

The Biden era: What do Arabs expect?

Wed, 2021-01-20 23:06

LONDON: Joe Biden has become the 46th president of the US, having defeated Donald Trump in an election last November whose outcome evidently failed to heal the political rifts plaguing the country. Trump did not attend Wednesday's inauguration ceremony.

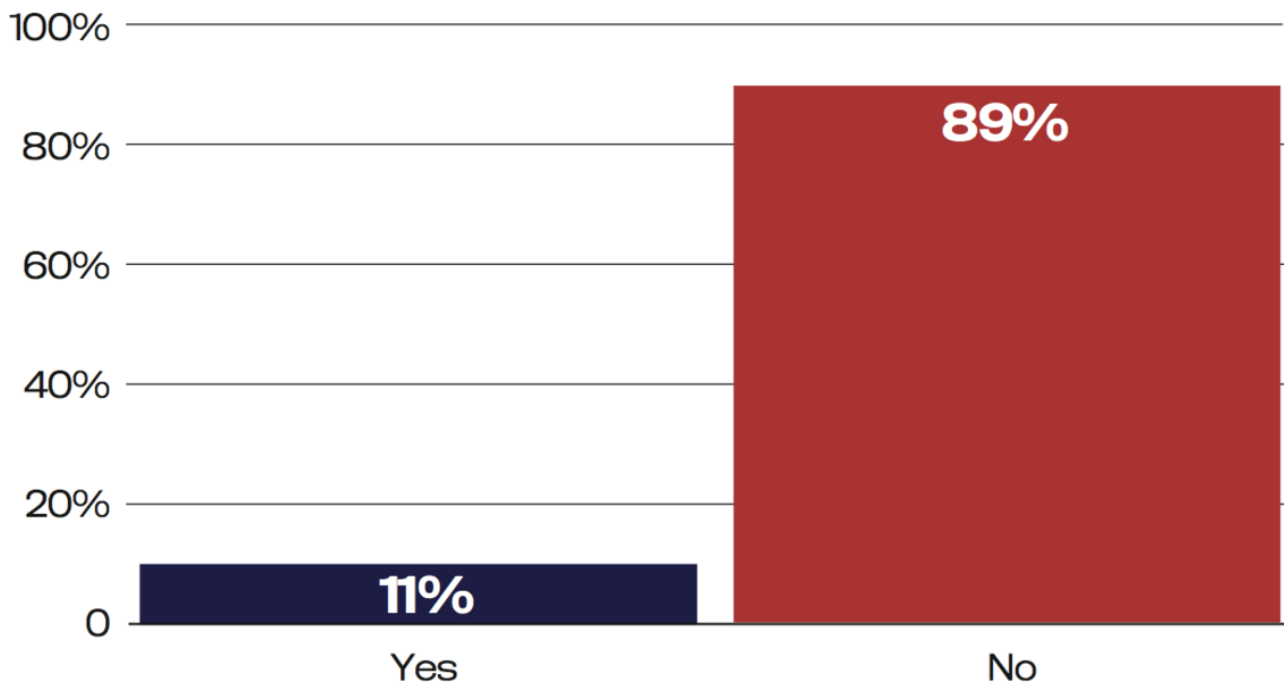
Complicating matters, a worsening coronavirus crisis and heightened security risks cast a shadow over the inauguration, which saw Biden and Kamala Harris take the oath of office respectively as president and vice president.

[Read the full report "The Biden Era: What do Arabs expect?" of the Arab News Research & Studies Unit](#)

While Biden will probably have his hands full tackling the pandemic, a sputtering economy and a growing partisan divide, foreign-policy issues are also expected to get high priority, especially considering his long stint as chairman or ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Thumbs-down for US embassy transfer decision

Should President Trump have moved the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem?



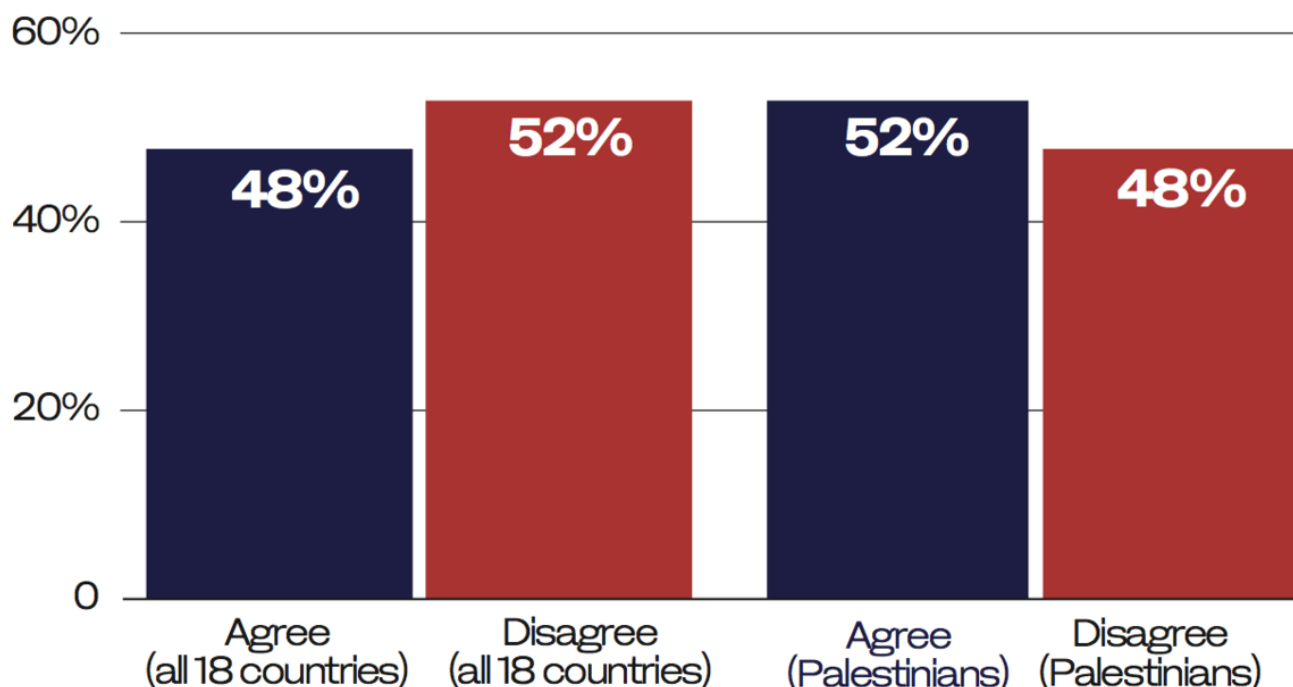
Source: Arab News/YouGov Pan-Arab Survey, 2020

As far as the Middle East is concerned, Biden will have his fair share of challenges. Nearly half (49 percent) of the respondents in a pan-Arab survey conducted in late September last year by Arab News in partnership with YouGov, the online polling company, said they believed neither Biden nor Trump was necessarily good for the region.

But that does not mean he cannot break free from the legacy of the Obama administration, in which he served as vice president for two terms. Biden's advisers would be well advised to listen to the views from the Arab region in shaping the new administration's Middle East policy.

Bigger US role backed by Palestinians in Occupied Territories

Do you support US efforts to play a bigger role in Israel-Palestine mediation?



Source: Arab News/YouGov Pan-Arab Survey, 2020

A majority (58 percent) of the Arab News-YouGov poll's respondents said Biden should discard the approach to the Middle East of his former boss, Barack Obama. The survey, which questioned people in 18 countries in the Middle East and North Africa, showed that Obama's policies remain unpopular among Arabs, who were disappointed by his failure to deliver the "new beginning" he promised during a speech at Cairo University in 2009.

The study – "The 2020 US Elections – What do Arabs want?," published on Oct. 25, 2020 – also showed that 44 percent of Arabs view youth empowerment as a key driver of global development and believe it should be a priority for the Biden administration.



Nearly half of the respondents in the pan-Arab survey said they believed neither Biden nor Trump was necessarily good for the region. (AP)

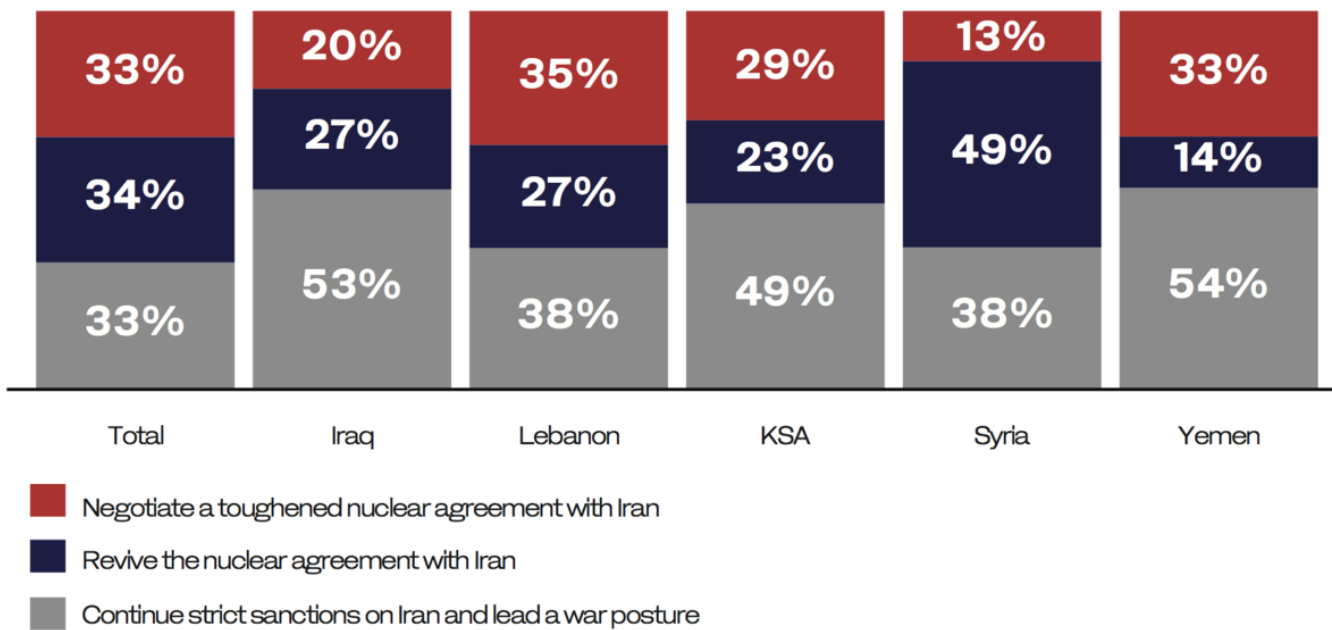
Arabs' disappointment with the Trump administration is understandable. In Jan. 2017, he signed an executive order that banned foreign nationals from seven predominantly Muslim countries from visiting the US for 90 days. The ban suspended entry of all Syrian refugees indefinitely, and prohibited any other refugees from coming into the US for 120 days.

[Read the full report "The Biden Era: What do Arabs expect?" of the Arab News Research & Studies Unit](#)

The executive order created an environment of fear among students from Arab countries, driving many to seek higher-education options in Europe. During the first coronavirus lockdown in July, the Trump administration also pushed for the cancellation of all visas issued to international students studying in the US, because they were no longer attending classes in person.

This plan was abandoned following pressure from universities that make millions of dollars in tuition fees from foreign students, and from US companies that often hire highly skilled foreign workers who begin their careers in America after graduating from the nation's top universities. Biden will not be encumbered by these unpopular Trump decisions and Arabs are unlikely to bear him any ill will in this regard.

IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT SHOULD THE NEXT US PRESIDENT DO ABOUT US RELATIONS WITH IRAN?

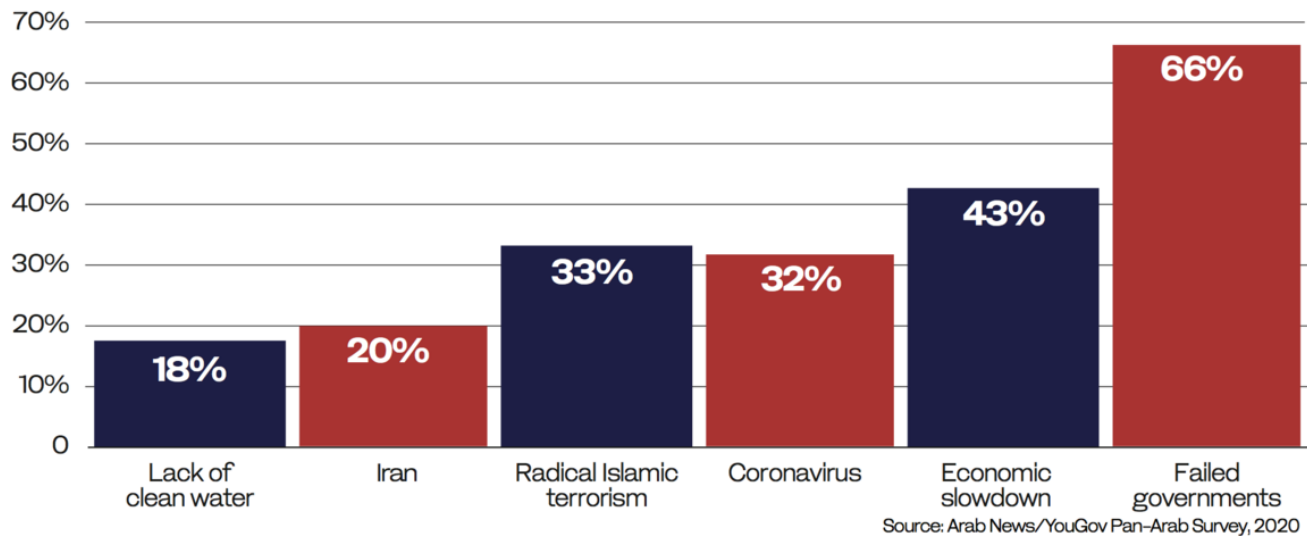


That said, there are Trump-era policies that will give Biden a strong leg up in dealing with strategic competitors and malign actors. Take Washington's approach to Iran. A large proportion of the pan-Arab survey's respondents – 49 percent in Saudi Arabia, 53 percent in Iraq and 54 percent in Yemen – favored maintaining Trump's strict sanctions and war posture.

It is notable that respondents in Iraq and Yemen – two countries that have intimate dealings with Iran in the sense that they are overrun with non-state actors controlled by Tehran – were strongly in favor of maintaining a hard line.

MIDDLE EAST'S CLEAR AND BIGGEST DANGERS

What are the biggest threats facing the Arab world?



The survey did show mixed Arab views on the elimination by the US in January 2020 of Iran's powerful military commander, Qassem Soleimani, the head of Quds Force, the division of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

responsible for extraterritorial military and clandestine operations.

Nevertheless, overall the findings suggested a widespread rejection of President Obama's strategy of addressing Iran's ambitions through the 2015 nuclear accord, or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), while turning a blind eye to its regional plans and expansionist agenda. The nuclear deal was viewed by Israel and Washington's Arab allies as giving a free hand to the IRGC to create havoc in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine.

Trump withdrew the US from the JCPOA in 2017 and applied a policy of "maximum pressure" that is widely regarded as having put Tehran on the defensive, both strategically and financially.

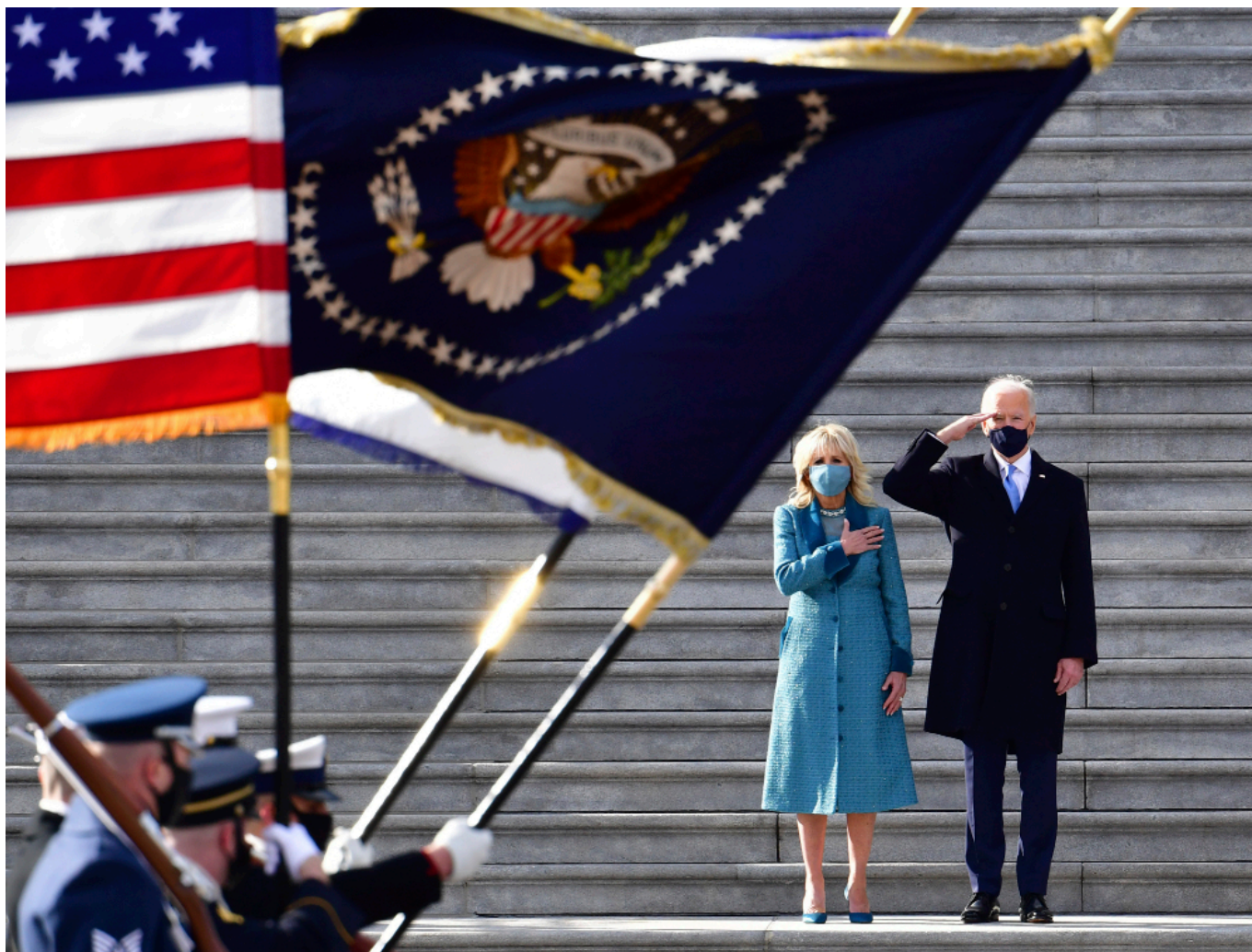
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The US secretary of state-designate, Anthony Blinken, told his confirmation hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee this week that the new administration has "an urgent responsibility" to do what it could to stop Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon. He added that a new accord could address Iran's "destabilizing activities" in the region as well as its missiles.

As Nadim Shehadi, associate fellow of Chatham House in London, wrote recently, "Iran has a clear strategy of perpetual war against the US and, through its IRGC proxies, collapsing states, building alternative institutions and gaining control."

The good news is that Biden does not have to choose withdrawal or capitulation. He has been dealt a strong hand against Iran by Trump which he simply has to play to win, for the sake of the US and its allies and partners, and, in the long term, for the Middle East's security, stability and prosperity.

Twitter: [@Tarek_AliAhmad](#)



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Taking helm of divided nation, US President Biden calls for end to 'uncivil war'
World leaders react to Joe Biden's inauguration

[Lebanon lockdown extension recommended as cabbies, soldiers clash at airport](#)

Author:

Wed, 2021-01-20 21:37

BEIRUT: The Lebanese Health Ministry's Scientific Committee on Combating the Coronavirus Pandemic has recommended extending lockdown by at least two weeks.

In the past week, the country registered a new record for daily coronavirus disease (COVID-19) cases. More than 78,812 cases were recorded in the past 20 days, which has led doctors to conclude that Lebanon has lost control over the virus.

Sixty-one new deaths were announced on Tuesday, a record high in Lebanon. The Higher Defense Council is expected to hold an emergency session on Thursday to assess the situation.

On Wednesday, taxi drivers clashed with soldiers in front of the Rafic Hariri International Airport in Beirut. Taxi drivers had previously blocked the road leading to the airport with their vehicles, protesting the effect of lockdown measures on their work.

The army intervened to reopen the road. Some protesters were injured after being beaten with rifle butts.

The airport's security command said: "Due to the lockdown and curfew in place, taxi drivers are banned from operating without permission. The current measures to transport travelers at the airport are temporary and everything will go back to normal once the lockdown is over. However, the command will not allow the airport's security to be jeopardized for any reason."

Bshara Al-Asmar, head of the General Labor Union, said: "As health and official authorities are insisting on extending the lockdown period, the Lebanese state, bodies and ministries must coordinate with the union, economic commissions and civil society to find a mechanism to support employees and daily workers of the private sector who are not getting paid during the lockdown, as well as daily and hourly-paid workers in the public sector, low-income and self-employed persons who depend on their daily work to earn their living."

Al-Asmar urged officials to "expedite the government's formation to achieve a minimum of political stability, which would pave the way for the economic reforms the country urgently needs, as poverty and unemployment have reached every Lebanese house."

Dr. Firas Al-Abyad, director of the Hariri Governmental University Hospital, stressed "the need to adopt and abide by extremely strict containment measures and implement effective and fast measures to track down the infected persons and those who have had contact with them, instead of only focusing on the numbers of available beds in hospitals."

Pending the decision of any lockdown extension, Hani Bohsali, head of the Syndicate of Importers of Foodstuffs in Lebanon, has called on "relevant authorities not to improvise or rush into any decisions, especially those related to food security of citizens."

Bohsali added: "Seven days after the beginning of the lockdown, the demand of food items, especially vegetables, bread and dairy products, has dramatically decreased, which is not the result of citizens' decreasing need as much as their inability to buy the food items they need, after they have disappeared

from the shelves.”

Bohsali also shed light on the incapacity of “delivery services, especially in supermarkets across Lebanon, to meet the needs of Lebanese.”

He warned that “extending the lockdown and keeping supermarkets closed will increase citizen’s needs of foods and goods, which will eventually lead to congestion and overcrowding in supermarkets.

“This will be a similar situation to before the lockdown, risking citizens’ health again.”



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Lebanon awaits February vaccine arrival as cases surge
Lebanon approves law to import vaccines as coronavirus hits new record

[US’ top foreign policy diplomat hints at continued hardline approach to](#)

Turkey

Wed, 2021-01-20 21:01

ANKARA: Joe Biden's new US administration has hinted at pursuing a hardline foreign policy approach to dealing with NATO member Turkey.

With American-Turkish bilateral relations already strained, Antony Blinken, Biden's choice for secretary of state, on Tuesday accused Ankara of failing to act like an ally.

And the top diplomat said Washington would consider whether further sanctions on Turkey would be implemented over its controversial purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense system.

Addressing legislators during his Senate Foreign Relations Committee confirmation hearing, Blinken said: "The idea that a strategic – so-called strategic – partner of ours would actually be in line with one of our biggest strategic competitors in Russia is not acceptable."

Aaron Stein, director of research at the US-based Foreign Policy Research Institute think tank, told Arab News: "The S-400 issue won't magically disappear, so sanctions are likely to continue."

He said the ball was now in Turkey's court. "If Ankara accepts that a mechanism for verification of non-deployment is needed to re-establish trust, perhaps we can get to a better place."

But, he added, if Turkey insisted that the terms of a reset were to simply accept everything it was doing, that would not work.

Blinken is known to be familiar with Turkey's domestic security concerns and was the first US diplomat to visit Ankara soon after the 2016 failed coup attempt.

"The Biden administration will likely take a cautious approach to Turkey given the regional security challenges, including ongoing threats from Russia, Iran, Syria, and terrorism," Jonathan Katz, senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the US, told Arab News.

However, he said there remained deep bipartisan concerns and issues of trust related to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, not only on the S-400 situation but also over democratic backsliding and corruption, and these matters would impact on how the new administration and US Congress managed America's sensitive relationship with Turkey.

"If I were Erdogan, I would not expect an early deviation in Washington from the CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) sanctions in place or on restrictions impacting Turkey's participation in the F-35 (US stealth fighter jet) program," Katz added.

Ali Cinar, a foreign policy expert on US-Turkey relations, told Arab News

that Biden would probably adopt an approach in line with former US President Barack Obama's foreign policy, and it would not be an easy relationship.

"The Biden administration has many concerns on Turkey such as the S-400s, Syria, human rights, and freedom of speech. Some new problems will be added to the current issues, but the ties will not break completely," he said.

Cinar expected there to be more negotiations, compromises, and intense diplomacy traffic between Ankara and Washington under the Biden administration.

The appointment of Blinken followed Brett McGurk's assignment as National Security Council senior director for Washington's policy in the Middle East and North Africa.

His appointment was also expected to set alarm bells ringing in Ankara as Turkish leaders have previously blamed McGurk for being the mastermind behind arming the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) that Turkey considers a terror group.

The US recently imposed sanctions on the Turkish defense industry with the bipartisan support of the US Congress, the first time that Washington had used the CAATSA against a NATO ally.

Caroline Rose, senior analyst and head of the strategic vacuums program at the Center for Global Policy in Washington, said the fact that Blinken had referred to Turkey not necessarily as a NATO ally but as a "strategic partner" was a sign of the nadir in US-Turkish relations.

"But I think this time the US will try and interweave its Turkey policy with partners in Europe to take a more multilateral approach," she told Arab News.

Rose added that Blinken, a trans-Atlanticist at heart, would likely focus on curbing Turkish behavior in its periphery – primarily in the Eastern Mediterranean – with greater cooperation with the EU and East Mediterranean Gas Forum.

Katz also pointed out the interactions between Turkish domestic politics and the US administration's foreign policy moves.

"There is also a keen understanding in Washington regarding Turkey's domestic politics that will also be a factor impacting policymakers, including the possibility of snap elections and potential new leadership in Ankara," he said.



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Turkey says turning back on S-400s 'problematic', seeks US dialogue
Turkey will not step back on S-400 missile systems despite US sanctions

[Don't fall for COVID-19 vaccine conspiracies, warns Muslim scholar](#)

Wed, 2021-01-20 00:37

LONDON: A leading Muslim scholar in Canada has warned people not to be taken in by conspiracy theories about the coronavirus vaccine.

Sheikh Mohammed Tahir Al-Qadri said that such views, which are being spread by some on social media in an attempt to discourage people from being vaccinated, go against the tenets of Islam.

“Saving lives is an act of worship,” he said during an interview with Sky News. “At the start of the pandemic, Muslims around the world were among those in the forefront. They put their maximum efforts into saving lives, providing people with food and every kind of necessary support. In the same way, they should come forward now.”

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[Iran leader refuses US help, citing virus conspiracy theory](#)

Al-Qadri, who is originally from Pakistan, sought to reassure his followers and encourage them not to believe false claims about the vaccines.

“Some people are saying that there is alcohol in it, or pork or other things forbidden (in Islam),” he said. “Some say these vaccines may affect certain parts of the brain. What can I say? These are totally baseless claims.

“This is a matter of medicinal development, of life, and it is just the same as when we take paracetamol, antibiotics or aspirins despite their side effects.

“Believing in the medical process is one of the basic teachings of Islam. Islam and the teachings of the Qur’an, the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, is focused on reason, intelligence, scientific research and intellectual development.”



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Serious questions over coronavirus origin fuel conspiracy theoriesIran leader refuses US help, citing virus conspiracy theory

[Trump grants Bahrain's King Hamad top honor on last day in office](#)

Tue, 2021-01-19 22:36

LONDON: Bahrain's King Hamad was awarded a rare medal by US President Donald Trump in recognition of his "remarkable efforts" to consolidate relations and the close partnership between the two countries, Bahrain News Agency (BNA) reported on Tuesday.

Trump decorated the monarch with the Legion of Merit, Degree Chief Commander, "a rarely-awarded, prestigious decoration that can only be bestowed by the president, typically to chiefs of state or heads of government of other countries," the White House said.

The king was also recognized for his "prominent role in pushing bilateral cooperation to broader and more comprehensive horizons, which promoted the common interests of the two countries and its peoples," BNA said.

The outgoing American leader said that he was "pleased to present this medal to the king, who over decades contributed to establishing Bahrain's position as a steadfast strategic ally and partner working alongside the United States."

Trump added that Manama's support for the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, which is stationed in Bahrain, had a supportive role in enabling it to perform its multiple tasks and he praised the king's courage and wise leadership vision for his support for peace and his decision to establish full diplomatic relations with Israel.

He described this decision as the start of a new era of economic and security cooperation among the most important US partners in the Middle East and made peace in the region a possible process that would reshape the region's landscape in a positive way for future generations.

The American president said that the partnership between the two countries would become deeper in the Middle East.

"The king's decorating of this prestigious medal is an indication of the high position that he enjoys in the US, and the great appreciation for the prominent roles and major contributions he has made in enhancing security, stability, and prosperity with the vision of spreading peace in the region," the statement added.

In its final days in office, the Trump administration announced the designation of both Bahrain and the UAE as "major security partners" of the US, a status unique to both countries that demonstrated a "new level of

partnership” and “represents an enduring commitment to economic and security cooperation.

“It also reflects their extraordinary courage, determination, and leadership in entering into the Abraham Accords,” the White House said on Friday.

Bahrain, the UAE, Morocco, and Sudan joined Egypt and Jordan to establish full diplomatic relations with Israel last year, in deals brokered by the US. Also, on Friday, Trump decorated Morocco’s King Mohammed VI with the same accolade bestowed on King Hamad for “vision and personal courage,” especially his decision to resume ties with Israel, that “have positively reshaped the landscape of the Middle East and North Africa and ushered in a new era of security and prosperity for both our countries and the world.”

The Legion of Merit is a military award that was created to honor Allied leaders in World War II and had gone into obscurity until it was revived by Trump, who last month also presented it to the prime ministers of Australia, India, and Japan.

(With AFP)





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US designates Bahrain, UAE 'major security partners' Bahrain, US sign deal to establish commercial zone