

Biden Does Not Say Where and How ‘America Is Back’

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US President Joe Biden insists, “America is back.” He says the US has returned to the world stage as a prominent actor and leader after four years of absence and wrong-headed policies adopted by the Trump administration. But, Biden does not say where and how “America is back.”

America is certainly not back to generating the hopes raised by the advent of the Obama-Biden administration in early 2009. As the first black US president, Barack Obama promised and was expected to deliver on his promises, particularly to this region and the wider Muslim world. On January 22, 2009, two days after his inauguration, Obama appointed former Senator George Mitchell as special envoy for the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. Mitchell was a highly significant choice, as he must have been the first senior level figure with Lebanese background to be selected to broker a deal. As the man who made his name as a peacemaker in the successful Northern Ireland peace process, he was told to get to the area “as soon as possible” to relaunch negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis. Obama followed up his appointment with an interview with Al Arabiya television on January 26, in which he expressed optimism over the possibility of a settlement between Palestinians and Israelis.

Obama met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on May 19 to urge freezing Israeli colonisation and a deal based on the “two-state solution” involving the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. Obama recommitted the US to this goal and reiterated his demand for a halt to Israeli colonisation during his encounter with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on May 28.

On June 4, Obama made history by delivering a speech at Cairo University in which he called for the creation of a Palestinian state, an end to Israeli colonisation of Palestinian lands, and negotiations with Iran. Obama’s aim was to reset relations with the Muslim world and “communicate that the Americans are not your enemy”.

Obama failed miserably on the Palestinian front due to Israeli intransigence. He also failed to convince Muslims of US goodwill. But, he did launch negotiations with Iran which culminated in the signing in 2015 of the landmark agreement providing for curbing Iran’s nuclear activities in exchange for lifting punitive sanctions.

Biden has, so far, done nothing on the Palestinian front but to promise to renew humanitarian funding cancelled by Donald Trump without committing to sums and delivering cash, and he is making a mess of dealings with Iran over the nuclear programme abandoned by Trump in 2018.

During his election campaign, Biden repeatedly vowed to return to the Iran nuclear deal, Obama's chief foreign policy success. As his vice president, Biden was involved in the effort to bring Iran to the negotiating table and secure its adherence to an agreement which was win-win for all concerned. As soon as he took office, Biden should have promptly signed an executive order for US reentry to the deal, as he did to rejoin the Paris climate accord, from which Trump also withdrew the US. By taking urgent action, Biden would have preempted efforts by members of his own administration to stall reentry and by pro-Israeli lobby groups and legislators to block the return of the US. Biden failed this test, putting the nuclear accord at great risk.

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First and foremost, Biden and his senior aides insist that Iran should be first to return to compliance with the terms of the accord by halting uranium enrichment to levels above 3.67 per cent purity, dispose of its stocks of enriched uranium above the amount permitted, warehouse advanced centrifuges banned by the deal, and allow UN inspectors to continue conducting snap inspections of undeclared installations and sites.

Iran has, quite rightly, responded by arguing that since Trump walked away from the deal, Biden should first return the US to compliance by rejoining the deal and lifting sanctions imposed by Trump. Tehran was in full compliance when Trump withdrew and continued to comply for 14 months before resorting to retaliation. Iraq insists that it has taken such action in line with Article 36 of the accord which allows it to reduce compliance if one or more signatories do not comply.

While Biden has stuck to his demand that Tehran should be first, he was offered a face-saving proposal by Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif who, on February 1, suggested that the two sides should ask the European Union Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell to create a mechanism which would enable Iran and the US to return to the deal simultaneously. Although this amounted to a serious concession by Tehran, Zarif's proposition was ignored by the US and its allies, the three Western European signatories of the deal, Britain, France and Germany.

Instead, the Europeans proposed an informal meeting of all seven signatories of the deal, including themselves, the US, Iran, Russia and China, to discuss compliance. The US accepted but, following days of deliberation, Iran rejected the invitation.

Iran's refusal came after the US conducted air raids in eastern Syria on pro-Iranian Iraqi Shia militia factions. Washington claims the bombings, Biden's first, were in retaliation for recent rocket attacks on Iraqi bases hosting US forces and Baghdad's fortified Green Zone where the US embassy is located. US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin justified targeting fighters in Syria by saying they belong to the same groups attacking US forces and personnel in Iraq. The Pentagon chose to hit in Syria because strikes in Iraq would increase pressure on Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhim from powerful Shia militia commanders and politicians to order the full withdrawal of US forces from that country.

War-torn Syria has become a free-fire zone where anyone can bomb without worrying about criticism or consequences. Israel has been lobbing missiles into Syria on a weekly basis without interference or comment by Biden or his administration.

The administration has added insult to injury by submitting a complaint against Iran to the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Organisation (IAEA), currently meeting in Vienna. Although the US is responsible for the crisis over the nuclear accord, the administration accuses Iran of non-compliance and of refusing to explain particles of enriched uranium found by IAEA inspectors in undeclared locations. Since censure of Iran by the IAEA could torpedo the accord, Biden is playing a dangerous game which can only roil this unstable region if the US and Iran do not return to full compliance with the nuclear deal. "America is back!" Indeed. Back to traditional bad behaviour.

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Featured image: The Israeli and American flags displayed on the walls of the Old City in Jerusalem (Photo: Yonatan Sindel)

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