

FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGES FACING THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

MIDDLE EAST

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



President Biden enters office with a Middle East that looks substantially different from when he departed as Vice President in 2016.

The Obama administration's nuclear deal with Iran was revoked by President Trump and is now in limbo. Israel has struck normalization deals with the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. Meanwhile, President Biden will have to confront the same problems that vexed President Trump, including the question of what to do about U.S. troop levels in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Biden administration has already made two significant departures from the Trump administration by signing an executive order to end the travel ban on Muslim-majority countries and ending support of the war in Yemen.

In The New Center's second installment exploring the foreign policy challenges that could confront President Biden early in his administration, we take a look at the current landscape of the Middle East.

URGENT PRIORITY

IRAN

During his confirmation hearing on January 19, 2021, Secretary of State <u>Antony Blinken</u> stated that reentering the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), otherwise known as the Iran nuclear deal, would be a central objective for President Biden's administration to "tighten and lengthen Iran's nuclear constraints." The JCPOA was negotiated between Iran, the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council— China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States—plus Germany), and the European Union in 2015. The JCPOA stipulated that Iran would take measures to deescalate its nuclear program, and upon verification of its commitments to do so, Iran would be provided relief from nuclear-related sanctions. On May 8, 2018, the Trump administration <u>pulled the United States out</u> of the JCPOA, citing Iran's continued development of ballistic missiles, funding for militant groups in the region, as well as what the Trump administration said were failures to live up to its core commitments in the original nuclear deal. Since the U.S. withdrawal, the <u>remaining parties</u> to the JCPOA have continued to preserve the deal by providing Iran assistance in exchange for the continued monitoring of their nuclear program, but the agreement risks falling apart without a U.S. return.

Back on the Rise Iran's enriched-uranium stockpile has returned to growth



Iran Nuclear Enrichment. Source: <u>Bloomberg</u>

In May 2019, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the organization responsible for certifying Iran's nuclear-related commitments, found that Iran <u>had continued to abide</u> by the main terms of the JCPOA. A month later, Iran announced that it would suspend implementation of parts of the JCPOA for not being protected from U.S. sanctions, which resulted in Iran <u>increasing uranium enrichment</u> beyond the agreed 3.67% purity limit. On January 3, 2020, the U.S. carried out a drone strike that targeted and <u>killed Qasem Soleimani</u>, an Iranian major general leading the Quds Force, which the administration had designated as a terrorist organization. Since then, Iran has stated it intends to start <u>enriching uranium at 20%</u> at its Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant. This would be the most significant breach of the JCPOA, but it is still far short of the 90% necessary for a nuclear bomb. In December 2020, following President Biden's electoral victory, Iranian President <u>Hassan Rouhani</u> stated that Iran "would return to compliance with the nuclear deal within an hour of the U.S. doing so." Although the Biden administration has expressed an openness to rejoining the deal, the President recently said he would not lift economic sanctions against Iran <u>until it complies</u> with the original terms of the JCPOA.

Iran has an <u>upcoming presidential election</u> on June 18, 2021, in which current Iranian president Hassan Rouhani will likely be replaced by a more hardline conservative candidate, further complicating matters for the Biden administration.

AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ

According to defense officials, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin is expected to review U.S. <u>troop levels</u> in Iraq and Afghanistan following President Trump's withdrawal of troops in his last days in office. Five days before President Biden took office, troop levels in Afghanistan were reduced from 4,000 to 2,500, and in Iraq, they were reduced from 3,000 to 2,500. Both President Trump and President Biden have advocated for ending "forever wars" with a focus on bringing our longstanding military engagement in both countries to a close. However, both Iraq and Afghanistan face a growing threat of violence from the Islamic State and the Taliban, respectively.

On January 21, 2021, the Islamic State claimed responsibility for a <u>double suicide bombing</u> in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad, which killed 32 people and wounded more than 100. This was the biggest suicide attack in Baghdad in over 3 years. While the Islamic State faced military defeat in 2017 and no longer controls vast territory in eastern Iraq, the organization still represents a threat, with sleeper cells carrying out low-level insurgencies in some areas. A <u>U.N. report</u> from August 2020 estimated that more than 10,000 Islamic State soldiers were still active in Iraq and Syria.

Under President Trump, the U.S. worked towards fully removing troops as well as brokering a peace agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Signed in February 2020, the United States agreed to commit to a phased, conditions-based withdrawal of all U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan within 14 months of signing the accord. In return, the Taliban agreed to prevent any group from using Afghan territory to threaten the U.S. or its allies and to sever any ties with Al-Qaeda. The February agreement also laid out the process through which to start <u>peace talks</u> between the Taliban and the Afghan government, which after repeated delays led to both sides agreeing on a set of rules and procedures in December 2020. However, while the U.S. has held up its end of the agreement by reducing troop levels, the Taliban has intensified attacks against Afghan forces and has not yet cut ties with Al-Qaeda. In November 2020 alone, the Taliban <u>killed</u> <u>244</u> pro-government forces and 200 civilians. President Biden's national security advisor J<u>ake Sullivan</u> stated that the administration is "taking a hard look at the extent to which the Taliban are in fact complying" with provisions of the February agreement. President Biden may face the difficult decision to delay the scheduled full troop withdrawal by May 2021, which could cause a further escalation of violence.

Taliban Control In Afghanistan

The Taliban has been battling the Afghan government for control of the country for nearly two decades.



Note. The number of districts in Aighanistan has varied in recent decades an

Taliban Control in Afghanistan. Source: <u>RadioFreeEurope</u>

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WATCH LIST

SAUDI ARABIA

On the campaign trail, President Biden labeled Saudi Arabia as a <u>"pariah"</u> and vowed to reassess U.S. relations with the country. Echoing his campaign pledge, President Biden has already set about reversing some of President Trump's policies in the region. This includes reversing the designation of Houthi rebels—which Saudi forces are fighting in Yemen—as a terrorist organization, as well as imposing a <u>temporary freeze on arms sales</u> in Saudi Arabia.





BY NC SA Source: Al Jazeera, Reuters, World Energy Atlas, Critical Threats | Updated: March 24, 2019

Yemen: Who Controls What. Source: <u>Al Jazeera</u>

The Yemeni Civil War broke out in late 2014 and led to the Houthis, an Islamic minority group which has organized as an armed political movement, overthrowing the Yemeni government. Former Yemeni president Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi was forced to flee to Saudi Arabia, where he has since stayed in exile. In response, Saudi Arabia has engaged in an ongoing military operation that has included airstrikes and widespread bombing of the Houthi rebels in an effort to restore the former Yemeni government. The conflict was widely seen as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia, which backed the former Yemeni government, and Iran, which supports the Houthi rebels. According to the <u>Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project</u> (ACLED), more than 112,000 people have died as a direct result of the violence, including 12,600 civilians killed in targeted attacks. The conflict has caused a disastrous humanitarian crisis, with over 80% of the population reliant on <u>humanitarian assistance</u> and many facing famine.

The U.S. has provided intelligence and logistics support in the Saudi-led campaign, which led to both houses of Congress passing a resolution in 2019 to end U.S. support to the Saudi Arabian war effort. However, then-President Trump vetoed the <u>resolution</u>, which the Senate failed to override. With President Biden in office and already temporarily halting the previously approved arms sales to Saudi Arabia, there appears to be a new paradigm in U.S.-Saudi relations. In President Biden's remarks at the <u>State Department</u> on February 4, 2021, he described the war in Yemen as a "humanitarian and strategic catastrophe" and vowed to end U.S. support of "offensive operations" in the conflict. Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines also intends to declassify the CIA report on the killing of Saudi dissident and journalist Jamal Khashoggi, which the <u>U.N.</u> previously reported as having been ordered at the highest reaches of the Saudi government.



SIMMERING CONFLICTS THE LEVANT (SYRIA, LEBANON, JORDAN)

The economies of Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan are all in dire straits, facing enormous challenges that could spark a future crisis. President Bashar al-Assad, the dictator of Syria responsible for the violent crackdown against protestors that led to the Syrian Civil War, has consolidated power over the country after reclaiming Syrian land from the Islamic State. After nine years of war and decades of corruption, nearly 83% of Syrians live below the <u>poverty line</u>. Much of Syria's city quarters and vital infrastructure has been destroyed in the years of conflict.

To punish the Assad regime for war crimes against the Syrian population, the U.S. Congress passed <u>the Caesar</u> <u>Civilian Protection Act</u> on December 17, 2019. Named after the alias of the Syrian military photographer who smuggled thousands of photos documenting Assad's perpetration of torture and extrajudicial killings, the Caesar Act imposes sanctions on persons and entities that knowingly provide support to or transact with the Syrian government. Unfortunately, the Assad regime has managed to insulate itself from the worst of these sanctions, and independent analysis suggests the civilian population is <u>bearing the brunt of the impact</u>.



Next door, Lebanon has been plagued by the government's longstanding political and economic failures. On August 4, 2020, these culminated in a <u>devastating explosion</u> of unsecured ammonium nitrate stored in a port warehouse in Beirut, which killed 204 people, injured 7,500, and caused \$15 billion in property damage that left an estimated 300,000 people homeless. In November 2020, the <u>World Bank</u> stated that Lebanon's economy faces "an arduous and prolonged depression," with real GDP projected to plunge 20% as a result of politicians' refusal to implement reforms to bring about recovery. With the Lebanese pound dropping 80% in value and Lebanese residents facing triple-digit inflation, the economic and financial crisis in Lebanon is the worst in its modern history and is expected to drag more than half the population into poverty. Although less severe, Lebanon's neighbor Jordan is suffering from an unemployment rate of 23.9% as of the third quarter of 2020, and a <u>state</u> <u>budget</u> that has been described as "the most difficult in the kingdom's history" by members of the Jordanian parliament. Regional instability and COVID-19 have led to a decline in tourist activity and <u>foreign aid</u>, which Jordan deeply relies on in its economy.

ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

The 2020 U.S.-brokered peace agreements between Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain, known as the <u>Abraham Accords</u>, have completely shifted the diplomatic landscape of the Middle East. The North African countries of <u>Morocco</u> and <u>Sudan</u> have subsequently normalized their relations with Israel, with other Arab states like <u>Oman</u> possibly following suit. The Abraham Accords are the first public normalization of relations between an Arab country and Israel since the Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty was signed in 1994. While the negotiation of these peace agreements is considered President Trump's signature foreign policy accomplishment, and Biden's National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan has <u>described</u> the Abraham Accords as "positive" for security in the Middle East, U.S.-Israeli relations could become more complicated under President Biden.

President Biden has already <u>restored diplomatic relations</u> with the Palestinian government after President Trump effectively severed ties over two years ago. This includes resuming American contributions to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) that provides aid to the Palestinians. Richard Mills, acting U.S. Ambassador to the U.N., <u>stated</u> that while the Biden administration welcomes the recent normalization agreements, "Arab-Israeli normalization is not a substitute for Israeli-Palestinian peace." The administration has said it remains committed to the long-sought but never-achieved goal of securing a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine. However, former Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. <u>Dan Shapiro</u> recently said, "the Middle East generally, and probably the Israeli-Palestinian issue, more specifically, are not going to be the top priorities for this Biden administration."

After failing to pass a budget in its coalition government, Israel faces a <u>legislative election</u> on March 23, 2021. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will attempt to hold onto his plurality in the Knesset, the Israeli legislature, and can expect to face another challenge to his continued leadership when his <u>corruption trial</u> continues in February 2021. Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority has announced it will hold <u>an election</u> for the first time in 15 years, with a parliamentary election scheduled for May and a presidential one in July.

