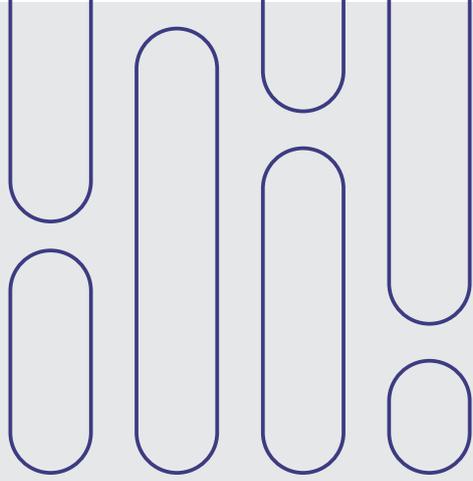


— Report —

Biden's Middle East Approach: Possible Implications for Iran and Its Allies in the Region



RASANAHA
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية
International Institute for Iranian Studies



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Joe Biden's victory in the US presidential election comes at a crucial time amid changing regional dynamics in the Middle East. Biden's victory signals certain changes in Washington's approach towards regional conflicts and crises. The challenges ahead for the new Biden administration in relation to the Middle East will largely revolve around Iranian aggression in the eastern Mediterranean and the Arabian Gulf, the crises in Syria and Yemen, and the reduction in the number of US troops in the region.

A Nuanced Approach

Biden's recent comments indicate a possible nuanced approach towards the Middle East. Biden, based on analysis of the outcomes of the Trump administration's maximum pressure policy on Iran, may be cautious about entering into any new negotiations with Tehran. Given the high possibility of a hard-line government coming to power in Iran, Biden has pledged that the United States will only re-enter the nuclear agreement if Tehran "strictly complies with the nuclear deal." The new round of sanctions imposed by the current Trump administration makes it more difficult for the president-elect to return to the nuclear deal with Iran immediately. Biden has proposed that any interaction with Iran would be in compliance with Washington's commitment to its allies in the region. Since both the Republicans and Democrats view Iran as a sponsor of terrorism, any sanctions relief will only be pursued if Iran reciprocates promptly.

The US policy towards Iran will be based to a large extent on

Washington's strategic considerations for long-term stability in the region enabling the United States to preserve its interests and maintain the regional balance of power in its favor. The important debate within the United States on withdrawing troops and "getting out of endless wars" has gained much popularity and this will be a major concern for Biden while engaging with different stakeholders in the region. Taking into consideration the popular call to withdraw US troops deployed overseas, Biden has argued for a strategy which he calls "counterterrorism plus." This strategy emphasizes the need to fight terrorist groups with aggressive airstrikes rather than depending on large military deployments. Such a strategy would further push the Democrats to constructively interact with regional powers to prevent further conflicts and wars.

Possible Changes in Policies

Biden's policy would focus on constraining Iran's nuclear program and curbing its aggression in the region. However, Biden's shift away from Trump's policy would be largely in regard to the tools and approaches Washington might employ. Some of Biden's top foreign policy advisers have indicated certain approaches the incoming US administration might adopt. Antony Blinken, one of Biden's foremost foreign policy advisers, has criticized Trump's approach towards Iran. He said that the United States is in a much worse place now vis-à-vis Iran compared to the past. Responding to what a possible Biden

approach toward Iran might look like, he said that Biden would focus on his commitment to diplomacy and coordination with US allies while at the same time effectively containing Iran's destabilizing activities in the region. Blinken's comments also stressed "uniting with US partners in the region instead of isolation from them."

Jake Sullivan, who previously served as Biden's national security adviser and helped in negotiations with Iran, also observes that US foreign policy prospects in the Arabian Gulf are likely to be much more inclusive via negotiating with all stakeholders in the region. He said that the United States should mainly focus on negotiating the nuclear file and facilitating a regional negotiation process where regional actors are the key interlocutors. The Biden administration adopting such an approach would weigh both US tactical and strategic considerations to de-escalate regional tensions and protect US economic and military interests especially in the major maritime chokepoints in the region.

Ayatollah Khamenei recently said that Iran's policy towards the United States would remain the same regardless of who wins the US election, while Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif commented after Biden's official victory that Tehran expects the United States to initiate contact. Certainly, the response from the present government in Tehran will determine the course of Washington's diplomatic engagement with Iran in the coming months.

Implications for Iran's Main Regional Allies and Proxies

Syria - One of the most important allies for Iran in the region is Syria. Biden has been critical of the Syrian government and has overtly criticized President Bashar al-Assad on several occasions. Iran's influence in Syria has grown in recent years. The Iranian government has exhausted much of its resources in arming militia groups in Syria. The IRGC and Hezbollah train militias and transfer them to Syria which has enabled them to control strategic positions in the country. An adviser to Biden mentioned that the president-elect considers sanctions as a necessary foreign policy tool in Syria. He added that sanctions like the Caesar Act should be part of a comprehensive strategy driven by diplomacy. Biden would also possibly pursue targeted sanctions as an important non-military tool to limit the Assad regime's war crimes while considering humanitarian exceptions to Syria.

Although Biden has been highly critical of Assad, he has indicated that he does not support any plan to remove him by force. Biden has criticized Trump's withdrawal from Syria, which prompted Turkey to attack the Kurds who fought alongside the United States against ISIS. However, it is not yet known how the Biden administration will engage with regional powers amid increasing tensions with Turkey to ensure the security of Syrian Kurds.

Iraq – Iraq remains a major concern for Biden. For a long time, Biden has struggled with the situation in Iraq amid criticisms from both Democrats and Republicans regarding his

views on Iraq. In the current context, Biden's foremost preference would be to engage with a stable government in Baghdad. Biden would focus on reducing the number of US troops in Iraq; however, a complete withdrawal is highly unlikely as the Democrats are extremely wary about the lingering threat of ISIS in the region. Also, Biden has reiterated that functioning governments and nation-building are critical to ending wars and conflicts in the region. Under Biden's leadership, the United States is more likely to engage with Kadhimi's government in Baghdad. Tehran's deep influence in Iraq remains a strong concern for Washington. The widespread protests in Iraq against foreign involvement create further challenges for Biden. Biden will likely work towards countering Iranian influence in the country and support a stable government in Baghdad that could potentially fight terrorist groups operating in Iraq.

Hezbollah - Hezbollah's engagement in the region will take a turn depending on the future of US-Iran relations. Lebanon's political instability and deteriorating economy have burdened the country. Biden expressed his solidarity and support to the Lebanese people in the aftermath of the deadly blasts which hit Beirut port in August. However, Biden might put more pressure on Prime Minister Saad Hariri and his new government to consider adequate reforms. It is too early to predict the Biden administration's approach toward Lebanon in the long run. Nevertheless, for Washington Lebanon is not an immediate concern, and the Biden administration might wait to

assess how the new Lebanese government's plan of action progresses.

French President Emmanuel Macron singled out Hezbollah for criticism amid the ongoing political and economic crisis in Lebanon. During a press conference in relation to ongoing developments in Lebanon, he said, "There's a question that needs to be asked to Hezbollah and ourselves. Is it really a political party or does it proceed just in a logic dictated by Iran, and its terrorist forces?" Since Biden has indicated that he will work closely with Washington's European allies, he might work to converge US and European interests in the region. The developments in France's reform program for Lebanon would play a major role here and Washington's support remains critical for any progress in the country.

Houthis - Biden has indicated that under his leadership he would reassess Washington's role in Yemen in order to end the war. Although Biden had earlier indicated a need to reassess US support of Saudi Arabia and its allies in relation to the war in Yemen, it is quite likely that Biden would try to address the situation in the country in consultation with Riyadh and its allies in the region. The Biden administration is likely to continue with the traditional US approach toward its allies. The United States is likely to work closely with Saudi Arabia and its partners/allies including the European powers to impede the flow of weapons from Iran to the Houthis because containing Iranian aggression remains a converging interest for Riyadh, Washington and its European allies.

Conclusion

Biden's approach toward the region will primarily focus on preserving US strategic interests and defending its long-term allies in the region. As indicated earlier, Biden will focus on reducing US military deployments in the region and work towards converging US interests with its allies. Washington will be concerned about the developments in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen as these countries are the pressure points impacting US-Iran relations in the current context. The Biden administration's approach will invariably impact Iran's regional role, and bringing major regional and global stakeholders to the negotiating table remains a key aspect of Biden's new Middle East approach.



✉ info@rasanahiiis.com

🐦 📺 📺 @rasanahiiis

🌐 www.rasanah-iiis.org

