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Biden Needs to End His Staff Travel Ban Now

by [David Schenker](#)

Apr 2, 2021

Also published in *Foreign Policy*

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Only three top State Department officials have been allowed to travel abroad, which is no way to preserve U.S. interests.

In 1604, the British envoy Sir Henry Wotton famously quipped that “an ambassador is an honest gentleman sent to lie abroad for the good of his country.” Today, while U.S. ambassadors and foreign service officers remain at their posts around the world, U.S.-based senior diplomats—with very few exceptions—are not traveling overseas to advance the country’s interests. Indeed, a senior administration official told me that in response to the pandemic, the Biden administration has limited official travel to matters of “war and peace.” Accordingly, since the inauguration on Jan. 20, only three senior State Department officials—Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his special envoys for Yemen and Afghanistan—have traveled abroad.

The prohibition, which is expected to continue at least through May, relegates most of Washington’s highest-level diplomatic discussions to Zoom, Webex, and WhatsApp. For senior officials who already know their counterparts, these discussions can be productive. But for the dozens of acting officials and newly minted political appointees filling the State Department’s top slots, the absence of rapport with their foreign equivalents complicates already challenging diplomatic engagements.

COVID-19, not surprisingly, has taken a toll on the State Department and its people, especially on U.S. embassies and consulates operating in countries with inadequate and overburdened health care systems. Recognizing the danger to U.S. personnel abroad, when the pandemic took hold last March, Foggy Bottom allowed diplomats the discretion to return to the United States. The State Department also worked to cut the number of personnel at high-risk, densely

packed posts—for example, Baghdad and Beirut—to reduce the risk of virus transmission.

The departures were accompanied by a temporary pause in travel out of Washington from March until mid-May, when then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo took his first pandemic-era trip abroad. As assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs at the time, I joined Pompeo and a small coterie of staffers on that May 13 trip to Israel. Prior to takeoff, all passengers were tested for COVID-19. Including refueling stops, we spent 30 hours in the air round trip for seven hours of meetings on the ground in Israel.

There was some criticism of Pompeo's decision to travel, but the two-and-a-half-hour meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Mossad director Yossi Cohen was substantive and important. It covered ground that would have been difficult to replicate even during a secure phone call.

Two months later, when Pompeo resumed his routine travel schedule, I followed his lead and took to the road. From August 2020 to January 2021, I spent more than a third of my time in the Middle East, managing relations and crises with partners and pressing U.S. interests in the region. During that period, I traveled to 14 countries—several more than once—flying almost exclusively on commercial aircraft. I traveled alone, did my best to adhere to pandemic protocols, and took dozens of COVID-19 tests—sometimes one per day. At the same time, I dodged hot spots, skipping Cairo and Amman, Jordan, during infection spikes to reduce risks for U.S. embassy personnel.

Either due to providence or prudence, I didn't catch COVID-19. I was lucky; one or two senior State Department officials did become infected while traveling. But the need to cajole, convince, and diplomatically engage allies and adversaries for the sake of U.S. national security doesn't subside because of the pandemic.

Arguably, the travel of senior diplomats is even more important now than it was in 2020. Until January, for example, the U.S. government had 13 accredited ambassadors serving in the 16 embassies in the State Department's Near Eastern Affairs Bureau. Today, there are just nine, with the highest representation in the other seven embassies in the region a charge d'affaires or deputy chief of mission. In many of these very protocol-conscious states, this sub-ambassadorial rank makes it impossible for the senior U.S. representative to meet with kings, heads of state, or foreign ministers. In these instances—which will persist for the foreseeable future as ambassador nominees await confirmation by the U.S. Senate—such high-level meetings can only take place when a senior State Department official travels to that country.

Meanwhile, nearly all senior State Department officials in Washington—as well as many of their foreign counterparts—have been vaccinated, which, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, means transmission of the virus is extremely unlikely. To be sure, there is still a risk for U.S. diplomatic personnel supporting these visits on the ground who have yet to be vaccinated, but following standard COVID-19 protocols is highly effective in mitigating transmission.

In the absence of senior-level personal engagement, U.S. interests are not being well served. Months after the transition, in the Middle East and elsewhere, the new administration is missing in action, with China and Russia looking to fill the void. Just in the last week, the Chinese foreign minister visited Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. While the secretary of state may have higher priorities than the Middle East, other senior officials from the department or the White House who have been vaccinated should be flying to the region and flying the flag. Both the substance and the optics of these meetings matter greatly.

Zoom has not transformed, and will not transform, the conduct of diplomacy. When dealing with sensitive issues—think of the Biden administration's efforts to reenter nuclear negotiations with Iran—senior U.S. diplomats still need to meet face to face with allies and partners to build trust, engage in candid conversations, and forge consensus. While there remains a role for online communications, the internet is no substitute for pressing the flesh—or bumping elbows.

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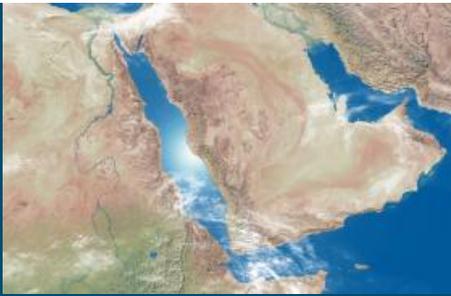


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