

Briefing Memo

Middle East policy and the Biden Administration: observations of the initial direction

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Introduction

Initially, it was thought that the new administration of President Joseph R. Biden, former Vice President to Barack Obama under the previous Democratic administration, would return to the Middle East policies of the second Obama term of 2013-2016, on account of the pledge during the election campaign of restoring the Iran nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), July 2015). Specifically, the sense was that given the changing security environment from a decade of war on terror that was prompted by the 9/11 attacks, the material and moral decay of US power and the rise of China in the East Asia and Indo-Pacific region, the way was open to greatly reduced US troop levels in the Middle East in order to rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific, a return to the Iran nuclear deal and further reductions in military spending.¹

It was also thought that the incoming Biden administration's important related challenges would include a swift settlement of the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars and their associated humanitarian crises, the rapid withdrawal² of US forces from Afghanistan by the deadline of September 11, 2021

¹ See KOZUKA Ikuya, "Security Prospects After the American Presidential Election 10 The Situation in the Middle East After the Establishment of the New Biden Administration: Considering future prospects through data analysis," *NIDS Commentary* No. 158, February 18, 2021, <http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/commentary/pdf/commentary158e.pdf>, accessed on July 17, 2021.

² Missy Ryan, "Biden will withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, 2021," *Washington Post*, April 13,

as established as the roadmap in peace negotiations with the Taliban by the former Trump administration, and the reopening of peace negotiations toward a two-state solution, based on preventing the expansion of West Bank of the Jordan river settlements by Israel. However, the present writer does not yet see an environment in which the Biden administration can proceed rapidly towards resolution of any of these issues.³ This naturally comes back to the substantial changes in the Middle East since the Obama era. President Obama's promotion of political reform and democratization in the region in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings has given way to support for continuation of the status quo. With respect to Israel, some posit that given the poor relationship Obama had with former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (who stepped down in June 2021) and the good relations he enjoyed with Joe Biden, this administration will chart a different course in the Middle East from Obama's.⁴

Fortunately, we have the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance⁵ to inform us as to the thinking behind the national security strategy of the incoming Biden administration. In this paper, based on the Interim guidance, I will try to analyse the Middle East foreign policy and security policy direction of the early Biden administration and the downgrading of priority given to the Middle East in US national security policy overall.

2021, Mohammad Yaghi, "What Drives President Bidens Middle East Policies? And what are their Impacts on the Gulf States?" Contact Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V., *Policy Report* No. 22, May 2021, p. 5, note 37, <https://www.kas.de/documents/286298/8668222/Policy+Report+No+22+What+Drives+President+Biden%E2%80%99s+Middle+East+Policies.pdf/98bac5dc-abc0-a108-18ef-32ff9f156873?version=1.1&t=1621864193248>, accessed on July 17, 2021.

³ KOZUKA, "The Situation in the Middle East After the Establishment of the New Biden Administration."

⁴ Yaghi, "What Drives President Bidens Middle East Policies? And what are their Impacts on the Gulf States?" p. 1.

⁵ The White House, March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>, accessed on July 17, 2021.

1. The place and priority of the Middle East in the Interim guidance

The Middle East summary is found on page 11 of the Interim guidance. It states that the US “will maintain a firm commitment to Israel’s security, while seeking to further its integration with Israel and its Arab neighbors and resuming our role as promoter of a viable two-state solution including Palestine. In addition, we will work with our regional partners to deter Iranian aggression and threats to sovereignty and territorial integrity, disrupt al-Qaeda and related terrorist networks and prevent an ISIS resurgence, address humanitarian crises, and redouble our efforts to resolve the complex armed conflicts that threaten regional stability.”⁶

But, the Interim guidance continues, “we do not believe that military force is the answer to the region’s challenges, and we will not give our partners in the Middle East a blank check to pursue policies at odds with American interests and values. That’s why we have withdrawn U.S. support for offensive military operations in Yemen and backed UN efforts to end the war. Our aim will be to de-escalate regional tensions and create space for people throughout the Middle East to realize their aspirations.”⁷

On pages 14 and 15 of the Interim guidance is found the Biden administration’s desire to revise the overcommitment of US military force in the Middle East since 9/11. Firstly on page 14, it is stated in bold font that “we will make smart and disciplined choices regarding our national defense and the responsible use of our military while elevating diplomacy as our tool of first resort”, while noting

⁶ Ibid., p. 11.

⁷ Ibid.

that “a powerful military matched to the security environment is a decisive American advantage”.⁸

Then on page 15, it states more specifically, “The United States should not, and will not, engage in ‘forever wars’ that have cost thousands of lives and trillions of dollars. We will work to responsibly end America’s longest war in Afghanistan while ensuring that Afghanistan does not again become a safe haven for terrorist attacks against the United States. Elsewhere, as we position ourselves to deter our adversaries and defend our interests, working alongside our partners, our presence will be most robust in the Indo-Pacific and Europe. In the Middle East, we will right-size our military presence to the level required to disrupt international terrorist networks, deter Iranian aggression, and protect other vital U.S. interests.” This reflects the intent of the Biden administration to substantially reduce the footprint of the US military presence in the Middle East. It is a statement that the Biden administration will dramatically reduce the priority given to the Persian Gulf region, which since the end of the US-USSR Cold War has been the next priority for US presence after the Asia-Pacific region and Europe.

2. What motivates the new Biden administration’s Middle East policy

So, why does the Biden administration see lower strategic priority for the Middle East? One of the reasons is likely the pressure on the administration exerted by the need to revive the economy after the human and economic toll of the Covid-19 pandemic since 2020. In other words, the rapid recovery of the damaged domestic economy is for the new administration a more pressing challenge

⁸ Ibid., p. 14.

than continuing protracted war in the Middle East. Moreover, on global foreign policy and security, the US confronts China and needs to focus on competing with it for resources in order to secure its economic leadership. Some have raised concerns that an outsized commitment of military forces to the Middle East draws scarce US resources away from the most important places.⁹ As President Biden cannot turn his back on the political and economic demands, a leftward shift is also on the cards compared to the Obama administration as a result of a marked structural move left in the Democratic Party in recent years, with a strong progressive trend emphasizing the human rights of minority groups and environmental issues.¹⁰

This has reduced the focus of US military involvement in the Middle East to a cost-benefit analysis, and it is easy to see that the cost of the existing commitment to the region is out of proportion to the benefits.

Firstly, the iron grip of the US on the region since the end of the Cold War in 1991 is secured by 25 military bases established since the end of the Cold War (12 in the Persian Gulf) and over 25,000 military personnel as of 2018.¹¹ US hegemony in the Middle East exacts a tremendous cost both materially and ethically, and in terms of financial, political, military and soft power. As an example, by the end of 2019, the United States Treasury has shouldered costs of \$500 billion per year for the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan alone, or a grand total of approximately \$6.4 trillion. By the end of November 2018, the nation had lost 14,702 soldiers, contractors and civilians, in Iraq and

⁹ Yaghi, “What Drives President Bidens Middle East Policies? And what are their Impacts on the Gulf States?” p. 1.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “U.S. Military Bases and Facilities in the Middle East,” American Security Project, June 2018, Yaghi, “What Drives President Bidens Middle East Policies? And what are their Impacts on the Gulf States?” p. 2, note 5.

Afghanistan.¹²

Further, tens of thousands of civilians died as a result of US military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. The US also lost moral authority and soft power in the region due to its inability to build stable democratic structures in Iraq, and the rise of sectarianism, Al-Qaida and ISIS. A study by the Watson Institute, Brown University, in November 2018 estimated the death toll in Iraq and Afghanistan at between 415,000 and 442,000.¹³

When it came to US aid and diplomatic effort in the region, its focus has been on the five host countries of Afghanistan, Israel, Egypt, Jordan and Iraq. In 2019, aid to Afghanistan amounted to \$4.89 billion, Israel received \$3.3 billion, Jordan \$1.72 billion and Egypt \$1.46 billion, consuming an estimated 31.5% of the total foreign aid budget of \$39.2 billion.¹⁴ This means that the US spent more on the Middle East than any other region of the world.

The Biden administration is likely trying to limit the overcommitment of US military to the Middle East as a result of the changing strategic focus of the US in the region over the past decade and an easing of oil and natural gas supply issues. Therefore, it is probably inevitable that the US will move to downgrade the priority of the Middle East in its national security strategy as Biden stresses the need to end the “forever wars” in the Middle East and pivot to securing political, economic and military superiority over China.

¹² Neta C. Crawford, “United States Budgetary Costs and Obligations of Post-9/11 Wars through FY2020: \$6.4 Trillion,” Watson Institute, Brown University, November 13, 2019; “Human Cost of the Post-9/11 Wars: Lethality and the Need for Transparency,” Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, November 2018, Yaghi, “What Drives President Bidens Middle East Policies? And what are their Impacts on the Gulf States?” p. 2, note 6-7.

¹³ Crawford, Human Cost of the Post-9/11 Wars, Yaghi, “What Drives President Bidens Middle East Policies? And what are their Impacts on the Gulf States?” p. 2, note 10.

¹⁴ “Foreign Aid Explorer: U.S. Foreign Aid by Country,” USAID, Yaghi, “What Drives President Bidens Middle East Policies? And what are their Impacts on the Gulf States?” p. 2, note 11.

In conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to analyse the Middle East foreign policy and security policy direction of the early Biden administration and the lower priority given to the Middle East in US national security policy overall, based on the Interim guidance document released by the White House in March 2021. However, negotiations to restore the Iran nuclear agreement promised by President Biden during the election have stalled over whether the US or Iran will be first to compromise. Then, as conflict raged between Israeli police in Jerusalem and Palestinians from May 10 to May 20, 2021, then escalated with extensive rocket attacks by Hamas and retaliatory air strikes by the Israeli air force, the Biden administration was slow to move toward a ceasefire between Hamas, which effectively controls the Gaza Strip and Israel, in order to avoid Israeli criticism.

In short, the Interim guidance contains rhetoric in support of good relations towards a two-state solution between Israel and its Arab neighbors but implies that for domestic political reasons, will not necessarily take a hardline stance of applying pressure to friends and allies, like the Trump administration before it. Therefore, while the Biden administration's Middle East policy is affected to some extent by domestic politics, particularly the progressive trends within the US Democratic Party, it is likely to retain plenty of room for maneuver going forward.

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