



# Nineteen Conflict Prevention Tips for the Biden Administration

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**What's new?** The Biden administration enters office facing significant foreign policy challenges. Some problems like the COVID-19 pandemic are new, while others, including several deadly conflicts, are old and stubbornly resist efforts at resolution.

**Why does it matter?** Past administrations have tended to reach for coercive instruments to deal with complex crises – including the threat and use of force as well as heavy-handed sanctions. The record suggests that these strategies often fail to deliver desired results and can make difficult situations even worse.

**What should be done?** Rather than return to strategies that have served the U.S. and others ill in the past, the Biden team should shy away from militarised solutions to complex crises and look to a new playbook for addressing the global peace and security challenges that lie ahead.

## *Overview*

A little over a week following Joe Biden's inauguration as the 46th president of the United States, his foreign policy team is taking shape. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan (a former Crisis Group Trustee), Secretary of State Tony Blinken, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines are settling into their new roles. Other key appointees, including Biden's nominee UN ambassador (Linda Thomas-Greenfield), are awaiting Senate confirmation. This team's members will not have to spend a great deal of time getting to know one another; they all worked in senior national security roles during the eight-year Obama administration, which ended when President Donald Trump took office in January 2017. But while those years of experience will be an asset, on the whole, the Biden administration should not plan simply to pick up where the Obama administration left off.

They might well be tempted to try. After all – with the enormous exception of the COVID-19 pandemic – the challenges of 2021 bear more than a faint resemblance to those of 2017. The U.S. and North Korea continue to face off over the latter's nuclear program. The conflicts that mired the U.S. in South Asia and the Middle East continue to ensnare it. The climate crisis continues to worsen.

But as it plunges in, the Biden team would be wise to take a hard look at the ways in which the U.S. caused or at least contributed to the predicaments that it now faces. Costly interventions that the U.S. led or supported in Iraq, Libya and Yemen have

generated conflicts and crises that continue to rock those countries and the regions beyond. The failures of past administrations to make difficult decisions about their objectives in Afghanistan have left the present team with even harder choices now. U.S. “maximum pressure” campaigns relying on heavy-handed sanctions and the threat of force have failed to deliver desired results in Iran, North Korea and Venezuela, immiserated millions of people and, in some cases, helped entrench U.S. adversaries.

In short, the coercive tools that Washington too often picks up when the going gets tough tend to make things even tougher. The U.S. government needs new habits and a different set of moves for confronting complex crises. To stimulate thinking along these lines, Crisis Group has compiled the following playbook for addressing nineteen of the major peace and security challenges that the new administration will face. The recommendations draw from Crisis Group’s prior writings and ongoing field-work. They are offered with the hope that the U.S. government will find in them ideas that can help it resolve old conflicts and defuse new ones, all in the service of a more peaceful world.

## **1. Afghanistan: Give Peace Talks a Chance**

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While peace talks present an opportunity for the U.S. to extricate itself from a decades-old conflict in Afghanistan, they will also pose one of the greatest foreign policy challenges for the Biden administration.

In February 2020, the U.S. and Taliban insurgents signed a deal in which Washington pledged to withdraw international forces from Afghanistan in return for the Taliban promising to prevent international terrorists from using Afghan territory to threaten the U.S. and to enter talks with the Afghan government. Those Afghan peace talks took six months to get under way and have only inched forward, while violence levels have remained high. With wide divergences among negotiating parties on substantive issues and the Taliban resistant to scaling back attacks while talks proceed, it is far from clear where negotiations are headed. At the moment, discussions are virtually stalled while the parties wait for signals from the new U.S. administration on its commitment, or lack thereof, to the nascent peace process.<sup>1</sup>

This should not be a close call for President Biden and his team. A path, albeit a narrow one, is open to achieving a political settlement – by far the best outcome for a country that has been continuously at war for the last four decades. The Biden administration should immediately signal its commitment to continue supporting the negotiations. Although critics have argued that there were flaws in the Trump administration’s approach, namely the extent to which concessions – particularly the pledge to withdraw U.S. troops – and recognition have been granted to the Taliban to draw them into peace talks with the Afghan government, this is water under the bridge. President Biden has little to lose in continuing to test the feasibility of reaching a political settlement. Conversely, an abandonment of negotiations would incur high costs: the likely return of the Taliban to unrestricted warfare (including

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<sup>1</sup> See Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°165, *What Future for Afghan Peace Talks under a Biden Administration?*, 13 January 2021.

targeting U.S. personnel), as well as the loss of at least tacit support for U.S. policy from Iran, Pakistan, Russia, China and other neighbours.

The new administration will, however, need to buy some time. The February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement set expectations for a total withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan by May 2021. This is not enough time for the new administration to set its policy course and evaluate Taliban compliance with the counter-terrorism assurances it provided in the February deal. Nor is it sufficient time for the Afghan parties – who, for instance, spent three months negotiating a brief set of procedural rules for talks – to notch any meaningful agreements. U.S. diplomats should swiftly move to persuade the Taliban to extend it, potentially by six months, given it took that long for Afghan peace talks to get under way. Washington should also prioritise the establishment of a regional diplomatic framework to support Afghan peace negotiations as well as the outcome of any peace settlement. Enduring stability in Afghanistan will not be possible without the regional powers' support.

Separately, the new administration will need to determine whether it intends to maintain an indefinite, if small, military presence in Afghanistan for counter-terrorism purposes, as Biden himself has suggested. That is a judgment it will have to make once it has gained its bearings. It will be painful one. A decision in favour of a persistent military presence would, at some point, be the death knell of the peace process because the Taliban are unlikely to consent to it. Russia, China and Iran would reject a continued U.S. presence and could take steps to complicate it. The Afghan government would want such a mission to include support for their existential fight with the Taliban. For Biden to keep troops in Afghanistan under those circumstances would make his administration the author of the next chapter of the so-called forever wars that began after the 11 September attacks, which will enter their third decade later this year. For the time being, the administration's top priority should be to keep the peace process going and buy the time it will need to face the decisions coming its way.

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## **2. China: Manage Strategic Tensions**

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Dealing with China's growing power will inevitably be at the forefront of foreign policy priorities for the new administration, which inherits a highly confrontational relationship with Beijing. U.S.-China relations will define, in large part, the world order for at least the next decade. Whether the Biden team can find its way to a less antagonistic relationship than the Trump administration remains to be seen, particularly because the new administration has already made clear it will pull no punches on China's abuse of its Uighur population, which Secretary of State Tony Blinken agreed at his confirmation hearing should be characterised as a genocide.<sup>2</sup> Beijing's conciliatory statements about the new administration providing a "new window of hope"

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<sup>2</sup> Dierdre Shesgreen, "'The world's on fire' and other takeaways from Biden's secretary of state nominee confirmation hearing", *USA Today*, 19 January 2021. Blinken was agreeing with a finding announced by his predecessor, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, on his final day in office. At her subsequent confirmation hearing, Biden's nominee as UN ambassador, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, said the State Department would review the finding announced by Pompeo because "all the procedures were not followed" and "to ensure that that designation is held". See Patricia Zengerle and Michelle Nichols, "U.S. reviewing China genocide ruling to make sure it sticks", *Reuters*, 27 January 2021.

seem to indicate a wish for reducing tensions from its side.<sup>3</sup> Still, if there may be more room for cooperation on some topics (climate change, global trade, public health), Beijing is clearly Washington's top strategic competitor. The two giants will have to find a way to manage the tensions that will invariably arise as China becomes increasingly assertive and the U.S. responds.

Although the Taiwan strait is a potential flashpoint, the South China Sea, through which more than one third of global trade transits, is arguably where the U.S.-China rivalry runs the highest risk of turning to open confrontation. Through its maritime claims, China has made the South China Sea a symbol of its superpower ambitions, while the U.S., which has traditionally been the dominant maritime power in the region, wants to guarantee crucial trade routes and, ultimately, contain China's rising power. In 2016, a tribunal created under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea ruled against China on certain key claims brought by the Philippines and others, but China rejected the ruling as "nothing more than a piece of wastepaper".<sup>4</sup> The U.S. tends to raise this decision to suggest that China's actions depart from the traditional rules-based international order.<sup>5</sup> The point is fair, but Washington would be far better positioned to assert it were the U.S. itself a party to the convention.

The U.S. will likely continue with the same tactics it has been using in trying to limit China's activities in the South China Sea. These include freedom of navigation operations, multi-state military exercises with various allies, public condemnation of China's actions, and diplomatic pressure and sanctions against Chinese companies that continue to improve Beijing's hand through construction in disputed areas. In order to prevent incidents at sea that could escalate, the U.S. should review crisis management mechanisms and communications protocols with relevant states, including China, and enhance them where possible and prudent. It would be especially useful to develop multilateral confidence-building measures with China and South East Asian states to avoid incidents at sea, including with relevant military and law enforcement agencies.

The South China Sea will also test the new administration's ability to shore up regional alliances neglected by the Trump administration. As it reinvigorates relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and its member states, particularly those that have territorial disputes with China in the Sea, it will need to exercise considerable tact, both because China will likely consider such moves as a threat to its interests and because leaders in the region – whose countries have strong economic linkages to China – have no wish to take sides in the U.S.-China rivalry. In rebuilding relations with these states, Washington should try to avoid unnecessary friction by emphasising mutual economic benefit rather than the importance of these alliances for its great-power rivalry.

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<sup>3</sup> "China sees 'new window of hope' in ties with U.S.", Bloomberg, 1 January 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Bill Hayton, "Two Years On, China's South China Sea Ruling Remains a Battleground for the Rules-Based Order", Chatham House, 11 July 2018.

<sup>5</sup> "U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea", press statement, U.S. State Department, 13 July 2020.

### 3. Colombia: Help Secure the Countryside

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The U.S. has long played an outsized role in Colombia – supporting successive governments as they have fought, and tried to make peace with, rebels, and pressing them to bring to heel the country’s vast narcotics trade.

Perhaps the most significant accomplishment in this long-running campaign was the 2016 accord between the Colombian state and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The accord has succeeded in certain ways. The vast majority of FARC members who demobilised remain in civilian life.<sup>6</sup> The transitional justice system envisaged by the agreement has become operational.<sup>7</sup> But in other ways, it is struggling. Social leaders, who are mostly local activists in rural areas and were the 2016 deal’s biggest backers, are being assassinated at an alarming rate, mostly by identifiable armed groups.<sup>8</sup> So are ex-FARC combatants.<sup>9</sup> There has been an increase in massacres and an overall deterioration of security conditions in the countryside in 2020.<sup>10</sup>

With the fragile peace gains at risk, the new U.S. administration can play an important role in helping the 2016 accord deliver on the peace and security it promised. The key will be to encourage Bogotá to develop a more realistic strategy for securing the countryside, where new and reinvigorated armed groups have filled the vacuum resulting from the state’s inability to control territories previously under the FARC’s influence, eager to profit from the illicit economies.

To date, the government’s response has been primarily to target such groups with military force and focus on forcibly eradicating coca plants. This approach reflects Bogotá’s conviction that the fresh violence is almost exclusively attributable to drug trafficking and criminality, as well as Washington’s predilection for eradication as its counter-narcotic solution. Yet this policy overlooks the role of deep-seated rural poverty and the almost complete absence of effective state institutions in many rural areas, which allow illegal markets and alternative providers of law and order to thrive. Moreover, it appears not to work. Little suggests the government’s strategy of taking out the armed groups (which tend to proliferate in these conditions) or eradicating the coca trade (which saw an increase in cocaine production in 2020, notwithstanding an acreage decline, indicating new efficiencies in the refining process) will be successful unless authorities tackle the underlying issues effectively.<sup>11</sup>

Washington and Bogotá should line up behind a new approach. Rather than pushing Colombia to pursue an eradication policy that penalises poor growers who are often being coerced into illicit activities by armed groups, the Biden administration should establish new priorities. It should encourage Bogotá to turn its efforts to fully implementing the rural reform outlined in the 2016 peace agreement – focusing in

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<sup>6</sup> “State of Implementation of the Colombian Final Accord – December 2018 to November 2019”, Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, September 2020.

<sup>7</sup> “Transitional Justice in Colombia”, Carr Center for Human Rights Policy (Harvard), Spring 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Crisis Group Latin America Report N°82, *Leaders under Fire: Defending Colombia’s Front Line of Peace*, 6 October 2020.

<sup>9</sup> “UN envoy says ex-FARC combatants being killed”, Al Jazeera, 15 October 2020.

<sup>10</sup> “UN documents 375 killings in Colombia in 2020, urges government action”, UN News, 15 December 2020; Laura Dixon, “‘In many ways, the conflict never ended’: ongoing violence threatens Colombia’s peace”, *World Politics Review*, 29 April 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Crisis Group Commentary, “Colombia: Peace Withers amid the Pandemic”, 30 September 2020.

particular on building roads connecting these communities to markets and providing small farmers with agricultural credits – while the U.S. refocuses its own anti-drug fight up the supply chain to target financial crimes and trafficking networks. The new administration should also place greater emphasis on supporting programs for voluntary illicit crop substitution rather than eradication. Finally, with Washington's help, Bogotá could also rethink its approach to rural policing, which at present too often treats residents of communities in high-conflict areas as adversaries rather than citizens with a right to security.

#### **4. Ethiopia: Mend Fences, Encourage National Dialogue**

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The Biden administration will inherit from its predecessors a strained relationship with Ethiopia, a regional powerhouse, traditionally a top East African security partner of Washington's and a country now very much in crisis.

The strains owe in part to the Trump administration's handling of a dispute between Ethiopia and downstream neighbours Sudan and Egypt over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.<sup>12</sup> The dam sits astride the Nile's primary tributary and causes friction with Cairo and Khartoum, which rely heavily on the river to meet their water needs. Tensions among the three ticked up in 2020 when Addis Ababa began impounding water before it had reached agreement with the downstream pair about how to manage river flows, especially in drought years. The Trump administration was upset, too: its efforts to play dealmaker were thwarted when Ethiopia walked away from an accord it thought it was on the brink of closing in February 2020. But its heavy-handed efforts to press the latter toward a deal did little more than alienate Addis Ababa and discredit Washington as an honest broker. In September, the U.S. suspended \$130 million of aid. In November, President Trump casually suggested in a telephone call announcing Sudan's rapprochement with Israel that Egypt might end up "blowing up" the dam.<sup>13</sup>

The net effect was a loss of trust and influence that the Biden administration should work quickly to restore by returning to the role of an engaged but neutral observer. One step toward mending fences would be for the administration to lend its backing to what is now an African Union (AU)-led process, which should help convince Addis Ababa that it is no longer looking to throw its weight behind Cairo on the issue.

A second source of strain is the war in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region.<sup>14</sup> Fighting broke out on 3 November 2020, when Tigray's forces, in alliance with some Tigrayan officers in the national army, forcibly took over some federal military units stationed in the region; Tigrayan leaders claimed they feared an imminent assault by the armed forces. Following weeks of fighting in Tigray, Addis Ababa declared victory over the regional leadership after taking the capital Mekelle on 28 November 2020. But Tigray's ousted leaders continue to mount armed resistance. The war to date has killed thousands of people, forcing 50,000 refugees into Sudan and possibly displacing

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<sup>12</sup> For background on the dispute, see Crisis Group Statement, "Nile Dam Talks: A Short Window to Embrace Compromise", 17 June 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Elias Meseret, "Ethiopia blasts Trump remark that Egypt will 'blow up' dam", Associated Press, 24 October 2020.

<sup>14</sup> For background on the crisis, see Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°162, *Steering Ethiopia's Tigray Crisis Away from Conflict*, 30 October 2020.

more than two million people internally, many of whom are now bereft of food and shelter. Worryingly, border tensions with Sudan are escalating. Prospects for a free and fair election are also diminishing. Nationwide polls, scheduled for 5 June, are not currently slated for Tigray, and opposition parties in another key region, Oromia, may well sit them out, complaining of state repression, including their leaders' detention and prosecution.

The Biden team should indeed focus first on helping avert a humanitarian catastrophe in Tigray. The U.S., with the European Union (EU), UN and other partners, should urge Ethiopian authorities to allow aid agencies untrammelled access to all of Tigray to offer much-needed rations and other assistance to vulnerable populations. It should further press for the withdrawal from Tigray of Eritrean forces, which by multiple accounts have been engaged in fighting alongside federal forces, though Addis Ababa and Asmara deny it. A continued Eritrean presence will deepen Tigrayan resentment at the intervention and make it harder to pursue a political settlement. The administration should further urge both Khartoum and Addis Ababa to resolve their border standoff through talks, perhaps with the support of the African Union's Border Program. In the same vein, Washington should encourage the withdrawal from Tigray of forces from neighbouring Amhara region. It should also recommend that a national boundary commission help resolve the dispute over areas that are currently part of Tigray but which the Amhara claim.

More broadly, the Biden administration should press Addis Ababa to accept that Ethiopia's deep political fissures cannot sustainably be resolved on the battlefield. In the run-up to the election, Ethiopian authorities should launch an inclusive national dialogue about the country's various fault lines, at the core of which is the struggle between pan-Ethiopian nationalists and supporters of Ethiopia's federal system, which formally devolves power to ethnically defined regions. The first agenda item should be agreeing on what conditions are needed for a fair poll.

Finally, the U.S. should encourage the federal government to offer amnesty to jailed Ethiopian opposition leaders, in order to give the June election a better chance of proceeding without boycotts or other disruptions. Once free, those key opponents should be part of the national dialogue.

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## **5. Iran: Return to the Nuclear Deal**

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The Trump administration's failed campaign to bend Iran to its will through a campaign of economic and diplomatic "maximum pressure" – including the repudiation of Washington's commitments under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – presents an immediate challenge to the Biden administration. It must try to reverse four years of damage its predecessor did to regional stability, not to mention to U.S. interests.

The campaign may have been intended to deliver a better nuclear agreement while curbing Iran's regional influence and weapons programs, but it achieved the opposite.<sup>15</sup> It reversed the JCPOA's non-proliferation gains, elevated tensions in the Middle East, and left the U.S. isolated from key European allies and almost the entirety of the UN Security Council. When the U.S. controversially sought to unravel what is left of

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<sup>15</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°220, *The Iran Deal at Five: A Revival?*, 15 January 2021.

the JCPOA by triggering a “snapback” mechanism in order to restore suspended international sanctions, the rest of the council effectively ignored it.<sup>16</sup> After a senior nuclear scientist was killed in what appeared to be a hostile foreign operation in November, the Iranian parliament passed legislation mandating further expansion of nuclear activities. Since then, Iran has begun to increase uranium enrichment to 20 per cent at its underground Fordow facility.

Still, the situation is not hopeless. Tehran has affirmed its willingness to resume full compliance with its JCPOA obligations if the sanctions relief spelled out in the agreement were to come about. According to both Iranian and International Atomic Energy Agency officials, reversing Iran’s JCPOA breaches could be achieved within two months.

The Biden administration should pursue U.S. re-entry into the 2015 nuclear deal, starting by revoking the 2018 order ending U.S. JCPOA participation and initiating a process of fully reversing Trump-era sanctions while Iran brings its nuclear program back into full compliance. As further confidence-building measures, Washington could support Iran’s International Monetary Fund loan request as a sign of good-will in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, and perhaps engage Tehran in discussions on a prisoner swap. Early discussions on ending the conflict in Yemen and supporting a dialogue between Iran and Gulf Arab countries could also help lower tensions.

Biden’s team may be tempted to link rejoining the JCPOA to other issues, but that could put the whole deal at jeopardy. The objective should be a clean re-entry. Other issues, such as regional de-escalation and Iran’s ballistic missile development, are critical, but best pursued subsequent to, not as a condition of, full restoration of the existing agreement.

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## **6. Iraq: De-escalate with Iran, Back Credible Elections**

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Since the U.S. mounted its invasion to topple Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iraq has endured years of insurgency and civil war. Although the U.S. government has sought to back successive Iraqi governments with financial and military aid, its relationship with Baghdad is complicated, in large part because it competes with Iran, Iraq’s neighbour and Washington’s chief regional adversary, for the role of Baghdad’s main outside patron. For successive post-Saddam governments, this competition has been debilitating. Over the last four years, the U.S.-Iranian standoff has helped confound efforts by the government and its partners to stabilise the country after a brutal war with the Islamic State (ISIS) from 2013-2017, and to confront the daunting economic challenges created by low oil prices and rampant corruption. On several occasions, notably following the U.S. strike that killed top Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in January 2020, the confrontation has threatened to turn Iraq into a major battleground in a proxy war.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Richard Gowan, Ashish Pradhan and Naysan Rafati, “Behind the Snapback Debate at the UN”, Crisis Group Commentary, 17 September 2020.

<sup>17</sup> See Crisis Group Statements, “Rescuing Iraq from the U.S.-Iranian Crossfire”, 1 January 2020; and “A Perilous Turning Point in the U.S.-Iranian Confrontation”, 3 January 2020. For background, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°184, *Iran’s Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East*, 13 April

Against this backdrop, the Biden administration has a chance to turn U.S.-Iraq relations in a better direction. The stakes are high. Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi's government is struggling to respond to a mounting economic crisis in the face of parliamentary pushback against its proposed austerity measures. The potential for mass protests is increasing as the crisis deepens. An economic implosion similar to Lebanon's could also drive young people into Turkey in search of opportunities in Europe, compounding political tensions over migration there. Meanwhile, periodic ISIS attacks – such as the double suicide bombing that killed 22 in Baghdad on 22 January – show that the jihadist group, while highly unlikely to regain its previous strength, is lurking eager to exploit disorder and discontent.<sup>18</sup>

One priority for the Biden administration's Iraq policy should be to defuse the persistent state of near conflict between U.S. forces and Iraqi paramilitary groups that assembled to fight ISIS in 2014. These groups, some of which are Iran-backed and some not, continue to control parts of the country. Particularly if the White House follows through with plans to revive the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran (see above), and U.S.-Iranian tensions subside, it could allow the Kadhimi government to focus on Iraq's internal problems, to the benefit of all concerned. The U.S. government could also advance this objective by avoiding direct confrontation with these groups and their agendas as it helps the Iraqi government rehabilitate governing institutions, tackle corruption and diversify the oil-reliant economy. Washington should instead quietly encourage the government's efforts to incorporate elements of them into the security forces, citing the views of respected religious leaders such as Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who has been warning of the dangers of what he decries as "militias" since 2003.<sup>19</sup>

Another priority for the Biden administration should be free and fair elections when polls take place in October. In general, elections have been a bright spot for Iraqi governance; they have been held more or less regularly and they enjoy a large degree of credibility. If the public deems the forthcoming elections illegitimate, that perception, combined with a deteriorating economy, could create a combustible mix and spark strife, especially in the south, where socio-economic conditions are particularly dire and paramilitary groups strong. The Biden administration should urge the government to tolerate peaceful mass protests, redouble efforts to ensure that elections can take place on time, and encourage confidence in their integrity by issuing biometric cards to eligible voters by June so that October elections are possible.

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2018. To many Iraqis, even more jarring than Soleimani's killing was the simultaneous killing of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the head of the Iran-backed paramilitary groups, who was Iraqi.

<sup>18</sup> "ISIS claims deadly and rare twin blasts in Baghdad", Associated Press, 22 January 2021. See also Sam Heller, "When Measuring ISIS's 'Resurgence,' Use the Right Standard", Crisis Group Commentary, 13 May 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Sistani's views on the subject are covered at length in Caroleen Sayej, *Patriotic Ayatollahs: Nationalism in Post-Saddam Iraq* (Ithaca, 2018).

## **7. Israel-Palestine: Put Palestinian Rights at the Centre**

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As it seeks to make progress on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Biden administration should re-examine traditional U.S. goals, place a greater focus on the protection of individual rights and keep its ambitions in check.<sup>20</sup>

Over the years, U.S. policies have had the unfortunate, though at times unintended, effect of facilitating entrenchment of Israeli control over Palestinians. The unintentional became purposeful under the Trump administration, which has encouraged settlement construction and in January 2020 released a “Peace for Prosperity Plan” that tilted decisively in favour of Israel’s continued occupation. The recent string of normalisation agreements and diplomatic thaws that the U.S. brokered between Israel and Arab countries may serve some positive purposes. But it was not linked to any progress in the peace process or in the lives of Palestinians. Instead, it was tied to U.S. steps that are both unrelated to Israeli-Palestinian peace and questionable in their own right, such as recognition of Morocco’s sovereignty over the Western Sahara and increased weapons sales to the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

In trying to create the conditions for a successful future negotiation, the Biden team should work on levelling the playing field. The administration almost certainly will make clear that a two-state solution is its preferred political framework, echoing the international consensus reflected in former Secretary of State John Kerry’s 28 December 2016 speech. But in reaffirming this preference, it should insist that if Israel continues to obstruct the establishment of a fully sovereign and viable Palestinian state, any alternative to the two-state solution will have to respect the right to full equality and enfranchisement of all those in any space controlled by Israel. It should also resist any impulse to be drawn into a peace process just to maintain the illusion of progress. Its energies would be better spent focusing instead on establishing the conditions for meaningful talks while protecting those whose rights are being violated in Israel and the occupied territories.

Of course, as part of these efforts, there are steps that the administration should take to repudiate damaging Trump-era legacies – starting with disavowal of the January 2020 Trump plan. At the same time, it should refrain from actions that shield Israel from the costs of its occupation and make peace more difficult to achieve, such as vetoing UN Security Council resolutions when doing so would undermine U.S. policy (for example, by undermining the two-state solution) or international law. Finally, it should encourage the Palestinians to undertake their own political renewal, advance internal reconciliation and give breathing space to non-violent strategies for achieving their goals.

## **8. Lebanon: Help Avert State Failure**

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In the aftermath of the massive explosion at the Beirut port on 4 August, which marked a new low in Lebanon’s political and economic decline, many inside and outside the country blamed Hezbollah, the Shiite Islamist party and armed faction closely aligned

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<sup>20</sup> See Crisis Group Statement, “Three Pillars for a New U.S. Approach to Peace in Israel-Palestine”, 15 December 2020.

with Iran, for the failure of a Lebanese system in which it has steadily become more powerful over the past two decades. Now, as Lebanon attempts to pull out of its tail-spin, domestic and foreign players are divided over Hizbollah's role in the reforms that donors insist the country needs. On one hand, France has included Hizbollah in its initiative to foster a new government with broad enough support to launch those reforms and unlock foreign assistance. On the other hand, the U.S. and others have pushed anew to curtail the party's influence.<sup>21</sup>

This policy tug of war over Hizbollah's role has come at a cost, deepening the country's polarisation as well as making domestic consensus behind a government and steps to rescue the Lebanese economy more difficult. Government formation remains stalled as parties continue to struggle over cabinet shares, increasingly with an eye on parliamentary and presidential elections in 2022. U.S. sanctions against allies of Hizbollah and pressure geared to excluding the party from executive power complicate this already difficult task.

Furthermore, forming a government would hardly be the end of Lebanon's climb out of the pit in which it finds itself. In order to gain the international support that it needs, and prevent the further erosion of state institutions, the new government will have to enact meaningful reforms requiring political players to give up part of their patronage networks and control over those institutions, which underpin their power.

Against this backdrop, it is time for the U.S. to shift its priorities. While it is hard to imagine any U.S. administration growing comfortable with Hizbollah's role in Lebanon, the price of focusing too keenly on weakening the group could be state failure, which would be terrible for the Lebanese people and destabilising for the broader region. Rather than looking at Lebanon through the lens of disempowering Hizbollah, the U.S. should make its number-one goal strengthening the state and avoiding its collapse. Accordingly, the U.S. should throw its weight behind the French effort to corral Lebanese political players, including Hizbollah, into a new government, and rally them around essential reforms. It should also encourage Lebanese allies to forge a level of pragmatic cooperation with their adversaries that would allow for the measures – especially legislation to safeguard the independence of the judiciary, and anti-corruption and public procurement laws – necessary to unlock international support, in particular an International Monetary Fund program.

There are other things the U.S. could do to complement this shift in focus. To shore up core state institutions, the U.S. should continue and perhaps even expand its support of the Lebanese Armed Forces. It should guide humanitarian support toward mitigating the effects of the crisis on the most vulnerable segments of the population, including refugees, and avoiding mass poverty and famine. Finally, in order to help give reform a fighting chance, it should ensure that its development support for the rehabilitation of critical infrastructure is tied to institutional measures that counteract patronage and rent seeking, for example through transparency in procurement and fund allocation as well as through civil society participation.

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<sup>21</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°81, *Avoiding Further Polarisation in Lebanon*, 10 November 2020.

## 9. Libya: Shore up the Ceasefire, Back New Elections

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Nearly ten years have passed since the U.S. led a North Atlantic Treaty Organization intervention in Libya that the Security Council had authorised to protect civilians but which ended up ousting Libyan leader Muammar al-Qadhafi and sending the country into a long-running civil war. Prospects for peace have begun to seem less bleak, however. A tenuous ceasefire between forces loyal to the Turkey-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) and those headed by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar and supported by Egypt, the UAE and Russia has held since October. In September, the field marshal and his allies lifted a nine-month oil export blockade, providing relief to the country's oil-dependent economy. In November, politicians from the two rival sides started a UN-supported dialogue. Foreign backers of Libya's warring factions have toned down their rhetoric even though they continue to compete for influence.<sup>22</sup>

Still, there are as many reasons for concern as for cautious optimism. Implementation of the ceasefire terms is lagging, with each side accusing the other of continuing to receive foreign military support, and for good reason. Their forces remain deployed on the front lines; foreign military cargo planes continue to land at their respective air bases, suggesting that outside backers are still resupplying their allies; Turkish officers are training GNA forces in plain sight; and Russian private military contractors remain part of Haftar's forces. Political progress has also bogged down: while UN-backed talks have produced a mechanism for establishing a new interim unity government, the road forward is studded with procedural challenges that could derail the process at any moment, jeopardising plans for parliamentary elections in December 2021. On the economic front, a dispute over management of oil revenues has led to a temporary freeze of hydrocarbon income. It is unclear how the government will cover public-sector expenses if oil revenues remain inaccessible.

What can the Biden administration do to build on the opportunities and address the challenges that this moment presents? For one thing, it can help shore up the shaky October ceasefire by pressing the UN Security Council to back it, including by standing up a scalable monitoring mechanism that the UN secretary-general presented to council members in December 2020. Secondly, Washington can express support for parliamentary elections in December 2021. Optimally, the UN-backed political dialogue will have reached agreement on establishing an interim unity government; currently, two rival legislatures, one backed by the GNA and the other by Haftar, compete for authority. If not, elections will still be necessary. Holding a vote in a highly polarised country, where weapons are abundant, corruption is ubiquitous and rival camps control territory, is obviously risky. But absent a negotiated solution to reunify the country's governing institutions, attempting to forge consensus on a new vote for a single parliament appears to be the best way out of the untenable status quo.

Finally, the administration should help resolve Libya's oil revenues dispute. The U.S. and the UN backed the current arrangement to freeze revenues as a mechanism to reassure Haftar that they would not be used against his side, and to persuade him to lift the oil blockade. But the arrangement was intended to be temporary, until the unity interim government could be formed. With that process stalled, however, the

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<sup>22</sup> See Crisis Group Briefing Notes, "Libya Updates #1, #2 and #3", 11 and 24 December 2020 and 21 January 2021.

revenue freeze is increasingly untenable. The state needs cash to function. Washington should lend its technical expertise and political weight to a push for a new agreement that assures Haftar and his foreign backers that oil sales revenues will not fund their Tripoli rivals' military build-up while allowing them to be tapped to cover public expenditures throughout Libya.

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## 10. **Mexico: Retire the Kingpin Strategy**

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Just over the southern U.S. border, much of Mexico sits in a state of deepening crisis. Criminals in the country quickly adapted to the changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, and they appear to have consolidated and even expanded their control over local economies, politics and populations.<sup>23</sup> High levels of violence continued unabated; indeed, murder rates remained just below record levels in 2020.<sup>24</sup>

It is hardly a secret in Washington that this growing crisis has enormous implications for the U.S. The question of how to deal with migrants crossing the border in search of a more secure and prosperous life has been at the centre of national politics for years, and cross-border narcotics trafficking is a persistent national security concern. The Trump administration came to power promising to staunch these flows, including through the controversial building of a wall along the border, and one of Trump's last acts as president was to travel there to boast of his work to that end. While the Biden administration has already made clear that it will deal with immigration in a way that is vastly more humane and responsible than its predecessors, it will still doubtless continue to evince a strong interest in addressing the drivers of cross-border migration.

As the new administration considers how best to help Mexico resolve the conflict-level violence that drives people to flee their homes, it should take the opportunity to rethink basic premises of bilateral security cooperation. For years, one such premise has been the "kingpin strategy" – the idea that arresting or killing criminal leaders makes criminal organisations implode. Yet this approach has not destroyed the criminal groups; it has resulted in their proliferation. In 2006, there were six large conglomerates; today, there are over 200 small- and medium-sized armed groups engaged in a mosaic of regional feuds.<sup>25</sup>

There is a better way. Mexico should abandon its one-size-fits-all, militarised approach to fighting organised crime and instead concentrate efforts on the handful of regions where the bulk of violence is occurring. It should develop security and assistance programs that are tailored to local dynamics in those regions, looking for help from international partners like the U.S., the EU and the UN. Programs should provide licit employment alternatives to counter the economic draw of armed groups and educational opportunities to address socio-economic underpinnings of insecurity. Demobilisation efforts could help counter the mass criminal recruitment of young people and local mediation could help relieve strains within communities following years of violence. To create an environment where these efforts have a chance of success,

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<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group Latin America Report N°83, *Virus-proof Violence: Crime and COVID-19 in Mexico and the Northern Triangle*, 13 November 2020.

<sup>24</sup> "Mexico's homicide rate stayed high in 2020 despite pandemic", Associated Press, 21 January 2021.

<sup>25</sup> See Falko Ernst, "Time to End the Lethal Limbo of the U.S.-Mexican Drug Wars", Crisis Group Commentary, 7 October 2020.

the U.S. and other partners could also help Mexico clean up the institutions charged with protecting the public from crime. For decades, these institutions have been riddled with collusion and corruption.

In order to make this pivot, however, Mexico will need backing from Washington. For the last several decades, the U.S. government, in championing, designing, financing and, in effect, imposing its own war on drugs on its neighbour, hoped it could purge the country of the corrosive social, political and economic impact of the narcotics trade and bring greater stability to the region. Since the early 1970s, it has invested in this vision, pouring billions of dollars into the effort. But iron-fist militarisation has not worked to date and nothing suggests that it will go forward. Washington should face this hard truth and change its course. If it wants to see peace across its southern border, it must support Mexico in moving off the war footing that has stoked the violence it is meant to end.

## **11. North Korea: Start with an Olive Branch**

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When in November 2016 President Barack Obama briefed President-elect Trump on the foreign policy challenges he would be facing, North Korea was at the top of the list. Four years later, Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities have only grown, yet the Korean peninsula is not visibly at the top of the new team's priorities. This may in part be because of the other headaches they have inherited, not least the global pandemic. But it may also owe something to the fact that relations between the U.S. and North Korea have been relatively stable, if not exactly calm, since the Trump administration's tumultuous first year, when the two leaders taunted each other with insults, and Trump threatened Kim Jong-un with "fire and fury".<sup>26</sup>

After the leaders met at a first-ever bilateral summit in Singapore in June 2018, the countries settled into an informal quid pro quo: the U.S. downscaled its joint military exercises with South Korea, and North Korea refrained from intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and nuclear device testing. Although Kim announced at the beginning of 2020 that he no longer feels bound by the North's unilateral testing "moratorium", he has nevertheless refrained from crossing the Trump administration's de facto red lines.

With a new president in the Oval Office, however, things could quickly change. Biden is likely to face some kind of provocation from Pyongyang early on – as happened with both the Obama and Trump administrations – probably in the form of further missile tests. But all missile tests are not of equal significance. Kim might, for example, take actions below the ICBM and nuclear test threshold, such as short-range ballistic missile tests, submarine-launched ballistic missile tests, missile engine tests and cyberattacks; if he does so, Biden should not take the bait. The most dangerous scenario would be an ICBM (perhaps the new model that Kim unveiled in October) or nuclear device test, which could kick off an escalatory spiral.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See Crisis Group Asia Reports N°s 293, *The Korean Peninsula Crisis (I): In the Line of Fire and Fury*, 23 January 2018; and 294, *The Korean Peninsula Crisis (II): From Fire and Fury to Freeze for Freeze*, 23 January 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Hyonshhee Shin and Josh Smith, "North Korea unveils 'monster' new intercontinental ballistic missile at parade", Reuters, 9 October 2020.

The Biden administration's immediate goal should be to get through this initial period without either side disturbing the fragile equilibrium, while leaving space for a new diplomatic process to take hold. In his confirmation hearing, Secretary of State Tony Blinken spoke about a strategy to pressure Pyongyang back to the negotiating table.<sup>28</sup> There might, however, be a case for a different approach: offering a series of conciliatory actions up front with the idea that these, coupled with strong deterrence, could get the relationship off on a better foot.<sup>29</sup>

What might this look like? To start, the new administration could send a positive signal – both to North Korea and to the South, which has made clear its eagerness for the nuclear talks to get back on track – by clearly affirming its interest in continued engagement, as well as its willingness to continue working within the framework of the June 2018 Singapore declaration that Kim negotiated with Trump. In the same vein, Biden could also quickly appoint a high-level special envoy for the Korean peninsula, who would immediately seek consultations with officials in Seoul and Pyongyang both to inform the administration's internal policy review and lay the groundwork for renewed talks.

Other steps could create a more conducive atmosphere for future consultations, and a disincentive for provocations while the potential for diplomacy is being explored. The administration should consider further modifying forthcoming joint military exercises with South Korea, which are scheduled for March, so that they do not communicate hostile intent. It could also announce new humanitarian and nutritional assistance, and perhaps an easing of travel restrictions. Depending on Pyongyang's reaction, Washington might then want to consider further confidence-building measures as part of its efforts to build a foundation for talks.

Critics will argue that such an approach would project weakness at a time when Pyongyang is continuing to build its nuclear capabilities – and given that it has, in the past, used diplomacy as a tool to buy time for its program rather than negotiate in good faith. But with talks having been stuck for a year and a half and the risk of Kim soon testing U.S. red lines with some kind of provocation, the benefits of sending an unmistakable signal about wishing to re-engage outweigh the costs, particularly since it may be the best way to pre-empt a potentially destabilising move from Pyongyang.

Looking to the longer term, the Biden team will need to give careful thought to what it can realistically hope to achieve through renewed talks. Complete denuclearisation has always been the overriding goal of U.S. negotiators, but that goal becomes less and less likely as Pyongyang's arsenal and missile capabilities continue to grow. A series of more modest arms control agreements to gradually reduce North Korea's capabilities may be more realistic, and more effective in enhancing stability on the Korean peninsula for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>28</sup> "Blinken says U.S. plans full review of North Korea approach", Reuters, 19 January 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Frank Aum and George A. Lopez make the case for this approach. See Frank Aum and George A. Lopez, "A bold peace offensive to engage North Korea", War on the Rocks, 4 December 2020.

## 12. Russia: Build off a Good (New) START

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Key issues of Russia policy that vexed the Obama administration's foreign policy team when they left office four years ago are waiting to greet the Biden team now.

U.S. intelligence agencies' finding of Russian meddling in the 2016 election still rankles. The Ukrainian conflict that began in 2014 – when an uprising unseated a government in Kyiv and Russia reacted by unlawfully annexing Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and supporting a separatist movement in its eastern Donbas region – persists, though a ceasefire has reduced casualties. So do the sanctions that the U.S. and EU levied in response. The war in Syria, where Russia backs the brutal Assad regime, which the U.S. has opposed, is also unresolved. The Biden administration's pointed comments on the arrest of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny after treatment in Germany for what seems to have been a government-orchestrated poisoning, and the crackdown on protests in Navalny's support throughout Russia, indicates that it will not steer clear of Russian human rights issues. While these differences will shape the U.S.-Russia relationship going forward, they should not exclusively define it; there are too many areas where the two countries need to work together for mutual benefit and for international peace and security.

The new administration appears to understand this imperative. On the same day that they launched investigations into a slew of alleged Russian activities (including election interference, the Navalny poisoning and the hack of the SolarWinds information technology company in which the U.S. believes Russian operatives breached Treasury Department and other U.S. government databases), senior U.S. officials also said Washington would pursue a five-year extension of the New START arms control treaty.<sup>30</sup> With Moscow in agreement, the U.S. and Russia have already moved quickly to extend the treaty and avoid further damage to an arms control framework that took two hard knocks under Trump. The U.S. withdrew first from the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, which it accused Russia of violating, and then from the 1992 Open Skies Treaty, which Russia has now said it will also leave.<sup>31</sup> New START extension also opens the door for the parties to begin working together and with other countries to start new negotiations on nuclear and conventional weapons, emerging technologies and cybersecurity.

A more difficult challenge, but one that the new administration should nevertheless tackle, is to make progress on Ukraine. Washington and Moscow could hardly be

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<sup>30</sup> Kylie Atwood, Jennifer Hansler and Vivian Salama, "Biden orders investigation into Russian misdeeds as admin seeks nuclear arms treaty extension", CNN, 21 January 2021. The New START treaty limits the U.S. and Russia to 1,550 deployed strategic nuclear warheads and 700 deployed nuclear weapon launchers and bombers each, as well as 800 total (deployed and non-deployed) launchers and bombers. It also provides for verification of compliance by both parties. See "New START Treaty", U.S. Department of State, n.d. At press time, Moscow and Washington had exchanged diplomatic notes confirming their intention to extend the agreement, and Presidents Biden and Putin had expressed satisfaction with the arrangement in a telephone call. Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber and Trevor Hunnicutt, "Russia and U.S. extend New START arms pact, Putin and Biden chat", Reuters, 26 January 2021.

<sup>31</sup> "The Open Skies Treaty permits each state party to conduct unarmed, short-notice reconnaissance flights over the others' entire territory to collect data on military forces and activities". "Open Skies Treaty at a Glance", Arms Control Association, November 2020. There are 34 state parties to the treaty, counting the U.S. and Russia.

starting from more different places, with Russia refusing to acknowledge its involvement in the conflict at all and the U.S. insisting that Russia stop undermining Ukrainian sovereignty and leave Donbas. Still, it would be a mistake for the U.S. to throw up its hands or to decide to accept a slow-burn war in hopes that the distraction and expense of managing it will accrue to Russia's detriment and the West's corresponding benefit. A simmering conflict on the EU's eastern flank is neither good for regional stability nor fair to the people caught in the middle.

Instead, Washington should work with Brussels and key EU member states, including Normandy Format members France and Germany, on a unified transatlantic strategy toward Russia with clear and defensible red lines. At the core of this strategy should be a firm insistence on preserving Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity; a commitment to support the reintegration of Donbas into Ukraine including through financial and technical support to reconstruction; and, as Crisis Group has argued elsewhere, a plan for gradual but reversible sanctions relief for Russia in the face of measurable progress toward peace, coupled with the prospect of stronger sanctions if Russia does not cooperate.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, the late 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh also offers both the need and opportunity for U.S.-Russian collaboration.<sup>33</sup> There, Moscow brokered a ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan, without the U.S. or other Western governments playing any real role. Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh will help prevent a resurgence of fighting. But a sustainable peace requires broader diplomatic engagement and financial support. Efforts to directly counter and compete with Russia here would be counterproductive to both U.S. and regional interests. Conversely, if the U.S. and its allies help Russia, Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan unblock transport corridors and kick-start trade in the South Caucasus, they might together transform the region. After years of mutual hostility and increasing isolation, Armenia and Azerbaijan should be reconnected with a rebuilt infrastructure of roads, rail, commerce and investment, which can shift incentives for both away from conflict and toward cooperation and prosperity.

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### **13. Sahel: Put Governance First**

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As the U.S.-supported international intervention in the Sahel approaches its eighth year, the Biden administration should take a step back and reconsider the priority it has placed on military operations in its strategy for the region.

The French have set the pace for international stabilisation efforts since 2013, when they sent troops to Mali to stop a jihadist advance on its capital, Bamako.<sup>34</sup> Since then, in addition to operating its own military mission (Operation Barkhane), Paris has thrown its weight behind the establishment of a UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA), a regional force (the G5 Sahel) and various other bilateral and multilateral mechanisms to support its stabilisation efforts. The results, however, have been disappointing.

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<sup>32</sup> See Crisis Group Europe Reports N°s 256, *Peace in Ukraine (I): A European War*, 27 April 2020; and 261, *Peace in Ukraine (III): The Costs of War in Donbas*, 3 September 2020.

<sup>33</sup> See Crisis Group Europe Briefing N°91, *Improving Prospects for Peace after the Nagorno-Karabakh War*, 22 December 2020.

<sup>34</sup> See Crisis Group Africa Report, *A Course Correction for the Sahel Stabilisation Strategy*, forthcoming.

Al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates continue to expand and embed themselves in rural insurgencies. Inter-ethnic bloodshed has spiked. It is often civilians who bear the brunt of violence.

The U.S. has long supported counter-terrorism operations in the Sahel, providing intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance support, air-to-air refuelling and military transport to Operation Barkhane. But it has become an increasingly reluctant partner to Paris in recent years. U.S. activities in the Sahel began facing more domestic scrutiny after 2017, when fighters from the local Islamic State branch killed four U.S. servicemen in Niger. Although they did not ratchet down U.S. support, Trump officials made clear that they were losing confidence in the French-led approach, arguing that it has failed to reverse the trend of jihadist insurgency and demanding an exit strategy for MINUSMA. They were not alone in their doubts. Other Western partners have also mulled whether it is time to take a new tack.

Still, it is not at all clear that the Trump team's scepticism will transfer to the Biden administration. As they seek to repair transatlantic relationships that were battered during the Trump era and reinvest in multilateralism, the new team may be tempted to defer to French *savoir faire* in West Africa. They may not just continue current levels of support, but also back French efforts to expand the resources available for regional counter-terrorism efforts – for example by supporting a push by Paris at the Security Council to obtain a Chapter VII mandate and UN funding for the G5 Sahel Joint Force.

Washington should think twice about upping U.S. support for military solutions in the Sahel. As Crisis Group has argued, rather than doubling down on a failed security-oriented approach, the better way to tackle regional instability is to focus on governance reforms and political dialogue with communities and insurgents, including – under certain circumstances – jihadists.<sup>35</sup> Military operations should be in the service of such an approach. To ensure that someone has a finger on the pulse of the region's complex political and diplomatic dynamics, the Biden team should, like the Trump administration, appoint a special envoy for the Sahel, who should work with diplomatic colleagues, development experts and the military's Africa Command to develop a coordinated approach to the region. That envoy should in turn encourage Sahelian states and their partners to make improvements in governance, especially in rural areas, the lead priority of an integrated counter-insurgency strategy.

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#### 14. Somalia: Defuse Pre-electoral Tensions

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Two months after the Trump administration announced that it was pulling out of Somalia the estimated 700 U.S. personnel deployed to assist the fight against the Islamist militant group Al-Shabaab, parliamentary and presidential elections are unfolding amid bitter wrangling among the country's elites.<sup>36</sup> The presidential vote, scheduled for 8 February but likely to be delayed, will see President Mohamed Abdul-

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. See also Crisis Group Africa Report N°276, *Speaking with the "Bad Guys": Toward Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists*, 28 May 2019.

<sup>36</sup> See Crisis Group Africa Briefings N°s 165, *Blunting Al-Shabaab's Impact on Somalia's Elections*, 31 December 2020; and 163, *Staving off Violence around Somalia's Elections*, 10 November 2020.

lahi Mohamed (Farmajo) seek to become the first incumbent in many years to win a second term. Farmajo's opponents, in concert with the leadership of the Jubaland and Puntland regions, accuse the president of reneging on the terms of a September agreement to organise the vote consensually. They claim that he has stacked the committees charged with conducting the vote with loyalists.

Under the September agreement, the upcoming polls will be "indirect" – with clans selecting electors and electors selecting the parliament's lower house. The lower house then works with the upper house (selected by federal member state assemblies) to appoint the president. Because of the prospect of an opposition boycott, the federal government is now looking to initiate a partial poll for the parliamentary elections in which just willing parties participate, while the opposition is considering options that include either conducting itself a parallel vote or just not participating until its concerns are heard. Either scenario risks delegitimising the electoral process in the eyes of many Somalis. Failing to reach a consensus agreement on the way forward ahead of the expiration of President Farmajo's mandate on 8 February risks destabilising the country.

Violence could spiral in several ways. Election-related disagreements between the government and opposition could spark armed confrontations among their respective supporters, potentially along clan lines. Al-Shabaab could also stage attacks: it already has warned of retribution for anyone participating in the vote, whether as electors or candidates for office, calling the exercise an "apostate" activity.<sup>37</sup> Somalia's vulnerability to these threats has been exacerbated by the withdrawal of foreign forces. In November, Ethiopia, due to the Tigray conflict, pulled out those of its troops that were deployed separately to the African Union mission. The Trump administration repositioned U.S. forces to neighbours Kenya and Djibouti as a force protection measure; the move was also aligned with the former president's stated objective of ending "forever wars".<sup>38</sup>

The Biden administration's immediate priority for Somalia should be to defuse risks of political disputes escalating into violence by smoothing the waters between Farmajo and his opponents. Washington should press Mogadishu to urgently host a meeting with federal member state leaders and the political opposition to discuss their concerns regarding potential electoral manipulation ahead of the 8 February expiration of Farmajo's term. Dialogue is the only option to unblock the impasse in an inclusive and peaceful manner that upholds the vote's legitimacy. To help cut through the distrust that has built up between the government and opposition, Washington (working with partners like the EU, UK and UN) could consider assuming an active mediation role between the opposing Somali parties and serving as a guarantor of any electoral agreement that emerges. It should also make clear to Mogadishu that the failure to have credible electoral proceedings will threaten to sour the U.S.-Somalia partnership.

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<sup>37</sup> "Communiqué from the consultative forum regarding the jihad in East Africa", Al-Shabaab, 18 March 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Joshua Keating. "Trump pulls the plug on his own ill-conceived war in Somalia," Slate, 8 December 2020. See also Declan Walsh, "In Somalia, U.S. troop withdrawal is seen as badly timed", *The New York Times*, 5 December 2020.

Following the election, the Biden team should channel its efforts toward helping Somalia to reset the key fault line that has hampered progress in recent years – tensions between the centre and its regions. This rift badly limits government effectiveness at all levels and hobbles efforts to tackle the major challenges that Somalia faces, including Al-Shabaab's long-running insurgency. Washington should encourage Mogadishu toward a comprehensive settlement that would allow Somalia's leaders to more effectively tackle security and governance objectives. A first step might be to press for formation of the inter-state commission envisaged in Somalia's provisional constitution as a forum for regular engagement between the two levels of government.

The Biden team will also need to wrestle with the question of whether to reintroduce U.S. troops. It may not be the best way to encourage long-term self-reliance on Somalia's part. It would be politically fraught at home, in light of frustration on both right and left with protracted military deployments. Still, Washington should work with security partners like the AU, EU, UN, UK, Turkey and regional governments, in addition to the Somali government, to figure out how best to make up any gaps in the training of the Somali armed forces and the conduct of security operations created by November's repositioning.

At the same time, there are limits to a purely military response to Al-Shabaab. The Biden administration should also begin to explore complementary approaches that could undermine the persistent insurgency, which could include some form of Somali government engagement with Al-Shabaab itself.

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## **15. Sudan: Help the Transition Succeed**

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Sudan has undergone a dramatic transformation in the past four years. Its December 2018 revolution set in motion events that included the downfall after 30 years of strongman and International Criminal Court fugitive Omar al-Bashir and the August 2019 arrival of an interim civilian-led government, which has a mandate to guide the country through a four-year transitional period culminating in 2023 elections.<sup>39</sup> Belatedly, it also resulted in the U.S. decision in November 2020 to rescind Sudan's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism. The latter move lifted a sanctions regime that had contributed to Khartoum's isolation for 27 years and was threatening to strangle the economic recovery that will be critical to a successful transition.<sup>40</sup>

The November 2020 rescission took more than a year to tee up, in part because of wrangling between Washington and Khartoum over legal claims regarding Sudan's alleged role in various terrorist incidents, including al-Qaeda's 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. Another reason for the delay was that the issue became bound up in the Trump administration's push to restore ties between Israel and various longstanding Arab adversaries. In the end, Khartoum agreed to move down a legislative pathway toward normalising ties with Israel; Congress enacted the Sudan Democratic Transition, Accountability and Fiscal Transparency Act of 2020

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<sup>39</sup> See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°157, *Financing the Revival of Sudan's Troubled Transition*, 22 June 2020; and Crisis Group Africa Report N°281, *Safeguarding Sudan's Revolution*, 21 October 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Max Bearak and Naba Mohieddin, "U.S. lifts Sudan's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism", *The Washington Post*, 14 December 2020.

setting forth the terms of U.S. diplomatic, programmatic and financial support to Sudan's transitional government and restoring some of its legal immunity; and the rescission was completed. While there was much to criticise in the Trump administration's subordination of its Sudan policy to its ambitions for Israel, it will nevertheless hand off a real opportunity to foster a more productive relationship with Khartoum than Washington has enjoyed in decades.

For all the challenges it faces, with the right kind of support, Sudan has the potential to be a powerful transformational story in a neighbourhood marked by backsliding on governance and stability.

What should that support look like? First, as a signal of its backing for the civilian side of the transitional government, the new U.S. administration should swiftly appoint the first U.S. ambassador to Sudan since 1997. This gesture would not only reciprocate Sudan's (Khartoum sent an ambassador to Washington in early 2020) but would also demonstrate the Biden team's commitment to the transitional government's success. In so doing, Washington can bolster morale and a sense of security on the part of the civilian authorities in Khartoum. Renewed U.S. leadership on the Sudan file would also encourage other like-minded international actors to refresh their own flagging diplomatic, financial and technical support for the transitional government.

Secondly, the Sudan Democratic Transition, Accountability and Fiscal Transparency Act requires the State Department to submit a strategy outlining U.S. support for the transition to civilian-led government in Sudan, and also authorises certain supportive measures. This exercise should form the basis for a concerted U.S. effort to help drive Sudan's economic recovery. With the Sudanese people suffering from rocketing inflation fuelled by crippling subsidies and a black-market exchange rate some five times the official rate, the country's foundering economy represents the greatest source of risk to the transition and to stability. The new U.S. strategy should back key legal, economic and security sector reforms with firm diplomatic guidance and robust financial investments; seek to boost U.S. and other foreign investment in Sudan; and invigorate weakening international efforts to support Sudan's historic transition.

Thirdly, the new administration should throw its full diplomatic weight into backing the civilian side of the transitional government, while pressing their ascendant military partners to fulfil the terms of the transitional arrangement by stepping back from years of bad practice, manipulating politics and capturing rents from the economy. Renewed engagement with key regional actors Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE to secure their support for timely, credible elections and a subsequent shift to civilian governance will be key to getting the Sudanese military to play a constructive role in the transition.

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## **16. Syria: Try Shuttle Diplomacy in the North East**

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Amid a lull in fighting, international attention to the Syrian war has waned. Yet Syria watchers are keeping a close eye on what the U.S. transition will mean for regional dynamics. Residents of north-eastern Syria looked on nervously as the Trump administration toyed with a precipitous troop pullout from the area. Such a withdrawal could have unleashed another round of conflict, with competing forces scrambling for advantage, causing a new humanitarian crisis of displacement and breathing life into the Islamic State's insurgency. In particular, it could have provoked renewed

conflict between Washington's local partner in the anti-ISIS fight, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and Turkey. Ankara sees the dominant Kurdish component of the SDF (known as the People's Protection Units, or YPG) as a Syrian extension of its enemy, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and has become increasingly bitter about continued U.S. support for the group.<sup>41</sup>

The Biden team has already signalled that a precipitous pullout is not on the cards, but beyond that, it is something of a mystery where U.S. policy may be headed. As Washington contemplates its options, it will need to thread a needle. Pledging to remain in the country for an unknown period without a clear, viable diplomatic roadmap could keep the area at constant risk of destabilisation attempts and violence. Yet exiting the wrong way could trigger a violent scramble for dominance, with Ankara, Damascus, Tehran's militia allies or some combination thereof attempting to seize territory and resources from the SDF. The U.S. itself might not be insulated should ISIS or other jihadists exploit the resulting chaos to reassert themselves.

Between those two ends of the policy spectrum, a safer route would be for the U.S. to commit to an eventual gradual withdrawal, conditioned on attainment of a negotiated arrangement that would protect the millions of civilians residing under SDF control from a violent free-for-all that ISIS elements could exploit. Minimising risks of a violent eruption in north-eastern Syria following a U.S. troop withdrawal almost certainly will require active U.S. shuttle diplomacy between the YPG and Ankara. Washington should seek to address Ankara's two major priorities: preventing a PKK armed presence and activity south of its border; and ending any YPG arms supplies to the PKK, as Turkey claims exist. Until a deal can be made, the U.S. would need to offer the SDF effective protection from Turkish and pro-Turkish forces. The U.S. might also need to help bring the SDF into internationally backed political talks about Syria.

Additionally, the U.S. should work with Ankara and the SDF to define a mutually tolerable endgame for Syria's north east, and then seek to reach agreements on tactical steps toward that end. These could include the YPG lessening its control over governance, resources and security in the region and allowing for meaningful participation by Arab and Kurdish opposition forces in local administration and civil society organisations.

Finally, if it pursues this option, the Biden administration should work with Congress to shore up the legal basis for troops to be in Syria, rather than continuing to rely (as past administrations have done) on a strained interpretation of the 2001 use of force authorisation enacted before ISIS even existed.<sup>42</sup> The updated authorisation should specify whom the troops are fighting and include a termination date, which could be rolled over with congressional support. This measure will guard against mission creep, keep policymakers focused on the task at hand and help ensure that the U.S. presence does not drag out interminably without appropriate public and congressional scrutiny.

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<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group Commentary, "The SDF Seeks a Path Toward Durable Stability in North East Syria", 25 November 2020.

<sup>42</sup> The same principle would apply where relevant to other groups in other theatres. See Tess Bridgeman, Ryan Goodman, Stephen Pomper and Steve Vladeck, "Principles for a 2021 Authorization for Use of Military Force", Just Security, January 2021. The authors suggest that any updated authorisation should "explicitly preclude [the] use of force against countries or organized armed groups other than those specifically named".

## **17. UN: Focus on COVID, Climate and Credibility**

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Diplomats at the UN have responded positively to Joe Biden's victory in the U.S. election.<sup>43</sup> It is "Christmas come early", joked one European ambassador.<sup>44</sup> After four years of tense dealings with the Trump administration, many were delighted to hear Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, Joe Biden's pick to be U.S. permanent representative to the United Nations, declare in November: "America is back. Multilateralism is back". But the hard part lies ahead. In the coming months, Thomas-Greenfield, a widely respected State Department veteran whose confirmation by the Senate should be smooth, has to start the arduous work of rebuilding U.S. relationships and credibility in New York.

Step one will be to address a managerial challenge: Thomas-Greenfield will need to get the U.S. diplomatic machinery at the UN back in working order. The Trump administration treated its representatives to the UN poorly, sending them unclear instructions on how to deal with conflicts like those in Yemen and Libya. Thomas-Greenfield's predecessor, Kelly Knight Craft, enjoyed little real influence in Washington. The new ambassador will need to reassure her foreign counterparts that she is fully plugged in to the White House and that she can deliver on the bargains she strikes in New York.

Step two will be for the Biden administration to demonstrate concrete proof of its commitment to multilateralism. The president is already well on his way, having fulfilled his pledges to rejoin the Paris climate change agreement and reverse Trump's decision to quit the World Health Organization over its handling of COVID-19. The U.S. also seems set to bid for a seat on the Human Rights Council, which the Trump administration quit in 2018. But the new administration should not stop there. Thomas-Greenfield will have a useful opportunity to affirm the White House's new strategic orientation at the UN in March, when the U.S. happens to hold the rotating presidency of the Security Council. The council president shapes the agenda for the month, and the U.S. could choose to convene debates or push for resolutions on a couple of symbolically significant themes.

One of these topics could be the security implications of COVID-19, an issue which the Trump administration botched in 2020, as it focused more on petty point-scoring against China than on how to use the council's powers to combat the pandemic.<sup>45</sup> As Crisis Group has noted, the pandemic's economic fallout could well fuel instability in the years ahead.<sup>46</sup> The Biden administration could push the Security Council to throw its weight behind measures, including the rollout of coronavirus vaccines to poor and fragile states, to mitigate these risks.

The new administration could also signal a new approach to discussion of the linkages between climate change and conflict in the Security Council. In 2020, Germany

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<sup>43</sup> Portions of this section were first published in Richard Gowan, "The Biden Administration's First Steps and the UN", RUSI, 22 January 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Gowan, "Repairing the Damage to U.S. Diplomacy in the UN Security Council", Crisis Group Commentary, 18 December 2020.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Richard Gowan and Ashish Pradhan, "Salvaging the Security Council's Coronavirus Response," Crisis Group Commentary, 4 August 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Richard Gowan, "Repairing the Damage to U.S. Diplomacy in the UN Security Council", Crisis Group Commentary, 18 December 2020.

led nine other members – including France and the UK – in hashing out a draft resolution calling on the UN to do more to plan for these threats. But it backed down when the Trump administration threatened to veto the text. The Biden administration might revive some version of the German text or, at minimum, insist that the Security Council do more to mitigate risks associated with climate change in countries on its agenda. It should find a ready audience for these ideas. The UK, which is preparing to host a major UN climate change conference in Glasgow in late 2021, is keen to focus more attention on climate-security links in New York, as are other Security Council members including Ireland, Norway and Kenya. China and Russia question whether the Council should take up environmental matters, but they may think twice about picking an early fight with the U.S. on a topic that is obviously important to the new president.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, step three in revitalising U.S. diplomacy at Turtle Bay should be to bolster ties with U.S. partners whom the Trump administration pointlessly alienated with its policies. While there may be limited room for improving relations with rivals Russia and China, there is quite a bit more the U.S. can do with its traditional friends. For example, the U.S. and France have often sparred over the value of UN peacekeeping in Mali, but the Biden administration could initiate a new dialogue with Paris on how best to calm the burgeoning violence across much of the Sahel (see above). Looking at multilateral security arrangements in Africa more broadly, the administration could also revive plans – developed in the Obama era but sidelined since 2016 – for the UN to help fund African Union-led peace operations on a case-by-case basis, which could both strengthen the AU and reduce pressures on UN operations.<sup>48</sup>

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## 18. Venezuela: Coax the Parties Back to the Table

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Venezuela is facing one of the worst humanitarian disasters in the world, the result of a long-running political and economic crisis that shows no sign of abating.<sup>49</sup> Responsibility for this predicament lies first and foremost with President Nicolás Maduro's government, which has grievously mishandled the economy since 2013, and starting in 2016 moved aggressively to deny opponents power and political space. In reaction to the latter, the mainstream opposition, led for the past two years by Juan Guaidó, the former National Assembly head and "interim president", and backed thus far by the U.S. and nearly 60 other countries, tried by various means to bring down his government. December's parliamentary elections – which the opposition boycotted – signalled the failure of these efforts. They also marked the futility of the ferocious U.S.-led "maximum pressure" strategy that for the past two years aimed at ousting Maduro.<sup>50</sup>

As the Biden administration takes the reins of U.S. policy, it is time for strategic recalibration. Part of that involves facing certain realities. The December elections

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group Africa Report N°286, *The Price of Peace: Securing UN Financing for AU Peace Operations*, 31 January 2020.

<sup>49</sup> "Venezuela Situation", UN High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d. Crisis Group Latin America Report N°79, *Imagining a Resolution of Venezuela's Crisis*, 11 March 2020.

<sup>50</sup> See Crisis Group Latin America Report N°85, *Venezuela: What Lies Ahead after Election Clinches Maduro Clean Sweep*, 21 December 2020.

left Guaidó with little standing to claim that he is the legitimate president. Although the opposition argues that the existing parliament should be recognised until free elections are held, unconditional recognition of Guaidó's "interim presidency" will be an obstacle to the negotiations that will be necessary to arrive at a political settlement. So, too, will continued insistence on Maduro's departure as a pre-condition. For negotiations to resume with any chance of success, the opposition will have to soften its stance on both of these points, and both camps will have to be willing to make concessions. In particular, the government should be prepared to approve reforms that could enable free and fair elections. The opposition should be ready to embrace the idea of a gradual transition that guarantees members of the Maduro government and its associated *chavista* movement freedom from persecution and the continued right to political participation.

Washington can help increase the odds that this approach will succeed by making clear that it will take a more nuanced approach to sanctions than it did during the Trump administration. It should subject existing sanctions to a rapid humanitarian review and scale them back where necessary to allow pandemic relief aid and otherwise prevent avoidable harm to the population. In particular, it should reverse the ban on crude-for-diesel swaps, which threatens to impair the ability to transport food and essentials and further hamper power generation. In parallel, the U.S. should scale up humanitarian assistance considerably, working with European and Latin American partner governments to pressure the Maduro government to grant access in accordance with standard international humanitarian principles to the multilateral organisations that manage it. Washington should also signal that it is prepared to ease other sanctions progressively so long as the Venezuelan government advances toward the restoration of civil and political rights, with sanctions to be lifted entirely if the parties reach a negotiated settlement.

Improved channels of communication with Cuba, a key Maduro ally, could help these efforts. The new U.S. administration should immediately review the designation of Cuba as a "state sponsor of terrorism", which former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced days before leaving office. Biden should seek a return to the *détente* with Havana reached by President Obama and urge Cuba to support comprehensive negotiations in Venezuela.

Finally, the U.S. should coordinate its diplomatic strategy with European and Latin American partners, aiming to build on the process facilitated by Norway and suspended in mid-2019. The International Contact Group, co-chaired by the EU, could lead coordination efforts with the U.S. and governments from the hemisphere in the Lima Group. Once conditions exist for a resumption of negotiations, these should be structured to incorporate an outer ring of international guarantors that includes Maduro allies.

## **19. Yemen: Prioritise Ending the War**

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U.S. policy in war-torn Yemen has been a disaster since the Obama administration made the fateful decision, six years ago, to support a Saudi-led military intervention. The Saudi-led campaign has not achieved its primary objective of unseating the Huthi militants who chased President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi from the capital Sanaa. The country is poorer, hungrier and more fractured than it was six years ago. Saudi efforts over the past year to bring anti-Huthi parties in Yemen together under a single umbrella have made some headway. But the Huthis have consolidated their control over the country's north west and are threatening the Hadi government stronghold at Marib. Elsewhere, the country is a political patchwork, run by pro-government forces, various militias and local authorities.

There are strong reasons for the Biden administration to prioritise ending this mess. First, the U.S. helped create it. Saudi Arabia would likely have launched an intervention in 2015 with or without U.S. support, but it might have looked for a way out earlier without Washington's backing, which has included intelligence and logistical support, as well as diplomatic cover. Secondly, the scale of the suffering creates a humanitarian imperative; as of mid-2020, twenty million Yemenis – a full two thirds of the country's population – were on the brink of starvation. Thirdly, the last thing that the unstable Middle East needs is another flashpoint where Saudi Arabia and Iran (which has over time increased its support for the Huthis) could come to blows, dragging the U.S. deeper into the conflict.

Certainly, the U.S. will face challenges as it works simultaneously to extract itself from the Yemen war (a Biden campaign commitment) and re-enter the JCPOA. Pulling back from the war is likely to leave Riyadh feeling forsaken, compounding the tensions that will arise from returning to the JCPOA, at the same time as it could embolden the Huthis. It will take some fancy footwork for the U.S. to step back from the war while helping end it, press the Saudis without driving them wholly away, and ease up on the Huthis without signalling they can blow off good-faith negotiations.

Broadly speaking, the sequence might consist of five steps. First, the Biden team should rescind Trump's eleventh-hour terrorism designation of the Huthi entity, or Ansar Allah, and certain Huthi leaders, which triggers sanctions that will only aggravate the humanitarian disaster and complicate diplomacy.<sup>51</sup> Secondly, it should throttle back military assistance, making clear that it will protect Riyadh from threats to its territorial integrity if they reach a certain magnitude, but that it cannot extend a blank check for the war in Yemen. Thirdly, it should make clear that good-faith efforts by Riyadh will be important as the U.S. re-evaluates the future of the U.S.-Saudi security partnership. Fourthly, the U.S. should up its support for UN-led peace efforts and perhaps even name a special envoy for Yemen to help. Finally, on the margins of negotiations with Tehran over the Iran deal, the U.S. should ask for help persuading the Huthis to reach a ceasefire and engage constructively in peace talks – not as a condition for U.S. re-entry to the JCPOA, but rather as a confidence-building measure that would benefit the region.

**Washington/Brussels, 28 January 2021**

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<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group Statement, "The U.S. Should Reverse Its Huthi Terror Designation", 13 January 2021.

## Appendix A: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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