

# Presidential Policy on the Middle East

by Michael Curtis



In his electoral campaign candidate Joe Biden spent far less time addressing foreign policy than internal policy issues. President-elect Joe Biden now has to formulate his views on a multitude of issues and indicate differences from the policies of President Donald Trump. Almost certainly the Biden views will differ on issues such as Russia, climate change, international organizations, and above all on three factors, the nuclear accord with Iran and containment of Iran's imperial ambitions, increased support for the

Palestinians, and criticism of Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

Admittedly, in view of the world-wide pandemic, the top priority of the U.S. president is to work with other countries to deal with Covid-19 and the issues both medical and economic resulting from it. This requires a cooperative attitude towards international organizations and cooperation, such as WHO, WTO, NATO, the Group of 7, the informal bloc of industrialized democracies, and the Group of 20, the forum for international economic cooperation by governments and central bank governors.

One can suggest inevitable differences between past and future U.S. administrations on some key issues: the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran and its nuclear program, from which President Trump withdrew in 2018; rejoining the Paris agreement signed by 196 parties in April 2015 to slow climate change the economic and political challenge of China and the deals with China on trade on soya beans and intellectual property rights; the sanctions on Russia; relations with the Taliban and withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan; relations with NATO after Trump insisted on increased military spending by the other nations; Trump decisions on removing U.S. troops 12,000 out of Germany without consulting NATO; extending the New START nuclear weapons treaty with Russia, which is due to expire in February and discussions of possible future arms control arrangements.

The Iran policy is particularly challenging now that the UK, France, and Germany have made two pertinent statements: one in January 2020 formally accused Iran of breaking the 2015 agreement that limited the nuclear program; the other on August 20, 2020 stated they were committed to the nuclear deal despite the challenges caused by the U.S. withdrawal from it.

Biden has intimated he will return the U.S. to the 2015 deal,

Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action from which Trump withdrew in 2018, and offer a “credible path back to diplomacy.”

This is not wise. There is general awareness of the danger of Iran, the country with a revolutionary Shiite ideology, a power eager to overthrow the Sunni regimes in the Gulf, and in alliance with Turkey, Qatar, and Hamas challenging the moderate Arabs. It has not been compliant with the 2015 nuclear deal which allowed Iran to have 202 kilograms of low enrichment uranium. Estimates of the International Atomic Agency are that Iran now has twelve times more, a stockpile of some 2,442 kg low enriched uranium, capable of making two nuclear weapons. Two additional problems exist: one is that the uranium has been enriched to a higher level of purity, from 3.67 % to 4.2%. The other is that Iran is building underground an advanced centrifuge assembly plant as protection from aerial attack.

What is likely to be Biden’s policy in Middle East? The last two presidents have differed sharply on Middle East affairs. President Barack Obama was often critical of Israeli actions and proposals and, as a minimum, cool towards Prime Minister Benjamin, Bibi, Netanyahu. Obama was sympathetic to the Palestinian movement, implicitly implying it was akin to the African-American struggle, and therefore he may have envisaged Israel as a colonial state rather than as a miracle in the desert. In an astonishing action, the Obama administration abstained rather than vetoed the UN Security Council Resolution 2334 of December 23, 2026, passed by 14-0, that the establishment of settlements in Palestinian territory occupied since 1967 had no legal validity, and was a flagrant violation under international law.

Obama had good relations with the Muslim Brotherhood, MB, the group that sponsored terrorist activists and Islamist ideological movements which he referred to as “moderate Islamists” and helped the MB government under Mohammed Morsi in Egypt who was favorable to Iran while not supporting Hosni

Mubarak. On this matter, the question now is whether Biden believes as Obama did that the MB is useful in the ongoing struggle against the more violent and radical al Qaeda and ISIS.

Biden appears more congenial than was Obama towards and has been more supportive of the State of Israel, and his personal relations with Netanyahu appear to be harmonious, but there are evident political differences. A starting difference is Biden's support of a two state solution with pre-1967 lines for Israel and Palestinians. He is opposed to Israeli settlement activity, but it is unclear whether some moderate settlement activity would be acceptable.

Biden needs protection from some members of his own party, from Bernie Sanders who called Netanyahu a "reactionary racist," and from Congress people such as-would be leaders of the Flat Earth Society, Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar, and others who advocate BDS against Israel. Indications of likely policies on the Middle East have come from remarks by Vice President elect Kamala Harris, on October 31, 2020 and others. They have spoken of renewing ties with the Palestinians, opposing Israeli unilateral actions, especially regarding annexation and settlement expansion, that might undermine a two-state solution. They favor economic and humanitarian assistance to Palestinians, restoring funding to east Jerusalem hospitals, addressing the "crisis" in Gaza, reopening both the U.S. consulate in east Jerusalem and the PLO mission in Washington, D.C.

Biden is unlikely to reverse the Trump decision to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, but even more unlikely to endorse other Trump decisions including recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the legality of West Bank settlements. He is likely to reverse the Trump policy in September 2018 of cuts and ending of funding for the UN Relief and Works Agency, UNRWA, to which the U.S. has given a third of its annual budget and 30 % of operations

in the region. The rationale for Trump's action is that UNRWA is an "irremediably flawed" operation, but also that Palestinians have been unwilling to negotiate with Israel. Biden will probably resume funding of UNRWA. He is unlikely to endorse Trump's approval of Israeli sovereignty of the Golan, but he is likely to support the Palestinian aspiration for east Jerusalem to be the capital of a future Palestinian state.

In his consideration of policy on Middle East affairs, Biden might consider at least seven factors: the important political changes and progress towards peace in the region made by the Trump administration; the significance of the Abraham Accords; the new power bloc in the region; the activity and terrorist consequences of what has been called by President Macron "Islamist separatism"; the increase by Iran of its enrichment of uranium ; the usefulness of Saudi Arabia in spite of its abysmal human rights record; the change in attitudes of moderate Arab regimes towards Israel.

This is the dawning of the age of Abraham, with the affinity of France, Israel, Greece, Cyprus, UAE and other Arab countries. It is important for Biden not simply to acknowledge but also to uphold and strengthen the Abraham Accords Declaration, originally a joint statement by the U.S., Israel, and UAE on August 13, 2020, and then documents formally signed on September 15 on the south lawn of the White House by the U.S., Israel, UAE, and Bahrain. It declared that the best way to address challenges is through cooperation and dialogue, and that developing friendly relations among states advances the interests of lasting peace in the Middle East and around the world. In general, it aims to encourage efforts to promote interfaith and intercultural dialogue, to advance a culture of peace, to end radicalization and conflict, and to establish diplomatic relations between Israel and its neighbors. More specifically, it established diplomatic or normalization relations the first

for a quarter of a century, between Arab states, UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Israel. Other Arab countries, including Oman, Kuwait, even Saudi Arabia, are expected to normalize relations with Israel.

Of course, the Arab countries involved in the normalization process may have mixed motives and hope to gain material benefits. The UAE is likely to obtain the U.S. F-35 fighter jets and large drones it has long wanted. Bahrain may obtain U.S. advanced weaponry. Sudan which signed a normalization agreement on October 23, 2020, wants to be removed from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism where it was placed in August 1993 when Osama bin Laden was living in the country. Yet normalization is breaking out all over. Gourmets may now enjoy a meal in the new kosher deli in Dubai. Air travelers have their journey shortened now that Saudi Arabia allows Israeli commercial flights over its territory.

The incoming U.S. president must recognize the shift in regional dynamics with the increasing role of moderate Arab governments and realize the success of Abraham Accords indicates a new power bloc as well as the most significant step forward for peace in the Middle East for some time. Two factors are present. One is that the Gulf states are now linked in security with Israel. The second is that the Arab world is abandoning or reducing its interest in the Palestinian cause. It is noticeable that the Palestinian resolution at the Arab League summit in November 2020 to condemn the Israeli-UAE deal did not pass.

It is also noticeable and an indication of change that the Secretary General of the Executive Committee of the PLO, Saeb Erekat aged 65 died on November 10 2020 in Israel, at Hadassah Medical Center in Jerusalem. He was second in line in leadership and the chief negotiator for the Palestinians, a man sometimes akin to undiplomatic hostile rhetorical excesses, yet also partly responsible for the Oslo peace accords of the 1990s. Without too fine a point, if

Palestinians can die peacefully in Israel, they can realize they can also live peacefully there.

President-elect Biden would do best if he encourages the Palestinians to create an infrastructure to be available for the emergence of a Palestinian entity that would be responsible for leading to peace and the ending of terror in the Middle East.