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“From Disengagement to Unprecedented Engagement: the US, the War in Gaza and the New World Order”

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Essay by Benjamin Miller, University of Haifa

Is it just a coincidence that at the same time as President Joe Biden’s wartime visit to Israel, the Chinese and Russian leaders met in Beijing in the framework of the Belt and Road Conference? While the timing might be a coincidence, the contrast between the two events indicates some of the links between the War in Gaza and the struggle over the New World Order between the West, as led by the United States, and the challengers—China, Russia, and Iran. The struggle is global but is taking place, particularly in Ukraine and Taiwan, and now also in Gaza.

Until a few months ago, it looked as though the US was in a process of disengagement from the Middle East. The rising rivalry with China in the Indo-Pacific, the fact that the US is becoming energy-independent, and the disenchantment of the US public with the costly and failed interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq led two presidents—Barack Obama and Donald Trump—to look favorably at the idea of at least some reduction in American involvement in the region. The 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan indicated the acceptance of this idea by the Biden administration. Beyond a military disengagement, and apart from some efforts to reach a limited agreement with Iran on its nuclear program, Middle East diplomacy was also a low priority. Even though the Biden administration rhetorically supported the idea of the two-state solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in practice this subject was put on the back burner.¹

Yet, during recent months—already before the monstrous Hamas attack—and culminating in its aftermath, the Biden administration became immersed in the Middle East in some very dramatic ways—both diplomatically and militarily.

Prior to the 7 October attack by Hamas militants, the Biden administration focused its efforts in the Middle East on reaching normalization between Israel and the leading Sunni Arab state, Saudi Arabia. The Saudis were expected to go ahead with this normalization in exchange for US security guarantees, the supplying of

¹ On Obama and Trump foreign policies, see Benjamin Miller with Ziv Rubinovitz, *Grand Strategy from Truman to Trump* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020). On Trump and Biden, see Charles W. Dunne, *US Middle East Policy: The Trump-Biden Doctrine in Action* (Washington DC: Arab Center, May 2023); On Biden’s policy, see Benjamin Miller, “Explaining the Changing Biden’s Doctrine: From Defensive Liberalism to Offensive Realism,” In Stanley Renshon and Peter Suedfeld, eds., *Presidential Leadership and Foreign Policy: Comparing the Trump and Biden Doctrines* (Forthcoming, Springer, 2024); and Suzanne Maloney, “The End of America’s Exit Strategy in the Middle East,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 10, 2023. See also Steven Simon, *Grand Delusion, The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East* (New York: Penguin Press, 2023).

advanced weapon systems, and assistance in enriching uranium in a nuclear reactor on Saudi soil. Israel was also expected to grant some unspecified concessions to the Palestinians.

The question is why the administration was interested in investing so much time and attention in making these commitments to Saudi Arabia, which Biden defined as a “pariah” state just a short time before?²

A second puzzle is the unprecedented support Biden conferred on Israel following the atrocities committed by Hamas terrorists, including the deployment of two aircraft carrier strike groups to the Middle East, and in addition to generously providing all the military needs of Israel and making a precedent-setting visit to the country in a time of war while delivering very supportive talks.

How are we to explain this change in strategy?

Two obvious explanations refer to domestic and individual factors: domestic/electoral politics with the upcoming presidential election in 2024 and the long-time personal sympathy of Biden for Israel. The president defines himself as a “Zionist” even though he is not Jewish. Such sympathy obviously grew immensely following the brutal killings and hostage taking by Hamas in the Israeli communities along the border with Gaza.

While these two accounts make a lot of sense, they do not fully explain the intensity of both the diplomatic effort regarding the Saudi normalization as well as the immediate far-reaching standing with Israel in its war with Hamas.

A third explanation refers to the relationship between great-power competition and regional conflicts.³ The challenge posed by US rivals to traditional American dominance in the Middle East has increased following two major recent developments. The first is the solidifying Russian-Iranian alliance in the context of the Ukraine War, with Iran providing weapon systems to Russia.⁴ The second is China’s brokering in February 2023 of the restoration of diplomatic relations between the two long-time regional adversaries: Shiite Iran and Sunni Saudi-Arabia, the latter of which is a traditional client of the US.⁵ The potential “loss” of Saudi Arabia became especially significant with the rising oil prices after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the crucial role of the Saudi leaders in the global energy market. Saudi Arabia has also become a prominent member of the emerging Global South, which consists of the new “non-aligned” force in global politics.⁶

The US response to these recent developments has been to lead the Saudi-Israeli normalization process as a key element in the effort to establish a US-led security partnership of the pragmatic states in the Middle East, which include the Gulf states, Egypt, Jordan and Israel.⁷ This solid configuration was expected to make possible at least a partial US disengagement from the Middle East in order to focus more on the Indo-Pacific

² Ben Hubbard and Peter Baker, “Biden to Travel to Saudi Arabia, Ending Its ‘Pariah’ Status,” *New York Times*, June 2, 2022.

³ On great-power competition and regional conflicts, see Benjamin Miller, *When Opponents Cooperate: Great Power Conflict and Collaboration in World Politics* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2nd ed., 2002); Miller, *States, Nations and Great Powers: The Sources of Regional War and Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Miller, *International and Regional Security: The Sources of War and Peace* (Routledge, 2017).

⁴ Mathieu Droin and Nicole Grajewski, “Iran, Russia, and the Challenges of ‘inter-Pariah Solidarity,’” *Texas National Security Review*, July 11, 2023 and Robbie Gramer and Amy Macinnon, “Iran and Russia Are Closer Than Ever Before,” *Foreign Policy*, January 4, 2023.

⁵ Saeid Golkar and Kasra Aarabi, “The Real Motivation Behind Iran’s Deal with Saudi Arabia,” *Foreign Policy*, April 6, 2023.

⁶ Cliff Kupchan, “6 Swing States will Decide the Future of Geopolitics,” *Foreign Policy*, June 6, 2023.

⁷ Javad Heiran-Nia, “US Offers New Guarantees to Arab States to Bolster Persian Gulf Security Order,” *Stimson*, September 19, 2023.

under the rising competition with China. It would also make it easier for the US to continue to lead the provisioning of aid to Ukraine in its war against the Russian invasion.

Iran, which is a Russian ally, is a leading supporter of Hamas, providing it with major military and financial support. We currently do not know whether Iran played role in the Hamas attack. What is clear is that Iran and also Russia have a major interest preventing the US-led security arrangement. A major, and brutal, Hamas operation would obviously lead to a devastating Israeli response that would kill and wound numerous Palestinians. Under these conditions, it would be impossible for the Saudis to go ahead with the normalization and it might even be difficult for the participants of the Abraham normalization accords with Israel—UAE, Bahrain and Morocco—to continue their participation in these accords.

The Biden administration felt the urgency to respond to these rising challenges. The Israel-Hamas War is likely to shape the future of the Middle East. Moreover, it is part of the global struggle between the US-led order versus the revisionist attempt to undermine this order. This attempt is led by the authoritarian powers of China (particularly vis-à-vis Taiwan), Russia (its invasion of Ukraine) and Iran. The latter is the most relevant in the Middle East context with its close relations with Hamas and also with the militant, Shiite, well-armed Hezbollah in Lebanon. The three revisionist powers are not formal allies and thus it is hard to believe that all three, especially China, were involved directly with the Hamas attack on Israel. Still, they all share the objective of undermining the American-led order and in this sense they all could benefit from what looks like a key goal of the Hamas attack—undermining the normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia and the broader American attempt to establish a new order in the region. This order is expected to focus on economic development while containing an expansion by the Iranian-led coalition and its Shiite militias in Iraq, Yemen, Syria and Lebanon.⁸

The global response to the Hamas attack provides a useful litmus test of attitudes to the world order.⁹ We can distinguish among three camps. The first involves the key members of the American-led order. The UK, Germany and France among others not only harshly condemned the Hamas killings and underscored Israel's right to respond, but their leaders also came to visit wartime Israel, expressing their horror at the attacks and their sympathy with Israel. The second group, the revisionist powers, did not condemn Hamas or offer special sympathy with Israel while Russian President Vladimir Putin in particular also blamed the US for the on-going violence. The third group involves the Arab states, including the moderates, who have signed peace treaties with Israel (Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority) or are members of the Abraham Accords and key candidates to join them. They accepted the claim of Hamas that Israel had struck a hospital in Gaza even though Israel provided powerful evidence that the explosion was the work of a militant Palestinian organization and not by Israel, an argument Biden endorsed. Moreover, Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority canceled the summit meeting with President Biden which was supposed to have taken place immediately after his visit to Israel.¹⁰ This meeting was designed to preserve the American-led order in the region

The current American policy is to show support for Israel's right to defend itself while exerting pressure on it to show restraint concerning the humanitarian aspects of the effects of the war on the civilian population in

⁸ Heiran-Nia, "US Offers New Guarantees to Arab States"; On the attempts of the Arab Gulf states to reshape the Middle East in their image, namely to focus on economic development rather than on violent sectarian conflicts, see *The Economist*, "Reorientation," September 9th, 2023, pp. 17-20.

⁹ David Pierson, Anatoly Kurmanaev and Tiffany May, "With Putin by His Side, Xi Outlines His Vision of a New World Order," *New York Times*, Oct. 18, 2023; Steven Erlanger, "New Global Divisions on View as Biden Goes to Israel and Putin to China," *New York Times*, Oct. 18, 2023.

¹⁰ On Biden's visit and the cancellation of the summit see Aamer Madhani and Colleen Long, "US President Biden wraps up his visit to wartime Israel with a warning against being 'consumed' by rage," *AP*, October 19, 2023.

Gaza and to follow the rules of international law.¹¹ Washington also aims to deter other forces from joining the war and broadening it, notably Hezbollah and Iran.

The overall objectives of the American policy are first to minimize the challenges to the normalization arrangements between Israel and the moderate Arab States, thus strengthening a post-war pragmatic order. If this partnership of the pragmatists is able to take care of their security needs vis-à-vis the Iranian-led revisionists, this might allow some American disengagement in the longer-run. However, in order to make such a partnership possible, the US will have to take care also of its second objective, which is to preserve the two-state option. For this purpose, it is important to avoid mass killing and suffering of the civilian population in Gaza. It is also necessary to cooperate with the Palestinian Authority and the neighboring Arab states in preparing for an intensive diplomatic process immediately after defeating Hamas. The key weakness in the normalization of the Abraham Accords is the fact that it avoided addressing seriously the Palestinian issue. This may have been the preference of the Arab governments for security (balancing Iran), diplomatic (relations with the US) and economic (the Israeli high-tech) reasons. Some have argued that it did not make sense to undermine such a mutually beneficial Israeli-Arab arrangement by trying to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict after numerous failures.

However, the normalization option overlooked the nationalist sentiments in the Arab world and the public identification with the Palestinian cause.¹² This was shown very clearly following the allegation that Israel killed hundreds of Gaza residents in its alleged bombing of the Gaza hospital. This allegation led to major demonstrations in the Arab street, which compelled the leaders to cancel their planned meeting with Biden. In other words, no stable arrangement can merge in the Middle East without addressing the Palestinian issue.

The unprecedented moves taken by the Biden administration following the Hamas attack might be explained by the high stakes involved in the struggle over shaping a new regional order as part of preserving an American-led global order. Accordingly, in his major address to the nation, Biden declared that US leadership “holds the World together” and thus Washington must deepen its support of Ukraine and Israel by providing them with billions of dollars in military assistance in the middle of two vastly different, and bloody wars.¹³

In sum, the simultaneous wartime visit of President Biden to Israel and the meeting of Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping—and the completely different responses of these leaders to the war in Gaza—symbolize the struggle over the shaping of a new world order.

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¹¹ On the current American and European policy, see Gideon Rachman, “Supporting Israel and protecting Palestinians are not contradictory policies,” *Financial Times*, Oct. 17, 2023.

¹² On the Abraham Accords and the Palestinian issue, see Dalia Dassa Kaye, “Why the Abraham Accords Won’t Bring Israeli-Palestinian Peace,” *Foreign Policy*, October 29, 2021; Lindsay Benstead, “Can the Abraham Accords Succeed? Exploring Arab Support for Normalization with Israel,” Wilson Center, Washington DC, August 1, 2022; Gregory Aftandilian, “From Hope to Halt: The Abraham Accords and the Palestinian Predicament,” *Geopolitics*, Gulf International Forum, September 11, 2023; Dana El Kurd, “Assessing the Abraham Accords, Three Years On,” Arab Center, Washington DC, August 31, 2023.

¹³ Chris Megerian and Seung Min Kim, “Biden declares Israel and Ukraine is vital for US Security, will ask Congress for billions,” *Associated Press*, Oct. 20, 2023.

Among his other publications: *When Opponents Cooperate: Great Power Conflict and Collaboration in World Politics* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2nd ed., 2002); *States, Nations and Great Powers: The Sources of Regional War and Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and *International and Regional Security: The Sources of War and Peace* (Routledge, 2017). He also published numerous articles in leading IR journals. Miller received a PhD from the University of California at Berkeley and has held Research Fellowships at Harvard University, MIT, Princeton University (Center for International Studies), McGill University and at the Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies (PIIRS). He has taught at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Duke University, the University of Colorado, Boulder, Princeton University and Dartmouth College. He also served for many years as the President of the Israeli Association for International Studies (IAIS).