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Forecasting U.S.-UAE Relations Under the New Biden Administration

by [David Pollock](#)

Dec 1, 2020

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Articles & Testimony

From addressing Iranian threats to mending rifts with Qatar and Turkey, the sound bilateral partnership on regional issues will likely thrive in the Biden era, albeit with some marginal adjustments by both governments.

The United Arab Emirates and the United States of America have also been united with each other, or at least close allies, ever since the former achieved independence very nearly half a century ago. In recent years, this tight and wide-ranging cooperation has even extended to important additional areas: nuclear energy; missile defense against Iran; top-level dialogue and joint endeavors to promote religious tolerance; tougher common action on counterterrorism, illicit finance, and Iran sanctions; F-35 advanced aircraft sales; and, of course, Arab normalization of relations with Israel.

But now here in Washington there is, as we say, “a new sheriff in town”: President-elect Joe Biden. How will he and his team relate to the Middle East in general, and to the UAE in particular?

The first point to make in this brief guided tour of the new political landscape is that the Middle East will continue to be a key area for American foreign policy—but probably not the top immediate priority for the new team in the White House. Rather, they can be expected to focus first on urgent domestic issues like the coronavirus, the economy, and the unfortunate social polarization in America. In foreign policy, they will almost certainly hasten to repair U.S. relations with Europe, Asia, and Latin America, even before turning seriously to the Middle East. But they will not and cannot forget that region, simply because of the major American interests, commitments, and crisis-

management requirements there.

Second, the key officials named to Biden's foreign policy team are uniformly solid, centrist, experienced, and capable people. They are not from the "radical" wing of the Democratic Party. They can therefore be counted on to pursue serious and constructive policies, in close consultation with all our traditional allies and partners abroad. That in itself will represent a welcome change. But in many areas, I expect more continuity than drastic difference.

Next, the incoming Biden team has unofficially asserted its readiness to resume negotiations with Iran. Yet the Trump team has been saying almost the same thing. The real question is, under what conditions, and with what end in mind? Biden's people have signaled a willingness to revisit the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, hopefully with an eye to revising and expanding it—in both duration (lengthening or perhaps even abolishing its expiration dates) and issue coverage (including new side agreements to restrict Iran's missile, militia, and other threats). It is Iran that so far **rejects this agenda**; and the Supreme Leader will almost certainly maintain that rigid stance until after Iran's own presidential "election" next spring.

So, the most likely medium-term outcome is a U.S. effort to lift (or at least relax) selected sanctions in return for Iran's informal acquiescence to cease its **violations of the original 2015 nuclear accord**. That would be a shift, but not a dangerous one. And it would be accompanied in this new American administration—unlike the Obama administration—by honest consultations with U.S. partners in the region, Arab, Israeli, and other.

Related to this is the recent, great progress in Arab-Israeli peacemaking, with the UAE in the lead. Rest assured that this is a consensus, not a partisan, issue in Washington; both Democrats and Republicans strongly support the Abraham Accords. True, some Democrats have raised concerns about **linkage to F-35 deals with the UAE**. Frankly, however, I do not see this as a serious obstacle, partly because of new understandings about it with the Israeli government, and partly because of America's own strategic calculations.

That loaded word "linkage" also calls to mind the Palestinian problem. Biden's team can be confidently expected, based on their consistent statements of late, to restore relations with the Palestinian Authority in the diplomatic and economic spheres. Equally important, they will almost certainly seek to turn Emirati and other Arab normalization deals with Israel into a "bridge" toward **practical progress on Palestinian-Israeli peace**.

If handled carefully and incrementally—again, unlike the Obama years—this could be a highly constructive approach, one that would end up serving the interests and values of everyone concerned. For that reason, the UAE should look forward to open-ended and open-minded discussions about this issue with all parties: Americans, Israelis, Palestinians, and fellow Arabs. The historic contribution Abu Dhabi has already registered on this front can be leveraged for further advances in the upcoming period, much to Washington's appreciation.

Now to other regional disputes: Qatar, Yemen, Libya, and Turkey. Biden's team, like Trump's, sees the feud inside the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as **an annoying distraction** from common interests and efforts at containing Iran. The UAE would thus benefit from actively promoting a compromise solution, which **polls show** is what the publics in all Gulf states, **including Saudi Arabia**, truly desire. On Yemen and Libya, the UAE's newfound military restraint will earn a favorable reception from incoming American officials. That would be richly complemented by more earnest attempts to help broker **UN-sponsored peace talks** and **political settlements** in both those tragically divided Arab states.

That brings us to Turkey. Seen from here, the ongoing serious quarrel between Ankara and Abu Dhabi has troubling regional ramifications. The United States certainly has its own sharp disagreements with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan—some of which may even intensify under Biden, to judge from his recent pronouncements on the topic. Nevertheless, the United States will continue to value Turkey as a vital NATO and regional ally. Loose talk notwithstanding, there is absolutely no chance of a **decisive rupture in relations** between these two longstanding (if

often squabbling) friends. Consequently, it would serve U.S.-UAE relations admirably if some way could be found to patch up, or at minimum paper over, the various differences that divide the three countries.

The natural segue here is to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Yes, Erdogan supports it. But no, the United States does not—not under Obama or Trump in the past, and not under Biden in the future. All the Arab conspiracy theories about this are, to put it bluntly, pure nonsense, *kalaam faadi*. A decade ago, the United States accepted Hosni Mubarak’s overthrow and then the MB’s democratic election to power in Cairo—but only because that’s what the Egyptian people insisted upon. Washington had, and has, little willingness or ability to intervene in such situations. To prove the point: in 2013, the United States, under President Obama, also accepted President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi’s overthrow of the MB. We will predictably **continue to do so** under a Biden administration as well.

So we come, finally, to the cause of regional democracy and human rights. Biden and his team will take this more to heart than Trump ever did, that’s certain. Yet they will not try to transform the UAE or any other Middle Eastern country into a Western-style republic against its will. The UAE would do well to listen attentively to private words of counsel from Washington about more human rights, freedom of expression, and rule of law, beyond the religious tolerance in which Emiratis rightly take pride. I sincerely doubt, however, that the Biden government will **simply jettison** all our regional strategic and economic national interests in favor of an idealistic but unrealistic pursuit of Middle East democracy. The appointment of centrist senior policymakers is a clear and reassuring sign of that, at least so far.

In conclusion, the sound partnership between the United States and the UAE is highly likely to survive, even thrive, in the Biden era. For this to happen, there will naturally need to be some marginal adjustments by both sides. I believe that process is already well underway, and look forward to its successful continuation in coming months and years.

David Pollock is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of Project Fikra. The above text is translated from the [Arabic version originally published on the Emirati website QPosts](#). ❖

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