction Turkey under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) and within 30 days after the final signature.¹³ CAATSA enables punishing sanctions for transactions

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with the Russian defense sector, and specifically, for the S-400s as they pose a threat by endangering the technical secrets of NATO's F-35 aircrafts. Sanctions on Turkey **may range** from banning visas for select targeted individuals to blocking any Turkish state transactions with the US financial system and denying export licenses. As a final favor to the Erdoğan regime, Trump may choose to sign off on a milder option in the CAATSA punitive list before leaving office in order to thwart Biden's potential imposition of harsh measures.

Given that the foreign policy team of the new administration is comprised of top leaders from the Obama era, CAATSA sanctions are likely to be discussed with regard to Turkey's long-term strategic orientation. The Biden team is expected to pursue a carrot-and-stick approach to avoid alienating Turkey completely. Devastating the Turkish economy through hard sanctions may result in the opposite effect, further pushing Turkey into Russia's arms. On the other hand, as it loses Trump's protective shield, Ankara will face a long list of demands that would test Turkey's commitment to the NATO alliance.

In this list of demands, the eastern Mediterranean may be at the top of the agenda—especially if Biden succeeds to close the emerging gap between European leaders and Washington. The European parliament is **seriously considering** sanctions against Ankara due to Turkey's aggressive gas exploration in the area that caused recent disputes over maritime borders with Mediterranean states. As a key NATO player, France has become most **vocal in criticizing** Turkey's strategic shift toward Russia; it is not

¹³ The House of Representatives and Senate **passed** a \$740 billion National Defense Authorization Act with veto-proof majorities. However, President Trump **vetoed** the bill on December 23, prompting the House on December 28, and the Senate on January 1, 2021, to overwhelmingly **override** his veto.

only disturbed by the [Turkish involvement in the Libyan civil war](#) but also frustrated by Turkey's ambitious agenda in the eastern Mediterranean.

The Syrian Kurds

As a result of Biden's vocal support of the Syrian Kurds during the presidential campaign, it will be interesting to watch how Washington-Ankara relations will be shaped by developments in northern Syria. Antony Blinken, Biden's pick for secretary of state, was a [strong advocate](#)

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of providing arms to the Syrian Kurds, but at the same time, he supported Turkey's fight against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leadership in Iraq's Qandil Mountains. Unlike many analysts, Blinken believes that these two goals are not incompatible: the PKK's offshoot in Syria, the People's Protection Units (YPG), can be supported under the mission of the Syrian Democratic Forces against the remnants of the Islamic State as well as Iranian proxies; at the same time, Turkey may receive support for military operations along the Turkish border in northern Syria.

The Assad regime's future military operations in the northwestern province of Idlib, however, may put Blinken's diplomatic skills to the test. In the case of a mass exodus from there, the Turkish government is likely to bring the ["safe zone" demand](#) back to the table—in order to relocate Syrian refugees alongside Turkey's borders in the eastern Euphrates. Yet, establishing Turkish protected enclaves in northern Syria is a direct challenge to the Kurdish towns in the Hasaka region; therefore, Washington will be caught between a rock and a hard place. Blinken [expresses optimism](#) in cooperating with Turkey in Syria if Ankara is willing to accept compromises. In return for accepting the Syrian Kurdish leadership, Ankara [may be given assurances](#) that the PKK does not conduct operations inside Turkey and that the United States could continue to share intelligence with the Turkish military in its fight against the organization's camps in Iraq. The challenge is most obvious: if Washington is to broker

a peace deal between Turkey and the PKK, it should calculate the domestic dynamics inside Turkey. As a result of [Erdoğan's alliance](#) with Turkish ultranationalists, many Kurdish politicians, including elected mayors, [still remain imprisoned](#). Most recently, a top Erdoğan aide was [forced to resign](#) due to his call for a release of the famous Kurdish politician Selahattin Demirtas from prison. Thus, creating a rift between the YPG and the PKK may be a mission impossible for Ankara.

Balancing Iran

Because the Biden Administration's top priority is to review the Iran nuclear deal, Turkey's stance toward the Islamic Republic will be a matter of debate in Washington. On the one hand, the Biden team may perceive Ankara as a useful partner to balance Tehran's influence in the region. Cooperation in Syria and Iraq will be on the agenda, as Turkish interests largely overlap with American interests in countering Iran.

On the other hand, such cooperation will be overshadowed by serious impediments and growing mistrust. Erdoğan's relations with the Iranian regime have been [a flashpoint of major skirmishes](#) inside the Trump Administration due to an ongoing [Iranian sanctions evasion case](#) in the US courts against Halkbank, one of Turkey's largest state-owned banks. Erdoğan has been most assertive in pushing to close the case of Halkbank by frequently raising the issue as a first concern for US-Turkey relations. This has occurred in behind-the-scenes meetings with the White House, according to Trump's former National Security Advisor John Bolton—given that the charges imply the massive scheme was [enabled by direct involvement](#) of the Erdoğan regime itself, including the Turkish president's closest aides. Bolton saw a contradiction between Trump's Iran policy and his pressure on prosecutors to save Erdoğan, [claiming](#) that there was an “obstruction of justice” due to Trump's preference for personal business ties over national interest.

If the Biden Administration does not interfere in the case, as expected, the next actions by federal prosecutors could well be a point of contention in US-Turkey relations. If the penalties are implemented without abatement, Halkbank may [not be able to survive](#) and the ripple effects will likely damage the [already fragile](#) Turkish economy.

US State Department Employees in Turkish Prisons

Since the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, one of the major thorny issues between Washington and Ankara has been the [dozens of western nationals](#) in Turkish prisons who were accused of terrorism on bogus charges and actually used as pawns to extract concessions from the United States and European countries—better known as “[hostage-taking diplomacy](#).” The clash over the case of the American pastor, Andrew Brunson, [led to Trump’s declaration](#) of economic sanctions against Turkey, which [resulted in](#) the pastor’s release and subsequent lifting of the sanctions. Other cases—including those of [three US consular employees](#)—have not received Trump’s attention, [raising the question](#) if Brunson’s evangelical identity was the main driver of the Trump Administration’s action. Some [US senators called](#) to impose Global Magnitsky Act sanctions against the Erdoğan government; these measures punish individuals and entities for severe human rights violations by freezing their assets and shutting them out of the US financial system. Thus far, in relation to the Brunson case, Turkey’s justice minister and homeland security chief were sanctioned under the Magnitsky Act—and later [were removed](#) from the list upon Brunson’s release.

Given that the Biden campaign promised to bolster the State Department’s prestige and influence—thus undoing Trump’s [decimation](#) of the department—the cases of three imprisoned US personnel may rise to shape the relations with Ankara. Compared to Trump, Biden and his team will be more responsive to the voices of US government institutions and therefore more assertive if the Turkish government takes more hostages for political gain.

Is a Reset in US-Turkey Relations Possible?

For Turkey, the Biden Administration means the end of cell phone diplomacy through presidential offices that disregarded US traditional institutions. Going back to normalcy ushers in both good news and bad news for Ankara. For those members of the Washington elite who perceive Turkey as a long-term geopolitical asset, there may be [an opportunity to reset](#) the relations through institutional ties if the Turkish government signals a minimum good faith effort over the S-400s, the most sensitive issue.

Although Biden's election victory has prompted domestic calls within Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party for reform and change, the Turkish president's latest allies—i.e., the ultranationalist Turkish Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and the Eurasianist Homeland Party (VP)—have proven to be more powerful within the Turkish bureaucracy to shut down such voices. The calls for reform are mostly driven by concerns over

the downward spiral of the Turkish economy; these demands were best reflected by heated tensions following the recent resignation of Erdoğan's son-in-law, Berat Albayrak, Turkey's finance minister and most powerful figure in the cabinet. As a pragmatic politician who remembers the negative impact of Trump's 2018 sanctions on the voting patterns in Turkish municipal elections, Erdoğan may choose to wind down the disagreements and clashes with Washington in order to save the Turkish economy.

A more pessimistic view, however, would predict that the Biden Administration will listen to the argument that the contentious issues with Turkey are too numerous and decide that only an assertive agenda would bring back the Erdoğan government as a meaningful NATO ally. Initially, Biden's White House is likely to display assertiveness on the issues, such as that of the S-400s, and this will gain bipartisan congressional support. Depending on the Erdoğan government's willingness to engage, the new administration may seek opportunities to repair the growing mistrust between the two countries.

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SECTION III

COMPLICATIONS OF THE GULF REGION

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The Biden Presidency and the Gulf Arab States

Kristian Coates Ulrichsen

November 20, 2020

Joe Biden takes office on January 20, 2021 with a most daunting list of challenges since Barack Obama entered the White House, with Biden as his vice president, in the immediate aftermath of the global financial crisis 12 years ago. Then, as now, domestic affairs dominated the opening months of the Obama Administration, which nevertheless went on to make a mark in foreign policy over its two terms in office. Now, with Biden set to appoint many of the officials who played a role in that administration to key foreign, defense, and security posts, the team he picks to focus on US policy in the Gulf will face quite a different set of challenges from those when they left office in January 2017. Indeed 2021 is not 2017, and regional political and security dynamics in the Gulf differ in significant ways that will impact the foreign policy files the Biden Administration inherits from its most unconventional predecessor.

The range of issues that will confront the president-elect and frame the next phase of US-Gulf relations is formidable. They include the unresolved rift within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that has festered since Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Egypt joined forces to blockade Qatar in 2017, US relations with Saudi Arabia and the ongoing war in Yemen that is approaching its sixth year, next moves vis-à-vis the Iran nuclear deal, as well as the evolving strategic

landscape after the UAE and Bahrain [signed normalization deals](#) with Israel on September 15, 2020.

An Initial Difference

At the outset, it should be noted that one feature that is likely to distinguish the Joe Biden Administration from the Donald Trump presidency is the reassertion of institutional capacity over personalized ties and the appointment of key personnel, including ambassadors, at all levels of government. It is unlikely that senior advisors to Biden will be [suspected of arranging](#) key details of summit meetings over WhatsApp messaging with Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, or that a partner as central to US interests as Qatar will go nearly an entire presidential term [without a permanent US ambassador](#) in-country. Nor is a secretary of state in a Biden White House expected to learn of meetings consequential to US interests almost by happenstance years after the fact, as was the case in 2019 with Rex Tillerson and [reports of undisclosed meetings](#) by Jared Kushner with foreign leaders in advance of the Qatar blockade in 2017.

The Pesky Gulf Crisis¹⁴

The blockade of Qatar and the resulting crisis that has split the GCC is an example of a challenge the Biden Administration will inherit that has roots in the “alternative facts” free-for-all that marked the beginning of the Trump presidency—and looks set to outlast it. The decision to launch the blockade of Qatar would almost certainly not have happened had the leadership in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi not identified a unique opportunity to leverage the transactional approach of the Trump White House. Indeed, Ben Rhodes, who served in the National Security Council throughout the Obama Administration, [stated in January 2018](#) that “some of the things that have happened this year, interestingly, were things we tried to forestall ... the break with Qatar, we basically had to spend a lot of time trying to prevent that from happening” before the Obama Administration left office in 2017.

¹⁴The crisis [came to an end](#) when the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council signed a “solidarity and stability” accord at the 41st GCC summit meeting, held January 5, 2021 in Saudi Arabia.

Tony Blinken served as deputy assistant secretary of state between 2015 and 2017 and later became Joe Biden's key advisor on foreign policy in the 2020 campaign. Two weeks into the blockade of Qatar, Blinken authored an op-ed for *The New York Times* entitled "President Trump's Arab Alliance is a Mirage." Starting from the premise that "Tweeting first and asking

The decision to launch the blockade of Qatar would almost certainly not have happened had the leadership in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi not identified a unique opportunity to leverage the transactional approach of the Trump White House.

questions later is not a good way to make policy," Blinken [argued](#) that Trump's "unconditional support for the Saudis" during his May 2017 trip to Riyadh "seemed to embolden them" and the Emiratis to move against Qatar. While Biden Administration officials will urge the American partners in the Gulf to speedily bring an end to the Gulf rift, their task will be complicated by the fact that the harder-line approach in Abu Dhabi that has [impeded previous efforts](#) to bring about a reconciliation [appears undimmed](#).

Relations with Saudi Arabia

Tipped by many for a senior foreign policy post under Biden,¹⁵ Blinken predicted in a July 2020 [dialogue](#) at the Hudson Institute that "we would be doing less not more in the Middle East." That same month, Blinken [said on a conference call](#) that a Biden Administration "would review the U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia, to which President Trump has basically given a blank check to pursue a disastrous set of policies." More detail was provided by Daniel Benaim, another senior advisor on Middle East issues to the Biden campaign, in a lengthy [article](#) for *The Century Foundation* in June 2020 titled "A Progressive Course Correction for Saudi-U.S. Relations." In it, Benaim made an argument for "reform, not rupture" in the relationship, called for a six-month strategic review of all aspects of US-Saudi cooperation, and urged the United States to "reassert its considerable leverage [and] reinforce lapsed expectations regarding Saudi behavior."

¹⁵ Blinken [was nominated](#) by Biden to serve as secretary of state.

Saudi officials may view the prospect of disengaging from the Yemen war as an issue they could present the incoming administration as a “gesture” of good faith and a sign that the Saudi leadership was prepared to break with and learn from the series of regional policy missteps of recent years.

Specific issues that Benaim suggested would be required of Saudi Arabia included a swift end to the rift with Qatar, a cessation of its military intervention in Yemen, and support for a structured regional dialogue with Iran. Saudi officials may view the prospect of disengaging from the Yemen war as an issue they could present the incoming administration as a “gesture” of good faith and a sign that the Saudi leadership was

prepared to break with and learn from the series of regional policy missteps of recent years. Saudi officials have struggled to identify a way out of Yemen that makes it look as if they are in control of the process, preserves national dignity, and ensures that the move does not appear as a strategic or operational defeat. [Reports](#) that the Saudi leadership is intensifying efforts to end its military involvement in Yemen are perhaps unsurprising.

The Biden Administration, therefore, is likely to give the Saudi leadership a (time-limited) chance to show that it is open to learning from the recent past and demonstrating, in practical terms, that it is ready to play a more constructive and responsible role in regional affairs. Already there are indications that Saudi officials have acknowledged the changing dynamics and may be preparing to make changes, with [reports](#) that female right-to-drive advocates detained since 2017 may soon be released¹⁶ and that the leadership is [intensifying efforts](#) to end the Saudi military involvement in Yemen. Such moves are unsurprising given the impending loss of the Trump White House that has [protected Mohammed bin Salman](#) from fierce and bipartisan political criticism since the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018.

¹⁶ One such activist, Loujain al-Hathloul, has actually been referred to the Specialized Criminal Court that looks into terrorism and national security cases. She was [sentenced](#) on December 27 to almost six years in prison for “incitement to change the kingdom’s ruling regime and cooperating with individuals and entities to carry out a foreign agenda.”

The Nuclear Deal with Iran

On a regional level, the Biden Administration likely will gauge the Saudi and Emirati response to its attempts to revive the JCPOA, bearing in mind that several of Biden's key advisors were pivotal in the initial US-Iran talks in 2012-13, which preceded the P5+1 negotiations. These advisors were in the White House when the Saudis and Emiratis launched their military campaign in Yemen in March 2015 just as the P5+1 negotiations were reaching their climax. Jake Sullivan¹⁷ was intricately and personally involved in the Iran negotiations during the Obama Administration; during Biden's 2020 campaign, he was responsible for managing the working groups of foreign policy experts. Sullivan has stated that after rejoining the JCPOA, the Biden Administration would immediately start negotiating "a follow-on agreement that deals with some [of] our ongoing concerns with Iran in respect of its nuclear program and its behavior" across the region.

It will not be as easy, as some may think, for the United States simply to rejoin the JCPOA in the opening 100 days of the Biden Administration, especially as such a move is conditioned on Iran also returning to compliance as well. Iran has a domestic political constituency just as active and as split on the merits of the deal as the American political landscape and the damage of the past four years cannot easily be swept away. Iran also is approaching a presidential election of its own, in June 2021, in which President Hassan Rouhani, one of the principal Iranian architects of the JCPOA, cannot run for a third consecutive term in office. While it is the case that the Supreme Leader, rather than the president of Iran, has the final say on matters such as the JCPOA, the Biden Administration may only have a window of a few months to convince Iranian interlocutors of its ability to negotiate a "stronger" deal

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¹⁷ Nominated by Biden to serve as national security advisor.

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Normalization with Israel

Biden's Middle East team will inherit a strategic regional landscape that has been changed by the signing of normalization agreements by Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan and the prospect that other Arab states may also normalize relations with Israel in due course.¹⁸ The UAE-Israel agreement was notable for including reference to a "[Strategic Agenda for the Middle East](#)" (which did not appear in the Bahrain-Israel accord). Emirati and Israeli officials, in particular, have been quick to operationalize the strategic and commercial [components of their normalization agreement](#), and the Emirati and Bahraini ambassadors to the United States shared a platform with their Israeli counterpart, Ron Dermer, on November 16 as the latter [called on the Biden Administration](#) not to rejoin the JCPOA. In addition to navigating a potentially confrontational path back toward the Iran nuclear deal, the Biden team and regional partners also will [need to decide](#) if the Middle East Strategic Alliance set up by the Trump National Security Council in 2018 has a future.

A Look at Possibilities

On some issues, such as Yemen, the experience of four years of grinding stalemate means the Saudis will be rather more open in 2021 to a political resolution of the war than they were in 2017, while the [shock to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi](#) regarding the lack of an overt US response to the attacks on energy and maritime targets in 2019 has left both leaderships more mindful than before of their regional vulnerabilities. These are points of opportunity for the Biden Administration to work with in the rebalancing of relationships that grew overly confrontational in the Gulf under the Trump team. In other areas, the realignment of Israeli-Emirati (and Saudi) strategic interests may be a harbinger of a broader diversification of Gulf states' security ties, further eroding the hitherto dominant American position and—along with Turkey's growing regional presence—creating

¹⁸ On December 10, Morocco [agreed](#) to normalize relations with Israel.

issues of its own that will come to define the Biden era in the Middle East.

The foreign policy team that Biden assembles will thus inherit an array of issues, some of which (the JCPOA and the Yemen war) began when they were in office under Obama and others (the Gulf crisis and Mohammed bin

Salman's self-inflicted missteps) more directly attributable to four years of the Trump Administration. The likelihood that the people in charge of Middle East policy in the opening phase of the Biden presidency will have served in government before will help them reframe the transactional style of decision-making. So, too, will the expectation that President Biden and his pick for secretary of state will move as quickly as possible to reverse the hollowing-out of the State Department that has undermined American diplomacy. Nevertheless, the legacy of the Trump years will continue to be felt for some time still to come.

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Biden and Iraq: A Chance to Address Past Mistakes

Nabeel A. Khoury

November 18, 2020

The Biden Administration is likely to [change a few policies](#) in the Middle East while keeping others essentially the same. Iran, long considered an adversary, is perhaps also key to a new diplomatic approach to the region and an important actor to European allies. Rejoining and reviving the nuclear agreement (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) has already been placed as President-elect Joe Biden's top priority in the Middle East, after expanding it and adding what was missing when it was first signed to achieve a broader understanding on other conflict areas in the region. It would also set in motion the most likely scenario for a fresh start there. European allies would applaud the reenergized approach while regional allies would stand to benefit from the reduced tensions. A prime example of a conflict zone where regional and international interests intersect, Iraq would be the natural place for President-elect Biden to test the feasibility of a broader regional agreement with Iran and the readiness of Gulf Arab states to join in a new reconciliation and collaboration in the region.

Mistakes of the Past

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on undoing the damage to the country during the Obama Administration, and finally admitting that the war was a mistake and that he personally misjudged the question in 2002. US policy is chock-full of mistakes in Iraq and Biden has certainly made a few of them. While his voting for the war may be blamed on the faulty intelligence presented by the Bush Administration, his pursuit of an Iran-appeasement policy during the Obama years was possibly an even more serious case of

bad judgment. Yemen was thrown under the proverbial bus and the Arab coalition's war, which continues to devastate the country, was endorsed and fully supported by the Obama Administration.

President Barack Obama's obsession with not repeating the Bush Administration's mistake led him to seek stability inside Iraq by supporting the Iran-endorsed Nouri al-Maliki as prime minister. The [2010 parliamentary elections](#), which saw a razor-edge victory for Iraqiyya—a coalition of Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish politicians prioritizing national reconciliation—presented an opportunity for the Obama Administration to focus on good governance in Iraq. Iraqiyya's leader, Iyad Allawi, though himself Shia, was allied with moderate Sunni leaders and well-positioned to achieve his national goals. He was also a longtime friend of the United States and could be trusted to consult and coordinate with Washington.

Obama—largely on Biden's advice—chose to back Nouri al-Maliki, Iran's choice for prime minister, partly to appease Iran during the JCPOA talks and partly because he assumed that Maliki would deliver a status of forces agreement that would regulate the presence of American troops in Iraq. Both assumptions proved wrong. Instead of driving a stabilizing policy domestically, Maliki adopted a hostile line toward both Sunni Arabs and Kurds, possibly lending fuel to an already nascent Islamic State (IS). He also proved himself to be much closer to Iran than to the United States and empowered Shia militias funded and trained by the Islamic Republic, thus

undermining the very state he was supposed to stabilize and strengthen. Obama's support for Maliki further [undermined US influence](#) in Iraq.

Maliki's successors, Haider al-Abadi and Adel Abdul-Mahdi, were both saddled with Sunni-Shia tensions, continuing clashes with IS, and an economic crunch that fired off the [October 2019 protest](#) and riots that eventually led to the resignation of Abdul-Mahdi in May 2020. The Trump Administration further complicated the picture with direct interventions against the Iran-supported Shia militias inside Iraq, culminating in the assassination of Iran's al-Quds Force leader, Qassem Soleimani, in January 2020. The [killing of Soleimani](#) at Iraq's international airport, while on his way to a meeting with Iraq's prime minister, damaged any opportunities for constructive dialogue to heal the rifts between the government and people of Iraq and halted any negotiations to help the Iraqi government regain control over armed militias. Needless to say, the assassination also complicated US-Iraq relations and ultimately ended Abdul-Mahdi's tenure as prime minister.

Breaking the Barriers

Biden's approach to Iraq will do well to address the concerns of many in the country who would like to have good relations with the United States. To that end, reassuring the Sunni communities begins with American support for strong Sunni personalities to join in key

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roles in any future Iraqi government. This should also be complemented by outreach to both Sunni and Shia communities at the popular levels via public diplomacy programs and events that recognize the importance of civil society organizations working on national reconciliation.

A recognition of the diversity of the [Shia communities](#) and their moderate politicians and fully engaging with them is also important. Secular Shia leaders work on countering extremist views in their communities and on stressing Iraqi religious traditions over those imported from Iran. Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, for example, is a major source of religious scholarship in the Arab world and presents a more secular view of political life

than that espoused in Iran. In the past he has resisted direct approaches by American diplomats, but such contacts can and should take place through some of his students and adherents to show respect and seek advice on national reconciliation.

Urgent Requirements

Reconciling with Iran and achieving an agreement on lessening tensions in the region would go a long way toward bringing stability to countries like Iraq and Yemen. Much will depend on supporting good governance. Iran-backed militias in Iraq act outside the realm of the state and therefore diminish its authority. An efficient and transparent state that treats its citizens fairly and equally would greatly allay the fears of the various communities in Iraq—Sunni, Shia, Kurd, Turkmen, Assyrian, Shabak, Yezidi, Mandeian, and others. Foreign military assistance, long a tool of US foreign policy, must include a heavy dose of civil-military relations and the importance of making sure Iraq's armed forces look like the society they defend; additionally, when needed for internal security, it is vital

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that they treat all areas equally. The [recent attacks](#) in Baghdad—which killed a young girl and injured others—are a reminder that security is still a major concern that needs to be addressed. That they took place as the Trump Administration announced a troop withdrawal from the country puts more pressure on Biden to more effectively manage the US involvement there.

The United States, along with international organizations like the World Bank and the International

Monetary Fund, can also bring foreign assistance to bear on the problems besetting good governance, such as corruption and lack of transparency. The protests of October 2019, which raised tensions internally and regionally, were as much about the lack of economic services as about a state that has failed overall in providing for the basic needs of its citizens. A Biden

administration must not side with narrow security interests over outreach to civil society leaders who called for democracy, human rights, and an end to corruption.

Opportunities Ahead

[Mustafa al-Kadhimi](#), Iraq's current prime minister, has to navigate carefully after the troubles that brought down his predecessor Adel Abdul-Mahdi, by working to reduce US-Iran tensions on Iraqi soil while tackling the serious economic challenges that inflamed the streets of Iraq this past summer. Once in the White House, President-elect Biden must work with Kadhimi on the most effective steps—including those that could be agreed on with Iran—to stabilize Iraq via economic development and to steer a delicate balance between American and Iranian interests. Rather than again sacrificing Iraq, rejoining and expanding the JCPOA could be used to facilitate the country's long-term stability and progress.

Biden is not without credentials and he has helpful allies inside Iraq. [Barham Salih](#), the Kurdish president of Iraq, was among the first to congratulate the president-elect, expressing optimism that a Biden presidency will bring new policies to help stabilize Iraq. Kurdish leaders were generally happy with President Obama's support for Kurdish rights within the country; indeed, [Biden's Kurdish sympathies](#) were evident as early as President George H.W. Bush's war for Kuwait's liberation in 1990. Biden opposed the decision to end the war without lending support to Shia and Kurdish rebellions against Saddam Hussein at the time and expressed fear that the dictator's lashing out at Kurdish opposition, in particular, would revert to brutal tactics—a prediction [borne out by events](#) shortly after Saddam accepted the [US terms to end the war](#).

Kurds, Sunni moderates, and Shia leaders in government are all predisposed to work with a new American administration to help prevent turmoil.

Biden has [visited Iraq 24 times](#) overall and, in 2002, he crossed into Iraqi Kurdish areas from Turkey—a message from him that Turkish suppression of Iraqi Kurds must be opposed. Kurds, Sunni moderates, and Shia leaders in government are all predisposed to work with a new

American administration to help prevent turmoil. On that score, restoring good-neighbor relations with the Gulf Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia, will be key to economic recovery in Iraq. The [recent reopening](#) of the Arar crossing between Iraq and the kingdom—closed since 1990—is a good and promising step and the Saudis will need to be nudged to make more overtures to warmer relations.

Iraq's [Sunni communities](#), though initially frightened by the loss of their status as a ruling minority during the Saddam years, are by now reconciled to having lost their prominent position in the new Iraq. Sunni Arab tribes met frequently with the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority in 2003 to forge a normal relationship with the occupation forces and to seek American help in fending off any vengeful Shia leaders; the late Ahmad Chalabi, for example, established a de-Baathification committee after the war in order to ferret out Saddam loyalists and either punish them or at least make sure they were removed from any sensitive positions in government. The excesses of that committee required US intervention on behalf of Sunnis who felt victimized by its decisions and measures.

As early as 2006, the James Baker/Lee Hamilton [Iraq Study Group](#) recommended the United States drastically reduce its forces and focus instead on helping with national reconciliation in Iraq—largely signaling the use of diplomacy to restrain the country's new rulers from overreacting to years of oppression under Saddam by taking it out on Sunni communities. This advice is still relevant today, with Iran-supported Shia militias taking internal security measures in their own hands and acting with extreme prejudice against Sunni Iraqis. Also relevant is the need to get Iraq's Arab neighbors to engage its government and population; this way, they will not feel pushed to Iran's corner but rather will be motivated through economic incentives to keep a balanced relationship between the Arab and Persian sides of the Gulf.

Turning the Page

After decades of war, and despite being an oil-producing country, Iraq still suffers from poverty and lack of development. Having played a large part in the destruction of Iraq in the past, the United States should take a leading role in the revival of its economy. As part and parcel of a broader Biden approach to the region, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation

Council countries must be brought in for a full normalization of relations with Iraq and for investing in its economic revival. A new understanding with Saudi Arabia on this subject will be key. Bringing pressure to bear on the kingdom must include, if necessary, the conditioning of US support and arms sales on a more transparent policy regarding human rights domestically, assisting in the reduction of tensions in the region, ending the war in Yemen, and investing in the redevelopment of Yemen and Iraq.

13

Iran and the World Wait for Biden

Daniel Brumberg

November 5, 2020

Iranian leaders have insisted that the November 3rd US elections would have **no real significance** for Iran's basic interests. But **such assertions** should not be taken seriously. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei himself **signaled** that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) should avoid a dustup with US forces; he was clearly worried that a US-Iran clash might work in President Donald Trump's political favor. Moreover, public opinion surveys suggest that a **wide swath of the Iranian populace** has watched the US elections closely. Iranians know that a win by former Vice President Joe Biden could open the door to an effort to rework US Middle East diplomacy in ways that could pose challenges—and opportunities—for Iran.

But if Iran and the rest of the world are waiting to see what the Biden Administration will do, the road to a revived or new multilateral US-Iran re-engagement will be long and arduous. The immediate challenge in both Washington and Tehran will be domestic: Biden and his advisors will take months to forge a new Iran policy, and nothing is likely to happen in Iran until after its June 2021 presidential elections. Finally, enduring strategic realities will complicate efforts to move the United States, Iran, and their respective allies from a state of continuous lower level conflict to something resembling a real process of diplomatic engagement.

Oil Development versus Resistance: The Two Key Camps

When it comes to diplomacy, Iran basically has two big interest groups: the “oil development” camp and the “resistance” camp. Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh [has summarized](#) the position of the first; as he put it, a “Return to its oil market share is Iran’s priority... Normal trade with the world is Iran’s priority.” This camp holds that oil and gas production is the key to Iran’s political and social stability. Nuclear energy cannot substitute for this vast sector and experience shows that the international community will not tolerate any quest by Iran to gain a nuclear program with the means—however implicit or partial—to threaten Israel. Thus, what this camp seeks is a revival of the

For the resistance camp, opposing—or at least containing—the influence of Washington and its regional friends is vital.

basic exchange that was at the heart of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), namely a return to the previously agreed—and strictly monitored—cap on uranium enrichment in return for ending nuclear-related sanctions and opening Iran’s economy.

The “resistance camp” sees things very differently. Its leaders want the benefits of oil exports, but they fear that any nuclear agreement will be a slippery slope to opening Iran up to the “toxic” western cultural, economic, social, and even political influence. Their greatest nightmare is that a nuclear agreement might open the door to normalizing relations with the United States. For the resistance camp, opposing—or at least containing—the influence of Washington and its regional friends is vital. Commenting on the latest normalization agreements between the UAE and Bahrain with Israel, former IRGC Commander [Mohsen Rezaei said](#) that there was no doubt that the United States will be expelled from the region and the thrones of its regional allies will not be protected.

If those are fighting words, the record shows that IRGC leaders pick their battles carefully and are not eager to ignite a costly conflict with the United States or Israel, not to mention Washington’s Gulf allies. But the resistance camp’s leaders believe that Iran’s future lies in the East; thus, they support a diplomacy that underscores this strategic and ideological stance. Indeed, because they believe that any return to one version or

another of the JCPOA will produce another needless detour on the path to resisting the West (and the United States) in particular, these leaders assert—perhaps with ample cause—that Iran cannot return to the negotiating table.

The Supreme Leader’s job is to mediate between these two camps (and many others). His heart—and much of his head—has long been with the resistance camp. In fact, his embrace of the latter *intensified* after the Trump Administration’s repudiation of the JCPOA discredited the oil development camp. But in a strange echo of a *dictum attributed to Henry Kissinger* that Iran must decide “whether it is a country or a cause,” Khamenei appears to believe that Iran has both concrete and ideological interests and thus it *must be both*. Indeed, because the country (and state) of Iran needs global oil sales, this Supreme Leader, and his successor, will not permanently shut the doors to a deal with the global community on the nuclear file.

Factional Fighting across the Development/Resistance Divide

The above two camps do not easily align with labels such as “reformists” and “hard-liners” or with a third faction that sometimes is called the “pragmatic conservatives.” Leaders from the hard-liner and pragmatic conservative factions have flirted with both sides of the development/resistance divide. In fact, some hard-liners believe that they can get the benefits of western investment while continuing to expand trade and investment eastward and, at the same time, to use a spectrum of tools—ranging from pure force to blocking social media—to limit the “contagion” of western influence. Some hard-liners even argue that this formula might even be easier to realize by reaching a deal with a reelected Trump. As *one Iranian security official put it*, “Tehran needs sanctions to be lifted and Americans want a calm Middle East. A win-win solution

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can be reached,” he added, and that “it will be easier with Trump. He is a businessman and does not want problems during his second term.”

This certainly seems like wishful thinking. It is true that Trump bragged during the campaign that “the first call I get when we win will be from the head of Iran, let’s make a deal.” However pumped up, a reelected Trump is very unlikely to agree to dropping what has been a nearly explicit policy of regime change. Even if he somehow abandons this position, Iranian leaders will never accept what is surely a key Trump White House demand, namely that Iran accept “zero enrichment” and, by implication, agree to the provision of energy grade uranium from outside Iran’s borders. No Iranian leader could endorse this position without committing political suicide.

Iran’s Spring 2021 Presidential Elections Will Reinforce the Resistance Camp

Then there is the question of Iran’s presidential elections in June 2021. With this poll looming, no one will risk proposing an opening to Washington. On the contrary, a crowded field of hard-line contestants will create incentives from all the candidates to flex their anti-American muscles. Still, some reformist candidates might risk making a case for negotiations. It is hard to recall a time when their ranks were more depleted, however. Veteran reformist writer Sadegh Zibakalam’s assertion¹⁹ that reformists should not run in the next elections because “people will not vote for reformists anymore” seems a little over the top. After all, Iranian politics has a way of generating surprises. As another reformist writer notes,²⁰ while the reformist current remains “alive and well ... due to its ‘virtual activism’ and ‘social networks,’” the struggle for change is now led by the protests of workers, teachers, and other vulnerable social groups, most of which are in the provinces rather than the political capital of Tehran.

The problem is that these popular groups have few ties to the formal political arena. As a result, they cannot strengthen the bargaining leverage of a reformist camp that faces a determined hard-line elite. Indeed,

¹⁹ Source is in Farsi.

²⁰ Source is in Farsi.

many of the latter are being bandied about as serious candidates for the presidency. These include Saeed Jalili, the former Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and Iran's former nuclear negotiator; Mohsen Rezaei, who now is the Secretary of the Expediency Council and formerly headed the IRGC; and Ali Shamkhani, a two-star general who also is the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council. All are very close to Khamenei or are part of the security apparatus. One possible contender, Justice Chief Ebrahim Raisi, is in fact widely considered a potential successor to Khamenei. Therefore, there is likely to be little ideological or strategic daylight between Iran's next president and the Supreme Leader—a sobering prospect whose implications for Iran's foreign relations in general, and its relations with the United States in particular, are hard to predict.

In fact, by mustering the domestic political cover that a more reformist candidate lacks, hard-liners might just get the space to pursue talks with the next US president. Such a paradoxical—if still unlikely—development could happen only if the occupant of the Oval

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Office accepts the basic idea that real talks require real concessions from Tehran and Washington. Biden's statements show that he agrees with this premise. But whether he will have the will and the means to engage with an Iranian leadership (that, in any case, has no reason to trust US commitments) remains to be seen.

Biden Faces a Tough Road Ahead

Richard Fontaine, a former foreign policy advisor to the late Senator John McCain, [argues that](#) “Trump has generated considerable leverage over adversaries and allies alike.” Biden, he asserts, “would do well to use some [of the leverage] Trump would leave behind.” Biden will get some of this leverage from the expanded set of sanctions imposed by the Trump White House. He will also inherit an emerging alliance between Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, and possibly Saudi Arabia that, if used smartly, could strengthen his hand. Moreover, Biden will enjoy a burst of relief and

enthusiasm in Western Europe that will translate into considerable US diplomatic capital.

Some of these very assets could also create constraints. Israel and Washington's Gulf friends will resist US efforts to reengage Iran. Tehran **will probably insist** that Washington withdraw the many different sanctions imposed by Trump before talks begin; it may even want to extract a promise from Washington to compensate Tehran for financial losses it incurred when the Trump Administration abandoned the JCPOA. Iran will also surely balk if the Biden Administration, one that seems eager to show US domestic audiences that it is not rushing to an agreement with Tehran, chooses to use piecemeal concessions by offering to remove some sanctions but to leave others in place. This will be a non-starter.

Iran's dire economic situation—compounded by the still raging COVID-19 virus—provides the ultimate source of US and western leverage.

Of course, Iran's dire economic situation—**compounded** by the still raging COVID-19 virus—provides the ultimate source of US and western leverage. But with a hard-line leadership that has isolated Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif (who is most likely to depart after the June presidential elections),

Iran will not make major concessions merely in return for US promises of sanctions relief—promises that Tehran fears will not be kept. Moreover, Iran has considerable assets of its own. These include an expanded enrichment program that Tehran has **openly pursued** with the goal of upping the diplomatic ante (a move that seems linked to Iran's **apparent efforts** to build an underground enrichment facility at its Natanz nuclear plant). Tehran also has a range of lethal military assets in the Gulf, Iraq, and Syria and a complicated if vital relationship with Russia. Given these advantages, when it comes to Iran's domestic politics, a weakened oil development camp will have little leverage to push for reviving a nuclear deal that already seems on its last legs.

JCPOA Plus: Smarter, but Easier?

The vastly widened breach between the United States and Iran means that the Biden Administration will have little to gain from limiting its Iran

policy to resuscitating the ailing JCPOA. Tony Blinken, who was a deputy secretary of state under President Barack Obama,²¹ has signaled as much, insisting that after Iran comes “back into compliance” with the JCPOA, “we would use that as a platform with our partners and allies ... to negotiate a longer and stronger deal.”

Biden has repeated this position by promising Tehran “a credible path back to diplomacy,” one that would not be limited to the JCPOA but also addresses “other issues of concern.” The latter presumably includes Iran’s ballistic missile program, which it has thus far refused to discuss. This is surely, as he says, a “smarter” approach than “maximum pressure,” a self-defeating policy that, as Biden further notes, has allowed Iran to stockpile something like “10 times as much enriched uranium as it had when President Barack Obama and I left office.” Nevertheless, it is far from clear that Biden’s wider-angle policy will be any easier to pursue.

Much will depend on how quickly Biden can repair Washington’s frayed relations with its western allies. The expectation is that his first overseas trip will be to Europe, where he will make reenergizing diplomacy with Iran a key US priority. He might then move on to Israel and the UAE, while skipping Saudi Arabia and its problematic crown prince. In stopping off in Israel, East Jerusalem, and Abu Dhabi, Biden could signal to the world that the purpose of US diplomacy is not merely to secure transactional deals between states and leaders who share mutual interests, but also to foster peacemaking agreements between long-standing rivals and even bitter enemies.

²¹ Blinken has been nominated by Biden to serve as secretary of state.

Yemen May Be a Priority for Biden and the Democrats

Gregory Aftandilian

November 17, 2020

As President-elect Joe Biden assembles his team and sets his priorities for the next four years, there has been much speculation as to what he will focus on in the Middle East. With the Israeli-Palestinian peace track moribund and fraught with difficulties, Biden might come to believe that devoting attention to ending the Yemen war is a more fruitful path to follow soon after he is sworn into office, especially as it would receive strong support from congressional Democrats and even some Republicans.

A focus on Yemen also has the advantage of showing Biden's supporters—especially the progressive wing of the Democratic Party that took the lead in passing the War Powers Resolution on the Yemen war, which Trump vetoed—that the era of US indulgence of Saudi Arabia, characteristic of the Trump presidency, is over. Moreover, if Biden is able to tie a resolution of the Yemen war to Washington rejoining the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), that might help to mollify some of the nuclear deal's critics on Capitol Hill because one of their criticisms was that it did not address Iran's "malign activities" in the region.

Biden's Position on the Yemen War and the Saudi Connection

During the presidential campaign, Biden connected the Yemen conflict with US policy toward Saudi Arabia under Trump and called for a

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reassessment of that bilateral relationship. At one point, he even referred to Saudi Arabia as a “pariah” state (largely for the Saudi government’s murder of dissident and journalist Jamal Khashoggi) and later stated: “I would end U.S. support for the disastrous Saudi-led war in Yemen and order a reassess-

ment of our relationship with Saudi Arabia.” At another venue, he said, in reference to the Yemen war, that he would “end the sale of material,” meaning arms, weapons, and bombs, “to the Saudis where they’re going in and murdering children.”

Of course, critics of Biden have pointed out that he was part of the Obama Administration, which supported the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthi rebels in Yemen beginning in March 2015. And some congressional Democrats even criticized the Obama Administration for its involvement in the Yemen war, which was one of the reasons—besides high civilian casualties—that the administration decided to halt the delivery of precision-guided munitions to Saudi Arabia in late 2016. However, unlike Trump, Biden seemed to have acknowledged that such support was a mistake and said in 2019 that it was “past time to end U.S. support for the war in Yemen.”

Unanimity among Democrats ...

After Trump took office, opposition to the Yemen war grew to become one of the few unifying policies of the fractious Democratic Party, besides opposition to Trump himself. Democrats, who have close links to human rights organizations, were inundated with reports of large-scale civilian casualties in Yemen, many of which were tied to the Saudi-led bombing campaign. A number of errant Saudi air strikes have hit schools, hospitals, and civilian gatherings like weddings. In the eyes of many Democrats and human rights groups, the fact that most of these bombs were supplied by the United States and that the American military was providing logistical support (such as air refueling) and intelligence to the Saudis in this war made Washington complicit in Yemeni civilian deaths. Moreover, as the

war dragged on, the humanitarian situation in Yemen continued to deteriorate, with disturbing [reports of famine and cholera](#) impacting millions of Yemeni citizens.

[Khashoggi's murder](#) in October 2018 while he was visiting the Saudi consulate in Istanbul was the catalyst that brought things to a head. The brazen and gruesome killing of this *Washington Post* columnist led many members of Congress to openly question the US-Saudi alliance and to focus their concerns even more on the Yemen war.

Progressive lawmakers in Congress, such as Independent Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont and Democratic Representative Ro Khanna of California, took the lead in [sponsoring legislation to invoke the War Powers Resolution of 1973](#) in connection to the Yemeni conflict; this resolution had been enacted in the waning days of the Vietnam War. It stipulates that if a president orders the military into hostilities overseas, he or she must seek approval from Congress within 90 days; if approval is not given then the president must withdraw the military from the conflict. Most presidents since the Vietnam era have ignored the War Powers Resolution, claiming it is unconstitutional because it infringes on the important commander-in-chief clause in the US Constitution. That Congress had the temerity to pass the resolution (the first time since 1973) as it pertained to the Yemen conflict [underscored just how upset](#) the legislative body had become over this conflict, one that has had disastrous consequences for civilians.

... and Some Republican Support, Too

Although moderate Democrats in early 2019 joined their more progressive colleagues in voting for the Yemen War Powers Resolution, what was surprising in this period of hyper-partisanship was that they were able to get some Republicans on board who believed that Congress needed to reclaim its constitutional role as the sole war-making body in the federal government—which has been eroded since the end of World War II. [In the March 13, 2019 vote](#) in the Senate, for example, seven Republicans, including prominent conservative Mike Lee of Utah, joined their Democratic colleagues in voting for the resolution by a margin of 54 to 46. Although Trump, as expected, [vetoed the resolution](#), and there was no two-thirds majority of Congress to override his veto, the episode was indicative of the

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attempt not only to reassert congressional prerogatives, but to try to end US complicity in a humanitarian nightmare.

Speaking for many of his colleagues, Democratic Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut [stated on the Senate floor at the time](#): “We should not be associated with a bombing campaign that the U.N. tells us is likely a gross violation of human rights.”

Given the political landscape on this issue, with some Republicans sharing sentiments with Democrats about the need to end US involvement in the Yemen war, Biden might see an opportunity not only to stop the conflict and use American diplomatic clout to reach a peace deal but also to ease the dire humanitarian crisis in that country. This would have the effect of killing two birds with one stone: in addition to ending the Yemen conflict, he could show the progressive wing of the Democratic Party that he is striving to undo Trump’s close embrace of an authoritarian regime and its disastrous war in Yemen. Given that the US Senate may remain under Republican control and is unlikely to pass a “Green New Deal” on the environment that the progressives hope to achieve, they at least could be assuaged that part of their foreign policy agenda was being addressed. In addition, Biden could then underscore to the broader American public his bipartisan credentials that he has touted throughout his political career by showing that he is able to achieve common ground with some Republicans. In fact, with Trump out of the White House by late January, Biden might be able to get more Republicans on board to support an end to US involvement in the Yemen war because they would no longer fear the wrath of a pro-Saudi Republican president.

Moreover, because the Saudis have realized that the war is essentially at a stalemate and that the longer it goes on the more it will cost them in terms of resources and reputation, they are likely [looking for an exit strategy](#). It is noteworthy that on November 11, 2020, the director of the United Nations’ World Food Programme, David Beasley, [told the Security Council](#) that Yemen is again facing famine. Hence, the Saudis might be

willing to work with Biden on this issue, which would have the added benefit of staying in his good graces and hopefully not stymie future arms sales to the kingdom if a peace deal in Yemen is indeed reached.

Yemen and the Iran Connection

During the campaign, Biden was highly critical of Trump's approach to Iran, [calling it](#) a "dangerous failure" because since Washington pulled out of the JCPOA, Tehran has now "stockpiled 10 times as much enriched uranium as it had when President Barack Obama and I left office." He also said he was not naive about "the challenges the regime in Iran poses to America's security" but added that there was a smarter way to deal with Iran.

Biden then [outlined his approach](#): rejoining the nuclear deal if Iran returns to strict compliance; strengthening and extending the JCPOA's provisions in concert with US allies; addressing Iran's problematic human rights issues; and working with "our partners" to "reduce tensions and help end regional conflicts, including the disastrous war in Yemen."

It is important to note that Biden specifically mentioned Yemen because he may believe that engagement with Iran could be the key to getting the Houthis there to accept a peace deal with the Yemeni government of Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, which is backed by Saudi Arabia. Although the extent of Iranian support for the Houthis ranges from minimal to substantial (with the truth probably somewhere in-between), Biden might see a return to talks with Iran as a way of putting the Yemen conflict on the table as part of a package deal. In other words, Iran's possible return to the nuclear deal's compliance, paving the way for substantive dialogue with the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany), might lead to progress to end the Yemen conflict.

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Of course, what the Iranians want first and foremost is the repeal of the US sanctions that were imposed by Trump (without the support of the other members of the P5+1) and which have severely hurt their economy. One of Biden's top foreign policy advisors [stated in June 2020](#) that if Biden won the presidency, the Trump-era sanctions would remain in place until Iran came back to full compliance with the nuclear deal. This has the potential of becoming a kind of chicken and egg story, with the Iranians not budging until sanctions are lifted, and the incoming Biden Administration not budging until Iran returns to compliance with the deal's terms. However, such a standoff need not be insurmountable. Clever diplomacy could get around this dilemma, with perhaps a piecemeal lifting of sanctions being tied to gradual steps on the part of Iran to reach compliance.

Although Biden's Iran strategy may not be fully fleshed out at this point, it is possible that he might desist from removing all of the Trump-era sanctions until Iran agrees to address some of its regional activities, like Yemen. These have worried US strategic planners who are concerned about instability near choke-point waterways, like the Bab al-Mandab Strait, as well Sunni Muslim Arab states that have fears about Iran meddling in their backyard and fomenting strife.

Returning to the JCPOA for Biden will undoubtedly come with some political costs: congressional Republicans almost uniformly oppose the deal as do some prominent Democrats, including the ranking member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, [Robert Menendez](#) of New Jersey. Besides wanting to extend and strengthen some provisions in the deal to mollify Congress, Biden may see a resolution of the Yemen war as a way to sell rejoining the JCPOA in Congress. This would likely involve all foreign players exiting Yemen militarily and a coalition government forming in the country.²² In other words, if both Iran and Saudi Arabia end their military involvement in Yemen, the need for American intervention becomes moot, which would allow Washington to concentrate more on assisting the hard-pressed Yemeni people. The Iran deal then becomes more palatable politically on Capitol Hill because it would be seen as reining in one of the areas where Iran has extended its influence.

²² Such a coalition government was [formed](#) on December 18.

The Road Ahead

None of this will be easy for the incoming Biden Administration to pull off. Rejoining the Iran nuclear deal will be highly controversial even if it is connected to a possible peace deal in Yemen—not only in the United States but in Iran itself, where hard-liners are ascending. Moreover, ending US military support for the Saudi campaign in Yemen as a way to induce Riyadh to scale back its involvement there is likely to encounter some resistance from elements in the Pentagon as well as among members of Congress who have ties to the arms industry. Nonetheless, if Biden wants to show that the United States is returning to the world stage through diplomatic engagement, he may well be advised that focusing on Yemen is worth the effort. Not only would he be able to please his Democratic Party supporters (as well as some Republicans), but such efforts, if successful, would end one of the world's worst humanitarian crises since World War II.

SECTION IV

HURDLES IN EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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The Biden Presidency Could Help Democratic Transition in Sudan

Abdelkhalig Shaib

December 15, 2020

When former Vice President Joe Biden won the election following four tumultuous years under President Donald Trump, the Sudanese government and people had a question paramount in their minds: What would become of the [American-Sudanese deal](#) to remove Sudan from the US State Sponsor of Terrorism List (SSTL) after the country suffered 27 years as a result of this designation? Subsequently, they asked, how will the future of the deal define the relationship between the United States and Sudan once the Biden Administration takes office in January 2021?

The US-Sudan Agreement

There are three main elements to the US-Sudan agreement that was reached in October 2020. First, the United States will delist Sudan from the SSTL when Khartoum [deposits in escrow](#) \$335 million to be paid as compensation to American victims of terrorist attacks. This is to fulfill its responsibility (which Khartoum denies) in the Al-Qaeda bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 and the *USS Cole* in 2000. Second, the US Congress must pass legislation restoring Sudan's sovereign immunity, a shield against future legal claims for past attacks once it pays the compensation. Third, the Trump Administration—albeit unofficially—linked delisting Sudan from the SSTL to its normalization

of relations with Israel, which the transitional government in Khartoum still [considers contingent](#) on the approval of a so far unformed parliament.

The first stipulation in the agreement has already been met. On October 23, President Trump [notified](#) Congress of his intent to rescind Khartoum's placement on the SSTL, and Khartoum deposited in escrow the \$335 million. On December 14, the period of 45 days Congress has to review the decision ended, making the [rescission official](#). Khartoum reluctantly agreed to normalize ties with Israel, agreeing to do so only if fully released from any future liability from terrorism-related lawsuits,

How the future unfolds and whether the deal will bring stability and prosperity to Sudan depend primarily on the ability of the United States (whether before Trump leaves the White House or under a Biden Administration) to keep its side of the bargain.

which took place on December 14. As things stand today, the second and third elements of the deal present the hardest complicating factors. How the future unfolds and whether the deal will bring stability and prosperity to Sudan depend primarily on the ability of the United States (whether before Trump leaves the White House or under the Biden Administration) to keep its side of the bargain.

While rescission of the SSTL designation does not require congressional action—i.e., there is no need to pass a bill in both chambers for it to take effect—restoring Sudan's sovereign immunity, under the [Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act](#), will need bicameral legislation. This may not happen if Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-New York) and Senate Foreign Relations Committee Ranking Member Bob Menendez (D-New Jersey) eventually decide not to back the bill, under pressure from their constituents.²³ Efforts to secure [congressionally approved immunity](#)

²³ On December 21, Senators Menendez and Schumer [issued a statement](#) in which they announced that they negotiated a compromise with the Trump Administration stipulating their approval of restoring Sudan's sovereign immunity. The agreement, however, did not preclude continuing litigation by victims of the September 11 attacks and their families, thus not satisfying Sudan's demand for a sweeping restoration. The compromise was included as the Sudan Claims Resolution Act in the \$1.4 trillion Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 funding the federal government.

for Sudan are still underway, with Israel aiding the effort. However, action on Capitol Hill is far from certain.

On December 9, Senators Menendez and Schumer released a [joint statement on negotiations with the Trump Administration](#) on legislation to restore Sudan's sovereign immunity. They offered two legislative options (in a potential [Sudan Claims Resolution Act](#)) to restore Sudan's sovereign immunity, preserve and protect the claims of the families of the September 11, 2001 attacks, and resolve the embassy bombing and other international terrorism-related claims against Sudan. The two versions are substantially similar and pushing either draft resolution through Congress will abort the restoration of Sudan's sovereign immunity. The Sudan Claims Resolution Act suggests incorporating a number of changes to the deal that the US State Department cut with Khartoum in October and offers conditional legal immunity if certain conditions are satisfied in full. One of these proposed changes is that Sudan would not be allowed to veto any exception, carve-out, or limitation relating to the settlement. The proposed Sudan Claims Resolution Act includes alternative text to rescind this veto.

It should be remembered, however, that removing Sudan from the SSTL and restoring its sovereign immunity are crucial for the country's political stability. American sanctions have crippled the country's economy and barred financial assistance and foreign investments from institutions like the World Bank. Perhaps the American [announcement](#) that the United States will provide wheat and other commodities over four years as well as some debt relief to Sudan is a step in the right direction. To be sure, there is an urgency to reach a deal in the US Congress, one way or the other; however, the price of any deal cannot be paid by the Sudanese people. The no-deal scenario may be the final nail in the coffin of Sudan's fledgling democracy and it would send the wrong message to the Sudanese people.

Hope with Joe Biden

Biden's election brings hope to Sudan, and other nations, that the new administration will restore political normalcy and approach things differently. The process of a political transition in a country like Sudan in order to achieve stability by supporting a civilian-led government requires

The Sudanese people have overthrown three military regimes in their modern history. One of the main challenges for them has not been overcoming dictatorships or totalitarian rule but how to consolidate democracy once secured.

more than merely removing the country from the SSTL. Sudan needs political and economic support. The Sudanese people have overthrown three military regimes in their modern history. One of the main challenges for them has not been overcoming dictatorships or totalitarian rule but how to consolidate democracy once secured, sustain it, and establish a set of norms and tradi-

tions that can genuinely provide it with a shield. Over the years, a major failure of the Sudanese was how to appreciate and safeguard institutions that political actors have created to actively participate in transitions from authoritarian rule.

The Sudanese people and many regional and international actors have had an overarching concern about whether the [December 2019 Revolution](#) could succeed in establishing democracy in Sudan and avoid the country's historical curse of reversion to authoritarianism. Sudan's current democratic transition is full of pitfalls; indeed, transitions are not supposed to be smooth and easy. It is facile to blame military coups for the failures of democracy when officers refuse to allow it to mature enough and crystallize to form self-sustaining and vibrant democratic institutions. It is fair to assume that this time, Sudan's military may not eventually cede power to any civilian elected government, despite the stipulations of the current arrangement between the generals and civilian leaders. Nevertheless, there is also the other side of the coin: the Sudanese may have been unsuccessful in these democratic transitions by failing to accede to their legitimacy and the processes such transitions created. It is important to remember the lessons of history as relevant to the current transitional period, for the [argument is simple](#): "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

The Biden Administration will have to urge political actors to adhere to [Sudan's constitutional charter](#) for the transitional period and to ensure that free, fair, and credible democratic elections are conducted at the end of the transitional period. Facilitating an environment for democratic

elections needs reconciliation and comprehensive and sustainable peace. Biden's team will have to engage with the transitional government in Khartoum to support [the peace agreement signed on October 3rd](#) in Juba, the capital of South Sudan, between the Sudanese government, the Revolutionary Front (a broad alliance between armed movements and other powers), and the Minni Minnawi wing of the Sudan Liberation Movement. The Juba peace agreement did not include the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (led by Abdelaziz al-Hilu, with whom past negotiations have faltered largely because of his demand of secularization and the separation of religion from the state), and the Sudanese Liberation Movement under the leadership of Abdel Wahid al-Nur (which refused to join the Juba peace talks, arguing that they did not address the root causes of the crisis in Sudan). The Biden Administration will have to tackle these issues and ensure a comprehensive peace agreement is reached in Sudan; without it, a meaningful constitution-building process in the country will be impossible to initiate.

The new US administration will have to support the Sudanese in their quest for a civil state that does not disavow religion but rather allows for a political space where all religions are treated equally. As the foundation of the civil state is the citizen, the Sudanese people cannot be ruled by religious men, military officers, or any higher appa-

The new US administration will have to support the Sudanese in their quest for a civil state that does not disavow religion but rather allows for a political space where all religions are treated equally.

ratus that is not elected outside the framework of an agreed-upon social contract that is protected by strong institutions. This requires building the institutions and the state's civil and military apparatuses upon legal frameworks that allow them to carry out their functions in a manner that integrates their roles without the influence of loyalties and patronage. It is thus vital to push for civilian oversight over—and the professionalization of—the Sudanese security and intelligence services alongside strengthening accountability for human rights violations and abuses, corruption, and other forms of malfeasance. This reform agenda will help the country arrive at political stability without falling into the trap of building modern

institutions that are utterly devoid of their institutional objectives. On the economic front, the United States would do well to take steps to engage its international partners to reduce Sudan's debt burdens, including advancing discussions on debt forgiveness consistent with the [Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative](#).

Washington will also have to commit to multi-faceted economic assistance for Sudan. This, undoubtedly, requires promoting economic and regulatory reform, private sector engagement, and inclusive economic development while combatting corruption and illicit economic activity, including that which involves the Sudanese security and intelligence services. One should note that part of a [12-month reform package](#) worked out with the International Monetary Fund in June 2020 is that the transitional government in Khartoum takes control of all state entities, including ones owned by the security forces, which is one of the toughest challenges of the transition in Sudan. The government's ownership, complete oversight, and transparency over all state-owned enterprises in Sudan are a must and a prerequisite for any sustainable economic reform in the country.

The "[Sudan Democratic Transition, Accountability, and Fiscal Transparency Act of 2020](#)" is incorporated in the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). The US Senate has overwhelmingly passed the NDAA by a veto-proof vote of 84-13 after the House of Representatives [passed it on December 8](#) by an equally strong majority of 335 to 78.²⁴ The bill is a step in the right direction and shows the US commitment to support the transition in Sudan to a civilian-led democratic government. The bill authorizes, among other things, assistance for democratic governance, the rule of law, and human rights. It also supports free, fair, and credible elections and long-term peace and stability in Sudan by authorizing assistance for conflict mitigation, including efforts to strengthen civilian oversight of the Sudanese security and intelligence services.

How the Biden presidency could help democratic transition in Sudan does not solely rest with the United States or with its influence to engage the international community in supporting a civilian-led government in

²⁴ The House of Representatives and Senate [passed](#) a \$740 billion National Defense Authorization Act with veto-proof majorities. However, President Trump [vetoed](#) the bill on December 23, prompting the House on December 28, and the Senate on January 1, 2021, to overwhelmingly [override](#) his veto.

the country. The Sudanese also have a pivotal role to play. There is no guarantee that democracy will survive in Sudan; to be sure, democracy is not so much a form of government as a set of principles. Further, relying on constitutional norms does not necessarily establish democracy. What is essential is that political actors in Sudan routinize, institutionalize, and normalize democratic practices, and this is a collective effort. In other words, the Sudanese must show a commitment to sustainable democracy so that their country may receive the support it deserves from the United States and the international community.

The Biden Administration and Egypt: A New Course or Business as Usual?

Khalil al-Anani

December 1, 2020

Since the announcement of Joe Biden's victory in the US election, a state of anxiety and unease has gripped Egypt. President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi will now lose a reliable friend in Washington, President Donald Trump, who famously [referred to him](#) as his "favorite dictator." Egypt's concern is rooted not only in Sisi's loss of an important ally in the White House but also in the incoming administration's overt criticism of the status of democracy and human rights in Egypt. The key question now is whether the US-Egyptian relationship will undergo significant changes under the Biden Administration or remain as it was during the past four decades.

Strategic Relationship with Sporadic Tensions

Since the late 1970s, Egypt has been one of the most important strategic partners of the United States in the Middle East. As the most populous Arab country with great political and cultural clout across the region, Egypt remains a key player with which any American administration would be keen to maintain a strong relationship. Egypt also controls the Suez Canal, the important global shipping route connecting the Mediterranean to the Red Sea. Furthermore, the relationship between Cairo and Washington was strengthened after Egypt signed the peace treaty with Israel in 1979; indeed, the bulk of the [over \\$84 billion](#) in aid

Strategic cooperation between Egypt and the United States cuts across multiple domains, but it is especially prominent in the areas of security, defense, intelligence, and counterterrorism.

the United States has provided to Egypt since 1946 was allocated since 1979, and most of that in the form of military assistance. In 2021, Egypt is set to receive \$1.4 billion in US aid. Such aid contributed to keeping President Hosni Mubarak's regime in power until he was overthrown after the January 25, 2011 uprising, and it is now essential for maintaining the Sisi regime.

Strategic cooperation between Egypt and the United States cuts across multiple domains, but it is especially prominent in the areas of security, defense, intelligence, and counterterrorism. Perhaps Egypt's position as a key US partner in these areas of strategic importance is what accounts for its importance to Washington as a regional ally. This is also what explains the persistent American concern for Egypt's stability.

The relationship between Egypt and Israel also plays an important role in strengthening the alliance with Washington. As the two countries have not witnessed any wars since they signed the peace accord in 1979, Washington considers the Egypt-Israel relationship as an important achievement that cannot be sacrificed. Egypt also has a critical function in ensuring Israel's security, especially on its western border with Gaza, which has been controlled by Hamas since 2007. On numerous occasions, Egypt has played a mediating role between Israel and Hamas, helping to maintain a shaky ceasefire and preventing military tensions from flaring up between the two parties. Meanwhile, Cairo and Tel Aviv have also developed strong security and economic ties during recent decades, especially in the field of oil and natural gas, which reinforces Egypt's position as an important regional partner for the United States.

Despite this unique relationship, the American-Egyptian relationship saw tensions in recent times, especially with regard to issues of democracy, civil liberties, and human rights. Under the administration of President George W. Bush, the United States pressured Mubarak to respect human rights and make political reforms. President Barack Obama's administration also urged the Egyptian government to free political activists and suspend limitations on civil society organizations. In response to protests that broke out in January 2011, the Obama Administration called

on Mubarak to respond to protesters' demands and allow for a transfer of power. When he refused to do so, Obama abandoned him and this contributed to Mubarak's downfall. Although the Obama Administration failed to condemn the July 2013 coup d'état that brought Sisi to power, it [partially suspended](#) its provision of military equipment to the Egyptian army in October of that year. The decision was taken in response to the regime's brutal suppression of peaceful protests and aimed to push Egypt toward establishing a civilian, democratically elected government through open and fair elections, especially following the Rabaa al-Adawiya [massacre](#). In March 2015, these limitations on Egypt's procurement of military equipment [were lifted](#) under the pretext of the country's counterterrorism needs.

During the era of President Trump, relations between Cairo and Washington reached an unprecedented degree of harmony and cooperation. Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi was the first foreign president to [congratulate Trump](#) on winning the 2016 election. The two leaders were known to share a strong personal relationship, one that was further strengthened by Sisi's

Over the course of the Trump presidency, the United States has even provided direct political, military, and economic support for the Sisi regime.

crucial role in facilitating Trump's so-called [peace plan](#) between Israelis and Palestinians—even though the plan's aims included normalizing relations between Israel and Arab countries at the expense of Palestinian rights. These factors encouraged the Trump Administration's deliberate disregard of the [horrific human rights violations](#) committed by the Sisi regime against Egypt's political opposition. Sisi also faced no criticism for his dictatorial policies toward political activists, journalists, and civil society organizations. Over the course of the Trump presidency, the United States has even provided direct political, military, and economic support for the Sisi regime.

Cairo's Reaction to Biden's Victory: Anxiety and Apprehension

Anyone following the Egyptian press will have noticed the extent of the Egyptian regime's anxiety and confusion following the announcement of Trump's electoral defeat. It is noteworthy that Sisi was the first Arab

president to [congratulate Joe Biden](#) on his victory. Cairo also [signed a contract](#) worth \$65,000 per month with a US-based lobbying firm in order to enhance communication and develop ties with the Biden Administration's transition team. In taking these steps, the Sisi regime is motivated by a deep fear of a return to Obama-era policies that paid attention to the promotion of human rights and the protection of personal freedoms and civil society.

These fears are further amplified by concerns that Biden would succumb to pressure from some members of the US Congress who are dedicated to human rights—such as Senator Chris Murphy (D-Connecticut) and Representative Tom Malinowski (D-New Jersey)—to introduce conditions on delivering military aid to Egypt in order to spur improvements in the country's human rights record. The Sisi regime also fears that the Biden Administration will open a dialogue with the Egyptian opposition abroad, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, and press for their integration into political life. Even though such a possibility is unlikely, it remains one of Sisi's concerns about the new US administration. At the same time, Biden's victory could have the opposite effect and contribute

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to hardening the regime's stance against the opposition, if Sisi wishes to prove that he is not submitting to American pressure. Perhaps this is what happened in mid-November when [Egyptian security forces arrested](#) many political activists and human rights defenders such as Gasser Abdel-Razek, the executive director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights.²⁵

Misplaced Optimism

Egypt is living under one of the worst dictatorships in the Arab world at present. Over the past six years, Sisi has stifled opposition—whether Islamist or secular—and, instead of extending liberties and freedoms, he

²⁵ Abdel-Razek and his two colleagues were [released](#) on December 3rd.

has built more prisons to confine dissidents, political activists, and journalists and imposed tighter restrictions on civil society. Egypt has now transitioned into a system of one-man rule where power is fully centralized in Sisi's hands. He is backed by the military establishment, which controls the political, economic, and security spheres. The situation in the country has only worsened after Trump assumed the US presidency in 2017.

Perhaps ironically, there is a stark similarity between Sisi's authoritarianism and Trump's authoritarian tendencies, which have come into view during his tenure as president. Thus, Trump's departure from the White House has come as a breath of fresh air to the Egyptian opposition, raising hopes that Biden will open a way for them to gain some influence and will put an end to Sisi's appalling human rights violations. However, it seems that members of the Egyptian opposition, especially those in exile, may be far too optimistic in their expectations of a Biden presidency and its ability to change the situation in Egypt. Washington's willingness to exert real pressure on Sisi to bring about change in his authoritarian policies is questionable at best.

First, Biden is not likely to risk the strategic relationship that Washington has historically had with Cairo for the cause of democracy and human rights. American strategic interests constitute the priority for any US administration, whether Democratic or Republican, even if this entails collaboration with authoritarian regimes. Second, Biden was not enthusias-

It is important to remember that the coup on July 3, 2013, as well as the unprecedented repression and bloody events that followed it—particularly the Rabaa al-Adawiya massacre—occurred while Biden was serving as vice president to Barack Obama.

tic about [ousting the former Egyptian dictator](#), Hosni Mubarak, after the January 2011 uprising; in fact, he maintained good relations with Mubarak due to concerns over the destabilizing transformations that the uprising sought to spur in Egypt. Third, it is important to remember that the coup on July 3, 2013, as well as the unprecedented repression and bloody events that followed it—particularly the Rabaa al-Adawiya massacre—occurred while Biden was serving as vice president to Barack Obama. In sum, it is

difficult to imagine that Biden would take harsh action if these violations were to occur again.

Finally, the Sisi regime has room to maneuver in the event that the Biden Administration criticizes its democracy and human rights record. Most importantly, it could turn eastward to Russia and China in order to exert pressure on the United States. In fact, Sisi [pursued this path](#) during the last two years of the Obama Administration and strengthened his relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin, concluding several military, commercial, and economic deals with the country. Similarly, during the Trump Administration, the Egyptian army has [conducted](#) several joint military activities with its Russian counterpart. President Sisi also bolstered his country's [relationship with China](#), particularly in trade and financial and economic issues, raising the volume of trade and investment between the two countries to unprecedented levels. Therefore, the Biden Administration will walk a fine line between preserving its strategic interests with Egypt and drawing attention to the country's appalling track record of democracy and human rights violations.

Is There No Hope?

The Biden Administration will most likely avoid making radical or dramatic changes to the US relationship with Egypt. The strategic ties between the two countries go back decades and the United States has remained eager to preserve this relationship despite occasional tensions. The two countries' cooperation in security, defense, intelligence, and military affairs is expected to continue without undergoing major shifts. This is especially true since the US Department of Defense and National Security Agency have a greater responsibility for managing and running these relationships than the White House.

Changes in the American approach might remain rhetorical and will not constitute real policy change. The Biden Administration is expected to direct some degree of criticism toward the Egyptian government's crack-down on opposition figures and political activists, as Biden has [openly criticized](#) the Sisi regime's human rights violations during his election campaign and even noted that he would not give "a blank check to Trump's favorite dictator." Perhaps this is what worries the Egyptian regime most. In addition, the Biden Administration will likely not stand in the way

of legislation Congress may pass concerning respect for human rights and democracy in Egypt. It is also doubtful that Biden would welcome President Sisi to the White House, at least not during his first two years in office. Finally, if a popular uprising occurs in Egypt in the coming years, the Biden Administration might potentially abandon Sisi, as Obama did with Mubarak a decade ago.

Despite the hopes pervading Biden's presidential victory, particularly after Trump's dreadful policies since 2017, genuine changes in American foreign policy—particularly toward authoritarian countries such as Egypt—will put such optimism to a real test in the coming four years.

Biden's Challenges in Stabilizing Libya

Emadeddin Badi and Karim Mezran

December 2, 2020

Upon assuming power, President Joe Biden and his administration will face a still-chaotic Libya despite the many political maneuverings afoot among Libyans and their respective outside backers. One promising intra-Libyan process is the [Libyan Political Dialogue Forum](#) (LPDF), sponsored by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and held in the Tunisian capital Tunis. On November 14, 2020, the UNSMIL hailed a “breakthrough” in the North African country’s fledgling peace process and announced that the 75 Libyan participants who gathered in Tunis for the LPDF had preliminarily agreed on a roadmap toward elections by December 24, 2021, Libya’s Independence Day.

The ceremonial description, however, obfuscated the politicking that permeated the Libyan parties’ deliberations, the actual precariousness of the foundations of the talks, and more importantly, the far-reaching impact their collapse would have. In a revelatory comment post-dialogue, a frustrated Stephanie Williams—the special representative to the secretary-general of the United Nations—likened some of the self-serving factions of Libya’s political elite to “[political dinosaurs](#)” who risk becoming extinct if they do not make themselves relevant to ongoing negotiations. While many share the sentiment that Libya’s elite has indeed become the equivalent of political relics, several precedents suggest that relying

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Nevertheless, the logic behind hosting talks and planning elections is explicit. The civil war that erupted in 2014 has spawned parallel political and economic institutions, polarized the country's social spheres, and de-facto fractured the very notion of legitimacy in Libya.

The vacuum that ensued, protracted by the continuous interventionism of regional players, was profitable to a narrow clique of Libyan elites who grew increasingly self-serving in their pursuit of personal interests. What was already an unsustainable reality became a lucrative status quo that this elite informally agreed to maintain, even at the cost of rising instability, criminality, violence, and with the COVID-19 pandemic, a pestilence overwhelming the North African country. Until April 4, 2019, this elite had primarily focused, at best, on spoiling and stalling mediation attempts or weaponizing efforts at political reunification to advance their own agendas.

The Tripoli Offensive Saga

General Khalifa Haftar's launch of a surprise offensive on April 4, 2019 to capture the Libyan capital of Tripoli was perhaps the ultimate act of egomania—the epitome of how morally bankrupt the elite had become. In doing so, the general not only unrepentantly **obliterated years of diplomacy**; he also spoiled a UN national conference planned days after his attack and willfully put in harm's way nearly half of Libya's population, which resides in the capital. His bidding was **given the green light** by John Bolton, former US national security advisor in the Trump Administration. Militarily, Haftar was supported by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) with heavy weapons, fixed-wing aircraft, and Chinese-made drones. Saudi Arabia **provided the funds** necessary to co-opt the forces that Haftar deployed toward Tripoli under the banner of his Libyan National Army (LNA), while **France shielded him** from any political repercussions for his attempt at a power grab.

The aura of inevitability on which Haftar had ridden to Tripoli's doorstep had diplomats fooled. Many made overtures to him pre-April 2019, marketing him as the panacea he never was or trying to incorporate him into a power-sharing arrangement he never wanted. The complicity of the international community in allowing Haftar to attack Tripoli, however, was commensurate with the Libyan people's refusal to relapse into authoritarianism: civilians in western Libya mobilized, converting [themselves into support forces](#), and joined armed groups to swiftly counter the septuagenarian's offensive in its tracks, effectively averting what would otherwise have been a massive humanitarian crisis.

Months later, the fighting had evolved from a proxy war fought by Libyans with international support into one where [foreign countries were now calling the shots](#). After Russian mercenaries affiliated with the paramilitary organization, the Wagner Group, deployed to Tripoli's outskirts to spearhead Haftar's offensive in September 2019, Turkey gradually scaled up its own decisive intervention. Ankara negotiated the Wagner mercenaries' [withdrawal from Tripoli](#) directly with Putin, a development that enabled anti-Haftar forces to expel remnants of the LNA from western Libya altogether.

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The successful counteroffensive precipitated the end of the war over Tripoli but ushered in a more precarious political and military situation in Libya. The LNA-aligned units retreated toward the coastal city of Sirte and the military air base of al-Jufra in central Libya. In both locales, Russian mercenaries took advantage of Haftar's weakened posture and his dependence on foreign support to significantly [expand their footprint](#). The Wagner Group, along with Syrian mercenaries transferred from areas in Syria held by Bashar al-Assad's regime, have entrenched themselves by building and fortifying defensive structures in Sirte and al-Jufra. Haftar's traditional backers, the UAE and Egypt, have also doubled down on support for his LNA. Cairo has worked with Moscow in training and

reorganizing the LNA's core units. Conversely, Turkey has also doubled down on its entrenchment in western Libya, where its Syrian mercenaries retain a presence in al-Watiya and Misrata and in military bases in Tripoli's suburbs. Ankara is expanding the scope of its military cooperation with the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA)-aligned interior and defense ministries by training Libyan forces—an endeavor complemented by diplomatic efforts to broker deals that would see Turkish companies expand their operations in Libya.

It is against this backdrop, which can only be qualified as a simmering conflict, that the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum hosted its first session. Western powers—chief among them the United States—had indolently spectated for over 16 months as regional powers wreaked havoc at Europe's doorstep as a result of a short-sighted desire to accommodate an aspiring dictator and the cabal of authoritarians supporting him. The shortcomings of this collective bystander apathy speak for themselves: Libyans reel from the effects of a war they never wanted while regional powers, which should never have been involved, prolong their misery.

Salvaging Libya's Political Talks and Its Future

Cynically and pragmatically, the path for Libya's contemporary talks to succeed—and for further instability to be averted—does not solely pass through the Libyan cities of Tripoli, Benghazi, Sabha, Ghadames, or Sirte. It encompasses Abu Dhabi, Ankara, Cairo, Moscow, Brussels, and Washington. Deflecting from this reality by emphasizing the importance of a [Libyan-led solution](#) while ignoring continuing serial violations of the arms embargo by regional and global powers is short-sighted. It is a policy that sets up a Libyan solution for failure while emboldening international spoilers to divide and conquer Libya while driving it to ruin.

The sole international actor whose political capital could meaningfully and decisively exert diplomatic pressure on both domestic and regional players is the United States. In that sense, the incoming Biden Administration has an opportunity to right its antecedent's wrongs, if only by adopting a more pragmatic approach to its policy toward Libya. While there is little to no chance that Libya will become a foreign policy priority for the new administration, simply factoring in that an inclusive Libyan political agreement is contingent on foreign countries meeting

their [pre-agreed commitments](#) would already be a breakthrough in how US policy is formulated.

Contemporarily, domestic parties and international meddlers are essentially deadlocked in a stalemate, one that the UNSMIL is seeking to exploit and convert into a political solution brokered between Libyan parties—

willfully obfuscating the fact that foreigners are simultaneously politically and militarily equipping Libyan parties with the tools to jettison or contest any agreement. This cycle of complicity will also need to be broken by a more proactive Washington if it is to protect the LPDF from spoilers. Mitigating these risks would require an increased level of coordination between Washington and Brussels, which a Biden Administration is well-positioned to do. Indeed, the incoming US administration will have an interest in unifying the European bloc's foreign policy outlooks and reining in diverging ideas. The presence of several francophone speakers within Biden's announced cabinet—most notably incoming Secretary of State Antony Blinken—could also be instrumentalized as part of an effort to rectify the course of France's unsettling foreign policy toward Libya. Indeed, not only did Paris [inexplicably leave high-end US-made anti-tank missiles](#) in one of Haftar's main forward bases in July 2019, but the Elysée Palace has also unilaterally and [consistently undermined](#) Europe's fledgling attempts to develop a collective policy toward Libya. Washington would do well to limit Paris's unilateralist impulses; such a diplomatic effort would allow a more rational European policy to crystallize toward both Libya and other geopolitical theaters, such as the eastern Mediterranean.

Given the volatile situation in Libya, coupled with the increasing risk of renewed armed confrontation between Haftar and the GNA, the two main protagonists, the incoming American administration will effectively have to land running. Biden must increase the level of involvement in support of the UN-led mediation. This could be better achieved with the appointment of a high-level envoy to help create a new process that addresses the real power of holders and spoilers in order to create a constructive climate

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that would support holding national elections. Revealingly, despite still offering some of the most prominent spoilers the opportunity to be part of the new executive authorities that the LPDF would spawn, the first round of the dialogue forum's talks in Tunis ended without reaching the much-sought comprehensive agreement and reshuffle in executive authorities that the UNSMIL was hoping it could broker.

This speaks not only to the extent to which Libya's elite is disconnected from Libyan constituencies longing for change, but also to the fact that the disunity and dishonesty at the international level is trickling down and being mirrored at the level of the political talks. The presence of a US envoy would help considerably in adding credibility to the process among Libyan citizens, many of whom have lost faith in the international community and the prospect of democracy. With minimal effort, the United States would effectively be subjecting Libya's political elite to strong public pressure by diplomatically coercing them and their foreign enablers, in turn creating an avenue for much-needed change.

In the short term, both Russia and Turkey remain enemies of any negotiated outcome that would see other international actors gain influence and possibly play a role that would inevitably reduce the decisive clout they enjoy today.

More broadly, in the short term, both Russia and Turkey remain enemies of any negotiated outcome that would see other international actors gain influence and possibly play a role that would inevitably reduce the decisive clout they enjoy today. This is primarily why both Ankara and Moscow have invested in entrenching their influence in the

security sector by training and equipping Libyan forces. To counterbalance Libyan actors' dependence on these weaponized and flawed "security sector reform" blueprints designed to protract the conflict, the Biden Administration should redouble efforts to promote a technical blueprint to unify Libya's military within the framework of preparing for elections—essentially spearheading a program for overhauling security sector governance. This effort could be complemented by an exercise of diplomatic coercion against Turkey and the UAE, which Washington should pressure to, respectively, repatriate Syrian mercenaries and halt transferring funds

to bankroll Russia's intervention in Libya. Another avenue to put pressure on Moscow is for Biden's Administration to leverage the [US House of Representatives-endorsed "Libya Stabilization Act"](#) to impose US Treasury sanctions on Libyan and regional actors proven to be involved in enabling Wagner's entrenchment in eastern and central Libya. This would go a long way toward averting the collapse of the LPDF—or the security dialogue on which the very premise of the political talks is based.

The LPDF Is the Way Forward

The Libyan Political Dialogue Forum represents an exceedingly rare opportunity to devise a genuine dispute resolution framework and negotiating table for the contours of an intra-Libyan process that brings about political reform and institutional reunification. As these political, economic, and social rifts are gradually mended, the process would culminate with elections that would restore legitimacy. Nevertheless, international actors—particularly the United States—should not expect that the reshuffling of executive authorities will be a sufficient placation tactic that will bring this plan to fruition. Learning from past mistakes while adapting to the contemporary sociopolitical and military situation is key if the process is to be moved forward. Overall, in addition to the countless domestic problems the Biden Administration will inherit and which it will have to manage creatively, the diplomatic context surrounding Libya in January 2021 is one that the White House will clearly have to adjust to as well.

What Can Tunisia Expect from the Biden Administration?

Sarah Yerkes

November 30, 2020

Like most of its North African neighbors, Tunisia saw little attention from the Trump Administration, compared to other parts of the Middle East such as Egypt, Iran, or Israel. While former Secretary of Defense Mark Esper did [visit Tunisia](#) shortly before the November 3rd presidential elections, meeting with President Kais Saied and [signing a 10-year Roadmap for Defense Cooperation](#) with his Tunisian counterpart, the country received few high level American visitors over the past four years and was rarely the subject of Washington's focus. It is noteworthy that this was not a dramatic change from the Obama Administration.

Although President Barack Obama had been drawn into supporting Tunisia following the 2010-2011 revolution and the unleashing of the Arab Spring, for most of his second term, Tunisia took a backseat to more pressing regional issues. These were the Libyan civil war next door, the conflict in Syria, the Iran nuclear negotiations, and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process—and that is despite broad bipartisan congressional support for Tunisia's democratic transition. Even in the years immediately following the revolution when there was a broad consensus within the US government on the need to “go big” in Tunisia to help consolidate its democratic gains, the country was never a priority. To be sure, Tunisia held policy-makers' attention only until the next conflict in the region reared its head.

The Biden Administration is likely to treat Tunisia similarly as its predecessors—as a non-controversial democracy that is perceived as doing well, relative to its neighbors, and thus deserves US admiration and support. Nevertheless, Tunisia most likely will not be a place where the incoming administration will devote a lot of time or energy, and this would be a mistake. There are several low-cost but high-reward opportunities for the Biden Administration to pursue there. Conversely, there is potentially dramatic instability that could come from the failure of Tunisia’s transition—an area where US assistance has a proven positive track record.

Within Congress, bipartisan support for Tunisia blossomed after 2011 and continued during the Trump Administration. While the country lost its main champion on Capitol Hill with the death of Senator John McCain, members of Congress on both sides of the aisle have tended to support Tunisia’s transition through continued appropriations and various statements and resolutions. In 2019, Senators Robert Menendez (D-New Jersey), Mitt Romney (R-Utah), and Chris Coons (D-Delaware) introduced a resolution affirming the “[strong partnership between Tunisia and the United States](#)” and recognizing the two countries’ shared values of democracy and support for human rights and the rule of law. Thus, even though President Donald Trump proposed [dramatic budget cuts](#) in aid to Tunisia in his first (and subsequent) budget requests, Congress largely ignored those cuts, keeping US assistance to the country at the same levels as under Obama.

More of the Same?

Despite Joe Biden’s foreign policy experience and interest, having served as chair and ranking member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and as vice president, his administration will confront the immediate priorities of addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and its concomitant economic challenges. His administration and the incoming Congress will have little appetite for expanding foreign assistance or further engagement in the Middle East. And he may be facing a divided Congress, including a combative Senate leadership that will not be eager to hand Biden any wins.

Thus, under the Biden Administration, the US-Tunisia relationship may very well remain unchanged. President Beji Caid Essebsi and his

successor, current President Kais Saied, were both skillful in their handling of President Trump. Neither managed to draw his ire and both kept Tunisia off of Trump's radar in a way that left US policy there to the professionals—from the highly experienced foreign service officers running the US embassy in Tunis to the career North Africa hands back in Washington. This leaves US-Tunisia policy in a good place, able to continue uninterrupted despite the political changeover, which is not the case for many other Middle East states.

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Additionally, President Kais Saied was quick to recognize President-elect Biden, [issuing his congratulations](#) and expressing eagerness to work with Biden on November 8, the day after US news outlets called the election in Biden's favor. Saied, who is far more wary of the West than his predecessor, is not likely to cozy up too closely to Biden and his team. But he has also remained above the fray and will not need to rebuild a relationship with the new US administration like his counterparts in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or Israel.

One factor that might point to a more robust US-Tunisia relationship involves the individuals who surround Biden. While the president-elect himself was [reportedly more skeptical](#) than President Obama of Washington's ability to influence democratic change on the ground during the Arab Spring, former Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who is [likely to serve](#) in the Biden Administration in a highly influential post such as secretary of state or national security advisor,²⁶ was one of the more vocal advocates for increasing US support to Tunisia in the years after the Arab Spring and could sway Biden toward embracing the young democracy. Additionally, many of those advising Biden on the Middle East served in the Obama Administration during the Arab Spring, witnessing first-hand that unrest and instability in Tunisia have the potential

²⁶ Blinken has been [nominated](#) by Biden to serve as secretary of state.

to spill over across the entire MENA region. And they had a front-row seat to the incredible success of Tunisia's democratic activists at bringing massive political and social change to a long-standing dictatorship.

The United States could play a mediating role, working with Tunisia on how to address the root causes of extremism, such as the socioeconomic deprivation and unemployment that are plaguing the country.

Another sign that Tunisia may see renewed attention from Biden's incoming administration is his team's interest in Europe and in rebuilding the US-European alliance. Tunisia, which is less than 100 miles from Sicily, is inextricably linked to Europe through geography as well as colonial ties, economic links, and a large diaspora.

It is at the center of the migration crisis, both as transit point for sub-Saharan African migrants to Europe and as an increasingly sizable source of migrants. The most recent terror attack in Nice, France, on October 29 was [carried out by a Tunisian](#) who left the country just one month before. This has thrown a wrench into Tunisian-French relations, with the French government [asking Tunisia to repatriate 231 migrants](#). With Biden focusing more on Europe and reaffirming US-European relations, the US government will likely be drawn further into the migration debate. And here, specifically, the United States could play a mediating role, working with Tunisia on how to address the root causes of extremism, such as the socioeconomic deprivation and unemployment that are plaguing the country, as well as cooperating with Europe on effective counterterrorism strategies that do not infringe on human rights.

To Embrace Democracy, Begin with Tunisia

In addition to fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and improving the US economy, another crucial domestic challenge for the Biden Administration will be restoring democracy at home. Along with the important work of shoring up trust in US institutions, President-elect Biden and his team have promised to restore US credibility on the world stage. Here, Biden would be well served by focusing on Tunisia. He has [promised to hold a Global Summit for Democracies](#) within his first year in office, which also

coincides with the 10th anniversary of the Tunisian revolution and the removal from power of President Zine El-Abidine ben Ali. Thus, holding a democracy summit in Tunis would be a perfect opportunity to draw attention to Tunisia's successes over the past decade and send a loud and clear signal to the region's democracy activists that the United States once again recognizes them and has their back.

There are several other low-cost ways that the Biden Administration could support Tunisia and its democratic transition. First, the United States should take seriously some of the requests of the Tunisian government for more regularized and formalized assistance mechanisms. One approach is through a long-desired bilateral free trade agreement. The United States already has a [Free Trade Agreement](#) with another North African country, Morocco, which entered into force 15 years ago. Further, the US-Tunisian economic relationship has steadily improved since the revolution. In February, Senators Chris Murphy (D-Connecticut) and Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina) [introduced a resolution](#) "expressing the sense of the Senate that the United States should initiate negotiations to enter into a free trade agreement with the Republic of Tunisia," making clear that there is bipartisan support for such an action. Thus, this could be one area where the Biden Administration could be confident that it would not face Senate opposition.

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The Tunisian government has also repeatedly requested a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on US bilateral assistance, similar to the one that [the United States has with Jordan](#), which provides a clear assistance commitment over a five-year period. While Tunisia should not expect to receive assistance at the same level as Jordan (more than \$1 billion a year), an MOU at an appropriate level, closer to the current US assistance levels of around \$150-200 million, would benefit both Tunisia and the United States. A five-year MOU would allow Tunisia to budget more effectively and efficiently and it would save appropriators time by

recognizing that Tunisia has received close to the same level of assistance for the past several years—under both the Obama and Trump administrations. More importantly, it would be a low-cost way to signal US commitment to Tunisia.

If an MOU is not on the table, another approach could be a social or economic roadmap document, similar to the 10-year [defense roadmap](#) that former Defense Secretary Esper signed with Tunisian Defense Minister Ibrahim Bartagi during Esper's trip to Tunis on September 30. This could be a highly symbolic as well as substantive gesture, indicating US support of the fledgling democracy and showing the rest of the world that the Biden Administration stands by its pledge to uphold democratic ideals and practices. While both an MOU and a roadmap would likely take a year or more to negotiate, they would actually save the administration time in the long run by developing long-term strategies to help both countries achieve their shared goals of a more democratic, stable, and prosperous Tunisia. Furthermore, the 2019 [Development Objective Agreement](#) signed by USAID and the Tunisian Ministry of Development, Investment and International Cooperation is a good first step toward a long-term strategy to address Tunisia's development challenges and could be supplemented by a 10-year roadmap or five-year MOU encompassing all forms of US assistance to Tunisia.

Helping the Revolution Succeed

Perhaps most importantly, the Biden Administration would be well served by turning its attention to Tunisia's unfinished transition, continuing to provide assistance to civil society actors, and working to address the massive socioeconomic disparities between Tunisia's interior and coastal regions. Biden's inauguration falls almost exactly on the 10th anniversary of the Tunisian revolution. This will be a crucial year for Tunisia as this anniversary will offer a flashing neon reminder of the goals of the revolution that have yet to be accomplished—particularly to Tunisians living in the interior where the revolution began. With the economic crisis exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, [many Tunisians are worse off today](#) than they were in 2010; this is producing higher levels of both regular and irregular migration, increased incidences of suicide and, most troubling, overwhelming despair on which extremist recruiters can prey.

While Tunisia has made tremendous progress, particularly in the arena of free expression and the development of civil society and independent media, its success is by no means guaranteed. The Biden Administration should continue and augment US support for good governance, particularly within the interior regions, to help restore the social contract and bring real, positive changes to the lives of Tunisians. President-elect Biden and his incoming administration should recognize, reward, and build on the Tunisian people's struggle that began a decade ago and heralded the Arab Spring as the hopeful movement for democratic development in the Arab world.

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The Complications Confronting Biden in Northwest Africa

Imad K. Harb

December 2, 2020

Following four years of American disarray and the absence of an effective foreign policy, the Joe Biden presidency faces both serious challenges in dealing with international affairs and copious opportunities to be a positive actor in the international community. In addition to rehabilitating the ranks and depth of the American foreign policy establishment, the incoming administration needs to imbue its approach to the world with a sense of responsibility, purpose, and humility, recognizing that multilateralism is the only way to move forward. Indeed, the Trump Administration's careless foreign policy should be seen as a warning to the United States that it must couple its international role with a concern for the interests of other, equally important regional and international actors.

During the Biden presidency, the call to reemphasize multilateralism can be applied to the American approach to the countries of Northwest Africa: Algeria, Mauritania, and Morocco. There, issues of domestic reform and regional stability must be met with concerted efforts that can go a long way if augmented by a strong American engagement in a region suffering from underdevelopment, interstate rivalries, and the presence of a stubborn extremist threat. American involvement there, in cooperation with equally concerned European states like France, could help mitigate multiple dangers and ensure regional peace and stability. In essence, and

despite its obvious concern with reversing the last four years of foreign policy malpractice, the Biden Administration must be open to innovative policy prescriptions that could help it gain the trust of the governments and peoples of Northwest Africa.

American Relations with Northwest Africa, at a Glance

Owing to different political and economic systems in Northwest Africa, the American approach, by and large, has been characterized by piecemeal dealings with the region's countries. Algeria's closed system and closeness with Russia and Europe offer limited American policy options toward that country and risk an overemphasis on counterterrorism cooperation. Mauritania's halting steps to a seemingly democratic political landscape have not received the requisite support; neither has the country's

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endemic poverty. Morocco's monarchy, with its emphasis on political stability, has won praise from the United States and a status as a non-NATO ally. Relations with these countries have thus required different American strategies that have limited collective action and did not necessarily lead to sustainable successes.

Algeria figures prominently in American [counterterrorism efforts](#), although the United States is not a major supplier of arms to the country. In fact, the two countries' relationship has so far failed to bypass a history of close cooperation between the North African country and Russia, heir to the Soviet Union. For example, in response to a recent request by Morocco to buy 25 American F-16 fighters that would be added to others already in its possession, Algeria [ordered](#) 14 Russian-made SU-57 fighters at a total cost of \$2 billion. There is, however, a healthy commercial relationship between Algeria and the United States, [amounting to about \\$1 billion](#) so far in 2020, mostly in energy products. Algeria is also a member of the US-sponsored [Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership \(TSCTP\)](#) that includes Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia. The United

States hopes that Algeria [would host the headquarters](#) of US Africa Command (AFRICOM), which would be a radical departure from previous policy. Finally, with the Trump Administration neglecting to support democracy and human rights around the world, the United States played no role in 2019 in helping Algeria's transition from the regime of former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

The United States maintains negligible economic relations with Mauritania; total trade with the country [has amounted to about \\$100 million](#) a year since 2018, a marked decline from the days of the Barack Obama Administration. Emphasis has been on humanitarian and security assistance. According to the US Department of State, Mauritania continues to [traffic in persons](#); despite abolishing slavery in 1981, [there remain](#) an estimated 90,000 slaves in the country. Ironically, Mauritania succeeded in early 2020 to become a member of the [United Nations Human Rights Council](#), which is "responsible for the promotion and protection of all human rights around the globe." The country is also a member of the US-led TSCTP and plays a role in fighting terrorism in western Africa.

American-Moroccan relations, on the other hand, are [old and deep](#), with the North African kingdom enjoying the status of a non-NATO ally since 2004. The United States and Morocco conduct regular joint military exercises and cooperate on counterterrorism measures. Former Secretary of Defense Mark Esper [visited Morocco](#) in October and signed two military agreements

Morocco continues to serve as a base of American operations in Northwest and West Africa against terrorist threats and as a trusted partner in what American planners call an anti-Russia alliance.

whose contents remained undisclosed. The kingdom continues to serve as a base of American operations in Northwest and West Africa against terrorist threats and as a trusted partner in what American planners call an anti-Russia alliance. Morocco also signed a [Free Trade Agreement](#) with the United States in 2004. Trade between the two countries [reached some \\$2.5 billion](#) so far in 2020, with American exports dominating the exchange, as is the case with Algeria and Mauritania.

Some Facts Awaiting the Biden Team in Northwest Africa

Three important issues should help elevate Northwest Africa to prominence among the members of Biden's foreign policy establishment over the coming years. Addressing all three effectively promises to advance American interests in a vital region, especially if the United States employs a regional approach to the countries involved.

The United States should emphasize its commitment and readiness to devote effort to persistent deficits in development goals and democracy promotion in Algeria, Mauritania, and Morocco.

First, the United States should emphasize its commitment and readiness to devote effort to persistent deficits in development goals and democracy promotion in Algeria, Mauritania, and Morocco. Despite having ample energy resources for purposeful and sustainable economic and social development, Algeria continues to fall behind in essential socioeconomic indicators. Youth unem-

ployment for the last three years has been [around 30 percent](#), a dangerous trend that will always be a source of instability, while overall unemployment stands at [almost 12 percent](#). Corruption is endemic: Algeria [ranked 106](#) among 198 countries in 2019 with a score of 35/100, putting it among the most corrupt in the world. With a [shrinking economy](#) that is dependent on energy exports and a world slowdown due to the coronavirus pandemic, the country's deficits are increasing and hope for a quick bounce back is disappearing.

This socioeconomic picture is compounded by public apathy and lack of confidence in the political process after the heyday of popular protests in 2019 that resulted in Bouteflika's resignation. That change at the presidential level was not translated into a program of political change in state and representative institutions, however. Instead, the country's armed forces and security services continued to wield unchallenged power and shepherded a political process that, in the end, [led to the election](#) of President Abdelmadjid Tebboune in December 2019. Yet Tebboune's victory was a mere renewal of the old Bouteflika regime, as he had previously served as prime minister. He received 58 percent of the votes cast in a poll of low turnout—under 40 percent of eligible voters. His tenure since acceding to

the presidency has not satisfied the demands for radical political change. Such a failure was evident in another very [low turnout referendum](#) on constitutional amendments in November 2020, which the opposition boycotted and in which only 24 percent of voters participated. Two-thirds of those who voted approved limiting presidential terms to two, setting rules for fighting corruption, and declaring states of emergency, among other things.

Mauritania is trying to address serious economic issues as its electoral democracy takes some important steps toward consolidation. In 2019, the World Bank [gave the country](#) a hopeful outlook for growth over the next few years, emphasizing good steps toward economic reform and fiscal responsibility. But the country still faces problems in addressing poverty and budget deficits and in helping the extractive sectors of the economy. At the same time, Mauritania has earned good marks for allowing a [peaceful transition of power](#) from one elected president (Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz) to another in 2019, although the current president, Mohammed Ould Ghazouani, [has run into trouble](#) with his appointed prime minister and many members of his administration who have been accused of corruption. Still, Ghazouani's election [was marred](#) by repression and attacks against opposition figures protesting the conduct and outcome of the poll. Additionally, and despite the international outcry against the practice, Mauritania still has not done what is necessary to completely eradicate slavery in the country.

At present, Morocco seems to be reeling from the domestic and external effects of the coronavirus epidemic. As a [report from the World Bank](#) details, Morocco's growth in 2020 is projected to shrink by over 6 percentage points from last year, which will result in an increase of 7.6 percent in the fiscal deficit. Remittances, tourism, and exports—three essential sectors for the national economy—will decline sharply in 2020. Unemployment is expected to exceed 12 percent while youth unemployment [will reach 22 percent](#). These trends will affect how the Moroccan government addresses such issues as social services, at a time of national emergency, and maintains law and order and political stability.

While political stability is of paramount importance for the monarchy, the unfortunate fact is that such stability is still maintained by a dominant royal court—which controls the deep state (the Makhzen) and

military and security services—and associated elite groups. What reforms were instituted in the aftermath of the 2011 public protests **remain insufficient** to ensure a vibrant democratic atmosphere and truly responsive representative institutions. Despite having added rights and prerogatives in the political system, the prime minister still serves at the pleasure of the monarch and any fundamental changes to the governing process require the latter's approval. Freedom of speech and of expression are constrained by government policies that have resulted in accusing activists of espionage for exposing episodes of official corruption, as the case of journalist and activist **Omar Radi** shows. A Facebook post by an unemployed activist, Abdelali Bahmad, **landed him in prison** for two years after he was charged with disrespecting the national flag. His case was emblematic of increasing restrictions on social media users. Activists **have been jailed** in connection to protests against corruption in 2016 and 2017 in the northern Rif region. These and other cases of government trespassing on social and individual freedoms erode Morocco's democracy and stress the need for major improvements in the country's human rights record.

The Biden Administration should be no stranger to the issue that makes Northwest Africa an essential region in its foreign policy: the threat from several extremist organizations operating in western Africa.

The second issue that should be prominent on the Biden Administration's agenda is the ongoing Algerian-Moroccan dispute over the Western Sahara region. While Morocco **claims sovereignty** over the territory and controls some 80 percent of it, Algeria has sponsored an exiled Saharan leadership in the form of the Polisario Front that controls the

rest and demands full independence for the territory. Mauritania, on the other hand, renounced any claims to the area in 1979. In 1991, the United Nations Security Council adopted **Resolution 690** that established the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) and set in motion a transitional period for elections. So far, no referendum has been conducted because of differences between Morocco and the Polisario in how to frame the question about the territory's future. If the coming Biden Administration is to construct a viable regional order that can ensure stability for Northwest Africa, it would do well to act as an honest broker

between the three parties to the dispute. The administration should be advised to remain impartial and distance itself from the transactional nature of the departing Trump Administration, [which offered](#) to back Morocco's claim to the region in exchange for the kingdom's normalization of relations with Israel. Morocco rejected the offer.²⁷

Third, the Biden Administration should be no stranger to the issue that makes Northwest Africa an essential region in its foreign policy: the threat from [several extremist organizations](#) operating in western Africa. As was the case during the Obama and Trump administrations, the American approach should encompass the entire region and should continue to involve the area's governments and international actors, such as France. While Algeria, Mauritania, and Morocco appear to escape the brunt of the threat because of strong security institutions, they are not immune to the potential instability it engenders. [As it stands](#), Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger are witnessing the worst impact of the violence, but states such as the northwestern trio, Chad, Tunisia, Libya, Nigeria, and others are just as exposed to the strengthening menace. It should be understood that a Biden strategy to deal with the threat of extremism should not focus solely on security cooperation with regional and international actors; indeed, addressing the danger will succeed only if the United States and other developed countries pledge economic assistance to the region's states. Only by helping to ameliorate socioeconomic ills resulting from underdevelopment can a fight against extremism succeed in western Africa and elsewhere around the world.

It Is Hard ... but It Is Doable

After the Trump Administration's chaotic, incoherent, and incompetent American foreign policy, the Biden Administration will have no choice but to hit the ground running on a slew of issues. While it is likely and expected that the new president and his administration will devote most of their energy dealing with the failures on the domestic front—the coronavirus pandemic and the economy, for starters—they must address equally consequential fiascos that impact American interests abroad. Importantly, the new administration would do well to have a

²⁷ Indeed, the Trump Administration [recognized](#) Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara as part of an agreement it negotiated on December 10, 2020 for normalized relations between Morocco and Israel.

holistic approach to Middle Eastern and North African affairs, including the complications of securing peace and cooperation between the countries of Northwest Africa. Security assistance to Algeria, Mauritania, and Morocco may work to help stymie extremists, but a better policy would also be to utilize financial and diplomatic resources to advance the causes of socioeconomic and political development. Open societies and hopeful economies are sure to help change the conditions from which extremist violence springs to the detriment of all.

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