

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

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

### A. US-Israel Relations

**1. Cold beginning for Biden and Netanyahu.** In contrast to his predecessors, Biden did not hurry to speak to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu. As speculations mounted that Biden shuns Netanyahu, White House spokesperson Psaki [asserted](#) that Biden is looking forward to constructively engaging with Netanyahu. Only 28 days after Biden's inauguration has the phone rang in Balfur, 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 the Congress's "unwavering 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 Middle Eastern branch of the military 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. Top National Security Advisor Sullivan [spoke](#) for the second time to 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 Israeli and US national security advisors. Israeli officials report that the US [notified](#) relevant Israeli officials about airstrikes in Syria targeting alleged missile launch sites in Syria. In an interview to 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

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administration. Israeli Foreign Minister Ashkenazi [met](#) with the US Chargé d'Affaires in Israel Shrier to discuss a "range of shared interests".

**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 US's firm 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 will return to the UN Human Rights Council as an "observer", after Trump pulled from 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](#) when proclaiming that the US will seek a seat in the UNHRC for the 2022-2024 term. Biden's pick for UN Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield, who vowed to defend Israel in the UN, was [confirmed](#) by the Senate. In a conversation with Greek Foreign Minister, Blinken committed to [strengthening](#) the quadrilateral cooperation between the US, Greece, Cyprus and Israel.

**4. Embassy move to Jerusalem sealed with little opposition.** The Senate overwhelmingly [approved](#) of congealing the embassy move to Jerusalem, with only three senators disapproving of 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 livelihood 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](#) cooperation in promoting peace talks within the Middle East Quartet and beyond, with Russian counterpart Safronkov, according to a release by the Russian Foreign Ministry. In an interview to CNN, Blinken [stressed](#) US commitment to a Palestinian state yet remained vague when asked about a Palestinian capital in Jerusalem. State Department Spokesperson Price implored Israel to eschew unilateral steps that would imperil peace realization, 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, [virtually 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 with regards to 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. 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 do away with the US’ long-standing 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 the UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs Al Nahyan about the rapidly advancing normalization with Israel, the reconciliation with Qatar, regional security, and collaborative efforts to assuage tensions. The US [blamed](#) Iran for a failed attempt to attack the UAE embassy in Addis Ababa, which 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 under Biden.

## 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 call with Egyptian Foreign Minister Shoukry. Following the release of an unclassified report by the Biden administration on the killing of Jamal Khashoggi in 2018, Secretary Blinken [announced](#) visa restrictions on 76 Saudi nationals allegedly connected to the assassination. Biden [announced](#) that the US will no longer supply Saudi Arabia with arms for its part in 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 as it pertains to Yemen remains unclear. The Department of State [welcomed](#) Saudi decision to release two Saudi-American political prisoners. Blinken [spoke](#) to Saudi Foreign Minister al-Saud, about 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 [reverses](#) the late Trump designation of the Houthi rebels as foreign terrorist organization, while certain sanctions will remain. The State Department called on the Houthis to [halt](#) their assault on Marib, home to a million dislocated Yemenis, and commit to peaceful negotiations. The State Department announced that the US Special Envoy for Yemen Lenderking will [travel](#) to Yemen to meet with the UN Special Envoy for Yemen Griffiths.

**2. Biden is keen on restoring the JCPOA, yet demands Iranian reciprocity.** Amongst the medley of bills striving to prevent US return to the JCPOA, 120 House Republicans [asserted](#) that the restoration of the deal will imperil national security, in response to a

Democrat letter urging the restoration of the deal. Biden [clarified](#) in an interview that the US would not lift sanctions imposed on Iran unless the latter will halt uranium enrichment beyond the JCPOA terms and prove “[strict compliance](#)” with the deal. The Chinese Foreign Ministry [claims](#) that US Special Envoy Malley discussed re-entering the 2015 Iran deal with Chinese officials. Head of CENTCOM Gen. McKenzie [implored](#) Iran to avoid provocations as the US attempts to revive the JCPOA, assuring that the US is “prepared for any eventuality”. Spokesperson Price asserted later in the month that the US is willing to start [negotiating](#) with Iran, if invited by the P5+1 and Iran. Meanwhile, the Pentagon [confirmed](#) the belated redeployment of USS Nimitz, that 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, and [expressed](#) in a shared statement concern about Iranian uranium enrichment, and urged Iran to eschew any escalating unilateral decisions. In a briefing with senior state department officials the administration [outlined](#) numerous actions to reinstate the pre-Trump status quo, such as leveling domestic travel controls for the Iranian UN mission with those of other countries. Sullivan [announced](#) that the US liaises with Iran regarding US citizens arrested in Iran. Biden’s foreign policy [purposefully deprioritized](#) the Middle East, which does not appear in the “top three” of regions of significance, asserts a close Biden advisor.

**3. Iranian aggression in Iraq results in Biden’s first air strikes.** A fleet 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-led military base in the autonomous Iraqi Kurdish region [resulted](#) in the death of an American contractor. Price acknowledged the possibility of an Iranian offense in the case of the US military base. Subsequently, Biden [ordered](#) airstrikes in Syria, without 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 not to retain 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*