

OVERVIEW

Four years of the United States (US) Donald Trump presidency have had some critical diplomatic repercussions for countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, both positive and negative.

For **Saudi Arabia**, the relationship between the White House and Riyadh has arguably been closer than under any other administration. This has enabled Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman to stake his claim as the future ruler of the world's largest oil exporter, which has involved impunity for contentious domestic and international actions, including extrajudicial killings and the war in Yemen.

In **Israel**, long-time Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has received more accolade from the US presidency than most other former premiers of Israel since its inception. This includes recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, the Golan Heights as Israeli territory, the Palestinian 'Peace Plan' which approves the annexation of up to 30 per cent of Palestinian West Bank Territory and Abraham Accords which normalise ties between Arab countries and Tel Aviv.

However, the Trump administration also withdrew from former president Barak Obama's 2015 nuclear deal with **Iran** – known as the JCPOA – one of the most significant foreign policy achievements of Obama's administration. The White House imposed a 'maximum pressure campaign' of sanctions, which has had the opposite effect of its intention during Trump's four years; Iran has ramped up nuclear capabilities and has proliferated soldiers and proxies further, not less throughout the region.

In **Iraq**, the Trump administration claims the defeat of terror group Islamic State (IS). However, policy choices have also eroded Iraq's sovereignty further to reduce the country to a 'theatre of aggression' in which the animosity between the Trump administration and Iraq's neighbours in Iran have played out, while a year of anti-government protests have largely been overlooked.

This AKE Special Report focusses on **how and why the incoming US administration under Joe Biden will alter its approach to these four countries**. It also touched upon what the US's realignment with the United Nations (UN) means to allow the US to reconnect with allies and enable a more stable and united approach to some significant international geostrategic issues in the Middle East, including **Turkey**.

INTRODUCTION

As the dust finally settled on the 3 November United States (US) presidential election, key power players across the globe are anxious to understand the shape of US

foreign policy over the next four years. For countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region the reception to US president-elect Joe Biden's victory was mixed. The

About us

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change in administration triggers a pivot in US policy for key regional players, for better or for worse. Granted, outgoing US President Donald Trump still has some weeks in power, in which he is already accelerating some of his more controversial policy stances. Many in the region are doing the same before he leaves.

On 24 November Biden's foreign policy team began to coalesce, which gives some indicators as to how the new administration will pivot its policies. Nonetheless, Biden's long tenure in US politics and his eight years' vice presidency beside former president and close friend Barack Obama already provides an indication as to how Biden's Middle East foreign policy strategy may unfold. However, Biden's foreign policy direction will not be his main focus when entering the White House.

At least over his first year he must focus on controlling the COVID-19 pandemic and work towards uniting his divided country. Biden has also indicated that he will re-join the Paris Accords immediately in a bid led by former Obama Secretary of State John Kerry and seek to repair damages done to the efficacy of the United Nations (UN), with the inclusion of Linda Thomas-Greenfield in his administration. Nonetheless, policy alterations and reparations must eventually be made in the MENA region. The key countries to which US policy will likely undergo a significant shift are Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran and Iraq.

SAUDI ARABIA: Increasing pressure and focus on accountability

US-president elect Joe Biden will differ in his approach to Saudi Arabia from both Trump and Obama. Biden has over recent years, and especially over this election campaign, made his differing stance towards Saudi Arabia known. Although Riyadh has long been one of the US' closest allies and its historic role as the world's largest oil exporter has enabled a mutually beneficial partnership on myriad issues, during a November 2019 Democratic debate Biden warned that his administration would "make [Saudi Arabia] the pariah that they are". The change between Biden and Trump's policies towards Saudi Arabia are self-evident, yet even Obama has been accused of coddling Riyadh in his eight-year tenor, especially in the trade-off between human rights and immediate US counterterrorism concerns.



The difference then between Obama and Biden's approaches is to do with the rise of one individual, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MbS). The young prince's ascension coincided with the end of the Obama years and since has been not just enabled but endorsed by Donald Trump and his Special Advisor and son-in-law Jared Kushner, with whom MbS is close. Two main issues stand out for Biden: the protracted humanitarian disaster that is the war in Yemen, into which Riyadh under MbS waded in 2015; and MbS's targeting of dissidents, political opponents and activists both domestically and internationally, including that of Jamal Khashoggi for which there have been few repercussions for the kingdom's officials. Biden has said that he would stop all US support for Riyadh in Yemen's war

Despite this, Biden is unlikely to follow a Trump style-approach of 'maximum pressure', nor could he pressure the world's largest oil exporter – the impact of the 1973 oil embargo still looms. It is more likely that Biden will place stronger conditions on US support for Saudi Arabia. What this could mean is to seek concessions over women's rights and the release of certain activists and princes. In recent days British Members of Parliament have called for Magnitsky Sanctions against the kingdom against the detention of former crown prince Muhammad bin Nayaf who has been languishing in solitary confinement since March in an unknown location in Saudi Arabia.

Washington may also seek to pressure Riyadh in a particularly sensitive sector – weapons. Even Obama signed off on the sale of over US\$115bln to Saudi Arabia alone in his eight years in office. Saudi Arabia was the destination for Trump's first trip overseas in May 2017, a visit that set the tone for the strong alliance that has persisted ever since. During this trip, Trump and King Salman signed a series of letters of intent for Riyadh's purchase of over US\$110bln of arms immediately, and US\$350bln over 10 years – admittedly they were only

memorandums of understanding but Trump's point was made.

Biden could heed the bipartisan call to reduce weapons' sales to the kingdom. In June 2019 seven Republicans, including Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and Senator Susan Collins of Maine signed a bill specifically targeting arms sales to Saudi Arabia. That bill was vetoed by Trump. He also vetoed a bill that would have limited the sale of weapons to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which has been an important coalition partner to Saudi Arabia in its ongoing military campaign in Yemen. Both of these issues may come back to the table and could go forward should there be no change in Riyadh's entrenchment in the war or the 2019 Riyadh Agreement.

Saudi media has continually sought to discredit the Biden administration's Saudi policy, branding Democrats' approach as foreign influence attempting to meddle in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state. It would be to the benefit of both parties that they find some common ground, although Biden's likely attempt (mentioned later) to return to the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal may prompt backlash in Riyadh. MbS could seek a 'get out of jail' card by promising to normalise ties with Israel, although the impact of this is reduced by the UAE's normalisation deal with Israel this year, as well as ailing King Salman's continued support for the Palestinian cause. MbS has previously shown that he would not be averse to isolating erstwhile allies on a whim, and it is hoped that he would see sense enough not to try to distance itself from the White House over this coming four-year term. Nonetheless, the relationship will remain tense.

ISRAEL: Long-time allies/ slight shift in approach

Long-time Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also followed the US presidential elections nervously. While the US under any president remains a key partner and staunch ally of Israel's, Trump's policy towards Israel over the previous four years gave Netanyahu concessions that no other US president has yet, effectively a carte blanche. Firstly, in December 2017 Trump announced that Jerusalem was the capital of Israel and acknowledged this fact by moving the US Embassy there. Secondly, Trump provided no opposition to Israel's Basic Law in July 2018 which specifies the nature of the state of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. Thirdly, he declared Syria's occupied Golan Heights legitimate Israeli territory in March 2019, widely seen as a political gift from Trump to help Netanyahu's bid in the Israeli election held two

weeks after the recognition. Fourthly, he cut aid and ties with the Palestinian Authority. Fifthly, over the course of his tenure Trump managed to push through his 'Palestinian Plan for peace' with not one architect of the plan a Palestinian. The premise of this plan is to annex legal and illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank, which could constitute up to 30 per cent of West Bank territory.



The UAE also rubber-stamped Trump's plan in the Abraham Accords which specifies a roadmap to guide the Palestinian question, signed between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain in September 2020. While the news of this was covered differently in Israeli and Emirati press an excerpt from the Abraham Accord explicitly states that the UAE and the State of Israel mutually recall 'the reception held on 28 January 2020 at which President Trump presented his Vision for Peace and committing to continuing their efforts to achieve a just, comprehensive, realistic and enduring solution to the Israeli – Palestinian conflict'. However, many of the moves made by Trump's administration with regards to Israel were widely condemned by the international community, including EU and UN allies, from whom Trump made unprecedented breaks over the course of his four-year tenure. The US remains the only country (other than Israel) who recognises Israeli sovereignty over occupied Golan.

Biden is not going to start overturning Trump's controversial moves. He has known Netanyahu for over 30 years, ever since Netanyahu assumed his first diplomatic post in Washington. Since his early days in the US Senate, Biden has been known as a staunch supporter of Israel, having travelled to Israel in 1973 just before the Yom Kippur war and met with then-prime minister Golda Meir. Furthermore, new Secretary of State Anthony Blinken has strong ties with Israel which will also soften the Democrats' policy stance towards the ally. Yet, Biden can take a harder stance on Israel. He is not backed by Republican megadonors who invest heavily in right-wing causes in Israel and is unlikely to appoint an ambassador like Trump's David Friedman, nor has a special advisor such as son-in-law Jared Kushner.

However, there are likely to be some reversals to Trump's plans. His administration will seek to mend ties with Palestinian officials, whilst re-joining UN nations in condemning the expansion of illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank and the destruction of Palestinian settlements – which is increasing amid Trump's last weeks. Furthermore, Israel appears to be using the last Trump days to target Iran's nuclear and military strategies. Israel appears the only likely candidate to have carried out the highly complex 27 November assassination of Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh in Absard – just days after outgoing US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo undertook what appeared to be a farewell tour of the region and visiting Netanyahu and senior officials in Tel Aviv – and drone strikes on senior IRGC commander Muslim Shahdan in Syria on 30 November. Biden could seek to end support Trump's unquestioning support for the Israeli right but is unlikely to roll back Trump's changes to those of the Obama period. The main source of contention then with Tel Aviv during Joe Biden's tenor will be how the US resets the damage that the Trump 'maximum pressure policy' has done for US - and indeed global – relations with Iran.

IRAN: JCPOA 2.0?

Joe Biden was heavily involved in negotiating the 2015 Iran nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), arguably the key foreign policy achievement of the Obama Administration. Indeed, John Kerry, Obama's secretary of state and now Biden's climate envoy, was the principal architect.



Repudiating the deal was therefore one of the first major foreign policy moves of the Trump presidency, which has since decimated Iran's already fragile Iranian economy, arguably increased Iranian militia expansionism, triggered Tehran to ramp up their nuclear programme whilst solidifying the Islamic regime; in essence exacerbating the issues that the Trump administration's sanctions under his 'maximum pressure policy' were seeking to curtail.

Biden's new US Secretary of State Antony Blinken also provides hope to the revival of the deal, as an 'internationalist', but may temper a complete about-face given his longstanding ties to Israel. Furthermore, Biden's National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan served as national security adviser to Biden when he was vice president and was a long-time aide to former secretary of state Hillary Clinton. He is credited for launching the secret talks with Iranian officials in 2012 which laid the groundwork for the nuclear deal. That same year, he played a key role in brokering the ceasefire that ended Operation Pillar of Defense, launched by Israel in response to Hamas rocket fire from Gaza.

Since the US's withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018 Iran has increasingly reneged on the terms of the deal. On 11 November 2020 the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported that Tehran's stockpiles of low-enriched uranium are 12 times over the limit set by JCPOA and that the first cascade of advanced centrifuges was moved to an underground plant in Natanz, further violating the JCPOA. Construction of an underground plant began in October after the previous facility was damaged in an alleged sabotage attack in July. Furthermore, the deal stipulated the restriction and reduction of extra-territorial activists by Iran's military. Nonetheless, Iran's expeditionary Quds force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) remain stationed in bases across Syria, including around Damascus and in positions in the Syrian administered Golan heights. Current Quds force General Isma'il Qaani has in recent weeks completed a trip to Lebanon's Hizbullah head Hassan Nasrallah as well as to Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi and heads of Iraqi Shi'ah militia. His visit indicates the influence that Iran continues to have in across the region. The IRGC also tacitly and explicitly sponsors Shi'ah militia in Iraq, who, even in recent months, have increasingly proliferated and weaponised, conducting intimidatory attacks against US military, diplomatic and logistical infrastructure in Federal Iraq. These militia are also operating in eastern Syria.

Concerning reports have emerged that Trump on 12 November asked his highest-ranking national security advisors, including outgoing Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, how to pursue a military strike on Iran's primary nuclear site. While he was dissuaded over fears of massive regional destabilisation reports emerged that on 21 November the US rapidly deployed several B-52H Stratofortress heavy bombers, which were seen flying towards Israeli airspace on 21 November while en route to the base in which they will be

stationed – likely Qatar. The bombers can carry nuclear weapons and other heavy munitions. On 27 November a senior Iranian nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhriadeh was assassinated in Absard outside of Tehran, which was undoubtedly carried out by Israel, but certainly demanded the backing of the US given the potential volatility and threats of retaliation that this triggered.

While Biden's office will seek to bring Iran in from the isolation imposed under the Trump presidency, Biden cannot appear to 'go softly' on Tehran and will not immediately lift Trump's sanctions. The work needed to return Iran to the terms of the JCPOA involves both a logistical and material shift from its current nuclear activities. It will take years of work and transparency for both sides to rebuild trust and prove their intent and appetite to adhere to the previous terms. Reverting to the JCPOA may be possible over Biden's first term. However, should either side seek to renegotiate, going back to the basics of the agreement and redrafting from scratch is unlikely to be an option. An explicit move to retaliate against Israel or the US retaliate for the assassination of Fakhriadeh could also cause massive disruption to early steps towards repairing the relationship under the new administration and will diminish for an expedited resolution to the last four years of damage. Biden's approach to Iran could also significantly impact the June 2021 presidential elections, with further isolation likely to push the result in favour of a more strictly conservative president.

IRAQ: Balancing Act

While the US's approach to Iraq should not by all means be overlooked, and indeed Baghdad's agency in the relationship should not be minimised, four years of US vacillation and Federal Iraq's increasing position as a theatre for US – Iran aggression has left the current Baghdad administration under Mustafa al-Kadhimi on an uneven keel. Nonetheless, Biden is unlikely to reverse the Trump administration's wind down of US troops in Iraq, after acting outgoing US Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller announced that the number of US troops in Iraq would be reduced from 3,000 to 2,500 personnel by 15 January 2021.

The ostensible reason for this drawdown is that the threat of Islamic State (IS) militancy in Iraq and Syria has been reduced. Another, but less publicised, reason is due to the ongoing vulnerability of US diplomatic and military assets to low-tech missile and rocket attacks from Shi'ah militia

backed by Iran which proliferate on the ground in Iraq. The third and lesser-known reason could have to do with Biden's leading role in authorising US Congress in 2002 and granting then-president George Bush the authority to invade Iraq, a move from which Iraq is visibly still suffering the consequences. While Iraq is unlikely to undergo a similar destabilisation and uptick of attacks witnessed in recent weeks since the beginning of the US's drawdown from Afghanistan, Biden's administration must tread a fine line with Mustafa al-Kadhimi in the run up to Iraq's elections in June 2021, supporting the electoral process and Kadhimi's small reforms to open the democratic process, whilst allowing the country some room to regain its agency in its own political determination.

Furthermore, Biden is unlikely to cancel the deals brokered by five US firms, including Chevron, General Electric, Baker Hughes, Honeywell International and Stellar Energy, and Baghdad to launch a slew of commercial agreements worth up to US\$8bln of investment. GE is working to conduct critical maintenance to Iraq's electricity infrastructure, decimated by years of sanctions and war. Trump's intention was to develop the infrastructure to go some way towards achieving the aim of weaning Iraq off Iranian electricity and cutting off a significant source of foreign exchange earnings. Biden's motives differ although his trajectory will likely remain the same. He will seek to ensure that the infrastructure work is undertaken to enable the world's third largest oil exporter to be energy self-sufficient, continuing with job creation and to reduce Iraq's environmental impact as the second largest utiliser of gas flaring after Russia.

Therefore, while some observers may see a US 'hands off approach' as allowing Iran more room to manipulate Baghdad's political sphere, becoming overly involved could continue to highlight Washington's failures in Iraq under multiple administrations. Biden's administration will seek to reengage with the US – Iraq Strategic dialogue without the coercive undertone of the Trump



administration. With a pragmatic approach to this dialogue and providing Baghdad with a framework on

which they can rely, the Biden administration has the potential to enable Kadhimi’s administration to move forwards with small electoral reforms. Furthermore, it can provide support through investment to enable Baghdad to meet at least some of the demands which protesters of the long-term mass protest movement in advance of elections in June 2021. This should allow Iraq coming into the new decade to move out from under the shadow of Iran and the US animosity.



Recalibration of international allegiances and approach to the United Nations

The MENA countries which have not been covered in this report are no less important. Recent events warrant a brief examination of how the US’s foreign policy engagement with other countries – specifically Turkey - will be built in conjunction with Biden’s administration through his choice of foreign affairs veteran Linda Thomas-Greenfield as the US’s envoy to the UN, which will also involve much needed realignment with the EU and allies of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Biden has expressed his support for targeted sanctions, which highlights the new 14 December 2020 sanctions that congress imposed upon Turkey for its purchase of Russia’s S-400 anti-missile defence system. These sanctions have been a long time coming development and are in fact in opposition to Trump’s objections. Ankara purchased the S-400s back in 2017 and took possession of the system in June 2019. Washington downplays the sanctions as less about Ankara than about

the payment of US\$500m for the system into Moscow, and the sanctions are primarily symbolic.

The US’s sanctions target Turkey’s Presidency of Defence Industries, the state-owned arm of the Turkish military responsible for military procurement and defence exports. Another reason is that the Russian systems are incompatible with the US’s F-35 fighter jets – which Turkey has purchased as a NATO member (and the second largest military in the allegiance). However, the main fear is that the necessary alignment of the US’s F-35 jets and Russia’s S-400 systems will allow Russia a back door into accessing sensitive US military technology and data.

However, just prior to the US’ sanctions, on 12 December the EU also announced that it had decided to impose sanctions on an unspecified number of Turkish officials and entities linked to Ankara’s gas exploration and drilling in disputed Cypriot waters. Greece, Cyprus and France had pushed for more substantive sanctions. The announcement was caveated with the fact the sanctions would be imposed in March, after the EU had time to consult with Biden’s administration, which would generate proposals on a broader approach to Turkey.

This announcement broadly underscores how allies who have not been able to rely on steady US policy over the last four years will be able to manage their own foreign policy decisions, in the knowledge that they will not be undercut by volatile and impulsive decision making in Washington. Thomas-Greenfield will enable engagement on multiple fronts, including with the EU and to develop a concerted approach to Turkey and with NATO - from which Trump isolated the US over his four years in office.

It will also allow for recalibration over issues with regards to the Palestinian cause, the reheated Western Sahara conflict – following Washington’s hasty recognition of Rabat’s claim to the Western Sahara after normalisation agreements with Israel – the Peace Process in Libya and once of the most critical issues, the catastrophic humanitarian crises of the most vulnerable countries to COVID-19 and war which include those in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen.