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President Biden's Gaza Policy Leaves the Middle East in Flames



Image by Nat.

President Joe Biden has now joined the ranks of Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush as a president whose Middle East policy crashed and burned spectacularly. Unlike Carter, who was stymied by the Iranian hostage crisis, or Bush, who faced a popular Iraqi resistance movement, Biden's woes weren't inflicted by an enemy. Quite the opposite, it was this country's putative partner, the Israeli government, that implicated the president in its still ongoing genocide in Gaza, as well as its disproportionate attacks on Lebanon and Iran, for

which Biden steadfastly declined to impose the slightest penalties. Instead, he's continued to arm the Israelis to the teeth.

Israel's total war on Palestinian civilians, in turn, significantly reduced enthusiasm for Biden among youth and minorities at home, helping usher him out of office. It also created electoral obstacles for Kamala Harris's presidential bid. By his insistence on impunity for the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Biden has left the Middle East in flames and the U.S. and the world distinctly in peril.

During his first three years in office, his administration wielded the tools of diplomacy in the Middle East. Donald Trump's sanctions against the Houthis in Yemen had imperiled the civilian population there by denying them humanitarian aid and gasoline to drive to the market for food. Biden lifted those sanctions and sponsored continued negotiations between those in power in the Yemeni capital of Sanaa and in the neighboring Saudi Arabian capital of Riyadh. Only relatively small contingents of American troops remained in Syria and Iraq to help with the mopping-up operations against the so-called Islamic State terrorist organization.

Pushing Iran into the Arms of China and Russia

Danger signals nonetheless soon began flashing bright red among friend and foe alike in the region, as Biden's team quickly squandered an opportunity to restore the 2015 "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," or JCPOA, between the U.N. Security Council and the Iranian regime in Tehran, which Trump had so tellingly trashed. Between 2015 and 2019, that deal had successfully kept Iran's civilian nuclear enrichment program purely civilian, closing off the four most plausible pathways to a nuclear weapon.

In those years, the Iranians had, in fact, mothballed 80% of their nuclear program in return for sanctions relief. While the U.N. Security Council lifted economic sanctions on that country, Republicans in Congress refused to halt unilateral American sanctions, which applied to third parties as well. European investors had to jump through hoops to invest in Iran while avoiding Treasury Department fines. As a result, a disappointed Iranian leadership went unrewarded for its careful compliance with the JCPOA.

Then, in May 2018, Trump stabbed the Iranians in the back, withdrawing the U.S. from the JCPOA and slapping the most severe economic sanctions ever applied by one country to another in peacetime on Iran. It essentially added up to an invisible blockade of the Iranian economy, even interfering with ordinary commerce like that country's oil sales. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu boasted of having convinced the gullible Trump to take such a step, which led Iran's petroleum exports to plummet over the next

three years. Trump even [designated](#) the Iranian National Bank a terrorist organization, again with potentially crippling consequences for the entire economy.

In revenge, Iran went back to enriching uranium to high levels and building more centrifuges, though without actually producing weapons-grade material. To this day, its civilian nuclear program remains a form of “the Japan option,” an attempt at deterrence by making it clear that it does not want a bomb but that, if it feels sufficiently threatened, it can build a nuclear weapon relatively quickly.

As soon as Joe Biden defeated Trump in 2020, the centrist Iranian President Hassan Rouhani declared that the JCPOA could be [restored](#) by the two leaders virtually by fiat. And Biden’s foreign policy team initially appeared to consider negotiations to reinstate the treaty, only to ultimately retain Trump’s outrageous sanctions as “leverage,” [demanding](#) that Iran return to compliance with the JCPOA before the two sides could talk.

Perhaps the Iranian public got the message that Biden was determined to be as hostile as Trump. Certainly, in the next round of voting in the summer of 2021, they swung behind hardliner Ebrahim Raisi. And despite occasional modest diplomatic forays since then, relations have been in a dumpster for the remainder of Biden’s term, with most of Trump’s “maximum pressure” sanctions still in place. And once again, as in the Trump years, the Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu has [lobbied](#) Biden hard to cease all negotiations with Tehran.

Iran, which might have been drawn into the Western camp, has instead become a [hostage](#) to Beijing. Starting in 2019, China [accepted](#) smuggled Iranian petroleum at a substantial price discount. Then, when the Ukraine War broke out and Biden imposed maximum sanctions on the Russian Federation, Moscow and Tehran found themselves pushed ever closer.

Now, the two countries plan to [sign](#) a “strategic partnership agreement,” while, in July 2023, Iran [joined](#) the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, cementing the alliances with both China and Russia into which it had been so vigorously pushed by Washington. Iran also became a definite [asset](#) for Russia in its Ukraine War, providing Vladimir Putin with crucial weaponry. In short, Biden’s hardline policy toward Tehran ultimately harmed his major foreign policy initiative, of defeating Moscow.

Passionate Intensity

Biden’s team also pursued the strategy worked out by Donald Trump and his son-in-law Jared Kushner of trying to wheedle or strong-arm Arab states into making a separate peace

with Israel, while throwing the stateless Palestinians under the bus. They managed to defame the Bible by naming their agreements — initially among Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, and Israel — the “Abraham Accords,” though they were actually thinly veiled [arms deals](#). Underlying such a strategy lurked the possibility of creating a military bloc, involving Israel and significant parts of the Arab world, to isolate and ultimately overthrow the government of Iran. The Arab signatories all sought the economic benefits of trade and investment with Israel as well as U.S. security promises, benefiting American arms manufacturers with their orders. Had Biden instead made a full-court press for Palestinian rights, he might have created optimism rather than despair.

Sudan was also soon blackmailed into joining the accords. A popular revolution there overthrew the decades-long dictatorship of Omar al-Bashir on April 11, 2019. Its civilian and military wings then entered into a tenuous cohabitation, with the civilians pressing the generals to return to their barracks. Civilian Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and the chairman of the Transitional Military Council, General Abdel Fattah Burhan, signed onto the Abraham Accords in January 2021 both to get Sudan removed from the U.S. list of terrorist nations and to begin repairing its economy.

In the end, that represented pure economic [blackmail](#), a policy [continued](#) by Secretary of State Antony Blinken. A 2022 poll [showed](#) that more than 74% of Sudanese rejected any normalization with Israel. Instead of attempting to bolster budding Sudanese democracy, the Biden administration continued to resort to backdoor deals with that junta in the interests of America’s main geopolitical client in the Middle East (while Sudan itself fell into a catastrophic civil war).

Blinken also made it a personal mission to rope Saudi Arabia into the Abraham Accords. Unlike the two other Gulf states committed to the treaty, however, Saudi Arabia has a largely pro-Palestinian Muslim population in the millions and a peace treaty with Israel might have fomented unrest among them. While Mohammed Bin Salman, the fickle crown prince who ran much of the show in that country, continued to vacillate on the issue, his father, King Salman, repeatedly made it [clear](#) that “Palestine is our number one issue,” and that there will be no recognition of Israel without an ironclad path to a Palestinian state (a longstanding Saudi [position](#)).

Nonetheless, the Biden foreign policy team continued pressuring Riyadh to normalize relations with Israel, even as the Gaza War grew ever more devastating and the Saudi public daily saw images of women and children being shredded by American-supplied bombs and drones. In an [opinion poll](#) released last January, 78% of Saudis said that they

felt psychologically stressed by the Gaza War, while nearly every one of them lambasted the U.S. response as “bad” or “very bad,” and 57% believed there was now no possibility of making peace with Israel.

Things Fall Apart, the Center Cannot Hold

The security guarantees the U.S. gave the United Arab Emirates under the Abraham Accords emboldened its leader, Mohamed Bin Zayed (MBZ), in his [quest](#) to create an informal empire stretching from [Yemen](#) to Sudan and even all the way to Libya. In April 2023, however, Sudan’s conventional army and the country’s special operations Rapid Support Forces (RSF) fell to fighting one another, as the generals that led them competed for power. The country then devolved into a horror show of a civil war, with half of its 50 million people now facing starvation and at least 62,000 already [slaughtered](#). The brutal RSF fighters are nonetheless [backed](#) by the Emirates (lovingly dubbed “little Sparta” by the Pentagon). And in these years, President Biden has proven impotent when it came to reining in America’s “Abraham Accords” darling. In fact, he only recently [hosted](#) MBZ at the White House and a Rose Garden that’s seen more genocidaires than most administrations.

The Israeli and U.S. response to the gruesome Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023, can fairly be said to have entirely undone all of Biden’s diplomatic work in the region. While the United States and some other Western governments viewed Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s never-ending devastation of Gaza and his country’s [deployment](#) of American 2,000-pound bombs against residential complexes as forced on him by Hamas’s alleged tactic of using civilians as “human shields,” virtually no one in the global South agreed. Even some European Union states and Israeli journalists [dissented](#).

South Africa brought a case against Israel at the International Criminal Court charging it with genocide, which the Court found “[plausible](#)” in January, issuing the equivalent of a preliminary injunction against the Netanyahu government. Israel, of course, ignored it and has simply continued the devastation there (and now [in Lebanon](#) as well). Somehow, Biden seemed unaware that the government of extremists formed by Netanyahu in late 2022 was anything but the Israel of the 1960 film *Exodus*, with a blue-eyed Paul Newman as the protagonist. It was instead a [witch’s brew](#) of virulent ethnonationalism and religious apocalypticism.

Worse yet, Netanyahu used the cover of his Gaza atrocities to expand the war further. He deliberately [bombed](#) an Iranian diplomatic facility (considered Iranian soil under international law) in the Syrian capital of Damascus last spring. Iran later responded with a

rocket barrage. Netanyahu went on attempting to get Tehran's goat, aware that if he could turn his conflict into an actual war with Iran, American jingoists would give him even more knee-jerk support.

In the process, he had Ismail Haniyeh, his chief, if indirect, civilian Hamas negotiating partner, [assassinated](#) in Iran's capital of Tehran on the occasion of the inauguration of a new president there. He then launched a [terrorist](#) onslaught of booby-trapped pager bombs against an Iran-allied group, Hezbollah, in Lebanon before invading that country and subjecting significant parts of it to a Gaza-style bombardment, as a response to Hezbollah rocket attacks on Israel in support of Gaza. Such provocations led to yet another Iranian missile [barrage](#) against Israel on October 1st to which Israel replied with [attacks](#) on Iranian military facilities. Biden was reduced to pleading with Iran to be reasonable in response, while declining to demand any similar restraint from Israel.

The Blood-Dimmed Tide

And here's the truth of the matter: President Biden could undoubtedly have halted Netanyahu's total war on Palestinian civilians at any point in 2024, given Israel's dependence on U.S. ammunition and arms. Instead, his gung-ho [support](#) of the insupportable in Gaza has helped turn the Middle East into a genuine powder keg, which he is bequeathing to his successor. Crucial Red Sea and Suez Canal maritime trade has already been partially [paralyzed](#), thanks to rocket attacks launched by Yemen's Houthi rebels in support of the people of Gaza, adding inflation and supply-chain difficulties to the global economy.

Biden then [restored](#) sanctions on the Houthis, harming Yemeni civilians, while allowing Netanyahu to go on butchering Gazan civilians. Lebanon, already a basket case, with a ruined port, a bankrupt national bank, no president, and a third of its population below the poverty line, now faces a wholesale [reduction](#) to fourth-world misery. More than a [million](#) Lebanese have had to flee their homes in that small country and the conflict will undoubtedly contribute to Europe's immigration crisis.

Consider it a distinct irony, then, that, rather than allying with Israel against Iran, most Arab publics have significantly [raised](#) their estimation of Tehran. Even long-time American ally Turkey and U.S. partner Egypt have felt threatened by the extremist Netanyahu government and its Napoleonic ambitions, and have begun [warming](#) to one another and exploring better relations with Tehran.

Nativist Shiite militias in Iraq rained down rockets on bases in that country hosting U.S. troops, but ranged even further afield, targeting American soldiers in Jordan

and killing Israeli troops in Israel itself. They pledged to come to the aid of Lebanon's Hezbollah. The Iraqi parliament recognized such militias in 2016 as the equivalent of a national guard. Iraq's outraged Shiites even finally convinced Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al Sudani to kick the last U.S. troops out of that country by 2026.

In the end, Biden's unfaltering bear hug of Benjamin Netanyahu ensured that even the last vestiges of the George W. Bush administration's neoconservative project of reshaping the Middle East to America's and Israel's advantage have now gone down the drain. Washington continues to send ever more bombs and sophisticated weaponry to a Middle East in flames and, with Donald Trump set to take office in January, such dangerous arms deals will likely only multiply.

Consider it a genuine first-class nightmare.

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