

Systematic Overview No. 2



The Middle Eastern Game of Thrones



קבוצת ראות
Reut Group

On the Eve of the Biden Administration



Authors: Eran Shayshon, Alex Grinberg, Adi Levy

9 December 2020

23 Kislev 5781

A Systematic Overview

**Middle Eastern Game of Thrones:
On the Eve of the Biden Administration**

Authors: Alex Grinberg, Eran Shayshon, Adi Levy

The purpose of this document is to analyze and map core developments concerning [the competition for regional hegemony in the Middle East](#) and Israeli national security ahead of the changing administration in the United States. This document relies on opensource intelligence available in the region’s various languages and relies on a unique methodology for the creation of new knowledge.

Table of Contents

Summary: Israel and the Middle East During the Biden Era 2

Introduction 5

The Nuclear Deal and Tehran’s Dilemmas 5

 The Nuclear Deal in Focus 5

 Difficult Decisions During the Transition Period..... 6

Success and Tremors in the Persian Gulf..... 7

 The Danger of a Nuclear Arms Race..... 7

 Fears of Losing a Grip on Yemen in Favor of Iran and its Allies 8

 Changing Saudi Attitudes toward Turkey Could Create Tension in the Moderate Axis 10

Toward a Turkish-American Conflict? 10

 Issues that May Cause Tension 11

Summary: Israel and the Middle East During the Biden Era

1. **With Joseph Biden's entry into the White House, a reassessment of US regional policy is expected. This reassessment is expected to place greater emphasis on human rights and democratic issues than that of the current administration.** Although it is unlikely that Biden will take a diplomatic U-turn in the region (see Reut's [reassessment of the Palestinian issue](#)), the President-elect is expected to withstand pressure from his party's progressive forces to implement a more liberal foreign agenda¹.
2. **By the time Biden takes office, there is an elevated possibility of an escalation between Iran and Israel that could deteriorate into a regional flare-up.** At this point, the Iranians are grinding their teeth and not reacting militarily against operations attributed to Israel for fear of American action against the nuclear project and to make it easier for Biden to return to the nuclear deal. However, the lack of an Iranian response is also a motivating factor for Israel to continue striking Iran. Hence the danger of a regional flare-up until Biden takes office is high.
3. **The Iranians will accelerate their nuclear program in order to enhance their bargaining power and to defy both the US and Israel as a response to their vulnerability.** This attitude is only strengthening in light of Iran's limited operational capacity to harm Israel at this stage.
4. **Currently, Israel lacks a clear strategy regarding the formulation of a new deal.** On the one hand, Israel is adopting an approach that will make it difficult for the Biden administration to achieve a new agreement. ² On the other hand, Israel is formulating a strategic approach to influence the content of the deal with Iran in cooperation with the new administration.³
5. **Although a thoughtful and measured combination of these approaches may be theoretically effective, in practice, these two opposing approaches are led by uncoordinated political rivals fundamentally divided on the nuclear issue.** Hence, the Israeli policy is uncoordinated. Various publications claimed that Prime Minister Netanyahu excluded the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Security from his meeting with the Saudi Crown Prince, during which they reportedly discussed issues related to the conflict

¹ For example, refer to this article written in March 2019 in the [Washington Post](#) by Congresswoman Ilhan Omar calling for the implementation of a comprehensive foreign policy.

² See the speech of the Israeli ambassador to the US ([quoted in Walla](#), November 2020) Ron Dermer, who stated that Biden would make a mistake if he returns to the nuclear deal. His remarks likely reflect those of the Prime Minister.

³ Barak Rabid [Walla](#) 18 November 2020.

against Iran. At the same time, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs has set up a team to work with Washington in order to influence the US regarding the new agreement.

6. **There is a concern of a nuclear arms race.** A return to the nuclear arms deal or the lifting of sanctions, combined with America's cold shoulder to Saudi Arabia, could heighten the likelihood of Saudi Arabia (and possibly also Egypt) of reviving its nascent nuclear program. All indications suggest that this project has military purposes. In such a situation, Turkey would not stand on the sidelines, while its regional rivals attempt to ascend the throne of regional hegemony.
7. **The pro-Iranian grip on Yemen will deepen and the Iranian circle of fire will expand.** US criticism toward Saudi Arabia's involvement in the region is expected to intensify, making it more difficult for Saudi Arabia to take action against the pro-Iranian Houthi rebels. The Houthi rebels are expected to strengthen their regional influence. This will make it easier for Iran to leverage them against Israel once they complete the construction of their kinetic capabilities. In the meantime, the influence of Israel and the international community against them will be limited.
8. **The wave of normalization has stopped: Saudi Arabia holds on to its normalization card for Biden.** So far, Saudi Arabia has refused to establish formal diplomatic ties with Israel without first resolving the Palestinian issue, as stipulated in the Arab Peace Initiative, which Saudi Arabia initiated. However, Saudi Arabia's "blessing" of the Abraham Accords and Netanyahu's visit to Saudi Arabia may indicate a decision was made to normalize ties with Israel as soon as the conditions are met.
9. **The surprising Saudi "detente" toward Turkey could create tension among countries in the moderate axis.** In light of Biden's election, Saudi Arabia is trying to block an unofficial boycott of Turkish products, whose purpose was to escalate tensions with Ankara. This development could create tension between Saudi Arabia and Egypt, two countries in the moderate Arab axis, whose rivalry with Turkey is ideological and deep-seated.⁴
10. **At the same time, Turkey is trying to ease tensions with Israel.** After months of pursuing an aggressive foreign policy with all regional players, Erdogan is trying to reduce the economic and diplomatic damage that he has suffered by attempting to get closer to Europe and to dialogue with Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the failure of Palestinian reconciliation efforts, which at this point are led by Turkey, are another demonstration of Erdogan's aspiration to become the patron of the Palestinian issue. Hence, although in the long run, the friction

⁴ See [Anadolu Agency](#). Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud stated that ties with Turkey are good and that there is no boycott.

between Israel and Turkey is expected to intensify in the face of Erdogan's regional ambitions, it is possible that secret discussions⁵ between Israel and Turkey will lead the countries to rehabilitate their diplomatic ties and resend their ambassadors.

11. **However, the cooperation is expected to be solely tactical and ad-hoc. It may be similar to the reconciliation efforts between Israel and Turkey following the Gaza flotilla raid, shortly after which Erdogan returned to disparage Israel.** Venomous incitement against Israel tirelessly continues in the Turkish press.⁶ Moreover, Turkish intelligence chief, Hakan Fidan, who is managing covert contacts with Israel, is known for his sympathy for Iran and is even suspected of exposing an Israeli spy ring that Israel operated against Iran within Turkey.⁷
12. **As the American diplomatic agenda concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is expected to focus on strengthening and upgrading the PA's control (see [Reut's paper](#) on the political process of the Biden era), there will be an opportunity for Israel to take advantage of the fruits of normalization with Arab nations regarding their increased involvement in improving Palestinian quality of life through economic and humanitarian aid, as well as initiating joint projects and ventures.**

⁵ See Amberin Zaman's article on [Al-Monitor](#), 30 November 2020.

⁶ For example, in the [Hürriyet Daily News](#), there was a claim that Mossad agents were planning to carry out an assassinations against Turks on Turkish soil.

⁷ Pazit Ravina in [Makor Rishon](#) 16 January 2020.

Introduction

1. **American foreign policy in the Middle East during the Trump era was based on a desire to dramatically reduce American involvement in the region**, while emphasizing the implementation and execution of American interests in away nearly devoid of any ideology.⁸
2. **With Biden's entry into the White House, a reassessment of US policy toward the region, including relationships with key players, is expected. It is clear that the next administration's foreign policy will place greater emphasis on human rights and democratic issues. However, it is not yet clear how sharp the change in American policy will be.** New working teams will only be partially staffed and the President-elect still has not yet commented on issues related to American regional interests. The uncertainty will continue for several months until US policy in the region is better clarified.

The Nuclear Deal and Tehran's Dilemmas

The Nuclear Deal in Focus

3. **Iran and its allies breathed a collective sigh of relief when the results of the American election became known.** Unlike the moderate Arab axis countries and Turkey and its allies, under President Trump, the US emerged as the Iranian regime's ultimate foe.
4. **President Rouhani is pinning his hopes that the new administration will return to the nuclear deal.** Rouhani and his pragmatic government are in the crosshairs of Iranian conservatives who were opposed to the nuclear deal from the outset. **Either way, until the Iranian presidential elections in June 2021, it is doubtful whether the parties will reach an agreed-upon draft.**
5. **The opposers of the nuclear deal (headed by Israel) from which the US withdrew not only criticize the international community's limited enforcement mechanisms regarding the Iranian nuclear project, but also the lack of reference to Iran's ballistic missile program,** as well as **the subversive web of proxy organizations** of Shia militias and mercenaries, which Iran operates in the region. The Trump administration's policy of maximum pressure has seriously damaged the Iranian economy. However, it has not changed Iran's conduct regarding these issues nor has it caused the country's economic collapse.
6. **In light of this, and in view of political situation which makes the return to the nuclear deal the goal of US foreign policy, the Biden administration has no leverage to force Iran to discuss its regional policies and missile program.**

⁸ This contrasts with the foreign policy that characterized the neo-conservatism of the Bush era or the liberalism of the Obama era.

7. **For Iran, the removal of sanctions is the precondition for its renewed commitment to the nuclear deal.** Iran is imposing strict conditions on the US for its return to the nuclear deal. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Sharif has repeatedly [stated](#) that if Biden wants to return to the nuclear deal, then he must honor US commitments under the deal and remove sanctions. Moreover, Iran's position in returning to the deal is that the US has violated the price tag. Iran is also demanding compensation and refuses the imposition of new terms. **Thus, the Biden administration's goodwill to simply turn the diplomatic wheel back before Trump will be not enough to appease Iran.**
8. **Allegedly, a hasty return to the nuclear deal is in Iran's clear interest.** This is because of the sanctions imposed on the country and Iran's COVID-19 situation, both of which are worsening the country's economic situation and fueling social unrest.
9. **However, Tehran's current bargaining position has improved. The Iranian nuclear project has progressed during the Trump administration and, due to this fact, Tehran has more bargaining power to delay its further development.** Moreover, any compromise, in Khamenei's view, could add further pressure to the regime's image as the flagbearer of the revolution. Adherence to the ideological morals and principles of the revolution is more important to him than any economic benefit resulting from a return to the nuclear deal.
10. **It is important to highlight that the position of Iranian conservatives who oppose the nuclear agreement is not perceived as detached or unfounded.** As early as in 2016, even before the Trump administration imposed sanctions on Iran, it was already clear that the nuclear deal did not bring significant economic improvements. This is because the Iranian economy is structurally "ill" and characterized by high levels of corruption. It does not provide protection for foreign investors. Hence, hopes that a torrent of foreign investment would flood Iran following the deal was clearly obstructed by the dam of reality. In light of this, Iranian "intransigence" favoring the prestige of the nuclear project over economic benefits should not be surprising.⁹

Difficult Decisions During the Transition Period

11. **Until Biden assumes office, an escalation in the region is expected. However, Iran's approach reflects a perception of anticipation of "almost at all costs" for Biden.** With the assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizaadeh, it seems that Israel is fully committed to exhausting the transition period before Biden takes office in order to operate and damage the Iranian nuclear project in Syria and the Iran's establishment in the region. From an Israeli

⁹ An article in the Iranian newspaper [Mashreg](#) on 12 August 2016: "Why did the nuclear deal not have an impact on the lives of ordinary people?"

vantage point, the possibility of a flare-up may actually be in Israel's interest if it leads to direct American actions against the Iranian nuclear project and, at least, creates difficulties in returning to the nuclear deal. Iran, for its part, is adopting an approach of "patience", while avoiding a reckless and ill-considered response.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the lack of an Iranian response is also a driving factor for Israel to continue striking Iranian targets.

12. **At this point, it is clear that Iran's operational ability to strike Israel is limited.** The significant absence of a response after a series of Israeli attacks demonstrates that Iran lacks the operational capabilities to harm Israel, except via Hezbollah. Yet, a Hezbollah operation in the current circumstances is unreasonable.
13. **Hence, in any scenario, the Iranians are likely to accelerate the nuclear program** in order to improve their bargaining chips with Biden. Additionally, this course of action is perceived as less dangerous than a military response at the moment in light of the aggression that they are subjected to by Israel and the US. Iran is likely to avoid a drastic leap, which would bring it back to the edge of nuclear weapon production because, doing so, would actually undermine its argument that it has no intentions of producing such a weapon.¹¹

Success and Tremors in the Persian Gulf

14. **Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf countries to a lesser extent, fear the possibility of changing US policies in the region.** The Saudis express their discontent not via statements, but rather through silence. It is no coincidence that King Salman offered his congratulations to Biden 24 hours late.
15. **One of Saudi Arabia's main concerns is the possibility of the reopening of the Jamal Khashoggi murder case.** The Trump administration covered for Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman regarding allegations that the journalist was assassinated at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, despite US pressure that the Crown Prince should somehow pay. American policy regarding the Khashoggi case may have geopolitical implications, which in the eyes of the Saudis, may strengthen their regional rivals, namely Turkey and Qatar, who have worked tirelessly to keep the case relevant and current.

The Danger of a Nuclear Arms Race

16. **The Gulf states have tacitly accepted the cancellation of the Iranian nuclear deal by the Trump administration and the hard hand against Tehran.** A return to the Obama administration's Iranian approach would be viewed by both the Gulf states and Israel as a

¹⁰ [Radio Farda](#) (Farsi).

¹¹ The [website](#) of Iran's Supreme Leader, Khamenei includes countless statements over the years denying any intention of Iran in building a nuclear weapon.

pass, allowing the Iranians to evade sanctions while covertly advancing their nuclear program, as well as American acceptance of Iran's subversion in an area to which the nuclear deal does not even apply. The widespread use of the term "Iranian regional policy" in the media and among diplomatic circles is nothing but a euphemism and may actually be misleading. Such policies are not legitimate diplomatic channels pursued by Iran as an independent state, but rather the use of terrorism, militias, and mercenaries. Iran smuggles advanced weaponry to areas, which undermine the central governments of the arenas in which they operate.

17. **A Saudi nuclear project is only a matter of time.** The Saudi sense of abandonment by the US or Washington's desire to negotiate with Tehran "at any cost" could lead Saudi Arabia to advance its nuclear program, which is currently still in its infancy.¹² Although there is no stated objective, there is no doubt that the Saudi nuclear program has military goals in the face of fears of a nuclear Iran. The US's ability to prevent Saudi Arabia from building nuclear reactors is very limited. Conversely, Saudi Arabia will not accept a reality in which the US takes reconciliatory approach to Iran, accepts the supply of Iranian weaponry to Houthi rebels in Yemen, and does not allow Saudi Arabia to "balance" the Iranian nuclear program with its own.
18. **Turkey will not stand on the sidelines as its rivals for regional hegemony, Saudi Arabia and Iran, equip themselves with nuclear capabilities.** Turkey is an industrialized nation with a developed military-industrial complex. Developing nuclear weapons will undoubtedly require less time and effort when compared to Iran, Pakistan, or Saudi Arabia. Nuclear weapons in the hands of the current Turkish regime, with its aggressive Islamist nationalistic policies, are nothing less than a nightmarish scenario, not only for Saudi Arabia, but for Arab and Western nations alike. Until now, there have been no indications of Turkey's intention to develop a nuclear program. However, this is a relatively reasonable scenario, in light of the country's aspirations for regional hegemony, as well as its advanced capabilities. Moreover, nuclear weapons have served and continue to serve as a forceful multiplier of geopolitical standing, which is in line with Turkish hegemonic aspirations.

Fears of Losing a Grip on Yemen in Favor of Iran and its Allies

19. **Yemen has become a major arena in the quest for attaining the throne of Middle Eastern regional hegemony.** A change in the American approach may allow the Iranians to

¹² The possibility for the acceleration of the Saudi nuclear program does not stem from a hypothesis or assessment, but the explicit declaration by the former Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs Adel al-Jubeir, who clearly stated that if a nuclear weapon is not withheld from Iran, then Saudi reserves the right to arm itself with nuclear weapons. This is a condition and a threat at the same time. [Al-Quds al-Arabi](#), 17 November 2020.

bolster their influence in this region at the expense of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have different interests in Yemen. While Saudi Arabia is battling the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels, the United Arab Emirates have effectively completed the establishment of their protectorate in southern Yemen.

20. **Yemen should concern Israel as it is part of the Iranian “ring of fire”.** In the war’s depiction in the US mainstream media, Iran’s role in the war in Yemen is completely absent. Iran supplies the Houthis with ballistic missiles, as well as members of Hezbollah and the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps who instruct the Houthis on the use of weapons. **The improvement of missile guidance systems could make Yemen a launchpad for firing rockets to Israel, as part of Iran’s plan to create a ring of fire around Israel.** In fact, Houthi officials have already threatened to fire rockets toward Israel. Rocket fire from Yemen to Israel will provide Iran with **space for denial as there are no definitive targets in Yemen to return fire.**
21. **The Iranian threat to Saudi Arabia via the Houthis is very realistic.** The Houthi rebels have launched ballistic missiles, delivered from Iran, to Saudi cities and airports; On November 24, the Houthis fired a Quds-2 cruise missile at a Saudi Aramco oil facility in Jeddah. The Iranian newspaper Khorasan praised the attack and the “resistance”, as well as the Houthi’s weaponry. The Iranian newspaper also linked the damage to the oil facility to Prime Minister Netanyahu’s visit to Saudi Arabia.¹³ The style and structure of the article leave no doubt that, this time, Iran is not even trying to conceal its support for the Houthis. Nevertheless, Iran’s ability to strike strategic oil facilities in the Gulf is not just a source of concern for Saudi Arabia.¹⁴
22. **Saudi Arabia is struggling to achieve its objectives in Yemen** Saudi bombings have caused numerous civilian deaths, adversely affecting the country’s image in the United States. As a result, the White House is also under pressure to stop supplying weapons to Saudi Arabia and to cool its relations with Riyadh because of the war in Yemen. The Saudis are wary of a change in the American position in the face of criticism among constituencies affiliated with the Democratic Party. Muslim organizations affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and supported by Qatar and Turkey are also behind anti-Saudi pressure campaigns.

¹³ . [Khorosan News](#) (Farsi).

¹⁴ [Reuters](#), 24 November 2020.

Changing Saudi Attitudes toward Turkey Could Create Tension in the Moderate Axis

23. **A wave of reconciliation is sweeping the Gulf states ahead of Biden's entry into the White House.** At the time of writing this report, a reconciliation is emerging among the Gulf states forming the moderate Arab axis and Qatar, which forms a central part of the pro-Muslim Brotherhood current led by Turkey.
24. **Moreover, in recent years, Turkey's intentions to challenge Saudi and Egyptian hegemony, as well as its aspirations to lead the Arab/ Islamic world, have become clearer.** The Turkey-Saudi conflict manifests itself in the two states' competition to influence economic, religious, and military spheres. The last few months have been characterized by an escalation in Saudi-Egyptian relations to the point that Saudi Arabia is unofficially leading an Arab boycott against Turkey. Additionally, only recently has a council of senior Saudi religious clerics and scholars, backed by Riyadh, declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist movement. This comes at a moment when Erdogan considers himself as the global leader of the Muslim Brotherhood.
25. **However, since Biden's election, Saudi Arabia has been attempting to tone down the escalation with Turkey and even align itself with the Biden administration.** King Salman has even called Erdogan and the Saudi Foreign Minister declared that Riyadh and Ankara have amicable ties. Saudi rhetoric against Qatar has also significantly subsided.
26. **This development could create tensions between Saudi Arabia and Egypt.** Although the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Turkey is laden with ideological considerations, it is in fact largely political. This is in contrast with the ideological tension between Turkey and Egyptian President al-Sisi, who ousted the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated government under Morsi, the same ideological movement with which Erdogan is affiliated. The Saudi move demonstrates that, in Riyadh's perspective, Iran poses a greater threat than Turkey.

Toward a Turkish-American Conflict?

27. **Ankara also has reason to be wary of the Biden administration.** Perhaps, it is Turkish concerns that are the most real since Turkey is the only country that Biden has critically and consistently addressed numerous times in recent years. **A clash of values and ideology is expected between the Biden and Erdogan administrations. This clash is expected to intensify in the face of numerous issues (see below) due to tensions on both sides. The friction between the two countries seems to be intensifying, despite Turkey being a NATO member nation and its function as a regional logistical base for the US.**

Issues that May Cause Tension

28. **There are conflicting interests in Syria.** The US supports the Kurds and the Biden administration will provide greater backing for the establishment of Kurdish autonomy in Syria and strengthening the Kurdish region in Iraq, issues which Ankara strongly opposes. Moreover, Turkey is deploying proxy Islamist forces in northern Syria. The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) also operate in these areas. The SDF is considered an ally of the US due to their war against the Islamic State. Turkey outright rejects the slightest notion of Kurdish autonomy in Syria and is waging a bitter war against the Kurdish People's Protection Units, or YPG, the sister movement of the Turkish-Kurdish Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK. Yet, in contrast, the Kurds were the West's most loyal allies in the war against the Islamic State.
29. Turkish policy in the **eastern Mediterranean basin threatens to create a rift in NATO.** Turkey's aggressive policies in the eastern Mediterranean, which is creating tensions primarily with Greece and Cyprus, is **overshadowing its relationship with the whole of Europe.** Turkey is provoking France and has fired a series of verbal barbs after a series of Islamist attacks in France. Biden's administration will not idly stand by in the face of the growing chasm between Europe and Turkey, as well as the Turkish provocations in the eastern Mediterranean. It is still unclear whether the new administration will be willing to invest realistic policies in curbing Turkish actions. **However, unlike the Trump administration, the Biden administration will not be indifferent to Turkey's confrontational conduct.**
30. **Between S-400 and F-35:** In Turkey, there are fears that the Biden administration will re-implement sanctions on Turkey over the acquisition of the Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile system under the auspices of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). In fact, this purchase cost Turkey its participation in the F-35 joint strike fighter program production work. Additionally, Turkey is very concerned over the appointment of Antony Blinken, who has a record of consistent and resolute positions against Ankara.
31. **The US has sanctioned Halkbank, a Turkish state-owned bank.** The sentence in US court against Halkbank, which is owned by the Turkish government, for the bank's money laundering methods which assisted Iran evade sanctions has heightened tensions between the two countries, especially given Turkey's difficult economic situation.
32. **Ankara suspects that Washington supports the Turkish opposition.** Ever since the 2016 coup attempt, the Turkish regime considers the domestic Islamic movement of Fethullah Gülen as its main enemy. The rivalry between Erdogan and Gülen stems from accusations

which border on conspiracy theories. Fethullah Gülen lives in the US and manages networks of organizations and educational institutions in Europe. He is competing with Erdogan for influence in the Turkish diaspora in Europe. Erdogan sees any official American dialogue/meeting with Gülen's organization and its representatives as a subversive act against the Turkish regime.

End.



קבוצת ראות
Reut Group