

# COMPARING HARRIS AND TRUMP ON MIDDLE EAST POLICY

Brian Katulis, with Benjamin Freedman and Sydney Taylor

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## Predicting the Next US Administration's Approach to the Region

The two leading presidential candidates in America's 2024 election have made statements and established track records on the Middle East based on their time in office. This document aims to highlight the most important and reliable positions staked out by former President Donald Trump and current Vice President Kamala Harris.

This compilation will be updated monthly, between mid-August and Election Day, Nov. 5.

Photo above by Nicolas Economou/NurPhoto via Getty Images.

# OVERVIEW



- Vice President Kamala Harris entered the White House in 2021 with limited foreign policy experience, and she has had few opportunities to engage in foreign policy over the past four years, while serving in the Biden administration as vice president.
- Harris will likely maintain the Biden administration's overall stances and engage in foreign policy and diplomatic efforts that are broadly in line with those of the Biden administration, at least initially.
- If she wins in November, she will inherit an increasingly volatile situation in the Middle East in addition to a host of other concerns, like Russia, China, the southern border, and more, that will require her to surround herself with seasoned foreign policy and regional experts.
- Harris is a staunch internationalist bent on working congruently with American allies to limit the influence of adversaries such as Russia, China, and Iran.



- The [official](#) Republican Party Platform of 2024 doesn't say much about foreign policy in the Middle East aside from "stand with Israel" and "restore peace in the Middle East."
- A second Trump administration could represent a continuation of previous policies from 2017-2021, including:
  - A "maximum pressure" approach to Iran with a focus on economic sanctions, strong rhetoric, and targeted military actions;
  - A strong disinclination toward diplomacy with Iran over a nuclear deal;
  - A lower priority on human rights and democracy in US policy and a higher priority on energy and economic policy cooperation;
  - An easy working relationship with regional strongmen like President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey;
  - A warm relationship with Saudi Arabia;
  - A desire to achieve a US-Saudi-Israel deal similar to the 2020 Abraham Accords that opened formal relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco;
  - A ban on immigration from Muslim-majority countries;
  - A largely hands-off approach in Syria.

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# ISRAEL/PALESTINE



- Harris has been more vocal regarding the devastation caused by the war in Gaza and the suffering of Palestinian civilians, as seen in her [speech](#) on March 3, 2024. She remarked that the conditions for the people of Gaza amid the war are “inhumane.” However, she also asserted that her stance on Israel’s right to self-defense remains the same, noting that she and President Joe Biden are “...unwavering in [their] commitment to Israel’s security.”
- Practically speaking, Harris’ approach to the war has not significantly [deviated](#) from that of the Biden administration. Her rhetoric appears to be more empathetic toward the plight of Palestinians, and she has [repeatedly referenced](#) that “far too many” civilians have been killed in Gaza; but Harris has a relatively standard pro-Israel voting record from her time in the Senate.
- Harris continues to underscore that policy planning for the “day after” in Gaza is a priority and was the [first](#) US official to encourage Arab heads of state to prioritize and discuss post-war plans.
- Speaking at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Dubai in early December 2023, Harris [laid out](#) three key elements for post-war Gaza: reconstruction, security, and governance. She said that the international community will need to “dedicate significant resources” to rebuild the devastated coastal strip, Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces must be strengthened so they can “assume security responsibilities in Gaza” and terrorists cannot be allowed “to continue to threaten Israel,” and the PA must be revitalized so it can govern both the West Bank and Gaza.
- In his comments at the [Herzliya Conference](#) in June 2024, Vice President Harris’ National Security Advisor Phil Gordon reinforced US support for Israel and what it views as the positive path forward, where Israel finds peace with its neighbors and is “integrated into the region like never before.” Gordon stated that “the choice should be clear” for ending the Gaza war, beginning with the three-phase cease-fire deal that was built upon Israel’s proposal and endorsed by Biden on May 31, 2024.
- Responding to protesters during her campaign speech in Arizona on Aug. 9, Harris asserted that she has been very clear in her past statements that “[now is the time](#)” to secure a cease-fire and hostage release deal. Furthermore, she said that she and President Biden are working “around the clock every day” to achieve this and that although Israel has the right to “[go after the terrorists that are Hamas](#),” it also has a responsibility to prevent harm to civilians.
- On Aug. 8, Gordon asserted on [X](#) that Harris does not support an arms embargo on Israel.



- Trump often describes himself as the “best friend that Israel has ever had.”
- In May 2018, Trump [moved](#) the US Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem; and the following March, he also [recognized](#) the Golan Heights as falling under Israeli sovereignty.
- In 2018, the Trump administration cut all [funding](#) to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA).
- Trump has [alleged](#) that the Oct. 7, 2023, attacks would not have happened if he were president, vowing that if he gets elected the Israel-Hamas war will come to an end. However, Trump does not seem to have a clear approach to handling the conflict.
- When asked about Palestinian statehood in the June 2024 presidential debate, [Trump’s response](#) was “I’d have to see.”
- In July 2024, Trump [told](#) Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu “do what you have to do” and “finish up the war” but warned Netanyahu that Israel’s public relations have taken a hit due to the graphic videos of death and destruction that have come out of Gaza.

Photo above by MOHAMMED ABED/AFP via Getty Images.

# IRAN



- In 2015, Harris supported the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) deal to rein in Tehran’s nuclear program. She is [quoted](#) calling President Trump’s decision to pull out of the deal in 2018 “reckless and one that jeopardizes national security.” In 2019, during her campaign for president, Harris [stated](#) that she “would plan to rejoin the JCPOA, so long as Iran also returned to verifiable compliance.”
- Harris has also been critical of Iran’s human rights violations, particularly after its violent crackdown on anti-government protests in 2022, following the death of Mahsa Amini in the morality police’s custody after her arrest for improperly wearing hijab. Shortly after, Harris [called](#) for Iran to be removed from the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women.



- Trump supports an assertive stance against Iran, but it is unclear what exact approach he might take if reelected given his mixed record of action from his first term and the uncertainty of current dynamics with Iran.
- Trump was a vocal critic of President Barack Obama’s 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the Iran Nuclear Deal, [calling](#) it “one of the worst and most one-sided transactions the United States has ever entered into.” He withdrew from the deal in May 2018 — against the advice of some in his administration and contrary to the analytical judgements of his intelligence community — and reimposed harsher economic sanctions on Iran.
- The 2024 Republican Party Platform and the Trump campaign have identified certain goals on Iran:
  - Preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear technology and delivery capabilities, in addition to blocking Iranian ambitions through the reinstatement and expansion of sanctions, providing security assistance to regional partners, and supporting freedom-seeking Iranians in their revolt against the mullahs;
  - Stopping Iran’s [unjust](#) detention of foreigners, including US citizens;
  - Ending Iranian cyber-attacks [against](#) the US and its allies; and
  - Ceasing the country’s [support](#) for terrorists, extremists, and regional proxies, such as Hezbollah, Hamas, the Taliban, and al-Qaeda.
- In his X Space interview with Elon Musk, on Aug. 12, 2024, Trump claimed that during his administration, [Iran had “no money”](#) for Hamas, Hezbollah, or their other “instruments of terror.” While Iran’s ability to fund their proxies was hampered by the heavy sanctions levied against the regime, Trump’s own Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [said](#), in 2020, that Iran was continuing to fund Hezbollah and Iraqi Shi’a terrorist groups.
- Trump also claimed during this interview that his administration successfully pressured China into [ceasing all oil purchases from Iran](#). These sales did drop in 2019 but [rose again](#) while Trump was still in office.

Photo above by Morteza Nikoubazi/NurPhoto via Getty Images.



# YEMEN/HOUTHIS



- In the past, Harris aligned with members of the Democratic Party when she [co-sponsored](#) legislation to end US support for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen.
- Vice President Harris' National Security Advisor Philip Gordon described the Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea as "[outrageous behavior](#)" as well as reasserted the US commitment to preventing future Houthi attacks, diminishing their capabilities, and rejecting their "self-proclaimed justification" for such attacks.



- In April 2019, President Trump used his veto power to [strike down](#) a bipartisan resolution that would have ended US military involvement in Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen..
- One of Trump's last foreign policy decisions during his presidency in January 2021 was to [designate](#) the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization, barring US citizens and entities from engaging financially with the group, a move that worsened the humanitarian crisis by hampering the delivery of aid.
- Trump [criticized the Biden administration](#) in January 2024 for conducting military strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen, accusing President Joe Biden of "dropping bombs all over the Middle East" in response to Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea.

Photo above by Mohammed Hamoud/Getty Images.

# SYRIA/THE ISLAMIC STATE



- On Syria policy, the Harris campaign adheres to a status quo approach, closely aligned with how the Biden administration has [handled Syria](#): prioritizing containment through humanitarian aid, countering terrorism, and supporting justice and diplomatic activities.
- The Harris campaign is also expected to continue the [existing policy on countering ISIS](#), sustaining small-scale deployments in theaters like Syria, Iraq, and Somalia, while prioritizing an intelligence and special forces approach to monitoring and neutralizing threats to the homeland from places like Afghanistan, Yemen, and across Africa.



- In an effort to remove American forces from “endless wars,” President Trump publicly called for the [withdrawal](#) of US troops from northeastern Syria in October 2019, abandoning the Syrian Democratic Forces and other allied militaries in the country with little notice. This announcement prompted his first defense secretary, Jim Mattis, to [resign](#) from his position, but US troops remained in Syria.
- When President Trump was inaugurated on Jan. 20, 2017, the White House issued a foreign policy [document](#) that stated “defeating ISIS and other radical Islamic terror groups will be our highest priority.”
- Trump also routinely argued that US allies in the Middle East and Europe should pull their own weight in dealing with the threat of ISIS, as the group poses a more serious threat to them than it does to the United States.
- ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed in a US Special Operations Forces raid in October 2019. Trump subsequently [claimed](#) that American forces defeated 100 percent of the ISIS caliphate in Iraq and Syria, though ISIS attacks continued to rise through the remainder of his presidency.
- ISIS attacks in Iraq and Syria are [on track to double](#) from 2023 to 2024, and it is unclear if another Trump administration, given its inconsistent regional security approach in its first term, would prioritize the fight against ISIS in a possible second term.

Photo above by DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP via Getty Images.



# ABRAHAM ACCORDS



- In 2021, Harris publicly affirmed [support](#) for the Abraham Accords. As vice president, she met the crown prince and prime minister of Bahrain, Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, in 2022, and has met and held calls with the president of the UAE, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, on numerous occasions. All of these engagements were against the background of the Biden administration's support for the accords.



- The Trump administration's top Middle East policy outcome was the 2020 signing of the Abraham Accords, and the pursuit of normalization deals between Israel and Arab states is one of the few Middle East initiatives the Biden administration has embraced from the Trump era.
- Another Trump administration would likely encourage other Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia, to enter into agreements similar to the Abraham Accords to deepen Israel's integration into the region, but that seems unlikely without the creation of a Palestinian state.

Photo above by MAZEN MAHDI/AFP via Getty Images.

# SAUDI ARABIA



- In 2018, then-Senator Harris [joined](#) a bipartisan coalition on legislation to restrict arms sales to the kingdom due to its involvement in the Yemeni civil war and the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. She also [co-sponsored](#) a bill to require a public report on Khashoggi's killing.
- In 2019, Harris [called](#) for the United States to “fundamentally reevaluate” its relationship with Saudi Arabia in order to stand up for American values and interests, while still collaborating on shared goals like counterterrorism.



- While Trump's first foreign visit as POTUS was to Riyadh, he also proved to be an [inconsistent](#) security partner when Iran attacked Saudi oil fields in Abqaiq in 2019 and the US stayed silent in its response.
- In line with the Biden administration, a Trump administration would likely seek to finalize a US-Saudi-Israel deal to normalize relations between the two Middle Eastern countries. However, it remains unlikely without a serious pathway for a future Palestinian state.
- Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, was a key interlocutor in the US-Saudi bilateral relationship and the signing of the Abraham Accords.

Photo above by FAYEZ NURELDINE/AFP via Getty Images.



# EGYPT



- Harris was incredibly vocal during her December 2023 [meeting](#) with President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi that the US would not accept under any circumstances the forced relocation of Palestinians from Gaza or the West Bank into Egypt.



- Trump has previously [praised](#) Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi as his “favorite dictator” and never conditioned foreign aid to Egypt on human rights [benchmarks](#) as the Biden administration has.

Photo above by KHALED DESOUKI/AFP via Getty Images.

# CAVEATS



In examining the record of the two presidential candidates, it is important to keep in mind five fundamental points:

- 1. The Middle East is currently not a leading issue in domestic politics.** Middle East policy questions do not appear to be a major factor in shaping voters' choices, [based on public opinion polls](#). The economy, abortion, immigration, climate change, and concerns about America's democracy all outpace foreign policy questions, including China, the Ukraine war, and the Middle East. Some have posited that the Israel-Hamas war or current conflicts in the Middle East might impact outcomes in key swing states, [especially Michigan](#), but that remains to be seen.
- 2. Statements by political candidates during a campaign often do not reflect their actual policies once in office.** Previous US presidents have often said things in trying to win votes that do not end up mattering in terms of how they govern. A recent prominent example of this is current President Joe Biden, who said Saudi Arabia should be treated [like a "pariah"](#) during the campaign but then proceeded to make Saudi Arabia central to his administration's engagement efforts in the region. Similarly, former President George W. Bush spoke very little about the Middle East and criticized "nation building" efforts by the United States around the world when he campaigned in 2000, but his presidency ended up focusing on the largest and most expensive US efforts to engage in "nation building" in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. Circumstances while in office, rather than past statements on the campaign trail, are more likely to shape policy decisions.
- 3. Nevertheless, campaign promises can have an impact on priorities.** President Obama won the presidency in part because [he promised](#) to "end the war" in Iraq and bring US troops home by a certain date. Obama [did this](#) in 2011, but then he also [sent troops back](#) into Iraq by 2014 because of the threat posed by the Islamic State. Trump [strongly criticized](#) the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, and he eventually [pulled America out of the deal](#) by 2018, more than a year and a half into office.
- 4. Both Trump and Harris have existing track records from their time serving in the executive branch, and these track records will likely shape the trajectory of their possible administrations.** Trump served as president from 2017 to 2021 and established a record during that time in office, and Harris is currently vice president in the Biden administration and will likely inherit much of Biden's policy framework on the Middle East. Harris may ultimately seek to position herself differently from Biden's record, and Trump will need to account for what has transpired in region since he left office in 2021. Both are more likely to avoid major shifts in actual Middle East policy in the opening months of their administrations because of other, higher priorities, but this will depend on what is happening in the region at the time.
- 5. The world watches carefully what US presidential candidates say on foreign policy.** Despite all of the talk about the possible decline in US influence in the Middle East and around the world, the statements made by presidential candidates are watched carefully across the region and the world as signals of what might come in the future. Inside

America's debate, different advocacy and activist groups often read into what candidates say about particular issues and try to claim their own imprint on those ideas, as recently witnessed in [statements](#) Vice President Harris made about Palestinians and the Gaza war, even if those statements represent little more than a shift in tone.

*Brian Katulis is Senior Fellow for US Foreign Policy at the Middle East Institute.*

*Benjamin Freedman was the Assistant to the Vice President of Policy and the Policy Center Coordinator at MEI.*

*Sydney Taylor served as the MEI Policy Center's Research Assistant on US Foreign Policy in the Middle East.*

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