

Biden in the Middle East: Opportunities and Challenges

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Brief Analysis

A panel of veteran diplomats and scholars from the Gulf, Israel, and Washington discuss the trip's goals and risks, as well as the president's chances for success.

On July 11, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Tamar Hermann, Dennis Ross, Ebtesam al-Ketbi, and Robert Satloff. Hermann is a senior research fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute and academic director of its Viterbi Family Center for Public Opinion and Policy Research. Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. Ketbi is founder and president of the Emirates Policy Center and a member of the Consultative Commission of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Satloff is the Institute's executive director. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Tamar Hermann

Recent poll results suggest that the success of President Biden's visit to Israel will be determined by how he handles five specific challenges and three opportunities. The first challenge lies in Israel's upcoming election, which is disadvantageous for Biden because Israelis will be more focused on that than the issues he raises during the trip. Second, the Palestinian issue has been sidelined for years, and raising it now seems unrealistic to the "average" Israeli. Third, Israeli media have long amplified and fanned controversy in the stances taken by progressive voices within Biden's party, leading many citizens to suspect that he will make concessions on issues important to Israel. Fourth, most Israelis believe that Washington and Jerusalem disagree on Iran, and they assume that this disparity will color Iran-related discussions on this trip. Finally, polls indicate that Biden is much less popular among Israelis than President Trump was, though he is more popular than President Obama.

As for opportunities, the foremost one is the deep support that Israeli Jews express for normalization with Arab states, including the Abraham Accords and the current prospect of reaching a breakthrough with Saudi Arabia during Biden's visit. Second, Israelis seem more willing to

listen to the United States because they perceive that the administration has not pressured Jerusalem much on sensitive issues before the trip. Third, Israel's centrist and leftist parties are hoping for a new agenda. For instance, Yair Lapid spoke about a Palestinian agenda in his first speech as prime minister, which had not happened in years.

At the same time, however, polls confirm that most of Israel's Jewish population identifies as right-wing, so it is unrealistic to hope for a major shift in the upcoming election. Although a large majority of Arab Israelis express support for a two-state solution, only one-third of Jewish respondents do. Moreover, both groups are deeply pessimistic about the prospect of achieving this solution in the near future, and they do not believe Biden can reach a breakthrough. They are more optimistic about his ability to advance Israeli-Saudi relations. Yet most poll respondents indicate they do not trust the administration to take Israel's interests into account bilaterally—a figure that rises to 75 percent on Iran issues specifically. In short, Biden will be received politely, but Israelis have low expectations for his visit and sense that it will be largely symbolic.

Dennis Ross

Although Biden's goal for this trip is in line with traditional U.S. interests—namely, fostering stability and peace in a region characterized by conflict—the visit itself represents a striking shift in his foreign policy priorities. The administration initially focused on competition with China, but Russia's invasion of Ukraine has affected its general approach. One notable result is that the Middle East has been elevated in the White House's new geopolitical strategy for upholding the rules-based international system.

For this visit, energy, security, and normalization are the president's top objectives. Sanctioning Russian oil has raised gas prices in Western countries, forcing Biden and other leaders to scramble for substitutes. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are key to this quest, prompting the Biden administration to seek rapprochement with the Gulf monarchies. Ultimately, cooperation with these countries will be necessary to facilitate a stable transition from fossil fuels to green energy, including joint research on green hydrogen and carbon neutrality.

In security terms, President Biden is now emphasizing efforts to integrate the region's early warning and air/missile defenses. This policy does not represent an exit from the Middle East, but rather a sounder basis for sustaining America's presence and sharing the burden under the umbrella of CENTCOM. This will require allies in the Middle East to work more closely with each other and the United States in preserving regional stability.

Regarding Iran, President Biden will not bridge differences with allies over the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on this trip. Yet there will be discussions with Israel and Saudi Arabia over how to respond to Iran's advancing nuclear program.

Regarding peace issues, the president can be expected to emphasize his deep connections with Israel—while simultaneously restating his support for a two-state solution and repeating U.S. calls for practical, material assistance to the Palestinians. This may lead to discussions in Saudi Arabia on investing in West Bank water infrastructure, which would have the twin benefits of addressing an acute Palestinian need and catalyzing direct Israeli-Saudi coordination.

Indeed, the trip could become a watershed moment if it places Israeli-Saudi relations on a normalization path. That path is likely incremental—the kingdom will not join the Abraham Accords anytime soon, but it is probably willing to take initial steps such as granting overflight rights to Israel's El Al airline and allowing direct flights for Israeli pilgrims attending the Hajj.

As for Biden's meetings with Israeli politicians, he will no doubt try to avoid playing favorites during their election season. As such, he will meet with the prime minister, the alternative prime minister, the defense minister, the president, and the leader of the opposition—though he will necessarily spend the most time with Lapid, which may bring the new prime minister extra attention and stature. More than anything, Biden will emphasize what comes naturally to him: his deep, emotional commitment to the U.S.-Israel relationship.

Ebtesam al-Ketbi

The Gulf states welcome this visit as a historic moment that should be used to create a more robust relationship with the United States. The Abraham Accords have generated unprecedented Arab-Israel cooperation, and U.S. officials seem focused on developing this regional partnership. The visit will also solidify U.S. strategy on burden sharing—in particular, there is an opportunity to solidify the multilateral framework engendered by the Negev Summit and encourage countries to go beyond their immediate economic and security needs. The first Negev Summit in March was a watershed in regional cooperation, and the working groups formed there should be continued and strengthened.

Despite the great promise for increased Arab-Israel cooperation, however, it is crucial not to lose sight of other important issues. On the Israeli-Palestinian front, reducing tension and escalation while integrating the Palestinians in regional cooperation are prerequisites for a sustainable peace. Elsewhere, concerns persist about Iran's regional behavior, missile/drone activities, and nuclear program. Gulf leaders hope that Biden's visit will enhance GCC security and expand U.S. ties with member states. A new approach to regional cooperation—one that combines deterrence and de-escalation with economic solutions—would promote security and deeper engagement among Arab states, Israel, and Turkey.

Ultimately, the most important benchmarks for the success of Biden's trip are twofold: a solid U.S. approach to containing Iran, and clarification of U.S. policy on China and Russia. On the second benchmark, the Gulf states want Washington to take their interest in strategic

balancing into account and provide assurances of U.S. security commitments to the region. Put another way, they do not want to be a great-power battlefield.

The building blocks for peace in the Middle East exist, but the United States still has a very large role to play in the region. It can do so by demonstrating a durable and sensitive commitment to its allies, both during Biden's visit and beyond.

Robert Satloff

Based on my own recent visit to Saudi Arabia, I believe that several of Biden's statements in the lead-up to his trip were mistakes—namely, that he would not meet with Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, and that he was taking the trip because Israel asked him to. Yet even though such remarks drew tough comments from the Saudis, Riyadh still wants a successful visit in order to showcase its convening power.

In particular, the Saudis want answers to five questions. First, will Biden continue Obama's legacy on Saudi Arabia, or will he follow the traditional U.S. policy of being the guarantor of Saudi security and urging regional cooperation and integration? Second, is Biden's focus transactional, or is he pursuing a strategic reset with Saudi Arabia? Third, will Biden view human rights solely through the lens of Jamal Khashoggi's murder, or will he use [a broader lens \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/one-small-handshake-united-states-one-giant-leap-us-saudi-relations\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/one-small-handshake-united-states-one-giant-leap-us-saudi-relations) that includes women's rights, personal freedoms, tolerance, and anti-extremism? Fourth, will Biden press for normalization with Israel quickly or support an incremental process underpinned by an improved U.S.-Saudi relationship? Fifth, is Biden visiting as part of a withdrawal from the Middle East, or does he intend to reassert the region's importance to U.S. strategy? If the Saudis receive encouraging answers, they will reciprocate, though [likely not \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/biden-sees-oil-key-his-visit-does-riyadh-agree\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/biden-sees-oil-key-his-visit-does-riyadh-agree) with a huge and sudden increase in oil production.

More broadly, Saudi policy is less adventurous today than in the past, and the crown prince wants to become a regional leader. The goal is to project his country as a consensus-maker in the Middle East rather than a change-maker. At the moment, the biggest developments in the kingdom are its sweeping social, cultural, and economic changes, which are broadly popular and have met little resistance. More reform is coming, but major transformations such as lifting alcohol and prayer restrictions and normalizing with Israel will take place incrementally. It is in America's interest to encourage these trends.

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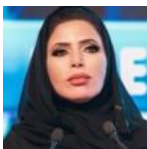
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