

21 January 2021

## The Biden Administration in the Middle East



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Every US president since Harry Truman has been bedeviled by the Middle East. That is sure to continue under President Joe Biden: circumstances both at home and abroad guarantee it, as do decisions taken by the Trump administration, which, at least partly by design, have already limited Biden's options.

Most consequential are words and deeds by the Trump administration, notably Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, to exert "maximum pressure" on Iran. This is ostensibly designed to try getting Iran to stop doing things the US finds objectionable – notably Iran's nuclear developments, ballistic missile program, and support for groups hostile to Israel or contending with Saudi forces in Yemen. But all that these efforts have achieved so far is to crush the Iranian people and bolster the clerical regime's claims at home of Iran's being victimized.

Unusually, President-elect Biden has already laid out his proposed approach to Iran, not just in general terms – such as classic bromides like "secure US interests" and "reduce tensions" – but in considerable detail, far beyond anything useful politically for the recent presidential campaign. In a CNN commentary last September (and repeated recently in an interview with the *New York Times*), Biden said he would return the United States to the 2015 multinational agreement designed to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), from which Trump withdrew two years ago. Further, Biden said he wanted to negotiate with Iran over some of its other activities, including what Pompeo calls its "malign behavior" in the region.

Significantly, however, Biden has imposed conditions on US return to the JCPOA and removal of any of the US-imposed sanctions: that is, "if" Iran "returns to strict compliance with the nuclear deal," especially its ramping-up of uranium enrichment. That could be just a negotiating tactic or designed to show that the Biden administration will not be giving Iran something for nothing. But if it really does mean that Iran must first unwind all the nuclear activities it has taken since the US quit the JCPOA, it is a non-starter, however desirable the United States and the European signatories to the JCPOA find them. Indeed, after the rhetorical flourishes are stripped away, the Biden approach is very similar to that which Pompeo advanced in a 12-point plan for dealing with Iran, and which more or less calls for Iranian surrender before talks start. This may be ideal from the US perspective, but it is no basis for kickstarting productive negotiations. This would be true

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with the friendliest allies (note the months-long Brexit impasse between the United Kingdom and the European Union), to say nothing of countries hostile to one another.

Missing in all this is something that should have been, as lawyers say – the “predicate:” what this is all about. It should be about long-term security in the region and efforts to work towards as much “stability” as can be hoped to achieve with so many countries in cultural and political difficulty if not also open conflict.

The United States and its partners have several basic interests in the region as a whole. One is to secure the free flow of hydrocarbons from the Persian Gulf. That’s in everyone’s interest, except terrorists like the Islamic State, which is powerless to achieve that goal. Next is to prevent Iran’s attacking any neighbor with any hope of success other than to cause limited disruption and, an Israeli concern, support for groups like Hezbollah. And then the biggest requirement: to keep nuclear weapons out of Iranian hands. But the Trump administration has done everything it can to cripple the JCPOA, while at the same time to see the Iranian government overthrown. Washington denies it seeks the latter goal but pursues it anyway.

Missing is any serious US strategic analysis of the region as a whole or any action to try creating regional security arrangements in which all the countries would have a stake – a necessary requirement. Iran is not a potent military power like the Soviet Union, to be confronted and contained at all costs. Without a nuclear weapon, Iran’s military capabilities are puny compared to virtually all of its Arab neighbors, which are awash with high-tech military equipment sold by the United States, Britain, France, and others. Can Iran cause mischief? Yes, but to counter it, the oversupply of weaponry to its neighbors is irrelevant.

The United States is rarely adept at fashioning grand strategy, other than cobbling together individual actions and labeling them as such. Indeed, the last time a US grand strategy preceded tactics in the Middle East was the 1980 Carter Doctrine, which was designed to deter the Soviet Union’s further inroads in the region after it invaded Afghanistan. The doctrine worked and was the basis for US regional policy until the USSR collapsed eleven years later.

There have been limited efforts to devise some regional arrangements, notably the Gulf Cooperation Council, which was formed in 1981, but it is of little account. Even with the recent “kiss and make-up” that lifts Saudi-led sanctions against Qatar, a fellow GCC member and host to the largest US military base in the region, any serious GCC cooperation on common security remains unlikely including against Iran, with which some GCC members retain friendly relations.

Any serious effort must include US leadership (neither the UN or the EU could substitute.) Further, for any regional security arrangement to have a chance of producing longer-range stability, every regional state must have a seat at the table. That includes Iran, which means ending its almost-automatic pariah status. Within the region, that status is about far more than just the behavior of the current regime. Security arrangements must also include the search for means to tamp-down or at least moderate long-standing Iranian-Saudi rivalry in the Persian Gulf, competition from various regional states, including Israel, and the millennium-and-a-half Shia-Sunni split.

A US-led effort to supersede today’s tactical steps with a genuine grand strategy would also need to include all the interested outside powers. Whether the US likes it or not, they include not just Turkey (currently a spoiler more than a stabilizer). It also means Afghanistan, which must be

accounted for as part of regional security, all the more so since last February's agreement between the United States and the Taliban means almost certainly that the latter, more likely sooner than later, will resume dominating Afghanistan.

More consequential outsiders with growing interests and engagement are Russia and China, with India in the not-too-distant future. The US would welcome an active role for the European Union but work on US-EU cooperation in the region has not even begun.

One step could be a major conference of insiders and outsiders. But even if it could be convened, there would be little hope of a grand bargain, at least in current circumstances. Unlike, say, the 1815 Congress of Vienna, there is too much churning to permit a lasting agreement. But a process could be started, beginning with an analogue for the Persian Gulf of the 1972 US-Soviet Incidents at Sea Treaty, agreed in the midst of the Cold War. Next could be what diplomats call an ongoing "contact group," along with consideration of basic principles, at least as goals. These would include the integrity of states, opposition to terrorism, recognition that nothing is to be achieved by continued inter-state conflicts (this has already been proved, though not all parties have recognized it), as much non-nuclearization as possible (Pakistan and Israel are both "grandfathered"), plus the idea – over time -- of fostering mutual responsibility for one another's security, starting with recognition that "making matters worse" has already been shown to be a dead-end for everyone (except terrorists.)

At the very least, especially with the arrival of a US administration promising greater competence in foreign affairs, the US needs to set goals like those above, as a framework for the United States' interests and policies. It could then begin working on both regional insiders and outsiders, with early recognition that mutual understandings of metes and bounds are more likely to profit each country's security interests (if not its political ambitions) than at present. At least the United States would then have a set of long-range strategic guidelines for the region, not the current mishmash of short-term tactics that, without a major leap in US strategic thinking, will continue in the Biden administration.

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