



How will Biden Presidency shape US Policy towards the MENA Region?

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BACKGROUND

- On November 3, Americans judged the presidency of Donald Trump, who is an outlier president. Biden was declared to win the presidency 10 days later from the election day.

- President-elect Biden will **revert** or at least change most of Trump's foreign policy decisions. He gave some clues about his presidency in his article '[Why America Must Lead Again](#)'.

There are three salient themes emerge from Biden's foreign policy preferences:

- (1) The US should **lead** again the world (a more **active** policy)
- (2) The US should engage with the allies and countries more **multilaterally**.
- (3) The US should **promote democracy** and take a tougher stance **against authoritarian leaders**.

These themes indicate that US will return to [JCPOA](#), distance itself from the Gulf countries, some small modifications in [Middle East Peace Plan](#) that disregards Palestine, suspension of US support to Saudi Arabia in Yemen Civil War, and lastly he will take [a tougher stance](#) against Turkey.

As the time of writing this brief, while most countries congratulate President-elect Biden, and express eagerness to work with him, authoritarian leaders still have not [stated anything](#).

As a result, the new US administration will generate a new balance of power in the region.

ANALYSIS

Afghanistan

The Trump administration skilfully developed an Afghanistan strategy which aimed to meet expectations of the American public and was characterized by Trump as "[Great nations do not fight endless wars](#)", an argument that gained **bipartisan support, with some scepticism** though. However, it seems to be more focused on creating a political effect for the Presidential elections by "[bringing US troops home from Afghanistan by Christmas](#)" than prioritizing American **strategic objectives**.

After having negotiated for more than a year and a half, on February 29, 2020, the US signed an agreement with the Taliban and the Afghan Government concerning building peace through **intra-Afghan** dialogue and **withdrawal** of the Coalition Forces from Afghanistan. The US already redeployed some of its forces out of the Afghan theatre, just before the presidential elections, despite the deteriorating military conditions on the ground, which was another indicator of pursuing short term domestic political objectives.

Now the election is over, and the new US Government might not be as willing as the current Government about a hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan since the strategic implications of such a move might not be acceptable. Therefore, in the coming months, the new President is more likely to listen to **attentive Pentagon staff**.

Egypt

Egypt shares a lot of similar misgivings of the GCC. Additionally, there is a widespread dislike of President Obama's administration in Egypt, that is directly linked to their belief that he favoured the Muslim Brotherhood, and it was his support that allowed them to take over power in Egypt with the election of President Moursi. Thus, the Egyptian Government considers the return of **Obama's vice president a very negative development**, particularly when they are engaged with fierce competition and power struggle with Turkey and they believe that Biden might also be more amiable to Erdogan.

The Gulf Countries



Source: [NBC News](#)

For the past four years, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) spent time, efforts, and treasure to influence and **lobby the Trump administration** to keep protecting them and at the same time toughen its stance against their old foe: Iran! Indeed, the image of [President Trump meeting](#) the Saudi crown Prince and discussing the 400\$ billion arms deal is still vivid in our minds.

Meanwhile, President Trump was already promising during his campaign to withdraw from Obama's nuclear deal. The US delivered on its promises and withdrew from the deal, and then it started increasing the pressure on Iran, with sanctions, assets freeze, and even the assassination of General Soleimani. At long last, the GCC felt that the Iranian tide was starting to subside in the region.

Saudi Arabia and GCC, in general, felt betrayed by President Obama. They believed that President Obama's exclusive focus on the success of the nuclear negotiations with Iran, and his willingness to sacrifice their interests and power centres in MENA (Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen) empowered Iran and allowed it to spread its power all over the region.

Therefore, the GCC feel that the victory of Biden will announce the return of the Obama softer doctrine to the US relations with Iran, a [negative turn](#) of events for them.

Israel

The election of Joe Biden does not mean a full reversal of Mr. Trump's all actions in the region, especially in terms of Israel. The president-elect's [past performance](#) is full of unstinting support for Israel. His past unwavering commitment gives an insight for his presidency.

In many platforms, he and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris have clearly stated that they will remain committed to preserve Israel's qualitative military edge (QME). However, Biden has already promised **a different approach** to Iran's nuclear issue and Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the undoing of Trump's policy, like **re-engaging with Iran** as giving more credits to solve the crisis in a more diplomatic path and restoring the relations with Palestinians.

Biden will take steps to preserve a negotiated **two-state solution** to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and avoid actions such as unilateral annexation of territory. It appears that his administration will not move the US Embassy back to Tel Aviv. However, it will open US Consulate in West Jerusalem and **reopen the PLO representative office** in Washington to placate Palestinian's concerns.

Normalization with Israel is a shifting reality, and Arab countries see it in their interest. As carrying Trump's efforts one step further, he can be expected to urge the other Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia – the most important actor for completing the normalization process, to take some concrete steps beyond talks.

Lebanon

In Lebanon, amidst a collapsing economy, and a financial meltdown, the political elites were waiting to see who the next US President would be, as each political party is manoeuvring to increase its share of power based on the results. Indeed, Lebanon's Government resigned in August following the catastrophic [Beirut port's explosion](#) on August 4, and the country has been lingering in an executive void for the last three months.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah has been keen to see President Trump lose, as they believed that the alternative will be much more favourable to Iran, and by consequences to them. Thus, Lebanon is most probably entering a political limbo, until the next administration foreign affairs agenda becomes clear.

Additionally, most of the political elites might also feel relieved with the victory of Biden, as it would probably limit US sanctions that have been targeting them. Indeed, President Trump's administration has been targeting several top politicians with sanctions. Last Friday, the son in law of Lebanese President was [hit](#) in the latest round.

Libya

Trump's Libya policy did not add much value to the international efforts to end the crisis in Libya. During Trump's four year term, the US continued to stay distanced from Libya issues and avoided taking responsibility in dealing with the problems. In the absence of US leadership, another western actor, EU, failed to establish a unified and efficient Libya policy. The power vacuum is filled by other regional and global actors, primarily by Turkey, UAE, France, Russia and Egypt.

Following Haftar's offensive upon Tripoli in April 2019, Libya policies of the Trump administration contradicted with official US position. While official US foreign policy institutions declared their support to the UN-backed Government of National Accord, Trump made a supportive phone call to Haftar. This was a move depicting Trump's preference for strong men in the Middle East. However, Haftar turned out to be not a strong

man, and both the Trump administration and the US-state institutions failed to have a significant impact in Libya.

The crisis in Libya requires a strong US presence and leadership to deter external and internal spoilers and encourage all actors to compromise. Biden does not promise such a commitment to Libya, as well. Thus, there will not be much difference for Libya in that sense. However, Biden vowed to prevent unilateral actions of Erdogan and Putin. If Biden decides to act against these two actors in Libya, then it might be a game-changer.

Syria

Biden's Presidency isn't likely to bring drastic changes to current US policies in Syria. The new administration will continue keeping the 500-600 troops in north-eastern Syria where they are providing support to Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the fight against Daesh. The troops are also protecting the US national interest by securing the areas in the vicinity of the oil fields in the provinces of Dayr az Zawr and Hasakah. Biden does not favour more interventionism in Syria. Nevertheless, he is also reluctant to leave the ground more to other powers such as Russia, Iran or Turkey. Last October (in 2019), when Trump decided to withdraw nearly one thousand American troops from the regions of Tel Abyad, Ras Al Ayn and further south, Biden was critical of this decision, seeing it as a setback in the fight against Daesh and in the support given to US allies, namely the Kurds.

In the political realm, the biggest issue is the existence of US sanctions which have terrible social and economic costs to the Syrian people. Biden will likely keep the sanctions in place because the Senate is unlikely to change position on this subject and on the removal of Assad. However, he may be more cooperative in supporting the efforts in the provision of humanitarian aid provided by regional and international NGOs. Some advisers of Biden have (in the past) expressed positive views about the sanctions which are deemed essential in convincing Assad to introduce some political reforms, to release some prisoners and to cooperate on the problem of refugees and internally displaced people.

The US-Turkish relations under Biden's presidency will also have a limited impact on US-Turkey cooperation or non-cooperation in Syria. Biden does not seem to be opposed to Turkish military presence in the Idlib province as well as along the Turkish-Syrian border where Turkey is trying to prevent additional refugee flow. Nevertheless, Biden is strongly critical of steps that alienate the Kurds. Likewise, he does not approve any military action that expels Kurds (after the Turkish military operations in Afrin, Tel Abyad and Ras al Ayn). It is likely that the new US administration will explore ways to bring together Turkey and the PYD. This will go alongside with US efforts to end intra-Kurdish rivalry (particularly between PYD and KDP-affiliated political groups). All in all, Biden's Presidency will likely bring more diplomatic moves without changing the existing US policies in Syria.

Turkey

During his presidency, Trump supported Erdogan or at least allow him to pursue an assertive policy in the region by providing an aegis for him against US Congress and [US institutions](#) as well. This will come to an end with President-elect Biden who believes the US ought to follow a ["very different approach"](#) against Turkey, and **support opponents of**

Erdogan to defeat him by the electoral process. Therefore, the relations may enter in [turbulence](#) in the next administration. There are four main dossiers:

(1) Backsliding democracy, (2) Turkey's assertiveness in the region, e.g. Libya, Syria, Caucasus, (3) the rapprochement with Russia particularly S-400, (4) Halkbank case.

While looking into the future US Policies, scrutinizing what President Trump has already provided Turkey can be illuminating. For instance, he withdrew US troops in Syria before Turkey's operation, blocked a [Security Council statement with Russia](#). Furthermore, Mr Trump sheltered Erdogan against US Congress and intervened the cases in the courts against Turkey personally or through his lawyers, notably the [Halkbank case](#).

Without Trump's protection, on the one hand, Biden presidency will impose **some constraints** upon Turkey, and support opponents of Erdogan, on the other hand, this does not mean that US will implement substantial sanctions or expel Turkey from NATO. Because "[it] would be [only] a gift to Putin" as Stavdiris [points out](#).

Yemen

Biden openly stated that he would end the US support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen. What is more, Biden's decision to revert to the nuclear deal asking Iran to abide by its provisions and further decision to accede to JCPOA again are two elements that will not make the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) content. These two elements will probably push KSA to accelerate its search for a face-saving exit from the war in Yemen.

Nevertheless, Biden did not state he would directly get involved in finding a solution to the war in Yemen. This is not a positive sign since the incredible demolition in Yemen is from time to time attributed to the US supporting role to Saudi Arabia's air campaign.

The divergent interests of the regional powers and local actors in Yemen and inefficiency of the international organizations in mediating the peace in Yemen pushes us to conclude that the key to the war in Yemen is **active US involvement**. In the only case, the US interfered directly for the solution to the Yemeni conflict during the Trump presidency; all the actors shifted gears to comply with the US request. More precisely, the Secretary of Defense Mattis and Secretary of State Pompeo called for an end to the hostilities and for peace talks at the end of October 2019 after a buildup of pressure on the Trump administration after Khashoggi killing. The response from actors was **quick**. The sides came together between 6-13 December 2018 in Sweden to sign the Stockholm Agreement.

The US is **the only actor** that can force the KSA, the UAE, and through them the legitimate Government and the Southern Transitional Council (STC), and that can incentivize a peace-bringing compromise to Iran and Houthis.

STRATEGIC FORESIGHT

Based on the analyses above, it is highly likely that:

- Biden administration will emphasize democracy and human rights issues in US Foreign policy. As such, he is expected to impose **some constraints on Egypt, GCC, and Turkey**, and stop US Support, or ignorance against these countries.
- This will have implications for the conflicts in **Libya, Palestine, Syria, and Yemen**.
- Israel will continue to be a key ally of the US. Nonetheless, Biden will pursue a more **diplomatic and softer** approach by giving room to Palestinians, e.g. restarting UN aid, opening a PLO office, engagement and restricting Israel's harsh policies.
- Biden pledges to return **JCPOA**, which enable the EU to repair the damages President Trump inflicted upon the deal. This will **disturb** Egypt, the Gulf Countries, and Israel as well.
- The new administration will **suspend the US support** to Saudi Arabia in Yemen Civil War. It is highly likely that Biden will distance the US from Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia.
- The dependence of the US on gas and oil from the Middle East has been **diminishing** after the shale gas revolution. Combined with Biden's policy preferences, **the significance of the Gulf countries** will continue to fade gradually.
- With respect to Libya and Syria, the new administration will **not pursue a** substantial change in US policies.
- Biden's emphasis on democracy and human rights and his targeting Erdogan will **exacerbate** the US-Turkey relations. However, this will not be an imposition of far-reaching sanctions or removing Turkey from NATO, that is beneficial to Russia, not the Western Alliance.
- The new administration will forge closer ties with **the opponents of Erdogan** as Biden pointed out in his article published in Foreign Affairs.