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Biden in the Maghreb: An Opportunity to Support Change

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The Maghreb region should be considered as an area where Biden can exercise more independence in formulating new policies and promoting values of democracy and good governance.

Thus far, the Biden administration's messaging has emphasized a U.S. return to global leadership, contrasting against the Trump administration's slogan of "America First." But the reality facing Biden includes the fact that Trump built good relations with most of the leaders of the Middle East—from the Atlantic to the Gulf—with the exception of Iran and its allies. Trump was able to restore confidence to the United States' traditional allies in Egypt and the Gulf states while contributing to containing the tension that erupted with Turkey at the end of Obama's presidency in 2016.

One can also see negative aspects to this type of U.S. influence: Trump won the friendship of Arab and Turkish leaders by abstaining from the usual U.S. pressures towards support for democracy, political reform, and protection of human rights—all issues that constitute sore points for authoritarian leaderships. In tandem, there has been no clear effort by Washington to support the ongoing political changes that some countries like Algeria and Sudan have pursued in the past two years.

Therefore, the implicit satisfaction among the region's ruling regimes with Trump's Middle East policy may impose the logic of a *fait accompli* on President Biden's foreign policy orientations, even as the crises in Syria, Libya, and Yemen continue to lack a solution. Rather, there is the expectation of a gradual return to the traditions of Washington institutional wisdom by providing sufficient diplomatic and non-diplomatic presence to achieve stability and balance in the region, with the question of whether the more recent policies of Obama and Trump—to avoid direct military interventions and costly wars—will continue.

Yet, especially in North Africa, Biden has the opportunity to push for the defense of democracy and good governance and to move away from the policies of exclusion, marginalization, and violation of human rights that fuel violence and militancy. While the question of a new deal with Iran is clearly on the table for the Biden administration, the Maghreb region should also be considered as an area where Biden can exercise more independence in formulating new policies and promoting values of democracy and good governance, especially given the movements already underway in these areas.

Moreover, the Maghreb would almost certainly benefit from increased international attention. At this moment, it is facing a number of security, political, and economic crises across the board, including the ongoing Libyan conflict, terrorist activity in the Sahel, and tensions in the Western Sahara.

The Libyan crisis in particular represents a source of deep concern for both Libyans and neighboring countries, even as the political process is currently showing signs of some movement. In January, participants at UN-brokered talks in Geneva agreed on a mechanism for choosing the new government. And in upcoming Geneva talks, Libyan delegates are expected to come together to create a temporary executive authority responsible for holding elections, along with the LPDF's efforts to hold a constitutional referendum beforehand. The United States, which remained separate from this process during the Trump administration, could be a part of the international support clearly needed to continue this vital political process, with the added benefit of increasing U.S.-EU cooperation, which Biden seeks to reestablish after faltering under Trump.

Algeria—the largest country in the Maghreb—is also currently experiencing important political transformations. With early legislative elections possibly scheduled for the end of the year, the country needs a stable environment in order to build strong institutions that perpetuate the desired change towards a new republic and ward off the unrest that has plagued the region elsewhere. Likewise, Sudan's transition process, which has benefitted greatly from its recent removal from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism, is still working to form a new government and would benefit from U.S. support in this process as the government navigates between disputing political and military factions.

Even Tunisia, held up as a democratic exemplar in the region, has been rocked recently by protest and suffers from ongoing political divisions and economic problems. Though the current U.S. administration has been more or less silent on these issues and developments in the Maghreb region so far, emphasizing public support and providing diplomatic incentives in these instances could provide an opportunity for the Biden administration to actively support stability and growth in the three countries in which these transformations are taking place.

The Arab Maghreb needs a set of new partnerships in order to break the historical and geographical status quo that enables certain powers—such as France and Russia—to intervene in the Maghreb affairs without helping the countries of the region to address their problems. Whereas the Trump administration had little focus on these points, Biden, like all U.S. administrations, has an opportunity to provide the counterbalancing influence required for countries like Algeria, Tunisia, and Sudan to continue the democratic and governance processes put into place over the past few years. The option is open for Washington to make efforts to understand the current forces at work in the Maghreb region. Here, the Biden administration can play a constructive role and strengthen economic, cultural, scientific, and technological cooperation in countries where these efforts could play a real role in encouraging nascent democratic and civil society efforts.

As always, these efforts also have a national security angle, both for the countries involved and the United States itself. Biden will also have to recognize that while the state of ISIS and other extremist groups has reduced since his former stint as Vice President, this does not mean that the threat of extremism has disappeared. Rather, it has moved to a latent stage, waiting to rise to the surface whenever pressure is reduced, as happened with the recent attacks on [Baghdad](#). Areas of instability are natural attractors for this kind of extremism, and the pockets of instability in the Maghreb can similarly provide these opportunities.

The MENA region does not expect Biden to completely renegotiate the United States' role in the region. The global system is currently undergoing a number of important changes, and Biden's presidency appears merely as a correction of the United States' role in light of a multipolar world characterized by a major power struggle. No one expects a complete return to a type of liberal regime that tries to impose an ideological tutelage on the world. Rather, the Biden presidency has an opportunity to present itself to the region as a correction to the populist wave that hit

Europe and North America in 2016.

As such, the best thing Biden can do regarding the Middle East and North Africa is to contribute to the rise of a balance—support institutions such as the Arab League and the somewhat reunited Gulf states in their efforts to resist Iranian influence while extending a helping hand to countries in the Maghreb where U.S. involvement could have an outsized influence on governance, economic reform and human rights. ❖



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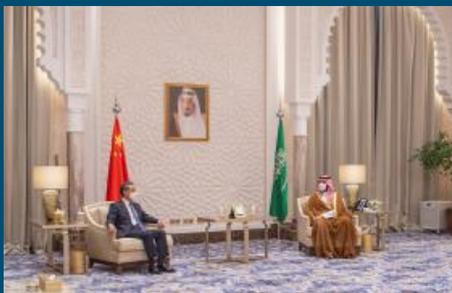
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