

Joe Biden's Legacy in the Middle East

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Complicity in genocide is the Biden administration's primary legacy in the Middle East, in addition to discrediting US claims to support human rights and uphold a "rules-based international order" (Amnesty International 2024, Human Rights Watch 2024, UNHCR, 2024). Joe Biden's support for Israel's devastating war on Gaza, in response to the horrific October 7, 2023 Hamas-led attacks on Israel, also resulted in the most negative attitudes toward the US by Arab publics in living memory, even worse than during the 2003 US invasion and occupation of Iraq. The Biden administration's acquiescence to Israel's seemingly intentional effort to make Gaza uninhabitable also made possible Donald Trump's shockingly illegal proposal to depopulate the territory to create "the Riviera of the Middle East" without Palestinians (Viser, Alemany, and Birnbaum 2025). Although Israel's war on Lebanon and Hezbollah and military engagement with Iran significantly weakened two US adversaries and facilitated the Assad regime's fall in Syria (removing a longtime Iranian ally), the Gaza war simultaneously strained Egypt and Jordan, two vulnerable American allies, while heightening regional tensions. Biden's policies have been disastrous for Palestinians, Lebanon, and America's standing in the Arab region, but they have not been a qualitative departure from decades of US support for Israel at the expense of Palestinians and international law amid policies

that produce greater instability for the region and insecurity for its inhabitants.

Joe Biden entered office with no interest in deepening US involvement in the Middle East. In fact, when he became president, some Arab rulers were concerned the US was "withdrawing" from the region (Kaye 2021). Like Obama and Trump before him, Biden wanted to reduce America's entanglements in the Middle East, a legacy of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, to focus on what Obama had sought but failed to fully achieve: a pivot to Asia in an era of increasing strategic competition with China. Biden mentioned the Middle East while campaigning for office, but mainly to criticize Trump. He called out Trump's support for Mohammed bin Salman after US intelligence agencies determined the Saudi Crown Prince likely directed Jamal Khashoggi's gruesome 2018 assassination (Trump refused to release the intelligence report about the killing and later boasted that he "saved his [MBS'] ass") (Moreni 2020). Biden vowed to make Saudi Arabia a "pariah" while also promising to get tough on Egyptian president Abdel Fattah Al Sisi because of his abysmal human rights record. Trump's description of Sisi as "my favorite dictator" (Youssef, Salama, and Bender 2019) prompted Biden to tweet, "No more blank checks for Trump's 'favorite dictator.'" One year into office, Biden's National Security Adviser, Jake

Sullivan, claimed that “Joe Biden has made human rights a central feature of our foreign policy” (Council on Foreign Relations 2021). (Sullivan later wrote, a few days before October 7, 2023, that the Middle East “is quieter than it has been for decades,” before boasting that the administration had “de-escalated crises in Gaza and restored direct diplomacy between the parties after years of its absence” (Sullivan 2023).¹

Whether human rights have ever been “central” to American foreign policy is questionable, but the pretense became less tenable after Russia’s March 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the resulting spike in oil prices and inflation felt by American consumers. Biden’s frosty attitude toward bin Salman warmed as he traveled to Jeddah in July 2022 to meet the crown prince and other Arab leaders and asked the kingdom to increase oil production (Biden’s request was rebuffed).

Biden’s shunning of “Trump’s favorite dictator” also ended a few months later, in November 2022, when he chose to attend COP 27 in Sharm El Sheikh and meet Sisi on the sidelines of the climate summit. Although the administration said the president would raise human rights and the fate of Egypt’s most prominent political prisoner, Alaa Abdel Fattah, during the visit, Biden left Egypt with Abdel Fattah in prison and no improvement in the human rights scene (Viser and O’Grady 2022). Predictably, other policy issues - oil, the Ukraine war, the optics of environmental advocacy, and later, Egypt’s mediation efforts during the Gaza War - were prioritized over human rights.

Biden’s full-throated support for Israel’s genocide in Gaza in response to the Hamas-led

attacks on October 7, 2023, which killed approximately 1200 Israelis (including at least 809 civilians, 68 foreign nationals, and 314 Israeli military personnel) and resulted in approximately 252 hostages, irreparably damaged US standing in the region and discredited American claims to support international law or universal human rights (UNHCR June 10, 2024). By April 2025, Israel’s war had killed over 50,000 Palestinians (including more than 15,000 children), injured over 113,704, and resulted in massive destruction to the territory’s hospitals, schools, universities, housing, and roads, making much of Gaza “uninhabitable,” most likely intentionally (OCHA, 2025). Seemingly endless US arms shipments, in violation of US law (Blaha 2024, Kirchgaessner, 2024), continued American justifications for Israel’s attacks, including on civilians, and multiple American vetoes of UN Security Council ceasefire resolutions, contrasted with US denunciations of Russia’s war on Ukraine, sanctions on Moscow, and an outpouring of Western empathy for Ukrainian civilians, led many to call out American and Western “double standards.” Such hypocrisy discredited US Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s frequent invocation of a “rules-based international order.” After Gaza, many concluded the US made the rules, lectured others to follow them, criticized adversaries for not doing so, and disregarded the rules for itself and its allies.

US Standing in the Region

The Biden administration’s support for Israel’s war had predictable consequences on Arab public opinion. Arab Barometer polling in Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, and Morocco in late 2023 and early 2024 indicated that the US standing among Arabs “de-

¹ The online version of the article was subsequently edited after the October 7, 2023 attacks to remove these claims.

clined dramatically.” “In four out of five countries ... fewer than a third viewed the United States favorably.” The war also “reduced support for normalizing ties with Israel from already low levels.” Michael Robbins, Amaney Jamal, and Mark Tessler concluded that increasingly negative attitudes toward the US meant “not only risking the support of Arab leaders but also jeopardizing the domestic stability of the United States’ key Arab allies” (Robbins, Jamal, and Tessler 2024).²

Other polls produced even more negative findings. An Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies survey of 8000 people in fifteen Arab states, the West Bank, and Jerusalem conducted around the same time found that 94 percent of respondents “considered the US position [on the war] negatively.” The US was viewed as the country that posed the “biggest threats to the peace and stability of the region,” followed by Israel, and 76 percent “reported that their position [on the US] had become more negative.” The percentage of respondents opposed to recognizing Israel also increased from 84 to 89 percent, including a jump from 38 to 68 percent in Saudi Arabia (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2024).

A third poll in Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, and Palestine conducted in October 2023 revealed “the lowest favorability ratings for America in ... more than twenty years” and that US trust and influence “had reached its lowest point historically.” The poll also indicated “a concurrent ... growth in attitudes that have helped fuel past ISIS, Al-Qaeda or even militia terrorism recruitment” (Dagher and Kaltenthaler, 2023). Although impossible to definitively conclude that US support for Israel’s war in Gaza will produce a spike in terrorism against the US and US interests

in the region (over and above the hundreds of attacks on US forces in Jordan, Iraq, Syria, and the Red Sea since October 7, 2023), it should come as no surprise if terrorism against the US increases in the coming period (Rodriguez and Couvillion 2024).

An Emboldened, Expansionist Israel

Biden’s support for Israel, coupled with its military success against Hezbollah and Iran and an even more supportive Trump administration in Washington, further emboldened Israel to act aggressively in the West Bank, Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza. Soon after the January 2025 Gaza ceasefire, Israel undertook military operations in the West Bank. Approximately 40,000 Palestinians were displaced, some permanently, from Jenin, Tulkarem, and other refugee camps, “the highest [number] since Israel occupied the territory” in 1967 (AbdulKarim and Kingsley, 2025). Nor had the West Bank been spared violence during the Gaza war, with at least 46 Israelis, including 19 soldiers, and over 900 Palestinians killed in the territory since October 7, 2023 (Goldenberg 2025 and UNRWA 2025).

Israel also seized territory in both Lebanon and Syria during this period. Immediately after the Assad regime’s collapse in early December 2024, Israel occupied more Syrian territory beyond the occupied Golan Heights while carrying out 480 strikes on Syrian military facilities and equipment (Krever 2024). And since the November 2024 ceasefire with Lebanon, Israel has erected five military outposts in southern Lebanon, prompting serious concerns about when, or if, it will evacuate newly occupied territories in both countries.

2 The authors also noted that “the United States’ loss has been China’s gain.”

Israel also blocked all humanitarian aid, goods, and fuel from entering Gaza at the beginning of March 2025 in an effort to pressure Hamas to accept Israel's proposed extension of phase one of the ceasefire, with the continued release of hostages, rather than moving to phase two, which would have ended Israel's military presence in Gaza in anticipation of the territory's reconstruction in phase three. Two weeks later, on March 18, Israel restarted the war, and in early April, Israel's defense minister declared that it would "seize large areas" of Gaza "to be added to Israel's security zones to protect our fighting forces and communities" (Cheeseman and Loveluck, 2025).

An emboldened Israel, with the backing of both the Biden and Trump administrations, has continued to act with impunity and in violation of international norms and law, resulting in a situation that seems certain to produce greater turbulence in the future.

Conclusion

Biden's complicity in Israel's genocide and Gaza's destruction also made possible Trump's outlandish proposal to displace Palestinians from the territory based on the logic that Gaza is now "uninhabitable" because of the scale of destruction, the dangers of unexploded ordinance, and the time it will take to rebuild the territory. While some in Netanyahu's government and Israel salivate over such a possibility - even establishing a Defense Ministry "Bureau for Voluntary Emigration" "to facilitate safe and supervised" passage of Gazans to target countries" - we cannot fail to describe such proposals for what they are: illegal and morally repugnant plans for ethnic cleansing (Lis and Kubovich, 2025). Whether Trump's Gaza proposal is executed or not, it appears very likely that Israel will annex all

or part of the West Bank while Trump is in office, only fueling further regional instability.

There were, of course, other important Biden administration policies that I have not discussed for reasons of space, including the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan and how some regional allies perceived this, prompting concern the US was "withdrawing" from the Middle East; failure to reestablish an Iranian nuclear deal after Trump's 2018 withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Protocol of Action (not entirely the Biden administration's fault); and the administration's fixation with securing Saudi-Israeli normalization without addressing the question of Palestine. In fact, the administration's obsession with Saudi-Israeli normalization without progress on Palestinian-Israeli peace was not only misguided but also directly contributed to Hamas' motivation to launch the October 7 attacks on Israel to derail such efforts. And so far, Hamas has succeeded, at least for the time being. ♦

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