

Summary of the online seminar

The Global Peacebuilding Association of Japan, the Kyoto Peacebuilding Center, and the Academic Council on the United Nations System Tokyo Liaison Office

An online discussion meeting with

Mr. Raber Talaat

Trump 2.0- The Future of the Middle East: A Kurdish Scholar's View

February 8, 2025

The Discursive Transformation of American Politics and Middle East Policy under Trump

Raber Talaat discussed Donald Trump's return to the White House as a significant change in American foreign policy that challenged fundamental aspects of the liberal internationalist system that the U.S. has followed since World War II. Trump's realist and pragmatic foreign policy approach signifies an abrupt move from multilateral cooperation to transactional diplomacy that prioritizes immediate strategic gains at the expense of alliances. The change impacts both U.S. alliances and its Middle Eastern role.

From Liberal Internationalism to Realist Republicanism

Liberal internationalism has for many years stressed global governance, collective security, and the encouragement of democratic principles through institutions such as NATO and the United Nations. On the other hand, Trump's doctrine is more likely to be described as a realist doctrine focusing on bilateral relationships, the interests of the U.S., and deal-making rather than ideology. This transformation is also witnessed domestically through the implementation of protectionist policies, including using tariffs and enforcing stricter immigration policies. Internationally, the Abraham Accords, which are the agreements that have been signed between Israel and Arab nations, are an indication of this shift where the focus is on regional stability through economic and security cooperation without having to go through liberal conditions like democratic reforms.

Talaat notes that in the case of Trump, the rhetoric and policies that the former president of the U.S. has adopted present an ideological development in American thought: the decline of liberal optimism and the emergence of a pragmatic, realist attitude that views diplomacy as a means of negotiation rather than as a means of moral persuasion. This change of gear is redefining U.S. engagement with allies and adversaries alike.

Reorienting U.S. Strategy in the Middle East

For many years, American foreign policy has concentrated on the Middle Eastern region, but traditional U.S. strategies have failed to achieve their objectives through democratic state-building. The Abraham Accords represent a significant application of this new approach, which replaces universal values with bilateral agreements based on security, economic needs, and strategic interests instead of promoting democratic standards in partner nations. The accords sidestep the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the primary regional peace focus, which deviates from decades of U.S. policy.

Talaat argues that the traditional state-based approach to stability stands directly opposed to Trump's policy initiatives. Previous U.S. interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya to

rebuild state institutions have ultimately failed because reconstruction efforts crumbled under corruption, weak governance, and external pressures. The Trump administration supports local governance systems that comprehend the region's diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural characteristics. Through local empowerment, the U.S. strives to establish governance systems that match local conditions while enabling the management of their specific challenges.

The approach offers certain advantages but comes with corresponding disadvantages. Without proper management, decentralization worsens existing sectarian and ethnic clashes whenever community trust weakens. Power vacuums post-ISIS in Iraq appeared because local governance was insufficient, which allowed militias and criminal networks to take control. Trump's administration understood these dangers, which led them to support a two-lane approach where local governance progressed in parallel with international capacity-building efforts. The strategy included local official training, development aid delivery, and support for talks between competing factions to lower tensions.

Beyond States: Rethinking Governance in a Fragmented Region

Talaat observed the moving 'beyond states.' Post-colonial state building has failed, and the Arab Spring has revealed the structural weaknesses of centralized governance as authoritarian regimes and democratic states have both collapsed. Trump's vision for the region is one of pragmatic decentralization, where local actors lead governance and development. The U.S., therefore, acknowledges that a one-size-fits-all, centralized model of state building is neither practical nor sustainable when it prioritizes local autonomy and bottom-up development. As for peace- Trump's policy will probably go into imposing deals, not trying to make deals, as he sees that the US has this power and influence over the regional actors to do as it fits with the Trump policy and the American vision in the area!

Conclusion

Talaat concludes that Trump's return significantly changes U.S. foreign policy, especially in the Middle East, where state-building has failed. The U.S. is trying to create sustainability and peace through pragmatic alliances, localized governance, and flexible, context-specific solutions. However, it is only if this model works and does so with some degree of success in managing the complexities of decentralized governance and dominant regional power dynamics that it will be successful. Therefore, in constructing a more stable and inclusive regional order, policymakers must adopt flexible and adaptive approaches relevant to a fragmented and post-liberal world.

Comments by Panelists

The following panelists and participants.

Mr. Sakane Koji- Aid Coordination Advisor to Timor-Leste Government, JICA

Dr. Daisaku Higashi- Professor, Sophia University

Dr. Sherko Kirmanj- Professor, Koya University

Mr. Kardo Rached- Lecturer, University of Human Development

Mr. Rached agreed with Mr. Rabar's assessment that Trump adopts a realist approach to

international politics and pursues protectionist policies in economic affairs. In this context, he emphasized that the political landscape and state structures in the Middle East have undergone significant transformations. Since the Arab Spring, traditional realist Arab states have largely ceased to function as they once did, and the post-colonial nationalist Arab states that emerged after World War II have been increasingly supplanted by non-state armed groups, both religious and secular, that employ violence as a means of governance. Mr. Rached concluded his comments by stating that the Middle East has reverted to a state of communalism and tribalism, where no actor possesses the capacity to centralize or consolidate state authority effectively.

Ms. Shoji, Mr. Mizuno, Ambassador Inomata, and Mr. Inoue also made comments.

List of the Speaker and Panelists

Speaker

Raber Talaat



Raber Talaat is the Director of Sbey Research, a non-profit organization dedicated to producing high-quality research shaping policies across Kurdistan, focusing on politics, security, economic and technological development, environmental issues, and sociological studies, with its flagship project being the Kurdistan Citizen Satisfaction Index (KCSI). Alongside his leadership at Sbey, Raber has extensive experience in political analysis and international relations, serving as Program Manager and Co-Founder of Sheekar Company, and previously leading research initiatives at the Iraqi Institute for Strategic Studies and Barometer Research Company. His commitment to governance transparency was evident in his tenure managing the American Society for Kurds (ASK), and his early work at Internews focused on gender issues, training hundreds of Iraqi women journalists. Academically, Raber holds a Master's in European Studies from Jagiellonian University and a Bachelor's in Sociology from Salahaddin University, currently pursuing a PhD in Politics and International Relations at the University of Kurdistan Hewler (UKH). His publications, including *Young and Political Participation and Pre-Democracy*, address critical issues in Middle Eastern politics, while his political analyses have been featured on major outlets such as Rudaw Media, Sbey Media, NRT, and KNN.

Commentators

Koji Sakane



Koji Sakane is a GPAJ Director and aid Coordination Advisor to the Timor-Leste Government. Engaged in development and peacebuilding for over 30 years at the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Previous positions include Chief Representative of the JICA Sudan Office, Senior Director of the JICA Peacebuilding Office, Senior Secretary of the JICA President's Office, and Secretary of the Permanent Mission of Japan to the UN. Recent publications: "Identity, Democratization, and Development Processes in Sudan" (Chapter 3 of "Thinking About the Future of Sudan," Akashi Shoten, Nov 2024), "Eroding International Order: The Global North Falls Behind and the Needs for Confidence-Building with the Global South" (IINA, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Oct 2024), "Sudan's Most Serious Humanitarian Crisis in 40 Years"

(IINA, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Aug 2024), "Dysfunctional Global System: How to Overcome the Crisis of Peacebuilding and Humanitarian Assistance?" (IINA, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, May 2024), "The Hamas-Israel Conflict: How to Resolve a Battle without Winners?" (IINA, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Dec 2023). MA in Conflict Resolution (Bradford University). Regular Author at Sasakawa Peace Foundation IINA.

Daisaku Higashi



Daisaku Higashi is a professor at Sophia University in Tokyo. He specializes in mediation on armed conflicts, post-conflict peacebuilding, and international relations. He obtained his MA and Ph.D. in Political Science at the University of British Columbia in Canada. He also worked for the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) as a team leader for reconciliation and reintegration in Kabul (2009-2010), as well as Minister-Counsellor in the Permanent Mission of Japan to the UN in NY (2012-2014) as a part of an exchange program between Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and University of Tokyo where he served as Associate Professor. He transferred to a tenure position at Sophia University in 2016. Since 2018, Prof. Higashi has been frequently assigned by Japanese Foreign Ministers to go to Iraq and South Sudan to make intellectual contributions to peacebuilding, meeting with numerous leaders, including vice presidents of both Iraq and South Sudan. His publications include, "How Can We End the War in Ukraine" (Iwanami Shinsho 2023), "Inclusivity in Mediation and Peacebuilding: UN, Neighboring States, and Global Power" (Edward Elgar 2022), "Civil Wars and Mediation: How Can We End the Modern Wars" (Chuko Shinsho 2020), "Challenges of Constructing Legitimacy in Peacebuilding: Afghanistan, Iraq, Sierra Leone and East Timor" (Routledge 2015), "Peacebuilding: Field Research in Afghanistan and East Timor" (Iwanami Shinsho 2009).

Sherko Kirmanj



Sherko Kirmanj earned his Ph.D. in International Studies from the University of South Australia. He is the author of several notable works, including Identity and Nation in Iraq (available in English, Arabic, and Kurdish); One Hundred Years After Sèvres: Where Are the Kurds Heading? (published in Kurdish); Islam, Politics, and State (published in Arabic and Kurdish). Kirmanj has contributed extensively to international scholarship, with numerous articles published in refereed journals and academic volumes in English. He has held teaching positions in Australia, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Malaysia, and the United Arab Emirates. Currently, he serves as the British Academy Chair in Education, Conflict, and Crisis at Ulster University, UK, and as an Adjunct Professor at Koya University, Kurdistan Region, Iraq.

Kardo Rached



Kardo Rached is a lecturer at the University of Human Development UHD—Sulaimany and Director of Quality Assurance at UHD. He is

also in charge of the Turkish Studies Unit at Sbey Research Center - Sulaimany. He has published various articles, most recently: "State-Reconstruction: Iraq after ISIS as a Case Study." *Analecta* 13.25 (2023); "Financing of non-state armed groups in the Middle East: Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) as a case study." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2022): 1-26; "Institutionalizing the Salafi Thoughts by the State: The Saudi Salafism as a Case." *Trames* 25.2 (2021): 239- 255. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* (2020); "Post-ISIS Iraq and the Shia Armed Groups." *Central European Journal of International & Security Studies* 13.1 (2019).