

America Votes, the Middle East Reacts: Views on U.S. Elections from Across the Region

by [Abdulrahman al-Rashed \(/experts/abdulrahman-al-rashed\)](#), [Mohamed Anwar E. al-Sadat \(/experts/mohamed-anwar-e-al-sadat\)](#), [Asli Aydintasbas \(/experts/asli-aydintasbas\)](#), [David Horovitz \(/experts/david-horovitz\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Abdulrahman al-Rashed \(/experts/abdulrahman-al-rashed\)](#)

Abdulrahman al-Rashed is the chairman of Al-Arabiya's editorial board and former general manager of its news channel.



[Mohamed Anwar E. al-Sadat \(/experts/mohamed-anwar-e-al-sadat\)](#)

Mohamed Anwar E. al-Sadat is a former Egyptian parliamentarian and chairman of the Reform and Development Party.




[Asli Aydintasbas \(/experts/asli-aydintasbas\)](#)

Asli Aydintasbas is a senior fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, focusing on Turkish foreign policy and the external ramifications of its domestic politics.



[David Horovitz \(/experts/david-horovitz\)](#)

David Horovitz is founding editor of the Times of Israel and former editor-in-chief of the Jerusalem Post and Jerusalem Report.

 Brief Analysis

Experts from the Gulf, Egypt, Turkey, and Israel respond to the initial voting results and discuss factors that may help or hinder the next administration.

On November 5, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Abdulrahman al-Rashed, Mohamed Anwar E. al-Sadat, Asli Aydintasbas, and David Horowitz. Rashed is the chairman of Al-Arabiya's editorial board and former general manager of its news channel. Sadat is a former Egyptian parliamentarian and chairman of the Reform and Development Party. Aydintasbas is a senior fellow with the European Council on Foreign Relations and a former columnist for Milliyet. Horowitz is founding editor of the Times of Israel and former editor-in-chief of the Jerusalem Post and Jerusalem Report. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

ABDULRAHMAN AL-RASHED

The good news is that Joe Biden already knows the Middle East probably better than any past incoming U.S. president since George H. W. Bush. A Biden administration is unlikely to diverge much from America's traditional policies in the region.

In the Gulf, given the persistent commonalities between U.S. and Saudi interests—security, energy, Iran, et cetera—Biden and Riyadh would likely establish good relations. This has been the case with all past American presidents, even those who were expected to chafe with Saudi leaders. These shared interests also make a total U.S. withdrawal from the region unlikely, despite rhetoric about ending “endless wars.”

Regarding Iran, Biden will likely build on President Trump's current approach by using tough sanctions to seek a political solution. Iranian leaders may see that Biden is their only chance at peace and prosperity in the near future, and therefore decide to compromise toward a new agreement.

Regarding the recent progress in Arab-Israel relations, Biden was supportive of the normalization agreements struck with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Sudan. If regional actors try hard enough, they might be able to build on this progress and create a more comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian deal that goes beyond bilateral agreements.

As for calls within the Democratic Party to press harder on human rights in the region, the reality is that the Gulf states and U.S. presidents have experienced tension over these matters in the past, and in the end they have come together and worked out understandings. Saudi Arabia and other countries do not plan to involve themselves in the complexities of American domestic politics, including the influence of progressives in the Democratic Party. Rather, they will do their best to maintain close ties with the White House as they have done in the past.

MOHAMED ANWAR E. AL-SADAT

Egyptians have been following this election very closely, and while the government may favor a Trump presidency, most of the public has big hopes for Biden. It is true that some people associate the Obama administration, and therefore Biden, with political Islam, but many Egyptians hope that he might put greater emphasis on the more fundamental effort to advance human rights and democracy in the Middle East.

Egyptians realize that the United States is deeply divided, but they want to see Washington back on the global scene pushing for its values of justice, equality, and democracy. The world needs a maestro to conduct the global symphony again, and the United States can act as an effective counterbalance against other, more problematic actors. The world also needs U.S. leadership to face challenges such as global warming and the coronavirus pandemic. In this region specifically, U.S. engagement is critical.

That said, the next president will face many significant challenges. The Arab-Israel normalization deals are positive, but some Egyptians fear they will lead to a “cold peace” like what they saw after the Egypt-Israel treaty. The region needs a more comprehensive agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

Looking ahead to a Biden presidency, a lot of things would change in the Egyptian government's rhetoric and approach. There will be more of an effort to adhere to human rights standards, not only because of Biden, but also because the U.S. Congress will be pushing for those things in Egypt. In the medium term, the two countries are likely to maintain a good, strong relationship.

ASLI AYDINTASBAS

Biden has a history in Turkey. When President Obama's relationship with Recep Tayyip Erdogan began to deteriorate, Vice President Biden became the point-person for communicating with the Turkish leader. That said, Ankara's first choice in this election is Trump, who has maintained good personal relations with Erdogan, allowed Turkey to progress its expansionist agenda by pulling U.S. troops out of Syria, and stayed relatively silent on issues in the East Mediterranean and Libya.

More generally, however, attitudes between Ankara and Washington have become adversarial. Turkish leaders would probably welcome a

reduced U.S. presence in the Middle East, seeing an American departure as a vacuum for them to fill. That view may be shortsighted in the end, though. A U.S. withdrawal is more likely to create an increasingly lawless Middle East where political fault lines make space for heightened conflict and instability, which would ultimately be detrimental to Turkey.

In contrast, a renewed U.S. emphasis on human rights could be good for Turkey, since such pressure has facilitated the country's internal development in the past. Yet the world is different now, and anti-American sentiment has grown substantially in Ankara. It will be difficult for Biden to achieve much traction with human rights demands in Turkey.

In the meantime, the Turkish government might actually prefer to receive light sanctions from the Trump administration for its acquisition of S-400 missiles from Russia, since such sanctions may be harsher if left for Biden to apply. Erdogan is also more likely to consider heavier engagement in the Azeri-Armenian conflict under Trump than he would be under Biden. Even so, Ankara has been very careful not to talk about the U.S. election or get involved in it.

DAVID HOROVITZ

As in other countries, Israelis have been watching the election very closely. President Trump has taken some popular steps in Israel such as moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem and applying "maximum pressure" on Iran. Israeli Jews largely believe that Trump is good for their country.

In contrast, they were very critical of President Obama's stance on Israel and what they viewed as his obsessive approach toward West Bank settlements. They believe Biden is less likely to be so focused on that issue, however, and expect to see a warm, positive relationship between the White House and Jerusalem.

Because the U.S. election has been very close, this moment is probably not a big turning point for the Democratic Party when it comes to Israel. And given the many other issues requiring attention on the global and domestic agenda, Biden will presumably be uneager to start a bitter battle with Israel, as Obama was willing to do. A nuanced, pragmatic Biden, who is not unduly optimistic about the potential for breakthrough with the Palestinians or naive to their intransigence, could be very good for the future of Israeli-Palestinian relations and a two-state solution.

For now, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's government has generally tried to stay quiet about the possibility of a Biden presidency. He has prohibited all of his ministers from saying anything about the election, in part to avoid exacerbating criticism that he has turned Israel into a partisan issue within the United States. Israel is already internally divided over Netanyahu, and with criticism from the right increasing, he needs to find a good middle ground.

This summary was prepared by Austin Corona. ❖

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