

Recommit, Don't Retrench: Policy Priorities for Biden's Middle East Trip

President Biden intends for his upcoming trip to Israel, the West Bank, and Saudi Arabia to lay out an “affirmative vision for U.S. engagement in the region.” This is an urgently important task at a vital moment. For the president to succeed, however, he must present a fundamental reorientation of U.S. strategy in the Middle East, going beyond the immediate priorities of encouraging partners to resign themselves to an Iran nuclear deal and, in the case of our Gulf allies, to pump more oil and offset a global energy crisis from Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

That invasion is underscoring for the United States how it still needs cooperation from its Middle Eastern partners at a time when those relationships have become tremendously strained. That strain is not new, nor can it be mended easily. It is deeply rooted in the damaging perceptions among our Middle Eastern partners of America's receding commitments to regional security – perceptions that have been deeply exacerbated by the precipitous withdrawal from Afghanistan, failed nuclear diplomacy with Iran, slow responses to Tehran's regional aggression, and conscious efforts to distance his administration from key partners like Saudi Arabia. At the same time, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) increasingly work together to uphold regional security, but such cooperation has clear limits in the absence of sustained U.S. leadership.

To address these challenges and harness these opportunities, President Biden must use this trip to signal unmistakably that the United States is undertaking a comprehensive strategic pivot – one that recommits it to upholding Middle East stability and strengthening regional security cooperation in the face of clearly appreciated shared challenges from Iran. This will reduce the prospects of conflict that could pull in the United States, bolster the credibility of America's commitments more globally, reassure unnerved allies, limit further inroads by Beijing and Moscow in the region, and enable U.S. partners to shoulder more of the shared burdens of countering Tehran and other threats.

President Biden should adopt the following policy priorities for his Middle East trip:

A. Recommit to the Middle East with a Biden Doctrine

The president should reaffirm and update the 1980 Carter Doctrine with a “Biden Doctrine” that explicitly reasserts vital U.S. interests in preventing regional domination by any power – including preventing a nuclear Iran – and that any such threats will be met by any and all elements of national power, to include use of military force and ensuring regional partners can defend themselves.

B. Lead on Integrated Regional Air Defense Network

The administration also should advance an integrated regional air and missile defense network by working toward a common air operating picture among the United States and its partners – including by facilitating transfers of Israeli defense systems to Arab states.

C. Address Partners' Security Concerns About Iran

The trip also presents an overdue chance to reassure partners by stating the obvious, that Tehran has demonstrated absolutely no willingness to agree to a deal that would credibly prevent it from attaining nuclear weapons capability, that it continues to advance its nuclear program to dangerous levels, and that a U.S.-led multilateral “Plan B” of comprehensive pressure is needed to prevent a nuclear Iran and roll back its regional aggression. To this end, the president should affirm Israel’s freedom of action by ensuring swift transfer of key weapons systems for which Israel already has arranged or requested expedited procurement, including Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAM) and GBU-39/B precision guided munitions (PGM), KC-46A aerial refueling tankers, F-35I multirole aircraft, and CH-53K heavy lift and SH-60/MH-60 multi-mission helicopters. Prepositioning PGMs in CENTCOM’s depot in Israel (WRSA-I) is the fastest transfer route for these munitions.

D. Expand Regional Defense Cooperation

The president should integrate Israel more fully into U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), including by incorporating Israel into U.S.-led exercises, planning, operations, and maritime task forces such as the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC), and Task Force 59 on offensive maritime drone operations.

E. Boost U.S. Military Readiness

Concomitantly, the United States should bolster its own military readiness in the region by updating contingency plans and military exercises for countering Iran, and enhancing regional force posture by deploying massive ordnance penetrator (MOP) munitions to Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, boosting U.S. naval presence rotating through the Strait of Hormuz and Red and Arabian seas, and ensuring force protection for U.S. strategic assets around the Middle East.

F. Develop Strategy for Israel-Saudi Normalization

Finally, the president should seek to capitalize on tentative but real steps by Riyadh – which is not part of the Abraham Accords – toward serious security cooperation with Israel, by developing a broader strategy for Israel-Saudi normalization. While this end goal may seem far off, U.S. auspices and incentives – including a genuine effort to put U.S.-Saudi relations on a more stable and positive footing – certainly could help promote tangible near-term progress on pressing regional challenges like port security, maritime domain awareness, energy infrastructure resilience, and counter-drone cooperation.