



Will Biden Pivot On Iran?

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How will a Biden administration handle the Middle East? Now that the results of the hotly contested U.S. election are (mostly) known, foreign policy experts and officials alike are turning their attention to that question. Over the coming weeks and months more particulars will emerge, as will the personalities who will be tasked with managing one of the world's most volatile regions.

Even before then, however, it is clear that one issue will be of overriding importance in shaping the complexion of the Middle East in the years ahead—as well as America's standing in it. It is the one issue where Biden's approach differs most greatly from the one adopted to date by the Trump administration. That issue is Iran.

Over the past two and a half years, the Trump administration has adopted a "maximum pressure" policy in an attempt to roll back the strategic gains made by the Islamic Republic as a result of its 2015 nuclear deal with the West. Through that deal, Iran accepted temporary restrictions on its nuclear program in exchange for massive sanctions relief and a rehabilitation of its international standing. For Iran, the deal was nothing short of a godsend, providing its clerical regime with hundreds of billions of dollars and setting it on a path of sustained regional expansion.

The Trump administration has aimed to reverse this expansion. Its objectives are abundantly clear: not to foment regime change in Tehran, but to curb Iran's destabilizing regional behavior and force it back to the negotiating table for a broader accord that better serves American strategic interests.

Biden and his top advisers have already signaled that they plan to take a substantially more accommodating tack toward Tehran. In the spring of 2020, at the start of the global coronavirus outbreak, Biden himself argued that the U.S. needed to ease sanctions pressure on Iran—even though the Iranian regime had by then repeatedly turned down offers of humanitarian assistance from the Trump administration. In much the same vein, a top Biden foreign policy adviser, former deputy secretary of state Anthony Blinken, suggested that a Biden White House would be willing to resuscitate the 2015 deal—including, presumably, reactivating the massive sanctions relief that accompanied the original agreement. The Biden-aligned Center for a New American Security has gone so far as to release a detailed blueprint of what future negotiations with Iran might look like.

Those overtures are reminiscent of the outreach that characterized the Obama years, and that helped empower a wave of Iranian regional aggression. Over the past half-decade, the Iranian regime and its proxies have worked in places like Syria, Yemen and Iraq to alter the regional status quo in Tehran's favor. A return to Obama-era engagement under Biden would risk reigniting similar dynamics.

It could also precipitate a new regional conflict. Arab states like the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia are now said to be deeply nervous that a Biden victory could end up empowering Iran and creating anew the conditions for it to dominate the region. Israel, meanwhile, has warned that it would be prepared to take action to prevent that from happening. In a recent television interview, Israeli settlements minister Tzachi Hanegbi predicted darkly that the logical endpoint of Biden's preferred approach could well be "a confrontation between Israel and Iran."

All that means Iran will be a major test for the incoming administration. If the Biden White House returns to the uncritical engagement that punctuated the Obama era, the results will be all too familiar: an empowerment of Iran's radical regime, a marginalization of America's regional allies and quite possibly a new regional conflict. If, on the other hand, it can take advantage of the current weakened state of the Iranian regime, it may be able to forge a new U.S. policy to contain and deter Tehran.

Doing so, however, will require the new administration to appreciate—and then to exploit—the leverage that has been created by more than two years of the Trump administration's "maximum pressure." Only time will tell whether it will.