

## THE POST-TRUMP US POLICY IN MENA REGION AND THE INTERESTS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

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Alexander G. AKSENEKOV,

ORCID 0000-0002-2965-6869, alex.aksenenok@yandex.ru

The Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), 8, 4th Dobryninskii Per., Moscow, 119049, Russian Federation.

Victoria I. FRADKOVA,

ORCID 0000-0001-7653-7929, vichkaru@yahoo.com

Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO-University), 76, Vernadskogo Prosp., Moscow, 119454, Russian Federation.

The article explores the emerging contours of the new American policy in the Middle East against the background of unprecedented and confusing domestic political affairs resulting from a highly questioned electoral outcome as well as D. Trump's complicated "fait accompli" legacy in the Middle East. The first political initiatives of Joe Biden demonstrate that unlike previous transition periods of incorporating Middle East into a revised global American strategy the current moment is fraught with difficulties. The authors examine the key regional priorities and the nature of "recalibration" process to a number of crucial issues in the region. Among them are as follows: the renewal of the Iranian deal, lessening tension in the Gulf, tackling Palestinian problem in the light of D. Trump's withdrawal from the internationally accepted a "two-state-solution" approach, political settlement in Libya and Syria. The authors draw a conclusion that even though rethinking Middle East role within the US global foreign policy strategy has already started, the process is slow and cautious since the Congressional mood as well as the partisan reaction should be taken into consideration. Chinese containment strategy and counteracting "Russian threat" are the aims topping the political agenda which means a disengagement from a conflict-ridden region, military redeployment and a policy of de-escalation. However, the agenda does not mean a full withdrawal from the region which will remain under the US focus even though it no longer tops the list. In other words, the task is to balance traditional democratic values with American national interest in the region, a balance which has always been hard to strike. Joe Biden's new Middle Eastern team of professional and experienced policy-makers who as well share deep knowledge of this region aims at shaping a more balanced and a more predictable policy in coordination with its European allies and regional partners. Additionally, the US "recalibration" of the Middle East may open a window of opportunities in bilateral US-Russian ties. Despite conventional "zero-sum-game" thinking the new Biden administration will not be able to ignore the fact that Russian comprehensive involvement in tackling a number of pressing regional issues is absolutely essential in contemporary Middle East politics.

**Keywords:** Middle East, The USA, Joe Biden, "recalibration", Russian foreign policy.

### About authors:

Alexander G. AKSENEKOV, Ph.D. (Law Sciences), Vice-President of Russian International Affairs Council.

Victoria I. FRADKOVA, Ph.D. (History), Associate Professor of MGIMO (University), Chair of International Relations and foreign policy of Russia.

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Over the past two decades, the Middle East dimension has consistently remained an important part of the US global strategy. All American presidents plunged, albeit to varying degrees, into the conflict environment of this troubled region in the messianic desire of an Indispensable nation (according to Albright) to ensure political and ideological dominance through "promoting democracy", building up military involvement in regional conflicts and antiterrorist campaigns, the continuation of mediation efforts in the Palestinian-Israeli settlement. At the same time, it was precisely around the Middle East and its place in the geopolitical plans of the United States that sharp debates unfolded at the inter-party level, in expert and

academic communities. The failures of the American Middle East policy during the presidency of Barack Obama, and especially during the period of Donald Trump's presidency, clearly showed the discrepancy between the ambitious goals and the achieved results. The US is losing interest in the Greater Middle East. In terms of practical diplomacy and leading "think tanks" political discussions, such issues had been arising as the "over-militarization" of the American presence, the ability and the need to take on the role of "sheriff" in regional conflicts and imposing liberal models of development on the Muslim world. At the same time, heated debates about the cost of leaving the region for Americans and methods that can be used

to maintain traditional influence without self-binding with unnecessary obligations did not stop. The Biden administration faced a difficult task – to find solutions to many long-standing problems in order to adapt the Middle East vector of the American policy to the new global and US realities. From this point of view, one should also consider the decision to hastily withdraw from Afghanistan, which came as a surprise to many US allies.

The authors of this paper made an attempt, starting from the previous vicissitudes of the US policy in the Middle East, to consider the features in the formation of the new administration's approaches to this region, to give an objective assessment of its first steps and make some short-term forecasts. Including in the context of the neighborhood of this part of Eurasia with Russia and China, opposition to which is declared the main direction in the return of the USA to a leading role in world affairs.

The US policy in the Middle East has always been the focus of research by both the American and Russian academic communities. Nevertheless, some of the American writings on this topic are not without bias due to the “special” American-Israeli relations, which have been directly affecting the nature of the Middle East course for more than a decade. An example of such a political position is the monograph *Innocent Abroad: An Intimate Account of American Peace Diplomacy in the Middle East* [1] by one of the authoritative researchers in this field, Indyk, directly involved in the formation and implementation of the US Middle East policy in the administrations of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. The failures of Neocon policy in the Middle East during the presidency of George Bush Jr. found its reflection in a number of critical academic studies that call into question the project of democratization of the Greater Middle East, the results of the military campaign in Iraq, and the entire system of American “hyper-unipolarity” [2, 3, 4]. A well-known American orientalist Lynch, analyzing the events of the “Arab Spring”, considers the ongoing transformations as one of the regional challenges for the American Middle East policy, which the Obama administration failed to cope with [5]. More critical assessments are contained in the book by the professor of the London School of Economics and Political Science Fawaz Gerges *Obama and the Middle East: The End of America's Moment?* [6]. The monograph by Burns, who is in the Biden team as Director of the CIA, *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal* [7], is not only an attempt to show the value and importance of informal “second track” diplomacy, but also harsh criticism of the Trump administration in connection with the devaluation of the role of the most important state

institutions (Department of State) and, as a result, a decrease in the effectiveness of the American foreign policy, including in the Middle East direction.

As for the course of new Joe Biden's presidential administration in the Middle East, this aspect has not yet been studied by the academic community as relatively little time has passed since the elections in the United States, and the Middle East policy is being formed more slowly than during the tenures of previous presidents. So far, expert assessments prevail in journalistic and political papers and in the studies of research centers.

In Russian science, the study of the American Middle East policy is covered by Vavilov in *US Policy in the Muslim World – Case Study of the Arab Countries. The Experience of Critical Analysis* and *USA and the Greater Middle East. Time of B. Obama* [8, 9]. The collective monograph *Middle East: Politics and Identity* (chapter 21 “US Democracy Promotion: Concept and Practice”) provides a deep analysis of the concept of “democracy promotion” and concludes that it is untenable to impose the Western political model on Middle Eastern societies and states [10]. Special mention should be made of the work by Shumilin *The US Policy in the Middle East in the Context of the Arab Spring* [11]. In the collective monograph *New International Relations. The Main Trends and Challenges for Russia* [12], one should mention the chapter “The Middle East: at the Turn of the Era” (Aksenyonok). It assesses the current state of the region through the prism of the evolution of the American course in the Middle East and Russia's new Middle East policy.

The latest election campaign, which has become a serious test for the entire political system of the United States, leaves its mark on the peculiarities in building foreign policy priorities. If the global course of the new administration – geopolitical confrontation with a measure of pragmatism where there are “American interests”, and the ideological message to promote democracy *versus* autocracies – was set out by President Biden in speeches to the Department of State employees [13] and at a special online session of the Munich Conference [14], then the formulation of the Middle East dimension in the foreign policy, apparently, requires additional time and considerable prudence. Now, after the Afghan fiasco, with a greater eye on the political alignments of internal forces.

The Middle East had been testing the strength of American presidents for decades, and Joe Biden will surely be no exception. Over the past two decades, from Clinton to Trump, this region, more than any other, has been at the center of partisan clashes and political science discussions.

The demarcation line in the Grand strategy was between the so-called “realists” and “idealist internationalists”. The former criticized their opponents for being too involved in the Middle East conflicts: the invested resources and efforts to strengthen state institutions do not give a desired result, and therefore it is necessary to move on to a more “economizing” policy, reduce the military presence and political obligations, avoiding overextension. Supporters of “realism” referred to the reduction of US energy dependence on supplies from the Middle East, which should give more space for maneuver, taking into account US own global priorities<sup>1</sup> [15]. Representatives of the second doctrine traditionally pointed to the inviolability of national interests, the relevance and indispensability of the leading role of the United States as a “stabilizing force”, urging not to exaggerate the dangers of extended communications. The departure of the United States has already led, in their opinion, to the formation of a vacuum, which was used by Russia and China to increase their military and economic influence in the region.

The failures of the American policy in Afghanistan and especially in Iraq gradually led to the formation of a kind of internal political consensus in relation to the problematic Middle East, that is, the middle line between the two extremes. This line was most evident during the years of Obama’s presidency. However, the post-2011 systemic upheaval in the Arab world, protracted proxy wars, the rise of international terrorism, humanitarian disasters, and massive refugee flows all presented the Obama administration with difficult decisions: how to reduce a military presence in the Greater Middle East so as not to become an object of criticism from their political opponents in Washington and not to undermine the structure of special relations with traditional US allies in the region.

Trump, like Obama, tried to avoid becoming too involved in regional confrontations, but his policy was characterized by inconsistency and voluntarism. The legacy of the new administration in the Middle East consisted of a series of sometimes impromptu decisions that further escalated tensions and complicated international efforts to resolve conflicts. The three key ones are the withdrawal of the United States from the agreement on Iran’s nuclear program (JCPOA), the refusal to solve the Palestinian problem on the universally recognized international legal basis for the peaceful coexistence of two states in the territory of

<sup>1</sup> Since 2015, the share of shale oil has been on average about 50% of the total energy production, which allows the United States to significantly reduce import purchases. If in May 2012 imports from the GCC amounted to 81,481 thousand barrels, then the same indicator for May 2020 was at around 44,300 thousand barrels.

Palestine, and the escalation of the policy of sanctions. These *fait accomplis* not only thwarted Obama’s attempts to create a “movable equilibrium” in the Persian Gulf and induce Israel to abandon settlement expansion but also created an essentially new reality. The presidential executive orders alone are no longer enough to lift the most sensitive sanctions. His constitutional prerogatives are limited by Congressional resolutions, where Democrats, especially in the Senate, may not get the necessary majority even if there is intra-party consensus.

In addition to domestic political reasons and pre-occupation with the development of a global strategy, some American political scientists explain the noticeable prudence of the Biden administration in the Middle East for two reasons: unwillingness to expose America to the outside world as a country that is once again changing its course sharply, and, on the other hand, the desire to show differences from Trump’s policy. What can be corrected without invading the powers of Congress, the Biden administration quickly did: restrictions on the entry of citizens from Muslim countries into the United States (the so-called Muslim ban) were lifted, quotas for emigrants were expanded, including from Syria, the tone of official statements has changed with an emphasis on classical diplomacy, human rights, and humanitarian issues. The Middle East was included in the agenda of constant consultations between Washington and its European NATO allies.

At the same time, there are signs that a rethinking of the place of the Middle East in the scale of US strategic priorities is indeed taking place. Some American experts even believe that the “recalibration” of approaches to the region (as they say in Washington) is going faster than one might expect. The new administration seems to be trying to find a middle ground between traditional “democratic values” in ideology and permanent state interests in practice, which often clashed in US foreign policy.

Well-known professionals with experience in Middle East affairs, such as the Secretary of State Blinken, the National Security Adviser Sullivan, and the CIA Director Burns, were returned to the Biden administration. The regional arm of the National Security Council is manned at the working level by qualified Middle Easterners from the Obama administration. McGurk was entrusted with coordinating policy in the Middle East and North Africa<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> McGurk was a representative in the US-created coalition against ISIS (an organization banned in the Russian Federation) and resigned after Trump’s decision to withdraw the American contingent from Syria, publicly criticizing the president’s policy in the Middle East.

The formation of the Middle East “team” in the State Department, which was relegated to a secondary role in the system of foreign policy decisions and experienced a personnel shortage during Trump’s presidency, is going slower, although the president has made it clear about the upcoming changes in this area [16]. Addressing the Secretary of State in his speech to diplomats, Biden made a significant remark: “... it is necessary that when you speak, the world knows that you speak on my behalf”. The appointment of career diplomats to the posts of regional special envoys of the President for Iran, Yemen, on the issues of Middle East settlement occurred without delay, which is *per se* indicative. All this was intended to increase the professional justification of the decisions made in conjunction with Washington’s global strategy and make them more understandable. Diplomatic tools in the generally accepted sense again come to the fore. Accordingly, the weight of the Department of State is growing, which will save many previous statements and decisions from eccentric personification. Now Middle East affairs are going through a stage of interdepartmental coordination and consultations with European allies, as well as with partners in the region.

The first steps towards redressing Trump’s most odious legacy are well under way. These are the search for ways to reach a “more reliable” deal with Iran, a revision of the US position in the Yemen conflict, and statements about the preferential use of the tools of multilateral diplomacy. As for other problematic areas – the Palestinian-Israeli, Syrian, and Libyan – new signs have also appeared, indicating the intention to work towards a correction of the ex-president’s course.

The indiscriminate withdrawal from Afghanistan, taking into account the fact that an internal political consensus has already been formed in the United States around this very decision, is unlikely to significantly change the mood of the American establishment in favor of reducing involvement in the Middle East. At the same time, a complete revision of Trump’s policy in key Middle East areas is hardly possible. The Biden administration has taken urgent diplomatic steps to reassure its allies of its continued commitment to principle under the “military redeployment”. That is, one can talk about changing the means of achieving goals, taking into account the mistakes (frequently, fatal) of Biden’s predecessors, and about adapting regional policy to the global strategy of “containment” of China and Russia.

Another thing is how the “evacuation” from Afghanistan will affect the situation in the very region of the Greater Middle East. Various terrorist organizations hailed the coming to power of the Taliban as a

victory for “Islamic jihad”; regional “power centers” perceived this as an opportunity to increase their influence, show more independence or “play” between Russia and the United States. In any case, the change of power in Afghanistan in the form in which it took place is unlikely to contribute to the stabilization of the situation in the region. Rather, it will introduce new complicating elements into it.

#### US-IRAN-JCPOA

Despite the fact that Biden and his administration recognized the destructive consequences of Trump’s decisions on the Iranian nuclear issue, primarily for the interests of the United States, restoring the status quo proved difficult to implement in terms of diplomatic practice.

Since 2019, by declaring “strategic patience,” Iran has been violating, step by step, its treaty obligations in the matter of uranium enrichment and inspections by IAEA experts. Under these conditions, the automatic return of the United States to the JCPOA by the same presidential act that formalized the exit is regarded by many in Washington as a loss of “political face”, although signals are being given to mitigate the policy of “maximum pressure” that has not justified itself. The lifting of the US demand to restore UN sanctions in connection with violations by Iran was officially announced and the readiness was confirmed to take part in the negotiations on Iran’s nuclear program in the 5+1 format (Russia, UK, China, France, and Germany).

Iran, for its part, refuses to have direct contacts in the official format provided by the JCPOA mechanism until the United States returns to the agreement from which it unilaterally withdrew. There is a situation that has received the name “egg or chicken”. That is, who should take the first step – the United States by lifting sanctions or Iran by lifting its “retaliatory measures”. This means that there will be a “long game” with international mediation. The European Union and Russia have already assumed such a role. The United States also retained communication channels (the key figures in the current administration, Sullivan and Burns, in 2013–2015 personally maintained closed contacts with the Iranians during Obama’s presidency). The Special Representative for Iran, Molly, also has extensive experience in working with Iranian diplomacy.

Progress in the new “nuclear diplomacy” also depends on how correctly Washington and Tehran will assess the time factor. There are widespread fears in the United States and especially in Europe that Iran is now much closer to the possibility of developing a

nuclear weapon and, in the event of lengthy behind-the-scenes negotiations, could move even further. Therefore, it is necessary to make urgent political decisions – either to take unilateral steps in easing the sanctions regime without a close relation to other obligations that are not textually regulated by the agreement or to return to the tactics of ultimatum pressure. Moreover, the presidential elections in June 2021 were won by a representative of the radical wing, which is gaining strength in Iran. On the other hand, the US administration cannot but take into account the mood in Congress, where not only the majority of Republicans oppose a change of course towards Iran but also some Democrats doubt the need to be hasty. Biden finds himself caught between his critics in Congress and his European allies.

US Secretary of State Blinken spoke at the congressional hearing in favor of a “longer and stronger deal”, which can be seen as a signal that the Biden administration is not refusing to consider such sensitive Iran issues as regional policy and missile technologies [17]. Later, there were even signals from the American side that the time to reach a new deal was by no means unlimited.

The expert community sees a possible compromise on the way to reaching an agreement on the principle of “compliance for compliance”, which contains a consistent sequence of steps in returning to treaty obligations on both sides. It cannot be ruled out that the participants in the negotiation formats will eventually reach broader agreements covering security issues in the Persian Gulf, Iran’s relations with Saudi Arabia, and Israel’s interests in Syria (comprehensive follow-up agreement).

#### USA – SAUDI ARABIA. CONFLICT IN YEMEN

Changes in the US Middle East policy are manifested in the Yemen conflict and in the new alignment of accents in relations with Saudi Arabia. Shortly after taking office, President Biden announced that the United States would stop supporting the military campaign in Yemen with the supply of “offensive weapons”<sup>3</sup> and move on to stepping up diplomatic efforts in which the United States has so far not been actively involved. The appointed Special Representative for the Yemeni Settlement Landerking, who previously oversaw this direction in the Department of State, quickly began multilateral contacts in support of the

<sup>3</sup> Since the outbreak of the armed conflict, the Trump administration, without directly participating in military operations, supplied Saudi Arabia with weapons and ammunition, provided intelligence information and technical assistance, up to refueling aircraft in the air.

efforts of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General. The decision to remove a key party in the conflict, the Yemeni Houthis, from the blacklist of terrorist organizations gives the American diplomat more freedom to revive the sluggish political process.

The decisions made in Washington did not provoke, at least outwardly, any violent reaction from the Saudi side. From mid-2019, Saudi Arabia began to reduce the scale of the bombing in Yemen and seek direct contacts with Sana’a. The large number of civilian casualties and the terrible humanitarian catastrophe aggravated by the coronavirus pandemic caused growing condemnation in the world. The political costs for Saudi Arabia and the United States that backed it were too great. While the situation at the front remains volatile and the Houthis managed to gain a foothold in the most populated territories they control, the involvement of American diplomacy in the UN mediation mission is generally in the interests of Saudi Arabia.

As for other sensitive issues for the Saudis, the change in the style of the Biden administration is causing serious concern in Riyadh. Here, the prestige of such a strong figure in the Kingdom as crown prince Mohammed bin Salman is directly affected. Washington announced that the president’s personal contacts would now be carried out at the level of heads of state, that is, with King Salman himself. The excessive attachment of relations with Saudi Arabia to the figure of the crown prince and to the son-in-law of the ex-president George Kushner provoked sharp criticism in Congress among not only Democrats but also influential Republicans. Warnings were increasingly heard that with the rise of the crown prince, Riyadh was playing a “risk game”, using, in the words of an authoritative American political scientist Lynch, Trump’s “strategy of concessions and warm hugs”. Such a strategy made it impossible for American diplomacy to exert a restraining influence on regional ambitions that contradict the long-term interests of the United States. The lack of proper response from Trump to the brutal reprisal against Khashoggi, a well-known critic of the policy of the Saudi crown prince, completely undermined the US policy in the region.

At the end of February 2021, Biden authorized the publication of an American intelligence report, in which Mohammed bin Salman was acknowledged responsible for the October 2018 murder of journalist Khashoggi. After that, Washington announced the imposition of sanctions against 76 related Saudi citizens. These decisions were taken against the backdrop of public calls for Saudi Arabia to change its behavior in respect of human rights. The Saudis were given to understand that they could no longer count on

US support in international organizations on human rights issues. A number of American experts advise the Biden administration to work towards transforming the political regime of the kingdom, where economic reforms are already underway, towards a constitutional monarchy like Jordan and Morocco.

The reconfiguration of relations with Saudi Arabia, however spectacular it may look in public discourse, cannot, in the authors' opinion, be seen as a fundamental departure from Trump's policies. The US-Saudi relations have experienced many ups and downs over the past two decades. The accusations of Saudi citizens of preparing and committing terrorist acts on September 11, 2001, the disappointment of the Saudis with the inability of the United States to protect Iraq from the growing influence of Iran, to "save" its Middle Eastern ally Mubarak, to resolutely support the armed opposition in Syria and, finally, their fears of Iranian expansion after the conclusion of the JCPOA agreement in 2015 were a great test of strength. However, despite all the mutual irritants, the understanding of the entire significance of the allied partnership for both parties remained unchanged.

The Biden strategy to contain "aggressive aspirations" of Russia and China assumes that Saudi Arabia will remain in the scale of the US foreign policy priorities. Here the regional dimension is closely linked to global military-strategic and economic interests in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. Extensive reform plans under the Vision 2030 program initiated by Mohammed bin Salman, major arms contracts, and lucrative investment projects all represent a wide field of activity for American corporations. In the total volume of Saudi arms imports, the US share remains dominant: 73% of purchases in 2015–2019. Over the years, the US administration has approved the supply of weapons to Saudi Arabia for USD64.1 billion [18]. Despite the protracted war in Yemen and escalating internal problems that have hampered Riyadh's activity in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia is seen by the Biden administration as a promising political asset, especially given its role in the Islamic world, where there has been a significant drop in the US influence. At the same time, relations of close partnership will now be built with a high degree of conditionality in such issues as respect for human rights, economic liberalization, political reforms, and consideration of American interests in the "hot spots" of the region.

### MIDDLE EAST SETTLEMENT

For many decades, the Palestinian problem remained at the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Over time, the trajectory of its development has changed slowly but consistently. After the conclusion of peace

treaties mediated by the United States between Israel and two Arab states – Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994) – the armed confrontation in the Middle East increasingly transformed from an interstate regional conflict into Palestinian-Israeli and Israeli-Syrian settlements. With the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, this track also changed, transforming into a conflict between Israel and Iran in Syria.

It was the systemic upheavals in the region since the beginning of 2011 that, in the author's opinion, played a key role in the preparation of the Abraham Accords on the complete normalization of Israel's relations with the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco. The breakthrough of the "Arab resistance front" in the context of solving the Palestinian problem was put at the center of the efforts of Israeli and American diplomacy soon after the failure of Clinton's mediation in 2000–2001 and subsequent rounds of Palestinian-Israeli negotiations during Obama's presidency. The Arab world, especially the oil monarchies of the Persian Gulf, deeply integrated into the world economy, were increasingly burdened by the chronic unsettledness of the Palestinian problem, blaming not only Israel and its settlement expansion in the Palestinian territories but also the Palestinians themselves, who were unable to overcome the painful split in their ranks. The strengthening of Iran's positions along the "Shiite Crescent" (Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut), the agreement on its nuclear program in 2015, and the war in Yemen became the motives for the Arab states of the Gulf that prompted them to make a difficult choice in favor of normalizing relations with Israel in the face of the "Iranian threat".

The political and diplomatic role of the United States as a mediator was constantly captivated by two incompatible contradictions – the commitment to allied relations with Israel based on common values and the realization that the continuation of the conflict damages the fundamental interests of the United States in the Muslim world. Trump only took advantage of the favorable regional situation for Israel to "go down in history" by implementing the "deal of the century", as if fixing the new realities that have developed in the region.

For the first time, the United States actually legitimized the occupation of the Palestinian territories, officially recognizing Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Israel as not contrary to international law. Thus, the Trump administration has completely departed from the two-state-solution formula, which, in accordance with the resolutions of the UN Security Council, was the basis of international efforts in the Palestinian-Israeli settlement. Like the issue of Jewish settlements,

the status of Jerusalem is, by and large, a *“fait accompli”* for the United States, since the president’s decision was made on the basis of Congressional Act No. 104 of 1995 on the US Embassy, which all Trump’s predecessors did not automatically put into effect by their decisions [19]. Therefore, the executive powers of the president in this case, as with the return to the agreement on Iran’s nuclear program, are clearly not enough, and comprehensive cooperation with Congress will be required.

Biden, albeit in a mild form, indicated his rejection of the “deal of the century” during the election campaign. Speaking in March 2020 to the annual conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), he stated that resolving the issue “through the formation of two states is the best way to guarantee a peaceful future for the Jewish democratic state of Israel” [20]. Almost immediately after his appointment, US Secretary of State Blinken said that the new administration would subject “a critical analysis of the provisions of the agreements (Abraham Accords) in terms of their obligations”.

Later, the Biden administration took further steps in this direction, announcing the renewal of the aid package for Palestine, which includes funding for the UN’s Palestinian refugee agency and the economic development of the Palestinian territories. The Palestinians were given to understand that negotiations on the creation of two states within the territory of Palestine remain a priority, and other steps may follow to clarify the situation after the elections in Israel in inter-Palestinian relations as well [21]. The United States officially supported the agreements on holding elections in the Palestinian territories in the context of a possible resumption of bilateral negotiations with international mediation and expressed regret over the decision of Mahmoud Abbas the President of the Palestinian Authority, to cancel the announced date of the elections.

Revising the legacy of the previous administration in the Palestinian-Israeli part, especially in parallel with working on the “Iranian dossier,” if Washington really intends to follow this path, will require subtle maneuvering in the Middle East field and the use of tools of multilateral diplomacy in partnership with the European Union and Russia. Confidence in the United States as a mediator has been seriously undermined, and the very negotiation process was blocked after the Palestinians left it.

It can be assumed with a high degree of confidence that, given the new domestic and Middle Eastern realities, the Biden administration is unlikely to be able to make a 180-degree turn. At the same time, it will be well within its power to make adjustments to correct its

shaky status as an intermediary. Unlike Obama, whose relationship with Netanyahu remained strained, Biden does not need confirmation of his commitment to the interests of Israel and may well play in this field in relations with the parties to the conflict. The uncertain situation in the Palestinian Authority and Israel in connection with the next elections and the coming to power of the government of Bennett provide him with such an opportunity, especially after the fifth round of the Palestinian-Israeli “war” in the Gaza Strip in May 2021.

## CONFLICTS IN LIBYA AND SYRIA

In the US regional policy, these two conflicts occupy an unequal place. Syria, being in the whirlpool of Middle East events, was continuously finding itself in the sphere of attention of the American administrations (the Arab-Israeli wars, its role in solving the Palestinian problem, in Lebanon and Iraq, the antiterrorist campaign). Whereas Libya, despite the fact that North Africa has always been given important strategic and economic importance, still played a marginal role. European allies dragged Obama into a campaign to overthrow Gaddafi, after which the United States, if not completely handing over the Libyan conflict to Europe, then took a wait-and-see position, not claiming a leading role. Their forceful actions were limited to pinpoint strikes in response to terrorist attacks, and politically, Washington tried to maintain a balance in relations with the opposing centers of power in Libya and supported the unsuccessful mediation of successive special representatives of the UN Secretary-General.

The new administration has noticeably stepped up its participation in multilateral negotiations. A particularly opportune moment for this occurred after the armed actions reached a stalemate, which made it possible to conclude a ceasefire agreement and begin a political dialogue with the assistance of the UN mission (UNSMIL), which was temporarily headed by US representative Williams. An important role was also played by the parallel diplomacy on the “second track” through the Geneva Center for Humanitarian Dialogue. As a result, an agreement was reached on the formation of a transitional government of national unity, empowered to prepare for the parliamentary and presidential elections on December 23, 2021.

Judging by the intensification of American diplomacy in coordination with European allies, the United States intends to further develop this political breakthrough in Libya, speaking more resolutely with the demands that all external forces stop military intervention, respect the ceasefire agreement, and observe the arms embargo. One cannot rule out a sharper reaction from Washington in the UN Security Council to the

involvement of proxy forces in the conflict, such as Syrian fighters brought in by Turkey or Russian mercenaries. Pressure will also increase on the economic front to ensure uninterrupted oil exports and unification of the banking system [22].

The Syrian crisis, although reflecting the general picture of the poor condition of a wide area of the Middle East, is a special case. In the “regime change” strategy pursued by the United States and its European allies, Syria has become the field where the demarcation lines between Russia and the United States have been drawn. The global aspect in the perception of both parties greatly outweighed the regional calculations. Having launched military operations in Syria in 2014 as part of the “anti-terrorist coalition” they formed, the United States declared the Assad regime illegitimate and relied on a military victory for the armed opposition, in which jihadists associated with ISIS and Al-Qaeda<sup>4</sup> rapidly gained strength. This was a major political miscalculation, which is now recognized by most Western experts. American diplomacy lost its freedom of maneuver and became a hostage to the exorbitant demands of rapidly multiplying armed groups.

Judging by the statements of Biden and members of his team, the political line in this area will be built taking into account the critical reflection on the mistakes of the two previous administrations, as the current administration understands them [23]. Among the states in which Trump “squandered the influence” of the United States, the US President also named Syria, where the positions of Russia and Iran were strengthened to the detriment of the interests of the United States and its Kurdish allies, according to the Americans. Secretary of State Blinken directly assessed Obama’s policy in Syria as a failure, and Trump’s announcement on the withdrawal of the military contingent, in his opinion, only worsened the situation, “depriving (the United States) of the few remaining levers of pressure” [24].

In mid-term perspective, the formation of the post Trump Syrian policy depends on a number of regional policy factors that are more tied to advancing negotiations with Iran (but without serious damage to relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia), as well as achieving mutually acceptable agreements with Turkey in the context of solving the accumulated bilateral problems between NATO allies, including on the Kurdish issue. That is, the policy in Syria for the current administration is rather a derivative of larger, according to its estimates, global interests in their regional dimension.

With the end of the civil war in its armed phase and the destruction of the military infrastructure of

ISIS, considering the future prospects and course of action in Syria is fraught with considerable difficulties for the new administration. From the point of view of international law, the American military presence is a violation of the sovereignty of the state, under whatever pretext direct external intervention is carried out. Now the illegitimacy of the American military presence, or, in the American sense, the “obscurity of the mandate”, is becoming more and more obvious. The relatively small military contingent in northeast Syria, which can easily be increased or reduced as needed through the border crossings with Iraq, will be maintained, and possibly increased. If there are no crisis situations, the Biden administration will try to flexibly balance between the shrinking limit on the expansion of the physical presence of its military in the region and the demonstration of the “flag” in Syria as one of the levers of political pressure on Russia. The mission of the American military, unclear after the defeat of ISIS, will apparently receive more solid justifications, from the point of view of the Americans, than simply “protecting” the oil fields, as Trump said.

A Pentagon representative, for example, hastened to clarify that “the United States in Syria is focused on fighting the remnants of ISIS, and is not guarding the oil fields” [25]. The intensification of terrorist attacks in the northeast, in the provinces of Hasakah, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor, provides a formal pretext for this, not only in terms of combating ISIS, but also in order to protect “Kurdish allies”. As long as relations between Damascus and the military-political leadership of the “Kurdish autonomy” in these provinces remain unsettled, the United States will always be able to continue to use intra-Syrian conflicts and the inflexibility of the Syrian leadership’s position on decentralization issues as an excuse to its “mandate” in Syria. Noteworthy in this regard are the confessions of the former US Special Representative for Syria, Jeffrey. “The Trump administration,” he said, “could not achieve its three goals – the complete withdrawal of Iranian forces from Syria, the total defeat of ISIS, and a political settlement, but the United States managed to create a military stalemate that did not allow gaining advantages for dictatorial President Bashar al-Assad” [26].

One cannot rule out some additional steps on the part of the Biden administration towards freezing the division of Syria into zones of influence, such as recognizing the legal personality of the Kurdish administration if the deadlock in the post-conflict settlement drags on indefinitely [27]. Theoretical substantiations of such decisions are already expressed by well-known American political scientists close to the administration. With reference to international legal precedents of the existence of unrecognized or not fully recognized states (Republic of Northern Cyprus, Kosovo, Taiwan)

<sup>4</sup> Organization banned in the Russian Federation.

and opposition movements (Venezuela), they consider the option of “imposed division of power” at the lowest level, within which “external actors directly deal with local authorities against the wishes of the recognized central government” [28]. Or, for example, the concept of “limited sovereignty”, built on the statement of the fact of the existence in Syria of enclaves under the control of foreign states or “proxy forces”, including along the perimeter of state borders [29].

Along with maintaining a low-cost military presence linked to a final settlement that includes limiting Iranian influence, the Biden administration is not abandoning the policy of financial and economic strangulation of Syria, considering the maintenance of sanctions as an important means of pressure on Russia as well. At the same time, the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation in Syria and its neighboring countries, the growing international criticism of such a US strategy against the backdrop of the coronavirus spread, and signs of disagreements on this issue in Europe — all this cannot but have an impact on the formation of Syrian politics [30].

In the administration itself and in influential expert communities, there are supporters of making adjustments to Trump’s extremely hard line, taking into account new realities and the sanctions experience. Their arguments boil down to the following. Demands for the removal of President Assad from power turned out to be untenable, as well as efforts to isolate Damascus in the international arena. Economic sanctions were able to weaken the already undermined Syrian economy, but did not change its “behavior” (this, and not the regime change, is the focus of the Biden administration). At the same time, the sanctions hinder the flow of humanitarian aid, which 80% of the population needs, and undermine the efforts of the Syrian government to combat terrorism. Thus, they do not contribute to the achievement of those political goals for which they were introduced. The Syrian leadership, being under such “maximum pressure”, relying on Russia, Iran, and China, has no incentives for any compromises [31].

Proceeding from this, considerations are expressed about the need to look for “alternative approaches” using multilateral diplomacy. Washington’s agreement not to interfere with the energy project to transport gas from Egypt to Lebanon through the infrastructure in Jordan and Syria (the so-called Arab gas pipeline) can be considered one of the signs of the beginning of shifts in this direction, although formally no exceptions were made from the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act [32].

The Carter Center, for example, proposes that work in this direction should be based on an inter-

connected set of agreements on easing sanctions in exchange for political commitments from President Assad. Among them are the release of political prisoners, the creation of a safe environment for the return of refugees, ensuring unhindered access to humanitarian assistance, political reforms, including the reorganization of the army and security services, the promotion of the Geneva process under the auspices of the UN, etc. The United States, in turn, should remove from the sanctions lists humanitarian assistance to combat the coronavirus pandemic and funding for the restoration of vital civilian infrastructure (hospitals, schools, irrigation facilities). Only after the successful passage of this stage, confirmed by the monitoring mechanism, will a “phased mitigation” of the sanctions regime follow [33].

Despite the fact that the most populous and significant territories are under the control of Damascus, the country is *de facto* divided into three geographic spheres of political and military influence outside government control. The risk of unintentional or provoked clashes between the armed forces of four foreign states (Turkey, Russia, the United States, and Iran) located in Syria remains. The situation of a frozen conflict, when large-scale armed actions are no longer possible, and a political settlement is still far away, is fraught with dangers for all external actors involved in it.

Questions arise: is it possible to resolve the Middle East conflicts in an international format and subsequently stabilize the region on the basis of a balance of interests? Is the Biden administration capable of constructive interaction with Russia where the interests of the parties coincide? Or will the inertia of the “zero-sum game” continue to prevail in making foreign policy decisions?

#### US AND RUSSIA IN THE MIDDLE EAST: WHAT’S NEXT?

The global course taken by the Biden administration to constrain China and counter the “threats” from Russia suggests a certain detachment from the Middle East and a movement towards de-escalation. The turn to the Indo-Pacific direction does not, however, mean leaving this region (although the plans for redeployment have been repeatedly mentioned by the US military). A certain degree of bifurcation will for some time prevail in the US policy in MENA region: unwillingness to be drawn militarily into regional conflicts and inertial thinking in the spirit of “zero-sum games” in order to prevent the leading role of Russia in the post-conflict settlement, or at least such compromises, which could be regarded as unilateral concessions [34].

The ongoing reassessment of US policy will be expressed in giving it the lost systemic and nuanced style that would be understandable to the outside world, especially to the regional allies with their clashing interests, and at the same time would not cause strong opposition in Congress. There seems to be some kind of consensus emerging on the Middle East. America cannot and will not “transform the region” because most of the challenges it faces are now more domestic. Preference will be given to multilateral diplomacy, although it is not entirely clear what the “new-old” Biden Middle East team means by this concept. Will this diplomacy become truly multilateral, within the international legal framework, or will the United States follow the path of creating coalitions of the like-minded led by them and the so-called selective multilateralism, which does not exclude unilateral actions [35].

Plans to create a regional “alliance of democracies” with an anti-Russian and anti-Chinese orientation have no real ground in this region. Even if the United States and the European Union manage to mend their relationship, badly damaged by the unilateral decision to hastily pull out of Afghanistan without proper consultation with the European allies. In some countries, a new “revolutionary wave” is gaining momentum (Lebanon, Algeria, Iraq), others have taken the path of reforms from above under harsh authoritarianism (Egypt, Saudi Arabia), while the long-term conflicts that erupted in the “Arab Spring” of 2011 are still far from being completed. Many experts in the Middle East and beyond it consider that the region lacks inclusive approaches. On the other hand, Washington will have to reckon with the fact that, unlike the times of the Soviet-American confrontation in the Middle East, the Arab countries of the region are pursuing a diversified policy, avoiding a purely one-sided orientation.

Opposing Russia which allegedly took advantage of the vacuum that has developed in the region, can certainly create some difficulties. However, new opportunities may also open up. The Biden administration will be more predictable and free to compromise. On both sides, a mirror policy is outlined in this sense. The US President has repeatedly said that his administration is ready to work with Russia where it sees fit. Russia also emphasized a “selective approach” to dialogue with the United States, that is, only on those issues that are “interesting and significant” for it [36].

To solve the problems created by Trump to the American policy, the United States (whether it wants to or not) will be forced to seek common ground with Russia. Its multi-vector policy over the past two decades has created a situation that is unique *per se*, when Russian diplomacy is able to be a link between influential regional players, although neither Moscow nor

Washington has the leverage over their partners that they had in the bipolar world. Russian-American interests in the Middle East diverge in many directions, and the establishment of cooperation will be further complicated by a crisis of confidence between the two states on other issues of the global and bilateral agenda. At the same time, one cannot but see that the emerging trajectory of “recalibration” of US approaches to regional policy opens up considerable space for interaction, coordination of efforts, or parallel actions.

A balance of interests can be achieved in such key issues as the continuation of the multilateral negotiation process on the Palestinian problem, taking into account new realities (“the deal of the century”, in the words of the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, is a thing of the past, but Israel’s relations with a number of Arab states have recovered), a joint search with Russia and Europe for ways to preserve the JCPOA and reduce tension in the Persian Gulf, stabilize the situation through Russian-American assistance to the still unsuccessful missions of international mediators in Syria, Libya, and Yemen. Russia’s influence in the complicated issues of the resumption of Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, in reaching compromise solutions on Iran’s nuclear program, and normalizing relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia on this basis is one of the important success factors. New opportunities for cooperation within the framework of the UN and other international organizations are also presented by the escalating situation in the humanitarian sphere, the search for ways to relieve tension around the refugee problem, and the coordination of efforts to provide assistance to the countries of the region in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic.

With the advent of the new administration in the United States, discussions on the topic of the prospects for some kind of collective security system in the Middle East have revived. Achieving this goal has so far seemed impossible. At present, several such projects have been launched into international circulation, including those from the United States. Russia was the first country to put forward for a wide discussion an initiative on the concept of security in the Persian Gulf zone, following the example of the OSCE, and is ready to put the multilateral “Helsinki approach” at the basis of discussions not only in the Persian Gulf zone but also in the Middle East as a whole and in North Africa [37]. Russia and the United States, judging by statements at a high official level, have a joint interest in diplomatic preparations for such a Middle East forum as the basis for negotiations on confidence-building measures, security guarantees, arms control, non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, development of regional institutions, economic cooperation, refugee issues, water resources, etc.

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## БЛИЖНИЙ ВОСТОК ВО ВНЕШНЕЙ ПОЛИТИКЕ США ПОСЛЕ ТРАМПА И ИНТЕРЕСЫ РОССИИ

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*АКСЕНОНОК Александр Георгиевич, кандидат юридических наук,  
ORCID 0000-0002-2965-6869, alex.aksenenok@yandex.ru  
Российский совет по международным делам (РСМД), РФ, 119049 Москва, 4-й Добрынинский пер., 8.*

*ФРАДКОВА Виктория Игоревна, кандидат исторических наук,  
ORCID 0000-0001-7653-7929, vichkaru@yahoo.com  
МГИМО МИД России, РФ, 119454 Москва, пр-т Вернадского, 76.*

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Приход к власти в США президентской администрации Д. Байдена влечет за собой нелегкую ревизию внешнеполитического курса. Из региональных направлений наибольшую трудность представляет Ближний Восток, особенно с учетом ряда «свершившихся фактов», оставленных предыдущей администрацией. В статье анализируются первые шаги Соединенных Штатов в этом регионе, выделяются основные векторы и характер проводимых корректировок в поисках места региона в общей стратегии. Авторы приходят к выводу, что кардинальных поворотов в ближневосточной политике вряд ли следует ожидать. Действующий президент будет вынужден считаться с соотношением сил в Конгрессе, которое нельзя изменить исполнительными декретами. Ближний Восток останется в сфере внимания де-

мократической администрации, хотя и не в числе первых приоритетов. В то же время новый стиль с акцентом на многостороннюю дипломатию поможет выстраивать более взвешенную и понятную линию в отношении ключевых региональных проблем, таких как возвращение США в СВПД, деэскалация напряженности в Персидском заливе, палестино-израильское урегулирование, конфликты в Сирии и Йемене. Администрация Д. Байдена не сможет проигнорировать и тот факт, что за последние два десятилетия многовекторная политика России показала свою востребованность. Новая реальность на Ближнем Востоке будет вынуждать американскую дипломатию налаживать с Россией взаимовыгодное взаимодействие через преодоление кризиса доверия даже в условиях напряженных двусторонних отношений.

**Ключевые слова:** Ближний Восток, США, Джо Байден, “переналадка”, внешняя политика, Россия.

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