

Noam Chomsky: Biden's Middle East Trip Contains Echoes Of Trump's Policies



Noam Chomsky

After 18 months in office, President Joe Biden decided to pay a visit to the Middle East region. Oil is most likely what is dragging him back to the Middle East, and why for months now he had been warming up to Saudi Arabia, despite having said as a presidential candidate that he would make the Saudis “pay the price, and make them in fact the pariah that they are,” while saying that there was “very little social redeeming value in the present government in Saudi Arabia.”

As Noam Chomsky notes in this exclusive interview for *Truthout*, Biden is carrying on a U.S. tradition: Relations with Saudi Arabia “have always proceeded amicably, undisturbed by its horrifying record of human rights abuses, which persists.” Security also likely figures in the equation of Biden’s trip, particularly with regard to Israel. He will also visit the West Bank and meet with Palestinian leaders, but it’s hard to say what he hopes to accomplish there. As Chomsky points out, “Palestinian hopes lie elsewhere.”

Chomsky has been, for decades, one of the most astute analysts of Middle Eastern politics and a staunch supporter of Palestinian rights. Among his many books on the Middle East are *Fateful Triangle: The United States, Israel, and the Palestinians*; *Middle East Illusions*; *Perilous Power: The Middle East and U.S. Foreign Policy* (with Gilbert Achcar); *On Palestine* (with Ilan Pappé); and *Gaza in Crisis* (with Ilan Pappé). Chomsky is institute professor emeritus in the

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C.J. Polychroniou: U.S. foreign policy under Joe Biden is barely distinguishable from that of Trump's, as you [pointed out](#) just a few months after Biden took office. Indeed, as a presidential candidate, Biden had called Saudi Arabia a "pariah" state following the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, but as president he is warming up to its de facto and murderous leader Mohammed bin Salman (MBS). What do you think is the purpose of his visit to Saudi Arabia?

*Noam Chomsky: It is surely a mistake to carry out a sadistic assassination of a journalist for the *Washington Post*, particularly one who was hailed as "a guardian of truth" in 2018 when he was chosen as [Person of the Year](#) by *Time Magazine*.*

That's definitely bad form, particularly when done carelessly and not well concealed.

U.S. relations with the family kingdom called "Saudi Arabia" have always proceeded amicably, undisturbed by its horrifying record of human rights abuses, which persists. That's hardly a surprise in the case of "a stupendous source of strategic power, and one of the greatest material prizes in world history ... probably the richest economic prize in the world in the field of foreign investment," as the State Department described the prize in the mid-1940s, when the U.S. wrested it from Britain in a mini-war during World War II. More generally, the Middle East was regarded at a high level as the most "strategically important area in the world," as President Eisenhower said. While assessments have varied over 80 years, the essence remains.

The same is true with regard to countries that do not rise to this impressive level. The U.S. has regularly provided strong support for murderous tyrants when it was convenient, often to the last minute of their rule: Marcos, Duvalier, Ceausescu, Suharto, and a long string of other villains, including Saddam Hussein until he violated (or maybe misunderstood) orders and invaded Kuwait. And of course, the U.S. is simply following in the path of its imperial predecessors. Nothing new, not even the rhetoric of benevolent intent.

The most revealing examples are when the intent really is benevolent, not unconcealed Kissingerian cynicism ("realism"). An instructive case is Robert

Pastor's explanation of why the Carter Human Rights administration reluctantly had to support the Somoza regime, and when that proved impossible, to maintain the U.S.-trained National Guard even after it had been massacring the population "with a brutality a nation usually reserves for its enemy," killing some 40,000 people.

The Latin America specialist of the [Jimmy Carter] administration and a genuine liberal scholar, Pastor was doubtless sincere in voicing these regrets. He was also perceptive in providing the compelling reasons: "The United States did not want to control Nicaragua or the other nations of the region, but it also did not want developments to get out of control. It wanted Nicaraguans to act independently, *except* when doing so would affect U.S. interests adversely" (his emphasis).

We sincerely want you to be free — free to do what we want.

It's much the same with Saudi Arabia. We wish they were more polite, but first things first.

In the case of Biden's visit, first things presumably include renewed efforts to persuade MBS to increase production so as to reduce high gas prices in the U.S. There would be other ways, for example, a windfall tax on the fossil fuel industries that are drowning in profits, with the revenues distributed to those who have been gouged by the neoliberal class war of the past 40 years, which has transferred some \$50 trillion to the pockets of the top 1%. That, however, is "politically impossible."

Politically even more impossible in elite calculations would be the feasible measures to try to stave off catastrophe by moving rapidly to cut off the flow of these poisons. These need not, however, be the calculations of those who have some interest in leaving a decent world to their children and grandchildren. Time is short.

There are broader considerations in Biden's Middle East tour. One goal surely is to firm up Trump's one great geopolitical achievement: the Abraham Accords, which raised tacit relations among the most brutal and criminal states of the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region to formal alliance. The accords have been widely hailed as a contribution to peace and prosperity, though not all are delighted. Not, for example, Sahrawis, handed over to the Moroccan dictatorship to secure its agreement to join the accords — in violation of international law, but

in conformity to the “rules-based international order” that the U.S. and its allies prefer to the archaic and unacceptable UN-based order.

Sahrawis can join Palestinians and Syrian Druze, whose territories have been annexed by Israel in violation of the unanimous orders of the Security Council, now endorsed by the U.S. And they can also join other “unpeople,” not least the Palestinian victims of Israel’s brutal and illegal occupation in areas not officially annexed.

Celebration of these diplomatic triumphs will presumably also be heralded as one of the achievements of Biden’s visit, though not exactly in these terms.

Israel may be the only country in the world where Biden is less popular than Trump, and one cannot of course forget the numerous times that he had been humiliated by former Israeli Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu. Is there anything that Biden aims to accomplish with his visit to Israel other than reaffirm U.S. support and deepen the role of the alliance between the two countries in the region? After all, the Biden administration proceeded with whitewashing Israel’s killing of Palestinian American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh in advance of the president’s visit to the Middle East.

As in the Khashoggi case, the handling of Abu Akleh’s killing was bad form. Not just the killing — or, quite likely, assassination. It’s not wise, in front of TV cameras, to allow the IDF to attack a funeral procession and even the pallbearers, forcing them to almost drop the coffin. The brazenness of the assault is a revealing illustration of the drift of Israel to the right and the confidence that the boss will accept virtually anything. The confidence is not entirely misplaced, particularly after the four Trump years of lavish gifts and kicking Palestinians in the face.

I haven’t seen polls, but it wouldn’t be much of a surprise to find that Trump is also popular in Hungary’s “illiberal democracy,” praised by Trump and virtually worshipped by media star Tucker Carlson on the far right. Orbán’s Hungary is now becoming a close ally of Israel on the basis of shared racist attitudes and practices and shared grievances about being unappreciated by soft-hearted liberals in the West.

It’s an open question how much domestic capital Biden will win with his expected professions of eternal love for Israel. That stance has become less popular among

his liberal base than it used to be as Israel's criminal behavior becomes harder to gloss over. All-out support for Israel has shifted to Evangelicals and the right, sectors of which believe Biden is not the elected president and a substantial contingent of which [believes Biden and other top Democrats are grooming children for sexual abuse](#). But there will still probably be some domestic gains. And it will show the hawkish elements that run foreign policy that he's committed to containment of Iran by an Israel-Saudi alliance, to borrow prevailing doctrine.

Biden may hope to firm up the alliance, but they scarcely need his help. Rhetoric aside, the alliance has been firm since 1967.

In brief, at the time, there was a sharp conflict in the Arab world — in fact, an actual war in Yemen — between Saudi-based radical Islam and Egypt-based secular nationalism. Like Britain before it, the U.S. tended to support radical Islam, seeing it as less of a threat to imperial dominance. Israel settled the matter for the time being by handing the victory to Saudi Arabia. It was at that point that U.S. support for Israel took the extreme form that has since prevailed, as part of a Middle East strategy based on three pillars: Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran (then under the Shah). Technically, the three were at war. In reality, they were tacit allies, very close allies in the case of Israel and Iran.

The Abraham Accords raise the alliance to a formal level, now with a slightly different cast of characters. It seems to be proceeding well on its own on the basis of shared interests. It's not clear that Biden can do much beyond expressing U.S. support, which in any event is hardly in doubt.

Do you see any reason why Palestinian leaders should meet with Biden? Can they accomplish anything else by doing so other than have their pictures taken with the president of the United States?

Failure to do so will evoke a stream of hostile propaganda, the last thing the beleaguered Palestinians need right now. Doing so will achieve little or nothing, but it's the least bad option, it seems.

On this narrow question, that is. Palestinian hopes lie elsewhere.

It may seem strange to say this, in the light of the colossal and unprecedented U.S. support for Israel since its demonstration of its military strength in 1967, but Palestinian hopes may lie in the United States. There are cracks in the formerly

solid support for Israeli actions. Liberal opinion has shifted toward support for Palestinian rights, even among the Jewish community, [as Norman Finkelstein documented a decade ago](#). The increasingly brutal torture of the 2 million inhabitants of Gaza's open-air prison has had particularly dramatic effects.

These shifts have not yet influenced policy, but they are likely to become more pronounced as Israel continues its drift to the right and the almost daily crimes become harder to conceal or explain away. If Palestinians can overcome their sharp internal divisions and effective solidarity movements develop in the U.S., changes can come, both at the people-to-people level and in government policy.

There's a background. In the 1970s, Israel made a fateful decision to choose expansion over security, rejecting opportunities for peaceful settlement along the lines of a growing international consensus. That compelled reliance on the U.S., which also entails submission to U.S. demands. Such demands were made by every president before Obama, and however reluctantly, Israel has to obey. Changing U.S. government policy, if significant, cannot fail to influence the array of policy options for Israel.

That could be a path toward the elusive goal of a just peace in the former Palestine, and even for regional accords that will not merely reflect the interests of repressive power structures but of the people of the region, who have repeatedly struggled for a more decent fate.

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books are *Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change* (2017); *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors, 2020); *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change* (an anthology of interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2021); and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (2021).