



Questions for President-Elect Biden: Is the US Still Relevant in the MENA Region?

Discussion paper of the Brussels International Center's *The US Presidential Crossroads: Foreign Policy Implications for the MENA Region* webinar event on 3 December 2020

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Discussion

On 3 December 2020, the Brussels International Center organized an online webinar titled *The US Presidential Crossroads: Foreign Policy Implications for the MENA Region* that brought policymakers, practitioners, and analysts together to discuss the recent November 2020 US Presidential Election, and its impact on US foreign policy in the MENA region.

There were several differing points of discussion, namely: what are President-elect Joe Biden's priorities in the MENA region; will there be a return to

multilateralism and how will this come to be; can we expect to see a return to the pre-Trump era status quo; and what does this all mean for the US/EU alliance in the region?

Having said this, and despite some attempts to regard President Trump's time in office as something of an anomaly in terms of US engagement with the world, the decline of US engagement in the MENA region has been a process that began under former President Obama. This is especially true for military

disengagement, such as troop withdrawals. The reality is that the time of large-scale US interventionism in the MENA region will continue to decrease, given changes in energy priorities and a move away from securitising oil as well as US domestic pressures to avoid more costly war.

What did change under Trump, however, was the way the US accomplished diplomacy. The traditional way of engaging with regional partners changed considerably, from increased tolerance for regional strongmen, and decreased cooperation with classic allies such as the EU. This, of course, combined with a general skepticism towards multilateral processes in general, including those orchestrated by the UN. As a result, the gap left in the US's absence in crises across the region was filled by a myriad of actors, all competing for their own interests.

This has left the power dynamics of conflict regions such as Syria and Libya determined by alternative actors such as Turkey and Russia, while the US has taken a diminished role. Whether the US will seek to insert itself back into these conflicts in a significant way is doubtful with the US's current priorities, which are being focused on domestic issues, such as the COVID-19 response, as well as repairing fractured relationships with key trading partners such as China and the EU.

However, speakers at the event identified a couple of key areas of US foreign policy in the MENA region that Biden will probably seek to change within the next year. The first of which are the relations with Iran and the JCPOA nuclear agreement. Trump famously withdrew the US from this deal, which was considered one of the flagship foreign policy achievements under

Obama, in doing so raising considerable distress from the US's European allies France, Germany and Britain, all who co-guaranteed the agreement. Trump instead defined US relations with Iran as one of maximum pressure, of threats and aggressive rhetoric. Under Biden, the administration will have someone who, having been Obama's Vice-President when the JCPOA was initially created, will have more reason to revisit this. Do we expect the JCPOA to return as it was in 2015, however? This is unlikely due to increased distrust between the parties involved, the US cannot just rejoin that simply. Instead, we can expect a US push to multilateral solutions towards Iran, with the framework of the JCPOA being a key part of this.

The other key issue will be to reconsider the US stance on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, given some of Trump's more partisan actions such as moving the US embassy to Jerusalem. Again, we should expect a return to a multilateral approach, with more measured US actions as a consequence.

What of relations between the US and Europe on these issues? Despite some of the more incendiary remarks of the Trump administration, the US remained a key strategic partner of the EU throughout. Under Biden, relations will undoubtedly be more cordial in the public sphere, and we can expect more multilateral foreign policy actions in terms of diplomacy. However, in some foreign policy areas, the US will be hesitant to be as involved as Europe. For example, while we can expect the US to be more rhetorically supportive of European partners in the Eastern Mediterranean against a bullish Turkey, in Libya, a country that was already destabilized following the 2011 NATO-intervention, it is unlikely that the US will pursue the personal agendas of some

European States such as France and Italy. In these instances, we should look towards wider multilateral efforts such as the UN-process to discern the reach of US foreign policy.

Ultimately, the Biden administration will face a tough question in deciding what the role of the US should be in the region moving forward. While the US, due to its dominant military and economic presence, will always have substantial influence on international issues, if the costs of answering some of the challenges in the MENA, in virtue of unilateral engagement, is too significant, it is doubtful there will be a complete reversal to Obama-era foreign policy. And while the US is adjusting its own domestic priorities, we can expect to see a greater reliance on multilateral mechanisms to achieve foreign policy objectives moving forward.

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