



USA Foreign Policy and the GCC: Lessons Learned

On 12 September 2017, TRENDS Research & Advisory organised a conference on USA Foreign Policy and the GCC.

The event featured three invited experts

- Ambassador Alberto Fernandez – career US State Department diplomat with numerous overseas postings in the Middle East/Africa
- Dr. Roby Barrett – a recognised defence and security analyst providing training to the US Government and military on Middle East Affairs
- Mr. Guy Taylor – Chief National Security Editor of *The Washington Times*.

The discussion was chaired by Dr. Richard Burchill, Director of Research at TRENDS and the event was opened by Dr. Ahmed Al Hamli, the President of TRENDS.

Context

The event was organised to examine how the USA's approach to foreign policy has been evolving since the election of President Donald Trump. TRENDS commissioned an earlier publication on The Changing International Order where 14 TRENDS experts contributed their views on how USA foreign policy is changing. One of the key themes of this research is that USA foreign policy has not been changing dramatically from the Obama era in terms of actions and substance. Equally, the experts highlighted that President Trump's rhetoric and words brought a great deal of uncertainty into understanding the actions and directions of USA foreign policy. Added to this complexity is the apparent differences, often subtle, between the different foreign policy of the USA. The White House, the Pentagon and the State Department, do not appear to have a unified voice and position on a range of foreign policy issues. This is particularly relevant to the Middle East and GCC as varying views and positions have been coming from the USA on key security concerns in the region.



Key Issues Raised in the Conference

In light of current events, TRENDS organised this conference to bring voices of experience direct from the USA, in order to hear their views and advice for understanding US foreign policy. The speakers were all in agreement that:

- US foreign policy is a complex phenomenon that is often difficult to understand.
- At present, in the foreign policy space there are differences in opinions being expressed by the key foreign policy actors of the USA.
- There is an absence of staff in key foreign policy positions both overseas and in DC.
- The key assignments are held by “acting” staff who are not in a position to make definite decisions or formulate policy for the longer term.
- The absence of key staff means that comprehensive understandings of the priorities for the region are not conveyed to decision makers, nor wholly understood by the US foreign policy actors, which has a direct impact on the GCC.
- The Middle East/GCC needs to take the lead in addressing US positions on foreign policy impacting the region.
- The local view and local voice from the region are essential for explaining to the US concerns and priorities.
- Many other parts of the world will be working to gain the attention of the US President and other government bodies engaged in foreign policy in order to influence action and decisions.
- The need to show the US what the region needs must be led from the region, there can no longer be a “wait and see” approach to see if the US understands the region and take appropriate action.
- The US has a strong interest in the Middle East/GCC, but that this interest is too narrowly focused and is based on what the US considers to be the priorities for the region.
- What is needed is greater input from the region in order to better illustrate the local context, allowing for more effective foreign policy engagement.
- The local context is very important and the US has long not understood the relevant context in its foreign policy; in particular for the GCC region.
- It is necessary for individual states, or the region as a whole, to make their priorities a direct priority and concern for the US. Otherwise, the region will be left guessing what the US may do next, or why the US is taking the decisions it makes.

- With the current foreign policy context with the USA, the time is right for the region to take control of the foreign policy ideas influencing the US.
- Even if there are differing positions and visions being expressed by the US foreign policy institutions, the states of the GCC can take advantage of this to explain needs and priorities of the region, from a GCC perspective.
- As there are a range of current threats to global security around the globe, the GCC states will need to act with vigour in getting the message of the region to the different foreign policy actors in the US.