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**America and the Middle East**

Americans often fret at the never-ending US entanglements in the Middle East. The region is considered “beyond repair”, with little regard to the US role in the dysfunction. There appear to be several seemingly disconnected episodes in the Middle East that keep drawing the US into its vortex.

On February 25, the Biden Administration launched an air attack on an Iranian-backed militia in eastern Syria, killing 22 and destroying infrastructure. This in response to recent rocket attacks by these militias against American contractors at the Erbil airport in Iraq which killed and injured several contract employees. These attacks and the American response take place against the backdrop of delicate posturing about the Iran nuclear deal.

The Biden Administration is anxious to lure Iran back into the deal which former president Trump thoughtlessly jettisoned in 2018, at the urging of Israel. Biden realizes this deal was the best chance to slow down Iran’s nuclear program, while a more robust deal is negotiated.

Iran for its part has shown little interest in renegotiating anything until the US comes back into compliance with the already signed deal. “You don’t buy a horse twice”, said Javad Zarif, Iran’s foreign minister. Given this backdrop, American policymakers feel the attacks by the Iran-backed militias were a test of US resolve under the new administration – hence, the firm but measured response.

While there is mutual interest in getting back to the 2015 deal, the leadership in both countries has to contend with domestic political sentiment. Iran, facing a presidential election in the coming months, feels unfairly treated while they were in full compliance. The US administration has to worry about the anti-Iran hawks in Washington and Israeli lobby’s influence, which punches far above its weight.

Into this tense scenario has catapulted yet another event from the Middle East. US Intelligence just issued a report about the 2018 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul. Khashoggi, a Saudi citizen, was an opinion writer for the Washington Post and was based in the Washington DC area. His columns were often critical of Saudi policies. The declassified report held the Saudi crown prince directly responsible for approving the killing of Khashoggi. This report had been kept under wraps for over a year by Trump.

The US-Saudi relationship has been a very close one. It had originally been driven by American dependence on foreign oil and Saudi influence over global oil prices. With the US now mostly self-sufficient in energy needs, the future of this relationship now appears somewhat uncertain.

During the Trump years, his advisor and son-in-law Jared Kushner had developed a very close relationship with the Saudi crown prince that was used for mutual benefit. Kushner, a close friend of Israeli PM Netanyahu, was able to get Saudi assistance in gaining recognition of Israel by several Saudi allies.

Israel is now in the news for refusing to take responsibility for Covid-19 vaccinations of the occupied Palestinian population. Israel announced it had vaccinated 50 percent of its population, among the highest in the world, conveniently ignoring its commitments under the Fourth Geneva Convention to which it is a signatory.

This treaty obliges “…occupying powers... to maintain public health within an occupied territory, including epidemics”. While ignoring the Palestinians, Israel announced it will be sending gifts of vaccines to countries that have recognized Jerusalem as their capital.

Given the breadth of its interests and priorities, it is unlikely America will extricate itself from entanglements in the Middle East anytime soon.

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