

US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 100 (April 2021)

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As the US implements historic withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Middle East continues to be eventful. The US leads multilateral efforts towards JCPOA return, with incremental advancements towards a concrete agreement. Biden's human rights-centered foreign policy continues to challenge US-Saudi relations and enrages Turkey with the recognition of the Armenian Genocide. As the US reinstates vital aid to the Palestinians, relations with Israel balance rhetorical support for the two-state solution and uninterrupted security cooperation. While holding different views on Iran policy, Biden is determined to reassure US allyship with Israel, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia.

A. Israel-US Relations

1. Robust Israel-US security cooperation amid disagreement on Iran policy. Secretary of Defense Austin [convened](#) with Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Gantz in Jerusalem, [constituting](#) the first Biden cabinet visit to Israel. Austin stressed the US' ironclad commitment to Israeli security and importance of normalization with the Arab world, and [did not address](#) the Iranian issue during his visit. He later [emphasized](#), in a press conference with Netanyahu, the US' commitment to Israel's qualitative military edge. The US did not orchestrate the attack on Iranian Natanz site on the eve of the talks in Vienna, [claims](#) a US official, Iran attributes the attack to Israel. Israeli National Security Advisor Ben-Shabbat [met](#) with US counterpart Sullivan to discuss Iran policy. Sullivan [asserted](#) in an interview that while the US and Israel disagree about the JCPOA, they are committed to a "no surprises" policy. Republican Congressman Keller [introduced](#) a bill to institute official bilateral law enforcement training between Israel and the US. A bi-partisan bill that would enhance US-Israeli cybersecurity cooperation was [introduced](#) simultaneously in the House and the Senate. In an interview with CNN, Secretary of State Blinken [denied](#) rumors that Special Envoy Kerry shared sensitive Israeli military intelligence with Iran.

2. Israel-US diplomacy remains warm, despite a changing American discourse. In response to a recent Human Rights Watch report that labeled Israel an "apartheid" state, the State Department [expressed](#) disagreement and called on Israelis and Palestinians to refrain from unilateralism. Secretary Blinken [discussed](#) issues including Palestinian humanitarian assistance, normalization with the Arab world and commitment to the rights of Israelis and Palestinians alike with Foreign Minister Ashkenazi. Secretary Blinken [congratulated](#) Israeli citizens for the 73rd anniversary of the Israeli independence, underscoring shared commitment to democracy and unwavering US support for Israeli security. Prime Minister Netanyahu [participated](#) in the Leaders' Summit on Climate, Biden's

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multilateral conference on climate change. MK Lapid [met](#) in Tel Aviv with Charge d'Affaires Shrier to discuss "various issues of mutual interest".

B. The Palestinians and the Peace Process

1. Biden takes first tangible steps to restore assistance to the Palestinians. Secretary Blinken [announced](#) that the US will restore 235 million USD in humanitarian, economic and development assistance to the Palestinians. Blinken elaborated that 85 million USD will be allocated for "peacebuilding programs" and "economic and development assistance" through USAID, as well as 150 million USD in "humanitarian assistance" through UNWRA. Blinken reaffirmed that "assistance for the Palestinian people serves important US interests and values". Drawing criticism, 17 Senate Republicans [urged](#) Blinken to recant the restoration of Palestinian aid. In a separate letter to Blinken, 20 Senate Republicans expressed "grave concern" about "the resumption of U.S. foreign assistance to UNWRA". Responding to clashes in Jerusalem and reports of racist attacks targeting Palestinians, the US Embassy [expressed](#) concern of escalation and called on all sides to end incitement. J-Street held its annual conference, where Bernie Sanders [called](#) for more US authority over spending of US aid in Israel. Meanwhile, Powers has been [confirmed](#) by a bi-partisan Senate vote to lead USAID.

2. Congress divided on the Palestinian issue, as progressives challenge unconditional support for Israel. A bi-partisan bill instituting an annual review of Palestinian educational material was [re-introduced](#) to the House floor. Rep. McCollum [introduced](#) a bill, originally co-signed by 16 House Democrats, which aims to [forbid](#) Israel from using US aid for operations in the Palestinian territories. Yet Congress still overwhelmingly supports unconditional aid to Israel, as 328 US lawmakers [submitted](#) a letter to the House Appropriations Committee imploring the full transfer of funds allocated to Israel. In a webinar with Americans for Peace Now, progressive representative Pocan [called](#) on the Israeli government to immediately allow entry to US lawmakers into the Gaza Strip to assess humanitarian situation.

C. US and Arab-Israel Relations

1. US keen on revitalizing Israel-Lebanon maritime talks. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Hale [visited](#) Lebanon to discuss economic reconstruction in Lebanon and maritime border negotiations with Israel, with Lebanese officials, including President Aoun and Prime Minister-Designate Hariri. Lebanese sources claim that under US demand, the mediated talks about maritime border with Israel will [resume](#) in May, under the leadership of US Ambassador Desrocher.

2. US expresses commitment to expanding the Abraham Accords. Secretary Blinken [proclaimed](#) in a virtual celebration of Israel's Independence Day, organized by the Israeli Embassy in Washington D.C., that the US expects more Arab countries to sign onto the Abraham Accords and move to normalize relations with Israel. Secretary Blinken [spoke](#) to Bahraini counterpart al-Zayani about normalization with Israel and security initiatives in the Middle East, and commended Bahraini efforts to quash human trafficking. Despite concern from Democratic congressmembers, Biden decided to [move ahead](#) with the 23 billion USD arms deal with the UAE, which led two Democratic Senators to plan a bill aiming to establish more congressional oversight and limit presidential discretion in arms sales as well as [protect](#) Israel's qualitative military edge.

D. US Middle East policy

1. Steps towards restoring JCPOA, as US denounces Iranian non-compliance. The US conducted “constructive” indirect talks with Iran in Vienna regarding a return to the JCPOA, mediated through the EU, [revealed](#) a senior State Department official. In a press briefing to apprise developments in the official Vienna talks, it seemed that [no substantial progress](#) was made, although a senior State Department official claimed the US and Iran achieved “greater clarification” with regards to the obstacles towards JCPOA compliance. Following Iran’s announcement that it would move to increase its uranium enrichment to 60 percent Secretary Blinken [expressed](#) his concern, and asserted that the move reflects lack of seriousness on Iran’s side towards negotiated settlement to the dispute. President Biden also [expressed](#) caution, asserting that the Iranian pledge to increase uranium enrichment is not “helpful”, but emphasized his optimism regarding the indirect talks in Vienna. 25 Democratic Senators [submitted](#) a letter to Biden, urging him to swiftly restore the JCPOA, and capitalize on the momentum of multilateral cooperation to expand the circle of diplomacy to Israel and the Gulf states. Meanwhile, 87 Republicans [signed](#) a bill to codify the “maximum pressure” policy, by preventing a return to the JCPOA and imposing additional sanctions.

2. Biden continues to stress US involvement in Yemen. The US [announced](#) its unequivocal denunciation of Houthi attacks in Saudi Arabia following the attack in Jizan, calling on the parties to commit to the ceasefire and cooperate with international diplomatic efforts. Special Envoy to Yemen Lenderking [met](#) in Berlin with UN Envoy to Yemen Griffiths and the German Foreign Minister Maas to discuss a solution to the conflict in Yemen and on ways to halt the attack on Marib. Lenderking also met with representatives from, Kuwait, Sweden and the EU to talk about the conflict in Yemen, and thereafter proceeded to visit the Gulf in coordination with Griffiths, where he [met](#) with officials in the UAE, and [later](#) in Saudi Arabia and Oman. As part of Biden’s reassessment of Trump’s policies, he [recanted](#) limits on resettlement from Yemen and increased slots for refugees from the Middle East.

3. Iraq remains a proxy field for US-Iran tensions. The Iraqi military Balad Air Base, located north of Baghdad and that hosts US contractors, was [attacked](#) by at least 5 rockets on April 18th. The US, as well as Iraqi officials, have repeatedly attributed such attacks to Iranian-backed militias, such as a two-rocket attack on April 4th. In light of the withdrawal of last US troops in Afghanistan, CENTCOM commander General McKenzie [clarified](#) that the US does not plan to withdraw its last 2,500 troops from Iraq.

4. US relations with Saudi Arabia scathed due to focus on Yemen and human rights. The US [began](#) to divert its military installments from the Middle East, with at least three Patriot defense systems redeployed from the Middle East, one of which from Saudi Arabia. The State Department [expressed concern](#) over the sentencing of Saudi aid worker Abdulrahman al-Sadhan in a counterterrorism court, and reaffirmed commitment to freedom of expression worldwide. Saudi Arabia is set to [join](#) an initiative by the US, Canada, Norway and Qatar to establish a platform for gas producers to discuss Paris Agreement implementation, as Bin Salman [participated](#) in Biden’s Leaders’ Summit on Climate. The US delegation headed by McGurk, the National Security Council’s Middle East policy coordinator, was set to [travel](#) to Saudi Arabia and the UAE to discuss concerns regarding US attempts to restore the JCPOA. A letter to President Biden signed by 76 Democrats [implores](#) Biden to demand the unilateral end of the Saudi blockade on Yemen. Two Senators [introduced](#) a bill that aims to prevent Saudi Arabia from obtaining nuclear weapons by prohibiting most arms sales to the Kingdom if it seeks to expand

its nuclear program, as reports revealed that the Kingdom was assisted by China in advancing its nuclear aspirations.

5. US commitment to strategic relations with the UAE is reaffirmed. Following meetings between Kerry and UAE officials, the State Department [issued](#) a joint statement with the UAE regarding shared commitment to decarbonize their economies, “strengthen the implementation” of the Paris Agreement and invest in decarbonization of Middle Eastern economies.

6. Biden recognizes the Armenian Genocide, as US-Turkey tensions increase. Following US recognition of the Armenian Genocide, US Ambassador in Turkey Satterfield was [summoned](#) for reprimand from Turkey’s Deputy Foreign Minister Onal. Despite condemnation from numerous Turkish officials, President Erdoğan did not hurry to comment on Biden’s proclamation, and [eventually called](#) it “outrageous”, assuring that Turkey will respond in the coming months. Foreign media [reported](#) that President Biden apprised Erdoğan of his intent before the declaration. The White House [announced](#) that Biden and Erdoğan will hold their first bilateral meeting during the NATO summit in Brussels in June.

D. Further Readings

- Daniel R. Depetris, “[Biden and the Middle East](#),” *Newsweek*, 2 April 2021.
- Robin Wright, “[Why it’s so hard for American to end its wars](#),” *The New Yorker*, 9 April 2021.
- Aisha Jumaan, “[Middle East: Obligation to Yemen](#),” *Seattle Times*, 23 April 2021.
- Julie Norman, “[Middle East balance key to Biden’s foreign policy aims](#),” *Chatham House*, 26 April 2021.
- Alex Ward, “[The US may still be helping Saudi Arabia in the Yemen war after all](#),” *Vox*, 2 April 2021.