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What Did the Confirmation Hearings Reveal About Biden's Middle East Policy?

by [Ilari Papa](#)

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Brief Analysis

Antony Blinken, Avril Haines, and Lloyd Austin responded at length to congressional questions about the Iran nuclear deal, the Yemen war, Arab-Israeli normalization, and other pressing regional issues.

On January 19, the Senate held confirmation hearings for three senior members of the incoming Biden administration: [Antony Blinken](#) as secretary of state, [Avril Haines](#) as director of national intelligence, and [Gen. Lloyd Austin, U.S. Army \(Ret.\)](#), as secretary of defense. In response to questions from legislators, all three officials reaffirmed that the Biden administration would take a measured approach in renegotiating a nuclear deal with Iran while addressing the country's hostile activities in the region. Additionally, Blinken stated that the administration would refrain from supporting Saudi activities in the Yemen war when they risk compromising U.S. interests, and would reexamine the recent terrorist designation of the Houthis. He also applauded the Abraham Accords and expressed support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Iran and the JCPOA

Asked for his views on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and whether he intends to coordinate Iran policy with Congress, Blinken stated:

“In my judgment, the JCPOA, for whatever its limitations, was succeeding on its own terms in blocking Iran's pathways to producing fissile material for a nuclear weapon on short order. It also featured—a feature that continues—the most intrusive inspections in a modern regime and history of arms control. The challenge we face now is that we pulled out of the agreement. Iran is now taking steps to undo the various constraints that were imposed on it by

the agreement. It has increased its stockpile of low-enriched uranium. It is now enriching at a higher level. It is deploying centrifuges in ways that were prohibited under the agreement.

“The result, based on public reporting, is that the breakout time—the time it would take Iran to produce enough fissile material for one weapon—has gone from beyond a year, as it was under the JCPOA, to about three or four months, based at least on public reporting. And that potentially brings us right back to the crisis point that we were reaching before the deal was negotiated.

“And so, the president-elect believes that if Iran comes back into compliance, we would too. But we would use that as a platform with our allies and partners, who would once again be on the same side as us, to seek a longer and stronger agreement, and also as you and the chairman have rightly pointed out, to capture these other issues, particularly with regard to missiles and Iran’s destabilizing activities. That would be the objective.

“Having said that, I think we are a long way from there. We would have to see once the president-elect is in office what steps Iran actually takes and is prepared to take. We would then have to evaluate whether they were making good—if they say they are coming back into compliance—[on] their obligations, and then we would take it from there. But in the first instance, yes, we absolutely will consult with you, and not only with you, I think as the chairman suggested, it’s also vitally important that we engage on the takeoff, not the landing, with our allies and with our partners in the region, to include Israel and to include the Gulf countries.

“With regard to Iran, of course there is the INARA [Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act] legislation. We will certainly make sure we’re in compliance with that legislation and its requirements. Many of the reporting requirements of course have fallen by the wayside once we got out of the agreement. At a minimum those would resume, and we would have to look at what the obligations under law would be if there is any forward movement with Iran.”

Blinken also assured Congress that the State Department would not unfreeze Iran’s sanctioned funds in an effort to bring the country back to the negotiating table.

Avril Haines was asked about renegotiating the nuclear deal as well, and offered the following response:

“It is true, obviously, that the president-elect has indicated that if Iran were to come back into compliance, he would direct that we would do so as well. And I think frankly, we’re a long way from that, and I think there’s going to be an opportunity to consult with Congress and with members like yourself on these issues as we look at that. But the president-elect has indicated, and I agree with this, that in doing so, we have to also look at the ballistic missile issues that you have identified and other destabilizing activities that Iran engages in.”

General Austin commented on Iran’s destabilizing activities in the Middle East and how a new nuclear deal could address these concerns:

“Iran continues to be a destabilizing element in the region. And if you look at its behavior, it doesn’t work well with its neighbors, it again does present a threat to our partners in the region and those forces that we have stationed in the region. If Iran were ever to gain a nuclear capability, almost every problem that we deal with in the region would be tougher to deal with because of that. So Iran’s activity, or its behavior, continues to be destabilizing.

“I would hope, and the president-elect has been clear, that the preconditions for us considering reentering into that agreement would be that Iran meets the conditions outlined in that agreement. So back to where they should have been. I would hope that as we enter into that agreement, we have this discussion about the sunset [provisions], and also take a look at broader things that may or may not be a part of this treaty but certainly things that need to be addressed. One of those things is ballistic missiles.”

Saudi Arabia and the Yemen War

In response to questions about the Saudi campaign in Yemen and the war's broader dynamics, Blinken stated: "The president-elect has made very clear that we will end our support for the military campaign led by Saudi Arabia in Yemen, and we will work on that in very short order once the president-elect is president. We have seen Yemen become the worst humanitarian situation in the world, and of course the Houthis bear significant responsibility for what's happened in Yemen. But the way the campaign has been conducted has also contributed significantly to that situation. And so our support should end. We have a partnership with Saudi Arabia. I believe we should do what we need to help defend Saudi Arabia against aggression directed at it, including from Yemen and the Houthis. But we have real concerns [about] the policies that our Saudi partners have pursued and, accordingly, the president-elect has said we will review the entirety of the relationship to make sure that, as it stands, it is advancing the interests [and is] respectful of the values that we bring to that partnership.

"We need to be clear-eyed about the Houthis. They overthrew a government. They engaged in a path of aggression throughout the country. They directed aggression toward Saudi Arabia and atrocities in human rights abuses and that is a fact. What is also a fact is that the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen pushed back against the Houthi aggression and has contributed to what is, by most accounts, the worst humanitarian situation that we face anywhere in the world. And one aspect of that situation is that about 80 percent of the Yemeni population right now is in areas controlled by the Houthis. Whether we like it or not, we have to find ways to get assistance to them if we're going to do anything about addressing the situation.

"So, my deep concern about the designation that was made is that at least on its surface, it seems to achieve nothing particularly practical in advancing the efforts against the Houthis and to bring them back to the negotiating table, while making it even more difficult than it already was to provide humanitarian assistance to people who desperately need it. I would think that we would propose to review that immediately to make sure that what we are doing is not impeding the provision of humanitarian assistance, even under these difficult circumstances.

"I recognize that some have talked about carve-outs for American providers of humanitarian assistance. The problem is that if the carve-outs don't apply to everyone around the world, it's not going to get the job done, because most of the humanitarian assistance provided to Yemen is not from the United States, it's from other countries. So I think we've got a specific and concrete problem that we need to address quickly if we're doing everything we can to alleviate the suffering of people in Yemen."

The Abraham Accords

Blinken praised the recent normalization deals between Israel and various Arab states as a significant foreign policy accomplishment of the Trump administration:

"There are certain commitments that may have been made in the context of getting those countries to normalize relations with Israel that I think we should take a hard look at, and I imagine the committee feels the same way. But I applaud the work that was done to push forward on normalization with Israel. It makes Israel and the region safer. It's a good thing, and yes, I would hope that we can build on that as well.

"The accords open new perspectives and prospects for travel, for business, for trade, all of which is very positive, and I hope we have an opportunity to build on them going forward. With regard to the BDS [Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement], the president-elect—and I strongly share this conviction—is resolutely opposed to the BDS for the reasons that you cite. It unfairly and inappropriately singles out Israel. It creates a double standard, and a standard we do not apply to other countries. Of course, we fully respect and will always respect the First Amendment rights of Americans to say what they believe and think, but the BDS itself is something we oppose."

General Austin likewise commended the Abraham Accords, noting that they have "put a bit more pressure on Iran."

Israeli-Palestinian Issues

Blinken said the following about potential peace efforts under the Biden administration:

“The president-elect believes, and I share this conviction, that the best way, and maybe the only way, to ensure Israel’s future as a Jewish, democratic state and to give the Palestinians the state to which they are entitled is through the so-called ‘two-state solution.’ Obviously a solution that is very challenged at this moment. I think realistically, it is hard to see near-term prospects for moving forward on that. In the first instance, what would be important is to make sure that neither party takes steps that make the already-difficult proposition even more challenging, and certainly [that each party] avoids unilateral actions that make that more challenging. And then hopefully, to start working to slowly build some confidence on both sides, to create an environment in which we might once again be able to help advance a solution to the Israel and Palestinian relationship.”

Finally, Blinken committed to recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the location of the U.S. embassy.

This compilation was prepared by Ilari Papa, with assistance from Sheridan Cole, Alex Harris, Kevin Mathieson, and Henry Mihm. ❖



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