

# “WHAT DID BIDEN’S TRIP ACHIEVE FOR THE UNITED STATES AND ITS MIDDLE EAST PARTNERS?”



## SUMMARY OF A ‘AGSIW’ WEBINAR



19 JULY 2022



### OVERVIEW

In a AGSIW (Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington) webinar, moderated by Hussein Ibish (Senior Resident Scholar, AGSIW), an assessment was provided of President Biden’s much talked about trip to the Middle East that took him to Israel, the occupied Palestinian territories, and Saudi Arabia, including his attendance in a summit meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council along with Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq.

Those countries effectively constitute the nucleus of a potential U.S.-led coalition in the region that could meet with immediate threats such as Iran’s nuclear ambitions, particularly given the impasse that has taken place at the nuclear negotiations. In the long run, forming such a network of cooperation could also help Washington curb Chinese and Russian influence in the region and among traditional U.S. partners.

In the webinar, key issues such as those listed below were discussed by a panel of experts in the wake of President Putin’s expected arrival in Iran:

- Was Biden able to secure significant bilateral progress with Israel, the Palestinians, and the Saudis?
- Did Biden’s visit reset relations with Saudi Arabia and, in particular, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman?
- Was Biden able to gain more Saudi support on oil production and pricing and assuage Saudi concerns about Washington’s security commitment to its regional partners?
- Is a formula developing to address Palestinian concerns sufficiently to facilitate more cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia?
- And, ultimately, are these the first steps in developing a regional coalition that could better allow countries in the region to work together and allow the United States to provide umbrella leadership with a smaller but more efficient and effective footprint?

### KEY POINTS MADE BY THE SPEAKERS

1. **ABDULKHALEQ ABDULLA** (*Non-Resident Fellow, AGSIW; Professor of Political Science*)

- Grade given for the visit is a C+ at best because the visit failed to achieve any of the following:
  - 1. The visit did not help dispel the view that the US was not an unreliable partner on whose predictable actions one could count.
  - 2. At a personal level, Biden clearly failed to establish any kind of rapport with any of the new and younger leaders of the region
  - 3. Biden failed to achieve anything meaningful on any issue of importance such as oil or human rights.
- Perhaps at a symbolic level the trip was ok but on substance Biden was confronted with '4 No's by the GCC + 3 leaders:
  - 1. No to an 'Arab NATO'
  - 2. A big No to siding with the US against both China and Russia
  - 3. No to further normalization with Israel (apart from the 2 Red Sea Islands and the right to fly over Saudi territory).
  - 4. No on the subject of substantially increasing oil production or moving away from OPEC +.
- On balance, perhaps some good came from his visit to the region because it did manage to fill a missing vacuum that could easily have been filled by the likes of both China and Russia.
- Finally, it might have been prudent if he had extended the same invitation he had made for MBZ of the UAE to officially visit the US to MBS as well (taking into account all its downsides).
- It was noted that the UAE had submitted a proposal for a defence pact with the US that would, if agreed to, provide that country with a kind of Article 5 guarantee that is offered to all NATO states. The proposal is now under consideration and the UAE feels that given its record in the past 50 years, it is deserving of such a commitment that would then 'quantitatively' make a difference.
- However, even if such an agreement was to be arrived at, it would be on bilateral basis and not multilateral and as such, inclusive of all the GCC states.
- At the end of the day, nonetheless, from the perspective of the GCC + 3 countries, the US was still the main military power in the region with 6 different bases.
- However, there was increasingly a feeling on the part of all these states that the situation was fluid and moving away towards a scenario that other key actors and not just the US also needed to be taken account.

2. **RANDA SLIM** (*Senior Fellow and Director of the Conflict Resolution and Track II Dialogues Program, Middle East Institute*)

- Given all the Nos, the grade given to the visit would not be anything more than a 'D'

- The failure to achieve anything concrete has been quite visible. As a result, it is unclear what was actually obtained apart from patching matters with KSA and setting new tracks for a new reset with the GCC.
- As for the others, much energy has been spent on highlighting the deal that connects Iraq to the GCC grid. But it was not mentioned that this would at best serve to procure some 5-10% of Iraq's electrical needs while omitting to mention that Iraq had at the same time signed a new similar agreement with a much higher percentage and higher prices with Iran.
- While arriving at what was announced as the 'Jerusalem Agreement' between the US and Israel may be dubbed as a success, it was at the same time clear that Biden had failed to do anything meaningful for the Palestinians.
- Biden even failed to mention the word 'occupation' or 'settlement expansion' in the entire course of the first leg of his trip to the Middle East – something that made the Palestinians the clear losers in terms of his journey.
- Finally, in a situation where the future of reaching any kind of an agreement over the JCPOA seems at best very bleak, Biden even failed to arrive at some form of an agreement with the parties he met for increasing his leverage over the Iranians as well.

### 3. **ALI ALFONEH** (*Senior Fellow, AGSIW*)

- The Iranians had initially been fearful that Biden's trip to the Middle East might result in them becoming further isolated.
- However, in the end it was clear that no shared vision of the region had emerged between all the parties (i.e., Israel, the Arab states and the US).
- In Israel, while the Israelis were insistent on highlighting the potential use of force, the US despite going along to an extent was at best half-hearted, preferring diplomacy for the time being.
- In these circumstances, it was easily noted that the Arab states were most anxious not get caught in any such crossfire.
- While the chances of reaching any kind of an agreement on JCPOA looks bleaker with each passing day, former Iranian Foreign Minister, Kamal Kharrazi who is now a close adviser to the Supreme Leader, said that Iran was now in possession the knowledge and means for producing a nuclear weapon – contrary to all previous assertions by senior IRI officials that weapons of mass destruction were against the tenants of Shia Islam.
- Kharrazi also spoke of the hope that the KSA embassy in Iran might also be soon reconstituted.
- As a whole, the Iranians were gratified that a solid anti-Iranian alliance did not result as a consequence of Biden's trip.

- In the Persian Gulf, Iran's first preference is to see all outside forces leave (so that it would be the top player). However, if this cannot be achieved, then to counterbalance the US and the West, it would prefer others such as China or Russia to have a permanent foothold.
- At the same time, Iran has always been distrustful of Russia and recent experiences with Russian behaviour in Syria has not in any way or shape eased Iranian anxieties in dealing with the Russians - irrespective of Putin's current visit to Iran.
- However, the war in Ukraine has somewhat reduced the power and strength of Russia, something that Iran is hoping to benefit from by increasing its own leverage with them.
- Iran has made use of its proxies in Iraq and Yemen more recently, though it does not micro-manage them. Sometimes, some of these proxies compete against themselves as in Iraq in order to endear themselves more with Iran for access to more funding.
- He refused to give a Grade to Biden's visit.

*Note: Hussein Ibish, a Senior Resident Scholar at The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, who moderated the meeting was of the view that Biden deserved a more generous Grade for his performance in the Middle East. Ibish felt that Biden had successfully opened new doors, established dialogue and recommitted the US to the region. As such, he thought that at least he deserved the Grade B.*

