

US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 98 (February 2021)

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As the Netanyahu-Biden call saga cast doubts about Biden's posture towards Israel's prime minister, security cooperation between Israel and the US remains seemingly uninterrupted at the outset of Biden's presidency. The administration expresses traditional support for Israel, while evidently resolved to restore US-Palestinian relations and salvage the two-state solution. Attempts at coaxing Iran toward the negotiating table bears little fruit as Biden orders US airstrikes against Iranian proxies. Consistent with Biden's promise to position human rights at the center of foreign policy, chinks appear in the ironclad relationship with Saudi Arabia, while Yemen receives greater attention.

A. US-Israel Relations

1. Chilly beginning for Biden and Netanyahu. In contrast to his predecessors, Biden did not hurry to call Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu. As speculation mounted that Biden was shunning Netanyahu, White House spokesperson Psaki [asserted](#) that Biden was looking forward to constructively engaging with Netanyahu. Only 28 days after Biden's inauguration did the phone ring on Balfour Street, and Biden [reaffirmed](#) his commitment to Israeli security, discussing the Iranian threat, the Abraham Accords and Israeli-Palestinian relations with PM Netanyahu, according to the White House press release. The call came after Secretary Blinken, Secretary Austin and Advisor Sullivan already contacted their Israeli counterparts. Republicans from the House Committee on Foreign Affairs [expressed concern](#) about Biden's failure to contact Netanyahu earlier on, urging him to prioritize US allies. Speaker of the House Pelosi [spoke](#) to Netanyahu as well, focusing on Covid-19 response and the two-state solution, while assuring him of "unwavering Congressional support for a safe and secure Israel".

2. Tight security cooperation between Israel and the US continues. Head of CENTCOM Marine Gen. McKenzie [hailed](#) Israel's addition to the purview of the Pentagon's Middle Eastern command. Plans for the deployment of the two recently purchased Iron Dome batteries are being [finalized](#), announced Brig. Gen. Gibson of the Department of the Army. President Biden's National Security Advisor Sullivan [spoke](#) for the second time to his Israeli counterpart Ben-Shabbat about the Iranian threat and other regional developments, Israeli media reports. It was reported that Sullivan [proposed](#) the resumption of a working group on Iran, headed by the Israeli and US national security advisors. Israeli officials report that the US [notified](#) relevant Israeli officials about airstrikes targeting alleged missile launch sites in Syria. In an interview with CNN, Blinken [reaffirmed](#) the centrality of the Golan Heights to Israeli security, yet challenged the legality of its annexation, which was recognized by the Trump Administration. Israeli Foreign Minister Ashkenazi [met](#) with the US Chargé d'Affaires in Israel Shrier to discuss a "range of shared interests".

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3. The US stands with Israel in the international arena. The State Department [condemned](#) the ICC ruling that the international court has jurisdiction to probe Hamas and Israeli war crimes in the Palestinian territories and East Jerusalem. Blinken [discussed](#) the ICC ruling with Ashkenazi, and the latter thanked Blinken for the firm US denunciation of the ruling. In another conversation between the two later in the month, Blinken [lambasted](#) international treatment of Israel as “one-sided” and “unfair”. Blinken [announced](#) that the US would return to the UN Human Rights Council as an “observer”, after Trump pulled out of the organization citing bias against Israel. Blinken expressed unease with the council’s “disproportionate focus” on Israel in his announcement, and later [called](#) to revoke [Agenda Item 7](#) while proclaiming that the US would seek a seat in the UNHRC for the 2022-2024 term. Biden’s pick for UN Ambassador, Thomas-Greenfield, who vowed to defend Israel at the UN, was [confirmed](#) by the Senate. In a conversation with the Greek Foreign Minister, Blinken committed to [strengthening](#) the quadrilateral cooperation among the US, Greece, Cyprus and Israel.

4. Embassy move to Jerusalem sealed with little opposition. The Senate overwhelmingly [approved](#) the permanent embassy move to Jerusalem, with only three senators disapproving the motion.

B. The Palestinians and the Peace Process

1. Biden is keen on restoring relations with the Palestinians. Biden [hastily moved](#) to restore diplomatic relations with the Palestinian Authority (PA), communicating with Palestinian officials in two weeks more than the previous administration did in the last three years of Trump’s tenure. Meanwhile, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Amr reportedly [focuses](#) on improving Palestinian livelihoods and US relationship with Ramallah, pushing to restore aid to the Palestinians and reinvigorate the Palestinian economy, sidelining efforts to resume peace negotiations. In another sign of commitment to Palestinian economic prosperity, a US delegation [attended](#) the ADHC (Ad Hoc Liaison Committee Meeting), and emphasized its commitment to the two state solution and elevating Palestinian living standards.

2. Substantial strides towards formal Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking? Blinken [affirmed](#) to Ashkenazi that the US views the two-state solution as the only viable pathway forward. Amr [discussed](#) with Russian counterpart Safronkov cooperation within the Middle East Quartet and elsewhere in promoting peace talks, according to a release by the Russian Foreign Ministry. In a CNN interview, Blinken [stressed](#) the US commitment to a Palestinian state yet remained vague when asked about a Palestinian capital in Jerusalem. State Department Spokesperson Price urged Israel to eschew unilateral steps that would undermine prospects of peace in response to the decision of Jewish National Fund to enable land purchases in Area C. The envoys to the Middle East Quartet, which includes the US, the EU, the UN and Russia, [discussed](#) the “latest political developments” and committed to convene frequently. In a conversation with Egyptian Foreign Minister Shoukry, Blinken reportedly [discussed](#) Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts.

3. Democrats remain critical of Israel on vaccines for Palestinians. Rep. Bowman [wrote](#) to Israeli Consul General Nitzan that he was “heartened” by the transfer of 5,000 COVID-19 vaccines to the PA, but reiterated Israeli responsibility for comprehensive Palestinian access to vaccinations. Prominent progressive Senator Sanders [criticized](#) Israel’s refusal to transfer

vaccines to the Palestinians while shipping them to foreign allies. Additional legislators who condemned Israel's exclusion of Palestinians from its vaccination campaign include [Rep. Tlaib](#) and [Rep. Castro](#).

C. US and Israel's Relations with Arab Countries

1. Senators urge reversal of US recognition of Western Sahara. Twenty-seven Senators from both sides of the aisle [urged](#) Biden to reverse Trump's "abrupt" and "short-sighted" decision to drop the long-standing US neutrality over the status of Western Sahara. US recognition of Western Sahara is widely viewed as a central motivation for Morocco's decision to normalize ties with Israel.

2. Amiable relations with UAE, with Israel as a main focus. Blinken [spoke](#) with UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs Al Nahyan about the rapidly advancing normalization with Israel, and about the reconciliation with Qatar, regional security, and collaborative efforts to assuage tensions in the region. The US [blamed](#) Iran for a failed attempt to attack the UAE embassy in Addis Ababa, while Iran disparaged the allegations as "baseless". The previous US ambassador to the UAE Barbara Leaf, currently senior director for the Middle East at the National Security Council, will [reportedly transfer](#) to the State Department as assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs. If nominated, Leaf would hold the most influential Middle East post in the Biden Administration.

D. US Middle East policy

1. Biden reassesses the Saudi-Yemeni arena, stressing human rights. Biden [spoke](#) to Saudi King Salman for the first time since assuming office stressing US commitment to "universal human rights and the rule of law", [which echoes](#) Blinken's previous discussion with Egyptian Foreign Minister Shoukry. Following the release of an unclassified report by the Biden administration on the 2018 killing of Jamal Khashoggi, Secretary Blinken [announced](#) visa restrictions on 76 Saudi nationals allegedly connected to the assassination. Biden [announced](#) that the US would no longer supply Saudi Arabia with arms for the Yemeni civil war. Yet the US will continue to [cooperate](#) with Saudi Arabia where interests align, and the nature of the arm sales restrictions pertaining to Yemen remains unclear. The Department of State [welcomed](#) the Saudi decision to release two Saudi-American political prisoners. Blinken [spoke](#) to Saudi Foreign Minister al-Saud about a commitment to ending the internecine war in Yemen, strengthening economic cooperation and combating terrorism. The Secretary of State also [condemned](#) Houthi violence against Saudi civilians, and violent operations within Yemen. Biden officially [reversed](#) Trump's designation of the Houthi rebels as a foreign terrorist organization, but kept in place certain sanctions on the group. The State Department called on the Houthis to [halt](#) their assault on Marib, home to a million dislocated Yemenis, and commit to peaceful negotiations. It also [announced](#) a visit to Yemen by US Special Envoy for Yemen Lenderking to meet with UN Special Envoy for Yemen Griffiths.

2. Biden is keen on restoring the JCPOA, but demands Iranian reciprocity. Various proposals were submitted to Congress seeking to prevent a US return to the JCPOA, one of them signed by 120 House Republicans [asserting](#) that restoration of the deal would imperil national security. This in response to urgings by some Democrats to revive the deal. Biden [clarified](#) in an interview that the US would not lift sanctions imposed on Iran unless the latter halts uranium enrichment beyond the JCPOA terms and proves "[strict compliance](#)" with the

deal. The Chinese Foreign Ministry [reported](#) that US Special Envoy Malley discussed re-entering the 2015 Iran deal with Chinese officials. CENTCOM Commander Gen. McKenzie [urged](#) Iran to avoid provocations as the US attempts to revive the JCPOA, warning that the US was “prepared for any eventuality”. Spokesperson Price asserted later in the month that the US was willing to start [negotiating](#) with Iran if invited by the P5+1 and Iran.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon belatedly [confirmed](#) the redeployment of USS Nimitz that had patrolled the Middle East for 10 months amid exacerbating tensions with Iran. Blinken conducted a meeting with the E3 (France, Germany and the UK) Foreign Ministers regarding Iran, issuing a shared statement [expressing](#) concern about Iranian uranium enrichment and urging Iran to avoid escalating unilateral decisions. Senior state department officials [outlined](#) various steps being taken to reinstate the pre-Trump status quo, such as leveling domestic travel controls for members of the Iranian UN mission with those of other countries. Sullivan [announced](#) that the US was liaising with Iran regarding dozens of US citizens arrested over the years in Iran. Biden’s foreign policy has [deprioritized](#) the Middle East, which does not appear in the “top three” of regions of significance, according to a close Biden advisor.

3. Iranian aggression prompts first Biden Administration air strikes. A barrage of rockets [targeted](#) the US Embassy in Baghdad - the third attack in a week on Western installations in Iraq. Previously, three rockets were [fired](#) at Balad Air Base in Northern Iraq, where an American citizen was reportedly wounded, and another attack earlier in the month on a US-controlled military base in the autonomous Iraqi Kurdish region [resulted](#) in the death of an American contractor. Price acknowledged the possibility of retaliation for the attack on the US military base, after which Biden [ordered](#) airstrikes on Iranian-backed militias in Syria, without seeking congressional approval.

4. Salvaging US-Turkey relations? Amid efforts in Turkey to [improve](#) relations with the US, Blinken [spoke](#) to Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu about bilateral relations, agreed to an [“open and sincere”](#) dialog and urged Turkey to remove the S-400 Russian missile system. The US [condemned](#) the [execution](#) of Turkish citizens and officials in the KRG by the PKK, which the US recognizes as a terrorist organization.

E. Further Readings

- [As Israeli government continues de facto annexation in West Bank, Biden Administration should establish real consequences](#), *J Street*
- [America steps back into the ring with the Palestinians](#), *Atlantic Council*
- [Stability in the Middle East Requires More Than a Deal with Iran](#), *Foreign Affairs*
- [America’s Middle East Policy Is Outdated and Dangerous](#), *Foreign Affairs*
- [Reimagining U.S. Strategy in the Middle East](#), *RAND Corporation*