

PLANTING THE SEEDS OF DEMOCRACY

Interview with Senator Joseph R. Biden, Jr. (D-DE), Ranking Democrat, Foreign Relations Committee

MEI: How does the Arab-Israeli peace process fit into the broader array of U.S. strategic, economic and humanitarian interests in the Middle East?

Biden: It's the whole deal. In a sense, it is the beginning, the middle, and the end. And the reason I say that is that the only way in which our other interests in the region—an obvious one being oil, another one being the diminishment of the likelihood of radical states emerging, and the third one would be the notion of whether or not there is going to be any rational way to contain the inhibitions of two autocratic countries like Iran and Iraq—all, it seems to me, depend on the prospect of expanding the 'zone of stability' in the region.

The peace process is the method by which we can extend democracy and stability in that region over time. And the idea that we can go through a sustained period of time in the 21st century, with the dominant feature of a region being autocracy and despotism, is not reasonable.

To put it more bluntly: If there is peace between Israel and the Palestinians, that means that the radicalization of the elements of the populations—in any of five countries we could name—diminishes drastically. In a bizarre way, I predict then that—when that occurs—the focus is going to start to be on how to deal with the stability of the regimes in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq.

MEI: With respect to the Middle East, what have been the high points and low points of your tenure on the Foreign Relations Committee?

Biden: The lowest point was the assassination of Rabin, even more than Sadat—and I was here then. Here you had a guy who had been the [Israeli] army chief of staff—I had first met him

when he was Golda Meir's administrative assistant—and certainly no dove. And here's a guy who brought the process to the next big step, and then assassinated—of all things—by a crazy Israeli.

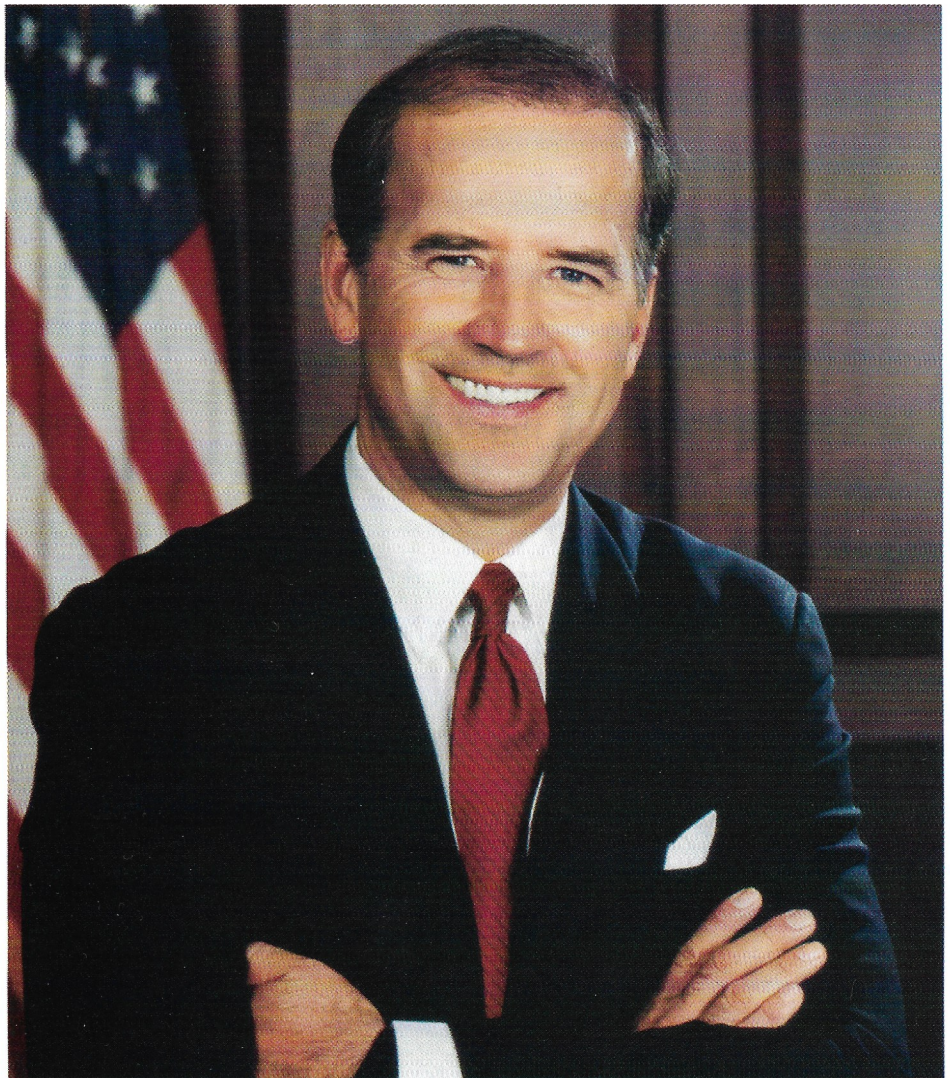
The high point of my tenure probably was Begin and Sadat, Camp David. That was the thing that was the least expected by most of us at the time, so that was probably the high point. Now

in retrospect, what had the most *significant* impact on the region is hard to tell—but I guess it could even be Camp David—because that sort of broke the cycle, and it was the first time in the previous 30 years that anyone stepped out of character.

MEI: Are you satisfied with the U.S. approach to Gulf security?

Biden: Yes. Obviously, when we talk about Gulf security, we could be talking about a lot of different things. "Times are a changin'." We're going to have to constantly reevaluate what our policy should be relative to Iran and what our policy should be relative to Syria and Iraq—but Iran and Iraq primarily—because they are the biggest players in terms of being able to do the most overall damage.

I have one disappointment. I think



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the [Bush] administration and this administration have not been forceful enough with China, in terms of the transfer of the technologies—both technologies that have the capacity to enhance the ability to produce nuclear weapons and the missile technology to deliver potent weapons. It's easy to Monday-morning quarterback and say, had we been more forceful with the Chinese—as I had proposed the last four years—that we could have affected what has already transpired. I think we could have. But I'm disappointed that we did not make, as our single most significant bilateral issue with the Chinese, the proliferation of weapons capacity and capability into the Middle East, into the Gulf. And that's the one area in which I'm disappointed.

MEI: How should U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East be balanced with other American interests, such as promotion of democracy and religious tolerance?

Biden: I think, as always, deftly. Foreign policy is human relations; it's a little like our relationships with our personal friends, our personal adversaries. None of us is pure, and so when you deal with an individual—90 percent of whose conduct and activity you approve and 10 percent you don't—you always are balancing whether or not you focus on only the 10 percent or the 90 percent. That's a little homely in terms of analogy, but that's the way it is in foreign policy.

It's very easy to say that we should be much more assertive with certain countries—for example, the balance in Saudi Arabia: The Saudis have been acting by and large as responsible parties—we don't like the fact they're not a democracy—the question is, what of the things that concern us do we focus on the most, and where are the priorities. That's why I said, in answer to your first question, that were there a genuine peace between the Israelis and the Palestini-

ans, then I think the pressure on the House of Saud to do certain things—the pressure that we could in turn generate to begin to plant the seeds of democracy in Saudi Arabia, for example—they all increase exponentially, all those possibilities. But what happens when we're talking about a life-and-death circumstance for Israel and our foreign policy commitments, you tend not to be able to deal with the things that are important, but that are on the second and third and fourth burners.

By and large, I think our priorities are right: The first and most significant priority is the security of Israel. Secondly, and right behind it, is essentially attempting to move the entire Mediterranean and the Gulf into a circumstance where we do not make them increase the number of nuclear powers in the region, increase the sophisticated ability to deliver weapons in the region. I think those are the two highest priorities—one ties to the other. Whether that means that, at the same time, we can insist that women be treated better in Saudi Arabia—that we should make that the number-one priority for us—I think it's self-evident we don't.

MEI: Did preparing for your Presidential candidacy [in 1987] add a new dimension to your understanding of foreign affairs in general, and specifically of the Middle East?

Biden: In all honesty, it didn't very much, because I had been so deeply involved in that. [Additionally], as you find when you go around the country, the last thing people ask you about is foreign policy. It's ironic: They will not elect you President if they do not think that you can handle foreign affairs; all they want to know is that you can handle it.

To the extent that foreign policy weighed upon me, it weighed upon me as my view of what—if I had been elected President—my single most daunting, important task would be: To be the person who conducts the for-



Arnie Sachs/CNP

Biden with former Secretary of State Christopher



"The lowest point was the assassination of Rabin..."

eign policy of America. All other policy you really do share with the Congress; you really are a 50-50 partner. We're not 50-50 partners with the President on foreign policy—the Constitution didn't design it that way.

MEI: Are the citizens of Delaware interested in and supportive of U.S. involvement in the Middle East?

Biden: The people of Delaware are kind of proud that I am viewed as the Democratic leader on foreign policy issues. But if they thought that's what was really my first and consuming interest, they'd be proud to have me home and not here. If, all of a sudden, I went back to Delaware and I said, 'You know, after 23 years of being the leader for the Democratic Party on criminal justice issues, I have no interest in that anymore, I'm not going to do that anymore—I'm going to concentrate on Bosnia, I'm going to concentrate on international trade'—I think they'd say, 'Joe, why don't you do that as a businessman or as a lawyer.'

And they are informed. For example, with our last trip to Bosnia, the major papers in the state gave it a great deal of coverage along with the press and the radio. Everybody knew I went to Bosnia, but whether it goes beyond that and they say, 'Joe, I got it, Bosnia is really important to my interest and my grand-kid's interest'—no, I don't think it gets to that level, nor does the Middle East. The second point I'd make is, I think there is instinctive and generic support for Israel in my state. Or, to use the slang expression, 'where the rubber really hits the road,' is when they think Israel has acted impetuously or selfishly or unfairly, or even more where they believe that Israel—and what we spend or do on Israel—impacts in times of crunch on education, or whether they pay more or less in taxes, or whether money's being

cut out of the school lunch program. It's not *literally* going to Israel, but they're smart enough to know all that money is fungible.

There is support for Israel, and even in a crunch, even when it *hurts* to support Israel, there is still a clear majority view in my state—which has a very small Jewish population—that says, 'No, Israel is worth it.' But I think they view it more in terms of the *moral* commitment that we made than in any other context.

MEI: What impact can a member of Congress have on the Middle East, beyond voting and formulating legislation?

Biden: I have observed that certain members of the Congress have had significant impact on events in the Middle East. Jack Javits, Frank Church and Hubert Humphrey had *phenomenal* impact.

I think individual Senators can have impact on other Senators here. For example, Frank Lautenberg [D-NJ] or Joe

Lieberman [D-CT]—two leading Jewish American Senators—if they were to get up and take issue with something as it relates to our activities with regard to Israel, they're listened to. First of all, everybody respects both of them, but secondly, [we wonder if they are] speaking for the national Jewish community. They are very much paid attention to.

The other way I think an American Senator can influence policy—and it used to surprise me—involves how closely we are listened to in Jordan, in Egypt, in the Palestinian Authority, in Syria.

MEI: In what ways has Congress been most helpful in advancing U.S. interests in the Middle East?

Biden: By continually and unswervingly supporting Israel's security interest, by the economic help and where-withal that we provide to Israel, basically by making it clear to Arabs in the region, that 'we're delighted to work with you, but if you think you can use us as a wedge—if you think there's any

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daylight between us and Israel—you're mistaken.'

MEI: In what ways do you believe Congress has been least helpful?

Biden: Sometimes I think Congress takes positions in order to gain a political advantage over the President [do-

mestically], and this can have a significant foreign policy effect.

Here's a good current example of the way in which Congress can be counter-productive. Right now [September 24, 1997] we're in conference on the State Department authorization bill, and the peace process is in trouble. The Israelis have said at the Legislative and Executive levels, "Engage Syria, we've got to get Syria on track—you use your pressure to engage Syria." And the Congress comes along, and one of our colleagues—well-intended—introduces

that way. We don't do any government-to-government trade with Syria anyway. Don't effectively impose a sanction or law that prevents me from being able to negotiate with them.' The Israelis—the Likud government—are saying to us, "Engage these guys." And [we're] going to pass a law that effectively says [we're] not *allowed* to engage them? That's petty interference. That's an example of when the Congress gets in and micro-manages or, in a partisan way, deliberately tries to put the Administration in an embarrassing

say that I have had the benefit—through experience—of being assured that the President, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense and the National Security Advisor all *listen* to me. Whether they listen to me and *heed* my advice is a different question, but I have access.

When I came from my last trip, for example, I called up Sandy Berger, wanted to see him, Sandy Berger came up, and we sat down, and discussed the details of my trip and my recommendations at great length. I have a great personal relationship with [Defense Secretary] Bill Cohen, who was my closest friend when he was here in the Senate, even though we were in opposite parties. Madeleine Albright is an old political ally, and her spokesman Jamie Rubin worked for me here for many years. So I have access, and I think all you can expect in my job as a Senator is *access* to the President. And that's never been denied me, and as for the recommendations I have made, they may have already been determined before I recommended them, or accepted after—I wouldn't presume to say which was which.

With regard to the Chairman [Jesse Helms], I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that our relationship has stunned most people so far. And it's very, very good. I

make it a practice in a new relationship to be very, very blunt. I had a very blunt discussion with Senator Helms in January, and we agreed we'd try to make the Committee work. Senator Helms has been extremely gracious and, to some extent [tried] to accommodate me, or an idea I had. Whether or not I influence either the President or the Secretary or anyone else—including the Chairman—substantively, effectively, I don't know. You have to ask them.



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an amendment that says that Syria must be characterized as a pariah nation, as a terrorist nation, falling within a particular category within our law, therefore prohibiting us from trading with the government, or dealing at all with the government, and making it incredibly difficult for the Secretary of State or for any Middle East negotiator or the President to engage Syria.

Now, it's totally counter-productive. The Administration says, 'Hey look, don't do that to us, don't tie our hands

position. Democrats have done the same in the past.

MEI: In terms of your individual role, what kind of impact do you have—as Ranking Member of the Foreign Relations Committee—on the Republican Chairman and on the Democratic President with respect to U.S. policy in the Middle East?

Biden: It would be presumptuous of me to answer that, and I wouldn't quite know how to answer it, except to