

# Biden's Middle East Policy in his Own Words: Understanding the New Administration's Priorities

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Brief Analysis

**The best means of understanding Biden's likely Middle East policy is by analyzing his own writing on the question, which suggests that expectations for a major shift in regional policies may remain unmet.**

Opinions in the Middle East split once again over the recent U.S. presidential elections. Those who supported President Trump believe that a second term would have meant less Iranian influence in the region and perhaps even the fall of the regime itself. Meanwhile, those backing Biden feel that Trump's removal will help the Palestinian cause and strengthen the "axis of resistance" (Iran, Syria, Hezbollah) through lifting sanctions on Iran and bringing back the nuclear deal. The bad news for both sides is that both will likely be frustrated by Biden's actual foreign policy in the region. It does not appear that there will be significant changes in the next U.S. administration's position towards the issues of counterterrorism or the presence of U.S. forces.

The best source on what we can expect from Biden's foreign policy is Biden himself. The President-elect published an [article \(https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again\)](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again) in *Foreign Affairs* magazine in the spring of this year, in which he outlined his proposed foreign policy for a Biden presidency. That article was entitled "Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump."

My analysis of this issue rests primarily on Biden's own views as outlined in this piece. As far as it seems from his article, Biden's foreign policy will be based on a particular set of principles. In listing these principles, I do not mean to suggest that I believe they will be applied word for word. Biden is a pragmatist and realist, and therefore his article begins by saying that "the next U.S. president will have to address the world as it is in January 2021, and picking up the pieces will be an enormous task."

**Biden on Foreign Policy Writ Large**

Biden will seek to uphold democratic and liberal values as the core of relations between countries. Biden writes, "As president, I will take immediate steps to renew U.S. democracy and alliances...the triumph of democracy and liberalism over fascism and autocracy created the free world." It is clear that his administration will make democratic frameworks the governing principle in its relationships with other countries, meaning we can potentially expect interventionist policies in countries that are classified as undemocratic. Furthermore, countries that have witnessed an increase in protests and demonstrations, such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Iran, should expect more U.S. pressure in the future. They should be aware that furthering democracy, good governance, and anti-corruption efforts will be the key to their relationships with the United States.

Biden was very clear in this regard when he stated:

"From Hong Kong to Sudan, Chile to Lebanon, citizens are once more reminding us of the common yearning for honest governance and the universal abhorrence of corruption. An insidious pandemic, corruption is fueling oppression, corroding human dignity, and equipping authoritarian leaders with a powerful tool to divide and weaken democracies across the world...Trump seems to be on the other team, taking the word of autocrats while showing disdain for democrats. By presiding over the most corrupt administration in modern American history, he has given license to kleptocrats everywhere."

Moreover, it is politics, not the economy, that will determine Biden's foreign policy. The era of Trump was marked by putting economic gains before political principles. Biden's foreign policy will be grounded in political principles, which will presumably in turn will lead to economic prosperity. Biden says, "Democracy is not just the foundation of American society. It is also the wellspring of our power. It strengthens and amplifies our leadership to keep us safe in the world. It is the engine of our ingenuity that drives our economic prosperity."

This does not mean that Biden will neglect the economy, but rather that he believes in the potential for greater economic prosperity through an approach grounded in globalization and an emphasis on the middle class and creativity. Biden writes, "Second, my administration will equip Americans to succeed in the global economy—with a foreign policy for the middle class. To win the competition for the future against China or anyone else, the United States must sharpen its innovative edge and unite the economic might of democracies around the world to counter abusive economic practices and reduce inequality." It is clear that competition with China will also be a priority in the Biden era, but through a different approach: one grounded in liberal principles and creative leadership, rather than the principles of economic warfare or protectionism.

In keeping with this less adversarial approach, the United States will lead the world through globalization, not Americanization. Trump's policy was based upon the slogan "America First," which his administration translated into many isolationist protocols. The Trump administration thus dealt globalization and its principles a serious blow. In a reversal of this trend, the Biden era will see a return to globalized U.S. policies, policies in which the United States leads international organizations rather than snubbing them and withdrawing from international agreements. Biden writes, "The Biden foreign policy agenda will place the United States back at the head of the table, in a position to work with its allies and partners to mobilize collective action on global threats...the United States' commitment is sacred, not transactional. NATO is at the very heart of the United States' national security."

In this globalizing approach, diplomacy will take priority. Biden criticizes the Trump administration's excessive use of 'hard power,' i.e. the U.S. military. While Biden does not rule out the use of military force as one of the tools of his foreign policy, he emphasizes that diplomacy should take precedence. Biden writes, "Too often, we have relied solely on the might of our military instead of drawing on our full array of strengths. Trump's disastrous foreign policy record reminds us every day of the dangers of an unbalanced and incoherent approach, and one that defunds and denigrates the role of diplomacy."

But despite this emphasis on global connectivity and diplomacy, it is likely that the Biden administration will return to a Cold War dynamic with Russia. Throughout his article, Biden focused on how a Russia “under Putin’s leadership” stands at odds with all the values that Biden holds. If we consider the support that Biden and his son have offered to Ukraine, we can understand the severity of his position towards Russia, which will bring us back to a cold war dynamic and all its implications.

As a component of this stance towards Russia, Biden affirms the importance of reviving NATO, as well as U.S. leadership of NATO, an approach that differs vastly from his predecessor’s policy of during last four years. Biden writes, “We must impose real costs on Russia for its violation of international norms and stand with Russian civil society...Putin wants to tell himself, and anyone else that he can dupe into believing him, that the liberal idea is ‘obsolete.’ But he does so because he is afraid of its power.” Biden’s emphasis on the “sacred” role of NATO, which was founded to confront the Soviet threat, is further evidence of the probable return to a Cold War climate. It seems that Russia knows what awaits it during the Biden era, which is why we find Russia (as well as China) among the few countries that have not yet congratulated Biden on his victory in the election.

In short, we can say that U.S. foreign policy in the Biden era will be committed to three primary tenets that Biden has outlined as follows, “The United States will prioritize results by galvanizing significant new country commitments in three areas: fighting corruption, defending against authoritarianism, and advancing human rights in their own nations and abroad.”

### **Biden and the Middle East**

It seems that Biden’s focus on democracy, liberalism, human rights, and fighting corruption will also govern his policy in the Middle East. Thus, even though a Biden campaign adviser told me that the Middle East was not at the top of Biden’s priorities, there is no doubt that his administration will give a great deal of attention to the issues mentioned above, especially in the countries that saw renewed popular protests in the fall of 2019 and winter of 2020. In this regard, I am referring to Iraq, Lebanon, and Iran in particular, although this list may include other countries in the future. These countries will be exposed to increasing U.S. efforts to guarantee freedom of expression, fight corruption, and protect human rights.

In his article, Biden also focused on four key issues in the region: fighting terrorism, Israel’s security, Iran, and relations with Saudi Arabia.

Eliminating extremist organizations will remain at the top of the list of U.S. foreign policy priorities in the next administration. Considering that the relationship between Europe and the United States will improve under Biden, one can expect that Biden will be just as concerned with fighting al-Qaeda and ISIS as his predecessors were. However, Biden has said he will take a more prudent approach to combatting terrorism: “We should bring the vast majority of our troops home from the wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East and narrowly define our mission as defeating al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS)...We can be strong and smart at the same time. There is a big difference between large-scale, open-ended deployments of tens of thousands of American combat troops, which must end, and using a few hundred Special Forces soldiers and intelligence assets to support local partners against a common enemy.”

It is therefore clear that Biden will not send any additional U.S. forces to the Middle East, but rather will continue the policy his predecessor began of reducing the number of U.S. troops in the region. Biden’s policy does not seem to differ much from Trump’s in this regard; Trump also tended to maintain small numbers of U.S. special forces and intelligence assets to help local partners in fighting extremist organizations.

Regarding Israel, Biden has stood out to many as one of the most vocal U.S. politicians in defending Israel’s security. He clearly emphasized this stance in his article when he said, “We need to sustain our ironclad commitment to

Israel's security." Thus, the positive response of the so-called "axis of resistance" to Biden's victory does not seem at all justified. It also does not seem that the new administration will be less keen to support Israel than its predecessor. As such, in spite of his excellent relationship with Trump, Netanyahu was among the first to congratulate Biden on his victory. Reports coming from the Biden campaign also indicate that the new administration has no intention of reneging on the decision to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, a decision that the "axis of resistance" considered the clearest sign of the Trump administration's bias towards Israel.

As for Iran, it seems that Biden is determined to revive the nuclear deal in order to stop Iran's attempts at possessing nuclear weapons, which he believes to be a top priority for his administration, "As president, I will renew our commitment to arms control for a new era. The historic Iran nuclear deal that the Obama-Biden administration negotiated blocked Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. Yet Trump rashly cast the deal aside, prompting Iran to restart its nuclear program and become more provocative, raising the risk of another disastrous war in the region... Tehran must return to strict compliance with the deal."

Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that renewed negotiations will be a difficult task in 2021 Iran. Iranian negotiators may demand the lifting of all U.S. sanctions, even the many that are unrelated to its nuclear program, having to do instead with terrorism, corruption, human rights, and other issues before the beginning of negotiations. The Biden administration may struggle to handle such a demand given its concurrent emphasis on human rights.

The Biden administration will also struggle to make any impact on Iran's ballistic missile program or its destabilizing regional activities, despite the significant danger these threats pose. The administration will have to deal with all these issues in an environment of severely crippled trust between the two countries. Even if the efforts exerted resulted in reaching a preliminary agreement between the two parties, there is an enormous obstacle expected, which is Iran's insistence this time on taking guarantees from Biden's administration that the agreement will not be abrogated by any future U.S. President. Even if the Biden administration agreed to this request, it would certainly require approval from Congress where republicans control the Senate, making their approval almost impossible.

Regarding Saudi Arabia, it seems clear that Biden already has a negative view of Saudi Arabia due to its human rights issues and the war with Yemen. Biden said in an interview during his campaign that he would make Saudi Arabia pay the price for its killing of Jamal Khashoggi. Khashoggi's fiancée said that Biden's win was a gift from above that would make it possible to achieve justice after her fiancé's murder. Biden also criticized Saudi Arabia's war with Yemen in his article, saying that "We should also end our support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen."

However, based on Biden's realism, it will be interesting to see whether his administration would actually sacrifice the century-long alliance with Saudi Arabia, not to mention the immense economic interests therein, for the sake of the principles in which Biden believes. Additionally, Saudi Arabia plays a critical role in normalizing relations between the countries of the region and Israel and building a serious coalition against Iran. This significant role will certainly rein in any thinking about a more hardline U.S. approach against Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia also seems well-aware of the depth of these mutual interests with the United States and its crucial role in the region. As such, Saudi Arabia congratulated Biden, in spite of its special relationship with Trump, reminding the United States of their century-long alliance.

In conclusion, while it is too early to pass judgment on the Biden administration's foreign policy, it is clear that, although we may see major shifts on key international issues, there will likely not be any significant changes in the three major policy issues in the Middle East: fighting terrorism, Israel's security, and the Iranian question. As for Saudi Arabia, it seems that we will see a mix of political realism, democratic principles, and human rights promotion in dealing with this matter. ❖

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