

## **The Next U.S. President and the Middle East** **<Report Summary>**

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### Issues in the Middle East that Require U.S. Engagement

1. The United States, which has long been at the center of the international order, now faces competition with China and is shifting its focus toward Asia. At the same time, it is also being compelled to address deepening global divisions. In this context, the primary issue in the Middle East, where the U.S. has remained involved as a superpower for Middle East stability, is the Palestinian issue. The large-scale surprise attack on Israel by Hamas on October 7, 2023, brought the "increasingly forgotten" Palestinian issue back to the forefront of concerns for both the U.S. and the international community.
2. However, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has rejected the two-state solution. Within Israeli society, perspectives such as "coexistence with Palestine is no longer possible" and the view that "the elimination of Hamas is essential for Israel's security" are increasingly prevalent.
3. Another issue the United States must address is Iran's nuclear development. The international community still has not found an alternative solution to the Iran nuclear agreement, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which President Trump abandoned in 2018, to prevent Iran from developing nuclear technology.
4. The normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia also remains a focus for the United States. In anticipating Saudi Arabia's potential participation in the Abraham Accords—the normalization agreement between Israel and Arab nations established during the Trump administration—the Biden administration has been advancing discussions on U.S.-Saudi security cooperation.

### Background for U.S. Middle East Policy

5. The United States has traditionally set its main policy goals in the Middle East as securing "the smooth export of oil and natural gas" and "the safety of Israel."

6. The Trump administration pursued policies that were especially favorable to Israel, fulfilling Israel's wishes by abandoning the JCPOA, shelving the Palestinian issue, and aiming to normalize relations between Israel and Arab countries through the Abraham Accords.
7. On the other hand, the Obama administration was critical of Israel's expansion of settlements, and the Biden administration has also expressed concern over Israel's "disregard for Palestinian human rights." It is said that the Netanyahu administration is placing its hopes on a second Trump administration.

#### Middle East Policy of the Next U.S. President

8. If President Biden wins a second term, then continuity can be expected in his Israel policy. That is, the U.S. is likely to continue conducting deterrent strikes against anti-Israel resistance forces like the Houthis while also continuing to work toward the two-state solution, which cannot be ignored in the context of Israel-Saudi normalization.
9. As for the problem of Iran's nuclear development, before the United Nations Security Council resolution endorsing the JCPOA expires in 2025, a second Biden administration is very likely to seek some form of agreement to ensure that Iran does not obtain nuclear capabilities. The election of a reformist president in Iran, reflecting renewed public demand for sanctions relief (and thus negotiations with the U.S.), could also serve as a catalyst for these negotiations.
10. Conversely, if there is a second Trump administration, then support for Israel would likely be strengthened, which would also entail reinforcing the containment strategy against Iran. Strengthening ties between Israel and Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, through the Abraham Accords would be viewed as an effective means of enhancing this containment.
11. On the other hand, if hardline advisers on Iran were to join the Trump administration, there is a possibility that democratization in Iran (i.e. regime change) could be set as a goal, which could significantly escalate tensions in the Middle East. This would be a critical issue with substantial implications for the stability of international energy markets, and would warrant close attention.

#### Outlook for the Middle East Situation and Implications for Japan

12. The Middle East has continued to experience conflicts and civil wars in various countries. Despite this, the stable supply of energy from the region has been maintained, as stable energy exports are a matter of survival for Middle Eastern exporting countries as well.

13. Nevertheless, the potential for supply instability remains. As long as Iran keeps its stance of "challenging the United States and Israel," the Israel-Iran and U.S.-Iran conflicts will have to persist. Consequently, triggered by certain unintended incidents or events, accidental clashes or unexpected escalations due to miscalculations could occur at any time
14. Accordingly, Japan must continue to make every possible diplomatic effort in order to ensure stability in the Middle East. At the same time, it will be essential for Japan to develop strategic response measures and action plans in preparation for emergencies, as well as to advocate for market stabilization through international cooperation.
15. Moreover, returning to the principle of supply diversification, and considering that Japan's move away from Russian energy has led to a currently 95% dependency on Middle Eastern oil, it will be necessary for Japan to further reduce its overall dependence on the Middle East for primary energy. Together with this, Japan should also enhance and establish its emergency response capabilities as outlined above.

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