

# Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iran: Moving Regional Issues from Zero-Sum to Red Lines

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## Introduction

The Gulf Arab states, notably, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, felt aggrieved that Iran's regional behavior was not addressed by the Obama administration and the other P5+1 states when they signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. Although they felt relief during the Trump presidency, especially when Donald Trump withdrew the US from the agreement in 2018, their fears have resurfaced now that Joe Biden is about to enter the White House and revive the agreement. However, the environment has changed markedly since 2015, and the Gulf states are arguably better positioned now to persuade the P5+1 to address regional issues, should President Biden fulfil his election pledge.

This article argues that instead of seeking to spoil US efforts to revive the JCPOA and wait out for a possible Republican president in 2025 or 2029, Saudi Arabia and the UAE would be better served by engaging actively with the P5+1 and ensuring that regional issues are on the negotiating table. However, they should not sit passively and whisper in the margins and expect to be invited to the table; they should badger and cajole their way to it. And yet, they must temper their expectations too. No revived agreement – in the form of the so-called JCPOA plus – is going to address all issues comprehensively or expunge the region of Iranian influence. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi should come to accept that Iran's influence in the region will remain – in one form or another – and they can use the opportunity of US re-engagement in the JCPOA to shape and determine the nature of Tehran's

influence. As the US begins its long slow draw down from the region, the Gulf states would do well to hedge against the eventuality early on. In fact, Abu Dhabi has already taken that step by normalizing diplomatic relations with Israel, but that may prove insufficient to manage the “Iran problem.”

It is clear that the US has neither the capacity nor the appetite to impose its will on the region, and so it will be left to the region’s states to play a more active role in curtailing Iran. This could be achieved by supporting Washington’s efforts to revive the JCPOA and pushing for regional issues to be addressed too, rather than simply seeking to subvert the agreement. Furthermore, instead of sporting a zero-sum approach towards Iran, which has not worked to date, Saudi Arabia and the UAE should draw up their own red lines of what they can and cannot accept from Iran in the region and use that as a basis for discussion.

### **Exit President Obama**

Much has changed since US President Barack Obama told the Gulf Arab states that they would have to share the region with Iran. The JCPOA had caught them off guard; and though Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in particular, had counselled against addressing the nuclear issue in isolation of other pressing matters, including ballistic missiles and regional issues, amongst others, their advice fell on deaf ears. President Trump’s campaign of “maximum pressure” against Iran, therefore, unsurprisingly, sounded like music to their ears. It amounted to a sea change in the US approach to Iran, and their hearty embrace of the irascible president promised much in the years ahead.

When Trump first assumed office, most analysts and commentators believed that his behavior would be socialized by the weight of office and the pull of bureaucratic politics. Those assumptions proved to be incorrect, as he pushed ahead with a number of election pledges including withdrawing from the JCPOA on May 8, 2018 and then moving the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem six days later. Although the embassy move was considered to be largely symbolic, rather than substantive, but one that will unlikely be undone by successive US administrations, the decision to leave the JCPOA, which had never passed through Congress to become a treaty, was viewed as a serious undertaking. It put to rest fears amongst the Gulf states that Obama’s pivot to Asia meant that they would have to share the region with Iran; and, in fact, Trump’s truculence would serve them well.

Although Trump's transactional approach to policymaking might have looked like an anathema to regional leaders who place high importance on building and maintaining strong durable relationships, his enthusiastic embrace of Saudi Arabia's King Salman and the UAE's Mohammed bin Zayed and support of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman during the turbulent times after Saudi dissident and journalist Jamal Khashoggi was murdered in Istanbul carried much promise. Of course, that promise appeared to be somewhat hollow, especially when Trump made off-the-cuff comments about the immediacy of Saudi Arabia's vulnerability should the US withdraw its troops from the kingdom, and more importantly when there was no US response whatsoever following Iranian missile strikes against Abqaiq and Khurais in September 2019.

The Saudi leadership may have cautioned the US against taking immediate action against Iran in response, but echoes of Obama's equivocation over the fate of Egypt's then-President Hosni Mubarak during the 2011 Arab uprising must have passed through the cloud-capped towers and palaces in the Gulf that month. In fact, the UAE took an early initiative to reach out to Iran following the missile strikes and other covert operations against UAE-berthed vessels in the Gulf in a bid to dial down tensions. Reports at the time suggested that Abu Dhabi's leaders were terrified that they would be next in line for Iranian missile strikes. The Abqaiq and Khurais attacks demonstrated at the time the limits of US security guarantees and, what is more, the limits of Trump's transactional approach to deal making. The Gulf states came to learn that whilst Trump's approach to the region differed to Obama's, both presidents appeared intent on drawing down diplomatic and political engagement and outsourcing military engagement to regional actors. To that end, beyond the bluster, bravado, and occasional shock tactic, US policy under Obama and Trump was not that different.

In spite of high expectations, Trump delivered little during his term of office. His so-called Deal of the Century fell at the first hurdle, unsurprisingly. There can be no doubt that relations between Israel and the UAE and Israel and Bahrain advanced whilst he was in the White House, and the team around him may have contributed towards creating an environment in which those relationships could move from private to public, but they were ultimately driven by the leaderships in Jerusalem, Abu Dhabi, and Manama – and Riyadh looked wistfully on.

In reality, the Trump years also delivered very little in terms of concrete outcomes on Iran. The policy of maximum pressure may have squeezed the Iranian population, but it did not persuade Tehran to change policy or enter into negotiations with the Trump administration. In fact, it raised the stakes, increased the risk of a major conflict, heightened the frequency of tit-for-tat exchanges and did little, if anything, to curtail Iranian influence in the region.

For some, the Trump approach was (partially) effective. The assassination of Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani and Kataib Hezbollah commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in January 2020 in Baghdad arguably reestablished US deterrence following Iranian missile strikes against energy infrastructure in Saudi Arabia in September 2019. Furthermore, Israel's assassination of nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh in Tehran, in November 2020, highlighted key vulnerabilities in Iran's security. Nevertheless, neither action nor indeed further such assassinations will force Iran to recalculate its regional strategy.

### **Enter President Biden**

As Joe Biden waits to enter the White House on January 20, 2021, it is unsurprising, then, that the same Gulf Arab states are reticent of what the next four years will herald. Biden's incoming team has made it abundantly clear that they wish to revive the JCPOA, as the US begins to re-engage with its key partners in Europe, NATO and international organizations, such as the World Health Organization. Instead of preparing to play the role of spoiler for the next four years or sniping from the side, the GCC states, in particular the UAE and Saudi Arabia, should engage with the new US administration (and other P5+1 states) and work constructively to ensure that Iran's regional role is an essential part of wider discussions.

Working constructively does not mean simply insisting that Iran's influence in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon is rolled back. That is an unrealistic objective and adopting that approach will mean that talks will fall at the first hurdle. The zero-sum approach to Iran has failed time and again and, therefore, the GCC states need to develop a much more nuanced approach based on mapping out and prioritizing their interests and being willing to do the same with Iranian counterparts.

Whilst the phrase “sharing the region” sends shivers down Gulf leaders’ spines, many analysts and policymakers from Arab states interviewed for a forthcoming Chatham House report, by Sanam Vakil and Neil Quilliam, recognize that Tehran has legitimate interests in some regional states, including Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. These range from security (Iraq), economic (Syria), and religious and cultural (Iraq, Syria and Lebanon) interests and should be considered seriously in fresh regional talks. At the same time, its influence in Yemen and the Palestinian territories was widely viewed as opportunistic and characterized as illegitimate.

Whereas the presence and activities of Iranian-backed proxy groups is considered to be a threat to sovereignty by nearly all Arab states and international partners as well, economic, religious, and cultural influences are viewed with less suspicion. In fact, Iran’s economic influence was regarded favorably and seen as a useful tool for bringing together otherwise competing parties and, at a more advanced stage, encouraging closer economic cooperation. Of course, it takes an impossible leap of faith to move from the current impasse where zero-sum thinking is *de rigueur* to a point where Saudi Arabia and Iran, for example, fund joint projects, but prioritizing GCC and Iranian interests in the region and identifying inflexion points would go some way to starting the process. For example, Iran considers Iraq to be critical to its national security, whilst Saudi Arabia affords that same priority to Yemen and that differentiation of itself opens up avenues for discussion.

## Conclusion

Saudi Arabia’s relationship with the Biden administration looks set to be rocky in the coming years. The legacy of Riyadh’s war in Yemen and the Khashoggi assassination, amongst other things, will overshadow relations. As a consequence, the new administration will be less forgiving than the previous one, especially if Riyadh seeks to undermine the JCPOA. Therefore, Washington will expect a higher degree of contrition and compliance than was previously afforded to the Obama administration, and Riyadh’s increased vulnerability to Iranian threats will most likely make it forthcoming. The UAE, on the other hand, whilst unpopular with Democrats in general, has made a number of moves, including normalizing ties with Israel, which will stand it in better stead with the new US government than its neighbor. Having said that, both countries will be keen to ingratiate themselves with

the new administration early on and show support for its regional policies; Saudi Arabia, in particular, as a means of side-stepping opprobrium from Congress. There is no better place to start than with the JCPOA, where Riyadh and Abu Dhabi can show willingness and creatively outline the forms of Iranian influence in the region they are willing to countenance, but at the same time the US can draw thick red lines – for all to see – over which it will accept no transgression.