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What a Harris Administration Could Mean for the Gulf and Wider Middle East

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Having secured the Democratic Party's nomination for President in August 2024, Kamala Harris, who has been Vice President of the United States under President Biden since 2021, will face Donald Trump in the 2024 U.S. presidential election. This is a shocking turn of events brought about by President Biden's decision to drop out of the presidential race in July 2024 due to concerns about his age and mental acuity during his campaign and in an early presidential debate. At the time of writing, Harris was leading Trump in the polls by [1.6 points](#) making the election still too close to call.

Whilst a Harris administration is unlikely to fully “reset” relations with the Arab World – that was already attempted by President Obama's [“new beginning” speech](#) in Cairo back in 2009 and was quickly undermined by the Arab Spring – she may be more active in putting pressure on Israel to end the war in Gaza. This would be a vital and overdue first step in re-establishing a semblance of regional stability, consistent with her rhetoric on [Palestinian suffering](#) and opposing the [‘forced relocation of Palestinians from Gaza.’](#)

Since 2023, when [Harris attended the UN Conference of the Parties \(COP28\)](#) in Dubai, climate change and the Israel-Palestine conflict have both been high on her agenda. She stayed in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) less than a day for COP28 before flying on to meet with Israeli President Isaac Herzog and head of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas. In the interim, she was consumed by a host of urgent, cross-cutting tasks, including [meetings with leaders from Jordan, Egypt, and Qatar](#).

Prior to her role as vice president, Harris had gained exposure to the region. As senator, [she travelled to Jordan in April 2017](#), including to Zaatari, the world's largest Syrian refugee camp. The same year, she [co-sponsored legislation](#) objecting to the Obama administration's choice not to veto a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning Israel's settlement-building in the West Bank, arguing it would not advance progress toward a two-state solution. Given the [2001 Clinton parameters](#), which envisaged the vast majority of the West Bank and all of the Gaza Strip coming under Palestinian statehood (with limited land swaps), and the [2002 Arab Peace Initiative](#), which refers to Israeli withdrawal to pre-1967 lines as part of a wider Arab peace deal with Israel, her argument appears to have been somewhat detached from conventional wisdom.

Harris is an [advocate of the Abraham Accords](#), the series of normalization deals with Israel that have so far included Bahrain, the UAE, Morocco and Sudan. But Harris has signaled a break from the Biden approach on Israel by choosing [not to attend](#) Benjamin Netanyahu's July 24 address to the U.S. Congress (although she did meet him in private). She has since gone on to assert that she [does not support an arms embargo against Israel](#). However, moves by allies, such as the [UK government's decision to extend a partial arms ban to Israel](#), may cause her to moderate her position.

In other Middle East theaters of conflict, [Harris voted to end U.S. support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen in 2018 and 2019](#) and to restrict U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia in the immediate aftermath of the Khashoggi affair. [She also voted for legislation designed to ban U.S. military action against Iran](#) after the assassination of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Commander, Qasem Soleimani.



She has called President Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran "[reckless](#)," stating that the agreement was the "[best existing tool we \[had\] to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons and avoid a disastrous military conflict in the Middle East](#)." In 2019 she recommended [reviving the deal](#) and condemned Trump for withdrawing U.S. troops from north-eastern Syria.

In 2023-2024 amid the war in Gaza, escalation between Israel and Hezbollah, and heightened concerns over Iranian nuclear breakout capacity, the policy backdrop has moved on and there is little to indicate her current thinking on this and other important Mideast topics such as civil nuclear assistance to Saudi Arabia and normalized relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

However, Philip H. Gordon, National Security Advisor to Harris, called U.S. support for Israel during the 2006 Lebanon War a "[disaster](#)" for refusing to seek an early ceasefire and tolerance for the way it was fought. The wording could be used about the war in Gaza and hints at how a Harris administration might have reacted under similar circumstances to the Biden administration, in which Harris has played a subordinate role.

Gordon has written a number of books and articles, including one that [sharply criticizes U.S.-led regime change in the Middle East](#). He was a foreign policy advisor during President Obama's presidential campaign where he served as White House coordinator for the Middle East from 2013-15 and supported the JCPOA. Prior to this he served in President Bill Clinton's administration from 1998-1999 as Director for European Affairs at the National Security Council. His approach reflects [a more limited role](#) for the U.S. in the Middle East, also envisaged by the leadership teams surrounding President Obama and Trump. If Gordon is again selected as White House coordinator for the Middle East, a position currently occupied by Brett McGurk, he will play a pivotal role in the future of U.S.-Middle East relations, but most probably within the parameters already set by previous administrations.

Harris' pick of Tim Walz as a running mate, rather than Josh Shapiro, governor of Pennsylvania which is a swing state, [might alienate some Jewish voters](#) but could create more wiggle room in her Mideast policy. Walz is known to be more [willing to change his perspective on different issues](#). Still, Harris' husband, Doug Emhoff, is Jewish and Harris has been clear that [she stands with Israel](#). Ilan Goldenberg, currently Harris' campaign director for Jewish outreach, and with experience on the 2013 peace process, has advocated for a two-state solution and looks overall to be fairly moderate. He has been proven to be right about the "[reckoning](#)" that Israel now faces, having failed to achieve a long-term ceasefire with Hamas and end its blockade of Gaza.

The professionalism and experience of her foreign policy advisors, coupled with the regularity in which Mideast crises land on the president's desk, Harris doesn't seem like she will disengage from the region. Given what is known about the personalities of some of the key foreign policy positions she will fill, there could be modest progress in the right direction. Whilst another Trump administration may be eagerly awaited by some states in the region which are interested in advancing their autonomy on the back of transactional and carte blanche policies, the ultimate end in 2021 was escalation in the Gulf and growing fears of conflict with Iran. The region has moved on and requires support across the board: in conflict resolution, post-conflict recovery, and setting the macro preconditions that will secure economic diversification and prosperity.

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