

GLOBAL STRATEGY FORUM

EDITION No. 48 - NOVEMBER 2020

*The 48th in our series of expert comment and analysis, by the historian **James Barr**. His most recent book is 'Lords Of The Desert: Britain's Struggle With America To Dominate The Middle East' (2018). As always, the views expressed are those of the author and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.*

Joe Biden In The Middle East

Joe Biden's victory in this month's presidential election has triggered a wave of speculation about what his presidency might mean for the Middle East. Most of it ignores a telling fact. In the Democratic Party's Platform – which formed the foundation on which Biden stood for office – the first mention of the Middle East comes on page ninety, a page before the end. The decision to relegate the issue to the very end is not simply an admission of how toxic a subject it is, but reflects the drafters' prayer that the region will not intrude on the domestic agenda in the next four years.

Yet if history is any guide, that represents a triumph of hope over experience.

Every single American president since 1940 has had to grapple with the Middle East. FDR referred rather revealingly to 'the Moslem

problem, the Jewish problem', distractions he did his best to avoid; his successor, Harry Truman, had to deal with the birth of the state of Israel. Ike faced Mosaddeq and Suez, JFK a war in Yemen – a country he admitted he struggled to place on a map. The Six Day War forced LBJ to take sides with Israel; its consequences have turned the country into a touchstone issue for evangelical Christian voters. For the Nixon administration, already engulfed by Watergate, the energy crisis that followed the Yom Kippur war was the last straw; trying to make peace afterwards, Gerald Ford found himself embroiled in a 'test of wills' with the Israelis that made him "mad as hell". Carter was destroyed by the Iran hostage crisis; the deployment of US Marines to Lebanon by Reagan revealed the limits of American power. Both Bushes will forever be associated with Iraq. Clinton of course was the midwife of the Oslo Accords, but for all the hours and effort that their negotiation involved, the impact was short-lived.



events@globalstrategyforum.org
www.globalstrategyforum.org

The chances that the next four years in the Middle East are uneventful are slim.

If Biden's team is guilty of wishful thinking, so too are people who expect a sharp departure from the policy of Donald Trump. For all the hands-on- glowing-globes and other hokum, Trump's policy followed established lines. While the exact terms of the 'deal of the century' speak volumes about its bombastic salesman's cupidity – in that he thought Palestinian objections could be allayed with dollars – a grand bargain of the type he was hoping to achieve was first attempted in 1918, and was being explored in 1945 by Roosevelt in the weeks before he died. Trump also continued the rollback begun by Obama, whose own presidential bid was founded on opposition to regime change.

Despite portraying Trump as an obscene aberration, Biden's foreign policy inevitably starts where his predecessor's leaves off. Moreover, its consensual nature may be reinforced if, as predicted, the January elections leave the Republicans in control of the Senate.

Although Biden has pledged to start giving the Palestinians help again, he will not reverse the US Embassy's move to Jerusalem, nor the Trump administration's recognition that the Golan Heights form part of Israel. He wants the many other Arab states which already speak secretly to Israel to take 'bolder steps toward normalization' of their relations with the Jewish state – in other words, make their cooperation public. If America's Arab allies in the region could acknowledge the legitimate

existence of Israel, that would make US policy much easier.

Although it seems unlikely that Benjamin Netanyahu will enjoy the same purchase with the new incumbent of the White House as he did with Donald Trump, Biden's approach is more likely to differ in tone than in substance. He shares the view that the Iran deal had significant shortcomings. Implicit in his comments in September about his determination to revive the deal *if Iran returns to compliance* – a vital caveat – was a recognition that the 2015 agreement did not go far enough in curbing Iran's parallel ballistic missile programme or its malign influence in the neighbourhood: views with which Israel will strongly agree.

In the past decade Iran has been responsible for tens of thousands of deaths in Syria and Yemen, and – through Hezbollah's corrupting power – a growing reluctance on the part of western countries to bolster bankrupt Lebanon. Biden needs to address this and de-escalate the problem. But his predecessor's sign-off on the assassination of Iran's top general, Qassem Soleimani less than a year ago provides no incentive for Khamenei to move first. In fact, Biden's obvious desire to focus on domestic issues may even give Teheran the upper hand. Given Biden's emphasis during the campaign on human rights, an anti-Iran front with states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE would also leave him open to accusations of hypocrisy.

Netanyahu is not the only Middle Eastern leader who is going to feel the draught



when @realdonaldtrump has gone. If Biden is serious about drawing a line under the last four years, then the last thing he needs is to be seen in the same room as the Saudi princeling Mohammed Bin Salman. Biden has promised a 'review' of relations with the Saudi government. A move to deny it the weaponry it needs to fight its war in Yemen seems one likely result.

Though it is possible that Biden's prioritization of climate change and his promise of an assertive position towards China will impact the Middle East, his main aim seems to be to avoid entanglement. No modern president has managed this before.

And if Trump succeeds in bringing the troops home before the end of his presidency he might even precipitate precisely the sort of crisis that Biden would so clearly like to avoid. Trump encouraged strongmen by turning a blind eye to them. Biden might inadvertently do the same by seeming to be absorbed by domestic challenges.

A Middle East crisis that challenged the United States to show it is the leader of the free world, would immediately create a quandary for a man who opposed the troop surges in Libya and Afghanistan during Obama's presidency. It would cause a rift in a party that is determined to avoid 'forever wars'. It would leave Biden facing an unpalatable choice: whether to show leadership which might involve military deployment that would be deeply unpopular with voters, or to let events happen which reinforce the impression that America is no longer the leader of the free world.

James Barr
November 2020

Author of '*Lords Of The Desert: Britain's Struggle With America To Dominate The Middle East*'



events@globalstrategyforum.org
www.globalstrategyforum.org