Growing Pains: The Promise and Reality of Biden’s Middle East Policy

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Brief Analysis

A year after Joe Biden’s inauguration, expectations for a shift in America’s Middle East policy have not materialized. Gulf monarchies are warily looking on as Washington continues to debate the U.S. role in the region.

The Biden team spent a great deal of effort in 2021 working to differentiate itself from the administration of Donald Trump, including a strong focus on re-establishing cordial dialogue with U.S. allies around the globe. Yet domestic concerns such as the COVID pandemic and the country’s battered economy have dominated the presidential agenda, leaving residual diplomatic capital and resources for issues abroad. Within the foreign policy sphere, President Biden has prioritized confronting a constantly expanding China and an increasingly revanchist Russia. In consequence, apart from the chaotic American withdrawal (https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/biden-bachus-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-is-complete) from Afghanistan and the resumption of the Iranian nuclear dossier (https://www.rand.org/blog/2021/02/why-biden-cant-turn-back-the-clock-on-the-iran-nuclear.html), which entered (https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/iran-oil-exports-are-focus-vienna-nuclear-talks-top-diplomat-says-2021-12-27) in its seventh round on December 27—many of the most urgent regional humanitarian and political crises from Yemen to Syria have not really been addressed.

The Biden administration has made no secret of its intention to downsize the U.S. footprint in the Middle East and reorganize the American overseas military to better counter the present threats to Washington’s national strategic interests, especially those originating from Russia (https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/17/world/europe/russia-nato-security-deal.html) and China (https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3154940/why-us-losing-china-battle-southeast-asia). In the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance statement that President Biden released in March 2021, America’s number-one enemy is identified as “antagonistic authoritarian powers” (https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NCS-v2.pdf)—those nations eager to undermine the democratic values underpinning the foundations of the liberal order as forged by the United States and its allies during the post-Cold War era.

Yet the matters of U.S. foreign policy remain a labyrinth, while the White House, despite its primary role, represents only one of the many centers of power capable of influencing its course. While it takes time for an incoming president to orient the country’s diplomatic apparatuses towards the same goal, the Biden administration faces a possible change in the political dynamics of the country with the November midterm elections (https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/29/biden-foreign-policy-congress-midterm-elections/), heightening urgency around this matter.

Tough Acts to Follow: The Foreign Policy of Trump and Obama

President Biden inherited a complex legacy concerning the U.S. posture in the Middle East from his two predecessors; the Obama administration repositioned the country away from the Bush era’s “War on Terror,” issuing a 2012 Defence Strategic Guidance (https://fggfas.org/crs/natsec/R42146.pdf) that committed the military to curbing expenditures and gradually disengaging from Middle Eastern conflicts.


After two drastically different approaches to the region, its players have signaled to the Biden presidency that they have a vested interest in switching from the confrontation-based
foreign policy that underpinned the Trump administration to one that is more informed by diplomacy. The Arab Gulf monarchies in particular made it clear when they closed ranks (https://agisw.org/what-the-al-ula-gcc-summit-has-and-has-not-accomplished/) at the al-Ula meeting in early 2020 that for the time being, they want to avoid head-on disputes. This signals a trend of deep-seated transformations (https://agisw.org/uae-outrage-to-iran-crack-open-the-door-to-dialogue/) that began after September 2019, when President Trump refused to reiate (https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/18/the-real-reason-trump-wont-attack-iran-saudi/) against Iran after drone attacks (https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/14/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-riyadh-drone-attack.html) – attributed to Iran—targeted Saudi oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais.

Efforts to thaw regional relations have also included a Saudi and Emirati rapprochement with both Iran and Turkey—mending fences (https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/turkey-and-the-gulf-states-a-new-era-of-detente/) with the countries' regional rivals.

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However, Gulf states are also wary of the domino effect within the United States away from military influence in the region, even in particular made it clear when they closed ranks (https://agisw.org/what-the-al-ula-gcc-summit-has-and-has-not-accomplished/) at the al-Ula meeting in early 2020 that for the time being, they want to avoid head-on disputes. This signals a trend of deep-seated transformations (https://agisw.org/uae-outrage-to-iran-crack-open-the-door-to-dialogue/) that began after September 2019, when President Trump refused to reiate (https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/18/the-real-reason-trump-wont-attack-iran-saudi/) against Iran after drone attacks (https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/14/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-riyadh-drone-attack.html) – attributed to Iran—targeted Saudi oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais.

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Middle East 9E41877A0F20481B85104A8EEA18EE28)

For its part, the Biden administration can learn valuable lessons from the failures of the Obama administration when regional players felt excluded from the process of negotiating the JCPOA. As Biden revisits negotiations with Iran, he must give these partners and allies credible reassurances (https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/05/10/reassuring-gulf-partners-while-recalibrating-u-s-security-policy-pub-84520) about the future of American commitments to regional security. With more than 300 Houthi drone and missile attacks targeting (https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2021/12/09/622705/yemeni-forces-shoot-down-saudi-spy-combat-drone-spokesman), Saudi Arabia in 2021 and the rebel group’s recent attack on civilian targets in the UAE, preventing air strikes has become a matter of high-level security concerns for both countries.

The Biden leadership, as well as decision-makers in the UAE, have seen the uninterrupted provision of ballistic missiles and launching systems from the United States as proof that Washington is upholding its commitment. Ensuring an air defense system among its partners in the Arabian Peninsula remains a vital issue for the White House. Despite the muscular approach (https://theintercept.com/2019/11/21/democratic-debate-joebiden-saudi-arabia/) Biden voiced against the Saudi military effort in Yemen during his campaign, once in the Oval office, he seems to have recognized that the United States cannot sever ties (https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/us-saudi-relations-after-khashoggi-intelligence-report-by-richard-haass-2021-02) with its regional partner and has nothing to gain by turning Saudi into a “pariah.” Besides removing (https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-yemen-rebels-terrorist-list/2021/02/05/ee6e55c8-3840-11eb-aaad-9398621d2b28_story.html) Yemeni’s Houthi rebels from the U.S. terrorism list in February 2021, the Biden administration has taken no major steps to undermine the Saudi-led coalition’s military operations in war-torn Yemen. Yet the United States has leverage (https://www.cnbc.org/analysis/puzzle-us-saudi-ties), and should use it to obtain more accountability from Saudi Arabia in terms of human rights violations.

The Biden administration’s more responsible and less impulsive foreign policy is not enough to safeguard Washington from increasingly tense great power competition (https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-12-10/age-great-power-competition), in these turbulent times, the United States will need to draw clearly-defined red lines (https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-17/uae-to-ask-u-s-to-restore-houthi-terrorism-label-after-attack) on its strategic interests and help ensure that regional allies follow their lead. President Biden should focus on restoring the U.S. credibility (https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2021-06-14/america-back-how-long) while leaving no room for faltering postures as President Obama did in regards to the Russian invasion of Crimea and Bashar al-Assad’s regime use of chemical weapons in Syria.

The United States should likewise remain vigilant and condemn ambivalent attitudes from its partners that directly threaten American strategic interests. The Biden administration showed such strength when Beijing allegedly attempted to build a military facility (https://www.wsj.com/articles/us-china-uae-military-11637274224) in the UAE and tried to assist (https://edition.cnn.com/2021/12/23/politics/saudi-ballistic-missiles-china/index.html) Saudi Arabia with its ballistic missiles production. It is too early to judge President Biden’s foreign policy, but his statements and policies during this first year allow us to sketch the parameters of a so-called “Biden Doctrine” (https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/20/the-biden-doctrine-exists-heres-an-inside-preview/). “Though the administration uses as a milder tone and more diplomacy than Trump, its policies still fit under the “America first” label. The aim seems to be to restore confidence in the United States, gain strength on the global stage, and achieve its goals through negotiation rather than unilateral action. The Biden presidency is not immune to pragmatic thinking (https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-09-09/biden-realist), or “ruthless pragmatism (https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/07/biden-middle-east-saudi-arabia-syria-yemen-strategy/),” as Steven A. Cook elucidated the administration’s approach. However, as exemplified by its arms sales, U.S. policy continues to look the other way on human rights violations when America’s strategic interests are at stake.


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