

COMPARING HARRIS AND TRUMP ON MIDDLE EAST POLICY

Brian Katulis, with Athena Masthoff

Sept. 27, 2024



Forecasting the Next US Administration's Approach to the Region

The two leading presidential candidates and their running mates in America's 2024 election have made statements and established a track record about the Middle East based on their time in office. This document aims to highlight the most important and reliable positions staked out by Vice President Kamala Harris, former President Donald Trump, and their running mates, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz and Ohio Senator J. D. Vance, respectively.

The Middle East remains on the margins of America's political debate, and the candidates have mostly positioned their comments on the Middle East to appeal to certain domestic constituencies, as is often the case during US election campaigns.

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

Photo above by Nicolas Economou/NurPhoto via Getty Images.

OVERVIEW



- The [Democratic Party Platform](#) was passed on July 16, 2024, prior to President Joe Biden dropping out of the race, and was released on Aug. 18, just ahead of the Democratic National Convention, when Harris formally accepted her party's nomination. The Platform lays out nine priorities ranging from the economy and the climate crisis to immigration and American leadership abroad, the last of which touches on US strategy toward the Middle East. The following stances, referred to as unified Biden-Harris positions in the document, provide a starting point for assessing potential policies toward the Middle East under a Harris administration, especially as it relates to Israel, Palestine, and Lebanon:
 - Object to any actions taken by either side that would jeopardize a two-state solution, including annexation;
 - Oppose settlement expansion;
 - Support that Jerusalem should remain the capital of Israel, despite it being a final status issue, while being accessible to all faiths;
 - Support "critical assistance" to the Palestinian people as long as it is compliant with US law;
 - Reject any movement to delegitimize Israel at the United Nations or by means of the Boycotts, Divestment, and Sanctions movement, while protecting American rights to free speech; and
 - Seek a diplomatic resolution to conflict along the Israel-Lebanon border by means of a sovereign Lebanon.
- 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.
- 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;
 - Strong opposition to 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;
 - A transactional 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; and
 - A largely hands-off approach in Syria or a potential withdrawal of US forces from the country.

Photo above by Royal Hashemite Court/Handout/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

ISRAEL/PALESTINE

(Harris)



- Harris has spotlighted the Biden administration’s months-long effort to achieve a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza war as a top priority.
- [Harris](#) and her running mate [Tim Walz](#) have both stressed a two-state solution as the end goal of US policy on the Israeli-Palestinian front, though they have not presented a plan for getting to that point.
- Harris has been more vocal regarding the devastation caused by the war in Gaza and the suffering of Palestinian civilians than President Biden, as was evident in her [speech](#) on March 3, 2024. She remarked that the conditions for the people of Gaza amid the war are “inhumane,” and she has [repeatedly referenced](#) that “far too many” civilians have been killed in Gaza. However, she also asserted that her stance on Israel’s right to self-defense remains the same, noting that she and President Biden are “...unwavering in [their] commitment to Israel’s security.”
- In the Sept. 10 presidential debate, Harris [said](#) that, “I will always give Israel the ability to defend itself, in particular as it relates to Iran and any threat that Iran and its proxies pose to Israel.” Moreover, she has a relatively [standard pro-Israel voting record](#) from her time in the Senate.
- Speaking to reporters in Arizona on Aug. 10, Harris said she and President Biden are working “around the clock every day” to achieve a cease-fire in Gaza, adding that although Israel has the right to “[go after the terrorists that are Hamas](#),” it also has a responsibility to prevent harm to civilians.
- 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 postwar 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.
- On Aug. 8, Gordon asserted on [X](#) that Harris does not support an arms embargo on Israel.
- Speaking at a gathering hosted by the National Association of Black Journalists on Sept. 17, Harris [voiced support](#) for Biden’s decision to withhold shipments of certain weapons to Israel as the Israeli military prepared for a ground invasion of Rafah.

Photo above by MOHAMMED ABED/AFP via Getty Images.

ISRAEL/PALESTINE

(Trump)



- Trump often describes himself as the “best friend that Israel has ever had.” On Sept. 5, Donald Trump posted a video on his [Truth Social account](#) with the caption “NO PRESIDENT HAS DEFENDED ISRAEL AND JEWISH AMERICANS MORE THAN DONALD J. TRUMP.” He stated he is the most “Pro-Israel president in U.S. history, someone that the Jewish community can count on.”
- Speaking at [the Republican Jewish Coalition](#) in Las Vegas on Sept. 5, Trump asserted that the Biden-Harris administration has “sought to cast blame for these deaths on Israel,” and that “the October 7th attack on Israel would never have happened if [he] was President,” a sentiment he repeated during his Sept. 10 presidential debate against Harris.
- In a May 12 interview with *CNN*, Trump’s running mate, Sen. J. D. Vance, [accused](#) the Biden administration of a “fundamentally incoherent policy” toward Israel and the war in Gaza, and he declared that the US should allow the Israelis to “prosecute this war the way they see fit.” He added, “You’re never going to defeat the ideology of Hamas, but you can root out those commanders, those final military-trained battalions, and I think you should empower the Israelis to do it.”
- Trump has also [vowed](#) that if elected, he would get the conflict in the Middle East “settled and fast,” though he has provided few details on how he would do so.
- When asked about Palestinian statehood in the June 2024 presidential debate, [Trump’s response](#) was “I’d have to see.”
- Some prominent voices in the Trump camp have made statements about the Gaza Strip in recent months that have raised eyebrows, even if they may not be practical suggestions that represent what Trump’s policy might be. Jared Kushner, Trump’s son-in-law who played a prominent role in Middle East policy in his first term, [suggested](#) at a [Harvard University forum](#) earlier this year that Palestinians could be moved to the Negev or Egypt, and that Gaza could have “very valuable beachfront property.” Richard Grenell, Trump’s former ambassador to Germany and acting director of national intelligence, [made similar comments](#) while meeting with Arab-American voters.
- 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, building on his [previous comments](#), from April, that Israel is “absolutely losing the PR war.”
- 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).

Photo above by MOHAMMED ABED/AFP via Getty Images.

IRAN (Harris)



- 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.

- Harris has promised to take a firm approach to Iran, with her campaign platform [pledging](#) to “never hesitate to take whatever action is necessary to protect US forces and interests from Iran and Iran-backed terrorist groups,” though without providing many details beyond that.
- Iran policy under Harris would likely continue the current administration’s relatively lax enforcement of sanctions on Iranian oil exports, especially if Harris pursues a revived attempt at diplomacy with Tehran.

Photo above by Morteza Nikoubazi/NurPhoto via Getty Images.

IRAN (Trump)



- Trump supports an assertive stance against Iran, but it is unclear the exact approach he might take if reelected given his mixed record of action from his first term, changes in the regional context in the intervening years, and the uncertainty of current dynamics with Iran. Few US partners in the region are likely to support a renewed collective “maximum pressure” campaign.
- Between the 2024 Republican Party Platform and the Trump campaign, the Trump team has set goals vis-à-vis Iran as:
 - 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 an interview with *Fox News* on July 16, 2024, Sen. Vance [asserted](#) that US engagement with Iran shouldn’t be these “weak little bombing runs.” Vance declared “if you’re going to punch the Iranians, you punch them hard,” crediting Trump for doing so with the killing of Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani and declaring that the strike “brought peace and checked the Iranians.”
- Trump’s initial term in office set a precedent for much stronger action on sanctions enforcement, which would likely be repeated as Iranian oil exports have risen considerably during the Biden administration. However, tougher sanctions enforcement would depend heavily upon successful cooperation with (or action against) third-party countries, such as Malaysia, that have been critical in facilitating Iranian exports to China.

- On Sept. 5, Trump posted [a video](#) on his Truth Social account highlighting that he had gotten rid of President Barack Obama’s “disastrous” 2015 Iran nuclear deal, formally known as the JCPOA, which “funneled billions into the coffers of the Iranian regime, legitimized their nuclear ambitions, and destabilized the region.” The video argues that he imposed “crippling” sanctions on Iran to restrain its nuclear capabilities.
- During the Sept. 10 debate, Trump [stated](#) that, “Iran was broke under Donald Trump. Now Iran has \$300 billion because they took off all the sanctions that I had. Iran had no money for Hamas or Hezbollah ... They had no money for 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 withdrew from the JCPOA 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 as part of the “maximum pressure” campaign.
- Speaking to *Fox News* in March 2024, Trump [said](#), “I bet you I would have had Iran in the Abraham Accords.”
- In his X Space interview with Elon Musk, on Aug. 12, 2024, Trump claimed 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 STRINGER/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 took place in the context of the Biden administration's support for the accords and efforts to deepen the ties between Israel and these countries.
- The vice president [met](#) with UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed during his visit to Washington in late September. The two, along with President Biden, likely discussed US-UAE bilateral relations, the regional situation, concerns about Iran, and the prospects for a major UAE role in post-conflict Gaza.



- The Trump administration's top Middle East policy outcome was the 2020 signing of the Abraham Accords. 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, and would push back against linking the agreements to the creation of a Palestinian state.
- Trump [met](#) with UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed during his late-September visit to the US. The two have enjoyed a good relationship. In their meeting, they discussed the strength of the strategic bilateral relationship.
- In his May 12 interview with *CNN*, Vance [proposed](#) that "Our goal in the Middle East should be to allow the Israelis to get to some good place with the Saudi Arabians and other Gulf Arab states." But he cautioned that this would not be possible until Israel defeats Hamas.

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.
- The continuation of President Biden’s pause on approvals for US liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports to non-free trade agreement countries would raise investment risks for Gulf national oil companies (NOCs), like Saudi Aramco or ADNOC, that plan to invest in upcoming US export projects or procure LNG cargoes from these facilities for sale elsewhere.
- Harris is highly likely to support continued implementation of the Biden administration’s 2022 Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), which could have a host of potential implications for the Middle East’s energy sector, including but not limited to the clean hydrogen market.



- 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. The Saudi government has declared that it would not proceed with normalization agreements without a serious pathway for a future Palestinian state — a point [recently underscored](#) by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.
- Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, was a key interlocutor in the US-Saudi bilateral relationship and the signing of the Abraham Accords. Kushner has maintained business ties [with the kingdom](#), as well as [Qatar and the UAE](#), since leaving the White House.
- Barring the need for additional input from Congress or the Supreme Court, Trump is highly likely to lift the US LNG export pause immediately upon taking office, providing greater clarity for Gulf producers on potential competition from US exports as well as regulations impacting projects receiving Gulf NOC investment.
- There is considerable uncertainty around Trump’s potential approach to the 2022 IRA. Should its incentives for US hydrogen production be significantly reduced, it would likely make US hydrogen less competitive with supply from the Gulf while also creating uncertainty around potential NOC investments in the segment.

Photo above by FAYEZ NURELDINE/AFP 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 military operations 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. As president, Trump generally pursued the same policy on the Yemen civil war initiated by former President Obama, including support for a UN-led negotiating strategy.
- One of Trump's last foreign policy decisions during his presidency in January 2021, however, was to [designate](#) the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization, barring US citizens and entities from engaging financially with the group, a move supported by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the internationally recognized Yemeni government. In response to pleas by international organizations and humanitarian aid organizations that the designation would worsen the humanitarian crisis by hampering the delivery of aid, the Biden administration rescinded the designation shortly after taking office.
- Trump [criticized the Biden administration](#) in January 2024 for conducting military strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen, accusing President Biden of "dropping bombs all over the Middle East" in response to Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea, but he would be unlikely to reverse course given the broad domestic and international support for efforts to deter Houthi attacks on international trade.

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.
- If elected, Harris is also expected to continue the [existing policy on countering ISIS](#), seeking to sustain 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.
- A bilateral US-Iraqi deal agreed under the Biden administration that stipulates a need for US forces to [withdraw from Iraq](#) by September 2025 and from Erbil by late 2026 could present a challenge for a Harris administration, given the ISIS resurgence next door in Syria and the likelihood that it will eventually spill over into Iraq.



- 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.
- Under Trump, Special Envoy James Jeffrey was given some authority to shape a more active US policy on Syria. This was the last time the US had a dedicated senior official for Syria policy.
- In a second term, Trump would likely pursue either a largely hands-off approach in Syria or potentially withdraw US forces altogether. The latter is in line with the [Project 2025 report](#) recommendation that the Syria mission be wound down, although Trump [has made efforts to distance himself](#) from the Heritage Foundation report since its release.
- 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 [have nearly tripled](#) 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 second term.

Photo above by DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP via Getty Images.



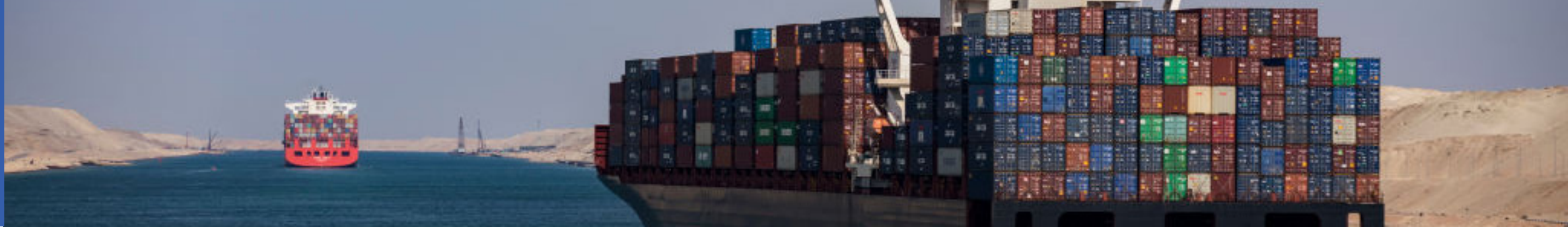
- A Harris administration would largely follow existing Biden administration approaches.
- Harris would implement a two-phase withdrawal of US forces from Iraq, as per the pending bilateral agreement with Baghdad.
- Her team would likely try to negotiate continued access to Harir airbase in Erbil to sustain US military operations in eastern Syria as the Biden administration has been doing.
- A Harris administration would continue using the Treasury Department to press Iraqi banks to implement reforms to reduce illicit cash flows to Iran.
- It would likely consider new sanctions waivers to Iraq to sustain imports of Iranian energy for Iraqi electricity supplies.



- Trump would welcome reducing American forces to the lowest possible level in Iraq, a point he [stressed](#) in a 2020 press conference with then-Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi.
- Trump would likely be less inclined to maintain a robust US assistance mission in Iraq, especially as his administration would view with greater skepticism the level of Iranian influence in Baghdad.
- Similarly, he would likely be less concerned about maintaining an Iraqi Kurdistan logistics base for US operations in Syria; the [Project 2025](#) report recommends winding down the Syria mission.
- As Trump accented in his 2020 press conference with then-Prime Minister Kadhimi, there would likely be greater interest in US energy deals with Iraq.
- A second Trump administration would be less inclined to grant Iraq sanctions waivers for Iranian energy imports, as it would aim to weaken Iran as much and as quickly as possible.

Photo above by Yunus Keles/Anadolu Agency 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 maintained a [friendly and transactional relationship](#) with Egyptian President Sisi, and his administration never conditioned foreign aid to Cairo on human rights [benchmarks](#) as the Biden administration had.
- In a second Trump term, efforts to address the humanitarian crisis in Gaza may be even less of a priority than they have been under the Biden administration.
- The former president has not made any public statements about rejecting the forced displacement of Palestinians from Gaza — a key issue for the Egyptian government.
- The only US efforts to mediate the long-running Egypt-Ethiopia-Sudan negotiations over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam were made under the Trump administration.

Photo above by Gehad Hamdy/picture alliance via Getty Images.

AFGHANISTAN



- During the Sept. 10 presidential debate, Harris **defended** President Biden's decision to pull out of Afghanistan and responded to questions about the administration's handling of the 2021 withdrawal of US forces by blaming Donald Trump for negotiating one of the "weakest deals you can imagine" that bypassed the Afghan government. She also criticized Trump for inviting the Taliban to Camp David.



- During the Sept. 10 presidential debate with Harris, Trump responded to the vice president's charges that he made a weak deal with the Taliban and bypassed the Afghan government by saying that his Secretary of State Mike Pompeo negotiated a "successful deal" with the head of the Taliban. That deal would have seen US forces leave roughly four months earlier than Biden eventually withdrew them.
- In the September debate, Trump also criticized the Biden-Harris administration for leaving billions of dollars' worth of military equipment behind in Afghanistan and said that the "embarrassing" withdrawal from Afghanistan sparked the Ukraine war.
- In a statement issued in August 2021, amid the US pullout, Trump **claimed** that, had he been president at the time, the withdrawal would have been "conditions based."

Photo above by KHALED DESOUKI/AFP via Getty Images.

TURKEY



- Harris is unlikely to raise Turkey’s human rights problems meaningfully, but US-Turkish relations are likely to face regular strains regardless due to some structural and strategic challenges in the bilateral relationship.
- A Harris administration’s almost certain follow-through on withdrawing US forces from Iraq by the end of 2025, in line with the recent agreement between Washington and Baghdad would have direct repercussions for Turkey, potentially creating a security vacuum impacting both Iraq and Syria, undermining Turkey’s Iraq Development Corridor project, and benefiting Iran.
- Erdoğan did not meet with Harris during his recent trip to New York for the UN General Assembly, despite [earlier reports](#) indicating he was seeking a meeting with the vice president. Harris’ National Security Advisor Philip Gordon [met](#) with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan during his March visit to Washington to discuss the war in Gaza and other regional issues.



- While Turkish President Erdoğan would clearly prefer a Trump second term rather than a Harris victory given the former US president’s more personalized, transactional style, the US-Turkish relationship would still likely experience multiple strains under a Trump presidency.
- Trump is unlikely to raise Turkey’s human rights problems meaningfully.
- But if elected, Trump will likely also follow through on withdrawing US forces from Iraq by the end of 2025, in line with the recent agreement between Washington and Baghdad. This will have direct repercussions for Turkey, potentially creating a security vacuum impacting both Iraq and Syria, undermining Turkey’s Iraq Development Corridor project, and benefitting Iran.
- Trump’s likely more hawkish Iran policy may strain ties with Turkey, given relatively close Turkish-Iranian trade and energy relations.
- Trump’s pro-Israel policy and Erdoğan’s pro-Hamas stance will be another problem between the two countries.
- If Trump ceases to provide weapons and aid to Ukraine, this might force an end to the war. This will deny Turkey the upper hand it has gained in its relations with Russia.
- During his previous term in office, Trump took steps that hurt the Turkish economy and humiliated Erdoğan.

Photo above by Erhan Demirtas/Bloomberg 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 Gaza 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 the White House 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.

Athena Masthoff is a Policy and Program Associate at the Middle East Institute.

Photo above by MANDEL NGAN/AFP via Getty Images.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Colby Connelly, Matthew Czekaj, Gerald M. Feierstein, Robert S. Ford, Charles Lister, Mirette Mabrouk, Alistair Taylor, Gönül Tol, and Marvin Weinbaum for their suggestions and contributions to this project.

Intellectual Independence

The Middle East Institute maintains strict intellectual independence in all of its projects and publications. MEI as an organization does not adopt or advocate positions on particular issues, nor does it accept funding that seeks to influence the opinions or conclusions of its scholars. Instead, it serves as a convener and forum for discussion and debate, and it regularly publishes and presents a variety of views. All work produced or published by MEI represents solely the opinions and views of its scholars. The views in this paper are reflective only of the author's analysis and perspective and do not necessarily represent the views of MEI.