

# Global Conversation with Gary Sick

## What has changed in US Middle East Policy Since the Election of Donald Trump



On the 30<sup>th</sup> of October, students from GG1 and GG2 gathered in the comfortable setting of the Library Living Room to listen to a prestigious speaker: Professor Gary Sick from Columbia University.

Professor Gary Sick works as a senior research scholar at Columbia's Middle East Institution and as an adjunct professor at the School of International and Public Affairs. He has not pursued the academic career for his entire life though: in the past, he served the United States' government for a long time. In fact, he served on the National Security Council under Presidents Ford, Carter, and Reagan as well as in the Persian Gulf, North Africa, and the Mediterranean as a U.S. Navy captain.

Most importantly, he was the principal White House aide for Iran during the Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis, playing a crucial role during one of the tensest moments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century American history.

This conversation mainly focused on three nations of the Middle East area: Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. Professor Gary Sick addressed the new inclination of the US government towards these States, contextualizing it in the peculiar framework of the region.

US-Iran relationships have been particularly tense in the last months after Mr. Trump proclaimed his willingness to withdraw the US from the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal if Congress and US allies fail to amend the agreement in significant ways. The POTUS, however, found his only allies in Israel and Saudi Arabia, with the UN confirming that Iran is adhering to nuclear deal limits.

US President Donald Trump once threatened to cancel the nuclear agreement reached with Iran in 2015. He believes Iran repeatedly conducted missile tests in violation of the spirit of the agreement. The United States fears that Iran may install nuclear warheads on its own missiles. The United States also accused Iran of providing missiles to Al-Qaeda in Yemen, which in turn sent the missiles to Saudi Arabia. Iran denies this.

Saudi Arabia is going through a very peculiar time for its history. During the last months, crown prince Mohammed bin Salman concentrated almost all the political and military power of the country in his own hands and started a series of cultural reforms. His aim is to return Saudi Arabia to a moderate form of Islam and to show to the rest of the world, in particular to foreign investors that this is a country they can trust. To do so he even started 'corruption purges', incarcerating a number of members of the royal family who may as well be just obstacles to his rise to absolute power.

Despite the country's new aggressive foreign policy, with its heavy involvement in the humanitarian crisis going on in Yemen, President Trump has shown unconditioned support for the Prince and his father, King Salman. The willingness of Saudi Arabia to not lose such a powerful ally was evident in the visit of the President of the US in May of this year, when the royal family warmly welcomed him. This visit had a greater meaning also because it was Mr. Trump's first foreign trip since becoming president.

Trump's policy in the Middle East becomes less easy to understand if we look at how he is managing relations with Qatar. In June of this year, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt announced their diplomatic relations with Qatar on the ground of supporting terrorism and undermining regional security and imposed an embargo and blockade on Qatar. Subsequently, the four countries, including Saudi Arabia, handed over 13-point request documents aimed at resolving the crisis to Kuwait through Kuwait. However, Qatar's reply did not satisfy the four countries. U.S. Secretary of Defense, James Mattis toured the Gulf but failed to push for a real solution to the crisis. Since the crisis broke out, the U.S. move has drawn much attention from international public opinion. The interruption dealt shortly after U.S. President Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia. After the storm, Trump repeatedly sent a message of sounding waves that made it hard for the United States to get rid of the initiator.

Now, the United States has begun to deal with the related countries. What are the purposes? Some people think that this move of the United States has both the intention of accepting the good and the further prevention of the offensive and further damaging the interests of the United States. The constant and mutual suspicion of the Gulf Arab countries is clearly conducive to the United States' intervening in the Gulf affairs. However, the complete rupture of these countries will give Iran an opportunity to take advantage of and even take profits. This is what the United States does not want to see. Therefore, it is most in the interest of the United States to "crack and continue" between Arab countries in the Gulf. Both Saudi Arabia and Qatar are important allies in the United States. However, under the current circumstances, it is obviously not appropriate for the United States to implement its arms dealings with the two countries. From this perspective, the United States also hopes to end the storm as soon as possible.

The framework depicted by Professor Gary Sick seemed to be a complex and dangerous one. Trump's confusing policy is not of any help in a historically unstable region such as the Middle East. Our hope is that the other organs of the US government will step up in case these policies will prove to be too dangerous for the world at large, as they have done in the last months for other extreme and inconsiderate decisions taken by the President.

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