

How Different Would be Biden's Policy Towards the Middle East from Trump's?

As predicted by the pre-election polls, Joseph R. Biden, the former US vice president won the 2020 presidential elections. His victory especially in popular vote was clear. In fact, he won more popular votes than any presidential candidate in US history.

His victory illustrated that a majority of Americans did not approve of Trump's views and policies, but most importantly, it showed that the American people had lost confidence in Trump to deal effectively with the Corona Virus and its economic fall outs.

Foreign policy, except for issues related to climate change and the necessity of the US returning to a cooperative mode internationally did not loom large in the electorate's concerns. Yet, with the exception of Russia, China, some Arab states, and possibly Turkey, most countries, especially the Europeans welcome Biden's election. The Europeans hope that transatlantic relations will improve under Biden. Under a Biden presidency, the US and Europe are likely to cooperate more on regional issues, including on the Middle East.

Meanwhile, US policy towards Russia and China is unlikely to change much. Certainly, they will not grow warm and Biden might even follow a harder policy on China and Russia.

What to Expect From Biden on the Middle East

Middle East countries should not expect drastic reorientation of American policy towards the region. For example, there would be no major change in American approach towards Israel. For instance, the US will not link any financial and military aid to Israel to a change in its position on issues such as settlement building. Nor would Biden return US embassy from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv. Similarly, Biden will not push hard for a Israel-Palestinian agreement. Thus, the so-called deal of the century promoted by Trump most likely will languish like many previous plans. But Biden will encourage Arabs to normalize relations with Israel, but he is unlikely to pressure them as Trump did. Meanwhile, Biden most likely would be a bit more generous towards the Palestinians and would reinstate financial help cut by Trump.

A main reason for continuing the basics of previous policies regarding the Israel is that Biden is staunchly pro-Israel. Moreover, he would have to be sensitive to the pressures from Israel's supporters in the US, including in the Congress. Biden needs congressional support for implementing his domestic agenda and he would not risk alienating pro-Israel senators and representatives.

Biden would be much less warm towards Saudi Arabia, especially its mercurial and arrogant Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman, and would not encourage his more adventurous policies, such as the war in Yemen. However, a Biden administration would avoid endangering America's strategic relations with Riyadh. The geopolitical and economic realities of US-Saudi relations, including Riyadh's large purchases of US arms, have not changed, and Biden must keep these facts in mind. In short, US-Saudi relations might grow a bit frosty, but there would be no permanent freeze. The same would be true of other Persian Gulf states, although a Biden administration might be more sympathetic to Qatar in its dispute with Riyadh.

Biden is unlikely to challenge Al Sissi on human rights ground. Egypt is strategically too important, especially as it regards relations with Israel. Biden is unlikely to repeat Obama's gamble with the Muslim Brotherhood and run the risk a deterioration in Egypt-Israel relations.

The same rule applies to Erdogan and Turkey. Turkey, too, is strategically too important. However, Biden would be less welcoming of Erdogan. No more frequent personal telephone calls between the two leaders. In other words, there might be a cooling of relations, but there would be no major change in the fundamentals of Ankara-Washington ties.

The Iran Conundrum

Biden's most difficult challenge would be how to reduce tensions with Iran and open a path for diplomacy and possible compromise on some key issues, including Tehran's missile program and its regional activities, which are opposed by Washington.

Biden would like to return to the 2015 nuclear agreement, provided Iran reverses increases in the level of its uranium enrichment. It is unlikely that he would lift all sanctions on Iran before some revisions to the original agreement. Biden, too, would insist that, before the full lifting of sanctions, Iran should be prepared to discuss issues related to its missile program and regional activities. The two issues need not be directly connected, but Biden must be certain that easing pressure on Tehran could open the way for more diplomacy to tackle other areas of discord between the two states.

In devising its Iran policy, Biden, too, would be sensitive to the concerns of its regional allies, especially Israel but also Saudi Arabia and its other Persian Gulf partners. He has already indicated that he would consult Netanyahu on JCPOA before returning to it.

Meanwhile, Iran must do its part to make it easier for Biden to act in a positive direction. In fact, progress in US-Iran relations would require a more accommodating attitude on Iran's part. But there is resistance to such a policy in Iran. Already, hardliners in Tehran have come up with preconditions for agreeing to full compliance with the JCPOA. A key hardliner, Shariatmadari, has said that Biden should apologize to Iran, pay reparation to Tehran for the damage done to Iran by sanctions and lift all sanctions. There is no way that any US administration could accept such conditions.

Iran's problems with the US go beyond the issue of JCPOA and have deeper roots. The most important barrier is that the Islamic Republic has defined itself in opposition to the US. Animosity towards the US is a major foundation of the regime's legitimacy, even though Islamic leadership's anti-American strategy has lost much of its popular appeal. As long as Tehran is unwilling to compromise on this basic issue no easing of tensions is possible.

Moreover, the issue of talking to America has become enmeshed with Iran's domestic politics and struggle for power among warring factions. At a deeper level, the Islamic Republic's animosity to the US is partly because of its rejection of modernity and all that it implies. The IRI leadership see the US as the embodiment of all the worse aspects of modernity. As long as Iranian polity have not resolved this fundamental problem, namely how to accommodate modernity domestically, they would not be able to have constructive relations with the outside world.

Iran must also realize that any easing of tensions with the US would require some form of compromise even if tacit and unspoken with Israel. At the very least, Iran must stop asking for Israel's elimination

form the Middle East's political map, peacefully or otherwise. Now that , Israel has expanded its relations with Iran's close neighbors both in the south and in the North(Republic of Azerbaijan) , Tehran must recalculate the security risks of its anti-Israel posture.

Iran should also remember that, unlike Trump, Biden would enjoy Europe's cooperation on its Iran policy. Tehran must realize that Europe's criticism of Trump's approach towards Iran was not an endorsement of Iran' behavior. Europe shares most of the US concerns about Iran and its regional policies. With Biden in the white house, Iran cannot count on exploiting US-Europe differences to its own ends.

In short, President Biden would be more flexible in dealing with Iran. He would use a more polite tone, provided that Tehran reciprocates. This could open an opportunity to address difficult issues in Tehran-Washington relations. But Tehran should remember that Biden would not give up America's fundamental demands.