



**INSTITUTE OF  
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

web: [www.issi.org.pk](http://www.issi.org.pk)  
phone: +92-51-9204423, 24  
fax: +92-51-9204658

*Report – CAMEA Panel Discussion*

# **“Biden’s Foreign Policy Approach Towards Middle East”**

**February 18, 2021**



*Rapporteur: Areeba Arif Khan*

*Edited by: Amina Khan*

The Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East & Africa (CAMEA) at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) hosted a Panel Discussion on 'Biden's Foreign Policy Approach towards Middle East' on February 18, 2021. The panel of experts included: Dr. Marvin Weinbaum, Director, Afghanistan and Pakistan Studies, Middle East Institute; Dr. Hassan Abbas, Distinguished Professor, NESU, National Defense University, USA & author of 'The Prophet's Heir: The Life of Ali ibn Abi Talib'; Dr. Nazir Hussain, Former Dean Faculty of Social Sciences, QAU and Ms. Fatima Raza, Research Associate, CAMEA, ISSI.

Director CAMEA, Ms. Amina Khan opened the panel discussion by stating that former US President Donald Trump's tenure in office has been quite tumultuous and unpredictable to say the least. The past four years have not just been turbulent for US domestic politics but have also created new challenges for American foreign policy in regions across the globe, including the Middle East which occupies a special place in the US foreign policy calculus and was the main focus of today's discussion. While the new administration has announced a 'reset' in America's foreign policy, indicating its desire to re-assess and repair alliances, re-join abandoned multilateral agreements, as well as focus on the protection of human rights as an essential component of its foreign policy in the Middle East, it will be interesting to see how this 'reset' will impact countries within the Middle East.

Talking about key takeaways from President Joe Biden's fourth of February foreign policy speech, Dr. Weinbaum said that in substance and congruity, the policy would be the same but there would be a clear difference in the style in which it is conducted. Major decisions will be taken with regards to Afghanistan and the rest of the Middle East will take its cue from there. There is also an opportunity for change especially with regards to Israel and Palestine. On US-China competition, Dr. Weinbaum hoped that it stays as only competition instead of turning into confrontation in the region.

Talking about Biden's February 4 speech Dr. Hassan Abbas opined that first and foremost message of Biden's foreign policy speech was the United States' return to diplomacy. Moving away from Trump's foreign policy model, the current framework is more binding and one that can keep the Middle East more united especially in terms of the humanitarian aspect. He also talked about the freedom of speech and stressed that it will be a binding force which will keep

the country united. He highlighted that the new administration is going through its standard review processes which is quite crucial at the moment.

He spoke about the decisions which new administration has made regarding the selection of new people in national Security Council and in states department. In his view point all the new people who have been selected are very learned and most of them are seasoned diplomats which will play a major role in rebuilding and reshaping US foreign policy of US.

Dr. Nazir Hussain while talking about the 4<sup>th</sup> February speech stated that US administration's approach would oscillate between continuity and substance. In his opinion Israel will be a new character for US in Middle East and might side line Saudi Arabia's in region.

Ms. Fatima Raza talked about how Biden's policy style appeared to be different from the previous administrations, as Biden wants to use diplomacy as a tool and focus on political resolution of conflicts in the region - there will be return of strategic maturity to the White House where it will continue to support its allies.

Talking about the change in GCC security architecture Mr. Hassan Abbas pin pointed that this is an extremely important point and this is also very relevant with what had happened with Qatar and how things have been changed especially the Abraham's accord, Israel relationship with UAE. He went on by saying that Biden administration will not push or change the way in which things stand in Gulf whether it comes to their relationship with Israel or another factor even with Iran. The GCC is in constant tension with Iran and even in some form it supports US negotiation positions.

If one major incident happens it changes the whole direction of things. So, there will be an attempt to work with GCC and it will have a huge impact on US - Saudi Arabia relations. He highlighted that there are the strong lobbies and influential centres in Washington which are of the view that US relation with house of Saud is very important and number of the Princes and other important players are very close and friendly with US. All these lobbies who wants to take power away from Mohammed Bin Salman will become very active and Gulf will play a very active role in this.

Talking about the US Saudi ties and US move regarding the halting of arms sale to Saudi Arabia, Dr. Nair Hussain mentioned that there are two things which are fundamentally important. One is US policy change towards the Yemen and according to the new policy Houthi rebels are not in the list of terrorist groups anymore. This will have a huge impact to ease the Iranian pressure vis-a-vis the Houthis and Yemen. Secondly, it is not possible for the US administration to drove off the pressure from the military and industrial complexes because there are chances that arms sales to Saudi Arabia will be resumed sooner later.

Discussing about US come back to JCPOA, Miss Fatima Raza was of the view that, by abandoning the deal Trump administration has made it extremely difficult for the new US administration to re-engage with Iran as well as return to JCPOA. At this stage since Biden administration wants to negotiate it with Iran and also wants to engage with Iran and may be at some point they want to return to JCPOA. But to do so they should do it from position of strength. She stressed that Biden's Administration has to review various policy aspects however; there is a very slight chance that Biden's administration will return back to the JCPOA.

Chairman Board of Governors, ISSI, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood also spoke about the Biden's foreign policy approach towards Iran and Saudi Arabia. He was of the opinion that the focus of Biden's foreign policy is going towards Russia and China. In Middle East it will be mostly focused on restoring alliances. While commenting about the JCPOA he stated that both the US and Iran are insisting that the other comply with the policy. There might be new agreement but it will be long process. Biden's administration should not use sanctions as tool to coerce Iran. He was also hopeful that under Biden's administration some balance may be generated towards Palestine.

Responding to question related to US-China competition in Middle East, Dr. Marvin Weinbaum emphasised that one can only hope that competition between China and US in Middle East will remain a competition not become an adversary. He was of the view that China and Russia can play a positive role in the region and it will keep on exerting its influence. He also highlighted that at this stage re-engagement with Iran seems difficult without international cooperation.

Dr Nazir Hussain was of the view that most Muslim countries will recognize Israel except for Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. He also said that Russian involvement in Syria is quite

prominent. Comparing China and Russia's importance in the region, he said that the former is significant on the economic front while the latter is important in terms of the security factor.

Dr. Hassan Abbass remarked that US should be very clear in its relations with Iran which will also define its approach towards the GCC countries. He further said that the US-Israel relation will have direct impact on the bilateral ties between Iran and the US. In Syria, he stated that there would be more competition between US and Russia which could go in a negative direction. While in Syria, one could expect a more active role.