



[U.S. President Biden Embarks on His First Trip to the Middle East Since Taking Office Last Year](#)

This week, U.S. President Joe Biden traveled to the Middle East for the first time since taking office last year. The multi-stop trip has garnered considerable criticism, with Biden's visits to Israel and Saudi Arabia drawing particular concerns regarding press freedom and the defense of human rights due to the two countries' egregious violations in these areas. Overshadowing the trip are the killings of journalists Shireen Abu Akleh and Jamal Khashoggi, and the decision to meet with Israeli and Saudi officials despite growing outrage at flagrant human rights abuses like these has been scrutinized. A host of activists, lawmakers, and observers alike have urged President Biden to do more to hold those responsible for human rights violations accountable, including other detriments to peace and security in the region such as continued illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank. As some justifiably highlighted, concrete and lasting advancements cannot be achieved by legitimizing entities that engage in this type of damaging and abusive behavior.

Grave human rights violations including the heinous killings of journalists Shireen Abu Akleh and Jamal Khashoggi, at the hands of the very authorities that Biden is meeting with on his trip, cannot simply be pushed aside for the sake of geopolitical and strategic considerations. During his presidential campaign and lead up to taking office, Biden himself vowed to make human rights the center of his foreign policy, yet now, in the midst of a real moment to put this to action, he has failed to do so. The respective governments responsible for these blatantly unjust murders need to be held accountable, or it undermines all of the core values that the United States stands for. If the Biden administration continues down this path, it is turning its back on the defense of basic human rights, press freedom, democratic principles, and the rule of law. Biden seems to be aware of all of these fair criticisms, going as far as penning an opinion piece in *The Washington Post* due to all of the backlash he has received for the trip, however he continues to perform mental gymnastics in order to try and justify what is wrong.

President Biden's Middle East trip has garnered little enthusiasm, with fewer than one-quarter of Americans approving of it in a recent University of Maryland poll. The survey also highlighted growing dissatisfaction with the governments of Israel and Saudi Arabia, with disapproval of the trip rising upon the mentioning of each. This indicates that the general population is becoming increasingly cognizant of their serious human rights abuses, which have come under even more intense magnification with high-profile incidents in recent years like the killings of Abu Akleh and Khashoggi. Rights and social justice activists lament that President Biden is willing to visit these countries and engage in normal relations, particularly at such a sensitive time and with heightened awareness of these major issues. They have outlined that Biden is indicating the administration is willing to sacrifice its core principles if it means being able to secure short-sighted achievements that do nothing in the way of helping bring about lasting peace and security.

Above all, the vital issues which must be adequately addressed as a precursor to any serious advancements in this process is Israel's continued illegal occupation of Palestinian territory, the expansion of unlawful settlements, and discriminatory practices against Palestinians. Activists and U.S. lawmakers have pushed Biden to do more regarding the issue of settlement expansion because of the damaging role it plays in impeding substantial progress towards peace and security. In the lead up to his Middle East trip, 31 Congressmembers called on the president to use every diplomatic tool at his disposal to ensure that Israel does not further advance its troubling plans. With respect to its treatment of Palestinians, rights groups have increasingly criticized Israel's policies and over the last several years, multiple reputable entities including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the United Nations have all accused Israel of apartheid practices.



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Observers point out that engaging with Israeli officials in the absence of repercussions for continued illegal settlement projects and other human rights violations will only lead to more animosity and a sense of injustice, as has normalizing relations between Israel and several Arab nations without fair concessions towards Palestinians. All this serves to ultimately do is alienate Palestinians, and reduce hope in the ability to secure their basic rights and freedoms. In a similar manner, Biden meeting with Saudi authorities signals to them that the administration is willing to look the other way despite their alarming array of human rights abuses if geopolitical and short-sighted interests are on the table.