



# **An Assessment of the Biden Administration's Policy in the Middle East**



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*Dr. Dania Koleilat Khatib is a specialist in US-Arab relations with a focus on lobbying. She is co-founder of the Research Center for Cooperation and Peace Building, a Lebanese nongovernmental organization focused on Track II.*

## INTRODUCTION

**I**n his first international address, in February 2021, newly elected US President Joe Biden declared that “America is back.” The slogan implied his administration would oversee a return to greater US involvement in world affairs but the fact is that he is proving even more isolationist than his immediate predecessors, Barack Obama and Donald Trump.

On the presidential campaign trail, Biden pledged to end America’s “forever wars” and pursue diplomacy relentlessly. However, it remains to be seen just how effective diplomacy can be in the absence of the threat of use of power.

## WITHDRAWAL FROM THE REGION SINCE OBAMA

Trump’s approach to the Middle East, although on the surface different from that of Obama, was at its core consistent with his predecessor’s when it came to withdrawing from the region and investing less effort there.

Trump’s declared approach to the Middle East was to end America’s engagement in endless conflicts in the region. While running for president in 2016, he claimed that the US had spent \$6 trillion on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a figure he increased to \$7 trillion in 2018.

America, he said, was protecting the people of the Middle East and he suggested that Arab countries should contribute financially to the cost of this US protection. He campaigned to bring “the boys back home” and, in December 2018, tweeted that it was time for others to fight. The US, he said, should not be the police force for a region in which the people did not appreciate its efforts.

But while Trump made the case for isolationism in particularly blunt terms, it was Obama who started the trend. Despite multilateral agreements, such as the Paris Climate Accords, the focus of the Obama administration was more domestic in nature than that of his predecessor, George W. Bush. For the average American, the only obvious consequence of Bush’s war on the “axis of evil,” and his administration’s doctrine of spreading democracy throughout the world,



***Biden hastily withdrew US troops from Afghanistan on the pretext that he had to follow through on decisions taken by the Trump administration.***



was two disastrous wars.

Obama adopted a more realistic approach to the region, which involved stepping back from attempts to reform it, accepting as it is and managing its problems. Regarding Iran, he succeeded in clinching a deal with Tehran where his predecessor had failed, simply because he had more modest aims and requests.

Obama campaigned on withdrawing from Iraq, in the process framing the new American isolationism. Although Trump’s campaign was based on undoing this isolationism, he nevertheless pursued the trend his predecessor started.

Trump pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal, more formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and the Paris Climate Accords. He even threatened to withdraw America from NATO. In the Middle East, he initiated a withdrawal from Syria under the pretext that the mission to eradicate Daesh had been accomplished.

Similarly to Trump, Biden campaigned on dismantling his predecessor’s record, promising to reinstate the Iran nuclear deal and return to the Paris agreement. But

**US President Joe Biden speaks during a meeting in 2021 on the need to address the debt limit. AFP**

when it came to the Middle East, he hastily withdrew US troops from Afghanistan on the pretext that he had to follow through on decisions taken by the Trump administration.

Hence, despite the fluctuations in foreign policy since Obama, and the declared intention of each of the past three presidents to undo the work of his predecessor, withdrawal from the region has not only been a constant element in the foreign policies of each administration but each successive president has accelerated the trend.

For his part, Biden seems to have been inspired by a 2020 report from international affairs think tank the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, titled Making US Foreign Policy Work Better for the Middle Class. It argues that it is better to have a “less ambitious” foreign policy that makes sure decisions mainly benefit middle-class Americans. Biden appointed Jake Sullivan, a co-author of the report, as his national security advisor.

Biden came across as a president who would value multilateralism, institutions and democracy, and there was widespread expectation of increased engagement by the



US in its handling of foreign affairs. However, similarly to his predecessor, he is taking a more unilateral approach to foreign policy, as exemplified by the hasty withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, which caused surprise and concern among America's European partners.

German chancellor Angela Merkel, for example, indirectly criticized the withdrawal saying that “for those who believed in democracy and freedom, especially for women, these are bitter events.”

While the world scrambled to handle the repercussions of the withdrawal, the Biden administration insisted it was the correct course of action, it was behind them and it was now time to move on.

Proponents of the withdrawal said the US spent 20 years engaged in a failed nation-building attempt in Afghanistan and there was no strategic benefit to be gained from remaining there any longer.

However, pragmatists point to the true original objectives of the US, which were to put in place a pro-US regime and make sure Afghanistan did not become a breeding ground for terrorists. Those objectives were achieved at a relatively low cost. In the two years that preceded the withdrawal, there had been no casualties and the US had a light footprint in the country, with a resultant low and sustainable cost.

## IRAN-CENTRIC POLICY

Biden's Middle East policy, similarly to that of Trump, is Iran-centric, which is also in line with Obama's regional doctrine. Trump decided to exert “maximum pressure” on Iran while paying special attention to the interests of Israel. With the Abraham Accords, a flagship policy of his presidency, Trump focused on pushing Arab countries to normalize relations with Israel without the latter offering any compromises, contrary to the approach of the Arab peace initiative.

The Biden administration, on the other hand, does not seek to increase the pressure on Iran, preferring instead to entice Tehran to revive the 2015 nuclear deal from which Trump walked away in 2018.

However, a return to the deal has proven to be problematic. The Iranians have a deep distrust of the US and fear there could be another withdrawal from the agreement in three years if a Republican wins the next



American soldiers arrive at Kandahar airbase after the Operation Deliberate Strike. AFP

presidential election. In this climate of distrust, the Iranians are refusing to offer more concessions.

Mohammed Jawad Zarif — who as foreign minister between 2013 and 2021 was the public face of Iran's foreign policy and broadly liked by the West — has been replaced as Tehran's leading nuclear negotiator by Ali Bagheri Kani, who is regarded as a more radical figure.

The atmosphere of the current negotiations is different, lacking goodwill and characterized by the refusal of the Iranians to talk directly to the Americans. They sense weakness in the US eagerness to seal a deal.

The Biden administration has promised a longer and stronger agreement but as yet has not even been able to restore the original deal, as Iran insists on the removal of all

sanctions. Added to that, there are technical difficulties created by Iran's acquisition of nuclear knowledge after it broke the agreement, in response to the American withdrawal under Trump, and began to enrich uranium.

The Biden administration is now in a weak position. It has promised Americans a stronger and longer nuclear deal but is faced with a more rigid Iranian leadership that is demanding conditions that fall outside of the scope of the JCPOA, including the removal of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps from Washington's terrorism blacklist.

The war in Ukraine has added another complication, as Russia is one of the signatories to the JCPOA and will doubtless use this to bring pressure to bear on the US. At the same time, Biden cannot offer Tehran any guarantee that the deal will not be revoked by a new president in three years.

Meanwhile, even as they negotiate the Iranians are increasing their regional activities carried out through proxies. On Jan. 17 this year, three people were killed by a Houthi missile attack on Abu Dhabi, the capital of the UAE. Another two missiles fired at the country later that month by the Yemen-based militia were intercepted.

In the face of these pressures, the success of America's declared intent to return to the JCPOA is far from guaranteed and there appears to be no alternative in place should the negotiations collapse. Meanwhile, the conflict in Ukraine is clearly a more immediate concern for the Biden administration than the situation in the Middle East.

## FROZEN CONFLICT

Biden has also rowed back from Trump's determination to apply maximum pressure on Syria, preferring a “frozen conflict” policy. Trump hoped the Syrian regime would crack under sustained pressure and agree to negotiate. That pressure was applied directly on Lebanon, which the US viewed as the lung for Bashar Al-Assad's regime and imposed sanctions on its banking sector.

But while Trump's goal was the collapse of the Syrian regime, Biden aims to maintain the status quo and prevent a collapse in an effort to avoid messy repercussions the administration would have to deal with.



## *The new US policy of “frozen conflict” sends a bad message to America's friends and enemies alike.*

Trump's policy on Syria had clarity, despite the whimsical character of the former president, who abruptly withdrew from northern Syria in 2019 following a call from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Biden's approach, however, is less clear. His “frozen conflict” strategy appears to depend on the Turks staying put in the northwest of the country and maintaining stability in the area. The Americans, meanwhile, will continue to support the Syrian Democratic Forces in a bid to maintain the status quo.

The status quo in Syria is not sustainable in the event of unexpected developments, however, and the Biden administration does not seem to have any contingency plans in place. In the absence of a solid, multifaceted policy to drive events, the situation could spin out of control at any time.

Regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Trump administration paid special attention to Israel and pushed Arab countries to normalize relations with the Jewish state but this does not seem to be the Biden agenda.

In fact, Biden was reluctant to hire a replacement for David Friedman, the ambassador to Israel appointed by Trump in 2017. It was only when the Gaza crisis erupted in May 2021 that the administration felt compelled to appoint a new envoy.

The current US policy on Palestine focuses on tactical issues and on making the lives of Palestinians easier on a day-to-day basis. However, there is no concerted effort to end the conflict and reach a solution — another example of the “frozen conflict” approach.

Unlike Trump, who attempted to force through solutions, Biden seeks to avoid or delay solutions as much as possible so as not to have to deal with any repercussions.

## NEW ALLIANCES

In Biden's Interim National Security Strategic Guidance report, published in March 2021, the entire Middle East was reduced to a single paragraph that spoke vaguely of America's “ironclad commitment to Israel's security,” working “to deter Iranian aggression,” and collaborating with regional partners to “disrupt Al-Qaeda and related terrorist networks.”

But, it adds, “we do not believe that military force is the answer to the region's challenges,



and we will not give our partners in the Middle East a blank check to pursue policies at odds with American interests and values.”

This last remark, which highlights the superior attitude of the Biden administration to leaderships in the Middle East, has caused a regional realignment. Trump sought to realign Arab countries with Israel but, as a result of Biden’s approach, old foes are getting together. This is partly because they no longer see the US as an ally they can rely upon and, feeling abandoned, they need to devise policies of their own and seek new alliances.

With Trump in the White House, regional leaders felt the US had their backs and that they could pursue more aggressive policies. Erdogan, the UAE’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed and Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman all had special relationships with Trump but lack this intimacy with Biden.

As a presidential candidate, Biden even labeled Saudi Arabia “a pariah” state , and the administration’s attempts to recalibrate the US relationship with the Kingdom is prompting former foes to coalesce; the Emirati crown prince has visited Turkey, for example, and Erdogan has visited both the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Driven partly driven by the Biden approach and partly by other factors, countries in the region are seeking security policies of their own. But the potential Saudi-Turkish rapprochement has come about mainly because both countries feel that they cannot rely on the US anymore and are facing similar threats. Turkey is cornered by Iran in Syria and in Iraq: Iranian militias protect the PKK in Iraq, while Tehran supports Assad in Syria.

Meanwhile, the main point of contention between Saudi Arabia and Turkey, the Muslim Brotherhood, is no longer a threat as it has lost its popular appeal.

## THE US NO LONGER AN OFFSHORE ‘BALANCER’

It is, perhaps, too early to speak of a Biden doctrine, given that he has been in office for less than a year and a half. However, the hands-off approach of his administration is creating more chaos than stability, as the US is losing its role as an offshore “balancer.”

While proponents of the Biden administration argue that the American

disengagement will push foes to reach agreement, in reality this disengagement is leading to escalation, as seen in Yemen.

Despite the talks in Iraq, we do not see any Saudi-Iranian rapprochement beyond the narrative on the need to solve problems. The negotiations mainly have revolved around tactical issues, such as the quota for pilgrims and the opening of embassies and consulates. However, the fundamental problems are too deep for the two parties to solve on their own and there has been an escalation of hostilities in Yemen and the waterways of the Gulf.

For talks to lead to results, they need the backing of a guarantor and, so far, the US has not been prepared to play this role. Neither does the Biden administration appear to be considering who might fill the void it leaves.

## DISCUSSION

The new US policy of “frozen conflict” sends a bad message to America’s friends and enemies alike. The discourse is that the center of world policies is no longer transatlantic, but focused on Chinese and Russian alliances.

This has great repercussions for the Middle East. Gulf countries that began to look to Russia and China as alternatives to the US a while ago now find themselves compelled to strengthen their relationships with America’s two main competitors. Russia and China are more relaxed when it comes to human rights issues and less particular than the US about the use of the weapons they sell.

However, they cannot compensate for the US for several reasons. The first is that both of them are close to Iran, which means that despite the apparent US disinterest in the Arabian Gulf, and Biden’s aloof attitude toward the region, the US is still of importance as long as the Gulf states have points of contention with the regime in Tehran.

While ideologically the Democratic Party remains focused on disengagement and on domestic affairs, this disengagement will affect the standing of the US around the world, along with the part of the prosperity enjoyed by America that stems from this standing. Why, for example, did the US historically win so many oil concessions?

It is difficult completely to separate foreign policy from domestic policy. The US enjoyed preferential treatment globally because

Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei taking part in a graduation ceremony for Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) cadets at Imam Hussein University in Tehran. AFP







Smoke is seen rising from buildings after several explosions hit the Ukrainian capital Kyiv early morning. AFP

it had a supreme position and because its allies relied upon it. If the US relinquishes its leading role in the world, ultimately that will affect its economic prosperity.

The war in Ukraine demonstrates that the Gulf region is still of strategic importance. As the US and Europe moved to put pressure on Russia through sanctions, they have sought the cooperation of the Gulf states more than ever before. However, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been unwilling to take a side in this fight.

This differs markedly from the Cold War era, when Saudi Arabia's fossil fuel policies rendered the price of Russian gas prohibitive, contributing to the economic collapse of the Soviet Union. Then, under the Carter doctrine, the US was committed to its Arab Gulf partners. This does not seem to be the case any longer, as the relationship has become more transactional.

Disengaging from the region will not shield the US from its problems. The resurgence of Daesh, as a result of the early US withdrawal from Iraq, took a toll on the West in the form of an increase in terrorist attacks.

While disengagement from the Middle East

and keeping a distance from the nations there might lead to some rapprochement between Arab Gulf states and Turkey, in general it will also result in more chaos as countries will tend to craft policies of their own that might well clash.

Also, Russia will tend to fill the void left by the US. Iran, sensing more lax American attitudes, will only grow more bold, which in turn will erode US prestige worldwide.

The problem is that the current US policy is driven by ideology more than pragmatism. The fixation on disengaging from the region is precluding a careful, cost-benefit analysis of such action. Relentless diplomacy cannot work unless there is a force behind it, a political will, and a willingness to enforce it if necessary. This is not evident within the Biden administration.

The regional status quo is not sustainable. Postponing the taking of necessary decisions will only aggravate the problems and will not delay the eventual need to handle them.

The policy of procrastination, while paying minimal attention to foreign policy and to the region, will definitely be exploited by America's rivals, who will seek to fill the void.

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