

Biden's Pick for Secretary of State Has a Record of Militarism

Antony Blinken — a backer of the Iraq War with right-wing views on Israel — is a return to the status quo ante.

Then-Deputy Secretary of State Anthony Blinken speaks at the 2016 Concordia Summit at Grand Hyatt New York on September 19, 2016, in New York City. Paul Morigi / Getty Images for Concordia Summit

President-elect Joe Biden's selection of Antony Blinken for secretary of state is a worrying sign. Despite Biden owing his election to the Democratic Party's progressive base and left-leaning independents, he has nominated someone *The Washington Post* has [described](#) as having "a centrist view of the world" and who has "supported interventionist positions."



Prior to serving in the Obama administration, initially under Vice-President Biden and later in the State Department, Blinken was Democratic staff director for the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee under Chairman Biden during the critical months leading up to the invasion of Iraq.

Under their leadership, the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee [limited hearings](#) to only a day and a half and stacked the witness list with war supporters, refusing to call leading Mideast scholars and former UN inspectors who would have testified that Iraq had already essentially disarmed and that an invasion would have disastrous consequences. This refusal to listen to experts or allow for the airing of diverse opinions, along with Blinken's willingness to push for an illegal, unnecessary and predictably disastrous war raises serious questions regarding how Blinken will lead the State Department.

During a 2007 news conference, when Biden was questioned about his role in pushing the war authorization through the Democratic-controlled Senate and about his refusal to ask tough questions of administration officials and other war proponents, [Blinken interrupted the questioner](#), falsely claiming Biden ensured "every hard question was answered" and that Biden had rejected unfounded claims by the Bush administration of Iraq's nonexistent nuclear program.

Medea Benjamin, co-founder of the anti-war group CODEPINK, [tweeted](#), "So we will have a president who supported the invasion of Iraq, and a secretary of state (Tony Blinken) who supported the invasion of Iraq," noting how "In the U.S., there is no accountability for supporting the worst foreign policy disaster in modern history. Only rewards."

The disaster in Iraq did not chasten Blinken to take a less interventionist approach in subsequent years. He was a [strong supporter](#) of U.S. intervention in Libya's 2011 civil war, even as Biden himself opposed it. Blinken also supported a far [larger U.S. military intervention](#) in Syria's civil war and has [opposed a withdrawal](#) of U.S. troops from that country. While a Biden administration will end Trump's shameless appeasement to Russia's Putin regime, Blinken may be prone to going too far in the other direction, such as [arming the Ukrainian government](#).

In 2017, Blinken and former Pentagon official Michèle Flournoy (Biden's likely choice for secretary of defense) founded [WestExec Advisors](#), a consulting firm with a secret client list believed to include aerospace and defense contractors, as well as a prominent Israeli artificial intelligence firm with close ties to that country's military. In choosing Blinken and likely choosing Flournoy, Biden appears to have little interest in ending the revolving door between the defense industry and top positions in government.

Mark Dubowitz, CEO of the influential neoconservative Foundation for Defense of Democracies think tank, [praised Blinken](#) and Flournoy as a "superb national security team. The country will be very fortunate to have them in public service."

One of the greatest concerns about Blinken's appointment for advocates of human rights and international law has been his strident support for the Israeli government. He has emphasized Biden's rejection of conditioning billions of dollars' worth of taxpayer support for Netanyahu on the Israeli government's compliance with international humanitarian law. Though a number of Biden's primary rivals and a sizable majority of Democrats support conditioning the aid, Blinken, [in a recent speech](#), underscored that Biden "would not tie military assistance to Israel to any political decisions that it makes. Period. Full stop. He said it; he's committed to it. And that would be the policy of the Biden administration."

This outright rejection of linking arms transfers to a country's record regarding human rights and international law raises concerns about what kind of leverage, if any, he would be willing to use on allies who violate such bedrock principles.

Blinken has reiterated Biden's determination to break with the Obama administration's public criticism of Israel's right-wing government. While Blinken and Biden have both publicly criticized the Palestinian Authority, [Blinken says](#) in regard to Israel that "Joe Biden believes strongly in keeping your differences — to the greatest extent possible — between friends and behind doors. You're much more effective when you have differences in opinion, when you have disagreements on a policy matter, dealing with it in private." He was unable to cite a case in which the Israeli government changed its policies without public pressure, however.

Right-wing Israeli officials are very happy with Biden's choice for Secretary of State. Former ambassador to Washington [Michael Oren](#) said, "I can think of no finer choice." Former foreign minister [Dore Gold](#) said that, in contrast to other Obama administration officials whom he saw as being "simply difficult" for objecting to Netanyahu's policies, Blinken was "a really good guy."

Despite the Palestinian Authority agreeing to virtually every aspect of John Kerry's 2015 peace proposal — which was summarily rejected by the Israeli government — [Blinken](#) has blamed the Palestinians for the impasse in negotiations. He demands that the Palestinians not just recognize Israel (which they already have), but to also explicitly recognize Israel as a "Jewish state," which would be politically impossible for any Palestinian leader to do and is something the U.S. has not demanded of any other Arab government. Indeed, there has probably never been an international agreement in which a party was required to formally recognize the religious or ethnic identity of another state. Blinken has refused to blame the impasse in the peace process on Israel's refusal to recognize Palestinian statehood or end its occupation and colonization of Palestinian lands in the West Bank.

Some Glimpses of Hope

Nevertheless, some progressives are relieved that Biden did not choose the even more hardline [Susan Rice](#) or other even more hawkish possibilities, and have noted some positive aspects of Blinken's record, as well as his outreach to the progressive community during the fall presidential campaign. Matt Duss, a progressive activist who served as Bernie Sanders's chief foreign policy adviser, [called](#) Blinken "a good choice," saying it would "be a new and great thing to have a top diplomat who has regularly engaged with progressive grassroots."

Blinken has emphasized a desire to return to the Iran nuclear deal. He has taken a tougher line toward U.S.-backed dictatorships than many in the foreign policy establishment and will likely challenge the unconditional support for such Middle Eastern dictatorships as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. He has shown some compassion toward refugees, exemplified by a 2016 appearance on "[Sesame Street](#)." He appears to take a more realistic and less belligerent view of North Korea than some.

While he has not supported a withdrawal of U.S. combat troops from the Middle East and Central Asia, he appears to take a more cautious position than he did when advocating an invasion, occupation and counterinsurgency war in Iraq. He has [emphasized](#) the "need to distinguish between, for example, these endless wars with the large-scale, open-ended deployment of U.S. forces with, for example, discrete, small-scale, sustainable operations, maybe led by Special Forces to support local actors."

Blinken will work to rebuild the State Department from the disastrous leadership of [Rex Tillerson](#) and Mike Pompeo, rebuild damaged relationships with democratic allies and take a much more multilateral approach to international affairs, all of which are positive.

However, what Blinken represents is essentially a return to the status quo ante. Both the United States and the world need better.