

President Biden's Visit to the Middle East: Recommendations for Israel

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President Biden's forthcoming visit to Israel reflects his desire to demonstrate once again his exceptional commitment to Israel, while his visit to Saudi Arabia aims to advance immediate US interests: influencing oil prices, restoring US standing in the Middle East, and expanding the regional military coordination vis-à-vis Iran. In meetings with the Palestinian leadership, the President will reiterate his commitment to a two-state solution, but there are no expectations of a political breakthrough. In the administration's changed approach to Saudi Arabia, there is an opportunity for Israel to demonstrate its potential as an asset and to benefit from ensuing possibilities. Iran will be the focus of the President's visit to the region: the future of the nuclear agreement is still unclear, and the administration is aware of the need to prepare for a reality where there is no agreement and Iran continues an active nuclear program. Close coordination between Israel and the United States is imperative, and with the administration, Israel should strive to define red lines, and political, economic, and military responses if they are crossed. In addition, Israel should ensure continued US backing for the "campaign between wars," and, in coordination with the Arab states, emphasize the value of the American presence in Iraq and Syria.

United States President Joe Biden is scheduled to visit the Middle East on July 13-16, 2022. He will visit Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and then fly directly to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, for meetings with the Saudi leadership, and will attend a GCC+3 summit – comprising Gulf Cooperation Council leaders, joined by the leaders of Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq.

Biden's decision to visit Israel, made a few months ago and before Saudi Arabia was added to the itinerary, reflects first and foremost his desire to emphasize once again his exceptional personal commitment to Israel, and his desire "to reinforce the United States' iron-clad commitment to Israel's security and prosperity." From his perspective, the importance of the visit lies in its very occurrence, and hence his intention to make the trip despite the political developments in Israel. In meetings with the Palestinian leadership the administration will reiterate its commitment to a two-state solution, but there are no expectations of a political breakthrough.

While the visit to Israel is important to Biden on a personal level, the administration attaches much importance to a successful visit to Saudi Arabia. The President agreed to the visit after extensive deliberation and mindful of the considerable criticism it arouses, mainly in the domestic American arena, given Biden's firm position regarding the involvement of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. However, the emerging geostrategic reality impels the administration to prioritize a realistic approach over adherence to values. A global economic crisis, caused in part by the ongoing war in Ukraine, affects the United States directly, causing inflation to reach new heights and strengthening concerns of a serious recession. The midterm elections to Congress in November 2022 and the palpable risk of losing the Democratic majority have sharpened the understanding in the administration that a change in approach is necessary, including in the strategy regarding the Middle East, in order to effect a positive impact on oil prices. Nevertheless, it is still too early to assess whether this represents a reversal of the administration's priorities and a new willingness and ability to invest resources in the region.

There are many issues on the US-Saudi agenda, and it is doubtful that it will be possible to resolve all of them during the visit. The visit's objectives include:

- a. Achieving a drop in oil prices through a clear commitment by Saudi Arabia to increase production over time. In the administration's view, such a commitment, even if it does not have an immediate impact on prices, will convey stability that will have a positive impact in the long term.
- b. Restoring the United States' standing in the Middle East and imparting to the Arab countries, and especially the Gulf states, that they can rely on the US as their main ally. This would challenge the conception that has grown over the past year that the US is disconnecting from the Middle East, and the consequent intention of countries in the region to look East, especially to China.
- c. Establishing a plan to expand the cooperation with the Gulf countries and other Arab countries on the Iran issue, as much as possible in

coordination with Israel. It is clear to the administration that in a reality in which there are slim prospects that the nuclear agreement will be renewed, and Iran continues to progress in its nuclear program – and even if an agreement is reached – the countries of the region expect the United States to present an action plan that will safeguard their interests. It seems that the administration also has an interest in sharing the burden of dealing with Iran with the regional states and preventing them from going in directions that do not match US interests.

- d. Advancing regional normalization measures, especially between Saudi Arabia and Israel. US figures have stated that the administration is working on "a roadmap to normalization" between the two countries. Senior defense figures from Israel and Saudi Arabia reportedly met recently in Egypt under the auspices of the United States, and it was likewise reported that during his visit, President Biden will discuss a "vision for integrated missile defense and naval defense" with his hosts. It is important to the President that before the midterm elections he is credited with advancing this successful political measure.

Significance and Recommendations for Israel

President Biden's visit to Israel is a milestone that is expected to contribute significantly to the understanding in the region and beyond that the United States continues to stand by Israel, and the US leadership is committed to Israel's security and welfare. This message is of particular importance at the present time, given the prevailing sense that the administration is eager to disconnect from the region. Even if the visit is mainly symbolic, it joins a long series of talks held over the past year that symbolize the direction the administration is outlining and the importance it places on the ongoing dialogue at all levels with the Israeli government. Israel has a clear interest in maintaining the pragmatism and intimacy that characterize the current relations, particularly as the administration has been careful not to use disagreements as avenues of criticism. For its part, Israel should ensure that its conduct continues in this spirit.

The discreet dialogue underway between Israel and the United States over the past year has enabled candid presentation of positions, even contrasting stances. Both countries must understand clearly the shared and divergent interests; the ability to bridge disagreements and formulate joint policy is in Israel's supreme interest. In this context, it is recommended that decision makers in Israel have a clear picture of the interests and priorities of the US administration, especially in the context of the competition with China and the war in Ukraine, and that Israeli policy take these interests into account as much as possible. The goal is to strengthen the administration's understanding, and Congress's understanding, that Israel is an ally of the United States no less than the United States is an ally of Israel.

The Iran issue will be the focus of the President's visit to the region. Despite the renewal of negotiations over the nuclear agreement, it is far from certain that an agreement will be reached. The administration is aware that it must prepare for a reality where there is no agreement, while an active nuclear program continues in Iran. Close coordination between Israel and the United States is imperative, and with the administration, Israel should strive to define red lines as well as agree in advance on political, economic, and military responses if they are crossed. In tandem, it is critical to analyze the risks and opportunities if the agreement is renewed. At the same time, the visit should reflect pursuit of joint planning regarding a campaign against Iran. Even if Israel can develop the ability to act independently, there is great importance in tightening the coordination with the United States in the operational sphere and in American backing for Israeli actions, in part as leverage on Iran. The war in Ukraine has proven that in the international arena there is intolerance of unilateral military aggression (and that is how any military operation in Iran will be seen by someone watching from the sidelines).

Whether or not the nuclear agreement is renewed, President Biden's visit is also meant to strengthen the regional coordination in the face of Iran's ongoing efforts to entrench itself throughout the region and to expand its use of missiles and UAVs. On this issue it is important to ensure continued American support for Israel's "campaign between wars," and in

coordination with the Arab countries, to emphasize to the President the value of continuing the American presence in Iraq and Syria.

The visit has the potential to deepen the trend of normalization between Israel and the Arab countries in general, and Saudi Arabia in particular. Even if the chances of establishing a regional NATO alliance are low, formulating a roadmap for tightened relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia is strategically significant for all sides. Israel for its part would do well to focus on raising ideas for covert and public measures that would help make it easier for the Saudis to cross the Rubicon and advance the bilateral relations at a pace that suits them. A breakthrough in Israel-Saudi relations would be considered a fitting return on President Biden's efforts.

The bottom line: President Biden's visit to Israel and the region is an opportunity to strengthen Israel's national security based on a clear and pronounced demonstration of the United States commitment to it. The administration's changed approach toward Saudi Arabia – while it is the result of new international circumstances – includes an opportunity for Israel to demonstrate its potential as an asset and to benefit from the possibilities that the change incurs.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen