

The U.S. Elections and the Future of the Middle East

Summary of an IPCRI-Mitvim Public Forum

Jerusalem, December 14th 2016

On December 14th 2016 [IPCRI](#) and the [Mitvim Institute](#) hosted at the American Colony Hotel in Jerusalem a public forum titled “The U.S Elections and the Future of Middle East.” After opening remarks by Dr. Gershon Baskin, Co-Chairman of IPCRI, and Dr. Nimrod Goren, Head of the Mitvim Institute, the speakers Dan Rothem, Rebecca Bornstein and Mofid Deak presented their assessments on American foreign policy in the Middle East under the presidency of Donald Trump. The forum was chaired by Suheir Jamil, a former researcher at the International Crisis Group, and was supported by the Kingdom of the Netherlands. This is a summary of the discussion that took place.

Dr. Gershon Baskin [opened the forum](#) by expressing his dismay at the atrocities committed against the civilian population in Aleppo. While he feels overall sympathetic towards the Obama administration and their achievements in the domestic sphere, Baskin emphasised, for him the tragic events in Aleppo highlighted the failure of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East as well as of the international community more generally. Baskin called on the Jewish people to speak up against these crimes committed in their immediate neighbourhood and to raise their voices in defence of Syrian civilians. He described the ongoing proxy wars in the region between the United States and Russia as extremely worrisome, particularly since President-elect Donald Trump had contradicted himself several times during his campaign, which makes it difficult to predict future U.S. policy in the region. Baskin highlighted that contrary to Israeli popular opinion, it is doubtful whether Trump’s policies and his promise to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem in particular, will benefit Israelis. “No one is going to bail us out here”, he concluded and called for Palestinians and Israelis to take joint initiatives with neighbouring countries rather than to wait for outside forces to solve the conflict.

Dr. Nimrod Goren similarly welcomed the initiatives to dispel some of the questions surrounding Trump’s presidency and its impact on the Middle East. In the absence of clear foreign policy guidelines coming from Washington, he called on local actors to take responsibility and oppose moves that might damage prospects for reaching the two-state solution, as the Trump plan to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem. Goren also stressed the importance of increasing cooperation and interaction between Israelis and Palestinians, as recommended by the recent Quartet report, at a time when contacts

between the two societies are becoming scarce. In his remarks, Goren related to the international conference on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, to be convened in Paris. He said that the Israeli government should have cooperated with the French initiative and should have agreed to participate in the conference. He also pointed out to possible benefits of the upcoming conference – laying out updated parameters for the two-state solution, moving forward the idea – that was agreed upon in the summer of 2006 – to devise a global set of incentives for peace, and setting a new international mechanism to advance Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution, which becomes even more important in the likely absence of American leadership on the issue.

Dan Rothem, Senior Research Consultant at the S. Daniel Abraham Center for Middle East Peace, prefaced [his remarks](#) by highlighting that it was impossible to predict future U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East with certainty, and that while we should be mindful of what is possible, it is what probable that we can point to. Regarding the last few weeks of the Obama presidency, historically, major U.S. diplomatic initiatives regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have taken place in the period between the elections and the inauguration of a new President.

As for the incoming U.S. President, since Trump lacked a clearly defined ideology and policy, Rothem predicted that Trump's foreign policy will mainly be determined by two factors. Firstly, U.S. foreign policy is commonly shaped by events the President has to react to rather than by the agenda he had set out during his campaign. Secondly, Trump's radius of action will be defined by great power relations and by strategic deals with Russia and China in particular.

With regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Rothem suggested that Trump "might just leave us alone." In Rothem's opinion, based on his business-minded approach, the new President might challenge the historical mantra of shared values and strategic interests between Israel and the U.S. At the same time, Rothem warned that in the policy-vacuum created by Trump, national security and foreign affairs staff may step in to shape policy as they did during the presidency of Bush junior. In view of the current overlap in ideology between staff appointed by Trump and the Israeli far-right, this would – in the best case scenario – result in American acquiescence of Israeli settlement construction and other Israeli policies slowly eroding the status quo in the Occupied Territories. In the worst case, American representatives would openly embrace an anti-Palestinian agenda.

Mofid Deak, a former US diplomat in Cairo and Riyadh, echoed Mr. Rothem's observation about the discrepancy between promises made during election campaigns and avenues in foreign policy U.S. Presidents actually pursue when taking up office. Mr. Deak explained that as businessmen who have never served in government, both Trump and his nominated Secretary of State will need a lot more preparation before they will be able to specify foreign policy objectives. He noted that while many previous Presidents had devoted their energy to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, during the last campaign foreign policy issues played a rather marginal role, as reflected in the near-absence of the topic during the presidential debates.

With regard to how Israel-Palestine is currently being discussed in U.S. media, Mr. Deak referred the audience to a recent [op-ed by Jimmy Carter](#) in *The New York Times*, in which Carter called on the Trump administration to recognise an independent Palestinian state and help it gain membership in the UN. Deak welcomed Carter's proposal but also doubted whether he will be able to influence the future U.S. administration with regards to debates about a one- or two-state-solution.

In absence of a real peace process, Deak concluded, Trump might surprise us by adopting a more incremental, albeit more effective approach to conflict resolution which helps Palestinians bottom-up, for instance by developing badly needed infrastructure. He nonetheless cautioned the audience against overestimating the prospects for substantive progress in the peace process. In his opinion, both the Israeli and the Palestinian leadership lack the willingness or capacity to tackle substantial issues in the conflict, such as questions surrounding Israeli settlements or the future of Jerusalem. Meanwhile, the international community and the Arab world more specifically, have been preoccupied with issues other than solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As a result, Palestinians currently lack the support of a powerful Arab intermediary, who would support their claims and compensate Israel for any concessions made to the Palestinian side.

Broadening the analysis beyond Israel/Palestine, **Rebecca Bornstein** from the Mitvim Institute [discussed perspectives in U.S. foreign policy](#) with respect to the Iran nuclear deal and the Syrian civil war. On the subject of Iran, Bornstein responded to claims Trump made during his presidential campaign to tear up the nuclear deal. Bornstein emphasised that while the deal is not perfect, and while the US and Iran continue to clash over Iran's ballistic missile tests and its continued financial support for terrorist groups, she considers the deal one of the Obama administration's foremost foreign policy achievements.

According to Bornstein, Israeli and American experts agree that the deal has succeeded in reducing Iranian nuclear capacity and threat. For that reason, she urged the outgoing U.S. administration to institutionalise communications and promote business ties with Iran, in order to strengthen cooperation between the two sides. She moreover highlighted that while the deal is not a formal treaty and can thus be cancelled at any point, it would not be in the U.S. interest to walk away from the agreement. Such an action would increase the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program, and antagonise the moderate forces in Iran associated with President Hassan Rouhani in the crucial period before Iran's May 2017 elections. As the Obama administration prepares to make a security-based case for the deal to the incoming Trump administration, businesses are following suit. Boeing framed its recent announcement of its deal with Iran Air around the jobs it will create in the U.S., which represents one of the chief concerns of President-elect Trump and his voters. Consequently, Bornstein suggested, Trump might be open to modifying his position on Iran.

With regards to the Syrian civil war, Bornstein argued that the Russian government currently backing Bashar al Assad has an interest in resolving the conflict quickly, rather than becoming entrenched, and is currently exploiting the window of time between the elections and the inauguration of a new President, when the U.S. range of action is

limited. In Bornstein's opinion, the Syrian crisis represents an area of failure – both of U.S. and international policy – and it is hard to predict that President-elect Trump will play a constructive role in solving it. Trump shows no inclination towards the responsibility to protect civilians or other humanitarian actions. He has repeatedly spoken against arming the moderate opposition, and seems to accept Russia's definition of what groups are considered terrorists. Meanwhile, prospects of a unified Syrian state seem ever more distant, and Russian policy has proven successful in terms of expanding its influence in the region.

In response to questions from the audience about new avenues for solving regional conflict, both Bornstein and Rothem emphasised the potential for European states to take a stronger lead in the international community. Rothem further suggested that Trump's presidency might actually cause stakeholders to depart from old truisms that have led to the stalling of the peace process, such as the assumption that negotiations are an indispensable precondition to any progress. With respect to conflict resolution more generally, Rothem later added that the Iranian nuclear deal represented one of the last state-centred approaches to conflict resolution and pointed out to what extent conflict in the region has been shaped by societal and sub-state actors.

When asked about the role of the Palestinian leadership, Rothem and Deak emphasised the need for the Palestinian authority to address questions of legitimacy and to re-evaluate their stance towards the peace process. Deak stressed the need for the Palestinian Authority to reconnect with the Palestinian population and for both sides to stop acting "as if the other does not exist." More specifically, he called on the Palestinian Authority to hold elections, even at the risk of Hamas winning, and to otherwise focus on improving the everyday life of Palestinians by providing municipal services and opportunities for economic development.

In response to the question how U.S. priorities in the region will change and whether they will include human rights issues such as tackling the shutdown of women's rights organisations in Egypt, Deak emphasised that the U.S. will continue to employ its principal tools; money, arms or military powers in order to guarantee the continuation of the Israeli peace with Egypt, the security of the Suez Canal and the fight against terrorism. By contrast, while human rights and women issues are important, he does not expect the new U.S. administration to focus on them in the near future.

Bornstein responded to a question about the role of foreign powers in the region by pointing to the case of Yemen where both Saudi Arabia and Iran are taking an active role in the ongoing civil war. If the great powers refrain from intervention, this leaves room for local actors to take the lead, but not necessarily to the benefit of the stakeholders. Regarding Trump's promise to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, Bornstein suggested that such a move will only lead to more violence and represents a taste of policies to expect from a President-elect who has surrounded himself with right-wing advisors with connections to the settler movement.

Commenting on the future of diplomacy more generally, Bornstein once more highlighted the unique nature of the Iran deal, where adversaries sat down to create structures for conflict resolution. She moreover stressed that Trump's background in business is not necessarily a bad thing as there is a great logical overlap between diplomacy and business. She expects that under Trump's administration priorities will shift towards a more self-interested U.S. foreign policy which shows places less emphasis on spreading democracy and human rights.

In response to a question from the audience about the changing role of Russia and China in the Middle East, Deak considered it unlikely that either of these powers will take a lead in the region. Based on his own experience as a U.S. American diplomat in Egypt, Deak argued that while the Egyptian have turned to Russian partners in the past whenever relations with the U.S. were tense, this served more to appease the Egyptian population than to deepen Egyptian-Russian relations. Ultimately, Deak concluded, leadership will have to come from the US and no other actors will be able to replace them.

Rothem summarised the panel's responses to all of the questions from the audience by stating that the foundations of the world order as we have known it since the Cold War have been put in question and that it is not yet clear what the outcome will be. He referred the audience to [an essay by Yuval Noah Harari](#) in *The New Yorker*, in which the author suggested that in the current crisis of liberalism, more relevant answers to the global challenges will come from the entrepreneurs, such as those in Silicon Valley, rather than from bureaucrats in capitals around the world.

By way of conclusion, Deak described the peace process as a bicycle: If the stakeholders do not keep cycling and working towards peace, they will only move backwards, as evident in Israel-Palestine where there has been no progress since the Kerry initiative.