



Joe Biden and the Future of the Gulf

This report is the outcome of webinar titled 'What does Joe Biden's win mean for the GCC region and neighboring countries?' on Thursday, November 12, 2020.

Discussion Report

The Gulf Studies Center at the College of Arts and Sciences hosted a webinar titled 'What does Joe Biden's win mean for the GCC region and neighboring countries?' on Thursday, November 12, 2020.

The panel included Dr. Marwan Qabalan, Dr. Bulent Aras, Dr. Majed Al Ansari, and Dr. Luciano Zaccara. It was moderated by Dr. Mahjoob Zweiri, director of the Gulf Studies Center.

Questions have been raised over the potential impact of a Joe Biden administration for Qatar and the Gulf region.

This report was elaborated by Thomas James, Gulf Studies Program, and it expresses his views based on the roundtable discussion, but it does not represent what was expressed literally by the presenters nor it expresses the position of the Gulf Studies Center.

Introduction

President-elect Joe Biden is expected to make significant changes in the GCC region and its neighboring countries. Biden's victory is seen as a welcome sign for the viability of liberal democracy in the United States and potentially good news for Qatar across several critical issues in the Gulf region.

With minor alterations, Biden is anticipated to follow suit to yesteryears' moderate but virtually unaffected methodology of prior democratic administrations, focusing on familiar bonds to Israel and arms sales that power the region's arms race.

U.S. President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris were facing a daunting task as they will have to cooperate with a Republican-controlled Senate. This indeed may lead to political paralysis and stalemate when it comes to resolving matters at a quick pace within the initial phase of Biden's presidency.

Consequently, Biden's administration will find it difficult to make substantive changes in the U.S. foreign policy compared to domestic areas. Biden was vice president during President Obama's term and chaired the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

These positions have provided him with the experience and expertise on numerous global matters. Biden's foreign policy in the Middle East is most likely to differentiate him from President Donald Trump.

However, considering his tenure as vice president, it is very likely he will prioritize the return of the U.S. into the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), terminate U.S. backing for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen, and reinstate the importance of human rights to the U.S.' itinerary in the Middle East.

A key area of contrast expected in the upcoming administration will be Joe Biden's approach towards Saudi Arabia, which will contrast the Trump Administration's stance that arguably moved closer to Saudi Arabia than any prior U.S. administration.

This was visible on the onset, when Trump's first excursion outside the U.S. was to Riyadh. Biden is likely to continue the resilient strategic alliance between the United States and Saudi Arabia; however, specific changes will be made to account for the Kingdom's unrefined and progressively disconcerting human rights record.

It is probable to expect more accountability for the Crown Prince's actions, including the ongoing and perpetual war in Yemen. Considering the resilient bipartisan Congressional resistance to the war in Yemen, Biden may intimidate to culminate in U.S. military sales to Saudi Arabia.

The topic of Syria and the Levant was bizarrely nonexistent in the U.S. presidential campaign, notwithstanding U.S. troops' presence in the said areas. Biden seems probable to preserve a similar approach by maintaining a small military presence in northeastern Syria, supporting the U.N. political process.

Regarding Biden's approach towards Turkey, the Biden administration is likely to contest Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400s air defense system and whether or not Biden the administration will execute CAATSA sanctions on Turkey. Congress remains solid on this matter; imposing sanctions on Turkey will alienate a NATO ally.

Biden and the GCC?

President-elect Biden is very probable to pressure Saudi Arabia and the UAE to end their blockade on Qatar. Towards the end of the Trump administration, diplomatic efforts were encouraged to find a solution to the blockade. The Trump administration endorsed the proceedings of the blockade but then has realized that disagreement between two strategic allies, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, does not play in favor of the United States.

An administration led by Biden is presumably unlikely to support the foundationless blockade against Qatar. Moreover, Biden will be more likely to employ levers to pressure the blockading nations, which was not a probability under the Trump administration considering the stalemate in the matter for the last three years.

Concerning the region, Biden will not bring any significant reforms to America's longstanding approach, but his more predictable policies will improve the incompetent and erratic approach of the Trump Administration.

Amid Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states, there are varied opinions on the Biden's presidency and its impact on the region. The majority of the government officials in the region associate Biden with Obama, thus expect the policies to follow similar rhetoric.

Biden's campaign team outlined support for a diplomatic approach to de-escalate tensions between Iran and the GCC states as a part of their election agenda. Biden's appointment may create the motion required to pursue a regional security dialogue, including Saudi-Iran talks.

Although expected, the GCC states' leaders are wary of the possibility that Biden may follow a similar foreign policy to that of former President Obama. The concerns are justified as throughout Obama's eight years as President; the Middle East witnessed the 'Arab Spring' revolts of 2010/11, the Egyptian coup of 2013, the dramatic rise of Islamic State (I.S.) in 2014, and the JCPOA's creation in 2015.

These developments, many of which were harmful to the region, induced several differences between the Obama administration and individual GCC states' leaders, increasing apprehensions and mistrust.

Saudi Arabia is essentially the GCC state most cautious of a possible Biden presidency. There are doubts that Washington may perchance embargo or ban annual individual arms sales while ending the U.S. support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen. If Saudi Arabia resumes escalating tensions in the region, such as its prior actions against Qatar, Yemen, and Lebanon,

it will face much more pushback from the Biden administration as compared to the leadership under Trump.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), on the parallel, will be less affected as compared to Saudi Arabia with Biden's victory. From Washington's perspective, UAE gradually withdrew from the war in Yemen and was considered uninvolved in the Khashoggi murder case.

Furthermore, UAE recently signed the Abraham Accords, which formalized the UAE and Bahrain's diplomatic relations with Israel. The normalization of ties is supposed to contribute towards stability in the region. By forming complete bilateral ties with Tel Aviv, the Emiratis have heightened the UAE's P.R. exertions with parties on both sides of the partisan in the United States.

Kuwait and Oman, the neutrally positioned GCC states, viewed Biden's victory through a positive lens. Kuwait has been an integral player in its role as a mediator between Qatar and the blockading states since 2017 and has successfully stayed nonaligned in the regional conflicts. Therefore, Kuwait will advantage of the inbound administration's diplomatic approaches to regional predicaments.

For Oman, Biden's strategy to end U.S. backing for the Saudi-led war in Yemen, which will force Riyadh to reach a political settlement with the Houthi rebels, will be affirmative. Omani representatives have seen Saudi intervention in Yemen as destabilizing while there remains a possibility of the crisis in Yemen spilling over into its territory, which will be a threat to the sultanate's national security. It is very likely that the Biden administration may involve Oman as a meditative party to facilitate dialogue with all involved parties.

Biden's Possible Impact on Bilateral Ties with Iran

When considering prospective relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, Biden has previously announced his urgency to reinitiate the Obama administration methodology, which highly juxtaposes the Trump administration's more pugnacious tactics, which originates due to the Trump administration's close ties to Saudi Arabia.

Biden will culminate in Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign and request to outline a contemporary form of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Biden will seek to integrate conditions mainly concerning Iran's activities in the region, and therefore attempt to make the agreement permanent. A renewed JCPOA, irrespective of its terms, will diminish the probabilities of military conflict between the United States and Iran, which would be detrimental to regional stability, the Gulf economies, and their security.

Biden's decision to re-implement to the JCPOA is more or less based on Iran returns to its promise of full compliance. This will also allow to pursue diplomacy with Tehran on broader issues. This will provide Biden with a landmark opportunity for renewed transatlantic cooperation. The E3, United Kingdom, France, and Germany are expected to encourage this

approach after expending efforts to contain the Trump administration's damage by seeking to preserve the nuclear agreement.

However, this will be met with stern opposition from the Republican party, alongside other U.S. allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. The duo will most certainly dissent the U.S. re-entering the JCPOA. The Iranian leadership has delineated the removal of the overwhelming sanctions and claims the right to be compensated for the economic damage done by Trump's administration.

The E.U. chairs the JCPOA's Joint Commission and will virtually play a role in outlining a diplomatic pathway between the United States and Iran.

To conclude, Biden's victory should bring about noticeable policy changes in the GCC region, with the new administration projected to express a unified approach which should be a departure from the Trump administration and its divisive policies in the region.

With Trump's chaotic presidency coming to an end, the Gulf states are preparing for significant changes in Washington that could heavily impact the Middle East. Biden will alter U.S. foreign policy towards better diplomacy, multilateralism, and liberal internationalism, which include relations with Israel, Saudi and Iran.

The Biden administration sees the Arab normalization pacts with Israel as a foreign policy priority. In Saudi Arabia's case, a re-assessment of U.S. relations with the kingdom will be another foreign policy priority for the Biden administration. The Biden administration may also refer back to the unpopular Obama-era policies, which might be a matter of concern for the GCC states. In Iran's case, the Trump administration did significant harm by the excessive sanctions imposed on Iran. Biden will attempt to return to the pre-Trump era in terms of the JCPOA. However, in order to go back to the pre-Trump era successfully as well as recover and regain Iranian trust, both states need to have a clear political strategy rather than sending signals.