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Repeating the Mistakes of the 2003 Iraq Invasion

The Warnings from the GCC and other Middle Eastern states on the Gaza crisis are once again being ignored

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The crisis in Gaza continues unabated. There have already been more than 20,000 deaths—1,200 on the Israeli side and more than 22,000 on the Palestinian side as of January 1, 2024. Moreover, the death toll on both sides continues to climb daily, although at a much faster rate for Palestinians, especially among civilians. In addition, the humanitarian crisis has been referred to as “unprecedented.” The damage done will have repercussions for decades to come.

Every day the conflict continues, the risk of a wider regional conflagration also increases. The situation on the Israeli-Lebanese border remains a powder keg as evidenced by the killing of Hamas official Saleh Al-Arouri in Beirut by a drone strike on January 2nd. In the Red Sea, the Houthis in Yemen have attacked commercial shipping lines, threatening to shut down a vital lifeline between the Suez Canal and the Bab el-Mandab. There is thus now a real possibility that the advances in de-escalation and rapprochement in the region, including between Saudi Arabia and Iran or the ongoing peace process in Yemen, that have been witnessed in recent years, could come to a screeching halt.

The determination of Netanyahu to continue its operations “until the job is done,” including suggestions that not only Hamas but also Hezbollah must be dealt with, makes wider escalation a very real scenario. All of this bears tremendous global consequences, even beyond the Middle East.

The situation is further complicated by the sheer unwillingness of the United States to call for an end to the violence. Until now, Washington has issued Tel Aviv a blank check which the Netanyahu government has cashed with impunity. On December 17, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin once again reiterated during his visit to Israel that the US would not dictate to Israel a timeline for the war. Despite increased lament about Israel’s “indiscriminate bombing of Gaza,” President Biden has by-and-large stuck to his unwavering commitment to Israel’s chosen course of action.

All of the above is eerily reminiscent of a previous case that brought lasting negative consequences for the Middle East and beyond—the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. What was framed by then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice as the “dawn of a new Middle East,” quickly turned into a quagmire from which the region has still not fully recovered.

Then, as now, the US and Europe ignored the numerous warnings coming from the region about the potential consequences the invasion would unleash. Prince Saud al-Faisal, Saudi Arabia’s then Foreign Minister, among many others, pleaded with US officials not to proceed with their war plans, fully aware of the Pandora’s box that was about to be opened. In 2005, Prince Saud bitterly stated that through the war, Washington had “presented Iraq to Iran on a silver platter.”

On the Gaza crisis, strikingly similar words of warning from the GCC side have been voiced, equally clear and straight-forward as back in 2002 and 2003 in the lead-up to the Iraq campaign. Speaking at a press conference on December 8, 2023, Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud said: "Our message is consistent and clear--that we believe that it is



absolutely necessary to end the fighting immediately." He then lamented the fact "that ending the conflict and the fighting doesn't seem to be the main priority" for the international community. The communique of the GCC Summit from December 2023 also warned of the dangers of expanding confrontations and stated that unless the violence is brought to an end, "dire consequences for the peoples of the region and for international peace and security" would result.

Outside of Gaza, countries like Saudi Arabia have argued for several years that the Bab el-Mandab is not secure, and that the Houthis represent an international danger. Now, international shipping companies are forced to circumvent the Red Sea due to Houthi attacks causing tremendous costs to the world economy.

One direct outcome of the Iraq War in 2003 was increased radicalization as witnessed by the rise of ISIS and the subsequent further empowerment of violent non-state actors throughout the entire Middle East. Today the same danger is present, as has already been witnessed by increased instances of radicalization in Europe.

And similar to the case in 2003, is the fact that the United States is once again muting the voices of its Gulf partners, ignoring the numerous warnings being put forward and pushing aside concerns that were proven valid the first time around. Up to this point, the lessons of the past have not been learned, and in fact are being ignored.

What Iraq in 2003 underlined is that there is no military solution to occupation. Resolution can only be achieved through a genuine political process. In the meantime, Israel, the United States, and much of Europe are quickly losing the war of public opinion in the Arab world.

It is high time that warnings from regional voices be heeded. Unless done so immediately, the outcome this time around could be equally devastating and possibly even more consequential. The alternative is another twenty-year disaster in the making.

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