



Biden Faces an Evolving Middle East

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The news that Bahrain's foreign minister is meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel this week highlights the predicament that president elect Joe Biden faces in the Middle East: he wants to restore a U.S. approach to the region that relies on increasingly out-of-date assumptions.

For starters, Biden promises to rejoin the U.S.-led global nuclear agreement with Iran, under which Tehran agreed to temporary restrictions on its nuclear program in exchange for relief from crippling sanctions.

President Obama, for whom Biden served as vice president, considered the agreement his top global achievement. The Democratic foreign policy establishment has sharply criticized President Trump's decision to leave it in 2018 and the administration's attempts to force Iran to renegotiate the deal through a "maximum pressure" campaign.

Rejoining the agreement would be reassuring to U.S. allies in Europe, particularly France and Germany, which criticized Trump's move and sought to convince Iran to abide by the agreement in exchange for European efforts to help Tehran evade Washington's increasingly tight economic sanctions. But rejoining the agreement and picking up where they left off may be no simple matter.

In a confidential report this month, the International Atomic Energy Agency concluded that Iran has secretly stockpiled at least 12 times the amount of enriched uranium that the agreement allows, a quantity that experts say is enough to build an atomic bomb in less than four months. Iran is also enriching uranium to a higher purity level—thus, closer to weapons-grade enrichment—than the agreement allows.

In response to the report, Iran announced that it will further restrict the access of international inspectors to its nuclear sites. Moreover, in another sign of its continued nuclear ambitions, Iran is building a new facility for assembling centrifuges (which enrich uranium) in the mountains near Natanz to replace a site that was destroyed in July.

Biden vows to rejoin the agreement if Tehran "returns to compliance," but he also vows to "strengthen and extend" the agreement—which would prove crucial because the deal's restrictions on Iran's nuclear pursuits all expire over time, clearing the way for Tehran to pursue the nuclear weaponry that it seems to desire.

Whether Biden can convince Tehran to sign on to a stronger and longer agreement that further restricts its nuclear ambitions is a very open question. Whether an increasingly restive Iranian population will overthrow its corrupt mullahcracy and replace it with a less hostile leadership that abandons the nuclear goal is another.

On another front, Biden vows to work with Israeli and Palestinian leaders "to keep the prospect of a negotiated two-state outcome alive" (while surely hoping to nourish far warmer ties with Netanyahu than Obama enjoyed).

Like Iran, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an issue on which Trump upended the previous U.S. posture. Rather than pursue peace, the holy grail of U.S. policymaking in the Middle East for decades, he gave Jerusalem a largely free hand to conduct its relations with the Palestinian side as it saw fit.

Over the years, America's leaders in both parties have viewed Israeli-Palestinian peace as the gateway to broader Israeli-Arab peace—and it remains a cherished goal of left-of-center U.S. policymakers and activities—but dramatic recent developments across the region should bury that myth once and for all.

The Arab world these days is far more interested in closer ties with Israel, both to help counter Iran's expansionist ambitions and to reap the economic benefits of greater trade and investment with the Jewish state.

Israel announced peace agreements with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, along with Sudan, in recent weeks. But, at least as important, it is working ever more closely with Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab nations on their shared goal of constraining Iran, the world's leading Shia power.

In announcing this week's visit of Bahraini foreign minister Abdullatif bin Rashid Al-Zayani to Israel, the official *Bahrain News Agency* said that the visit would "affirm Bahrain's strong and permanent position in favor of supporting the peace process" and focus on "the economic opportunities and bilateral accords with Israel."

Last month, top UAE officials visited Israel and, following an aviation agreement between the two nations, Abu Dhabi's Etihad Airways announced this week that it would begin daily flights to Tel Aviv in March.

All told, Biden's efforts to restore the policies of the past in the Middle East could run headlong into changed realities on the ground.

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