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Blinking, Biding or bombing?

European expectations of American policy
in the Middle East



Joe Biden © Gage Skidmore

Major drivers of US Middle East policy will likely remain the same even under a Biden presidency. Hence, the US role in a number of conflicts across the region may not initially vary that much. The possible exception is a return to the nuclear deal with Iran. The EU should facilitate such a step to reduce the risk of region-wide conflict and use it as a precursor to initiate a regional security initiative that can address deeper security perceptions, threats and force postures. In parallel, it ought to reconfigure its Syria strategy to make it more difficult for Tehran to leverage any gains from a return to the nuclear deal in Syria. The EU can achieve this, for example, by providing greater support for Turkey in Idlib and for the Syrian Kurds in the northeast.

Ever since Joe Biden became the Democratic candidate for the US presidency, a range of [articles](#) and [interviews](#) has shed light on the question of how his presidency might shift US Middle East policy. As events, [resource scarcity](#) and foreign advocacy are likely to create gaps between plans and reality, it is more fruitful at this point to assess potential shifts in underlying US foreign policy drivers. This alert examines three interests that have propelled US policy across the region¹

1 Naturally, there are others. Yet, the interests discussed here have endured and substantially impact the entire region.

for the past two decades and offers ideas on how the European Union (EU) can engage with them.²

US Middle East policy drivers

To begin with, Washington has consistently prioritised the protection and growth of Israel as an ally and US outpost. Both countries share a 'self-made' mentality, a conservative religiosity and strong socio-political bonds via the Jewish diaspora in the US. In geopolitical terms, Israel serves as a US outpost in the Arab-Turkish-Iranian Middle East. In exchange, Israel supplies the US with intelligence and force projection. Israel's illegal settlement project has been de facto normalised by the failure of the numerous – mainly US-led – peace efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while the Trump administration has more recently used the Abraham Accords to shift the Palestinian question to the background.

Another critical driver of US policy in the region has been the aim of reducing the risk of a recurrence of 9/11 by means of a continuous 'war' against violent Sunni extremism. This war has mostly been fought by military means, including drone strikes, proxies and allied forces. Paradoxically, to achieve victory the US has teamed up with many of the region's authoritarian regimes that keep *all* political alternatives to their rule at bay – extremists, incremental reformers, as well as progressives. Examples include Egypt (except 2011-2013), Saudi Arabia and, more recently, the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In a sense, the price for suppressing extremism has been the maintenance of authoritarianism.

2 The longstanding US interest in protecting the Arab littoral states of the Persian Gulf and keeping seelanes open to ensure smooth supply of global energy markets, in exchange for Gulf country financial surpluses being invested in US financial instruments, can also be considered. See for example : Hanieh, A. *'Money, markets and monarchies'*, Cambridge: CUP, 2018. The importance of this interest is arguably declining somewhat due to US energy self sufficiency.

A final longstanding US interest has been the containment of Iran. Many US policy makers view its theocratic regime as an incorrigible revisionist bastion of anti-Americanism that must be quarantined. The shift in this view under President Obama that led to the nuclear deal was unique, but short-lived in its practical consequences (2015-2018). The past few years have seen a return to business as usual with a key regional power being isolated with destabilising effects on the regional order. Despite sanctions, protests and turmoil, Iranian influence in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria nevertheless appears to have remained largely intact.

Constants versus variables

The Israeli driver will likely remain constant despite Prime Minister Netanyahu having badly damaged the country's relations with US Democrats. In Washington, there is not much to gain from diplomatic criticism of Israel, let alone restrictive measures. The sunk costs are perceived as high and the running cost of supporting Israel as low. [Separating](#) US support for Israel as an ally from US support for the Israeli settlement project is hardly feasible as the two define each other today. Another relevant factor is that the Israeli left has disintegrated from an electoral perspective, i.e. there is only the right to work with.

The US focus on radical Sunni extremism will probably become less prominent as priorities and resources shift to counter China. Yet, the legacies of the invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), the survival of Al Qaeda and Islamic State, as well as conflict-fuelled instability in Yemen and Syria will ensure continuation of the 'war on terror' in diminished form. Greater outsourcing of this war to US allies could be one way forward. This would have the additional benefit for Washington of helping key allies – the Emirates and Saudis – mitigate the negative impact of a greening global economy and their own authoritarianism on their regional status, especially if Abu Dhabi and Riyadh maintain close political ties with Washington via the US industrial-military complex.

US pressure on Iran might relax relatively swiftly under a Biden administration if Washington delivers on its stated promise of a return to the nuclear deal as per its original terms, and if Iran returns to compliance. Such a move could take the sting out of the conflict that looms over the region as a result of President Trump's 'maximum pressure' policy on Iranian society via an unprecedented sanctions regime. But the road of return is [strewn with obstacles](#) like the Covid-19 pandemic, US Republican resistance, Iranian principalists acting as spoilers until the June 2021 presidential elections, concerns about Iran's regional profile, as well as opposition from US allies who may intervene in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq to maintain pressure on Iran.

What would a 'geopolitical' European Union do?

The EU's overriding short-term interest in the Middle East lies in reducing regional tensions so as to minimise negative spillover effects. To achieve this, the EU ought to latch on to Mr. Biden's stated desire to return to the nuclear deal and facilitate it as much as possible. At the same time, it should also reconfigure its Syria strategy. The key is to return Iran to compliance under the nuclear deal without further conditions, while minimising the benefits this may bring Tehran in Syria. The EU can facilitate a return to the nuclear deal by [scaling INSTEX up](#) to provide large-scale humanitarian Covid-19 assistance or by [reviving the credit line](#) for purchasing Iranian oil as foreseen in the 2019 '[Macron plan](#)', while talks sort out the [modalities and steps of return](#). The speed of this process is less critical than the manner in which it is conducted. Iran is not in a hurry, but it also lacks alternatives. If the offer is right, it will have little choice.

Minimising the benefits Iran might reap in Syria from a revived nuclear deal demands an overhaul of current EU policy that continues to chase an elusive 'political transition' – i.e. getting Assad out. Instead, EU policy should aim to contain Assad much more stringently. Even though Iran will remain in Syria, it is also precisely this presence that is of greatest regional concern

(more so than, say, in Iraq or Yemen). Syria under Assad connects Hezbollah with Tehran via Iran's allies in Iraq, threatening Jordan and Saudi Arabia, as well as generating another Iranian front against Israel. The concern of these countries about Iran's posture must be addressed to dampen the centrifugal forces that a return to the nuclear deal may create. The EU can take four steps to be 'soft in the nuclear realm and tough in Syria' with regard to Iran:

- Tighten its targeted sanctions against the Assad regime and – especially – enforce them better;
- Ensure northeast Syria remains out of regime control and incentivise the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG/PYD) to cut their (economic) ties with the Assad regime, building on the recent headline agreement between the YPG and the Kurdish National Council (KNC) to govern northeast Syria more inclusively;
- Augment its collaboration with Turkey by supporting Ankara's presence in Idlib, expanding the EU-Turkey Refugee Facility to include the area and preventing Turkey from undertaking further military action against the YPG. This requires compartmentalisation of EU-Turkish policy disputes like the Eastern Mediterranean and Afrin;
- Increase aid to Syria's neighbours while unshackling EU humanitarian aid from [regime constraints](#) inside Syria itself. The latter can be done by [creating alternatives](#) to the remaining UN-legitimised border crossing point for humanitarian aid, and by [pushing back together](#) with the US against aid diversion by the regime.

If a return to the nuclear deal and reintegration of Iran into the global economy can be combined with preventing Tehran from leveraging any economic benefits in Syria, the basis might be laid for a meaningful regional security initiative that can start addressing deeper security perceptions, threats and force postures more comprehensively. The EU could contribute its multilateral habits of compromise and dialogue to such an initiative, which tend to be [in shorter supply](#) in Washington – irrespective of who sits in the White House.

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