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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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25.07.2022

President Biden and Iran: the Cost of a Missed Opportunity



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President Joe Biden initially picked much of the low-hanging fruit from the misery of the Trump years. He revived the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and returned the United States to the Paris climate accords; the World Health Organization; and the Human Rights Council of the United Nations. But Biden has been timid in addressing the worst aspects of Trump's legacy in international security. Trump's vindictive tariffs on Chinese imports are still in place, although removing them would have improved Sino-American bilateral relations and alleviated the inflationary spiral in the U.S. economy. A return to the Iran nuclear accord would have created the opportunity for improving U.S.

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relations with Iran and compromised the Israel-Saudi pressure campaign against the United States.

Biden's trip to Israel and Saudi Arabia last week demonstrated that Trump's pandering to Jerusalem and Riyadh would continue in the Biden administration. The president traveled hat-in-hand to Saudi Arabia for increased oil production, and his fist bump with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was seen around the world. Biden's most costly regional blunder was his failure to return to the Iran nuclear accord—the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—which served the interests of Jerusalem and Riyadh, but not the interests of the United States and a global community concerned with the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

The JCPOA, one of the genuine triumphs of the Obama administration, was negotiated by John Kerry, arguably the most successful secretary of state over the past thirty years. The agreement was a careful exercise in multilateral diplomacy as key European countries as well as Russia and China joined an international accord that honored the Non-Proliferation Treaty from 1969. Iran agreed to intrusive international monitoring from the International Atomic Energy Agency; limited the enrichment of uranium to a non-threatening 3.67 percent; dispersed most of its enriched uranium to Russia; and capped the number of centrifuges for the enrichment of uranium. Even Israeli national security experts have praised the agreement.

The nuclear accord had the potential to transform a possibly violent situation in the Persian Gulf into an arena for possible political and diplomatic compromise. But Trump and his national security adviser John Bolton abrogated the deal, which undermined the case for reducing the U.S. military presence in the region. President Biden needed to reinstate it. Any success in limiting the nuclear program in Iran (and North Korea) could have created opportunities for nuclear reductions in the United States and Russia.

In order to restore the agreement, Biden merely had to remove Trump's listing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a foreign terrorist organization. The designation was largely symbolic, and would have left in place the individual sanctions on the corp's commanders. But Biden was fearful of the Republican reaction to the lifting of the listing, so missed an excellent opportunity. (Similarly, Biden was prepared to resume modest relations with the Palestinian Front at the outset of his administration by reopening the U.S. consulate in East Jerusalem and permitting the reopening of the Palestinian mission in the United States, but was intimidated by opposition from pro-Israeli Democrats in the U.S. Congress.)

Biden also catered to the interests of Israel and Saudi Arabia when he proclaimed a willingness to use military force against Iranian nuclear weapons as a “last resort.” Biden should have dodged an Israeli journalist’s question about the use of force; instead, he tried to satisfy the Israeli political community. The president’s unfortunate reference to a possible use of force as well as the recent increase in defense cooperation between the United States, Israel, and various Gulf countries increases the chances for instability in the region. The United States should avoid any security alliance or agreement in the region, requiring commitments (that we shouldn’t make) and risks (that we shouldn’t enhance).

If the United States wanted to contribute to regional stability in the Middle East and to reduce its own military presence, then it would encourage bilateral negotiations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The fact that the current cease-fire in Yemen appears to be holding provides the best opportunity in recent years to encourage a Riyadh-Tehran dialogue. The United States must stop exaggerating the Iranian threat in the region, which finds Tehran in support of failed states such as Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. These failed states are virtually meaningless to U.S. national security concerns.

Moreover, the Iranians are Moslem and Shia, but not Arab, so there are definite limitations to their possible success over the long term in the Middle East, which is primarily Sunni. There is a Sunni majority in more than 40 countries from Morocco to Indonesia. Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia are more than 90% Sunni. The global picture finds more than 85% of Moslems are Sunni.

Biden must know that no matter what the United States does and is prepared to do for Israel, it will never be enough for the Israeli leadership. Two Democratic presidents—Jimmy Carter and Barack Obama—served the security interests of Israel, but were vilified for their efforts. Carter’s success in negotiating the complete establishment of relations between Israel and Egypt meant that Israel would never again have to deal with a threatening Arab alliance. Obama signed off on the most generous military assistance bill in the history of U.S.-Israeli relations, but was labeled as “anti-Semitic” in the Israeli press. Israel, facing its fifth general election in less than four years, doesn’t even have a government in place. As a result, Biden’s trip to Israel was symbolic and yielded no satisfactory substantive progress.

Instead of U.S. participation in the Iran nuclear accord, which would have contributed to U.S. efforts to “pivot” away from the Middle East, the Biden administration is pursuing retrenchment in the region. The war in Ukraine has contributed to an international energy crisis that has made Washington dependent on increased supplies of oil from Saudi Arabia

and other OPEC countries. Biden's willingness to pursue a military solution to the possibility of nuclear arms in Iran, even as a "last resort," unnecessarily pandered to the Israeli and Saudi point of view.

As a result, Biden's trip to the Middle East demonstrated the weakness of U.S. influence in the region; the increased difficulty of any resumption of the Iran nuclear accord; and the enhanced role that Israel and Saudi Arabia will play in challenging U.S. policy. The trip contributed to the notion that U.S. military strength in the region is the only measure of our political and diplomatic influence there. The trip to Israel was particularly meaningless as he met with a caretaker prime minister, Yair Lapid, and gave virtually no attention to the Palestinians.

Thus, the United States remains mired in the Middle Eastern "briar patch." Since the revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, U.S. administrations have relied on military force to assert influence in the region. Any discussion of using military force against Iran, even as a "last resort," merely contributes to the damage to U.S. relations that spiraled with the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the one-sided support to Israeli militarism in the region. It remains to be learned if Biden's trip leads to increased oil production, which would allow him to justify abandoning his "pariah policy" toward the Saudi Arabia and the Crown Prince.

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CounterPunch 22.07.2022