

US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 95 (November 2020)

Amb. (Ret.) Barukh Binah*

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During this "changing of the guards" period in Washington, one must examine the intentions of the incoming administration while keeping in mind that the outgoing one still holds power and is fully authorized to set US policy until January 20, 2021. This issue will therefore focus on both administrations – that of Donald Trump, still clinging to the presidency, and that of Joe Biden, aiming for an orderly transition.

In the wake of the Abraham Accords - The State Department [notified Congress](#) of a 35 billion USD arms deal with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that included as many as 50 F-35 fighter jets. The Emirates' Embassy in Washington [portrayed](#) the deal as advancing a more stable and secure Middle East. However, there were [some objections](#) to the deal in Congress. Pompeo expressed hope of additional states normalizing ties with Israel before Trump leaves office.

Iran – Iran fears a reckless US operation given Trump's mercurial nature, but has displayed equanimity and demanded US policy changes as well as financial compensations. It insisted that its ballistic missile program is non-negotiable given its deterrent capacity against Iran's enemies and the broad front opened by Israel. Iran also made clear it would continue its uranium enrichment. Khamenei tweets that the US elections "are merely a show" and Rouhani insisted that the issue was not who is elected but rather what policies his administration adopts. Iran wants the US to adhere to international law and respect Iran rather than punish it with sanctions, pointing out that the Americans were the ones who abandoned the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, not the Iranians, and therefore the US is responsible for correcting the situation. Iran says Biden's rise does not promise an end to sanctions, but opens the way for the US to get closer to the Iranian viewpoint; should the U.S. take this route there will be a new situation.

The Trump Administration, on the other hand, maintains its "maximum pressure" policy on Iran, sending a B-52 to the region (without expressly designating Iran as the reason) and imposing sanctions (November 10) on six companies and four individuals alleged to have helped Iran procure sensitive goods, including US-made electronic components. Treasury Secretary Mnuchin accused Iran of using a global network of companies to bolster its military capabilities. The US also continued to confront Iran's cyber activity, with the Trump Administration shutting down sites used by the Revolutionary Guards to support terror groups, including Hezbollah, Hamas and the Taliban. The US delegation to the IAEA reported that Iran continues uranium enrichment in Fordow, that it holds undeclared amounts of uranium and must not be believed. The US Treasury imposed sanctions on the

* Amb. (Ret.) Barukh Binah is a Policy Fellow at the Mitvim Institute. He had served, inter alia, as the Deputy Director-General of Israel's Foreign Ministry, in charge of North America, as Ambassador to the Kingdom of Denmark, Consul General in Chicago and as Deputy Head of Mission in Washington, DC.

Islamic Revolution Mostazafan Foundation, alleging that it is used by the regime to fund allies and persecute enemies. Al-Qaida's second-in-command was assassinated in Iran, allegedly at the behest of the US, by Israeli agents.

The incoming administration indicated that it does not make light of Iran's ambitions, but insisted that abandoning the nuclear agreement was a bad policy move that caused a rift with US allies ([Jake Sullivan told CNN](#) that the allies view Iran and the US these days in almost the same light). German Foreign Minister Maas said he believes Biden's victory presages a US return to the nuclear agreement as long as Iran stops violating its commitments. Biden [seeks to return to the agreement but faces challenges](#) both because of the continued sanctions and [Trump's examination of military options](#). Trump reportedly abandoned the idea only due to objections by senior national security advisers, Vice President Pence and Defense Secretary Esper, whose position against military action likely triggered his firing. The IAEA director also expressed concern over a military operation that would undermine the international inspection regime and could harm the inspectors themselves.

According to the Trump Administration's point person on Iran, Abrams, Biden will obviously seek to re-examine the 2015 nuclear agreement, improve it and adapt it to conditions in 2021. Abrams, a veteran expert on the region, noted that this is a bi-partisan position. The Saudis, too, believe the agreement has failed and in any case, the Saudi Foreign Minister declared that his country would have to take part in negotiations on a new agreement to amend the flaws of the first one. Israel's Ambassador to the US Dermer declared, most undiplomatically, that Biden would be making a mistake by reverting to the deal with Iran.

The Palestinians - Mahmoud Abbas congratulated Biden and Harris and said he looks forward to working with them, strengthening ties with the US and achieving freedom, independence, justice and respect while advancing stability and peace. Along with the official congratulations, Prime Minister Shtayyeh expressed hope that the new administration would prioritize the Palestinian issue and operate in accordance with international law and the two-state solution, and would mend relations with the Palestinians. Top Palestinian official Dahlan, who may replace Abbas at the leadership, called Biden's victory a "positive development" in overcoming the negative repercussions of the Trump-Netanyahu alliance and in paving the way for a two-state solution as promised by Biden and as Harris stated following the elections. Harris has also reiterated her opposition to settlement expansion and noted that the new administration would restore aid to the Palestinians and re-open the US consulate in East Jerusalem as well as the PLO office in Washington.

Protests were held in Ramallah against Secretary Pompeo's visit to the settlement of Psagot and its winery. The Palestinian Authority condemned the visit and the Trump Administration's policy shift labeling settlement produce as "made in Israel". Hamas expressed satisfaction with Trump's defeat and hope that Biden would right his wrongs, walk back Trump's "deal of the century" and his recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital as well as the US Embassy's move to the city. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad is not counting on such changed given its bitter experience with previous US administrations.

Lebanon - President Aoun expressed hope that relations with the US would stabilize under Biden in order to serve both sides. Prime Minister Hariri expressed certainty that the historic ties between the two states would be maintained. Parliament Speaker Berri congratulated

Biden and Harris and expressed hope that their administration would strengthen US friendship and cooperation with Lebanon. Negotiations with Israel cover the maritime border continued with its guidelines dictated by the Hezbollah, which is seeking Lebanese government cover vis-à-vis the Trump Administration as an alibi should things go wrong. Each side was reported to be entrenched its position, and senior UN officials predicted talks would resume in earnest only once Biden takes office.

The Trump Administration imposed sanctions on former Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, President Aoun's son-in-law, citing accusations of corruption against him and his Hezbollah partners. The US move was perceived as a warning to Aoun and Hariri against forming a coalition government with Hezbollah. The US is believed to be planning sanctions on additional Lebanese officials, among them the head of Lebanese intelligence. US Ambassador to Lebanon Shea made clear that the sanctions were imposed within the framework of "maximum pressure" on Hezbollah after Bassil concealed the organization's weapons deals. She noted that the sanctions were targeting Bassil and not his movement and added that the US would help Lebanon deal with the coronavirus through independent organizations but not through its health ministry that is considered close to Hezbollah. Bassil claimed the Americans must present proof of their claims against him and added, "I will not turn against any Lebanese... I will not save myself for Lebanon to perish. I have grown accustomed to the daily injustice". Aoun toughened his positions in the wake of the sanctions and said he was awaiting French mediation and demanding to see the evidence on which the new sanctions are based.

Syria - A State Department official [told Asharq Al-Awsat](#) that the US continues to support Israel's right to defend itself against Iranian threats from Syria, that it cooperates with Israel to detect such threats, and that it knows the Syrian regime still has chemical weapons it is prepared to use against its own people. Syria, for its part, was furious at Pompeo's "provocative" visit to a Golan Heights settlement. At the same, the US imposed sanctions on senior Syrian military figures, members of Parliament and organizations affiliated with the regime – 19 individuals and organizations in all - in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and as part of the international effort to force President Assad to stop the war on his people. Upon his retirement, US special representative for Syria Jeffrey, who was initially critical of Trump, praised the President's "realpolitik" on the Syrian issue and recommended the next administration adhere to the same policy.

Iraq - President Salih, Prime Minister al-Kadhimi and other top officials said they were looking forward to working with the new administration and strengthening the US-Iraq partnership. The "conditional ceasefire" came under threat by the Hezbollah Brigades that threatened "stronger and crueler" attacks unless the US implements the timetable for its pullout from Iraq. The pro-Iran group warned the "unpredictable" Trump against action that would violate the détente between the armed militia and US forces in his final days in office. On the other hand, others in Iraq, including Shiite leaders, fear a provocation that would provide Trump with an excuse for harsh retaliation. Meanwhile, contacts continued on drawing down the US presence in Iraq, and the Pentagon confirmed a reduction to 2,500 troops by Jan. 15. The Trump Administration extended by 45 days the exemption that allows Iraq to keep buying oil from Iran. [Iraq was both hopeful and anxious](#) about Biden's presidency. Iraq's leadership knows him well and remembers that as Vice President he supported a US pullout and that in 2006 [he wrote an article](#) calling for governance of Iraq along ethnic lines, in other words for splitting it up into autonomous regions.

Turkey - In congratulating Biden, President Erdogan emphasized his country's determination to work closely with the incoming administration to enhance world peace. Turkey's Foreign Minister underscored his country's ties with the US within NATO and the warm relationship between Trump and Erdogan that enabled the two sides to overcome "troubling" issues. Turkey's Defense Minister added that his country would continue installing the Russian missile defense system but suggested forming a working group to discuss US concerns about the compatibility of the Russian S-400 missile defenses and US-made F-35 jets. In any case, Turkey will have a special place in Biden's foreign policy with the US shifting its emphasis from an unrelenting fight against terrorism to the renewed power rivalry vis-à-vis China and Russia.

Saudi Arabia - During his election campaign, [Biden referred to the Khashoggi murder](#) and said his administration would re-assess US ties with Saudi Arabia and its support for the war in Yemen. Harris emphasized that the new administration would halt US support for the war in Yemen. Meanwhile, Secretary Pompeo met with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, mainly to discuss the situation vis-à-vis Iran (refusing to refer to reports that Netanyahu took part in the meeting, reports that the Saudi Foreign Minister denied). Saudi Arabia, well aware of Biden's critical approach toward its policies, may be considering a goodwill gesture, possibly in the Yemeni arena, including direct contacts with the Houthis. On the other hand, the Trump Administration is actually considering designating the Houthis as a terror organization.

Egypt - In congratulating Biden, President al-Sisi said he expected cooperation with his administration in strengthening the sides' strategic relations for the benefit of both states and their people. Al-Sisi and his people are said to be concerned to some extent by Biden's declared commitment to human rights and his tweet that the US would no longer issue "blank checks" to Trump's "favorite dictator". Cairo is also concerned that the new administration might seek to renew the US dialogue with Islamist elements that al-Sisi regards as quasi terrorist groups. There is also concern over the administration's expected stand on the Ethiopian dam. Whereas the Egyptian opposition believes that once Biden issues a few statements on human rights to satisfy the regime's opponents, US-Egypt relations would soon after revert to their previous state.

Jordan - King Abdullah II congratulated Biden and Harris on their victory and said he was looking forward to working with them on bolstering the historic US partnership with Jordan for the sake of their shared goals of peace, stability and prosperity.

Israel and the Jews - Biden has reiterated his unwavering support for Israel and his [commitment to defeating the BDS movement](#). Members of his Middle East team enjoy close ties to many Israelis. In addition to his [designated Secretary of State Blinken](#), who is well versed in regional issues and whose family has strong ties to Israel and a history of Holocaust survival, the team that is shaping up includes familiar Obama Administration figures. It is expected to include, among others, Dan Shapiro, Tamara Cofman Wittes, Dafna Hochman Rand, Mara Rodman, Ilan Goldberg, Andrew Miller and Daniel Ben-Naim. However, the progressive wing of the Democratic Party continues to express criticism of Israel and some 40 members of Congress gave urged Secretary of State Pompeo to condemn Israeli annexation plans.

The lifting of restrictions on former spy Pollard allowing him to move to Israel did not affect the Jewish vote. Former ADL Chair Foxman noted that over two-thirds of the Jewish community voted for Biden. He himself openly endorsed Biden for the first time, raising eyebrows within the community and beyond. Foxman explained his decision by referring to the [renewed anti-Semitism in the US](#), which, he said, was dividing the Jewish community. While the representative body of the Jewish community, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations [issued a call urging unity within the community](#) in order to “assure the strengthening of the historic bipartisan US support for Israel” and the continued US leadership against anti-Semitism.

New administrations may take a few months to get officials and policies in place. Here are links to some articles by senior foreign policy experts and think tanks that might point to the Biden administration's policies.

[Can Joe Biden's Value-Centric Foreign Policy Succeed In The Middle East?](#), Ari Heistein
[The End of 'America First': How Biden Says He Will Re-engage With the World](#), David E. Sanger

[Meet the contenders for Biden's Cabinet](#), Politico

[Is Iraq on Track?](#), Antony J. Blinken, Norman Ricklefs, Ned Parker

[Biden Must Craft a Foreign Policy for a World the U.S. Doesn't Rule](#), Aaron David Miller and Richard Sokolsky

[The Seven Pillars of Biden's Foreign Policy](#), Robin Wright

[Joe Biden Has a Barack Obama Problem](#), Timothy McLaughlin

[What leaders overseas will want to ask of the Biden administration?](#), The Brookings Institution

[How Biden Can Restore America's Role Abroad](#), Dennis Ross

[The Can-Do Power](#), Samantha Power