

BIDEN MIDDLE EAST TRIP

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



President Biden's Middle East trips came in the backdrop of key critical developments not just in the region itself but around the globe. In his first regional tour since taking office, the US President made stops in Israel, and Saudi Arabia, held talks with Palestinians and West Bank officials, as well as attended the Jeddah Security and Development Summit. The four-day trip while being called a success by the White House fell victim to numerous controversies and questions. At home, many critics blame President Biden to go against his campaign promises to make the Saudi Kingdom a global pariah as he fist-bumped Saudi Arabia's crown prince Muhammad Bin Salman, who was directly linked to the killing of Jamal Khashoggi by US intelligence agencies.¹

With the background of the murder of Jamal Khashoggi still unaccounted for, the shift in dynamics as a result of rising gas prices hitting the US economy, and the power vacuum created for Russia-China-Iran as a result of US's blank check policy with Saudi Arabia.² The visit has been met with a chorus of criticism, especially on humanitarian grounds. Republicans heavily criticized President

¹ "Reorient...Not Rupture: Biden Defends Saudi Visit in Column," Aljazeera, July 10, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/10/reorient-not-rupture-biden-defends-saudi-visit-in-column>

² "Biden Disputes Saudi Minister's Account Of Meeting With MBS," Aljazeera, July 17, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/17/biden-disputes-saudi-ministers-account-of-meeting-with-mbs>

Biden for warming up and accused him of ‘fist bumping with murderers,’³ and saw the move as a clear violation of American values and human rights. However, the administration is of the view that there is a growing need to maintain cordial and workable relations with the Saudi kingdom especially as the US continue to address the increasing oil cost.

Key Takeaways:

Biden’s Middle East Strategy

The visit by the US President was multi-tiered in terms of policy and strategic repositioning in the Middle East and the Gulf region. During his visit President Biden un-wrapped Washington’s strategy for the Middle East. He reassured Washington’s uninterrupted engagement with allies in the Middle East and stressed that the US would not walk away from the region and will ensure the Middle Eastern allies of the US’s commitment to deter Iran from getting a nuclear weapon.⁴

- This policy overture defines US’s position as reprioritizing the Middle East after its unceremonious withdrawal from Afghanistan, making it easier for the US to relocate its resources to the Middle Eastern and Gulf region.
- While it primarily has targeted goals for the region its visit also serves as a means to reassert Washington’s influence in the Middle East in the Gulf in wake of the growing Chinese and Russian influence.
- Active US engagement in the Middle East in wake of new prominent challenges as the world grows more competitive and complex. It was also made clear that the primary reason for the US to stay engaged in the Middle East is to not leave a vacuum that can be filled by countries such as China, Russia or Iran.
- The strategic policy trend that the US laid out during Biden’s visit only reserves space for a regional coalition and integration between the US along with its like-minded allies while alienating others.

³ “Biden holds controversial meeting with Saudi crown prince,” CBS Evening News, July 15, 2022, <https://www.cbs.com/shows/video/GSw32bHeXkX2OJplghnTMOYLsTvOImxR/>

⁴ “Background Press Call Previewing Day Two of the President’s Trip to the Middle East,” White House, July 13, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2022/07/13/background-press-call-previewing-day-two-of-the-presidents-trip-to-the-middle-east/>

- Washington proposed a regional security alliance along the lines of NATO constituting Arab states, Israel and the Gulf to primarily counter the Iranian threat. The talks were also dominated by the idea to create a US-led Middle East Air Defense Alliance (MEAD) that would defend member states from mutual threats; hostile missiles and drones.⁵
- The coalition's primary responsibility would be to protect and address the security needs, along with working together on other areas such as technology, energy, water and food, amongst others.
- Once the coalition holds its footing it can further develop into orchestrating broader multilateral security architecture in the region through multiple diplomatic, economic, security and strategic cooperation to address collective agendas.

This visit also reflected US's desperation to strengthen and sustain its energy supplies by reshaping the old alliances with Saudi Arabia, and Emirates, amongst others. While the US is trying to reassert its influence in the Middle East the tone of the visit has sent escalatory messages to Iran as it gives the impression of the formation of a strategic bloc in the Middle East with one side in the US camp and one that falls with the Chinese, Russian and Iranian camp. This will slowly encourage bloc politics in the region and raise caution and alarm in the already fragile region. The idea of selective coalition will divide the region further as it clearly outlines measures to counter mutual security threats –as China and Russia are already demarcated as the new threats to the stability and security in the Middle East.⁶

While a Middle Eastern security coalition would be a weighty achievement for the US that will not only reassert its power in the region but also secure its national and strategic interest; it will on the other hand have far worse security challenges and repercussions. A military campaign under the banner of a coalition, and Iran's diplomatic isolation will further plunge the region into chaos and conflict with grave implications for not just the countries in the region but also beyond the region. In addition, Washington's disposition to rebuild a coalition against Iran⁷ in case of failure of talks on

⁵ Shahira Amin, "Biden's Middle East Trip Is Sending Iran an Escalatory Message. Here's Why," Atlantic Council, July 13, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/bidens-middle-east-trip-is-sending-iran-an-escalatory-message-heres-why/>

⁶ "China and Russia: The New Threats to Middle East Security and Stability," US Department of State, October 8, 2019, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/china-and-russia-the-new-threats-to-middle-east-security-and-stability/index.html>

⁷ "Background Press Call Previewing Day Two of the President's Trip to the Middle East," White House, July 13, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2022/07/13/background-press-call-previewing-day-two-of-the-presidents-trip-to-the-middle-east/>

JCPOA and to curtail its aggression in the region will diminish any role of diplomatic footprint that the US or its allies have at the moment over Iran.

Jeddah Security and Development Summit

The Jeddah Security and Development Summit was the first of its kind attended by the leaders of Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, KSA, and the United Arab Emirates as well as GCC+3 countries – the Republic of Egypt, the Republic of Iraq, and the Kingdom of Jordan. The Summit broadly covered all aspects of the relationship and reaffirmed US's commitment to the Middle East and the region's integration. It highlighted the importance and need of working together to address the emerging regional and global challenges through partnerships. Throughout the Summit, President Biden reiterated Washington's commitment to the Middle East and the United States' decades-long strategic partnerships in the region. The US also reaffirmed its continued commitment to the security and territorial defence of its partners in the region and recognized the region's increasingly important role as a trade and technology crossroads between hemispheres.⁸

US declared five working principles of commitment⁹ to the Middle East that lays the architecture of the future trajectory and engagement between the US and the region.

1. **Partnerships:** through partnerships US will strengthen and support and defend its allies in the region against foreign threats and encourage countries to subscribe to the rule-based international order.
2. **Deterrence:** the US will protect its allies in the region against any foreign or regional powers as well as the Middle East's waterways, nor tolerate single country dominance, military buildups, or threats in the region.
3. **Diplomacy: diplomacy will be used** to maintain regional stability, de-escalate, and end conflicts wherever possible.

⁸ "Fact Sheet: The United States Strengthens Cooperation with Middle East Partners to Address 21st Century Challenges," July 16, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/16/fact-sheet-the-united-states-strengthens-cooperation-with-middle-east-partners-to-address-21st-century-challenges/>

⁹ "Fact Sheet: The United States Strengthens Cooperation with Middle East Partners to Address 21st Century Challenges," July 16, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/16/fact-sheet-the-united-states-strengthens-cooperation-with-middle-east-partners-to-address-21st-century-challenges/>

4. **Integration:** integration in the form of political, economic, and security connections amongst the US and its partners, while respecting each country's sovereignty and independent choices.
5. **Values:** promote human rights and the values enshrined in the UN Charter.

Oil Politics

This visit came amidst a global energy crisis. The prices of fuel have spiraled as a result of European and American sanctions on Russian fuel exports due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹⁰ Oil production also remained at the top of agendas throughout the Middle East visit as with the crucial US midterm legislative elections in November. The added oil output could help decrease the gas prices and the raging inflation in the US which stood at 9.1 per cent in June – the highest in 41 years – crucial for Biden's midterm elections in November.¹¹ Washington argued for increased oil production to lower global prices in order to toughen the bite of sanctions against Russia and make non-Russian energy supplies available to European markets.

Moreover, many analysts believe that equal chances are that Saudi Arabia may also be reluctant to boost production as Saudis may be concerned about turning their back on Russia, because Russia has been a strong ally through thick and thin supporting OPEC in managing oil prices.¹²

However, despite the Biden administration's continuous reassurance, this visit is being seen as a departure from the administration's promise to ostracize Saudi Arabia on humanitarian grounds. With eyebrows being raised by both, democrats and republicans, the visit is cast as a betrayal, as going back on American values. A survey conducted by The Brookings Institution targeting American citizens showed that the Republicans disapproved of Biden's trip more than the Democrats.¹³ However, Republican disapproval of the trip was the highest when the question emphasized Saudi Arabia — from 41 per cent in the neutral sample group to nearly 54 per cent; whereas, Democratic

¹⁰ Cohen, Patricia, and Stanley Reed, "Why The Toughest Sanctions On Russia Are The Hardest For Europe To Wield," New York Times, February 25, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/25/business/economy/russia-europe-sanctions-gas-oil.html>

¹¹ Mo Abbas, "Biden on the Hunt for Higher Oil Production on Saudi Arabia Trip; The Odds Are Steep," NBC News, July 15, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/business/energy/biden-saudi-arabia-trip-higher-oil-production-rcna38320>

¹² Mo Abbas, "Biden on the Hunt for Higher Oil Production on Saudi Arabia Trip; The Odds Are Steep," NBC News, July 15, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/business/energy/biden-saudi-arabia-trip-higher-oil-production-rcna38320>

¹³ Shibley Telhami, "It's Risky For Biden To Go To The Middle East," Washington Post, July 7, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/07/07/biden-saudi-arabia-israel-trip-july-criticism/>

disapproval was highest when Israel was mentioned from around 10 per cent in the neutral sample group to 17 per cent.¹⁴ The boost in disapproval among Democrats under 35 was significant from around 8 per cent in the neutral group to 30 per cent in the second group, where the introduction mentions Israel; with fewer than one-quarter of Americans approved of the president's trip.¹⁵

Contrary to popular opinion, the Biden Administration asserts that the main focus of the meeting was not oil prices. Instead, they have cited an array of issues - from restoring relations and strengthening a strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia, to end the war on Yemen, to normalizing ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel.¹⁶

The survey results signify that while there is concern over rising oil prices among Americans, however, both democrats and republicans express concern about Saudi Arabia's humanitarian record. The higher disapproval numbers upon mentioning Saudi Arabia seem to be concerned with the Kingdom's violation of human rights. The survey highlighted contrasting affinity of both, democrats and republicans towards Israel. Though Republicans' affinity for Israel has risen over the years, the opposite has happened among the Democrats further cautioning that the recent visit and the advancement of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel has garnered more harm than praise whilst affecting the Democratic constituency. While the proverbial ice between the US and Saudi Arabia has been broken, Biden's meeting with Muhammad Bin Salman did not achieve much.

¹⁴ Shibley Telhami, "It's Risky for Biden to go to the Middle East," Brookings, July 12, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/07/12/its-risky-for-biden-to-go-to-the-middle-east/>

¹⁵ Shibley Telhami, "It's Risky For Biden To Go To The Middle East," Washington Post, July 7, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/07/07/biden-saudi-arabia-israel-trip-july-criticism/>

¹⁶ "US 'Will Not Walk Away' From Middle East: Biden At Saudi Summit," Aljazeera, July 16, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/16/biden-lays-out-middle-east-strategy-at-saudi-arabia-summit>