



Gulf Insights

Reflections on the United States- GCC Relations:
from Visa Waiver to Elections

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**Reflections on the United States- GCC Relations:
from Visa Waiver to Elections ¹**

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Introduction

The United States election results, due this week, will impact the Middle East as a whole and the GCC in particular. Considering the U.S. role as a global power with a number of key partners and allies in the broader Middle East, the outcome of the U.S. presidential race will have important consequences for the regional dynamics, economic ties and foreign policies. Against the background of multifaceted ties between the U.S. and the GCC countries, there has been an interesting development toward incorporating Qatar in the U.S. visa waiver program. This Gulf Insight looks at the strategic uncertainty that undergirds the U.S. approach to the Gulf in view of the upcoming presidential elections, as well as highlighting the current shared priorities between Qatar and the US as the former enters the visa waiver program.

Looming strategic uncertainty in the Middle East beyond the U.S. presidential elections

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The upcoming US presidential elections continues to exert pressure on the already fragile MENA regional affairs. The uncertainty arising from a prospective second Trump administration has raised concerns in the eyes of US allies in the trans-Atlantic and Asia-Pacific regional orders. Despite the Biden administration's [initial declared commitment](#) to multilateralism, reinvigoration of alliances, and upholding the institutional foundations of the liberal international order, the US-led order has been fast eroding. In the face of shifting economic power to Asia, heightened geopolitical tensions triggered by great power politics, and eruption of regional conflicts, Biden administration has largely proven ineffective to devise corresponding policies. Not only the economic and political foundations, but also the conflict mitigation function of the existing international order has been put into shatters.

[Whoever wins](#) the elections in November, the new administration will have to tackle with this issue first, before outlining a new U.S. policy towards any region. Yet, the willingness or ability of the administration to rectify the rules and institutions of the existing international order and restore its legitimacy are highly questionable. In the case of the Middle East, the attention of the regional actors, again, is on the U.S. security provider and conflict pacifier roles.

While Donald Trump left office with the controversial Abrahamic Accords intended to lay the groundwork for a comprehensive normalization with Israel and the Arab Middle East, the Biden administration has performed badly as a peace broker and security provider. It has been unable to reconfigure a nuclear deal with Iran to succeed JCPOA, from which the Trump administration pulled the United States out. Nor has the Biden administration managed to bring to fruition a long sought-after deal, a [security pact](#) of sorts, with Saudi Arabia, let alone creating a new security architecture for the entire region, dubbed by some as a Middle-Eastern NATO. Although the widening scope of regional normalization and de-escalation wave in 2021 and 2022 generated a renewed interest for such proposals and created a permissive environment for region-wide initiatives, the American diplomacy failed to materialize those projects.

Since the eruption of the conflict a year ago, the Biden administration has not taken [decisive actions](#) towards conflict settlement and containment, while watching the erosion of the international normative order in the face of Israeli atrocities. On the contrary, by

foregoing any reasonable restraints on Israeli war machine, Washington has been complicit in Netanyahu's drive to regionalize the conflict.

In the face of a widening cycle of violence and growing risks of an all-out interstate war, [neither presidential contender](#) is in a powerful position to reengage with the Middle East in a decisive manner, by extending credible security guarantees and mitigating the further spread of the conflict. The crisis of American diplomacy is here to stay, and there is not much hope that a change of administration will turn the tables around. The regional actors will have to reckon with this reality of ineffective American pacifier, a news which comes with mixed blessing.

Against this background, it is high time to expect the continuation of the Gulf Arab monarchies' engagement with Iran. By creating such a platform that [brought together Iran and the GCC members](#) at an informal gathering of foreign ministers in early October, Doha has taken the right steps in that direction.

Qatar's entry into the Visa Waiver Program of the United States

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The State of Qatar is the first Arab country and the second Muslim country after Brunei Darussalam to be admitted to the [Visa Waiver Program \(VWP\)](#) of the United States recently. The inclusion of Qatar in the VWP is touted as a recognition of the "[strategic partnership](#)" between the two countries. Qatar and the United States have enjoyed strong ties for years, and Washington officially recognized Doha as a "major, non-NATO ally" in 2022. With the VWP, Qatari citizens will have the opportunity to travel to the United States for business and tourism purposes [for up to 90 days](#). In return, US citizens will also be eligible to take advantage of the same privileges when travelling to Qatar.

It is imperative to note that Qatari citizens' refusal rates for non-immigrant visas of the United States have been remarkably low for a long time; it is currently [below 3 per cent](#). Qatari citizens are generally granted a 10-year multiple entry visa (B-1/B-2 visa) and

subsequent visa renewals rarely require physical presence for an interview. Under the VWP, Qatari citizens are now required to obtain an ESTA (Electronic System for Travel Authorization) before travelling to the United States. This move signifies a deepening of trust and cooperation and enhancing Qatar's role as a strategic partner in the region and beyond. As travel becomes more accessible, it may also lead to increased collaboration in various sectors, such as education, technology, and commerce, thereby reinforcing the bilateral ties.

What is unique about the VWP is that it involves the [fulfilment of stringent security requirements](#) for participating countries including counterterrorism, law enforcement, immigration enforcement, document security (passports and other identity information), and transparent border management. Qatar has made a significant whole-of-government effort to meet all program requirements successfully. The compliance of the rigorous VWP requirements has enabled Qatar to gain a new level of recognition as a trusted partner in international mobility and security issues. Qatar's rank in the [Henley Passport Index](#) is relatively low, compared to some other high-income, wealthy nations. For instance, Qatar occupies the 47th position in the Henley Passport Index and enjoys 107 visa-free destinations whereas Singapore occupies the 1st position and enjoys 195 visa-free destinations. The participation of Qatar in the Visa Waiver Program will help remove some of the impediments to the mobility score of the Qatari passport and ascend to the rank of one of the world's most powerful passports in the near future.