

SUMMARY REPORT

# 2nd Annual Middle East Strategy Forum (MESF)



THE INSTITUTE FOR  
PEACE & DIPLOMACY



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## KEYNOTE I

# The Future of U.S. Involvement in the Middle East and the Role of Alliances in Advancing Peace and Security in the Region



### Amy Tachco

Director of Regional and Multilateral Affairs, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, U.S. Department of State

— United States

## SPEAKER

- **Amy Tachco:** Director of Regional and Multilateral Affairs, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, U.S. Department of State (United States)

## MODERATOR

- **Bijan Ahmadi:** Executive Director, Institute for Peace and Diplomacy

*Note: This speech was delivered under Chatham House rules. Thus, there is no public summary report for this session.*



## PANEL I

# The Emerging Security Architecture in the Middle East

## SPEAKERS

- **Hassan Ahmadian:** Assistant Professor, University of Tehran (Iran)
- **Peter Jones:** Executive Director, Ottawa Dialogue; Former Senior Analyst, Privy Council Office (Canada)
- **Abdullah Baabood:** Chair of the State of Qatar for Islamic Area Studies and Visiting Professor, School of International Liberal Studies, Waseda University (Oman)
- **Susan Ziadeh:** Former U.S. Ambassador to Qatar; Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Arabian Peninsula Affairs (United States)

## MODERATOR

- **Elizabeth Hagedorn:** U.S. State Department Correspondent, Al-Monitor (United States)

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The diminished US presence in the region, whether reality or perception, is influencing the policy-making process within strategic circles in many Middle Eastern countries.
- The regional allies of the US are seriously concerned about the unstable state of American domestic politics and the possibility of drastic change it may bring about vis-a-vis the Middle East region with a transition of power from one administration to another.
- As a result, the region is undergoing political and security realignments to better respond to the new realities on the ground. The emergence of the Abraham Accords and the wider reception of the Iran nuclear deal by the region are two major indications of the region and the Arab states, in particular, are playing their cards carefully in this changing security environment.



- The Iran-Saudi dialogue is another positive development – if the results offer the possibility of further engagement and de-escalation between Iran and the Arab countries in the Middle East.
- Despite these new developments, the US still remains the most powerful international actor and security guarantor in the Middle East with its military and intelligence forces well present in the region, as part of the US Central Command.

## SPEAKER HIGHLIGHTS



### Peter Jones

Executive Director, Ottawa Dialogue; former Senior Analyst, Privy Council Office

— Canada

#### On the perception of the U.S. role in the Middle East:

*There is a perception in the region that we just don't know; from president to president, administration to administration, what will be the American place and priorities in the region.*

*Perception influences the way people think. The perception of an Iran-Saudi rapprochement is a perception that is driving a lot of discussion and policy consideration in the region.*

#### On forming an inclusive regional security order:

*There is a belief, a hope, on the part of the Biden administration that the Abraham Accords can evolve into both a deterrent alliance, which Israel believes they are, but also some kind of regional dialogue mechanism on potential cooperation on energy, human rights and economic development across the region.*





## On the ongoing Saudi-Iran dialogue:

*The issue with these security talks is always determining what the terms would be based on, how long it would last, what's going on around it. Assuming that it is a genuine rapprochement of strategic interest, which I have my doubts about at least in the near term, I think it would have a significant impact on the regional security dynamics.*

*My assumption is that it's more of an 'on certain issues we're together, on others, we'll keep our powder dry' type of arrangement. It will depend on which areas they choose to collaborate on, but I don't think it's going to happen terribly soon.*



**Hassan Ahmadian**

Assistant Professor at the University of Tehran

— Iran

## On the change of policy position on JCPOA in the region:

*They [GCC countries] have their reservations, but they are now welcoming the JCPOA and supporting the international efforts to revive it. This is mainly the result of their negative lived experience of heightened regional tensions with Iran during President Trump's era.*

*The only country that still remains totally against the JCPOA is Israel. So, there is a clear divergence here that I think can widen further provided that the JCPOA is revived in the future.*



### On Iran's regional deterrence strategy:

*Historically, there haven't been any unilateral conventional arms control agreements in the region. Anything that should be merely tackled with regards to Iran's ballistic missiles program, I think, should be regional.*

*In Iran, we know that we live in a messy environment in the Middle East... but to be singled out for our regional defence strategy and be told to change this or that, is not acceptable based on the debates unfolding within strategic circles in Tehran.*

### On the impact of the Abraham Accords on regional security:

*The heralding of normalization between Israel and the Arab states by the Abraham Accords will raise regional tensions due to the fact that it does not address the fundamental Israeli-Palestinian conflict and it will be used to counter Iran on the regional front.*

*My view is that the Iranian response to Israel's active involvement in Erbil shouldn't be a surprise because the Israelis are moving beyond the least acceptable balance of power that they had with Iran. They, through the Abraham Accords, are trying to strengthen their presence around Iran by encircling it, which Iran will be keen to stop that from happening and tipping the longstanding balance.*



## Abdullah Baabood

Chair of the State of Qatar for Islamic Area Studies  
and Visiting Professor, School of International Liberal  
Studies, Waseda University

— Oman

### On U.S.-GCC relations:

*The US is still very much the security guarantor of the Gulf region. Yet, the region, rightly or wrongly, is perceiving that the US is perhaps abandoning them. There are, of course, reasons for that. One is the pivot towards Asia, on the Pacific and China. Another one is the fact that the United States didn't respond to some challenges such as attacks on oil facilities in the region. With this perception of abandonment, there are parallel fears of becoming entrapped by the Iranian threat.*

*This perception has political implications, with the Gulf States no longer prioritizing the needs and demands of Europe and the US, such as the call for an increase in oil production. We have to note that the Gulf states are not united in their perception of their relationship with the US. Qatar, for example, has built a very strong relationship with the US, while the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the UAE has deteriorated.*

### On Iran-GCC relations:

*The region itself suffers from this rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The two are the elephants in the room, as it were, and if they quarrel and fight with each other in any way. The other smaller countries want to live in a peaceful region, whereby there is at least a balance between the two major regional powers.*

*The region views this rapprochement or dialogue as a way to ease tensions in the region. Obviously, not all the Gulf states are in agreement. Some are more against Iran than others, but in general, they are looking forward to a more peaceful regional cooperation.*



## On GCC views of the Abraham Accords:

*The Abraham Accords will add even further dimensions to what is already a very complicated picture in the region. Bringing Israel closer to Iran and to the region is only going to raise tensions as we have seen. Obviously, Iran will have to respond in one way or another which is going to be more harmful.*

*I'm sure that any rapprochement or dialogue between Israel and the Arab countries is useful and welcome, however, I think there is a lot of hype over the Abraham Accords with it receiving much more attention than it should. We have to also take into consideration that the Gulf states care most about their regime's security. This goes for Iran as well. When we consider these sorts of security arrangements in the region, first and foremost, it should be more inclusive, comprehensive, and it must guarantee regime and state security.*



### Susan Ziadeh

Former U.S. Ambassador to Qatar; Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Arabian Peninsula Affairs

— United States

## On the perception of the U.S. role in the Middle East:

*This perception is interesting to me because the reality is really very different. The U.S. has a long-standing military and security presence in the region. From a regional security perspective, our commitment is still very much there and it has not diminished, despite our withdrawal from Afghanistan.*



## On the security dimension of the Abraham Accords:

*The Abraham Accords may be viewed as a hedge against Iran—that's one possibility as the deterrent force—, but also the Arab countries look at the way that the US supports Israel, that the support of Israel has been a constant throughout Israel's history. To align with Israel perchance is also a way of lining up their stronger relations with the United States. but I think it is valid to at least examine, to what extent this alignment with Israel is helpful in strengthening the US commitment to their security in the region.*

## On peacemaking efforts in Yemen:

*If we look at Yemen now, we hope that there will be some kind of diplomatic resolution to this conflict so that it is not seen simply as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and that it can be contained in a way that creates regional stability. That would be a really great first step to showing that countries diplomatically can engage in a way that's productive for the region, whether within or outside of the confines of the JCPOA agreement.*



## PANEL II

# West Asia: A New Theater for Great Power Rivalry

## SPEAKERS

- **Wenran Jiang:** Advisor, Institute for Peace & Diplomacy; President of Canada-China Energy and Environment Forum (Canada)
- **Mohsen Milani:** Executive Director, Center for Strategic & Diplomatic Studies; Professor of Politics, University of South Florida (United States)
- **Assaf Orion:** Senior Research Fellow & Director, Israel-China Research Program, Institute for National Security Studies (Israel)
- **Lawrence Wilkerson:** Retired United States Army Colonel; Former Chief of Staff to US Secretary of State Colin Powell (United States)

## MODERATOR

- **Kelley Vlahos:** Editorial Director at the Responsible Statecraft (United States)

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The region has undergone a slow realignment since the United States has signalled its desire to begin a retrenchment from the region, or at least reprioritize its activities in the Middle East as it looks towards China and other great power rivalries on the global stage.
- To say that Russia and China are not cultivating the region in hopes of gaining influence as great powers, would be an understatement. In light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Moscow tested the durability of its ties with Arab states and Iran in the face of US/Western pressure. All these costly developments for the region worked out well for China as it is carefully calibrating its geopolitical and economic presence in the Middle East.
- Russia's power is not merely based on factors of economic or military capability. Ultimately, Russia is a large country that has many asymmetrical powers and influences such as on the flows of energy and food supplies within the region.



- While Russia and China both show signs of prioritizing Asia, with the Middle East, in particular, they differ in their strategies and long-term objectives. For Russia, it is a matter of forced strategic choice, with a strong military dimension, that requires tactful engagement, whereas, for China, it is more about the economy and energy with growing interests in expanding military and security relations as well.
- The US is going to pursue a policy of 'self-help' in the Middle East region, meaning that, as opposed to continued investment in the military presence as a stabilizing force in the region, it will principally utilize its diplomatic, economic and financial resources to support regional allies in stabilizing itself.

## SPEAKER HIGHLIGHTS



### Wenran Jiang

Advisor, Institute for Peace & Diplomacy; President of  
Canada-China Energy and Environment Forum

— Canada

### On the different roles and objectives of China and Russia in the Middle East:

*Enough activities, statements and interactions have emerged pointing to the fact that Russia is going to make Asia, especially the Middle East, West Asia and North Africa very much a priority in the future. Amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this should be interpreted as Russia having no choice and doing it mainly as a forced strategic choice.*

*Unlike Russia, China enjoys the flexibility and maneuvering space needed for its strategic engagement with the Middle East region. The Chinese stated policy position is that you cannot build security at the expense of another country's security. This position is well received by all the countries including Israel across the Middle East, which has opened a lot of doors for China in the region.*



## Mohsen Milani

Executive Director, Center for Strategic & Diplomatic Studies; Professor of Politics, University of South Florida

— United States

### On Iran's regional role in the post-U.S. withdrawal era from the Middle East:

*The US is still very much the security guarantor of the Gulf region. Yet, the region, rightly or wrongly, is perceiving that the US is perhaps abandoning them. There are, of course, reasons for that. One is the pivot towards Asia, on the Pacific and China. Another one is the fact that the United States didn't respond to some challenges such as attacks on oil facilities in the region. With this perception of abandonment, there are parallel fears of becoming entrapped by the Iranian threat.*

*This perception has political implications, with the Gulf States no longer prioritizing the needs and demands of Europe and the US, such as the call for an increase in oil production. We have to note that the Gulf states are not united in their perception of their relationship with the US. Qatar, for example, has built a very strong relationship with the US, while the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the UAE has deteriorated.*

### On the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the Middle East:

*This idea that either the US is leaving the Middle East or is pivoting toward China [most of it] is really propaganda by some regional allies of the United States to get more concessions from Washington by saying, if you leave, we are going to China or to Russia.*

*Regardless of what happens in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, I believe that Ayatollah Khomeini has already decided long before the invasion, to make a partial pivot towards China and towards Russia. If there's one thing you should know about Ayatollah Khomeini, it's that he does not change his views easily. Especially when it comes to strategy, he is quite consistent.*





## Assaf Orion

Senior Research Fellow & Director, Israel-China Research Program, Institute for National Security Studies

— Israel

### On the emerging perceptions of the U.S. and Russia in the Middle East:

*The minute the United States, in 2011, started speaking about its Pacific Century, about pivoting to Asia, there began a magical phase of AWOL (absent without leaving). Their feet are in the Middle East, but their mind is in China...so there is a deterrence deficit here, which is not by the size of the forces but by the appetite to use them.*

*The US lack of willingness to respond to direct and indirect attacks on its regional allies—despite having the operational capacity to do so—has damaged the US reputation as a regional security guarantor in the eyes of its allies across the Middle East region.*

### On China's Middle East engagement strategy:

*On their general strategy, the Chinese choose to be on good terms with everyone. They're making relationships in parallel with the most bitter enemies like Saudi Arabia and Iran, even on the same visit by Xi Jinping; to Israel and Iran. They tend not to mix politics and business.*

*On the military side, we are seeing initial buds of an emerging presence in Djibouti, Guadal, Port Khalifa in the UAE and Eritrea. So, China is looking at this region, not just through its peace-keeping capacity and the anti-piracy mission. Though, China is not interested in taking the burden of the US as a security guarantor to engage in navigational security or energy security.*



## On Iran's nuclear and regional strategies:

*"We already understand the direction in which Iran is heading, the argument now is about the timeline. If the JCPOA is resigned it will rewind the developments for 6 months, then start setting. In 9 years, we will find ourselves in the same predicament, only this time, Iran will be able to legitimately acquire, enrich and so on. With or without a JCPOA, Iran is going to use the axis of resistance, which means that all the Gulf countries will be under attack."*



### Lawrence Wilkerson

Retired United States Army Colonel; Former Chief of Staff to U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell

— United States

## On the change of U.S. strategy toward the Middle East:

*We are not necessarily leaving the region, but we are turning it over to the diplomats. By that, what I mean is that we are going to pursue a policy of self-help, with facilitation by the United States; principally through our diplomats, economic and financial power.*

*The Americans are tired of the endless wars as our aggregate debt [in the US] is going to be \$30 trillion USD by 2030. That's not very far away but that's going to have an enormous impact inside the Superpower. This has a direct impact on the direction of American foreign policy.*



## On a new theatre for regional competition among great powers:

*The new cockpit of strategic competition is the Red Sea. It is not the Persian Gulf anymore. It is being obfuscated and sort of hidden by the turmoil created in Eastern Africa and by the Yemen situation, where you have people going across the red sea almost every day in vast numbers. So much so that we thought recently about reconstituting the combined task force there, the US part of it, to handle the traffic, smuggling, cheating, death and murders associated with these flows.*

*As a result of the War, Russia is now so preoccupied with not collapsing, which is the main geo-political strategy of the Biden administration so that it can clear the deck and go after China. Xi Jinping also senses this to a certain extent. While he is reluctant to be too close to Russia, he nonetheless is going to keep that warm as he sees this ultimately pointed at him. This is the dynamic that's taking place and the Middle East is just an ancillary theatre to that dynamic.*



## KEYNOTE II

# Egypt: A Stabilizing Role in the Turbulent Middle East



### H.E. Ahmed Abu Zeid

Former Egyptian Ambassador to Canada; Director, Public Diplomacy Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

— Egypt

## SPEAKER

- **H.E. Ahmed Abu Zeid:** Former Egyptian Ambassador to Canada; Director, Public Diplomacy Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Egypt)

## MODERATOR

- **Jon Allen:** Former Canadian Ambassador to Israel; Senior Fellow, Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy (Canada)

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- While Egypt supports the Abraham Accords and the normalization of relations between Israel and Arab countries, it also believes that the resolution of the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the ultimate gateway to stability and security in the region.
- Egypt still views the two-state solution as the most viable roadmap toward resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which suffers from the international community's lack of political will and appetite to prioritize it in the face of many other regional and international challenges.
- The international community has failed—repeatedly—to address the root causes underlying the multitude of conflicts and tensions in the region. From Syria, Libya,



and Iraq to Lebanon, Yemen, and Sudan, no political solutions have made sustainable peace in the region. With the US's declining role and the lack of global leadership in the region, these conflicts seem to grow amid the changing regional and international order.

- Regionally, Egypt has launched a number of consultative mechanisms, on one side to address the crisis from within, and another to deal with trans-regional interferences in the Arab affairs and the impact of the International crisis on the stability of the region.
- To strengthen its role as a reliable partner in the region, Canada must review, re-configure and refocus its Middle East Strategy to adapt to the profound changes that have transpired in the region in the past decade.
- In the domains of humanitarian work and development assistance, Canada needs to make its contributions more strategic and impactful. Such reconfiguration should consider the national agendas of the countries as priorities instead of Canadian exclusively.



## PANEL III

# West Asia: Canada's Defense and Foreign Policy Toward the Middle East

## SPEAKERS

- **Ulric Shannon:** Director-General, Peace and Stabilization Operations, Global Affairs Canada; Former Canadian Ambassador to Iraq (Canada)
- **Miloud Chennoufi:** Professor, Royal Military College of Canada (Canada)
- **Gordon Venner:** Former Associate Deputy Minister, Department of National Defence; Former Canadian Ambassador to Iran (Canada)
- **Ferry de Kerckhove:** Former Canadian Ambassador to Egypt; Senior Fellow, Graduate School of Public and Global Affairs, University of Ottawa (Canada)
- **Peggy Mason:** Former Canadian Ambassador to the UN for Disarmament; President; Rideau Institute on International Affairs (Canada)

## MODERATOR

- **David Carment:** Senior Fellow, Institute for Peace & Diplomacy; Professor, Carleton University (Canada)

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Canada's Middle East policy suffers from a long-term vision and pragmatic roadmap that enable the government to match its value-based rhetoric and policies with concrete actions and tangible changes on the ground.
- While Canada's interests are diverse with much potential to be discovered within the region, the primary driving force of Canadian involvement in the Middle East is to support the regional and global allies, which are often coordinated with the United States.
- Canada's Middle East Engagement Strategy is influenced by the following three factors in order: alliance management with the US and Western allies (NATO), strong relations with Israel and domestic/constituency politics.



- With the war in Ukraine and the North Atlantic Alliance being questioned, there needs to be more caution and considerations for further investment in the Middle East though that does not mean withdrawing from the region by any means.
- Despite the common perception that Canada is a major peacekeeping country, there is little investment and activity from Canada when it comes to peacekeeping missions in general and vis-a-vis the Middle East region in particular.
- With the war in Ukraine and the North Atlantic Alliance being questioned, there needs to be more caution and considerations for further investment in the Middle East though that does not mean withdrawing from the region by any means.

## SPEAKER HIGHLIGHTS



### Miloud Chennoufi

Professor, Royal Military College of Canada

— Canada

### On Canada's approach to the Middle East:

*When it comes to relations between Canada and the Middle East, there are two starting points that should be taken into account. The first one is the regional structural order. There is an order, it is a problematic one, articulated around 5 fault lines. No country getting interested in this region can overlook them, because their policy will be influenced by these fault lines. The second point is, Canada's status as a power on the global stage.*

*"There is no vital interest for Canada to be involved in the Middle East. Even when it comes to the issue of terrorism, the most high-profile terrorist attacks that happened in Ottawa were not generated in Canada like in Europe. Thus, it's ultimately become more about our relationship management with the United States that influences our Middle East policy.*



## Gordon Venner

Former Associate Deputy Minister, Department of National Defence; Former Canadian Ambassador to Iran

— Canada

### On Canada's engagement with the Middle East:

*Yes, we have values that are at play in the Middle East and yes, we have interests that are in the Middle East, but usually when we get involved in the Middle East, that's not why. We get involved in the Middle East usually because it has to do with our relationships with our friends and allies, particularly the really big one just south of us.*

*There is a long history of us using the Canadian military in the region to carry out a variety of different functions. Some of those have been surprisingly useful and successful, even if they haven't been that high-profile. Particularly, the Canadian contribution to the United States Security Coordination Mission, which was a long-term success.*



## Ferry de Kerckhove

Former Canadian Ambassador to Egypt; Senior Fellow at the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, University of Ottawa

— Canada

### On Canada's review of the Middle East Engagement Strategy:

*There hasn't been a foreign policy review in years. Now it is a big debate in Canada as to whether it's useful or not to have a foreign policy review, I tend to say that the*





*process is more important than the result.*

*There is minimal outsourcing of thinking, or at least of trying to get alternative views in the system. Lloyd Axwoody started this development when I was head of policy planning, requiring an alternative view for every single issue of significance. We actually ended up creating a parallel policy thinking in collaboration with outsiders. What I'm hoping is that we actually take the Lloyd Axwoody paradigm and impose it on some kind of review because then the alternative perspectives will be discussed in depth.*



### **Peggy Mason**

Former Canadian Ambassador to the UN for Disarmament; President, Rideau Institute on International Affairs

— Canada

## **On Canada's inconsistent policy toward the Middle East:**

*The region is awash with weapons. Yet Canada's increased trade is largely due to arms exports to the region's most repressive regimes such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This approach epitomizes, in my view, the double standard underlying our professed commitment to human rights and a rules-based international order. I think promoting trade that supports human rights and does not exacerbate terrible regional conflicts, as the one in Yemen is, would appear to be a key minimum step that Canada could take.*

*We really have to see what we're talking about when we talk about the defence of the so-called rules-based international order, because if the fundamental elements of that are the two elements, sovereignty on the one hand and human rights on the other, then that is not we have been coherently doing in the Middle East.*



## Ulric Shannon

Director-General, Peace and Stabilization Operations,  
Global Affairs Canada; Former Canadian Ambassador  
to Iraq

— Canada

### On Canada's Middle East Engagement Strategy and the path forward:

*The Middle East Engagement Strategy has been reviewed twice and I think if we look at what the results are six years on, it's entirely possible for us to essentially declare success or declare victory. Daesh has been defeated territorially.*

*I question whether the pursuit of objectives through traditional programming has a strong likelihood of success. In countries like Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, we've potentially reached the limit of what we can do organically in terms of response programming, whether humanitarian or development, without seeing a much stronger commitment on the part of host governments in the region.*

*We are not being compelled to do more in the region by our key partner, which is the United States. The US is very much looking at disengaging from the region, and limiting exposure and as far as I know, they have not asked us to do more. That is a significant factor, I would suggest, in us taking more of a wait-and-see position.*



## PANEL IV

# The Abraham Accords: Challenges and Opportunities for the Region

## SPEAKERS

- **Trita Parsi:** Executive Vice President, Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft (United States)
- **Assaf Orion:** Senior Research Fellow & Director, Israel-China Research Program, Institute for National Security Studies (Israel)
- **Aaron David Miller:** Senior Fellow, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Former U.S. Deputy Special Middle East Coordinator for Arab-Israeli Negotiations (United States)
- **Jon Allen:** Former Canadian Ambassador to Israel; Senior Fellow, Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy (Canada)

## MODERATOR

- **Peter Jones:** Executive Director, Ottawa Dialogue; Former Senior Analyst, Privy Council of Canada (Canada)

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- From a regional perspective, the Abraham Accords are viewed as moving beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict rather than resolving it, which renders the biggest loss to the Palestinians.
- The Baghdad dialogue provides a great opportunity for sustainable peace as it is designed not to be reliant on US support, but rather be reliant on the self-interest of the regional states to seek reduced tensions and diplomatic engagement.
- The extent of operational cooperation between Israel and Arab countries in the Middle East is much more robust and active than portrayed in public.
- Jared Kushner's game plan was to produce a 22-state solution, not a two-state solution. The two-state solution was not a high priority for the Trump administra-



tion, but a 22-state solution with Israel engaging many of the Arab states was.

- Countries in the Persian Gulf region, with the UAE standing out in particular, are approaching the Baghdad Dialogues and the Abraham Accords in parallel. They are investing diplomatic resources in both regionally-oriented dialogues for various purposes.

## SPEAKER HIGHLIGHTS



### Trita Parsi

Executive Vice President, Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft

— United States

### On the geopolitical impact of the Abraham Accords:

*From a more geopolitical perspective, there are two different paths that region may take. On the one hand, it is the Abrahams Accords, which is similar to previous attempts in the region. Even though it does go beyond them in many different ways, it is indeed quite different in the sense that it is an overt alliance between Israel and some of the Arab States. But the key elements of it are nevertheless an effort to keep the United States committed to the region and it is organizing the region in blocks, in which its critical component is to try to isolate and contain Iran.*

*The Abraham Accord necessitates continued Arab-Iranian tensions. This is made very clear in the document that was leaked by the foundation for Abraham's Accord, saying that any improvement in Saudi-Iranian relations would be a threat to the Accords. That in and of itself gives a very clear image of how the approach tends to cement, rather than resolve tensions in the region. The same cannot be said about the Baghdad Dialogue.*

*If the Baghdad Dialogue leads to reduced tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, I think it is conceivable that, at some point, there could be an inclusion of Israel since there is a Palestinian component. Of course, it would face tremendous diffi-*



*culties with countries like Iran which refuse to recognize Israel. But there is nothing in the Baghdad dialogue that would exclude Israel, whereas what is inherent in Abraham's accord, is that there have to be continued tensions between Iran and the Arab states, in order for the incentive structures of the Accords to remain in place and sustainable.*



### **Assaf Orion**

Senior Research Fellow & Director, Israel-China Research Program, Institute for National Security Studies

— Israel

#### **On the Abraham Accords and Israeli-Palestinian issue:**

*Let us ask, has resistance to normalization promoted a two-state solution until now? I think we have many years of failure behind us. It also tells us that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, although very important to the Israelis and the Palestinians, is not the main fault line, nor the main conflict explaining the instability within the region.*

*The relations with the Gulf States, important as they are for Israel, were never a sufficient incentive for Israel to make tough choices vis-a-vis Palestinian issue. Countries like Egypt, and Jordan, along with three or more members in the Arab camp, can actually play an active role and engage in making a difference and promoting conditions to solve this conflict in the post-Abraham Accords era. Despite this, I don't think that this is at the Palestinians' expense. If the Palestinians play it right, there's a lot to gain from these new realities.*

*I think Iran should be congratulated for being so threatening to the Gulfies that it was a great incentive to sign a deal with Israel. The fact that Saudi will warm up to Iran, well, looking at the couple, it's not real love. That's Saudi's attempt at limiting incoming material threats. My indication is that, pretty early on, the UAE signed an*



*MOU for maritime security with Iran, which meant ‘stop mining my tankers please.’ Do you see it tamping down the Accords? No. They can recognize that the Accord is a multifaceted agreement.*



### **Aaron David Miller**

Senior Fellow, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Former U.S. Deputy Special Middle East Coordinator for Arab-Israeli Negotiations

— United States

#### **On the impact of the Accords on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict:**

*The common assumption was that no Arab state could possibly enter into some reconciliation with Israel without an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. That assumption was girded by two other, yet-to-be-realized propositions. One, that unless Israel settled up with the Palestinians, the state, the nation of Israel was doomed to be a pariah in the international community. Number two, that the Palestinian-Israeli status quo was fundamentally not sustainable. That ultimately, it would break down into massive violence, and might even provoke some sort of regional war. The problem that none of these propositions came to pass is...that in fact, Israel has expanded its influence and its recognition in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The Abraham Accords seem to be a sort of confirmation of this reality.*

*I think, for those states that weren’t touched by the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates in particular. Saudi Arabia, led by a ruthless and then reckless Mohammad Bin Salman and the much smarter and mature Mohammad Bin Zayed, sought to create a new set of relationships with Washington by exercising a kind of foreign policy which aligned with the incoming Trump administration. One that was profoundly anti-Iranian as well as a much more pragmatic and functional view of Israel.*

*The Trump administration offered a series of quid pro quos to facilitate this recon-*



ciliation between Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. The Biden administration frankly, inherited this process. Understanding that the other piece of it, the Israeli Palestinian process, was not ready to be resolved, they understood the value of having some kind of working element.

*I am more persuaded as the years go by, that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has a logic all of its own. No amount of pressure, or even inducements on the part of the Arab states to Israel, will make an Israeli Prime Minister, who is fundamentally opposed to a set of terms that would allow Israelis and Palestinians to get into a negotiation, to resolve the 6 core issues that drive their conflict. The Palestinian Movement is also fundamentally divided now and no amount of pressure on Palestinians will push them to abandon their political aspirations. I think the Abraham Accords exist in large part because of the changing regional priorities, facilitated for sure by an American broker. In many ways, the Accords seem to be untethered from any serious effort to use them either as incentives or disincentives to motivate either Israelis or Palestinians.*



### Jon Allen

Former Canadian Ambassador to Israel; Senior Fellow,  
Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy

— Canada

### On the benefits of the Abraham Accords for regional states:

*Israel was the big winner. It achieved formal recognition of relationships it had been developing under the diplomatic table for some time with Morocco, UAE and Bahrain. For Israel, this is a game changer and it brings it significantly closer to being accepted as a legitimate partner and sometimes an ally in the region. Israel will likely deliver more to its partners than it will receive from them, but the recognition it achieved will be more than worth it. Israel may benefit from Gulf State investments.*





*By joining two Sunni-led states which are at odds with Iran, Israel also succeeded in increasing regional opposition to that country and its support for Israel's enemies: Hezbollah and Syria. But, perhaps most importantly for Israel, it achieved all of this without having to offer any concessions to the Palestinians. As such, Israel bypassed the conditions previously set out by the Saudi-led Arab Peace initiative."*

*They were signed of course, after the Trump administration had already moved its embassy to Jerusalem, closed its consulate and cut off funding both to UNRA and the PA. As noted, the Saudi Peace initiative was ignored. Land for peace, no longer governed. Moreover, there were no suggestions, then or now, that the UAE or the other parties to the Accords, would condition their future participation on an improvement in relations between Israel and the Palestinians.*





## PANEL V

# Syria: A Regional and Global Fault Line in Flux

## SPEAKERS

- **George Beebe:** Vice President and Director of Studies, Center for the National Interest; Former Director of Russia Analysis, CIA and Special Advisor to Vice President Cheney for Russia/Eurasia and Intelligence Programs (United States)
- **Itamar Rabinovich:** Former Israeli Ambassador to the United States; Former President, Tel Aviv University; Distinguished Fellow, Brookings Institution
- **Jerome Drevon:** Senior Analyst in Jihad and Modern Conflict, International Crisis Group (France)
- **Joshua Landis:** Chair Director, Center of Middle East Studies and the Persian Gulf Studies, University of Oklahoma (United States)

## MODERATOR

- **Elizabeth Hagedorn:** U.S. State Department Correspondent, Al-Monitor (United States)

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The war in Ukraine has damaged Russia reputationally and materially, spreading its resources thin in Syria and making Moscow a less reliable strategic partner in military terms across the region. With the Russians weakening themselves in Ukraine, the value to the United States, wearing Russia has greatly diminished in Syria.
- One of the main goals for the United States in this region is to roll back Iran's influence and its potential threats against Israel. Therefore, The United States and Israel have engaged in bombing Iranian targets as well as blocking trade routes to prevent arms transfers to Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon.
- The U.S. has made a number of concessions to Turkey under President Trump, which allowed Turkey to take some areas in that region while undermining Kurdish interest in the region. This strategy has moreless continued under President



Biden as a way to pressure Iran and limit its influence in the country.

- The new thinking in the Gulf and in parts of Israel is that the only way to roll back Iranian influence will be to strengthen the central government in Syria, rebuild its economy, and let the Gulf countries outmaneuver Iran on the economic front – an area that sanctioned Iran cannot offer much.
- The front lines in Syria are stable due to the presence of foreign actors, Turkey in particular. The U.S. military presence in Syria is small, not costly, and largely symbolic, with a few hundred soldiers in the region being sufficient in achieving U.S. objectives.

## SPEAKER HIGHLIGHTS



### George Beebe

Vice President and Director of Studies, Center for the National Interest; Former Director of Russia Analysis, CIA and Special Advisor to Vice President Cheney

— United States

### On Russian successes and failures in Syria:

*What the Russians are really looking for in the region and in the world more generally is a much more multipolar order; one in which the United States is not the dominant hegemon. But, it is a place where other powers, both regional and extra-regional, are important players that can counterbalance American influence by constraining the U.S.' freedom of maneuver. They've been quite successful in denying America its objectives in Syria.*

*What they have not been able to do is to rebuild Syria; to allow Assad to consolidate his rule and to convince the West to lift economic sanctions. They can effectively deny certain objectives to the United States there, but they can't bring peace, prosperity and reconstruction to the country.*



## On the role and interest of Iran in Syria:

*I think we've accurately pointed out that we can't prevent, or drive Iran completely out of Syria. We're going to have to find a way of counterbalancing that interest.*

*I don't think it [Arab engagement with Assad] will distance Syria from Iran, but it could introduce other interests in Syria that can serve to hedge against Iranian power and counterbalance it. Syrian politics are not the sole playground of Iran, there are other interests there that have to be taken into consideration. There's a sort of balance of power approach within Syria and in the broader region that stands some chance of improving stability inside the country and in the region.*



### Joshua Landis

Chair Director, Center of Middle East Studies and the  
Persian Gulf Studies, University of Oklahoma

— Canada

## On the current state of Syria:

*The civil war in Syria is not over, but it's largely over and Syria is chopped up into 3 major zones. Security means something different to everybody. The people, the US/Israel interests and then Iran/Russia interests in security.*

*The dilemma for the U.S. is that by keeping Syria partitioned and stopping trade, and trying to turn Syria into a quagmire for Russia, as it has to a certain degree successfully done, what is that going to gain the United States? On the terrorism front, ISIS can run between the legs of the three different divisions. So, keeping Syria divided, in many ways, is counterproductive to the war against ISIS. The only real way to defeat ISIS in the region is to have a strong central state.*

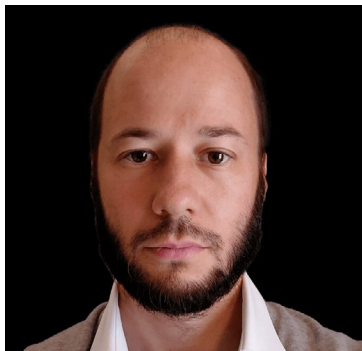


### On Iran's security interest in Syria:

*Iran, of course, has made tremendous advances in its overall security architecture in the region, both because Iraq is now firmly in the hands of the Shiite population, which looks favourably towards Iran, as well as the fact that Syria is still dominated by the Alawites, who are not Shiite but are heterodox Shiites that are allied with Iran. Hezbollah is also dominant now in Lebanon. For the first time in modern history, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Iran are all allies.*

### On Iran's security interest in Syria:

*If Turkey, as an ally of the U.S. and a member of NATO, takes over the northern region, which might be good for America geostrategically in the short term, but it would be very bad for the Kurds. This is because all of those American allies in the Syrian Defense Forces would be thrown into jail and bad things would happen to them. The Syrian regime, which on the security side is a minoritarian regime, needs the Kurds to be able to rule the North-Eastern region of the country. It could not rule without them. Ultimately, I think there will be a return to some kind of alliance between the Kurdish elements in the North, and Assad balancing the Arab tribes. This has happened in the past.*



#### **Jerome Drevon**

Senior Analyst in Jihad and Modern Conflict,  
International Crisis Group

— France

### On the stability of the front lines in Syria:

*When we are speaking about Idlib, we are not just speaking about militants trying to organize themselves, we're speaking about a region where there are at least*



*10,000 Turkish soldiers that are not going to move. The Russians have even acknowledged this fact. Even though there are still military strikes and bombings on a regular basis, the front lines are not going to move.*

*Similarly, the presence of Turkish-backed forces in the north of Aleppo and more importantly, the presence of American troops in the North East, have frozen the frontlines there as well. The American presence is by no means comparable to the Turkish presence; it is much smaller. But, symbolically, it's sufficient to deter any other states from the regime to the Russians and the Turkish, from doing anything to change the frontlines. The situation is frozen and could last as such for a very long time.*

### **On the future of external powers in Syria:**

*The U.S. will maintain a small military footprint in Syria and I don't actually see a withdrawal any time soon. Because the reality is that the presence of American troops is more symbolic than massive the way the Turkish presence in Idlib. The U.S. presence is very lasting and it can last because it's cheap. It's symbolic and so having a few hundred soldiers in the region, is sufficient in achieving the U.S. objectives.*

*I don't really understand the argument that was raised about the potential reliance on Gulf investment to widen the gap between the Syrian regime and Iran. I don't think that's realistic. Ultimately, we are speaking of two countries that have been allied for more than 40 years. Iran has been the only country to actively support and stand by the regime by sending troops. I don't think the regime will turn its back, even for a few billion, given Iran's role in saving the regime from being toppled.*



## Itamar Rabinovich

Former Israeli Ambassador to the United States;  
Former President, Tel Aviv University; Distinguished  
Fellow, Brookings Institution

— Israel

### On the dynamics of Russian interests in Syria:

*Russia's interests in Syria is to keep the regime in place, in essence, to thwart any effort at toppling the regime and to keep its own bases, both naval and air and to depend on Russian influence by controlling parts of the military directly through militias. Militias and some parts of the military, either pro-Iranian or pro-Russian, the Russians are not seeking the same kind of influence that the Iranians do in Syria; they don't wish to penetrate the culture, society and religion in the way that the Iranians do.*

*I would say that everything we have been for the past 6 years has changed with the invasion of Ukraine, Russian military resources are taxed, and it may have to shift away from some units from Syria into Eastern Europe, so we have to keep monitoring the evolution of the Russian war in Ukraine and see to what extent it will affect Russian presence and policy in Syria.*

### On Iran's long-term objectives in Syria and comparisons to Turkey:

*Two large non-Arab countries in the region, Iran and Turkey, have very similar populations and are former imperial states with strong militaries and large economies. Iran is seeking hegemony and while Turkey is not systematically seeking hegemony, it has ambitious policies in seeking roles in places like Libya and Syria.*

*Turkey, as a Sunni state, does not seek to be the Sunni competitor or a counter-balance to Iran. Iran obviously does not want to rule over Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. That would be too much to swallow, but it does want to have a supreme influence of hegemony over these countries as it also provides Iran with leverage on the Mediterranean with closer proximity to Israel through the countries that are subservient to Iran.*



## KEYNOTE III

# A Conversation with the Ambassador of Iraq to Canada



## H.E. Wadee Al-Batti

Ambassador of the Republic of Iraq to Canada

— Iraq

## SPEAKER

- H.E. Wadee Al-Batti: Ambassador of the Republic of Iraq to Canada

## MODERATOR

- Younes Zangiabadi: Executive Vice-President, Institute for Peace and Diplomacy

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Iraq is increasingly vulnerable to proxy conflict within its borders. Thus it has increased interest in playing the role of regional mediator to avoid having its territory used as a playground for proxy conflict, whether it's between Iran and the U.S./Israel or Iran and Saudi Arabia.
- The continuation of Iranian and Turkish attacks on groups and targets in Iraqi territory is a serious violation of sovereignty and national security concern for Iraq. While these attacks are often publically condemned by the government, there is no deterrent force that can prevent such attacks from happening again.
- Iraq supports reviving the Iran nuclear deal, viewing it in its national and regional interests for the positive impact it may have on de-escalation and regional diplomacy across the Middle East.



- Iraq's military relationship with Canada, the U.S., and the West (NATO) in general is dynamic and adaptable to the political and security environment at hand. For instance, the continuation of Western military presence in Iraq is decided based on the risk of conflicts or terrorism in the country that may have regional and global spillover like ISIL.
- Iraq values Canada's non-combat presence to assist in the training of Iraqi troops on issues of mines and explosives. This long-standing relationship, in which Canada has played an active role since 2003 as a nation and as a NATO member, is important for the bilateral relationship as well as meeting Iraqi needs.





## KEYNOTE IV

# The Iran Nuclear Deal at a Crossroads



### H.E. Stephan Klement

Ambassador of the European Union to the United Nations in Vienna; EEAS Special Advisor on the Iran Nuclear Issue

— European Union

## SPEAKER

- **H.E. Stephan Klement:** Ambassador of the European Union to the United Nations in Vienna; EEAS Special Advisor on the Iran Nuclear Issue

## MODERATOR

- **Younes Zangiabadi:** Executive Vice-President, Institute for Peace and Diplomacy

*Note: This speech was delivered under Chatham House rules. Thus, there is no public summary report for this session.*



## PANEL VI

# The Iran Nuclear Deal: The Path Forward

### SPEAKERS

- **Ali Vaez:** Senior Adviser to the President & Project Director for Iran, International Crisis Group (United States)
- **Eric Brewer:** Senior Director, Nuclear Threat Initiative; Former Director for Counter-proliferation, U.S. National Security Council (United States)
- **Suzanne DiMaggio:** Senior Fellow, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (United States)
- **Nasser Hadian:** Professor, University of Tehran & Former Director for Political Development, Center for Strategic Research (Iran)

### MODERATOR

- **Peggy Mason:** Former Canadian Ambassador to the UN for Disarmament; President; Rideau Institute on International Affairs (Canada)

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- As a result of the Ukraine crisis, the appetite for creating two potentially simultaneous nuclear crises in Europe and the Middle East has pushed western negotiators to drop discussions of timelines and deadlines on Iran's nuclear program.
- From an Iranian perspective, there is a common belief that their nuclear advancements would eventually result in the accumulation of additional leverage, which would strengthen their hand in extracting more concessions from the US, particularly in form of guarantees.
- Iran has now accumulated 42 kilograms of 60% enriched Uranium, which is even closer to weapons grade than the last time Israel sounded its alarms. This is bound to become, and arguably is already, an alarming development for Israel, which is concerned about the accession of Iran as a nuclear power in the region.
- The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) discovered traces of uranium at 3 undeclared sites in Iran. If Iran doesn't cooperate, it risks being condemned by



the IAEA, which would add further complexities to the prospects of reviving the nuclear deal.

- With the JCPOA talks at a stalemate, it should be expected that the Director General Rafael Grossi will draw a conclusion that Iran has not cooperated, making the continuation of nuclear talks and revival of the JCPOA dependent on the resolution of the IAEA probes.
- Iranian stakeholders are considering the prospect of a 'longer and stronger' deal whereby Iran would wait to have more leverage by advancing its nuclear capacities. Yet, in 2025, Iran has a presidential election, which puts the negotiation window now or 6 years from now.
- With the potential change in Congress this coming November, the benefits of returning to the deal perhaps erode for Iran as well. Even if Iran never chooses to actually produce a nuclear weapon, even that high degree of nuclear potency can pose immense safeguard challenges and motivate other countries in the region to pursue similar hedging strategies, potentially to develop enrichment reprocessing.

## SPEAKER HIGHLIGHTS



### Ali Vaez

Senior Adviser to the President & Project Director for Iran, International Crisis Group

— United States

### On the dangers of continued stalemate in the nuclear talks:

*Iran has now accumulated 42 kilograms of 60% enriched Uranium, which is very close to weapons grade. Although Israel is not ringing the alarm bells now, I think eventually, especially if the prospects of restoring the JCPOA completely fade away, you will hear those alarm bells very loudly and it will put pressure on the Biden administration to take military action.*



*There was a roadmap that Iran and the IAEA had negotiated on a separate issue not related directly to the JCPOA, regarding traces of Uranium that the IAEA had been able to at 3 locations in Iran. Now that the JCPOA talks are in limbo, most likely those issues will not be resolved. We know that the US and Europe have been very frustrated with Iran dragging its feet on this issue, which means that there might be a central resolution against Iran. In the past, Iran has threatened that it would respond to a central resolution by further escalating its nuclear program or ratcheting down transparency measures.*

### **On the prospects of Iran seeking a longer and stronger deal:**

*Let's say Iran says that the JCPOA is done and we want a better for better, more for more, kind of agreement. What's going to happen is, this is not an easy thing to negotiate as we've seen already with one year of indirect negotiations...Iran has made clear that some lifting of sanctions is necessary as an entry ticket to the negotiation table. Now, Biden is not going to lift any of those sanctions, which means that talks are still going to be indirect, which also means we will face the same kinds of difficulties we faced in the past few months.*

*Some people in Iran would say that, in their view, the Biden administration is a lame duck administration, so let's keep our leverage intact and wait for the next Republican president to come to power in 2025. Now, the problem is that in 2025, Iran also has a presidential election. So then, you'd have to wait until the new Iranian president is installed, or perhaps a second term by Raisi and by that point the JCPOA is absolutely dead and we'd have to negotiate a new deal from scratch. It's not a matter of now or six months from now, but rather a matter of now or six years from now.*



## Eric Brewer

Senior Director, Nuclear Threat Initiative; Former  
Director for Counterproliferation, U.S. National  
Security Council

— United States

### On the misguided strategy of playing the waiting game:

*At this point, each side thinks that it can wait the other side out, I fear though, that one or both of them will be wrong. By the time they realize it, it would be too late to take action and save the JCPOA. The bottom line is that the longer this drags on, the harder it becomes to save the deal.*

*Once Iran reaches the nuclear threshold status, it will be much harder for the international community to convince Iran to roll back its program. It means, at a practical level, that Iran's capabilities will reach a point where there's a very good chance that Iran will be able to produce enough material for a bomb by taking that 60% enriched uranium and enriched to 90%, or diverting it to covert facility before the international community can detect or stop it.*



## Suzanne DiMaggio

Senior Fellow, Carnegie Endowment for International  
Peace

— United States

### On the missed opportunities and the path forward in the nuclear talks:

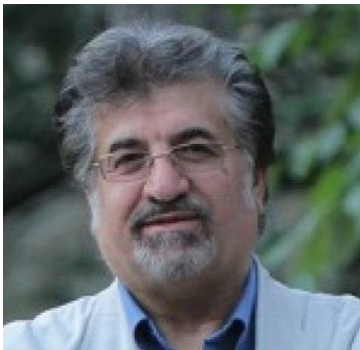
*The current state of deadlock overshadows the significant progress that has been made in Vienna under very difficult circumstances. The technical aspects of the agreement have been, by and large, worked out. The technical experts concluded*



*their work and departed Vienna back in March, but the momentum spurred on by this progress has since dissipated, with both sides continuing to dig into their respective position on the remaining issues.*

*If the US had moved quickly in announcing that the US is back, diplomacy is back and that we're back in the WHO, the Paris Accords and the JCPOA, the Iranian team was ready to move forward on that basis. Unfortunately, a zero-sum mindset has emerged. That mindset is, whoever blinks first is the loser. It's a difficult negotiating environment for adversaries who deeply distrust each other.*

*I think at the end of the day, both the Biden and Raisi administrations have strong incentives to make compromises to restore the deal. Simply put, there is no better deal within reach that would provide Iran with the sanctions relief offered by the JCPOA. Further, there are no better options on the horizon for the US that would place Iran's nuclear activities under such tight constraints as a restored JCPOA.*



### **Nasser Hadian**

Professor, University of Tehran & Former Director for Political Development, Center for Strategic Research

— Iran

#### **On Iran's strategic debate around the future of JCPOA:**

*Sitting in Tehran now, the questions have become: are we better off going for a longer and a stronger deal (which Biden had vouched for), or are we better off going back to the JCPOA, or it would be maybe better to build further leverage [through nuclear advancement] for when Republicans take over the Congress or even the White House and negotiate with them?*

*The assumption is that President Biden is going to very quickly go back for a longer and stronger deal, no matter what that could mean. Let's assume that it is still going to be limited to the nuclear issue, not to the regional or missile issues. Or*



*at most and at best the deal will survive for three years. If that's the assumption, are we better off going for the longer stronger deal while we have 42 kilograms of 60% enriched, advanced centrifuges and so on? Wouldn't that put pressure on the other side to come with reasonable demands for a longer and stronger deal?*



## KEYNOTE V

# A Conversation with the Ambassador of Turkey to Canada



### H.E. Kerim Uras

Ambassador of Turkey to Canada

— Turkey

## SPEAKER

- H.E. Kerim Uras: Ambassador of Turkey to Canada

## MODERATOR

- Zachary Paikin: Research Fellow, Institute for Peace and Diplomacy

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- From Ankara's point of view, the international order is now multipolar, which offers Turkey a lot of space to maneuver and try different approaches toward the Middle East region while pursuing its traditional diplomacy. In Turkish terms, this may be called dual-track policy, which is seen in the Turkish approach toward the Russian-Ukrainian war.
- In recent years, Turkey has become a leading country for drone production and supply with many clients including but not limited to Ukraine relying on Turkish-made drones for defence. Their drones are also playing an important role for Turkey in countries such as Syria, Libya, and Iraq where it has ongoing military operations.
- Turkey defines its foreign policy as "humanitarian and enterprising" with broadened horizons at a global level that goes beyond the Middle East and reaches





Africa, Latin America, and the Asia Pacific. Turkey is rebalancing its diplomatic relations by diversifying them instead of merely investing and engaging with the West.

- Turkey has major problems in its immediate neighbourhood that requires the country to work with its neighbours such as Iran and Russia. From Syria and Iraq to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, the three neighbours have so much at stake that has been agreed upon to be discussed and negotiated through diplomatic channels.
- Turkey is prioritizing the “voluntarily” return of Syrian refugees to Idlib which the Turkish-backed forces control. It is important to note that the high number of Syrian refugees coupled with the unprecedented inflation rate and dire economic situation has sunk the popularity of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to its lowest point since 2015.



## PANEL VII

# Revisiting Turkey's Role in West Asia

### SPEAKERS

- **Galip Dalay:** Associate Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House (Turkey)
- **Max Hoffman:** Director, National Security and International Policy, Center for American Progress (United States)
- **Gönül Tol:** Founding Director, Turkey Program, Middle East Institute & Senior Fellow, Frontier Europe Initiative (Turkey/United States)
- **Chris Kilford:** Former Canadian Defense Attaché to Turkey; Fellow, Centre for International and Defence Policy, Queen's University (Canada)

### MODERATOR

- **Zachary Paikin:** Research Fellow, Institute for Peace and Diplomacy (Canada)

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- On the debate of structural vs. personal approaches to Turkish foreign policy, there are different views as to whether there will be continuity of President Erdogan's assertiveness in future governments or whether it will be used as a tool for Erdogan's domestic legitimacy and consolidation of power.
- The primary ideological framework driving Turkey's foreign policy considerations towards the Middle East is shaped by a more militarized and nationalist approach that some argue is inspired by the legacy of the Ottoman Empire. It is likely that this assertive foreign policy strategy will continue under a different diplomatic tone should Erdogan lose power in the next general election.
- Turkey's relationship with NATO is one of allyship. Despite some turbulence in the past, the relationship is likely to not only remain the same but also improve considering Turkey's unique relations with both Russia and Ukraine.
- For a long time, Turkey considered the West as its indispensable ally and political anchor, which offered enough incentives and benefits that kept Turkish diplo-



macy mainly Western-focused. Yet, in recent years, the idea has become that the West is one center of power among others. Therefore, we don't have to filter our engagement with non-Western powers be it Russia or China."

- After the Arab Spring, there was more of a convergence between Turkey and Iran, as well as with Russia. In the new era, the divergence element both in the Turkish-Iranian and Turkish-Russian relations, have become much more visible. Particularly, within the Turkish-Iranian relationship, the areas of contestation are growing, which can clearly be witnessed in Iraq (formation of government), the Azarbaijan-Armenia conflict, and Syria

## SPEAKER HIGHLIGHTS



### Galip Dalay

Associate Fellow, Middle East and North Africa  
Programme, Chatham House

— Turkey

### The factors behind Turkey's re-engagement with former rivals in the region:

*In the last 10 years, we have seen a region whose political, ideological and geopolitical struggles have been an outcome of the Arab Spring. Now, the region has entered a post-Arab Spring phase, therefore, the alliances born out of the Spring, might not be as useful given the significance of the political/Islamic actors in the region has declined. Now, we have once again reverted from a regional framework to a state-centric framework where Turkey is re-engaging with countries to adapt to the geopolitical realities on the ground.*

### On Turkey's position on the Russian-Ukrainian war:

*The invasion of Ukraine will not prompt Turkey to choose sides. Surely, it will be leaning closer to the West, but Turkey will not choose sides at this stage. Turkey will still seek better relations with Russia because the cause of a breakdown in*



*Turkish-Russian relations is still significant. One of the differences between countries like Poland is that if Russia tried to punish Poland, it would trigger a NATO response, whereas Russia can punish Turkey in particular areas that are not covered by NATO security arrangements.*



### **Max Hoffman**

Director, National Security and International Policy,  
Center for American Progress

— United States

#### **On factors shaping a more militarized Turkish foreign policy:**

*President Erdogan's worldview has always been quite consistent, even before Syria. That is, that the world is bigger than five; that the West is in relative decline and that Turkey should be more independent and assertive in its own right. What changed in 2015-16 for a variety of domestic and regional factors, was the tactics that he used to pursue that policy. They became very aggressive, often unilateral and often military based. I think that President Trump's lack of interest in trying to mitigate and wind down regional conflicts, exacerbated the tendency of regional players like Erdogan, but also MBS and MBZ, to throw their weight around in military terms.*

#### **On the impact of domestic politics on Turkish regional strategy:**

*I think the number one reason is that Erdogan is driven in many facets by political and regime security. That is his number one overarching concern. The economic conditions in Turkey have become so dire, that this is an existential political threat that he feels he must address before June of next year. I think the economic front has to be number one in terms of reducing that political risk premium and attracting investing from regional actors in exchange for improved relations.*



*I think that Syria and the Kurdish question are explained by domestic politics. As to whether an opposition government would adhere to these positions or not, I think the tactics, tone and equally some of the policies would change dramatically over time. Any likely opposition coalition would contain by necessity the 10-14% of Kurdish votes that largely go to the Peoples' Democratic Party."*

#### **On pursuing a "compartmentalization policy" toward relations with Iran:**

*The remarkable and enduring defining factor of Turkish-Iranian relations has been the compartmentalization. I remember a moment in 2015 when Iranian-backed Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia Militias were fighting bloody battles with directly backed Turkish proxies. The rhetoric around Syria was extremely hostile. Simultaneously, Erdogan was in Tehran signing trade and energy deals not too far away from where the conflicts were unfolding. I think that compartmentalizing has long defined the relationship and will continue to do so.*



#### **Gönül Tol**

Founding Director, Turkey Program, Middle East Institute & Senior Fellow, Frontier Europe Initiative

— Turkey/United States

#### **On President Erdogan's political ambition defining Turkey's foreign policy:**

*Foreign policy has never been about international pulls and pushes for Erdogan. It has always been about consolidating and monopolizing power. In Syria, that's been the case since day one. Starting in 2011, he started switching tactics, Syria in particular played a very important role in the consolidation of his power. Before 2011, it was important for Erdogan in that it helped him achieve his goal of marginalizing the military. But post-uprising Syria, his priority was toppling the Assad*



*regime because he was trying to capture the conservative segments to establish an executive Presidency. He needed to burnish his Islamist image and, by throwing his support behind the Islamists of the region, he presented himself as the leader of the Muslim Nation. That policy of toppling a 'godless regime' helped him consolidate his power. This tactic has since failed and he switched again in 2015 to ally with the Turkish nationalist. As a result, his foreign policy changed, so his Syria policy, where toppling the regime took a back seat.*

*Erdogan is changing alliances at home. I think that explains the changes in Turkey's foreign policy. Before Erdogan consolidated power, he pursued a very cautious foreign policy, trying not to stay too far from Turkey's traditional line, which was pro-EU and pro-Western. Regionally, that approach entailed staying out of the domestic affairs of regional states and maintaining the status quo. At that point, he was vulnerable, having captured 34% of the electorate. He was also cautiously aware of the secularist establishment's power, seeking not to provoke them. That was his way of waiting until he monopolized power.*



### **Chris Kilford**

Former Canadian Defense Attaché to Turkey; Fellow, Centre for International and Defence Policy, Queen's University

— Canada

#### **On domestic factors shaping Turkish foreign policy:**

*Having to support refugees, having your trade routes cut off, knowing that every single day, 500-600 kids are born to those Syrian refugees in Turkey... these are people that the government is responsible for, which adds another layer of pressure on Erdogan.*

*Since June 2015, the government's electoral fortunes are falling. Surprisingly, no one has mentioned the attempted coup that took place in 2016. This still reson-*



ates in day-to-day politics. To this day, members of the Fethullah Gülen are being arrested. This speaks to my last point, that being aware of the many divisions that occur in Turkish society. There's the Kurdish PKK, then there's the opposition, then we have the followers of Fethullah Gülen and the Nationalist Movement Party as well. One wonders, who will be in power after June 2023.

#### **On the future of Russia-Turkey relations:**

*If things start to go sideways in Russia after its invasion of Ukraine, there are implications for Turkey in Libya, Syria, Azerbaijan and Armenia. An absence of Russia in any one of these three areas would create even more instability, which would ultimately fall back onto Russia itself but also other actors involved including Turkey. Turkey-Russia relations are complex, historical and deep. Up until now, I would argue that Turkey has been very beholden to Moscow, for trade, tourism and energy. In Ankara, it looks like an advantageous context in that now Russia is becoming beholden to Turkey.*



## KEYNOTE VI

# Keynote by the Swiss Envoy for the Middle East and North Africa



### H.E. Wolfgang Amadeus Brühlhart

Swiss Special Envoy for the Middle East and North Africa

— Switzerland

## SPEAKER

- **H.E. Wolfgang Amadeus Brühlhart:** Swiss Special Envoy for the Middle East and North Africa

## MODERATOR

- **Pouyan Kimiayjan:** Research Associate, Institute for Peace and Diplomacy (Canada)

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- With Switzerland elected, for the first time, as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, there will be more investments and resources devoted to mediation, peacemaking, and diplomacy in the Middle East with a particular focus on climate change and de-escalations in the region.
- For the first time, Switzerland has crafted and implemented a comprehensive “Middle East and North Africa Strategy” (2021-2024) to take a more structured and constructive approach, in coordination with host countries and other key actors, to address challenges facing the region.
- With climate change on the top of the agenda, Switzerland will support regional cooperation on climate change/action and hosting of annual forums in the Middle





East region such as the Sharm El-Sheikh Climate Change Conference (UNFCCC COP 27) this year and the one in the United Arab Emirates next year.

- Switzerland has already two initiatives in place in support of regional cooperation in the region. Launched in 2010, the Blue Peace Initiative engages with multiple actors in various water-scarce regions to turn competition over shared fresh water into collaboration for stability and sustainable development. Canada, as a country with extensive experience in conflict resolution and effective cooperation over shared fresh water with the United States, can engage and contribute to such regional initiatives.



## PANEL VIII

# The Security Implications of Water Scarcity and Climate Change in the Region

## SPEAKERS

- **Mohammed Mahmoud:** Director, Climate and Water Program and Senior Fellow, Middle East Institute (United States)
- **Erin Sikorsky:** Director, Center for Climate and Security and the International Military Council on Climate and Security; Former Deputy Director of Strategic Futures Group, U.S. National Intelligence Council (United States)

## MODERATOR

- **Anthony Dionne:** Managing Director, iAffairs Canada (Canada)

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The primary impact of rising temperatures on the water in the region is on surface water supplies, which are being impacted by evapotranspiration. Thus, runoff is limited and sometimes totally lost when snowpack doesn't accumulate in the winter season, causing serious problems for the dependent populations on the water resource.
- Food security is directly impacted when there is a limit in the water supply. Agriculture, which is central to many of the regional economies, is highly water-intensive and therefore, vulnerable to climate change. With a large rural population depending on the agriculture sector in economic and financial terms, it will not take that long for these climate-related issues to turn into security matters such as protests and forced migrations.
- While it is crucial to have predictive capabilities and the tools to assess climate-related risks, the real gap is the lack of climate literacy and the human resource that can analyze issues within their right contexts and anticipate how climate change will shape water supply and drought risk. To fill this gap, the security and intelligence community needs to build a climate-literate national security workforce in the region and beyond.



- Many sectors will compete for jobs on the basis of this limited water supply, as virtually all major sectors of the economy require water. It will be difficult to prioritize sectors above one another. The lack of water resources will ultimately cause large-scale job loss in some sectors, which can later translate into security issues for the affected states.
- The increasing variability means that old patterns and understandings of precipitation are inapplicable, while new patterns are hard to discern. This makes it very challenging for the security/intelligence community to make operational and contingency plans as they are mainly rooted in assumptions, which are upended by climate change.

## SPEAKER HIGHLIGHTS



### Mohammed Mahmoud

Director, Climate and Water Program and Senior Fellow, Middle East Institute

— United States

### On the regional mindset around food security in the Middle East:

*Food self-sufficiency is a luxury or a desire when it comes to agriculture. For many countries, it's an existential necessity, due to limited water resources, but also growing large populations that need to be sustained in terms of food and food security. Egypt for example, with the Nile River Delta, is an active agricultural hub. Yet, still Egypt needs to import food to enhance and supplement what is locally available. In terms of the agriculture sector, it will always be the largest in water use, which affects other sectors and water resources for countries as well as the region.*



## On the importance of water use across various economic sectors:

*My take on the tensions between jobs and water shortages is that it's going to be tough to prioritize some sectors [like agriculture] over others. For instance, the energy sector, which requires water for cooling, is essential in maintaining the population. On the economic side of things, having certain sectors being functional supports jobs being available.*

## On regional cooperation over shared waters and river systems:

*The Nile and Tigris Euphrates are two largest systems that come to mind. Agreements and coordination are essential. Most countries on these rivers already have agreements in place, granted some of them are still mixed with the colonial era in terms of agreements. Moving forward, there has to be a mechanism that binds transboundary countries on those river systems to conjunctively cooperate on the operation of systems like reservoirs, releases and available water resources.*

*My perspective on the political side of things, in terms of those negotiations, is that they set the direction. I feel that the solution doesn't even come from the governance level but from non-government portions of technical experts, engineers and operators to 'save the system.' The directives are set forth by governments, but in terms of storage, maximizing water supply to downstream countries, and coordinating components across countries, these are technical questions.*



### Erin Sikorsky

Director, Center for Climate and Security; Former Deputy Director, Strategic Futures Group, U.S. National Intelligence Council

— United States

## On strategic foresight challenges focused on the security-related impact of climate change:



*While it's quite easy, on a 10-20 year timeline, to project what the physical risks might be, the uncertainty comes in when you add the elements of politics, defence, security and how institutions and individuals will react to the trends. How climate hazards intersect with other ongoing risks, conflicts and political situations, is really a compound risk problem.*

*The real question is how to compound issues of climate change with risks of conflict, extremism and governance in the region. The challenge is to identify how climate change shapes and affects these potential risks.*

*Many regions around the world are having trouble adapting to one climate crisis, before the next one hits. As a big bureaucracy and government, the pace of change in terms of strategic considerations is much slower for the military, the State Department, and USAID.*

#### **On the politized nature of climate change in Washington:**

*Having someone in the White House who does not focus or believe in climate change makes it harder for the national security community to work on these issues. Things get deprioritized. I will say that even during the Trump administration, US Congress continued to put forward climate security provisions through bills such as the National Defense Authorization Act and others that were signed into law and pushed the defence department to continue doing climate security assessments and resilience building.*

*When you have that high-level push as we do now with the Biden administration it helps move things forward more quickly. Yet, there are challenges as the national security community is not set up to deal with actor-less functional risks like climate change or pandemics. They're organized regionally. So when we speak of the Middle East, getting that climate component into the conversation, requires helping those policymakers, from ambassadors to defence attachés posted in the region, to understand why the climate is central to their core duties.*



## PANEL IX

# Afghanistan and the Taliban's Second Coming

### SPEAKERS

- **Max Abrahms:** Associate Professor, Northeastern University; Senior Fellow, Institute for Peace & Diplomacy (United States)
- **Nipa Banerjee:** Senior Fellow, School of International Development & Global Studies, University of Ottawa (Canada)
- **David Fraser:** Former Commander of Canadian and NATO Forces in Afghanistan (Canada)
- **Gordon Venner:** Former Associate Deputy Minister, Department of National Defence; Former Canadian Ambassador to Iran (Canada)

### MODERATOR

- **Farid Tookhy,** Senior Fellow, Institute for Peace and Diplomacy; Lecturer, University of Ottawa (Canada/Afghanistan)

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The renewed United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) is the best mechanism and diplomatic channel through which countries should engage the Taliban and deliver on the urgent need for humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.
- The Taliban is seeking to gain legitimacy from international actors in the form of recognition, which they believe can lead to internal legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghani people if it were to happen.
- There are power struggles within the Taliban's governance structure as to how and who should run different parts of the country. Thus, the Western objective of ensuring that the government is inclusive is going to be a difficult task given the plethora of fundamental issues such as tribal divisions, and the extension of particular tribes into Pakistan. Yet, this condition remains the most preferable and constructive approach on the part of the international community to ensure some



form of inclusivity in Taliban governance.

- Aid conditionalities, along with leveraging their quest for legitimacy can pressure the Taliban to ensure that the international support provided to the country is not misused or corrupted. While these approaches might somewhat facilitate the provision of aid in the short term, they cannot serve as long-term solutions to Afghanistan's humanitarian and economic needs.
- The Taliban does not currently present as a global terrorist threat, although the possibility should not be precluded given that the tribal divisions, in conjunction with the Taliban's take-over, can present as sanctuaries for terrorists to regroup and plan.
- Undermining the Taliban risks plunging the country into yet another cycle of full-fledged civil war—a scenario that could end up boosting terrorist groups such as the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISIS-K) while aggravating Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis.

## SPEAKER HIGHLIGHTS



### Max Abrahms

Associate Professor, Northeastern University; Senior Fellow, Institute for Peace & Diplomacy

— United States

### On the internal challenges of the Taliban in Afghanistan:

*Afghanistan is a really interesting case because the government is essentially a militant group. Since the 90s the Taliban has switched back and forth between being a government, a non-state actor and now a government again. In a sense, the country is led by a militant group. It is hardly subdued with two main sets of militant challenges to the Taliban's rule. ISIS-K and the National Resistance Front (NRF).*

*The bottom line is that in the immediate and medium term, I do not foresee the*



*Taliban being supplanted by any militant rival. Yet, the Taliban should not take its governance for granted and must be strategic to avoid the chances of being supplanted down the road. My assessment is that the NRF poses a bigger threat than the ISIS-K ever becoming the government.*

*During the height of the ISIS caliphate, all the think tankers in the media who lined up that day said that ISIS was so strategic and savvy for its extreme brutality, which it then bragged about on social media. I was a lone voice starting as early as 2014, arguing that my research showed the opposite. That more restrained groups tend to fare better when it comes to achieving their political agendas because more moderate groups tend to attract more local and national support.*

*In a sense, The NRF is lucky, because the Taliban and ISIS-K have been very heavy-handed, to say the least, in using indiscriminate violence, fanning grievances against the population, The NRF has a long way to go in terms of garnering local support to upend the Taliban, but it is not unforeseeable in the future. The more the Taliban is seen as an enemy of the people, by harming civilians with violence, or imposing ultra-strict laws against women, the easier it will be for Taliban rivals to recruit local support.*



### **Nipa Banerjee**

Senior Fellow, School of International Development & Global Studies, University of Ottawa

— Canada

#### **On engaging the Taliban:**

*Many global and regional powers faced with the hard decision of whether or not to deal with the Taliban, have expressed the need for talks. Why this urge to speak to the Taliban? To promote immediate access of the ordinary afghans to humanitarian assistance to satisfy the basic human needs of food, water, clothing and*





*shelter of the population as well as preventing the abuse of their human rights.*

*Western powers gave up their opportunity to engage the Taliban at the Bonn conference of 2002 when reconciliation with a defeated, broken and weak group, could have mitigated the future insurgencies and violence prospect. Missing another opportunity to engage with the Taliban now, will isolate the regime and the innocent afghan along with it. An isolated Taliban could quickly return to the reign of terror of the mid-90s.*

*Western powers should engage in diplomatic talks with the Taliban, with diplomatic leverages and conditions at the base of the negotiations. Talking to the Taliban does not imply immediate recognition or legitimization of the new Afghan government. The talks should be understood as consultations to discuss conditions for potential future recognition. The Taliban's quest for legitimacy serves as an opportunity to pressure the Taliban to introduce longer-term governance reforms and to take action in addressing the immediate humanitarian crisis.*



## **David Fraser**

Former Commander of Canadian and NATO Forces in Afghanistan

— Canada

### **On the learned lessons and the path forward in Afghanistan:**

*After 20 years, Afghanistan has fundamentally changed to a point where the Taliban is unable to do what it wants. Yet, what has changed is not irreversible so we are seeing a slow degradation of the impact of the international community.*

*There was never a military victory. All we as military officers aimed to do was to buy time. We had to buy time for the political and the economic aspects to take root and find the root, to the point where they can take over and be self-sustaining.*



*The training and the equipping of the Afghan forces of some 300,000 should be more than adequate to the needs of some 40-50,000 Taliban. But, the leadership was not there to use what was trained and what was equipped. Therefore, that too was ineffective. The good news is that the equipment is not going to last very long because it needs Western maintenance. It will just sit there much like the Soviet equipment from before.*

### **On the role of regional actors and the UN in Afghanistan:**

*Pakistan continues to be the major influencer in the area and within Pakistan. Number two would go back to Iran. Iran played a very soft role in Afghanistan. But they have come out as a significant regional power. Finally, you can't ignore China. It's going to have completely different interests than other countries involved because it is there to secure the resources that it needs. Russia is completely out of the picture for the foreseeable future.*

*I think the UN is certainly the organization that we all need to work through to influence what is unfolding inside Afghanistan. If we don't, we won't know what's going on. I think one way to approach the dialogue is through the UN. It's the only channel we have to engage and help people. There have to be conditions on the aid to ensure that it gets to the right people. Let's face it. Everything comes with a string attached to it and the UN seems to be that mechanism where we can take arm's length from nations like Canada and the US to stand back, but at the same time do the right thing for the people.*



## Gordon Venner

Former Associate Deputy Minister, Department of National Defence; Former Canadian Ambassador to Iran

— Canada

### On the important role of the UN in negotiating and facilitating reforms with the Taliban:

*The one right thing that has happened in Afghanistan since the Taliban took over, is that the UNSC renewed a mission for UNAMA, with a new mandate that takes into account tricky realities.*

*If we want to have influence without dealing with the regime itself, support of UN-AMA is the place to start. Their new mandate involves humanitarian, political and human rights work. The human rights work specifically references women, children and journalists. So, if you're a 12-year-old female journalist, the UN has got your back. Beyond that, there is an opportunity for countries to support the UN's work, if in no other way, than simply in terms of money.*

*On points of diplomatic leverage, if there's something we can use for leverage, it's the desire for legitimacy. I'd much rather try to get leverage from that, than for turning Afghan citizens into unwilling participants in a hunger strike. If that works, great. The problem is that initial indications show that the leverage on legitimacy is not as strong as we'd like it to be.*

## About Us

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