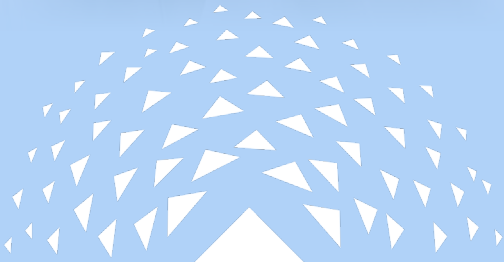
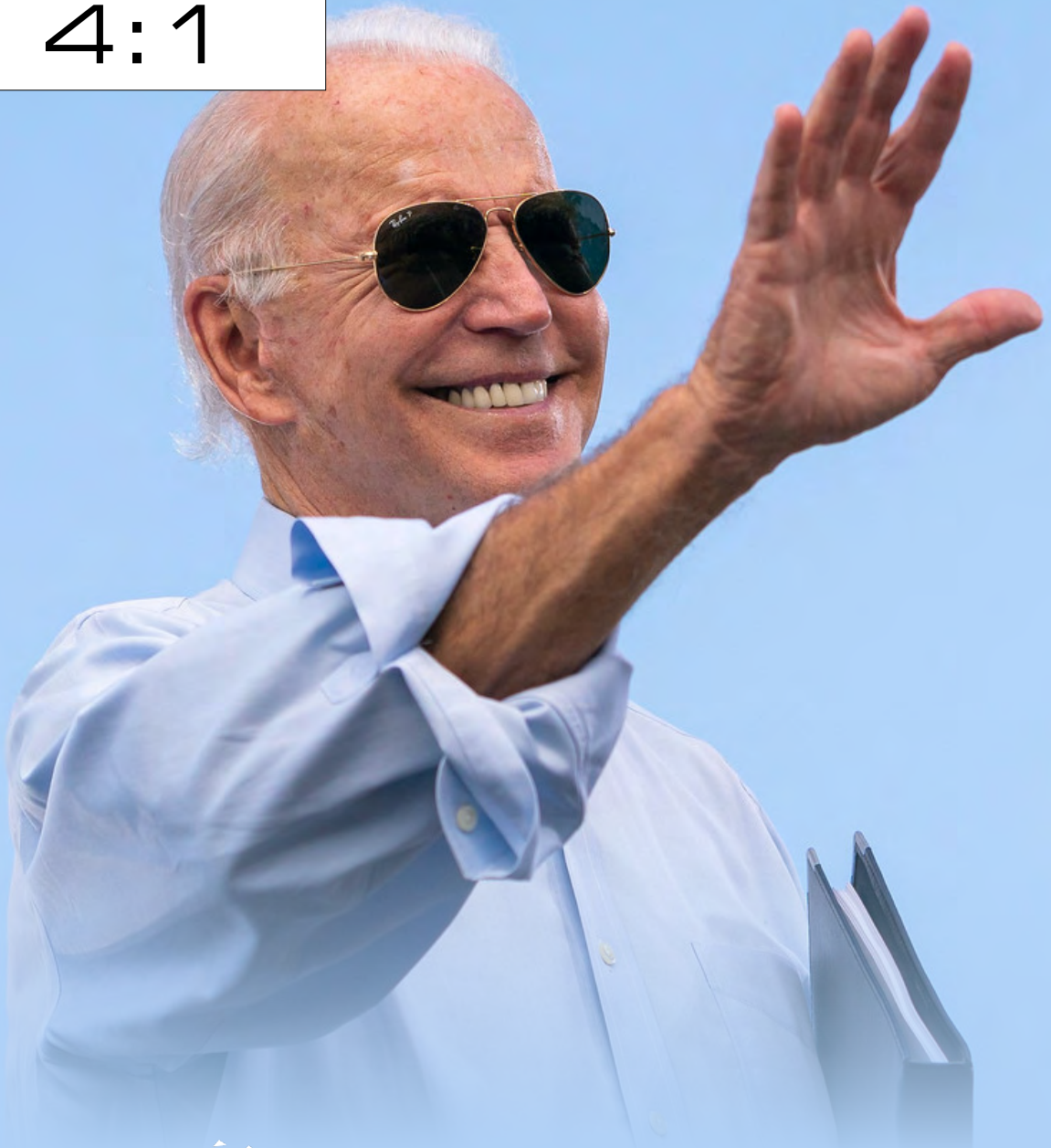


KKI

4:1



**What do Middle Eastern
Countries Expect from the
Biden Administration?**

KKI 4:1

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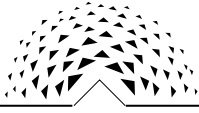
In the 4:1 series of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, four researchers give a short answer to the same question concerning international politics and economics. Our aim is to launch the scientific debates in and beyond Hungary and to promote dialogue among experts. In this issue, our topic is: "What do Middle Eastern countries expect from the Biden administration?"

SHIRIN AFKHAMI

Joe Biden's election victory is certainly good news for Iran, despite the country's official statement that it does not care who presides in the White House. In the past two years, Iran's economy has suffered severe distress from US economic sanctions, after Donald Trump withdrew his country from the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018. Since then, Iranian officials have repeatedly accused Trump of having a law-defying character and dismantling international deals, blaming him for pursuing [a dangerous foreign policy](#). They have, on many occasions, slammed Trump's maximum pressure campaign on Iran and criticized what they refer to as "unilateral approaches" towards the Middle East. As a result, Tehran will undoubtedly breathe a sigh of relief with a new President in the White House, especially one that was the second-highest ranking officer of the administration that negotiated the nuclear deal with Iran in the first place.

Biden has said that rejoining the Iran nuclear deal would be high on his agenda. The current Iranian government welcomes the idea. It, however, stresses that at first, Washington needs to fulfil its commitments under the nuclear deal and lift the sanctions (implementation of JCPOA resolution 2231 and committing to article 25 of the UN charter). Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has frequently noted that it is only after the removal of sanctions that the two sides, alongside other signatories to the deal, can negotiate the terms of a US return to the agreement. However, Iran has, again and again, stated that it would reject any conditionality for the nuclear talks, [with Zarif recently saying that Biden is in no position to set out conditions for Tehran](#). That is while President Hassan Rouhani says the new US administration should [compensate his country for Trump's policies](#) and measures. These all show that Rouhani's government is in favour of a JCPOA resurrection, but only in the exact way it was agreed upon originally in 2015.

Iran also emphasizes that its military and defensive capabilities, including its ballistic missile program, are not negotiable. It says if the US, or the EU, are concerned about peace and stability in the Middle East, [they also need to address Washington's weapon sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, or Israel's refusal to join the Non-Proliferation Treaty](#). These statements suggest that Iran finds the Middle East policies of the US unbalanced and discriminatory. Consequently, Iran would expect a different series of policies and priorities regarding the region from the Biden administration. Tehran's main expectation would concern the Israeli-Palestinian



conflict, where according to Iran, Trump [crossed the red line on many occasions](#). Transferring the Israeli capital to Jerusalem, official recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, and the visit of former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Israeli settlements in the West Bank are some of the Trump administration's moves that Iran has been strongly critical of. Iran's rhetoric shows that it would want the new US administration to relocate the Israeli capital to Tel-Aviv and reject the recognition of the Golan Heights as part of Israeli territory. Given Iran's close alliance with the government of President Bashar al-Assad, Tehran would also urge a more immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the American troops from Syria. Tehran [denounces the presence of any foreign troops in Syria](#) not permitted by the Syrian government, particularly the US forces that Tehran claims are only in Syria to loot the oil under the mask of fighting terrorism. Iranian authorities have also consistently voiced opposition to the US and EU sanctions on Syria, [condemning them as illegal and unfair](#).

Tehran's expectations from the Biden administration regarding Iraq would also be similar to that of Syria. After the assassination of Iran's top commander Qassem Suleimani by the US, fears increased that escalating tensions between Iran and the US would play out in Iraq. Iranians, however, showed that rather than their stated goal of a 'harsh revenge', they were, in fact, more in [favor of an accelerated withdrawal of the US-led forces](#) from the region. Iran is also likely to call for its removal from the US list of states sponsoring terrorism.

However, there are just a few months between Biden's inauguration and the presidential election in Iran. If Biden were to return to negotiations and diplomacy with Iran, it is to be seen if he chose to seal the deal with the current reformist/moderate government or wait for the next administration that is going to be in charge of the country for the next four years. There are stark differences between the Iranian reformists and hardliners concerning their views of the government in Washington. Hardliners have been opponents of the nuclear deal. They have consistently blamed Rouhani's government for trusting the US, pushing for legislation to exit JCPOA. Hardliners might prefer a relatively isolated US, with less intimate ties with its European allies, a President whose rhetoric might not be that much welcomed by the international community, in contrast to what is expected of the new democratic government in Washington.

CAGLA YILDIRIM

The US presidential election between Donald Trump and Joe Biden inspired many theories and analyses. Various speculations and scenarios were discussed as to which candidate would bring something new to the table or continue with his previous agenda, and the focus was on COVID-19, which put issues of foreign affairs in the background. However, the previous experiences of both candidates indicated what would happen regarding foreign relations if they were elected.

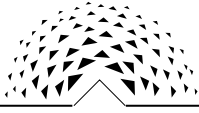
Turkish think tanks expressed various expectations regarding Biden's foreign policy. According to SETAV, neither Biden nor Trump has a long-term, consistent vision, although they do not have many similarities in terms of foreign policy. Biden has been a traditional follower of the Democratic party; therefore, some experts expect a third Obama term. In contrast to Trump, they expect progressing relations with Asia and Europe, and approaching China and Russia with a more sensitive attitude. [Think tanks expect](#) that Biden will first focus on the domestic problems that COVID-19 has created, while improving the relations with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that were damaged during the Trump administration.

Biden is considered to have substantial experience in foreign affairs. Even though he has supported US leadership in protecting the liberal status quo of the international system with the help of their allies, he is seen as having made numerous mistakes regarding foreign affairs. He is also [held responsible](#) for most of the mistakes that took place during Obama's term regarding the Iraq and Syria policies. Biden is expected to bring back the dignity of the US as a leader of the international system and not repeat Trump's mistakes. However, he does not seem to have a well-defined new foreign policy agenda and seems to bring back Obama's legacy instead.

Democrats [have different opinions](#) among themselves regarding foreign policy, including about the Middle East. There are some who want to restore dynamics and are rethinking what the Middle East means for the US, and what value it represents for their own interests. Nevertheless, [some suggest](#) that although the Middle East is still important for the US, it is not as important as it used to be. Reformists support short-term and limited operations in the region against terrorist organizations, and they prefer to avoid long-term and broad interventions. On the other hand, some names in Biden's foreign affairs team [support a more assertive diplomatic approach](#) towards regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, supporting a US helping hand with the Gulf states.

The officials who also served on Obama's foreign affairs team suggest continuing Obama's policies with some revision regarding topics such as the Iran nuclear agreement and the security of Israel. Biden favours diplomatic means; therefore, he is expected to reduce the size of the US army in the region, although it is expected for the US to still be present in the Gulf region. Priorities Biden has promised in different meetings and speeches so far include the withdrawal of the vast majority of American troops from Afghanistan, the narrow focus of the military mission in the Middle East on the fight against Al-Qaeda and Daesh, and an end to American support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen.

About Iran's nuclear issue, the names surrounding Biden aim to reduce nuclear diplomacy, reduce tensions in the region, and prioritize regional dialogue. Despite Trump's criticism towards the issue, [one of their main goals](#) is to return to this agreement and strengthen the limitations on Iran's nuclear program by diplomatic means. It is understood from Biden's statements about the region that a limited military presence will remain focused on the fight against DAESH in Iraq under his administration, and that the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) will continue to be supported in Syria.



Biden's discourse on the Middle East points to a change that can restructure [the US policy on Iran](#) in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and other issues, with Biden willing to turn the US back to JCPOA. If his proposed Iran policy is implemented, Biden will end the maximum pressure campaign after reaching a compromise with Iran. In regional matters, there will be no significant U-turn from Trump's policies, although the tone of the rhetoric and the politics will differ. Therefore, the traditional attitude towards Iran does not seem to change significantly, and it is difficult to predict a change in Iran's regional policy.

When it comes to the Syrian portfolio, Biden [is expected](#) to rely on the bureaucrats of the State Department and the National Security Agency, which means a continuation (and even strengthening) of the anti-Assad policy and a cooperation with Syrian Kurdish forces. No major change is in sight in this regard, which reproduces some points of tension between Turkey and the United States. Nevertheless, there is a possibility of Biden turning to Russian President Vladimir Putin to make a grand bargain regarding Syria, a promise that could be seen positively in Ankara (if Turkey is not excluded from the process).

ELIAS DAHROUGE

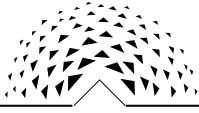
From a general perspective, Lebanese public opinion has a strong tendency to perceive most domestic political trends as influenced or determined by the agendas of foreign powers. Political actors are no exception in this respect. This is even more true when it comes to the US, the world's strongest superpower, and the US presidential election is therefore one of the most followed non-domestic political events. Joe Biden's election has to be understood within this framework. However, the Lebanese political system is based on a multi-sectarian, fragmented society, where sectarian political formations play an intermediary role of representation between the state and its citizens. In this context, each faction tries to take advantage of the position of its respective foreign allies on the regional political chessboard. Hence, each actor has conflicting interests at stake. Concerning Biden's victory, the most prominent issue around which the Lebanese actors can be mapped is the US-Iran conflict and its regional ramifications. In this respect, the most relevant actor is Hezbollah, Lebanon's most influential actor. The Iranian-backed Shia militant group has a relatively positive perception of Biden's victory. Indeed, after the [maximum pressure policy](#) of the Trump administration, Hezbollah hopes that Biden will loosen the reins. Although the leadership is aware of the fact that the US pro-Israeli foreign policy [will not alter dramatically](#), the party's supporters and militants [were very optimistic](#) about the elections results. This optimism has to be understood on two levels. First, Biden has promised that he would [rejoin the Iran nuclear deal](#) (also known as the JCPOA). This development concerns Hezbollah on its regional dimension. Being an Iranian proxy, the party expects some bargains in

its involvements in Syria or in Yemen, for instance. Second, during the past few years Trump gradually imposed a list of [severe sanctions](#) on the party and on some of its [local Lebanese allies](#). This policy started to endanger Hezbollah's strength on the Lebanese political scene by deterring other political actors from cooperating with it. All these developments happened in parallel with a [multi-level economic, social, financial, and political crisis in Lebanon](#) starting from fall 2019. The situation is the same for the majority of Hezbollah's allies. This also includes some of the major Christian parties, like President Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement. As for the other actors, their expectations are much more ambiguous. We should not forget that Lebanon is very polarized, and most regional tensions are reflected on its domestic political scene. While most of Hezbollah's political rivals may seem happy about Trump's policy, the resulting destabilization of Lebanon is not in the interest of any of them. Some supporters from the parties that once were part of the anti-Syrian, pro-Western March 14 coalition openly expressed their sympathy with Trump. However, the actual situation is much more complicated. Saad Hariri is the perfect example for this. Once supported by the Saudis, he knows that his ascent to [Premiership](#) cannot be achieved without Hezbollah's support, which has resulted in a strong love-hate relationship between the two. The Biden administration would then be [more understanding](#) of the specificities of the Lebanese political field.

Beyond the expectations of Biden's future policies, the US presidential election came at a critical moment for Lebanon. It came amid the ongoing worsening economic, financial, social, and political collapse that started in October 2019, causing a massive wave of protests. Still, since the resignation of Diab's Cabinet following the [Beirut port explosion](#) of August 2020, the political parties have been unable to [form a new government](#) due to paralyzing negotiations. The bet on Biden led this deadlock to postpone cabinet formation for after the US transfer of power, as if the new administration would change its policies from one day to another. This collective procrastination is only worsening the current crisis. Poverty rates jumped from [28% to 55% in one year](#), while [hyperinflation](#) has caused the Lebanese Lira lose [80%](#) of its value during the last few months. All of these are added to a [dramatic deterioration](#) of the management of the COVID-19 pandemic.

NOHA EZZAT

The Middle East has been a pinnacle of US foreign policy since the Cold War, with its geopolitical contours largely shaped by America's solid alliances with its heaviest states: Turkey, Pahlavi Iran, and Saudi Arabia since the 1950s, Israel since the 1960s, and Egypt since the 1970s. The demise of Pahlavi Iran in 1979, and the subsequent emergence of Iran's Islamic regime, remains the central dilemma for the US in the region, along with its reverberating effects



across Iraq since 2003, and Syria since 2011. Biden, as former vice-president and former chairman of the senate committee on foreign relations, has a long acquaintance with the region, [as does his secretary of state, Anthony Blinken](#).

Biden's and Blinken's record on the Middle East is key to understanding the new administration's impact on the region. First, they were aligned with Obama's decision to negotiate a deal with Iran, which was essential to settling a long-standing enmity on realistic grounds, especially given the need to resolve the Syrian question and maintain Iraqi stability. Second, they were involved in Obama's policy arming YPG Kurds in Syria ([which embittered NATO ally Turkey](#)), although both aimed at maintaining Turkey as a central US ally, and were outspoken in [condemning the 2016 coup attempt](#). Third, Obama's support for Mubarak's overthrow and acceptance of Islamist electoral wins ([which Saudi Arabia vehemently opposed](#)), was coldly received by Biden, [who continued to defend Mubarak](#) until his overthrow.

Compared to Obama's unorthodox policies, Biden and Blinken are keener on America's alliances and aware of its decades-old ties in the region. Although expectations abound about a four-year extension of the Obama administration, Biden's and Blinken's strong traditional institutional credentials render those expectations unsound. The Middle East can expect a mix of resuming only the Obama policies dictated by inevitable shifts and emerging American interests, namely counterterrorism and pivoting to Asia, along with a revival of the multilateral alliances that characterized the Clinton administration. This implies a serious accommodation of Turkey, Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia into the multilateral nexus Biden will try to rebuild. Yet, this strategy will stumble upon the highly personalized and un-institutional policies those states entrenched under Trump. Whether it is Erdogan, Netanyahu, Sisi, or Bin Salman, the effective leaders of these states will try to seek advantages from Biden's desire to keep them on board, with the aim of maintaining the survival of their personalized regimes.

Heading down a path with those inherent contradictions, the US and its partners will be facing a complicated institutional task and a daunting personal exercise. The extent to which the US will appease (or confront) them to pursue its interests will depend on the geopolitical issues they are entangled with. Given the central role Iran and Syria will occupy, the trajectory of relations with Turkey and Saudi Arabia will be crucial. Both countries are America's biggest allies and the region's largest economies, which gives them leverage to ensure Biden's traditionalism plays out in their favour. Turkey will push for reduced reliance on the Kurds in return for stepping in to play its classical role in America's multilateral calculus, and Saudi Arabia will exert maximum pressure to ensure a new deal is tied to curbing Iran's influence, not a mere restoration of the old deal.

Egypt, whose reputation is marred by clear breaches of human rights that will face scrutiny from Biden, will nevertheless face no strategic dilemmas for its regional calculus. US support for Egypt's army against ISIS in Sinai is not expected to flounder, neither is the desire to reach a deal on Ethiopia's GERD. Also,

[Egypt's close relations with Israel, Greece, and Cyprus in the East Mediterranean has bipartisan support in Washington.](#) So, despite its weaker position in the region, Egypt is on its way to easily navigate the Biden term, only losing the personal rapport enjoyed with the White House under Trump.

The Washington allies who have long navigated their American alliance through a clear institutional framework and found it difficult to adapt to Trump, will welcome Biden's return to normalcy. Jordan, burdened by Trump's support for Israel's breach of commitments to Palestinians, is expecting a renewed commitment to its security and historic role in the West Bank. Oman, which played a key role in the Iran deal and has been [uneasy about the Saudi-Emirati plans for the GCC](#), will be anticipating the positive effects of a return to diplomacy with Iran, and, along with Qatar, a possible return to a consensus-driven GCC.

Lastly, Israel continues to enjoy its solid bipartisan support despite the differences over settlements and Netanyahu's policies. Although personal tensions could arise between Biden and Netanyahu, that will not alter the calculus of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Blinken has clearly [affirmed the unconditional nature of support to Israel](#). For now, shifts are expected with Iran (and consequently Saudi Arabia), then the Syria-Iraq-Kurdistan Triangle (and consequently Turkey), which will be the geopolitical highlights as Biden attempts to leave a positive legacy where the US remains entangled, and where he has long had a deep interest.