

The 2020 US Election: Why it Matters for the Middle East

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The upcoming US election will be consequential for Middle East foreign policy. The candidates, Donald Trump (incumbent) and Joe Biden, have conflicting attitudes on some of the most contentious issues in the region, such as US-Iran relations, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Saudi Arabian diplomacy.



P.C. via Associated Press

US-Iran Relations

Trump has orchestrated the shift in US foreign policy towards a firm stance against Iran. US-Iran relations deteriorated in 2018, when Trump haphazardly pulled the US from the Iran nuclear deal—a landmark agreement that helped stabilize decades-old bilateral tension between the nations. Since then, Washington has placed economic sanctions on Iran through a “maximum pressure” campaign to persuade Iranian officials to negotiate an agreement that would also limit the country’s ballistic missiles.¹

The sanctions have crippled Iran’s economy, causing record inflation rates and nationwide protests in 2019 and 2020.² US-Iran

relations have only been further complicated by the US assassination of the popular Iranian General Soleimani in January.

As a result of the economic damage from the “maximum pressure” campaign, Iran found support in the East. Iranian officials drafted an extensive economic and security partnership with China, undercutting Trump’s efforts to isolate the Iranian government.³ The agreement threatens the US by potentially giving China a foothold in the region that the US strategically held for decades.

A Trump reelection, and thus a continuation of his “maximum pressure” campaign, would encourage the new China-Iran alliance, creating

greater instability in the Middle East as China and the US compete for regional influence.

While Trump’s “maximum pressure” approach involves great coercion and little diplomacy, Biden would like to approach Iran with less aggression and more diplomacy. Biden’s expertise in negotiating with foreign leaders and his willingness to participate in diplomatic negotiations with Iran could repair and stabilize US-Iran relations.

A key negotiator of the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal, Biden will likely face pressure from NATO countries who supported the deal and opposed the US decision to withdraw from it in 2018.⁴ This pressure, combined with Biden’s distaste for Trump’s approach, could likely result in the resurgence and reinstatement of the previous Obama-backed program. Biden’s support for this less aggressive, more diplomatic deal makes him an attractive option for both the people and government of Iran.

Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

While Trump continues to feud with Iran, he is strengthening the US alliance with Israel.

With Israeli-Palestinian tensions still at a high, the outcome of the US election will undoubtedly shape the future and determine the feasibility of a Palestinian state. Trump has consistently shown camaraderie with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and support for Israel, primarily by recognizing Jerusalem as Israel’s capital.

In January, Trump issued his “deal of the century”: a proposal for Israeli-Palestinian peace.⁵ The plan, negotiated without Palestinian representation, was skewed heavily in support of Israel and gave Palestinians an archipelago state surrounded by Israeli territory.⁵

Opponents of a two-state solution praised the plan as the conclusive end to a possibility of an autonomous Palestinian state. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and other advocates of a two-state solution denounced the plan for the same reasons, seeing it as the demise of a two-state solution.

In the wake of Israel’s plan to annex up to

30 percent of the West Bank, a move condemned by many global powers,⁶ Biden reiterated his appeal for a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine.⁷ He publicly announced that annexation efforts “undercut the prospects for peace”⁷ and that his administration would oppose them. This stance mirrors the Obama administration’s criticism of PM Netanyahu’s expansion of settlements in the West Bank in 2016.

However, Biden has long been an ardent supporter of Israel and is uniquely equipped with the knowledge and skills from his time as the Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to shape policy within the region.⁴

With this experience, Biden hopes to aid in rejuvenating the once promising US-Palestinian financial and diplomatic relationship, while at the same time emphasizing his support for the existence of the Jewish State. Unlike Trump, however, Biden looks to more heavily involve the Palestinian Authority in his efforts to establish peace in the region.

Saudi Arabian Diplomacy

Since the beginning of his presidency, Trump firmly defended Saudi allyship to “ensure the interests of our country, Israel and all other partners in the region.”⁸ Yet, Trump faced sweeping criticism over his cultivation of US-Saudi ties, as he failed to hold the Saudi government accountable for their inhumane air war in Yemen and the disappearance of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Throughout his political career, Biden has faced criticism for his relatively hawkish stances, like his support for the Iraq war and failure to help end the war in Afghanistan—an ardent promise of the Obama-Biden campaign. Although the former vice president often praises Barack Obama’s foreign policy, Biden emphasized that he is no longer in support of the Saudi-led Yemen conflict that the

Obama-Biden administration once backed.⁹ In a 2019 debate, Biden publicly expressed his goal to make the Saudi government the “pariah that they are.”¹⁰ Overall, Biden would take a less friendly approach compared to how the US has recently conducted its diplomatic relations with the Saudi Kingdom.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, US-Iran relations, and Saudi diplomacy are only a few of the controversial issues in Middle East foreign policy that the upcoming president will face. Neither a Trump nor a Biden victory can resolve any of the complicated matters within the region, but the outcome of the election will profoundly shape core affairs in the Middle East.