

## US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 97 (January 2021)

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*In the waning days of his presidency, Trump hastily advanced consequential foreign policy moves such as introducing additional sanctions against Iran, facilitating reconciliation between Qatar and GCC states, restructuring CENTCOM to include Israel and designating Houthi rebels international terrorists. President Biden filled relevant foreign policy posts, and the incoming administration announced its intention to restore relations with the Palestinians and reinstate the traditional US support in the two-state solution, signaling a diversion from Trump's unabashedly pro-Netanyahu approach. Whereas Trump's last days in office witnessed rapidly escalating tensions with Iran, the Biden administration plans to pursue diplomacy and seek a new nuclear deal.*

### A .Israel-US Relations

**1. Iran occupies the foreground of US-Israel cooperation.** Trump [ordered](#) the reorganization of the US Central Command (CENTCOM) to include Israel within the largely Sunni-grouping of American allies in the Middle East, solidifying a unified front against Iran. The move aims to reflect the warming and increasingly overt relations between Israel and Arab states. Previously, Israel was incorporated under the European branch of US military command. Secretary of State Blinken [discussed](#) the Iranian threat and peace efforts with Israeli Foreign Minister Ashkenazi, in their first phone call. Defense Minister Gantz [discussed](#) regional stability and the future of the US-Israel relations with incoming Secretary of Defense Austin, who expressed US commitment to Israel's qualitative military edge.

**2. Biden's staff introduces a fusion of new and old attitudes, as the Trump administration remained adamantly committed to Netanyahu until the end.** In an interview at the conclusion of his tenure, Secretary Pompeo [affirmed](#) Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights and legitimate claim to Jerusalem. He also lauded Kushner and Trump's efforts in facilitating the Abraham Accords and stressed the significance of military and diplomatic pressure on Iran. The 47th session of the annual US-Israel Joint Military Group convened partly in person and partly virtually to affirm the robust Israel-US alliance and celebrate the Abraham Accords. In his confirmation hearing, Secretary Blinken [insisted](#) that the US Embassy in Jerusalem will not be relocated, averred that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel and reaffirmed the administration's resolute opposition to BDS. The Biden administration, nonetheless, is unlikely to [execute](#) Trump's plan to designate pro-BDS organizations as anti-Semitic. Biden [named](#) Sasha Baker, who is perceived as part of the progressive wing of the Democratic party, as Senior Director of Strategic Planning. Baker was previously Elizabeth Warren's Deputy Policy Director, who [supported](#) withholding

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military aid to Israel and reversing the embassy move to Jerusalem in the case that Israel hampers peace realization. Echoing traditional support for Israel, Biden's pick for Ambassador to the UN Thomas-Greenfield [expressed](#) her resolve to combat policies critical of Israel and entice normalizing Arab states into aligning with Israel in the international arena.

## B. The Palestinians and the Peace Process

**1. The Biden administration upholds a two-state solution strategy.** Blinken [reaffirmed](#) his support for the two-state solution in his confirmation hearing, but nevertheless expressed skepticism about the prospects of striking a deal in the foreseeable future. Biden [named](#) Samantha Power administrator of the USAID, which is expected to play a central role in the restoration of US-Palestinian relations and in funding joint Israeli-Palestinian civil society and economic initiatives.<sup>1</sup> Biden [nominated](#) another Obama administration veteran, Hady Amr, as US Deputy Assistant Secretary for Israeli-Palestinian affairs, in hopes of restoring the ebbing trust in the US. In a UN Security Council meeting concerning the turbulent Middle East, the Acting US Ambassador to the UN, Richard Mills, [reiterated](#) US support for the two-state solution and stressed the importance that the sides eschew from unilateral moves. Mills posited that Biden will pursue a constructive, more impartial role in mediation between the sides, and will [revamp](#) relations with the Palestinians. A Biden aide [reportedly](#) discussed resumption of aid and reopening of the PLO Washington mission with Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Shtayya.

**2. Israel is responsible for Palestinian health during the pandemic, lament numerous Democrats.** Despite international praise of Israel's sweeping and swift vaccination campaign, numerous Democrats, such as Rep. Newman, [criticized](#) the exclusion of Palestinians from the inoculations, stressing that Israel has a "moral and humanitarian obligation" to protect the health of Palestinians.

## C. US and Israel's Relations with Arab Countries

**1. Sudan officially signs into the Abraham Accords.** During a visit by Trump's Secretary of Treasury Mnuchin to Khartoum, Sudan [joined](#) the Abraham Accords, officially agreeing to normalize relations with Israel. In return, Secretary Mnuchin [pledged](#) in a memorandum of understanding that the US will lend Sudan more than 1 billion USD towards the repayment of its debt to the World Bank.

**2. Prizes galore for Morocco after the decision to normalize ties with Israel.** Trump [bestowed](#) King Mohammed VI with the US Legion of Merit due to the latter's decision to normalize diplomatic relations with Israel. A spur of miscellaneous collaborative agreements followed, as US Ambassador to Morocco Fischer [signed](#) a memorandum of understanding seeking to protect Moroccan cultural property and heritage. In another memorandum of understanding, the Trump administration and Morocco agreed to combat all forms of anti-Semitism, including the delegitimization of Israel. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Schenker [convened](#) with Moroccan officials in Rabat, discussing security and economic cooperation. The incoming Biden administration [has yet to clarify](#) its position on the status of Western Sahara.

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<sup>1</sup> Despite warm relations with the pro-Israel camp during Obama's first tenure, Power, then the US Ambassador to the UN, [refused](#) to veto an anti-occupation resolution in the waning days of the Obama administration.

**3. Biden suspends sale of advanced fighter jets to the UAE.** Whereas the Trump administration eagerly struck arms deals with Gulf states, often with disregard to their human rights record, Biden [promised](#) to “reassess” alliances and uphold US values in the international arena. The comprehensive arms sale with the UAE, which Biden suspended for the time being, is [widely viewed](#) as a central factor in the UAE’s groundbreaking decision to normalize diplomatic ties with Israel.

## D. US Middle East Policy

**1. Tensions between the US and Iran reach new highs during Trump’s last days in office.** Secretary Pompeo [condemned](#) a decision in December by Iran’s legislative body that enabled the expulsion of UN investigators. Pompeo averred that Iran’s defiance to cooperate evinces to its malevolent intentions. In response to Iran’s vow to avenge the killing of top general Qassam Sulimani, the Defense Department [reversed](#) a decision announced earlier this month to redeploy the USS Nimitz from the Middle East. Acting Secretary of Defense Miller implored international actors and Iran to refrain from questioning the “resolve of the US”. As tensions escalate, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) aerospace commander [proclaimed](#) that in a war-scenario between the US and Iran, the IRGC would not discriminate between “US bases and host countries.” American B-52 bombers [flew](#) in the Middle East three times this month, signaling American presence in the region. The State and [Treasury](#) Departments [issued](#) a spree of additional sanctions against Iran, initially [targeting](#) its steel industry by designating 15 materials critical to military armament as non-tradable with Iran. Notable Iranian officials were [designated](#) terrorists, and institutions operating under Iranian discretion were [sanctioned](#). Pompeo also [warned](#) of an Iran-al-Qaeda alliance, asserting that Iran has become the headquarters for the terrorist organization, whereas officials claimed the intelligence evidence was [dubious](#) at best.

**2. Biden’s vision for renewed diplomacy with Iran.** Days before his inauguration, Biden [introduced](#) his State Department team, composed of numerous Obama administration alumni, including Sherman and Nuland. Sherman, whom Biden intends to nominate as Deputy Secretary of State under Blinken, [was a chief negotiator](#) of the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA), signaling his resolve to reinstate the Obama-era US-Iran relations. Biden [nominated](#) Malley as special envoy to Iran, responsible to convince Iran to curb its nuclear aspirations and negotiate the lifting of the stifling economic sanctions. Biden’s National Security Advisor Sullivan, [claimed](#) that the Biden administration will move quickly to reinstate the JCPOA, and would further negotiate to curtail Iran’s missile capabilities. In the first briefing to the press White House spokeswoman [clarified](#) the administration’s goal to contain Iranian military capabilities and called on Iran to comply with the JCPOA restrictions. Blinken [asserted](#) in his confirmation hearing that consultation with Israel and other US allies over US Iran policy is central to his administration’s foreign policy vision.

**3. The US welcomes Gulf unity.** Trump’s senior advisor Kushner [facilitated](#) Qatari-Saudi reconciliation that would effectively end the three-year blockade on Qatar. The Department of State issued a [statement, welcoming](#) the al-Uha Declaration in the 41st GCC summit, that enables the re-establishment of diplomatic and economic ties between GCC countries (and Egypt) and Qatar. The feud between the sides festered in part due to Qatari ties to Iran and terrorist groups, an accusation vehemently denied by Qatari officials.

**4. Biden reviews Houthi terrorist designation.** Secretary Pompeo pushed to [designate](#) the Houties, a Iranian-backed Yemeni rebel group, a Foreign Terrorist Organization [without consultation](#). The designation unlocked a vast arsenal of economic and military actions that

could be employed against the group, and [potentially imperl](#) Yemen's access to humanitarian aid. While the Biden administration largely refrained from hastily recanting Trump's late foreign policy moves, Blinken [announced](#) that the Biden administration will review the status of the Houties, temporarily suspending numerous sanctions imposed by the previous administration.

**5. Biden revokes the Muslim ban.** Biden [nullified](#) the notorious "Muslim Ban" on his first day in office. The act, also known as the 2017 travel ban, was introduced by Trump and restricted entry to the US from several Muslim countries. Muslims around the world [lauded](#) the decision, which will perhaps assuage the grievance of Muslim populace, scathed by the discriminatory policy.

## E. Further Readings

- [The Last Days of Pompeo](#), *The Guardian*
- [Trump's Inexplicable Crusade to Help Iran Evade Sanctions](#), *Foreign Policy*
- [With Iran, Biden Can't Let Perfect Be the Enemy of Good](#), *Foreign Policy*
- [Secretary of State Pompeo Leaves No Bridges Unburned](#), *New York Times*
- [United States Policy on Palestine: 2021 and Beyond](#), *Al-Haq*
- [The Biden Administration and the Middle East: The View from Washington on the First 200 Days](#), *The Middle East Institute*