



Roundtable report

Prospects and opportunities for US policy and the quest for regional security in the Middle East

12. April 2021, online

The Institute for Islamic Strategic Affairs organized a closed-door online roundtable on the 12 April, 2021, that brought together experts from the Middle East and the United States to discuss the US foreign policy towards the Middle East and prospects for collective security in the region.

Session 1

Middle East policy under the new Biden administration (current thinking, expectations, challenges)

A US expert opened the roundtable with *a first input statement* laying out the key priorities of the Biden administration. From his point of view, Biden's point of departure will be to *concentrate all efforts on the major domestic challenges*, which will determine this administration's failure or success. With rampant polarization, a post-factual political and public discourse, degree of partisanship previously unseen in US politics and massive economic challenges, the US faces a major domestic crisis. The new administration will therefore focus on establishing the government as an agent in domestic policies again and put all its efforts behind strengthening the middle class and society's resilience. Against this background, foreign policy issues will be less important than the major



domestic priorities. In fact, most of this administration's top foreign policy priorities are linked to domestic policy goals as Anthony Blinken's March 3 speech highlighted. Expecting a rather risk-averse and transactional leadership style, foreign policy objectives would be likely to be evaluated against their potential impact on domestic political priorities.

With respect to the Middle East, the US is interested in restoring its role, yet - at the same time – unlikely to make it a major priority on its own. Re-starting the JCPOA negotiations is considered key to avoid potential escalatory cycles with major impact. While recognizing major challenges relating to domestic concerns and objections against re-entering the JCPOA, the view was put forward that the risk of escalation so far outweighs these domestic concerns. Against the background of redefining the understanding of foreign policy “partnership” and the notion of “allies”, efforts are also underway to re-establish/redefine relations to key countries in the Gulf.

During the first weeks of the administration, the Yemen conflict was determined as one of the “lower hanging fruits” where foreign policy success might be possible and where new efforts were undertaken. More difficult issues to be addressed were identified as Russia's role in the region and the Syrian crisis as well as the approach to newly emerging and current key actors in the region, defined as Iran, Israel and Turkey. Notwithstanding these considerations, the expert concluded that the region has decreased in importance to US foreign policy based on the following reasons:

- 1) this administration's priority of advancing domestic policy issues;
- 2) the decreasing importance of hydrocarbons from the region for US energy security,



- 3) the “war fatigue” after the US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan,
- 4) the strategic shift from the Middle East towards Asia and the challenges China poses to the US role,
- 5) the difficulties with existing partners and alliances in the Middle East and the rise of Turkey, Iran and Israel as major power players in the region.

With regard to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, relations would fall short of “real” partnership if defining partnership as based on shared values, support for domestic policies and high degree of overlapping interests. Especially with the prospects of Mohammed Bin Salman becoming king, US relations with Saudi Arabia are likely to stay strained. Further challenges for the US priorities in the region would relate to the rise of non-Arab countries in their impact on the region and future escalation/de-escalation dynamics, most notably Turkey, Israel and Iran. These countries are relatively stable and have the biggest military capabilities. From these only Iran could trigger an escalatory cycle that could threaten the key US interest of domestic recovery. In the light of the ongoing escalatory dynamics and upcoming elections in Iran, it was important for the Biden administration to manage this issue quickly and restart the JCPOA negotiations. However, joining a new nuclear agreement could create new divisions at home and it is not yet clear whether the opportunities and gains of the nuclear deal would outweigh these domestic risks. The internal discussion within the administration on this question is not yet finalized.

In a *second input statement*, an expert from the region reflected about the region’s expectations towards the US foreign policy. He made clear that while the US has changed in the past years, so has the region. Social media for instance has provided people across the region the opportunity to exchange ideas,



analyse trends and shape public policy. Especially young people have broken with previous generations' perceptions and political orientations. While on the one hand there is a growing sense of confidence and rejection of what is perceived as Western paternalism it is also important to acknowledge the prevailing lack of trust in the US in the region and the need to start working towards rebuilding trust that is based on the identification of common values. At the same time, there are however also a number of issues on which the US and the Middle East need to cooperate and where they have common interests. One major issue is the threat of radicalization and terrorism. Despite growing evidence that ISIS is gaining ground in some Middle Eastern states and North Africa, the Biden administration has so far given this topic too little attention. The US together with the international community should develop a prevention strategy to counter these risks. Notwithstanding these fields of cooperation, the expert emphasized the need for greater self-reliance with regard to security in the region. The Abraham Accords have been a first step in this direction, but more needs to be done to become less dependent on the US and to enhance regional coordination.

In the following open discussion, participants commented on different aspects of the previous inputs. One expert remarked that interpretations about the US “abandoning the Gulf” were overstated and related to misperceptions. Though the Pentagon had deployed more troops to the Indo-Pacific, this would not translate into a decrease of importance of the Middle East. On the contrary, from a military perspective the military bases in the Gulf had not lost in importance, but rather to the contrary, and misperceptions about troop reductions were often related to misinterpretations of regular troop rotation. In addition, the temporarily enhanced US presence in the Gulf has been directly related to the



US role in Afghanistan and in Iraq and would need to be interpreted also against this background. Another point of discussion concerned the way the US could engage in the region. One participant highlighted that change in the region needs to happen gradually and not disruptively. For instance, pressuring Saudi Arabia into the Abraham Accords or overstating expectations on KSA on other issues could have a destabilizing effect. Domestic constraints would here need to be taken into account. Another expert pointed out that the US had not been a good partner for the region either and that it needs to decide on the foundation of its policies and its vision for the region. Focusing on economic visions and prospects based on common interests could enhance cooperation and secure buy-in at home while working towards a better future for the region. Increased transparency in relation to the Aramco market opening was stated as one example in the context of creating stronger and more transparent business and investment partnerships, developed in the context of a new vision for economic growth and development based on stronger institutional cooperation. In this way the region and its people could benefit from a much needed market-oriented and institutionally led vision for growth, while - at the same time - also addressing concerns in the US about China's raising economic influence and investments in infrastructure projects in the region. A stronger US commitment in the economic realm (potentially in cooperation with European partners) as part of a bigger vision could thus help to balance other forces and it is built on shared values and interests and help communicating the respective advantages of cooperation to all sides.

Session 2



Priorities, needs and options for regional security discussions

An expert from the Middle East opened the second session. He argued for a critical inward-looking perspective from the region, which would mean taking responsibility for some of the self-inflicted problems as well as possible ways forward. Supporting such a process, the US will remain an indispensable ally. In light of the ongoing pandemic and its impact on the already difficult economic situation in the region, coupled with an over-dependency on oil and a large and vulnerable young population, the region is facing massive challenges ahead. These factors can create enormous instability across the region, even in the Gulf States and it is clear that the US will not solve all these issues.

At the same time, no existing institution in the region is equipped to address these challenges or act as a conflict resolution mechanism. Given the current conditions, neither the Arab League nor the GCC can take on this role. Neither will the Abraham Accords be able to solve these major issues if there is no solution to the Palestinian question. A regional mechanism would furthermore require involving Iran as a major regional actor and would need to focus not only on regional security, de-escalation and conflict resolution mechanisms, but also on addressing the major threats to human security such as economic development and climate change. While the region needs to take on responsibility, it also faces a large spectrum of different interests and visions and will need partners and support. Here, the US could play a role supporting the region overcoming these obstacles.

Finally, the expert laid out steps to advance the discussion on regional security. He believed it required more out-of-the-box and non-exclusionary thinking. It would also be essential to broaden the discussion and engage different



international players in this discussion. Lastly, in the long-term the region would require a mechanism to discuss conflict resolution.

The next speaker focused on a European perspective on US Middle East policy. Europeans regard US support to the following issues as central: restoration of a rules-based international system and multilateralism, protection of European unity and the fight against terrorism. With regards to the Middle East, three issues shape European priorities: its energy dependency, preventive diplomacy and governance. The EU witnessed how the past US administration undermined some of the EU's core interests by exacerbating the divisions in the EU and undermining multilateralism. This was especially visible in the Middle East with Trump's maximum pressure policy towards Iran and its approach towards Saudi Arabia. So far, Biden has chosen a different approach from the previous administration, but there is still a divergence from European interests. While he has re-opened negotiations with Iran, a return to the JCPOA is not a given as negotiations might fail or an agreement might not be comprehensive enough. The expert further pointed out that the current European policy towards the Middle East is based on "confusion", yet that stronger US-European cooperation would be needed. Instead of Europeans "throwing money at problems" or adopting a securitized approach towards the region, there should be joint support for regional dialogue (European interest in regional dialogue being noticeable).

During the following discussion, further contributions focused again on the role of Iran, Turkey and Israel. One contribution questioned the internal stability of the three countries and the respective repercussions on the region. One expert believed that Turkey had reached a post-Erdogan era, which could lead to new power struggles and uncertainty. Similarly, Iran might face a leadership crisis if

Khamenei dies. The ongoing elections in Israel, on the other hand, had revealed the weakness of its political system and the importance of unresolved internal power struggles. In this context, the Abraham Accords were interpreted as being limited in reach and not designed or able to contribute to the resolution of broader regional issues but rather serving various interests and intentions in bilateral agreements.

Focusing specifically on Iran, another participant emphasized that despite having the upper hand in Yemen and Syria, the current protests in Iraq against Shia militias and Iranian influence might put a limit to Iranian expansionism in the region. While there was currently a tendency of reorientation towards Russia and China noticeable in Iran, regarding its longer-term foreign policy, he believed that the upcoming elections would see a shift towards those officials closer to the supreme leader, but this would not severely affect Iran's foreign policy. The major influence on foreign policy has always been the supreme leader and the upcoming elections were unlikely to impact on this bigger dynamic.

Other participants pointed to the risk of a vacuum against the background of a perceived risk for further withdrawal of the US from the region and the importance of regional countries taking ownership for regional de-escalation mechanisms (in addition to interest-based cooperation on certain thematic issues and with European and US in a supporting role). In addition, some commented on the importance of governance issues and sustainable development as being equally pressing for the region as well as the need to build something positive for the region. Ideas mentioned in this regard were an EU-US supported economic vision and growth initiative, a multilateral climate forum for the region and the establishment of a permanent dialogue mechanism on regional de-escalation and regional security. Whereas an expert from the region



saw a role for the US in supporting such mechanism, one US expert believed that the EU is better placed to support this. She rather perceived the added value of the US in supporting security sector reforms in the region.

During the final round, there was an interest expressed to deepen the discussion and/or reconvene in a similar format. Suggestions included to further hold consultations with experts from other regions, particularly Europe, in joint or separate formats.