

Opinion – The Challenges Facing Joe Biden in the Middle East

Written by Marwan D. Hanania and Edwin Tran

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MARWAN D. HANANIA AND EDWIN TRAN, JAN 20 2021

Joe Biden's presidency will likely have important consequences for U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. Biden comes into the job with a lot on his plate. For sure, his priorities will be to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, heal domestic wounds and rebuild America's relationship with its European allies. However, the Middle East is never low on U.S. priorities. Biden previously spent four decades in Congress focusing on foreign affairs and then served as Vice President under Barack Obama, holding a significant foreign policy portfolio. As a consequence, it is almost guaranteed that he will bring that expertise to bear, and apply much of it to the Middle East.

The challenges the Biden administration faces in the Middle East stem from the legacies left over from the Bush, Obama and Trump administrations. In the aftermath of the George W. Bush administration's disastrous forays into Iraq and Afghanistan post 9/11, Barack Obama came to power in 2009 with a pledge to extricate the United States from Iraq and to rejuvenate U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. He was able to significantly reduce U.S. military presence in Iraq to around 4,000 troops while having some limited success in the War Against Terror, including the assassination of Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan.

Obama generally supported Arab Spring movements in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Whether the downfall of the three regimes that controlled those countries was a desirable outcome or not is open for debate, as only Tunisia ended up in a somewhat better situation. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the Obama administration tried to improve conditions in those countries through financial aid and symbolic support. For example, the U.S. promised to raise Tunisia's status to that of a key non-NATO ally and offered \$500 million in loan guarantees to the Tunisian government in 2015.

As far as the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Bahrain and Yemen, the Obama administration's approach was problematic and contradictory. For example, the U.S. supported a number of Sunni rebels against the Iranian-backed Assad regime in Syria, but was generally friendly with the Shi'ite-led government in Iraq and led a rapprochement with Syria's main Middle Eastern ally, Iran. While critical of the Syrian government's harsh tactics in Syria, the Obama administration not only tolerated but weaponized the war in Yemen and did not do much to restrain the Bahraini government during its crackdown on protesters in Manama.

In regards to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Obama continued to exert some effort to further the cause of peace generally with little success. To his credit, he abstained from vetoing a UN Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlement activity. However, the fact that this act occurred at the end of Obama's presidency meant it was a purely symbolic gesture lacking concrete ramifications.

Perhaps Obama's greatest success toward the Middle East was embodied in the kind of language and diplomatic approach that he used. Unlike the preceding Bush administration and the succeeding Trump administration, Obama and his spokespersons used diplomatic language which went some way toward creating goodwill.

Donald Trump did the exact opposite. He started by imposing a so-called Muslim travel ban and decried the immigration of people from what he called 'shithole countries' to the United States. Trump also did great harm to the

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potential resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The so-called 'Deal of the Century' that son-in-law Jared Kushner spearheaded did nothing to address the cause of tensions between Israelis and Palestinians. The Trump administration also gave in to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's every demand, no matter how outrageous or unilateral, including acknowledging Jerusalem as Israel's capital, approving Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights, and cutting funds from key organizations like UNWRA and the Palestinian Authority.

In Syria, Trump generally avoided getting entangled in the Syrian conflict and was wary of dealing with the Syrian opposition. Although he may have been correct as far as the extremist nature of some of the Syrian opposition groups was concerned, his deferral to Russia and Turkey left Kurdish communities in northern Syria with little protection. Other Syrian communities in key cities were left vulnerable to the whims of the Assad regime. As a symbolic gesture, Trump did fire rockets at a Syrian airbase on April 6th 2017 after Syria purportedly crossed a red line and allegedly used chemical weapons.

Similarly, the Trump administration did little to stop Saudi Arabia's excesses in Yemen and protected Crown Prince Mohamad Bin Salman after the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Trump and Kushner played a key role in creating a Saudi-Israeli alliance against Iran. This has had the effect of drawing attention away from the Palestinian cause, which is still arguably the central destabilizing issue in the Middle East. Furthermore, Trump's assassination of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani in January 2020 could have triggered a war, but the Iranians refused to aggravate tensions further and launched a symbolic retaliation only.

This context is vitally important to consider for the Biden administration. President Biden will certainly face the legacies of his past with Obama while navigating the turbulent waters set by Trump. The Biden administration has talked big, believing itself up to the challenge.

Broadly speaking, Biden has talked about a reduction in overall U.S. troop presence in the region, but he has been against a total withdrawal. The Biden administration will likely seek to continue providing some military support to key U.S. allies. Commenting on Trump's hasty withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria, Biden explained in a speech in 2019 that Trump's actions 'have had devastating clarity on just how dangerous he is to our national security, to our leadership around the world.' Rather than a total withdrawal, there are hints that Biden will switch the modus operandi of U.S. forces to largely advisory roles, particularly in the area of counterterrorism.

These moves are certainly an attempt at appeasing the American domestic audience, who have mostly decried the endless wars that have spanned nearly two decades. This strategy directly contradicts Biden's focus on supporting democracies, which may necessitate a continued military presence in countries like Iraq. Biden may be remembering his tenure under Obama and how the pull-back of troops resulted in the strengthening of the Islamic State. In this light, the shift in tactical operations should help Biden satisfy the demands of his constituents while continuing his obligations to his Middle Eastern allies.

Furthermore, by maintaining a nominal troop presence, Biden may be looking for ways to re-assert an American role in Syria and Iraq to check Russian designs. This will be welcome news to Kurdish communities that bore the brunt of Trump's disengagement from Syria. Biden should be wary though of repeating the mistakes of the Obama administration in Syria: he should at all costs avoid supporting extremist groups or allowing Saudi Arabia and Qatar to fund another Salafi-style rebellion.

Although Biden has demonstrated a more pro-Israeli position than some fellow Democrats during his career in the U.S. Senate, he will likely want to repair the damaged relationship between the United States and the Palestinian Authority. Whether Biden will take this a step further and pressure Israel to make meaningful concessions to the Palestinians is unlikely. It is fairly safe to say that Biden will seek to re-engage the Palestinians and try to relaunch peace talks. He may also seek to re-empower Jordan's monarchy, which presides over an important stabilizing country in the region, one that Trump largely ignored.

Biden will likely encourage further peace efforts between Israel and other Arab nations, but probably not at the expense of progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track. During the UAE-Israeli and Bahrain-Israeli peace negotiations,

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Biden congratulated all countries involved for what he called a 'historic step to bridge the deep divides of the Middle East.' But he also reiterated the 'right of the Palestinians to a state of their own.'

When Obama crafted the JCPOA agreement with Iran, Biden was there working directly with officials and crafting policies. Biden himself made remarks saying that he was ready to speak to Iranian leadership. He has since defended the deal. While nobody can predict the future with total certainty, it is likely that Biden will want to re-establish some sort of dialogue with Iran.

There are some complications. While the Biden team may already have started discussions with Iranian officials, Iran has been noncommittal with its position. Iran has both indicated that it wants the U.S. to return to the table, while at the same time it has acted belligerently and rejected U.S. efforts at re-negotiation. However, the actions of the Trump administration have revealed a striking weakness in American foreign policy here. With the possibility of radical shakeup every four to eight years, many countries like Iran will be wary about making any major bilateral agreements, particularly ones like the JCPOA. Despite these challenges, European allies have urged Biden and his cabinet to follow through on such plans and this may very well help push the momentum forward.

In pursuing these goals, the Biden administration will run into all kinds of obstacles, not least the fact that they are going to have to deal with difficult personalities involved in the region: Netanyahu, Putin, Erdogan, Mohamad bin Salman, and others. They will have to balance practical considerations with idealistic goals. It is important that the administration consider all points of view before making decisions in the region and taking action. With Biden's history and expertise in this area, the incoming administration should be well prepared for these and other challenges. As such, the best outcome would occur when the United States takes a balanced approach to the region, not one that serves a limited agenda.

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