

Varied Reactions in Syria to Biden Victory

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Brief Analysis

This snapshot of reactions should inform leadership in Washington to focus on increasing its commitment to supporting allies and punishing adversaries.

While Syrians all closely watched the U.S. elections, there was no single, homogeneous view among them about the outcome of a Biden victory versus a Trump one. Many Syrians' views differ depending on their geographic location and the entity that governs their region in the fractured country. Given this fractured public reaction, a better understanding of Syria's future in relation to the new U.S. administration requires analysis of Syrian reactions from four different blocs: the regime in Damascus, the Kurdish bloc east of the Euphrates, Islamist militias in northwestern Syria, and ISIS.

Damascus wavers between Moscow and Tehran

As usual, the Assad regime in Damascus has refused to express its true feelings about the changes in leadership in Washington. Nonetheless, regime supporters have expressed several reasons why they think Biden's victory will either be advantageous or damaging to the regime's interests.

For example, Some of the Syrian regime's supporters believe that Biden's victory will relieve Damascus of Trump's moodiness and unexpected behaviors. Citing the attack on the Shayrat airbase, these regime supporters note Trump's willingness to act counter to his own statements on withdrawing U.S. forces from the Middle East. The Biden administration will be expected to be more consistent in its approach to Middle Eastern affairs.

Furthermore, the leadership of the Assad regime appears to believe that Biden may steer pressure away from Tehran and towards Moscow. Damascus could benefit if the new administration were to return to the nuclear agreement

with Iran and end the U.S. sanctions that have exhausted Tehran economically. As Damascus tries to exploit the differing feelings of Iran and Russia—the two key parties protecting Damascus in Syria—vis-à-vis the Biden victory, such an agreement may allow Iran to give more support to Assad so he could does not have to completely capitulate to Moscow.

Biden himself has more than once declared his plans to stand up to Moscow, which began to impose itself more heavily on the Assad government during Trump's term. In this respect, the Damascus government will try to break away a little from the Russians' stranglehold in Syria by leveraging its relationship with Tehran, a card that Trump's pressure on Iran has taken away from the Assad government over the past two years.

On the other hand, some supporters of the Syrian regime believe that Biden's victory, though beneficial to Assad in some ways, means that returning to total regime control over northeast Syria has become impossible as there is unlikely to be any sudden U.S. withdrawal from the region east of the Euphrates. Moreover, the process of reconstruction discussed by the Russian and Syrian governments will come to a halt until the comprehensive political change in the country demanded by Washington occurs. Assad's government does not favor this demand, which it considers interference in its domestic affairs.

Optimism east of the Euphrates

It was clear that the public, journalists, and civilian activists in the regions east of the Euphrates favored Biden, who has often stated his favorable opinion of the Syrian Defense Forces (SDF) and Kurds. The social media pages of residents east of the Euphrates were full of pictures of Biden, and SDF leader General Mazloum Kobani congratulated Biden on his victory using Twitter. The residents and leaders of the region are aware that Biden's victory means an end to the painful surprises in their region, especially after Washington's unfulfilled promises to stop allowing repeated Turkish attacks against those regions. Syrians in the region constantly talked of James Jeffrey, the U.S. envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and Washington's special representative for Syria engagement, as Turkey's top man in the region.

The leadership east of the Euphrates feels at ease after Biden's victory because they believe that he will stop Turkish attacks against them. Biden's win will also strengthen their position in the upcoming negotiations with the Russians and Damascus regarding the country's administrative and constitutional form. If he adheres to his campaign platform to support the SDF in Syria, Biden will ensure an indirect umbrella of protection over SDF leaders and the Autonomous Administration during negotiations on the fate of the region. These leaders hope that the Biden victory will help convince the Russians to begin pressuring Damascus to accept the desired process for political change, and also help allow the leaders of the Autonomous Administration – which numbers some four million people – to be involved in the official political process and participate in drafting a new constitution for the country.

Concern in northwest Syria

People in the northwestern region controlled by Turkish-funded militias and the areas under Turkish occupation received the news of Biden's win with frustration and shock. Social media users from this region said they considered the Biden victory a setback for them, arguing that the new president in Washington orbits Obama's policies that, as they put it, favored the Iranians. Additionally, as was the case in Ankara itself, these groups considered the Biden victory a defeat for their patron, Turkey, as Turkish President Erdogan was among the regional leaders close to the Trump administration.

A quick survey of social media in that geographical area of Syria showed many people calling Biden's win a victory

for the SDF that thwarts the armed Sunni opposition's attempt to control the whole of northern Syria by implementing the Turkish plan for a so-called "safe zone" there. In essence, the apparent goal of this zone is to eliminate the entity made up of Kurds and their Arab and Christian allies east of the Euphrates.

These grassroots Islamist-leaning radical Sunni groups, as well as Syrian Turkmen groups affiliated with Turkey, are concerned that Biden will act on his promises to support the SDF and sanction Turkey for its blatant violations in northern Syria. These groups avoid mentioning that the reason they supported Trump was likely his excellent relationship with Erdogan, focusing instead on the narrative of Biden's openness to Iran. Curiously, this position seems to ignore the fact that Trump, despite his excessive hostility towards Iran, was inclined towards Putin and Russia, who are hostile to the armed opposition in Syria. One would expect these groups to realize that Russia, and not Iran, has a stronger hold on affairs in Syria, and that Russia's influence does not bode well for these groups.

Thus, anxiety was the dominant feeling among these groups in the areas under Turkish occupation and the so-called opposition areas, including large areas held by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Meanwhile, **HTS's parent organization, Al Qaeda in Syria, Q** has preferred not to comment on Trump's defeat so far.

ISIS movement indifferent

Biden's victory resonated little among the ranks of ISIS—the group has not issued any statements or reactions on the election either directly or through affiliated webpages. ISIS considers Washington and the Western world at large a legitimate target for their jihad, regardless of who's in the White House.

Though without a clearly defined geographic territory, ISIS continues to carry out military operations against Assad forces, Iranian militias, and the SDF in the vast Deir ez-Zor Governorate. ISIS itself is aware that Washington's commitment to support the SDF will promote attacks against ISIS, and, consequently, ISIS will face significant, long-term difficulties from the new leadership in Washington if the latter adheres to its campaign promises regarding Syria.

Syrian geography has therefore become one of divergent visions and hopes. This snapshot of reactions should inform leadership in Washington to focus on the necessary work of filtering its relationship with the entities on the ground in Syria, which requires increasing its commitment to supporting allies and punishing adversaries. The commitment required of the Biden administration begins with mending rifts with allies caused by Trump's arbitrary decision-making throughout the Middle East that caused tragedies for thousands of people in Syria and elsewhere. Furthermore, Ankara and Moscow's **delay (<https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-turkey-recep-tayyip-erdogan-russia-ankara-689bff4b5acc45c67b35dd6cd1f6e406>)** in offering congratulations to Biden makes clear that the two countries with the broadest involvement in Syria, along with their allies within Syria, feel that Biden will work to restrain their behavior and impose solutions that do not align with their expansionist ambitions in the region. Hopefully, these solutions may contribute to restoring a measure of balance and tranquility for some in the region. ❖

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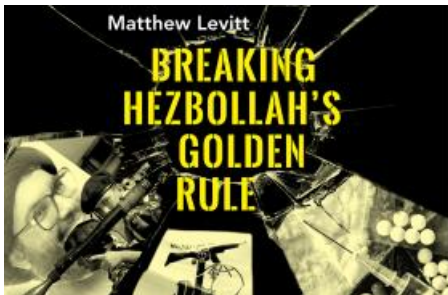
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