

## **Most Dem Voters Are to the Left of Biden on Foreign Policy. Can He Be Moved?**

*It is time to organize the necessary pressure to force the new president to adopt a less militaristic foreign policy.*

While a likely Republican-controlled Senate could limit many of the progressive domestic policies President-elect Joe Biden has promised to enact, presidents have far more leeway to advance their agenda in the realm of foreign policy. As a result, Biden — who has perhaps the most extensive background in foreign affairs of any new president in U.S. history — has the ability to make a positive difference. While he will certainly be an improvement over Donald Trump, Biden's record is well to the right of most Democratic voters.

Scores of foreign policy officials from the Bush administration and allied pundits endorsed Biden. This is not surprising in light of his support for Bush's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Bush's backing of Arab dictatorships and the Israeli occupation, and Bush's dramatic increases in military spending with borrowed money.

In 2002-2003, the majority of Democrats, virtually every major union and mainline Christian denomination, and millions of people in the streets opposed the idea of invading Iraq. According to an informal survey I conducted, it appeared that roughly 90 percent of Middle East scholars and 80 percent of State Department professionals specializing in the region also opposed it. On the other side, the Bush administration, the Republican Party, right-wing fundamentalist churches, the arms industry and neoconservative intellectuals supported it. Biden's decision to side with the latter coalition raises disturbing questions regarding with whom he would ally on major foreign policy questions.

To justify his support for the war, Biden made [a whole series of false claims](#) regarding Iraqi weapons, weapons programs and weapons systems in an apparent effort to frighten the American public into supporting an invasion and occupation of that oil-rich country. Despite claims that his vote for the war authorization was based on concerns about Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction" (WMD), he [defended the decision to invade](#) even after inspectors had returned and the Bush administration acknowledged they were wrong about the WMD claims.

And Biden did not simply vote for the war authorization. As head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he limited hearings on the war resolution to only a day and a half, [stacked the witness list with war proponents](#) and rejected calls for leading Middle East scholars and former UN inspectors — who would have testified that Iraq had achieved at least qualitative disarmament and that invading and occupying Iraq would prove disastrous — to testify.

Biden still [opposes a withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq](#), even in the face of demands by the Iraqi parliament that they leave.

Regarding Israel and Palestine, Biden successfully pushed for a [hardline party platform](#), which failed to even mention (much less condemn) the Israeli occupation and the more than 250 illegal settlements while criticizing international civil society campaigns to boycott companies and other entities that support Israeli occupation and settlements. Biden has pledged to uphold Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem solely as Israel's capital and move the U.S. embassy in Jerusalem, a move made possible by [a 1995 bill](#) which Biden co-sponsored.

Biden rejects calls for conditioning U.S. military aid to countries which violate human rights and other international legal norms. He has called for tens of billions of dollars' worth of unconditional taxpayer-funded military aid to Israel in the coming years, rejecting calls by his primary rivals Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Pete Buttigieg and — according to polls — three-quarters of Democratic voters that military aid to Israel and other recipients should be conditional on adherence to human rights and international law. [Biden insists](#) that conditioning aid to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing government over its ongoing violations of international humanitarian law is “absolutely outrageous” and would be a “gigantic mistake.”

As a departure from the Obama administration, Biden promises to keep any [criticism of Israel private](#). He has attacked the United Nations, [the International Court of Justice](#), and others for challenging or even simply documenting Israeli violations of international humanitarian law. Biden promises to veto any UN resolutions critical of Israel.

This is not a result of political pressure. While [90 percent of Democrats](#) say the U.S. should either back the Palestinians or be neutral in the peace process, Biden has made clear he will [back Israel](#) in the negotiations.

For most of his Senate career, Biden opposed the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. He now says he supports a two-state solution, but only along the parameters that Netanyahu is willing to agree to, which essentially means a territory divided into small, noncontiguous units surrounded by Israel with a degree of autonomy akin to that of a Native American reservation in the United States.

While the large-scale civilian casualties inflicted by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in military operations in recent years have raised concerns both within Israel and internationally, [Biden has repeatedly gone on record defending the IDF's conduct](#). Not only has he failed to even once raise concerns about the thousands of civilian deaths inflicted by Israeli forces, he has been a harsh critic of human rights organizations and international jurists who have done so. Going well beyond the normal “pro-Israel” rhetoric expected of U.S. politicians, he has defended Israeli attacks on heavily populated civilian areas as legitimate self-defense against “terrorism.” He has accused the United Nations and reputable human rights groups of “opposing Israel's right to self-defense” for raising concerns about Israeli attacks on crowded urban civilian neighborhoods — an indication of how, as commander-in-chief, he may support similar heavy bombing of urban population centers if he suspected there were “terrorists” in their midst.

Biden will likely return the United States to the World Health Organization (WHO). However, he has made clear the U.S. would quit and cease its financial support if the WHO admitted Palestine as a member. Indeed, he pledges he would keep the United States out of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization due to Palestinian membership and would do the same to any other UN agency that recognized Palestine. He insists the United Nations should not play a role in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and he [attacked the International Court of Justice](#) for its unanimous 2004 decision (save for the U.S. judge) that, while Israel has the right to build a separation wall on its internationally recognized borders, it should not build it deep into the occupied West Bank as part of a land grab to incorporate illegal settlements.

While Biden has defended large amounts of taxpayer-funded aid to Israel in part due to arms procurement by autocratic Arab regimes, Biden has also supported unconditional military aid and arms transfers to these very dictatorships. He has little sympathy with pro-democracy movements in the Arab world. For example, as millions of Egyptians took to the streets in January 2011 calling for democracy and demanding the resignation of Hosni Mubarak, Vice President [Biden defended the autocratic ruler](#), insisting he was not a dictator and that he should not resign, while questioning the legitimacy of the protesters' demands.

Biden condemned Bernie Sanders, a critic of Fidel Castro, for simply also acknowledging the communist government's advances in literacy programs and health care, and criticized Trump for [“cozying up to dictators”](#) for meeting North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, claiming that, by contrast, he insisted that the Obama administration [“never embraced an authoritarian regime.”](#) In reality, the Obama administration — with Biden's support — poured in billions of taxpayer dollars to prop up the Abdel Fattah el-Sisi dictatorship in Egypt and provided tens of billions of dollars' worth of arms sales to family dictatorships in the Persian Gulf region.

## Signs of Hope?

Despite his hawkish proclivities as a senator, Biden as vice president was a [more moderate and less-interventionist voice](#) within the Obama administration, often running afoul of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and other hardliners. He opposed the surge in Afghanistan, the intervention in Libya and the Navy Seal operation in Pakistan that killed Osama bin Laden.

His more moderate position may have been influenced by a family tragedy. Of the 535 members of Congress, Biden was the only one to have a child to serve in Iraq. His son Beau, a member of the Delaware National Guard Reserves who was shipped off to Iraq while he was the state attorney general, died from a rare form of brain cancer generally caused by [exposure to ionized radiation](#), which Beau may have picked up from military burn pits there.

[Biden's campaign website](#) declared, “As president, Biden will elevate diplomacy as the premier tool of our global engagement,” implying a de-emphasis on military intervention. He has repeatedly stressed that, “The United States must lead not just with the example of power, but the power of our example.”

Biden is potentially malleable. He originally ran for Senate in 1972 as an opponent of the Vietnam War. He has swung back and forth depending on the political wind. For example, he opposed the 1991 Gulf War, but then supported the Iraq invasion 12 years later, despite the fact that the Gulf War was legally more justifiable and a predictably easy victory, while the Iraq invasion was just the opposite. This would seem to indicate that his instincts may be more political than a result of deep-set ideology.

[He has promised](#) to “End Forever Wars” in Afghanistan and the Middle East and “bring the vast majority of our troops home from Afghanistan and narrowly focus our mission on Al-Qaeda and ISIS.” In a reversal of both the Obama and Trump administrations, he has promised to end U.S. support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen. He has pledged to support nuclear arms control and return to the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris climate accord.

With only a few exceptions, virtually every change in U.S. foreign policy over the last several decades — including ending the Vietnam War, accepting the Central American peace plan, imposing sanctions on apartheid South Africa, curbing the nuclear arms race, ceasing support for Indonesia's occupation of East Timor and phasing out most U.S. involvement in Iraq — came not from the initiative of enlightened Democratic leaders, but from pressure by opponents of war and supporters of human rights.

With the election behind us, it is time to organize the necessary pressure to force the new president to adopt a less militaristic foreign policy. Peace Action, CODEPINK and other progressive organizations are mobilizing to pressure Biden not to appoint war hawks to key foreign policy positions. Though foreign policy concerns may not be high on the agenda of Americans struggling amid the pandemic and economic recession, Biden needs to be reminded that the progressive base that made his victory possible will hold him accountable.