

# FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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## The End of America's Exit Strategy in the Middle East

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Washington's Illusions

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**T**he shocking Hamas assault on Israel has precipitated a beginning and an end for the Middle East. What has begun, almost inexorably, is the next war—one that will be bloody, costly, and agonizingly unpredictable in its course and outcome. What has ended, for anyone who cares to admit it, is the illusion that the United States can extricate itself from a region that has dominated the American national security agenda for the past half century.

One can hardly blame the Biden administration for trying to do just that. Twenty years of fighting terrorists, along with failed nation building in Afghanistan and Iraq, took a terrible toll on American society and politics and drained the U.S. budget. Having inherited the messy fallout from the Trump administration's erratic approach to the region, President Joe Biden recognized that U.S. entanglements in the Middle East

distracted from more urgent challenges posed by the rising great power of China and the recalcitrant fading power of Russia.

The White House devised a creative exit strategy, attempting to broker a new balance of power in the Middle East that would allow Washington to downsize its presence and attention while also ensuring that Beijing did not fill the void. A historic bid to normalize relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia promised to formally align Washington's two most important regional partners against their common foe, Iran, and anchor the Saudis beyond the perimeter of China's strategic orbit.

In tandem with this effort, the administration also sought to ease tensions with Iran, the most dangerous adversary the United States faces in the Middle East. Having tried and failed to resuscitate the 2015 nuclear deal with its elaborate web of restrictions and oversight of Iran's nuclear program, Washington embraced a Plan B of payoffs and informal understandings. The hope was that, in exchange for modest economic rewards, Tehran could be persuaded to slow down its work on its nuclear programs and step back from its provocations around the region. Stage one came in September, with a deal that freed five unjustly detained Americans from Iranian prisons and gave Tehran access to \$6 billion in previously frozen oil revenues. Both sides were poised for follow-on talks in Oman, with the wheels of diplomacy greased by record-level Iranian oil exports, made possible by Washington's averting its gaze instead of enforcing its own sanctions.

As ambitious policy gambits go, this one had a lot to recommend it—in particular, the genuine confluence of interests among Israeli and Saudi leaders that has already generated tangible momentum toward more public-facing bilateral cooperation on security and economic matters. Had it succeeded, a new alignment among two of the region's major players might have had a truly transformative impact on the security and economic environment in the broader Middle East.

#### WHAT WENT WRONG?

Unfortunately, that promise may have been its undoing. Biden's attempt at a quick getaway from the Middle East had one fatal flaw: it wildly

misperceived the incentives for Iran, the most disruptive actor on the stage. It was never plausible that informal understandings and a dribble of sanctions relief would be sufficient to pacify the Islamic Republic and its proxies, who have a keen and time-tested appreciation for the utility of escalation in advancing their strategic and economic interests. Iranian leaders had every incentive to try to block an Israeli-Saudi breakthrough, particularly one that would have extended American security guarantees to Riyadh and allowed the Saudis to develop a civilian nuclear energy program.

At this time, it is not known whether Iran had any specific role in the carnage in Israel. Earlier this week, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Tehran was directly involved in planning the assault, citing unnamed senior members of Hamas and Hezbollah, the Lebanese militant group. That report has not been confirmed by Israeli or U.S. officials, who have only gone so far as to suggest that Iran was “broadly complicit,” in the words of Jon Finer, the deputy national security adviser. At the very least, the operation “bore hallmarks of Iranian support,” as a report in *The Washington Post* put it, citing former and current senior Israeli and U.S. officials. And even if the Islamic Republic did not pull the trigger, its hands are hardly clean. Iran has funded, trained, and equipped Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups and has coordinated closely on strategy, as well as operations—especially during the past decade. It is inconceivable that Hamas undertook an attack of this magnitude and complexity without some foreknowledge and affirmative support from Iran’s leadership. And now Iranian officials and media are exulting in the brutality unleashed on Israeli civilians and embracing the expectation that the Hamas offensive will bring about Israel’s demise.

#### WHAT’S IN IT FOR TEHRAN?

At first glance, Iran’s posture might appear paradoxical. After all, with the Biden administration proffering economic incentives for cooperation, it might seem unwise for Iran to incite an eruption between the Israelis and the Palestinians that will no doubt scuttle any possibility of a thaw between Washington and Tehran. Since the Iranian Revolution in 1979,

however, the Islamic Republic has used escalation as a policy tool of choice. When the regime is under pressure, the revolutionary playbook calls for a counterattack to unnerve its adversaries and achieve a tactical advantage. And the war in Gaza advances the long-cherished goal of the Islamic Republic's leadership to cripple its most formidable regional foe. Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has never wavered in his feverish antagonism toward Israel and the United States. He and those around him are profoundly convinced of American immorality, greed, and wickedness; they revile Israel and clamor for its destruction, as part of the ultimate triumph of the Islamic world over what they see as a declining West and an illegitimate "Zionist entity."

In addition, in the Biden administration's entreaties and conciliation, Tehran smelled weakness—Washington's desperation to shed its 9/11-era baggage, even if the price was high. Domestic turmoil in both the United States and Israel likely also whet the appetites of Iranian leaders, who have long been convinced that the West was decaying from within. For this reason, Tehran has been committing more strongly to its relationships with China and Russia. Those links are primarily driven by opportunism and a shared resentment of Washington. But for Iran, there is a domestic political element as well: as more moderate segments of the Iranian elite have been pushed to the sidelines, the regime's economic and diplomatic orientation has shifted to the East, as its power brokers no longer see the West as a preferable or even a viable source of economic and diplomatic opportunities. Closer bonds among China, Iran, and Russia have encouraged a more aggressive Iranian posture, since a crisis in the Middle East that distracts Washington and European capitals will produce some strategic and economic benefits for Moscow and Beijing.

Finally, the prospect of a public Israeli-Saudi entente surely provided an additional accelerant to Iran, as it would have shifted the regional balance firmly back in Washington's favor. In a speech he delivered just days before the Hamas attack, Khamenei warned that "the firm view of the Islamic Republic is that the governments that are gambling on normalizing relations with the Zionist regime will suffer losses. Defeat awaits them. They are making a mistake."

WHERE DOES IT GO FROM HERE?

As the Israeli ground campaign in Gaza gets underway, it is highly unlikely that the conflict will stay there; the only question is the scope and speed of the war's expansion. For now, the Israelis are focused on the immediate threat and are disinclined to widen the conflict. But the choice may not be theirs. Hezbollah, Iran's most important ally, has already taken part in an exchange of fire on Israel's northern border, in which at least four of the group's fighters died. For Hezbollah, the temptation to follow the shock of Hamas's success by opening a second front will be high. But Hezbollah's leaders have acknowledged that they failed to anticipate the heavy toll of their 2006 war with Israel, which left the group intact but also severely eroded its capabilities. They may be more circumspect this time around. Tehran also has an interest in keeping Hezbollah whole, as insurance against a potential future Israeli strike on the Iranian nuclear program.

For now, therefore, although the threat of a wider war remains real, that outcome is hardly inevitable. The Iranian government has made an art of avoiding direct conflict with Israel, and it suits Tehran's purposes, as well as those of its regional proxies and patrons in Moscow, to light the fire but stand back from the flames. Some in Israel may advocate for hitting Iranian targets, if only to send a signal, but the country's security forces have their hands full now, and senior officials seem determined to stay focused on the fight at hand. Most likely, as the conflict evolves, Israel will at some point hit Iranian assets in Syria, but not in Iran itself. To date, Tehran has absorbed such strikes in Syria without feeling the need to retaliate directly.

As oil markets react to the return of a Middle East risk premium, Tehran may be tempted to resume its attacks and harassment of shipping vessels in the Persian Gulf. U.S. General C. Q. Brown, the newly confirmed chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was right to warn Tehran to stay on the sidelines and "not to get involved." But his choice of words unfortunately suggests a failure to appreciate that the Iranians are already deeply, inextricably involved.

For the Biden administration, it is long past time to shed the mindset that shaped prior diplomacy toward Iran: a conviction that the Islamic Republic could be persuaded to accept pragmatic compromises that served its country's interests. Once upon a time, that may have been credible. But the Iranian regime has reverted to its foundational premise: a determination to upend the regional order by any means necessary. Washington should dispense with the illusions of a truce with Iran's theocratic oligarchs.

On every other geopolitical challenge, Biden's position has evolved considerably from the Obama-era approach. Only U.S. policy toward Iran remains mired in the outdated assumptions of a decade ago. In the current environment, American diplomatic engagement with Iranian officials in Gulf capitals will not produce durable restraint on Tehran's part. Washington needs to deploy the same tough-minded realism toward Iran that has informed recent U.S. policy on Russia and China: building coalitions of the willing to ratchet up pressure and cripple Iran's transnational terror network; reinstating meaningful enforcement of U.S. sanctions on the Iranian economy; and conveying clearly—through diplomacy, force posture, and actions to preempt or respond to Iranian provocations—that the United States is prepared to deter Iran's regional aggression and nuclear advances. The Middle East has a way of forcing itself to the top of every president's agenda; in the aftermath of this devastating attack, the White House must rise to the challenge.