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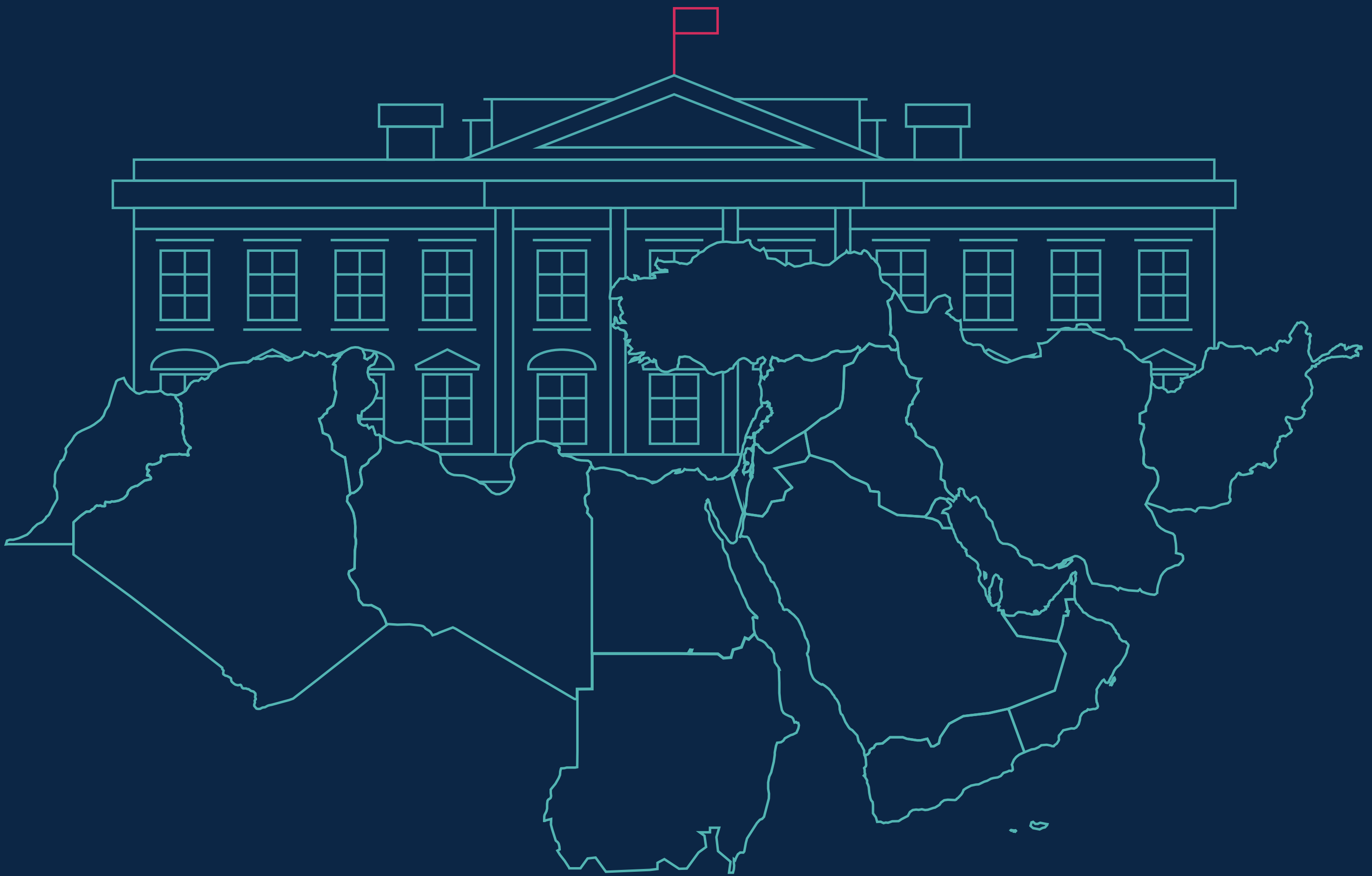
Middle East Reactions to the First Year of the Biden Administration

Joshua Krasna, Editor



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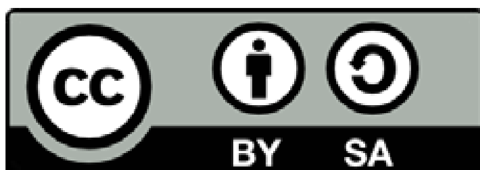

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Foreword

Whereas Joe Biden's election as U.S. President was greeted with a sigh of relief in Germany and the E.U., reactions in the Middle East varied greatly. Trump's uneven Middle East policy had over the years created new allies that viewed a possible change of direction under Biden with concern, as well as actors who were sidelined significantly during Trump's four-year term and hoped for an upgrade of relations. Officials and pundits throughout the region agree, however, in their assessment of waning American interest, engagement, and influence in the region over the past decade – a trend unchanged during successive administrations.

Today the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is a region too often characterized by political, social, and economic crisis, as well as regional tensions and violent conflicts. Changes in the level of involvement and influence of external, geopolitical actors (i.e., Russia and China) are contributing to profound changes in regional power balances and to general uncertainty. Against this backdrop, the contributors to this publication provide valuable insights into their respective countries of expertise, outlining the varied responses of governments and populations to the first year of the Biden Administration, as well as the broader implications of a U.S. retreat from the region. As part of its mandate in the Middle East and North Africa, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung is aiming to strengthen exchange and understanding between countries of the region as well as between Germany and Europe on the one hand and the MENA region on the other. Our cooperation with the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies forms part of this effort and produces, in addition to occasional publications, a series of intra-regional dialogues.

The change in U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East has not gone unnoticed in European capitals either. Europe is more than ever relying on good relations with its southern neighborhood, while struggling to maintain its relevance and ability to shape and support regional transformation processes. Moreover, the conditions for the E.U. as a global political actor have undergone significant change in recent years. Good transatlantic relations have nevertheless remained, and will continue to be, the cornerstone of European foreign policy. A year of the Biden presidency has however shown that, despite a welcome change in tone and reinforcement of relations, the ongoing shift of focus to the Indo-Pacific, the relative strategic downgrade of the Middle East and demands for an increased "European autonomy" in geopolitics and security, remain. This challenge is well known in Brussels and the president of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen has early into her presidency called for a "geopolitical commission". However, after decades of unparalleled U.S. influence and military presence in the region, Europe - like actors in the region - is uncertain about the future of American engagement in the Middle East and North Africa and, until today, seems to be hesitant to form a policy of its own.

I would like to thank the authors cordially for their insightful and incisive contributions and the editor for his excellent cooperation and effort. It is my hope that this publication is thought-provoking for political decision makers, experts, and other stakeholders alike, and will further deepen the understanding of a region in flux.

Dr Beatrice Gorawantschy
Director Israel Office, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
Jerusalem, January 2022

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Introduction

Dr. Joshua Krasna, The Moshe Dayan Center (MDC), Tel Aviv University

The United States' policy regarding the Middle East, and especially its military involvement there, has been undergoing a significant transformation in the past decade and a half. After serving as an "offshore balancer" in the region since the 1950s, its role changed after the Iranian Revolution and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, when it became directly militarily involved in the region – declaredly, to protect the supply of oil to the West – and developed a permanent presence in it. The American involvement jumped again in 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union left it the sole superpower in the region, and Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait brought a massive American military presence (700,000 troops) to the region, and yet again in 2001-2003, when the Global War on Terror brought lasting, massive and region-wide American military involvement.

By 2009, after thirty years of a higher profile and tempo of U.S. involvement in the region, the American public was unwilling to bear the cost of facing what it saw as insoluble problems of the region, and wanted to bring the troops home: the political discourse reflected this. In addition, in the past decade, domestic oil and gas production in the U.S. soared, and it returned to be the largest energy producer in the world, making the oil issue less crucial to American regional policy. China has been defined, by both political parties, as the primary strategic threat, and the newly christened Indo-Pacific region, the key arena. The U.S. is therefore largely retrenching in the Middle East.

Four years of the Trump Administration did not halt this trend, but added complex cross-currents. Conservative regimes, such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt, fearful of political Islamism and of Iran, were encouraged by the "Realist" tenor of the Administration, and developed close relations with the president and his circle; Riyadh and Abu Dhabi became the leaders of the Arab world. The Trump Administration withdrew from the JCPOA accords with Iran, and began a campaign of "maximum pressure". It downplayed agendas of human rights and democracy-building. It also developed close ties with the Netanyahu government in Israel, supporting its positions on Jerusalem and the Golan Heights and marginalizing the Palestinian issue. Notably, it encouraged the creation of an alignment between Israel and the conservative Arab states, leading to the abortive "Plan of the Century" and the successful Abraham Accords of 2020, and to more open acceptance of Israel in the region.

The replacement of the Trump Administration by the Biden Administration was not only a change of personnel, but to a greater degree than in recent U.S. history, a change of direction and ideology. The actors in the region who had developed close cooperation with the Trump Administration view the new President warily; other actors, who had not fared well under the previous administration – such as Jordan, the Palestinians, and Iran – were hopeful. Israel, traditionally the U.S.'s closest ally in the region, and for which close cooperation with Washington is a crucial component of national security policy, changed its own longstanding leadership in parallel with that of the U.S. Its new government is compelled to play a complex balancing game, building an intimate working relationship with the new administration, which disagrees with some of its policies and part of whose core constituency is skeptical of the relationship, while at the same time retaining relations with the Republican opposition.

It is clear that all actors in the region need to position themselves for a future where the American involvement is less overweening and more indirect. The American withdrawal from Afghanistan, both the fact and the method of its occurrence, has made this even more crucial for regional actors. This paper seeks to examine, through a series of brief analytical essays, how key players in the region view the Biden Administration, and more broadly, their relations and interactions with the United States a year into its term. This should help to assess possible developments in the future. The paper continues a series of cooperative projects between Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Israel Office and the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, dealing with regional dynamics and intra-regional dialogue.

Saudi Arabia and the Biden Administration: Back to Basics?

Dr. Brandon Friedman – The Moshe Dayan Center (MDC), Tel Aviv University

Saudi Arabia and the United States are experiencing the biggest crisis in their relationship since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The Saudis have been gravely concerned by the more restrained American use of military power in the Middle East, which has characterized U.S. policy since late 2011. In Riyadh, this change is perceived as a declining American commitment to their defense.[1] On the other hand, the failed Saudi war in Yemen and the 2018 Saudi plot to murder Jamal Khashoggi, a U.S. resident at the time, triggered frustration, condemnation, and outrage in the U.S. Congress, particularly among the more progressive wing of the Democratic Party.[2] The Saudis had to navigate blistering bi-partisan criticism from American politicians during the 2019-2020 presidential campaign. For example, during the Democratic presidential debate in November 2019, Candidate Biden said that he would end the American arms deals with the Saudis that he argued were contributing to "the murdering of children" and the "murdering of innocent people." Biden added that he would "make them pay the price and make them, in fact, the pariah that they are."[3] However, at the beginning of December 2021, nearly one year after the new administration took office, the U.S. Congress approved President Biden's new $650 million arms deal with the Saudis.[4] How can we explain this U.S. volte-face on arms sales? And has this new U.S. "mood" changed the way the Saudis perceive the Biden administration's broader approach to the region?[5]

The Saudi-American relationship, which emerged following World War II, was rooted in three shared strategic interests. First, Saudi oil was a key component of the U.S.'s post-war reconstruction of Western Europe, the Marshall Plan. Second, the U.S. and the Saudis were both hostile to the Soviet Union's communist ideology and viewed the Soviet Union's expansion as a national security threat; The Saudis, in particular, found communism's hostility to religion an anathema. They played an important role in mobilizing the American covert war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. Third, Saudi territory, including sea lanes and air space, were valuable military assets in any confrontation between East and West, and the Saudis recognized they needed a certain amount of Great Power protection in the context of the Cold War.[6]

However, the Biden presidential campaign and the new administration have placed human rights at the heart of their foreign policy agenda.[7] This new emphasis on human rights in U.S. foreign policy, together with the messy American military withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, and, as noted, what is seen as American unwillingness to use significant force in defense of the Gulf against Iran, have led the Saudis to question the future viability of what has been a resilient if imperfect partnership for the past seventy years.[8]

One year into his presidency, President Biden has had to come to terms with two realities that have altered his administration's confrontational approach to the Saudis. First, ending the war in Yemen has required more than Saudi goodwill and cooperation.[9] The Houthis have proven more uncompromising than the U.S. had anticipated,[10] undermining the Biden administration's plan to find a diplomatic solution to end the war early in its first term.[11] The Houthis's 2021 offensive on Maʿrib,[12] and the steady stream of missile and drone attacks on the Saudi cities and critical infrastructure in 2021,[13] have made it difficult for the Biden administration to demand restraint from the Saudis, who have largely cooperated with the Biden administration's attempt to jump-start diplomacy.[14]

Second, high inflation and rising gasoline prices in the United States have forced the Biden administration to plead for increased Saudi oil production, which Biden hopes can help reduce pressure on the U.S. economy during a midterm elections year. Saudi Arabia remains the most important

oil producer in the global market. Its state-owned company, Aramco, possesses the power to modulate the total supply of oil on the global market because it can bring millions of barrels of oil to market faster and cheaper than most of its competitors, including U.S. shale oil producers.[15] Saudi Arabia can also cut its production to prop up prices. By the end of November 2021, the price of gasoline in the U.S. had increased by 61 percent during the prior year, from $2.11 to $3.40 per gallon at the pump (a seven-year high).[16] Political pressure generated by high gasoline prices led Biden to release 50 million barrels (of 620 million) from the U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserve on November 23, 2021.[17] However, relying on the Strategic Petroleum Reserve did not appear to be a sustainable solution. Increased Saudi oil production would reduce gasoline prices for U.S. consumers and, at the same time, allow the Biden administration to stick to its domestic climate change commitments. Biden's alternative to greater Saudi production would be to incentivize U.S. energy producers to dramatically increase U.S. production. But even if U.S. shale oil production could be rapidly increased, this would undercut Biden's pledges to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and support clean-energy alternatives to fossil-fuels.[18] As a result, a senior U.S. delegation visited the Kingdom to urge the Saudis to continue increasing its monthly oil production (by 400,000 b/pd) despite the potential reduction in global demand.[19] The Saudis agreed to the U.S. request, raising the question of what they asked for in return. President Biden has already reversed his promise to block arms sales to the Saudis – can he afford to compromise on his human rights agenda by meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, as is reportedly in the works, and rehabilitating his image in the West?[20] Whatever the case may be, U.S. officials are no longer discussing how to "punish" the Crown Prince.[21]

The Biden administration appears to have reluctantly rediscovered the value of the U.S. partnership with Saudi Arabia. Despite the U.S. shale energy revolution,[22] Saudi Arabia's oil production still retains the power to stabilize or upend a volatile market that stills powers the global economy. The Saudis, for their part, remain skeptical about the partnership with the United States. The Biden team's November 2021 charm offensive is unlikely to change the broader direction of U.S. policy — military disengagement from the Middle East. The Saudi discourse, as a result, reflects the perception that the Saudis can no longer rely exclusively on the United States for their security.[23] A recent report confirming that the Saudis have received China's help in building an indigenous ballistic missile manufacturing facility is a powerful reminder of the Saudi effort to diversify its security partnerships.[24] The Saudis have also increased their defense ties with France and the United Kingdom during the past year, and may do the same with Israel, even as they seek to preserve their vital security relationship with United States.[25]

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Egyptian-U.S. Relations a Year Into the Biden Administration

Dr. Michael Barak –
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President Joe Biden's election was initially received by the Egyptian government with trepidation and fear of an anti-Egyptian policy similar to that of the Obama Administration. This apprehension was gradually, though not completely, replaced by hope and cautious optimism that the Biden administration's intention is to improve and strengthen relations with the Egyptian government. This came in the wake of Operation Guardian of the Walls in May when Biden finally called al-Sisi after four months of a breakdown in relations to thank him for his mediation in this conflict between Israel and Hamas in May, and especially with the resumption of the strategic dialogue between Egypt and the U.S. in November. In Egypt's view, the changes in the global balance of power and Egypt's growing involvement in regional conflicts such as Libya and the Gaza Strip have led the Biden administration to a new recognition of Egypt's vital role in the region, and more generally, to renew its traditional alliances. However, this optimism is mixed with fear that unresolved core disputes, especially the issue of human rights, will sabotage the restoration of the two states' relationship.

"Rediscovery" of Egypt as a Strategic Partner

In the Egyptian narrative, which is aimed primarily at American ears, government officials, research institutes and the media make sure to describe Egypt as a strategic and loyal partner of the U.S. Egyptian member of parliament Olfat al-Malawy pointed to benefits for the U.S. of strengthening alliance ties with Egypt: ability to exert indirect influence on the foreign policy of less moderate Arab countries and on votes in the various Arab institutions; maintaining Arab-Israeli peace; and military cooperation against regional threats such as terrorism and Islamic extremism.[1] The Egyptian Al-Ahram Institute pointed to Egypt's efforts to maintain the stability of Arab states against intrusion of non-Arab subversive factions; Egypt's integration into regional projects to deal with the climate crisis, especially with the water crisis; and more.[2] Mutaz Zahran, Egypt's ambassador to the U.S., praised in an article published in the American press the joint activities of the U.S. and Egypt around some of the crises in the Middle East, such as efforts to calm Gaza and regenerate; striving to end the civil war in Libya; supplying gas to Lebanon, and more. He argued that Egypt, unlike other countries, has maintained allegiance to the U.S. amid the shift in global power.[3]

As was mentioned, the resumption of the "strategic dialogue" between the two countries was received positively in Egypt, depicting it as a "new kind of partnership" or as "a return to the traditional foundations of the strategic partnership between the two countries", in the words of al-Ahram researcher Dina Shehata. For her, the political realism guiding Biden, American fear of a rise in power by China, Russia and Iran, and the American preference to rely on alliances and regional balances as a substitute for direct American intervention, as well as thanks to Egypt's rehabilitation on all levels, have led to this achievement.[4]

The Egyptian "street" also advocates strengthening ties with the U.S. A public opinion poll published by the Washington Institute in December 2021 found that about 55% of Egyptians rated their ties with the United States as important, and irreplaceable by ties with other countries such as China and Russia.[5]

Human Rights in Egypt – a Stumbling Block in U.S.-Egyptian Relations?

Egypt seems to be encouraged by restoration of its relations with the Biden administration, but at the same time, it is concerned about the latter's continued interest in the issue of human rights. In September, Biden threatened to cut back on military aid to Egypt as long as there is no improvement in this issue. In December, Biden held the "Summit of Democracy," which focused on three issues: dealing with tyrannical regimes, fighting corruption, and supporting human rights. Civic representatives from 108 countries, but not from Egypt, were invited to the conference.

Egyptian publicist Muhammad al-Mashnawi expressed bewilderment at the summit and argued that it did not reflect a genuine concern for individual liberties but should be seen as part of the cold war waged by the U.S. against China and Russia. He accused Biden of falsely pretending to be a human rights defender because he did not bother to close the Guantanamo Bay detention camp.[6] Dalia Ziada, a prominent political activist and head of the Liberal Democratic Institute in Egypt, warned of the expected negative consequences:

It is unfortunate that the Biden administration has not learned from the mistakes of the previous administration and is unwilling to change the shameful policy expressed in exerting economic and political pressure through cutting or freezing military aid, in order to push Egypt to improve human rights. This path has not succeeded with the previous Egyptian regimes, and will never succeed with the current Egyptian leadership. Not to mention the negative impact it will have on the strategic partnership between the two countries.[7]

The Egyptian government has been using a more apologetic tone on these issues, emphasizing that it is obliged to operate in a complex post-revolutionary reality characterized by terrorism and economic instability, and therefore patience is needed in the issue, as the Egyptian foreign minister told in the Strategic Dialogue Summit[8] Indeed, in September 2021, al-Sisi presented a new strategy on human rights that would be conducted between the years 2021-2026. The program seeks to reform the criminal justice system, re-examine the death penalty, protect civil and political rights, and train civil servants in the field of human rights. In October, Egypt repealed its emergency law, and in early November, al-Sisi even released 416 Egyptian activists from prison.

The Renaissance Dam in Ethiopia and the Muslim Brotherhood

In the Egyptian discourse there is also reference to the U.S. involvement in the issue of the Renaissance Dam in Ethiopia, which is considered a security threat to Egypt. There are those who question the ability of the U.S. administration to resolve the crisis in light of U.S. internal problems and its preference to shift its center of activity from the Middle East to the Chinese Sea.[9] On the other hand, there are those who explain that the U.S. is acting cautiously with Ethiopia so as not to push it into the hands of China and not undermine the stability of the African Horn. Therefore, understanding and patience must be shown towards American mediation efforts.[10] Another issue in the Egyptian discourse is concerned with U.S.-Muslim Brotherhood relations. There is an Egyptian consensus that those ties should be cut, since the MB are a terrorist group falsely pretending to portray themselves as human rights defenders.[11]

Conclusions

A year later, it is clear that the Egyptian government is pleased with the turnaround in the Biden administration's attitude, whereas Egyptian human rights organizations are dismayed. Egypt can now feel more confident and motivated to play a growing leading role in M.E. conflict zones, paving the way to deepen its influence in the region. At the same time, Egypt is aware that it must address unresolved disputes, especially on the issue of human rights, if it wants to exploit the momentum and deepen the bilateral relations. If Egypt does not take serious measures to improve its human

rights situation and makes only cosmetic changes or random gestures to placate the U.S., it can negatively influence its relations with the U.S. government. Nevertheless, it seems that Biden prefers security and stability and therefore cooperation with Egypt, also aimed at curbing the influence of China and Russia in the region, even at the cost of the human rights issue in Egypt.

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One Year into Biden's Presidency, Iran Stands at a Strategic Crossroads

Omer Carmi – Tel Aviv University

On November 3, 2020, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei delivered a televised speech on the occasion of the anniversary of the 1979 U.S. embassy takeover in Tehran. Khamenei used his speech to discuss the upcoming presidential elections in the United States and stressed that it doesn't matter who would be the next president, since the Islamic Republic's policy vis-à-vis Washington is clear and does not change with the "movement of individuals".[1] This statement reflected his long-standing skepticism towards Washington, which is rooted in a belief that all American presidents – Democrats and Republicans alike – are the same when it comes to dealing with Iran. But Khamenei's remarks also reflected an attempt by the Iranian leadership to lower domestic expectations of a future engagement with Biden's administration.

Indeed, while many Iranians thought that a Biden victory is favorable for Iran,[2] Khamenei and regime officials highlighted that the new administration cannot be trusted and will likely continue to pressure Iran, while employing new tactics. For example, Saeed Jalili, who served as the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council a decade ago and is now Khamenei's representative on the council, explained in an interview that was published on the Supreme Leader's website in January 2021 that the Biden administration will continue to pressure Iran, but will shift from Trump's "maximum pressure" policy to a "smart pressure" based on international coalitions.[3] In August, Khamenei reiterated this idea and claimed that Biden's administration is similar to its predecessor and demands "the same thing that Trump demanded". Khamenei used a metaphor to illustrate his claim, explaining that "behind the scenes of U.S. foreign policy there lies a predatory wolf that sometimes changes into a cunning fox" – the analogy was clear.[4]

The same philosophy of distrust dictated the Islamic Republic's behavior when it comes to the negotiations to revive the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). In his last meeting with Hassan Rouhani's government before they left office this summer, Khamenei urged officials to learn from past experiences and not to trust negotiations with the West, warning that they should "utterly avoid tying their plans to negotiations with the West, for they will surely fail"…[5] On other occasions he stressed that both Presidents Obama and Trump continued to exert economic pressures on Iran even after sanctions were lifted and failed to meet their promises under the JCPOA[6]. Continuing this line of thought, Iran's new president Ebrahim Raisi rejected the idea of direct engagement with Biden, and suggested in his first press conference as president-elect in June that the U.S. should "prove its honesty" since "the people of Iran don't have a good memory of the JCPOA".[7]

The ayatollahs' strategic reasoning was clear: Iran must place a set of maximalist demands as a condition for restoring the JCPOA. If Biden will not agree to these excessive demands, then Iran must not be in a hurry for a U.S. return to the nuclear deal and should not rush into reviving it. These demands not only include a full sanctions removal, but also the establishment of a robust mechanism to verify that Washington has indeed lifted all sanctions not only "on paper" – a lesson Iran learned from its "JCPOA experience". Iran also demands various assurances that will guarantee that the next U.S. administration will not be able to withdraw from the nuclear deal in the future. Although Iran and the P4+1 (with the U.S. not present in the room) held eight rounds of talks in Vienna since President Biden took office, as of January 2021, the Islamic Republic continues to hold to its stringent demands in the negotiations[8].

In parallel to sticking to its maximalist demands in the negotiations, Tehran has also considerably expanded its nuclear program – a process that started during Trump's presidency but intensified

in 2021.[9] Iran accumulated significant amounts of uranium enriched to 20% and 60%, and expanded its infrastructure of advanced centrifuges.[10] Tehran was far from shy about its nuclear advancements, bragging that they created diplomatic leverage vis-à-vis the U.S. and its allies. On November 14, the official newspaper of President Ebrahim Raisi’s government published an editorial titled “Operation Sanctions Defeat”, declaring that by taking a proactive approach, Iran was able to put the ball in the international community’s court.[11]

The last pillar of Tehran’s strategy concerns its alternative for the nuclear deal and focuses – at least per the regime’s rhetoric – on neutralizing sanctions by relying on internal resources and diversifying Iran’s foreign policy by strengthening its relations with Russia and China. This approach of “Looking to the East” is being promoted by Raisi’s new government, and his foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian explained in February (before he was appointed to the foreign ministry) that Iran should “prefer the East to the West” in order to safeguard its national interests.[12] Indeed, since President Biden took office, Iran expanded its relations with China after the two countries signed a strategic agreement in March 2021,[13] and signaled its desire to reach a similar partnership with Moscow.[14] Tehran also joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a member state in September.[15]

Aside from easing its international isolation, this initiative reflects Tehran’s view of international and regional transitions of power. Abdollahian argued in February that the 21st century will be “the century of Asia”, and the regime’s long-standing narrative speaks of America’s “declining power” and its impending collapse. This narrative further intensified after Washington’s withdrawal from Afghanistan in August, which Iranian media framed an American retreat, using the occasion to highlight what they perceive as a change of powers in the Middle East. For example, Iran’s former ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Danaeifar, compared the American position in the region to that of the United Kingdom in 1971, when British forces withdrew from their bases in the Persian Gulf.[16] Many officials also maintained that Iran is able to exploit this opportunity and expand its presence and influence in the region, despite international pressures. IRGC senior official Gholam Ali Rashid explained in September that the work of General Qasem Soleimani, the late Quds Force Commander, created deterrence for Tehran. He noted that Iran now has “six armies” outside of its borders – referring to Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Syria, the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units and the Houthis in Yemen – and that it holds a corridor of “1,500 km long and 1,000 km wide” that stretches “all the way to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea”.[17]

But despite the regime’s extravagant rhetoric and alleged lack of urgency to engage with President Biden, the upcoming year will likely pose a strategic crossroads for Iran. Tehran’s brinkmanship strategy in the nuclear field has already forced U.S. officials to acknowledge that they may soon reach a point at which returning to the nuclear deal no longer makes sense, and that Washington is preparing for “a world in which there is no return to the JCPOA.” [18] This may indicate that the Islamic Republic will soon have to leave its façade of indifference vis-à-vis the U.S. and decide if its intention is to engage with Biden, or risk a major escalation.

1 “US elections don’t affect Iran’s policy toward the US”, *The official website of Iran’s Supreme Leader in English*, November 3, 2020.

2 For example, a poll by Iranian polling center ISPA that was taken before the U.S. elections showed that 50% of the respondents thought that there is no difference between Biden and Trump when it comes to their Iran policy, while 36% thought that Biden is better for Iran, and only 8% claimed that Trump will be the better option for Tehran. See @ispa_polling, *twitter.com*, October 5, 2020.

3 “Why America’s return to the JCPOA without sanctions lift will be harmful? [Persian]”, *The official website of Iran’s Supreme Leader in Persian*, January 13, 2021.

4 “We support the nation of Afghanistan; Governments come & go”, *The official website of Iran’s Supreme Leader in English*, August 28, 2021.

5 “West’s approach in negotiations is unjust and malicious”, *The official website of Iran’s Supreme Leader in English*, July 28, 2021.

6 “Zionist regime’s normalizing ties with pitiful govts can’t save it”, *The official website of Iran’s Supreme Leader in English*, March 21, 2021.

7 "President-elect: US must return to nuclear deal with Iran", *Press TV*, June 21, 2021.

8 To better understand Iran's current demands in the nuclear negotiations, see Omer Carmi, "Reading Through Iran's Nuclear Demands", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, November 24, 2021.

9 For a list of the nuclear steps Iran took during the Trump presidency see "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance", *Arms Control Association*, November 2021.

10 For a current analysis of Iran's nuclear program and advancements see Kelsey Davenport, "Explainer: Iran's Nuclear Progress", *Iran Primer*, November 22, 2021 and David Albright, Sarah Burkhard, and Andrea Stricker, "Analysis of IAEA Iran Verification and Monitoring Report – November 2021", *Institute for Science and International Security*, November 19, 2021.

11 "Operation Sanctions Defeat [Persian]", Iran, November 14, 2021.

12 "Details of Imam Khamenei's strategic letter to Russia's President", *The official website of Iran's Supreme Leader in English*, February 15, 2021.

13 "China and Iran Near Trade and Military Partnership, Defying US", *New York Times*, September 24, 2021.

14 "Iran, Russia Discuss Long-Term Deal on Comprehensive Cooperation", *Tasnim*, November 16, 2021.

15 "Shanghai alliance SCO grants Iran full membership", *Press TV*, September 18, 2021.

16 "Danaeifar, Iran's former ambassador in Iraq: The region is certainly on the verge of great changes [Persian]", *Jamaran*, August 31, 2021.

17 "Major General Rashid: Iran's defense policy is defined as independent from foreign powers [Persian]", *Tasnim*, September 25, 2021.

18 "Briefing With Senior State Department Official On the Seventh Round of the JCPOA Talks", *U.S. Department of State*, December 4, 2021

The United Arab Emirates and the Biden Administration – A Year Later

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The "change of the guard" following the presidential election in the U.S. has not gone unnoticed by the leadership of Abu Dhabi. Like their conservative regional counterparts – Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and to a large extent, Israel and Egypt – the Emirati leadership was more than supportive of President Trump's foreign policy agenda in the Middle East.

A year after the Biden Administration assumed power in Washington, the U.S.-U.A.E. relationship seems to be on an ambivalent course, wrapped in feelings of uncertainty and unpredictability. On the one hand, the U.A.E. is still highlighted as one of the U.S.' strongest Arab allies in the "Global War on Terrorism" and as a state with which the U.S. holds a special relationship. According to this view, the U.A.E., as a long-term ally of the U.S., constitutes an essential component of Washington's desire to lessen its regional involvement in the Middle East as it draws more focus to Asia.

But at the same time, some voices, both in the media and in Congress[1], suggest that overlooking the U.A.E.'s controversial conduct could be detrimental to U.S. interests in the region and beyond. They argue that destabilizing policies advanced by the Emirates in Yemen, Libya and Syria could serve as a case in point. At times they even refer to the U.A.E. as "Little Sparta"[2] (as was nicknamed by former U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis) in order to point to Abu Dhabi's disproportionate military capabilities relative to its small geographic size. In sum, the U.A.E. was portrayed as the epitome of this long-standing, harmful U.S. policy in the Middle East that has supported states without keeping them fully accountable for their actions.

As it turned out, the Biden Administration policy towards the U.A.E. began with a diplomatic imbroglio, in the form of a freeze on an arms deal signed by the Trump Administration right before its term ended.[3] The deal included the F-35s, a token of Washington's gratitude for the U.A.E.'s participation in the Abraham Accords with Israel. It was eventually approved in April, but the bitter ramifications of its delay were evident.

Even after the deal was approved, Washington tried to squeeze further concessions from the Emirates, and requested that the Emirates "take a step back" from China, making use of the imminent F-35 transfer as leverage. The United States was concerned about growing military and economic ties between Beijing and the U.A.E. and was particularly worried that Huawei, the Chinese telecommunications company banned from operating in the United States for its alleged espionage on behalf of the Chinese government, would use its newly acquired access to the Emirates to survey American planes and drones in the Arabian Gulf.[4] Additionally, it seems that now the U.A.E. may be signaling to the U.S. that it wants its own concessions, given the recent delay in the USD $23 billion arms deal.[5]

The United Arab Emirates is not sitting idly by in the face of Washington's new political path. The Emirati leadership's main response has focused on expanding its network of alliances and diplomatic ties with new regional and international forces, in the hope that these could offer it the military and economic support that Washington might no longer provide. In the Middle East, the U.A.E.'s diplomatic efforts from the last few months have focused on Israel (following the Abraham Accords), Syria, Turkey and even Iran, the Arabian Gulf's nemesis, whose representatives met several of their Emirati counterparts.

The most significant international actor that may improve relations with the Emirates is China. On the economic level, the Emirati-Chinese understandings include several economic agreements, as well as other agreements, military in nature. The most significant one is the attempt to build a Chinese military base in the Emirates, which was foiled several months later after the interference of

a very worried Washington. This Chinese-Emirate approach is a clear signal to the United States that the Emirates will, as part of a larger strategy in the region, act in its best interest with or without American involvement, as also shown by the U.A.E.'s threat to walk away from the upcoming arms deal.

Part of this Emirati effort to act individually is seen in their newfound membership and increased power in regional and international organizations. For example, starting in 2022, the U.A.E. will become a temporary member of the United Nations Security Council[6], while also hosting the Global Energy Forum[7] and the India Global Business Forum.[8] This again is a message that the United States must watch closely; the U.A.E. will take its own initiative to join international geopolitical and economic fora to promote its own interests, even if they must be their own advocate. Additionally, these efforts have already begun to bear fruit, showing the U.S. that aside from threats and delays, there are other ways to solve disputes.

Interestingly, however, the Emirates are a bit more reserved than their Saudi counterparts. While Riyadh entered a head-on diplomatic feud with the United States (possibly because the Saudi royal family itself was personally attacked in Biden's statements), the Emirates have tried to buttress their diplomatic capabilities without overly antagonizing Washington. One example is the aforementioned Emirati decision to forego the prospect of a Chinese military base in the Emirates, following the extreme American anxiety. Another example is the "OPEC Plus" management of oil. In the face of Biden's request to increase oil production to curb the global rise of oil prices, Saudi Arabia decided to continue to limit production in order to humiliate the White House[9] and make it seem incompetent compared to the Trump administration. The Emirates, on the other hand, supported the American policy of increased production and even entered a minor diplomatic crisis with Riyadh over this topic. Ironically, the two Gulf oil manufacturers' disagreements were mediated by Russia – perhaps another sign that the Biden Administration is "losing its edge" in the Middle East.

Despite the concerns raised in Abu Dhabi, the U.A.E. is likely to continue to work closely with Washington. With a foreign policy that has proven to be flexible, the U.A.E. might successfully navigate the coming changes in U.S. foreign policy more easily than other governments, particularly in light of the passage of the Abraham Accords and its hedging policy toward Iran.

1 Jon Hoffman, "Washington's Blank Check for the United Arab Emirates Must End," *Foreign Policy*, November 3, 2021; Jacob Magid, "Despite Biden OK, 'concerned' Democrat says US Congress to review UAE arms deal." *The Times of Israel*, April 15, 2021,

2 Yoel Guzansky, "Sparta in the Gulf: The Growing Regional Clout of the United Arab Emirates," *The Institute for National Security Studies*, January 8, 2017.

3 Jacob Magid, "US Suspends $23 Billion Sale of F-35s to UAE That Followed Abraham Accords," *The Times of Israel*, January 27, 2021.

4 Hiddai Segev, "The 5G Tender in Israel and the Global Struggle Against Huawei," *The Institute for National Security Studies*, July 14, 2020.

5 Gordon Lubold and Warren P. Strobel, "United Arab Emirates Threatens to Pull out of $23 Billion F-35, Drone Deal with U.S.," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 14, 2021.

6 "Stronger United." *Permanent Mission of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations*, October 14, 2021, https://uaeun.org/unsc/.

7 "Global Energy Forum." *Atlantic Council*.

8 "India Global Forum UAE 2021." *Gulf News*, December 9, 2021.

9 Stanley Reed, "OPEC and Russia Won't Expand Oil Output Faster, in a Rebuff to President Biden," *The New York Times*, November 4, 2021.

Turkish-American Relations in the Biden Era: "It's Complicated"

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Despite their turbulent nature, relations between Turkey and the U.S. have stemmed from considerations of grand strategy and the immediate interests of both states. Turkey's perception of Russia as the historical nemesis of the Ottoman Empire and of modern Turkey has constituted the backbone of this complicated relationship.

Until the rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002, Turkish foreign policy was indeed in line with that of the U.S. A significant breaking point in the relations took place in March 2003, when the Turkish parliament rejected the U.S. appeal for deploying military forces on the Turkish territory to launch the invasion of Iraq also from the north. The Turkish parliamentary veto did not leave an alternative for the U.S. but to launch the invasion only from the southern frontier in Iraq. Unsurprisingly, this act created a serious rift between the two sides that became loud and clear with the infamous "Hood Event" (Turkish: Çuval Olayı) on July 4, 2003, in which a group of Turkish military personnel operating in northern Iraq were captured, led away with hoods over their heads, and interrogated by the U.S. military. The incident created an earthquake in the Turkish public and was utilized by anti-American circles to launch large-scale anti-Americanism, which is still felt today.

Anti-American tendencies reached their peak in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt in July 15, 2016. The silence of then-U.S. President Barack Obama during the incident, perceived as waiting for clarification of the results of the insurrection, caused deep mistrust in Ankara. Moreover, Erdoğan was even more irritated when the U.S. refused to extradite Fethullah Gülen – an Islamic preacher accused of orchestrating the coup attempt, from his exile in the United States.

In this tense diplomatic atmosphere, and after a significant delay, then U.S. Vice President Joe Biden paid a visit to the bombed Turkish parliament on August 24, 2016. Upon his arrival to Turkey, Biden received a cold reception. But more importantly, he was surprised to be informed about the already launched Turkish Armed Forces' (TSK) "Operation Euphrates Shield: against ISIS and the Kurdish PYD-YPG (a U.S. ally) in the Syrian territory.[1]

It seems that even then Biden did not approve Turkey's foreign policy in Syria. During his presidential campaign, Biden openly criticized former President Donald Trump for allowing Turkey to conduct "Operation Peace Spring" against the U.S.' Kurdish allies in Syria, and wrote on Twitter that if he was President, he would make Erdoğan pay a heavy price for what he has done.[2] Biden went on and openly called Erdoğan an "autocrat" and promised to support the Turkish opposition political parties in toppling the Turkish president's rule democratically.[3] Unsurprisingly, Biden's statements were received very negatively in Ankara. Erdoğan's spokesperson İbrahim Kalın openly insulted Biden in a tweet from his official account, stating that "the days of ordering Turkey around are over" and that Biden would pay the price if he will dare to do so.[4]

Inevitably, the Biden-Kalın social media swordplay deepened the existing anti-Americanism tendencies in the Turkish public. As of June 2021, 54% of the Turks see the U.S. as the most serious threat against their country's national security, with only 20% not seeing it as a national security threat.[5]

Erdoğan did not experience a "golden age" with President Trump either, despite the positive chemistry between the two leaders. Erdoğan decided to escalate the bilateral relations by adopting "hostage diplomacy". On September 2017, Turkish police arrested Metin Topuz – a Turkish citizen working for the American consulate in Istanbul – with espionage charges. The U.S. responded to this move by halting consular visa services in the country. However, it seems that Ankara was not

deterred. On September 28, 2017 Erdoğan decided to use imprisoned American pastor Andrew Brunson – accused of espionage charges – as a bargaining chip to compel Fethullah Gülen's extradition. Turkey's reluctance to release Pastor Brunson from prison deteriorated into a full-scale diplomatic crisis; the Trump Administration imposed sanctions against top Turkish government officials who were involved in the detention of Brunson. Tariffs on Turkish products were also raised. Unsurprisingly, the U.S. measures had a huge impact on the fragile Turkish currency. On August 2018, the Turkish lira suffered from an (at that time) unprecedentedly high devaluation, with one dollar becoming equivalent to 6.95 Turkish Liras. At the end, in October 2018, the Erdoğan administration could not continue, and Pastor Brunson was released from the Turkish prison and extradited back to the U.S.

Ankara also declared its opposition to the U.S. policy of imposing sanctions against Iran. As the neighbor of this country, Turkey suffered serious economic losses from the sanctions regime: therefore, the state-owned Halkbank began to circumvent the sanctions. At first in March 2017, deputy director general of Halkbank Hakan Atilla was arrested in the U.S. Then, in October 2019, the U.S. Treasury filed a lawsuit against the bank in New York, in which it could face a fine of up to $20 billion for helping Iran evade sanctions. Today, the ongoing Halkbank affair still constitutes a serious burden on the bilateral relations.

Ankara's contradictory foreign policy on Iran has had ramifications on the bilateral relations. On October 29 and on December 12, 2019, respectively, the House of Representatives and the Senate passed the Armenian Genocide bill. President Biden's official recognition of the genocide on March 24, 2021 can also be seen as the last step of a finalized policy.[6]

While all the above-mentioned crises can be seen as relatively middle-scaled ones, Turkey's decision to acquire Russian S-400 anti-ballistic missile systems in July 2019 and its testing of the systems on a former American base in the city of Sinop in October 2020 led to a genuine paradigm shift in Turkish-American relations. As a result, in December 2020, prior to leaving office, the Trump Administration imposed Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act's (CAATSA) sanctions on Turkey's defense industry. Moreover, Turkey was removed from the NATO flagship F-35 joint strike fighter project.

Having already being paid 1.4 billion dollars to acquire the F-35s, Ankara currently seeks to use these funds for 40 new F-16 jets and to launch a modernization maintenance for those jets it possesses in its inventory. The Biden administration has still not given a green light for this venture.[7] In doing so, the U.S. applies further pressure on Turkey to soften Ankara's position, especially vis-a-vis the PYD-YPG in Syria – preventing a new Turkish ground offensive against this entity.

Apart from the Kurdish question, Biden's reluctance to move forward with the F-16 deal also derives from the latest "10 Ambassadors Crisis", which highlighted once again the deteriorating situation of human rights and freedom of speech in Turkey. On October 18, the U.S. ambassador in Ankara and nine other Western counterparts signed an online petition that called for the immediate release of the Turkish philanthropist Osman Kavala, considered by Erdoğan the mastermind behind the 2013 Gezi Park protests. Erdoğan threatened to declare the ten ambassadors persona non grata. The crisis was averted thanks to the ambassadors' joint statement that they are obligated by Vienna Convention's article 41 not to interfere in other countries' internal affairs. In light of the incident, President Biden chose not to invite Turkey to the December 9-10, 2021 "Summit for Democracy" event that gathered the heads of all the democratic states. This act shows President Biden's categorization of Turkey together with China, Russia and Iran.[8]

The density and the magnitude of the series of consecutive political crises has largely destroyed the mutual trust between Washington and Ankara. The most important indicator of this mistrust is the ongoing deployment of the U.S. forces in the city of Alexandroupoli, Greece next to the Turkish border. In Turkish eyes, the deployment is seen as a measure to deter Turkey from engaging with Greece in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea, and even as a "siege" against Turkey. On the Amer-

ican side, recent U.S. troop deployments signal Washington's undeclared desire to gradually move away its military properties from Turkey to Greece.[9]

Despite all the above, and given the U.S.' special interest in containing China, Turkey may be able to win back the hearts of the Americans if it confronts China not only by disengaging itself from Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, but also by criticizing Beijing openly on the Uyghur question. Certainly only such an act can reset the American-Turkish relations and would restore Turkey's strategic position in the eyes of the U.S. However, given Turkey's growing engagement with China – including selling its ports, companies and even signing swap agreements between the central banks of both countries – such a policy change cannot be seen in the horizon.

Unless a drastic change will take place in Turkish foreign policy it seems that the already "complicated" U.S.-Turkish relations will further deteriorate in the near future. In such a scenario, the most significant challenge for Washington may be to keep Turkey close enough – despite their differences – to not lose this important country to the hands of the Russia-China axis.

1 "ABD Başkan Yardımcısı Biden Türkiye'de" [USA Vice President Biden is in Turkey], *AA*, August 24, 2016 [Accessed: November 29, 2021]

2 @JoeBiden, Twitter, October 16, 2019, https://twitter.com/JoeBiden/status/1184560895768137729?s=20 [Accessed: November 28, 2021]

3 "Turkey condemns Biden's criticism of 'autocrat' Erdogan", Al Jazeera, August 16, 2020 [Accessed: November 28, 2021]

4 @ikalin1, Twitter, August 16, 2020, https://twitter.com/ikalin1/status/1294874944971714561?s=20 [Accessed: November 28, 2021]

5 U.S. allies Israel (41.8%), Greece (38.7%) and France (37.3%) were also seen as the leading threats against Turkey. Interestingly, despite Iran's desire to export its Islamic revolution and engagement in a proxy war with Turkey in Syria, only 34.6% of those surveyed regarded Iran as a threat. The same ironic picture is also applicable for the historical nemeses Russia (20.7%) and China (18.9%) respectively. "*Turkish Foreign Policy Public Perceptions Survey – 2021*," Kadir Has University, June 15, 2021. https://www.khas.edu.tr/en/arastirma/khasta-arastirma/khas-arastirmalari/turk-dis-politikasi-kamuoyu-algilari-arastirmasi-2021.]

6 "24 Nisan: Ankara Biden'ın 'soykırım' açıklamasını nasıl okudu, Türk-Amerikan ilişkileri nasıl etkilenir?" [April 24: How did Ankara perceived Biden's 'genocide' statement. How will the Turkish-American relations will be affected?], *BBC Türkçe*, April 25, 2021 [Accessed: November 28, 2021]

7 "Türk-Amerikan İlişkilerinde Olumlu Rüzgar Esecek mi?" [Will there be a positive wind in the Turkish-American relations?] *VOA*, November 1, 2021 [Accessed: November 28, 2021]

8 "Biden-Erdoğan görüşmesinde "insan hakları" vurgusu" [During the Biden-Erdogan summit emphasis on the "Human rigths"], *DW*, November 1, 2021 [Accessed: November 28, 2021]

9 "Yunanistan: ABD'nin Rusya'ya karşı yeni 'sıçrama tahtası'" [Greece: The new springboard of the USA against Russia], *TRT Haber*, November 26, 2021 [Accessed: November 28, 2021]

Iraqi Discourse on the Biden Administration

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The relationship between Iraq and the United States during the first year of Joseph Biden's Administration was defined by what one might call normalization. For most of the past thirty years, policies emanating from Washington dominated Iraqi political discourse. From the First Gulf War and sanctions to the 2003 war and occupation, then withdrawal in 2011 and war again in 2014, the Iraqi-American relationship has been anything but normal. However, over the past twelve months, the new American Administration has not been the driving force in Iraqi politics. When Iraqis did discuss the United States, they focused more on America's attempt to turn away from Iraq.

Setting the Stage and Initial Views

On the eve of Biden's presidency, Iraqi views of the United States were fractured and complex. Much of Iraq's political landscape was hostile toward President Donald Trump. Iraqis accused Trump of using their country as a battlefield in America's proxy war with Iran. On January 7, 2021, a top Baghdad court even issued an arrest warrant for Trump for "ordering the assassination" of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani and Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in January 2020.[1] Many Iraqis saw Trump through the lens of his bigoted statements about Arabs and Muslims. When Trump pardoned four American security contractors who killed fourteen Iraqi civilians, including a nine-year-old boy, one Iraqi lamented "our blood is cheaper than water."[2]

Nevertheless, even under Trump, Iraqi discourse on the United States was complicated. For much of 2019 and into 2020, Iraq was engulfed in popular protests against an entrenched and corrupt ruling class with close ties to Iran. This created significant anti-Iranian sentiment, even among the Iraqi Shi'a, who at times saw American power in Iraq as a check on Tehran.[3] Additionally, the main Kurdish parties saw the American military as their greatest ally, and hoped it would remain in the country indefinitely.

In this context, Biden's election met a mixed reaction among Iraqis. His reputation in Iraq was closely tied to his vote in favor of the 2003 Iraq War and his plan in 2006 to divide Iraq along sectarian and ethnic lines. Profiles of Biden in the Iraqi press often highlighted these issues.[4] At least among Arab Iraqis, these positions were deeply unpopular. As one report posted by a prominent Iraqi think tank argued, "Biden has never been on the right side."[5] Nevertheless, Iraqis also recognized that Iraq was not a major issue in the American election and that Biden seemed to have backed away from his previous calls to divide the country. Many Iraqis also hoped that Biden's more moderate approach to Iran would ease regional tensions that have fed proxy conflicts in their country. As such, Iraqi leaders publicly welcomed Biden's victory.[6]

Strategic Dialogue and Ending Combat Mission

The strategic dialogue between Washington and Baghdad on ending U.S. combat operations in Iraq dominated the Iraqi discourse on Biden's Administration during its first year. The process began under President Trump and then culminated in July 2021, when Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi and President Biden negotiated an end to the American combat role in Iraq by the end of 2021. The agreement was praised by most of Iraq's political landscape.

However, some hardline Shi'i factions aligned with Iran, such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq and the Badr Organization, remained skeptical, arguing that the agreement was little more than window dressing for a

continued American military presence. As one Shi'i militia member stated, "There are doubts and fears that what was agreed on in Washington will not be applied on the ground."[7]

The Kurds publicly welcomed the Iraqi-American strategic dialogue, but they were also clearly concerned that an American withdrawal would leave them at the mercy of Baghdad, Iran, and Turkey.[8]

Iraqi discourse on a potential American troop withdrawal was also affected by the botched American exit from Afghanistan. Many Sunni Arabs and Kurds feared a repeat of the "Afghan scenario" in their country, in which Iranian proxies would quickly seize power. However, Iraqi factions aligned with Iran denied that was a possibility.[9]

Biden Reconsidered

Despite the importance of these issues, the most poignant aspect of Iraqi discourse on Biden was the lack of it. Iraqi politics and diplomacy were dominated by local and regional issues over the past year. It is noteworthy that when Biden met Iraqi President Barham Salih in September, Biden congratulated Iraq on the Baghdad Summit – attended by regional leaders and French President Emmanuel Macron in August – and the Pope's visit in March. The United States was not a factor in either of those events.[10]

Moreover, Iraqi political discourse has shifted away from seeing American policy as the central issue for Iraqi politics. Several op-eds in the well-respected newspaper, al-Mada, argued that Iraq was not an important issue for Biden. Moreover, Biden was no longer trying to divide the country, and even if he was, Iraqis argued that they did not need people like Biden to split them along "regional" [مناطقياً], "sectarian" [مذهبياً], and "ethnic" [قومياً] lines; Iraqis divided themselves into those categories every time there was an election.[11] These types of arguments diminish the role of American policy in shaping Iraqi politics. Instead, they depict local issues like corruption, or regional actors like Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia as driving Iraqi politics.

America's future in Iraq is far from certain. There are plans to leave a residual American military force in Iraq. How different it will be from the type of force that has been there in recent years is unclear. Yet, both American and Iraqi public opinion favor an end to American combat missions in Iraq. As such, both American and Iraqi leaders have tried to downplay the role of the American military in Iraq. Whatever the truth of such claims, they do appear to have moved Iraqi political discourse away from the America-centric views of previous decades.

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Overtaken by Events: The Biden Administration's Deepening Engagement in Lebanon

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The Lebanese government officially welcomed Joe Biden's election as 46th president of the United States. However, behind the congratulatory official remarks and expressions of hope for stronger ties between the two countries, a sense of resignation and anxiety prevailed among Lebanon's political class regarding the new administration. On a fundamental level, the Lebanese political class understood that the new administration, like the previous one, did not intend to be proactively engaged in Lebanon or view Lebanon as a foreign policy priority, and that the administration's approach to the country would largely be dictated by its Iran policy.[1] The Trump administration viewed Lebanon as an area of competition with Iran and took an openly confrontational approach to Hizballah, Iran's local proxy, as part of its policy of maximum pressure. In contrast, the Biden administration departed from the Trump administration's policy of maximum pressure as it sought to reenter negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program. Not wanting to antagonize Iran or undermine the potential to reach an agreement, the Biden administration took a less openly hostile approach to Hizballah.

Initially, the new administration confined itself to supporting civil society organizations, gently pushing for economic and political reform, providing humanitarian aid, and maintaining U.S. support for the Lebanese army, a traditional cornerstone of the U.S.'s Lebanon policy. For Hizballah and its allies in the March 8 coalition, the reorientation of Biden's regional policy was a welcome reprieve, though they largely remained skeptical and critical of America's regional policy. However, for parties affiliated with Lebanon's March 14 coalition, such as the Lebanese Forces and the Future Movement, the thought that the Biden administration would lessen its pressure on Hizballah was a cause of anxiety and concern.

However, both camps' early assessments of the Biden administration's Lebanon policy would prove to be inaccurate. Lebanon's worsening political and economic crises, which have brought the country to the verge of total collapse, compelled the Biden administration to change course and increase its involvement in Lebanese affairs.

It is within this context – the deterioration of the political and economic situation in Lebanon compelling the United States to more proactively engage – that Lebanese responses to the Biden administration must be understood. Since U.S. policy in Lebanon broadly aims at containing Hizballah and the expansion of Iranian influence in the country, the response of Hizballah and its allies has – unsurprisingly – mainly been negative. In contrast, those opposed to Hizballah and Iran in Lebanon have generally welcomed greater involvement in the country's affairs by Washington. To illustrate, this article explores two areas in which the Biden administration's engagement has been most evident, and provoked the most vigorous response: working to resolve Lebanon's energy crisis, and actively mediating the Lebanese-Israeli maritime dispute.

Lebanon's Energy Crisis

As Lebanon's energy crisis deepened in the summer of 2021, the Biden administration and Hizballah announced competing "plans" to alleviate and solve the crisis. Hizballah, in a bid to enhance its influence and that of its Iranian patron in Lebanon, announced it would import Iranian fuel into the country, while Iran offered to begin exploring for oil and gas in Lebanon's coastal waters. In contrast, the United States announced its backing for a proposal to import Egyptian natural gas to oper-

ate Lebanon's power plants and to transfer Jordanian electricity into the country via Syria, essentially establishing a mechanism for Arab states to increase their influence in Lebanon at Hizballah's and Iran's expense.[2] The competing energy plans brought the Biden administration into direct and open conflict with Hizballah and its March 8 allies. Hizballah intensified its criticism of the United States and its ambassador in Lebanon, pushing the narrative that the U.S. was to blame for Lebanon's economic and energy woes. In several speeches, Hizballah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah accused the U.S. of waging an economic and propaganda campaign against Lebanon. He argued that Lebanon's woes were entirely to blame on the United States, which had laid siege to the country and was working to cause its disintegration.[3] Ambassador Shea brushed aside the criticism, rhetorically asking if that was the best Nasrallah could do?[4] Nasrallah also argued that the U.S. plan was nothing more than an effort to sell false hope and illusions to Lebanese citizens.

However, opposition groups and parties affiliated with the March 14 alliance welcomed the U.S. initiative, while acknowledging geopolitical and technical obstacles still had to be ironed out for it to come to pass, namely repairing damaged infrastructure and the U.S. waiving the application of Caesar sanctions on this matter.[5] They also pushed counter-narratives against their rival, Hizballah. One of the most popular media outlets associated with the opposition downplayed and dismissed both proposals, asking its followers on Twitter who sold the Lebanese a better illusion – Hizballah or U.S. Ambassador Dorothy Shea.[6] The Kataeb Party, one of Lebanon's oldest political organizations that formally joined the opposition, accused Nasrallah of usurping the state's power once again and sowing internal discord.[7] Kataeb leader Samy Gemayel also dismissed Hizballah's charge that the U.S. was waging an economic war against Lebanon.[8] These criticisms were even echoed by Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati, who lamented that a "group" would take an action that exposed Lebanon to U.S. sanctions and that such fuel shipments violated Lebanon's sovereignty.[9]

Mediating the Lebanon-Israel Maritime Dispute

Lebanese-Israeli demarcation negotiations over competing maritime territorial claims, mediated by the United States, were derailed in December 2020 on the eve of Biden's inauguration when Lebanon unexpectedly made additional territorial demands.[10] The dispute between the two countries intensified in September 2021 when the U.S. oilfield service company Halliburton announced that Israel had awarded it a contract for drilling in the northern part of the Karish gas field, which lies in the area claimed by Lebanon in December 2020. The announcement provoked strong condemnations by Lebanese officials, who accused Israel of violating past agreements, and the Biden administration pushed for renewed negotiations to settle the dispute.[11]

President Biden appointed Amos Hochstein, an Israeli-born energy expert in the State Department, as the new American mediator. In October, Hochstein traveled to the region for talks with Lebanese and Israeli officials. Hizballah and its March 8 allies heavily criticized Hochstein's appointment and visit to Beirut. Pro-Hizballah media outlets such as *al-Mayadeen* and *al-Akhbar* published articles about Hochstein, casting doubt on his ability to be an impartial and neutral arbiter of the dispute. This was done through implicit and explicit references to Hochstein's Jewishness and mentioned that Hochstein was born in Israel and served in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), including in southern Lebanon.[12] Similar narratives regarding Hochstein were promoted and amplified on social media by Hizballah and its allies. The virulently anti-Israel (and antisemitic) Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) posted infographics declaring Hochstein an "enemy, not a mediator." The SSNP reiterated its uncompromising rejection of negotiations with "the enemy," e.g., Israel, warning against economic normalization.[13] Such criticisms were also echoed by some opposition groups, such as Shabab Masref (the Youth of the Bank), which decried the Lebanese government's submission to negotiations with "the Israeli Amos Hochstein," essentially accusing Lebanese politicians of colluding with the enemy.[14]

However, the narrative and tone of parties affiliated with the March 14 coalition were entirely different. Articles published by the Lebanese Forces and Kataeb did not include any references to Hochstein's Jewishness or Israeli origins, addressing him by the titles befitting his office and status as the Biden administration's designated mediator. Moreover, the articles focused on the issues at hand. They stressed that negotiations did not address normalization but were intended to reach an agreement that would enable Lebanon to begin exploiting its oil and gas reserves.[15] Meanwhile, the French-language daily *L'Orient-Le Jour* addressed the issue of Hochstein's Israeli origins in a neutral, analytical manner, even praising him as "the right man for the job."[16]

Given that Lebanon's political and economic crises remain unresolved and continue to worsen, the Biden administration will likely remain active in Lebanese affairs, further sharpening and intensifying the varied responses to its policies.

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The Palestinians and the Biden Administration

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The Palestinian attitude towards the new Biden administration initially divided, predictably, into two approaches: that of the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority (P.A.) on the one hand, and of the hardliners of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) on the other. While President Mahmud Abbas and other P.A. officials welcomed the new administration with cautious optimism, Hamas and PIJ leaders expressed little expectation that the new administration would implement policies significantly different from its predecessors' regarding the Palestinian issue in general and their organizations particularly. The P.A.'s cautious optimism was gradually eroded during the first year, pushing its leaders to search for old-new avenues to return the Palestinian problem to the forefront of the international agenda.

The most positive expression of a Hamas official towards the Biden administration was stated early on by the movement's spokesperson, Fawzi Barhoum. He gloated at the departure of Trump, whom he described as a major actor in instigating "violence and extremism". Barhoum expressed hope that the Biden administration would correct the American historical injustice against the Palestinians, particularly regarding the refugees and Jerusalem issues.[1] However, most Hamas officials showed very little interest or hope that the situation would change, and repeated the argument that while American and Israeli governments change, the longstanding policies regarding the Palestinian issue remain unchanged.[2] This claim and its context implicitly hinted that the American administration should recognize Hamas's legitimacy as opposed to its longstanding policy.

The Biden administration indeed maintained the traditional American policy that considers the P.A. the only legal leadership and partner for any arrangement. However, the President did deliver several statements regarding the Gaza Strip, particularly during Operation Guardian of the Walls (May 10-21), which were perceived by Hamas as positive. These included pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to enter a ceasefire, as well as use of "even-handed" rhetoric that stressed the right of both people to live in peace and prosperity.[3] Following the operation, the administration also expressed its intention to assist the international reconstructing efforts of the Gaza Strip.[4] A few days after the operation, Arab media platforms even suggested the possibility that the Biden administration would open a direct channel of communication with Hamas.[5]

However, as the immediate impact of the operation faded away, Hamas officials returned to their usual rhetoric that America has no intention to change its longstanding policy towards the Palestinians. Ismail Haniyeh, the chairman of Hamas' Political Bureau, stated in late September that neither Biden nor new Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennet are accepting any political solution to the Palestinian issue, not even one based on a Palestinian state within the June 4, 1967 borders. Therefore, Haniyeh argued, their election does not change the course of occupation and there is no expected change at the American-Israeli relations as the two countries are connected with strong interests.[6] Dr. Basem Naim, the Head of Hamas's Political and Foreign Relations Department condemned in November the United States vote at the United Nations against a draft that was supposed to provide the Palestinians the right of self-determination.[7] At the same time, Hamas did not attribute much importance to the U.S. decision to change its vote a few days later from 'no' to 'abstention' on the U.N. General Assembly Resolution granting Palestinian refugees the right to return to Israel.[8]

From the beginning, the PIJ had even lower expectations from the new administration. While also heavily criticizing the Trump Administration, the organization predicted that no American change of policy is in sight. Shortly after Biden's electoral

victory, Daud Shihab, a spokesperson for the PIJ, stated that the new President continues the traditional American complicity in "Israel's crimes".[9] Another official, Sheikh Nafedh Azam, said that the Palestinians have a bitter experience with the U.S. administrations, and yet Washington always failed to break them, including Trump "who tried to bend them" for four years.[10]

At the P.A. headquarters in Ramallah, the inauguration of Biden raised hopes that the new President would reverse some of his predecessor's policies regarding the PA. They hoped, for example, that Biden would order the reopening of the PLO office in Washington and the American Consulate in East Jerusalem, which were shut down during Trump's tenure.[11] .[12] Most importantly, Mahmud Abbas hoped that the new administration will regenerate the process to promote the two-state solution.[13]

Some early signs of optimism did appear in January 2020, including the speech of U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Richard Mills, where he expressed the new administration's preservation of relations with the Palestinian Authority.[14] P.A. senior official, Jibril Rajub, went as far as congratulating the Americans for reopening the PLO office in Washington.[15] In February, the P.A. sent an official letter to the new administration stressing its commitment to the two-state solution. The letter also stated that all the Palestinian factions are supporting this solution and the PLO as their sole representative[16] (PIJ soon refuted this claim, as did other opposition parties such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine).[17]

However, Abbas's optimism soon evaporated. Biden's foreign policy placed low priority on the Middle East. His first phone call to Abbas was in May and actually meant to curb Hamas' aggression against Israel, and not for the sake of broad cooperation with his government.[18] The PLO office in Washington and the American East Jerusalem Consulate have not been reopened[19] and Biden refused to meet Abbas before his U.N. General Assembly speech in September.[20]

Biden's lukewarm attitude undoubtably disappointed Abbas, who is facing difficult challenges within the Palestinian arena. The most serious one is the political strengthening of Hamas in the West Bank following Operation Guardian of the Walls. As opposed to the common thinking, the conflict did not break out because of the Sheikh Jarrah dispute, which is still pending for the court decision, or the Israeli police raid in the Al-Aqsa Mosque (following rocks and Molotov cocktails throwing on Jewish prayers in the Wailing Wall). The conflict broke out because of Abbas's decision to cancel the general elections that were supposed to take place in May, in which many predicted the strengthening of Hamas, which responded with a clear intention to undermine both the P.A. and Israel. Following the conflict, popular support for Hamas temporarily grew (but returned lately to the same level of support before the operation, which is around 25% as opposed to 22% of the Fatah).[21]

This and other incidents in the West Bank have led the P.A. to arrest several of Hamas's armed cells, but at the same time to signal to Israel and the U.S. that Abbas is considering resuming the "national dialogue" with Hamas and the PIJ. While the chance that such reconciliation will reach fruition is – as always – very small, Abbas uses it, among other things, as leverage on the Biden administration in order to change its priorities and policy vis-a-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the shorter term, Abbas made it clear that he expects the administration to fulfill its promises to reopen the East Jerusalem consulate and the PLO offices in Washington. As Ramallah sees it, the ball is now in the Americans' court.

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Jordan and the Biden Administration: Back Where They Want to Be

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Jordan was arguably the U.S. Middle East ally happiest about Biden's election. The Trump Administration minimized Jordan's role in U.S. regional policy. It pursued "paradigm-breaking" policies, especially on Jerusalem, the Palestinian issue, and the settlements, that sidelined Jordan and ignored its interests. These culminated in February 2020's stillborn "peace plan," which included Israeli annexation of the Jordan River Valley, and in the Abraham Accords of September 2020, which Jordan accepted reluctantly.

Biden's arrival led to a return of the seventy-year centrality of Jordan to U.S. regional policy,[1] partly due to the administration's ambivalence towards Trump's preferred Arab interlocutors, Saudi Arabia and U.A.E. The President himself has a long-standing acquaintance with King ʿAbdullah II (and his father King Hussein). Jordanians also view the appointment of former U.S. Ambassador to Jordan, William Burns, to head the CIA as a positive development (especially in view of the organization's historic centrality in the bilateral relationship).[2]

A first test of the tie's renewed strength was the April 2021 crisis surrounding the arrests of two former royal advisors for sedition, and tension between the King and his half-brother, Prince Hamza. The regime saw a broader international context, with "outside forces" (reportedly Saudi Arabia and the Trump Administration) attempting to stir up tribal elements against the King.[3] President Biden stood firmly behind the King: On April 7, he called ʿAbdullah and expressed his total support for him; the White House readout of the call expressed strong U.S. support for Jordan and underscored the importance of the King's leadership to the United States and the region.[4]

The King was the first Arab leader to meet with Biden in Washington, in July 2021 (after being the first Middle East leader he called in November 2020). ʿAbdullah spoke then of having "lost a couple of years,"[5] while the White House stated before the visit that it would be an opportunity to "showcase Jordan's leadership role in promoting peace and stability in the region."[6]

On the security level, Jordan has returned to centrality in U.S. military contingency planning for the Middle East at a time when the U.S. is rationalizing its presence in the region and shifting its focus to the Indo-Pacific. In January 2021, the Jordanian government signed a domestically controversial agreement that allows the United States to station armed troops, aircraft, and vehicles in Jordan (there are some 3,000 U.S. troops in Jordan).[7] In July, the U.S. closed three logistic installations and a support mission based in Qatar and shifted them to Jordan. This was justified as enabling more flexible use of the equipment, including in scenarios involving Iran, and decreasing the forces' vulnerability to rocket attacks by Iranian-backed militias.[8]

Washington was apparently a key player in the three-way deal between U.A.E., Jordan, and Israel for an Emirati-financed solar energy project in southern Jordan. The deal will provide Jordanian solar generated electricity to Israel, and Israel, in turn, will provide 200 million cubic meters of desalinated seawater to Jordan. This deal, which has met with popular and parliamentary opposition in Jordan, would ameliorate Jordan's severe water shortage, defined by the U.S. Ambassador in Jordan as a "key interest of the U.S."[9] It was reportedly brokered by U.S. climate envoy John Kerry, who participated in the signing of the "declaration of principles" (which Jordanian officials have taken pains to stress is not yet a formal agreement).[10]

On the diplomatic level, the King seems to have received a fresh mandate from Biden to help de-escalate the region and reduce the influence of Iran and its allies, in an era of declining direct American engagement. The trilateral relationship between Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq, developing rapidly for the

past three years, dovetails neatly with new American priorities and strategies for the region. One of the geopolitical goals of this alignment is to restore the traditional axis of leadership in the Arab World, after it shifted in the past decade to traditionally more marginal players in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Jordan and Egypt also hope their ties with Iraq will help reduce its dependence on Iran; ʿAbdullah, during his visit to Washington, urged Biden to back al-Kadhimi's efforts to steer Iraq away from Tehran.

The close ties between Amman and Cairo led the two to increase involvement in Lebanon, and provide needed energy resources to Lebanon's disintegrating economy and society. Jordan announced in August that it will supply Lebanon with electricity through the Syrian grid. The petroleum and energy Ministers of Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon, meeting in Amman in September, agreed on shipment of Egyptian gas to Lebanon through Jordan and Syria, using the refurbished Arab Gas Pipeline. Apart from increasing the two states' own regional reach, and stabilizing Lebanon, these measures are also clearly aimed at reducing the influence of Hizballah and Iran (who were planning to provide fuel). The U.S. Administration sees the Egyptian-Jordanian effort in this wider context and is backing the two projects. It is reportedly willing to provide the two countries with a waiver from the Caesar Act of 2019, which sanctions those having economic ties with the Syrian regime.[11]

The American attitude regarding another major element of current Jordanian policy, the regional and international rehabilitation of the Asad regime, is less clear. American forbearance regarding energy cooperation between Jordan and Syria may not extend to Syria's reintegration into the Arab League and the wider regional and international community, or to the issue of cross-border trade, an extremely important issue for Jordan, a sixth of whose trade passed to or through Syria before 2011. One observer refers to an American "orange, if not a green, light."[12]

Jordan is also taking a lead in ensuring the Palestinian issue is on the international and American agenda, and especially in buttressing the Palestinian Authority under President Mahmoud Abbas ("Abu Mazen"). Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman al-Safady has praised what he termed "tremendous positive change in the U.S. position vis-a-vis [the Palestinian] issue," especially statements by Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken "reiterating commitment to a two-state solution, opposition to settlements, [and] urging respect for the historical status quo in Jerusalem and the holy sites."[13]

Alongside these positive developments, questions abound regarding the Biden Administration's attitude towards the internal situation in Jordan. There is much internal criticism of the regime's using steps to ostensibly handle the coronavirus crisis in order to stifle internal criticism and free expression, and expand the coercive national security state. Recently, there was fervent public and parliamentary debate regarding thirty constitutional amendments, drawn up by a royal commission, to "modernize" the political system. These proposed amendments promote party politics and parliamentary democracy – including elected governments – in the future, but also further strengthen royal control of appointments and of the national security apparatus. Some Jordanians draw hope from Biden's September speech to the U.N. supporting demonstrators "in every region," and regarding the need to support transparency, and fight corruption and inequality, and more generally from the progressive slant of the Democrats. They see Biden's term as a significant opportunity to promote change in Jordan. [14]However, it may be that after the abrupt American withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Biden Administration will look to prioritize the stability of Jordan, and other longtime U.S. allies, over its human rights and democratizing agenda.[15]

1 An interesting development is that the rapid improvement of relations in the wake of the U.S. elections is reflected in Jordanian public opinion: In *KAS Jordan's Foreign Relations Survey* carried out in September 2021, the percentage of Jordanians surveyed who considered the U.S. Jordan's closest ally rebounded to 28% from a low of 21.5% in 2019 (it was 40.8% in 2018), and as Jordan's greatest economic supporter jumped from 2019's 25% to 49%. In both these questions, it displaced Saudi Arabia.

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North Africa and the Biden Administration: Clinging to Previous Commitments, Facing New Challenges

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The emergence of a new American administration, particularly from a different political party, typically entails foreign policy modifications and a reexamination of the outgoing administration's diplomatic commitments. The Biden Administration's early foreign policy adjustments are even more pronounced, as the new president set out to reaffirm America's international position after his predecessor's retreat from active diplomatic engagement with many American allies. For the leading North African countries (Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia), the initial encounter with the Biden administration was heavily overshadowed by the impact of American policy decisions during the Trump era, as the future of those decisions remained unclear. As the year progressed, the Biden administration was forced to react to new regional developments and adopt policies that would address these new realities. All these developments were influenced by the nature of relations each country had with the United States, and by the broader regional context. This paper offers an overview of bilateral relations between Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and the U.S., highlighting the main issues affecting them over the past year, and an assessment of possible future directions.

Morocco

Morocco remains the most prominent U.S. ally in the Maghreb, with a long history of bilateral relations (dating back to the American revolution) that in recent years have further intensified. Morocco was a strong supporter of the U.S.-led "War on Terror", participated in the Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Initiative, and signed a free trade agreement with the U.S. in 2006. The most significant recent development in Moroccan-U.S. relations occurred in the twilight of the Trump administration, when the U.S. announced its recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the disputed Western Sahara region in December 2020. The American official policy towards the Western Sahara until then was to support the United Nations peacekeeping effort, and increasingly focused on granting autonomy to the region. This decision's impact spilled over to Morocco's initial engagement with the Biden administration.

It is hard to overstate this decision's impact on Morocco, and how much it emboldened the kingdom. For the first time since its forces took control over most of the region in 1975, a major world power openly declared that an independent Saharawi state (supported by neighboring Algeria and promoted by Saharawi residents) was not a realistic option for resolving the conflict, and that greater autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is the only feasible solution. This American approach, favoring autonomy and effectively moving towards Morocco's preferred solution, had been percolating beneath the surface since the Obama era, but no formal recognition had ever been given.[1] The American announcement left room for a negotiated solution but was clearly a departure from the existing international consensus concerning the Sahara. Coupled with the American recognition was a Moroccan agreement to renew diplomatic relations with Israel. The U.S. also advanced a large arms sale to Morocco and announced plans to establish a consulate in the Western Sahara, a further sign of its support for Morocco.[2]

Morocco was quick to offer its gratitude to outgoing President Trump, awarding him the "Order of Muhammad" in January.[3] But the main question that overshadowed Moroccan-American relations following Biden's inauguration was whether the new administration would uphold the former administration's decision. The entire issue was

evidently a vexing question for the Biden administration, as no other involved parties in the Sahara (such as the European Union) followed suit in recognizing Moroccan sovereignty.[4] The administration remained silent on the matter during its first months in office, with officials repeatedly stating that they were reviewing the policy. The administration faced considerable domestic pressure to rescind recognition: In February 2021 26 senators from both parties sent a letter to President Biden, asking him to reverse the decision.[5] Former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, who had also served between 1997-2004 as the U.N. special envoy for Western Sahara, was more vocal, criticizing the Sahara recognition as contrary to international law and diplomacy, an abandonment of American commitment to the principle of self-determination, and detrimental to U.S. relations with Algeria.[6] The linkage between the Sahara and renewing Morocco's relations with Israel was another complicating factor in this diplomatic affair, as Morocco reportedly delayed implementing its agreement with Israel until the American position on the Sahara was clarified.[7]

The Biden administration's position was clarified in April, when a news report quoted U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken that the U.S. would not reverse Trump's Western Sahara decision but would work with Morocco to appoint a new U.N. special envoy for the region and resume autonomy talks.[8] Regardless of how future negotiations over the Sahara may evolve, Morocco was clearly relieved by the Biden administration's decision not to reverse recognition. It removed any holds it had placed on advancing relations with Israel, and felt confident about its position with the Biden administration and overall relations with the U.S. In a November meeting with his Moroccan counterpart, Secretary Blinken praised Morocco's recent proposal on Western Sahara, offering fresh U.S. support to Morocco.[9]

It is unlikely that the U.S. will reverse its course on the region, but it may display greater reluctance to voice full-throated support for Morocco, considering opposition from its European allies. The Western Sahara issue will likely continue to overshadow ties, with the Biden administration already facing domestic pressure (when Congress blocked funding for expanding the U.S. consulate in Dakhla)[10] and having to navigate foreign opposition to its recognition of Moroccan sovereignty.

Algeria

Algeria's relations with the U.S. have historically been fraught and very different from the strong alliance between Washington and Morocco. Algeria's foreign policy embraced neutrality during the Cold War but effectively drifted closer to the Soviet bloc. The U.S. was also wary of Algeria in the 1990s, concerned about a possible Islamist take-over and domestic instability following the domestic strife between Islamists and the regime.[11] Nevertheless, Washington recognized Algeria's strategic importance and ability to rein in Islamist militant groups, and sought to establish a working relationship, particularly in the military sphere, with Algiers. The Algerian regime, for its part, was interested in bolstering its international legitimacy and obtaining military aid, and has been open to expanded engagement with the U.S., while actively pursuing ties with alternative powers like Russia and China.

The American recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara dealt a serious blow to Algeria's relations with the U.S. Algeria has long opposed Morocco's claim to the territory and supports the Saharawi independence movement. The entire Sahara question remains part of a more complex competition for regional hegemony between Algeria and Morocco, with Algeria opting to sever its diplomatic relations with Morocco last summer. Algeria's ruling regime in recent years has faced increasing domestic unrest, which has heightened the government's sensitivity to its international standing.

Aware of Algeria's anger over the American recognition of Moroccan sovereignty, the Trump administration took some damage-control steps during its last days in office. Then-Assistant Secretary of State David Schenker visited Algiers in early January to bolster relations. He discussed a range of issues with his Algerian interlocutors, which were described by foreign minister Boukadoum as a "chance to hold a complex and frank assessment of bilateral ties".[12] There was no indication that the

visit mollified Algeria's anger or had a significant impact on its ties with Washington.

Little diplomatic activity was recorded during the Biden administration's first months in office, when Algiers was clearly waiting to see the new administration's decision regarding the Sahara. As it became clear that Washington was not reversing its decision, Algeria's frustration over the Sahara became more pronounced, with the above-mentioned diplomatic relations break with Morocco. The Biden administration did devote attention to Algeria's strategic location, and dispatched the U.S. military commander for Africa, General Stephen Townsend, to meet Algerian president Tebboune in September. Townsend praised U.S. ties with Algeria and expressed hope that a strong bilateral relationship will continue to develop.[13] Beyond these statements of goodwill, however, there was little sign that Algeria was interested in a meaningful engagement with the new administration, or that the U.S. would abandon its support for Morocco and improve relations with Algeria. Future ties remain largely dependent on developments concerning the Western Sahara.

Tunisia

Tunisia's relations with the U.S. are largely detached from the issues affecting Washington's relations with Morocco and Algeria. Tunisia is not actively involved in the Western Sahara, and as a smaller North African country, plays a more modest role in regional affairs. Tunisia has traditionally maintained friendly ties with the U.S. (it is defined as a Major Non-NATO Ally), which appreciated Tunisia's moderate, pro-western positions. Since the revolution in 2011, which overthrew Zayn al-'Abidin Ben 'Ali's authoritarian regime and ushered in a democratic political order, the U.S. has sought to support Tunisia's transition and has refrained from applying any pressure on the government. Over the years, some Tunisian commentators argued that Washington could and should do more to help Tunisia, but overall relations remained cordial.

Tunisia's relations with the U.S. entered a new phase over the summer, following the country's president Kais Saied's decision to suspend parliament and assume greater control of the political system. This measure followed a long period of political turmoil between political parties, along with rising economic difficulties, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Saied's supporters welcomed the changes, while his opponents accused him of an unconstitutional coup intended to derail the democratic process. For the Biden administration, and Tunisia's other Western allies, the unfolding Tunisian political crisis was perplexing. Washington initial reaction was muted, with a vague statement "siding with Tunisia's democracy" that reflected a "wait and see" approach. Secretary Blinken later spoke with Saied and urged him "to adhere to the principles of democracy and human rights" and noted in an interview that he was concerned that Saied's measures ran "counter to the constitution". But Blinken and other administration officials refrained from openly criticizing Saied or threatening sanctions against him.[14] In the months that followed U.S. officials called for a "political dialogue" in Tunisia that would address the political crisis, but remained reluctant to pressure a country whose stability remains vital to American interests in the region, and a model for democratic reforms. Tunisia's uncertain political future is likely to affect the Biden administration's approach to the country over the coming months.

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The example was the lifting of sanctions on Iran by the Obama administrations in 2015, which weakened the Iranian Kurds ability to resist the central government's oppressive measures.

The Kurds and Biden: Ambiguous Relations

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The beginning of the Biden Administration raised hopes among the Kurds of Greater Kurdistan, spanning regions of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. This hope fed on deep frustration with the Trump Administration and more importantly, on Biden's positive stance on the Kurds prior to his coming to power. Yet, the Kurdish issue in each region has a different domestic context and different history of relations with the U.S., hence the need to differentiate between them and highlight the nuances characterizing them.

The Kurds of Iran have been outside the scope of America's strategic interests and its policy toward Iran. The U.S. never seriously engaged with them and if anything, the Kurds fear that the Biden administration will come to terms with Iran at their expense.[1] As for the Kurds of Turkey, historically speaking, all U.S. administrations have viewed them through the prism of their prioritized strategic relations with the Turkish state, hence the American aloofness from the Kurdish problem in that country and the designation of the Turkish Kurdish PKK as a terrorist organization. Still, what kindled some hope among the Kurdish Turkish political elite was the Biden Administration's emphasis on democracy and human rights in general, as well as its ongoing friction with Ankara. The administration's declaratory stance on human rights issues in Turkey has even caused it to come to be branded in Turkish circles an enemy of Turkey.[2] So far, however, Kurdish hopes that President Biden will pressure Ankara to improve its stance regarding the Kurds have been frustrated.

The Kurds of Syria have had a short and ambiguous history of relations with the U.S. It started in 2014 with American support to Kurdish fighters, the YPG and YPJ, in defeating ISIS in Kobane. This support, which has continued with ups and down until this writing, bore fruit, as Kurdish forces and their Arab allies managed to defeat ISIS and take control of large swaths of Northeast Syria, reportedly costing the lives of of more than 11,000 Kurdish men and women.[3] However, with the defeat of ISIS in 2017, the Trump administration suddenly changed course, twice giving Turkey a "green light" to attack Kurdish controlled areas.[4] The American "zig-zag" and the withdrawal of a large part of the 2,500 troops from the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) increased the Kurds' sense of abandonment and betrayal. Nor did the U.S. back the Kurdish bid for participating in the talks on the future of Syria. What exacerbates the Syrian Kurds' precarious situation is the ongoing attacks by Turkey, which regards the autonomous region as an existential threat and thus seeks to destroy it.[5] On this point there is convergence of interests between Turkey, the Syrian regime and ISIS, which encircle the autonomous region and pose severe challenge to its very existence. Culminating this all are Kurdish fears that their main backer, the U.S., will under Biden withdraw the remaining American forces from Syria, which will unleash a fatal blow to the nascent autonomy.[6]

To balance this picture, it is important to note that at the time of this writing, 900 American troops are still deployed in the autonomous region; that the Syrian Kurds have their own representative in Washington, which their brethren in Turkey and Iran do not; and that they are considered by the U.S. as an ally and partner. Also, for what it is worth, following the Afghan debacle Biden pledged to continue American support to the Kurds of Syria.[7] Notwithstanding this declaration, the Kurds remain in the fog, since there is nothing concrete to reassure them militarily, politically, and economically.

Of the four parts of Kurdistan, the relationship between the Kurds of Iraq and the U.S. is the most enduring and robust. The U.S. played a crucial role in the very establishment of the autonomous region in 1991 and in its survival and flourishing ever since. For its part, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has proved a strong and reli-

able ally on two important occasions: during the 2003 war in Iraq, and in that of 2014-2016 against ISIS. Accordingly, the Kurds expected that the U.S. would support them in their ordeal during the Baghdad and Shi`i militias' onslaught against the region, and the severe blockade by the surrounding countries, after the September 2017 referendum for Kurdish independence. However, the Trump administration turned a blind eye to these actions, which cost the autonomous region economically, strategically and politically. Then-president of the region Masoud Barzani expressed deep Kurdish frustration, saying that "the Americans failed to understand the main issues within Iraq and Kurds paid heavily for every mistake Washington made in their calculations about the nature of power in Iraq." In his opinion, this was evident when the U.S. opposed the Kurdish referendum in 2017, which proved it was "ready to jeopardize the future of a nation over the interest of one person, [Iraqi Prime Minister Haider] al-Abadi." [8]

Little wonder then, that the Iraqi Kurds and their leadership welcomed with high expectations the new Biden administration, considering him as the most pro-Kurdish American politician ever. In the past he displayed concern for their plight and as vice president, he visited Iraq 24 times and developed friendly ties with the Kurdish leadership. He also supported a federal structure for Iraq and, following the Kurdish referendum for independence in 2017, stated that the United States "could have done more for the Kurds." [9]

Yet one year on, the KRG is faced with serious challenges due to the new administration's strategic shifts and priorities: Biden's July 2021 declaration of his intent to withdraw American forces from Iraq by the end of 2021; the American withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021; the general disposition towards disengagement from the Middle East; and the attempts to reach a deal with Iran on its nuclear program. Such a deal might change the balance of power in the region; strengthen Baghdad's hands at the expense of Erbil; and weaken the importance of the Kurdish region as a buffer to expansionist Iran. These shifts sent shock waves in the Kurdish region which might leave it under the mercy of Baghdad and the neighboring countries.

Thus, the Kurds are caught in a vice of contradictory American policies and interests. On the one hand America, including the Biden administration, has been motivated by such constants as the unity of the state, stability of the Middle East, and the need to come to terms with the central government, even at the expense of the Kurds. On the other hand, it has developed certain dependence on the Kurds. America needs the KRG as "boots on the ground" against the ongoing terrorist activities of ISIS and the anti-American Shi'i militias; as a buffer against Iranian expansionism in Iraq; and as secure and welcoming base for Americans in Iraq. In Syria, America needs the Kurdish forces for containing ISIS and other anti-American forces, as well as a card against Syria, Russia and Iran. But on the other hand, it still considers Turkey as a strategic partner, hence the Kurdish fear that it will abandon them, as the previous administration had done.

Since the Kurds do not have a better alternative than the U.S., they seek to placate it. Thus, the KRG's leadership has toned down calls for independence, while the enclave in Syria is playing down linkages with Turkish Kurdish PKK. Both of them also highlight their pro-Western tendencies, their democratic policies and most importantly, their crucial strategic role in fighting ISIS and pro-Iranian proxies, thus contributing to the stability of the state. So, ironically enough, the best guarantee for America's continued backing of the Kurds is the ongoing existence of ISIS and Iranian proxies. It remains to be seen, however whether this need will change the administration's strategic approach toward the Kurds from mere proxies to long standing engagement with their cause.

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The Biden Administration and the October 2021 Sudan Military Coup

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Sudan can be viewed as an arena of great power rivalry, where the U.S. and its European allies are struggling with Russia and China for influence. For the Biden administration, recent developments in Sudan are directly linked to this struggle, and its response to the 25 October 2021 military coup in Sudan reflects this.

Two and a half years after a people's revolution brought a transitional government to power, the Sudanese army took control of the state apparatus and arrested civilian members of the transitional government, including Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. Protests and clashes escalated around the country. At the insistence of Russia and China, the U.N. Security Council press statement did not expressly condemn the military coup. The U.S. suspended 700 million USD in assistance to the Sudanese transitional government and, like its European allies, reiterated its support for Sudan's transition towards democracy and the right of its people to protest peacefully.

On November 20, 2021, Hamdok made an agreement with Chairman of the Transitional Sovereignty Council General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, which saw his re-instatement as Prime Minister. While Western states expressed careful optimism, pro-democracy Sudanese citizens were not appeased by what they saw as a "treason agreement" and a victory for the military.[1] On January 2, 2021, Hamdok resigned from his post, leaving the army in full control. Protests continued and organizers stated that there is "no negotiation, no bargaining, and no partnership with the army."[2] The weakening of the civilian component of the Sudanese government comes at the expense of the U.S. and its allies, while Russia and China stand the most to gain from it.

U.S.-Sudan Relations and the Lifting of Sanctions

Relations between Sudan and the United States had been on a positive trajectory until the October 2021 military coup. In 2018 the Obama Administration lifted economic sanctions which had been in place since the 1990s due to Sudan's support for international terrorism and the regime's role in the Darfur genocide. After the people's revolution of 2019, the Trump Administration supported the transitional government that emerged, lifted Sudan's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism in 2020, and facilitated a peace treaty between Sudan and Israel in 2021. There were high level administration visits to Sudan and several Sudanese Sovereign Council members were hosted in Washington.[3] While the U.S. has been the largest foreign aid provider to Sudan for years, the Israel-Sudan normalization agreement came with the promise of an additional 81 million dollars in humanitarian assistance.[4] Also, Sudan received a one billion dollar bridge loan to cover most of its debt to the World Bank.[5]

The U.S., Russia, China and the Sudanese Military

Since the formation of the transitional government, it seemed that General al-Burhan was interested in rapprochement with the West, while keeping his options open. Russia has been trying for more than a year to secure a lease for a naval base on the Red Sea, near Port Sudan; this would be Russia's first military base in Africa since the fall of the Soviet Union.[6] Even though the Sudanese military depends on Russian weapons and military hardware, al-Burhan put the Russian request on hold. China for its part also exports arms to the Sudanese military, and has important mining, transportation and energy contracts in the country.[7] At

the same time al-Burhan improved relations with Western states to open the Sudanese economy to Western investment.

From the American perspective, the 25 October 2021 military coup was more than a set-back; it was an insult. Jeffrey Feltman, the U.S. Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa, met with al-Burhan and Hamdok just hours before the coup. Feltman left the meeting having been reassured that Sudan's transitional government was moving towards democracy, only to find out when his flight landed that the opposite was true.[8]

The coup and the renewal of negotiations with Russia suggest that al-Burhan is attempting to play one great power off against the other. In doing so, al-Burhan signaled the U.S. not to exert too much pressure on the Sudanese military. On the other hand, he did re-instate Hamdok, in what appeared to be a concession to the U.S. and its Western allies. Al-Burhan can now conceivably use Sudan's renewed relations with the U.S. as a bargaining chip with which to negotiate a better deal with Russia. Such a deal might include monetary aid for Sudan's faltering economy and the option to end the port deal with Russia before the proposed 25-year lease is over.

Sudanese Opinions on the U.S. and its Role in the Recent Crisis

Sudanese perceptions of the political crisis also direct a spotlight on the role of great powers in Sudan. Those who are pro-democracy, yet skeptical of the success of the recent protests, view Biden as less active in the political field than Trump. They believe that Biden has limited influence with the Sudanese military.[9] Within this group, there is a concern that the Biden Administration is not doing enough to counter Russian influence on Sudan. They argue that the Sudanese army is dependent on Russia and that if Biden will not give an incentive to Sudan by engaging more with the Sudanese security sector, the U.S. will lose its leverage over the military-dominated government.[10]

Others, mainly those actively protesting the military coup, see Biden as less manipulative than his predecessor.[11] They argue that the U.S. does have significant leverage over Sudan and that the suspension of the 700 million was intended to push the military to strike a deal with the civilian leaders. Moreover, they point out subtle differences in the way in which the 20 November agreement was received by the different members of the Transatlantic alliance. European states embraced the agreement, whereas the U.S. welcomed the agreement with noticeable restraint. Sudanese observers of this persuasion have also been encouraged by the behavior of the American Embassy personnel towards the protesters. The current U.S. chargé d'affaires visited the families of protesters who were killed while exercising their rights to protest peacefully.[12]

Many of those that are not participating in the protests are preoccupied with supplying their basic needs in the impoverished country. Humanitarian organizations estimate that in 2022, nearly a third of Sudan's population will be in need of humanitarian assistance, which is the highest percentage in ten years.[13] This vulnerable segment of the population looks back at the Omar al-Bashir era with longing and favors a return to military rule in exchange for stability and an improvement in the economy.

With the economy ever worsening, protests continuing, and the military using more aggressive means to disperse protesters,[14] Sudan appears to be teetering on the brink. The U.S. and its allies are striving to keep Russia and China from exploiting Sudan's tilt back to authoritarianism. The question remains which course Sudan will take: Will the military succeed in forming a stable government with a semblance of democracy? Will the protesters usher in more democracy? Or is the country sliding towards anarchy?

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Israel and the Biden Administration, One Year Out

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The Biden administration, now a year in office, has managed a quiet but profound reset in Israeli policymakers' expectations and perceptions of the United States. No dramatic policy pivot announced the change, yet it is keenly felt. It guides Israel's response to the new Iran talks, among other sensitive policy arenas.

Some of the change can be explained by the strange, groundbreaking new government in Israel, and a Democratic administration's satisfaction with Benjamin Netanyahu's ouster from power after twelve long years. The new coalition is fragile, built of no fewer than eight political factions straddling nearly every political, ethnic and religious divide in Israeli society. The Biden administration seems keen not to push it over the edge into new elections that could bring Netanyahu back to power.

But that dynamic cannot fully explain the new attitude in Washington, if only because it was already discernible before the June 2021 swearing in of the new Israeli government, when Netanyahu still occupied the prime minister's chair. In the May fighting in Gaza, the Biden White House was careful not to publicly assail the Netanyahu government even as it quietly sought to end the fighting. Neither cheerleader nor antagonist, America under Biden has seemed to seek, above all, a shrinking of its relationship with Israel to a lesser role in its broader policymaking.

For many in Israeli policymaking circles, it's a welcome change.

The Trump years delivered gains long desired by Israeli governments, from the Golan to Jerusalem to intensive U.S. support for burgeoning Israeli-Arab ties. Why would its replacement with the cooler Biden administration be perceived by Israeli policymakers as a good thing?

Low Expectations

When Joe Biden stepped into the Oval Office as president in January 2020, Israeli leaders in Jerusalem were openly worried about the new administration. Parts of the Israeli right lamented the "lost opportunity" of a second Trump term, especially the loss of any near-term hopes for a West Bank annexation.

On the Israeli left, while there was some satisfaction with Trump's fall, that didn't translate into optimism over Biden. Many still recall the heady days of Barack Obama's startling rise to power and his commitment of vast political capital to Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking — and the swift and ignominious failure of those efforts. Why would Biden do any better?

Yet there was a deeper source of pessimism that crossed political lines. One heard it whenever officials gathered or pundits opined on American policy on the television news broadcasts: A quiet but growing loss of faith in American stewardship of global affairs.

To a small state in the Middle East, the last quarter-century of U.S. foreign policy feels like a roller-coaster ride. Each change in administration brought a sharp foreign-policy pivot seemingly driven more by America's internal divides and hyper-partisanship than by considered reexaminations of American foreign policy interests.

Where the Bush administration invaded Iraq, aspired to democratize the Arab world and boasted about a "no daylight" policy with Israel, Barack Obama took office in January 2009 pointedly committed to resetting the U.S. relationship with the Muslim world and putting massive pressure on Israel to enter a Washington-backed peace initiative. Obama staffers explicitly couched their new posture as an antithesis to the previous administra-

tion. Obama himself announced this new direction at his grand 2009 speech in Cairo, whose very title — "A New Beginning" — conveyed the break with the old. Trump, too, declared himself the antithesis to his predecessor and seemed to construct his foreign policy on that basis. He withdrew from the Paris climate agreement and Iran nuclear deal and imposed travel restrictions from several Muslim nations. On the Israeli-Palestinian issue, he took unprecedented steps to align U.S. policy with that of the Netanyahu government, moved the U.S. embassy to Israel, recognized Israeli claims to the Golan Heights and flipped the pressure to the Palestinian side, drastically cutting U.S. aid to the Palestinian Authority.

To Israelis, Palestinians and many others affected by U.S. foreign policy, America was fast becoming an unpredictable ally, its foreign policy cannibalized by its domestic culture wars. What good are promises of support against Iran by one president if the next doesn't see themselves as bound by their predecessor's commitments?

Netanyahu seemed for years to be abandoning the traditional Israeli bipartisan diplomatic strategy in Washington in favor of a political bear-hug with Republicans, and many Israeli policymakers nervously braced for the blowback. Would the Republicans, including sometimes unpredictable populists like Trump, stand by Israel's side? Would Democrats cast Israel aside if it became too closely identified with their political enemies?

Back to Basics

In some ways, the Biden administration continued the tradition of repudiating his predecessor. His administration quickly rejoined the Paris climate accords, restored Trump-suspended protections for wild lands, and so on.

But in geopolitical matters, Biden, a grizzled veteran of four decades of foreign-policy debates, seemed to have a different goal in mind. Instead of simply disavowing a despised predecessor, as his own recent predecessors had done, he seems to want to shake America's foreign policy free from the culture war, to stabilize it, and as one Israeli official put to this writer recently, re-professionalize it.

He doubled down on the few policies consistently upheld by both Obama and Trump. Both sought to draw down U.S. forces in the Middle East and the Muslim world; Biden continued in that vein, ordering the long-sought but politically painful withdrawal from Afghanistan.

On the Israeli-Palestinian front, Biden prioritized stability. He moved quickly to end Trump's punishment of the Palestinians and restore aid. But he also signaled to the Israelis that none of Trump's many gifts would be disavowed simply because they had come from Trump. The administration affirmed its support for the Abraham Accords, acknowledged Jerusalem as Israel's capital and promised to leave the embassy there, and, through Secretary of State Antony Blinken, accepted Israel's presence on the Golan Heights "as a practical matter" driven by genuine security needs.[1]

The Golan comment, made by Blinken in February, was especially significant, because it wasn't forced on Biden by outside political or legal pressures. One could argue the embassy recognition was a concession to political and legal realities in Washington (it would have needed an act of Congress to return the U.S. embassy to Tel Aviv). The Golan acquiescence was not.

To be sure, there arose during Biden's first year in office the usual run of disagreements over settlement construction and the American desire to open a formal consulate to the Palestinians in Jerusalem, but here, too, the overriding priority for Washington seemed to be to maintain quiet. The U.S. chastised Israel over settlement building, garnering some small concessions from the Bennett government. It applied some pressure on Israel to agree to a consulate to the Palestinians, but seemed to indefinitely shelve the idea after Israel's foreign minister Yair Lapid, in an apparent concession to the political realities of the new coalition, expressed opposition.

On Iran, the Biden administration has managed to avoid head-on collision with Israel even as Israeli defense officials made a show of launching prepa-

rations for military operations against Tehran. Instead of repudiating Israel's hawkish posture, as Obama officials once did, the Biden White House drew Israel closer, holding high-level visits in Jerusalem and Washington and making a show of close coordination. Eschewing both Trump's nigh-categorical embrace of Israel and Obama's public excoriation, Biden seemed content to calmly let Israel play the bad cop in the larger drama.

That stability-conscious middle path is fast becoming Biden's foreign-policy identity: He canceled the Trump administration's snapback sanctions in September – which were in any case ignored by much of the rest of the world – but has imposed other sanctions against organizations and individuals related to the IRGC and Iranian oil exports over the course of the year.

It's too early to forecast how Israel will react to a potential new U.S.-Iran deal and attendant rapprochement, but the sense in Jerusalem that the U.S. and Israel are no longer either in lockstep or at loggerheads may have contributed to the sudden outpouring in recent months of former Israeli officials publicly criticizing Netanyahu's aggressive posture toward the Obama administration and the 2015 nuclear agreement.

A Fickle Embrace

Some Israeli officials still worry that a Republican win in the midterms could seal off the possibility of a major domestic policy win for the administration and shift Biden's attention overseas once again in search of a legacy achievement. But in the meantime, Israeli officials are quietly grateful for Biden's steady hand.

On December 10, as 2021 drew to a close, Donald Trump helped to clarify the point in his sudden, blistering repudiation of Netanyahu. In interviews with an Israeli journalist, Trump cursed Netanyahu for, as he put it, disloyally acknowledging Biden's election win back in February. He went on to declare that a Netanyahu-led Israel "did not want to make peace" and "never did." It was a startling volte-face that showcased a more basic danger for Israel in the American culture war's takeover of its foreign policy: a partisan embrace driven by domestic politics turns sour quickly when one runs afoul of fickle politics.

A year into the Biden era, a strange calm has descended over the Israeli policymaking elite. In his bid to extricate U.S. foreign policy from the ravages of domestic politicking, Biden's cautious and less partisan approach has protected Israelis and Palestinians alike from the frenetic twists and turns of America's increasingly dysfunctional politics.

1 Jacob Magid, "Blinken supports Israel holding Golan, but backs off recognizing sovereignty", *Times of Israel*, February 9, 2021.

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