

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



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# I. Executive Summary

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.”<sup>1</sup> 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.

## **II. Forgotten Partners Remembered: Context for Biden’s Trip**

President Biden will make his first trip to the Middle East as commander-in-chief on July 13-16. After stops in Israel and the West Bank, he will attend a summit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, that convenes the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council plus Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan.<sup>2</sup>

The trip comes after the Biden administration spent its first year and a half in office distancing itself from its Middle Eastern partners and avoiding pressing regional security challenges. It took a conflict in the bloodlands of Eastern Europe, however, to remind the United States of its continued interests in and need for partners from the Middle East. The serious consequences for global energy security of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine have underscored how instability overseas directly impacts the U.S. economy and national security. The conflict has driven the administration to turn, once again, to America’s partners in the Middle East, whether it be Israel’s proven ability to shoulder heavy burdens for collective defense, or Saudi Arabia’s and the UAE’s spare oil production capacity to offset dramatic rises in energy prices.

Yet, President Biden was met with deafening silence when he sought Riyadh’s and Abu Dhabi’s help in opening the spigots.<sup>3</sup> Instead, both countries stood by existing agreements with Russia to cap oil output, as the Gulf more generally continued to hedge against America’s ongoing departure from the region by maintaining friendly ties with Moscow and Beijing.<sup>4</sup> Turning these cold shoulders into lower oil prices is almost certainly the – not entirely unspoken – reason for Biden’s return to a region he would have rather forgotten. This would be a major departure from then-candidate Biden’s 2020 *Foreign Affairs* article in which he said “I have long argued we should bring the

vast majority of our troops home from the wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East and narrowly define our mission as defeating al Qaeda and the Islamic State.”<sup>5</sup>

### III. American Absence

Biden’s trip comes at a crucial moment, as U.S. ties with regional partners urgently need mending. The president’s mission will surely fail, however, if he arrives in the region seeking only to elicit promises of increased oil production or acceptance of any potential new nuclear deal with Iran. The disagreements and lack of cooperation plaguing U.S. relations with its Middle Eastern partners today is rooted in deeper and more serious strategic problem: American absence from the region. Significant breakthroughs on this trip are unlikely unless the president can meaningfully alter the beliefs of Israel and Gulf countries that the United States has no commitment to the security of its regional partners.

Fundamentally, the precipitous and chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan has severely worsened preexisting perceptions dating back years, among allies and adversaries alike, that the United States is reducing its Middle East presence and commitments as quickly and recklessly as it can. Similarly, the administration’s assiduous pursuit of open-ended, often conciliatory, nuclear diplomacy with Tehran – and its glaring reticence to adopt a “Plan B” to pressure the regime – has deepened concerns from Jerusalem to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi about America’s willingness to prevent Iran from imminently crossing the nuclear threshold and counter its rising regional aggression.<sup>6</sup> Most tellingly, these fears were confirmed by the White House’s muted and plodding attempts, for which Secretary of State Anton Blinken apologized in person, to assist the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in response a major missile and drone attack in January by Iran’s Houthi proxies in Yemen – an attack which Emiratis call “our 9/11.”<sup>7</sup> The resumption of U.S.-Iran nuclear talks in Doha does nothing to disabuse America’s partners of their concerns.

Tensions with Saudi Arabia also have been running high following then-candidate Biden’s explicit efforts to treat Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) as a “pariah” over the 2018 murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Since his inauguration, President Biden has conspicuously downgraded relations with the kingdom further by softening sanctions on the Houthis, ending “offensive” arms sales to Riyadh, and releasing a U.S. intelligence assessment finding MBS culpable for Khashoggi’s killing.

As a result of this American pivot away from the Middle East and its partners’ legitimate security concerns, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and others see fewer reasons to cooperate with Washington now. They have instead begun hedging toward China and Russia. In Saudi Arabia’s case, this has translated into much greater bilateral trade with – and major

arms purchases from – China, as well as possibly accepting payment for oil sales in China’s yuan rather than U.S. dollars.<sup>8</sup> In the Emirates’ case, this includes cooperation with China on COVID vaccines and 5G telecommunications – U.S. opposition to which led the UAE to suspend its purchase of U.S.-made F-35 aircraft – and even the first purchase of Chinese combat training aircraft and initial work on a secret Chinese military facility near Abu Dhabi.<sup>9</sup>

## IV. Regional Cooperation Rises...

Strained relations with Washington and perceptions of retrenchment are compelling U.S. partners to deepen security cooperation among themselves and do more for their self-defense.

Amid the combination of receding U.S. presence and Iran’s expanding nuclear and regional aggression, Israel is assuming a much greater leadership role in actively rolling back Tehran’s advances on both fronts by going more directly after the “head of the octopus” and no longer just the tentacles in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Gaza.<sup>10</sup> More broadly, in the past year-plus, the Abraham Accords and Israel’s reassignment to the area of responsibility for U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) are creating unprecedented chances to coordinate and integrate Israel and America’s Arab partners – not just those that recognize Israel, but possibly also Saudi Arabia and others – into a coherent regional security architecture under U.S. auspices.<sup>11</sup> After a tepid initial reaction, the Biden administration increasingly has embraced the Accords for these reasons, including participating in the Negev Forum that aims to convene working groups made up of American, Israeli, Bahraini, Moroccan, Egyptian, and Emirati diplomats for regular meetings to coordinate on energy, defense, and other issues.<sup>12</sup>

Already, Israel has joined initial CENTCOM-led military exercises alongside its new Accords partners, and it now has a liaison officer stationed at the Bahraini headquarters of U.S. naval forces in the Middle East.<sup>13</sup> In January, after the brazen Iran-backed drone and missile strike, Abu Dhabi unofficially asked Jerusalem about acquiring Israeli air and missile defense systems.<sup>14</sup> In March, CENTCOM convened top military officials from Israel and Arab states in Egypt to strengthen multilateral cooperation on detecting and defeating Iranian missile and drone attacks; according to Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz, this budding coalition already has successfully thwarted attempted Iranian drone strikes in the region.<sup>15</sup>

Though Saudi Arabia is not a member of the Abraham Accords, Iran-led threats are driving the kingdom toward working with Israel on security issues as well. Under



CENTCOM’s umbrella, its forces have exercised with other Arab militaries alongside Israel, and it joined the regional air defense talks in Egypt in March. Even before the UAE did so, and amid drawdowns of U.S. interceptors in the kingdom, Saudi Arabia reached out to Israel about acquiring air and missile defense systems to help defend its cities and critical infrastructure against persistent Houthi attacks from Yemen – by most estimates, the biggest and most sustained drone offensive in history.<sup>16</sup> And as part of talks to secure an Israeli-approved transfer of Egyptian Red Sea islands to Saudi Arabia, American diplomats are trying to broker overflight and direct-flight agreements that could promote progress on normalization between Riyadh and Jerusalem.<sup>17</sup>

## V. ...But Requires U.S. Leadership to Advance

If shared fears of U.S. retrenchment helped drive Israel and key Arab states together in the first place, American engagement nevertheless was, and will remain, absolutely critical for ensuring that this cooperation achieves its full potential even as the shared threat from Iran intensifies. This includes not only consistent and visible U.S. diplomatic leadership, but also crucial and timely security incentives – which only the United States can credibly offer – in order to convince Arab states to take further political and strategic risks inherent in closer ties with Israel. By shepherding growing military-to-military ties, Washington can help build further positive momentum between Israel and its Arab neighbors and enhance their combined capabilities to uphold regional stability, thus reducing the direct burdens on the U.S. military. This also will temper the appeal or urgency for Arab countries to hedge toward Iran or to continue exploring deeper strategic coordination with China and Russia – both of whom actively are trying to make greater regional inroads at U.S. expense.<sup>18</sup>

## VI. Opportunities to Strengthen Regional Security

According to the White House, the president intends to use this trip to lay out an “affirmative vision for U.S. engagement in the region.”<sup>19</sup> This is urgently needed, but to be successful it needs to look beyond the immediate priorities of increasing Gulf oil

output and securing buy-in for an Iran nuclear deal. President Biden must signal unmistakably that the United States is undertaking a comprehensive strategic pivot that recommits to upholding Middle East stability – including by fostering increasingly close and concrete cooperation among U.S. partners. Fortunately, given the importance of America’s diplomatic leadership in helping achieve unprecedented strategic breakthroughs in recent years among regional partners, this trip offers timely opportunities to strengthen shared defenses and undergird U.S. leadership.

Doing so will reverse pervasive, and dangerous, perceptions among allies and adversaries alike of waning U.S. presence and interests in the region, and will underscore how the administration appreciates the gravity and exigency of growing threats from Iran. This will help reduce the prospects of the Middle East once again boiling over into conflict that drags in the United States. It also will bolster the credibility of America’s commitments more globally, reassure unnerved allies, limit Beijing’s and Moscow’s abilities to make further inroads in the region, and enable U.S. partners to shoulder more shared burdens of countering Tehran and other threats.

## VII. Policy Priorities

### *A. Recommit to the Middle East with a Biden Doctrine*

A top priority for the president should be to articulate a “Biden Doctrine” that – in the wake of sustained drawdowns in America’s regional presence and commitments – updates and clarifies U.S. interests, commitments, and force posture requirements in the Middle East for the first time since the 1980 Carter Doctrine and 1981 Reagan Corollary. Specifically, a Biden Doctrine should lay out that it remains a vital U.S. interest to prevent regional domination by any power – including through the spread of nuclear weapons – 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*

A new approach also should recognize that among America’s greatest assets are the willing and capable partners most directly threatened by Tehran, and who already are increasingly doing what the United States asks of its allies by taking up more of the burdens of collective defense. The high potential for such combined efforts is reflected in Congress’ recent bipartisan, bicameral legislation – known as the DEFEND Act – that would require the Pentagon to work with Arab partners and Israel to develop a counter-Iran air defense strategy and capabilities.<sup>20</sup>

To build on these encouraging first steps, on his trip President Biden should focus on efforts to construct a more coherent, U.S.-led regionwide early warning and air and missile defense network. A logical first step would be to begin developing a common air operating picture among CENTCOM and partner nations. Another initiative could be for the United States to facilitate the transfer of Israeli air and missile defense systems to its budding Gulf partners.

### *C. Address Partners' Security Concerns About Iran*

President Biden should finally make explicit that, despite ample good faith and patience from the administration, Iranian obstinance has rendered further nuclear diplomacy fruitless and there is no going back to the JCPOA – and that the foreign terrorism organization (FTO) designation will not be lifted on Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). This would be invaluable in reassuring partners who, afraid that the United States was going to accede to a deal undermining their security interests, had begun hedging their bets, weakening their ties to Washington, accommodating Iran, and/or reaching out to American competitors. The administration also should publicly reverse the White House's counterproductive 2021 decision to remove the FTO designation on Iran's Houthi proxies in Yemen and emphasize the U.S. commitment to being a reliable supplier of its Arab partners' legitimate defense needs.

Furthermore, given Israel's concerted and proactive campaign to roll back Iran's nuclear and regional expansions, President Biden should officially support Israel's strategic and operational freedom of action, including by reaffirming U.S. policy to provide Israel the tools it needs to defend itself, especially against the existential threat of a nuclear Iran. Most pressingly, this entails the swift transfer of critical capabilities for which Israel already has arranged or requested expedited procurement, namely:

- Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) tailkits, GBU-39/B small diameter bombs (SDB), and possibly other precision guided munitions (PGM);
  - » The fastest option is to preposition these PGMs in CENTCOM's depot in Israel, known as WRSA-I. This stockpile, currently outdated, is officially intended to support Israel's "qualitative military edge" (QME), which U.S. law requires the United States uphold.<sup>21</sup>
- Two KC-46A Pegasus aerial refueling tankers (concomitantly, Congress should request the administration to assess the availability of KC-46As for transfer to Israel);<sup>22</sup>
- Fixed-wing combat aircraft and helicopters, including a third squadron of F-35I multirole aircraft to continue replacing Israel's aging F-15/-16 long-range strike fleet, as well as CH-53K heavy lift and SH-60/MH-60 multi-mission helicopters;

- » In parallel, the United States should fast-track efforts to sell and/or transfer additional F-15 fighter aircraft via the Excess Defense Articles (EDA) program.
- Adequate batteries of – and interceptors for – Israel’s Iron Dome, David’s Sling, and Arrow air defense and missile systems, all of which are co-produced with the United States.<sup>23</sup>

During the President’s stop in Israel, the administration also should ensure the United States and Israel revive regular meetings of their Joint Political Military Group (JPMG), which has not been convened since the Trump administration. Though a strategic dialogue has taken initial shape through multiple meetings of National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan with his Israeli counterpart Eyal Hulata, the JPMG provides a useful forum for fleshing out the details of bilateral military cooperation, including arms transfers.

#### *D. Expand Regional Security Cooperation*

Beyond air and missile defense, the Biden administration should seek to strengthen maritime domain awareness and cooperation against Iran-led threats to shipping and littoral critical infrastructure, by incorporating Israel into CENTCOM-led combined task forces such as the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC), and Task Force 59 on offensive maritime drone operations. This should be part of a broader effort to integrate Israel more fully into CENTCOM alongside U.S. and Arab partner forces through exercises, planning, and information-sharing and interdiction operations.

#### *E. Boost U.S. Military Readiness*

Tangible military preparations will add credibility to a Biden Doctrine and signal U.S. resolve more globally in the face of challenges from China and Russia. Specific actions should include:

- Updating contingency planning for operations against Iran’s nuclear, missile, and drone programs, and for operations to counter potential retaliation by Iran and/or its proxies;
- Regional force posture enhancements, including: 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; and
- Joint and combined military exercises to demonstrate and improve readiness for these updated contingency plans and force deployments.

The administration also should conduct a strategic communications campaign publicizing these activities and connecting them explicitly to the new U.S. posture laid out in a Biden Doctrine.

### *F. Develop Strategy for Israel-Saudi Normalization*

Building a regional integrated defense network should go hand-in-hand with efforts to bring Saudi Arabia into the Abraham Accords over time, especially as Saudi and Israeli forces and security officials increasingly interact around the Middle East. This will entail determining how far the kingdom is prepared to go in terms of peace with Israel, what concrete steps and initiatives would be involved, and what support Riyadh would need from Washington to restore confidence in the strategic relationship and rebuild ties after the nadir reached during the first year and a half of Biden's term. This will require the administration to create a firewall between strengthening defense of shared U.S.-Israeli-Saudi security interests on the one hand, and addressing lingering concerns about the Khashoggi killing on the other. Such U.S. auspices could promote, at least as concrete next steps in the near term, Israel-Saudi cooperation on pressing regional security challenges such as port security, maritime domain awareness, energy infrastructure resilience, and counter-drone cooperation.

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