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Three months after the horrendous events of October 7, the death toll in Gaza continues to mount daily. The humanitarian crisis has been called “unprecedented” and will have lasting effects for generations to come. Moreover, every day the crisis continues, the region faces the potential of multiple conflicts that, unless managed effectively and immediately, threatens to broaden the scope of the calamity beyond what has been seen so far.

The escalation is already visible in the Red Sea, with several attacks on international shipping lines putting 12% of the world’s commerce that traverses the Bab El-Mandab strait at risk. These attacks increase the possibility of further regional reactions and instability. While efforts such as the recently announced US-led maritime task force Operation Prosperity Guardian are welcome steps to prevent further incidents from occurring, the issue of maritime security around the world’s chokepoints must be addressed collectively by the international community. Only such combined efforts will send the right message to the concerned states, and to the Houthis in Yemen and other violent non-state actors and prevent more attacks.

The rising tensions in the Red Sea are a clear indication of how volatile the security environment in the entire Middle East remains and how quickly developments can escalate. Given the current state of affairs, any incident can further unravel the delicate situation in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, or Libya, to name the most immediate cases. Once the pressure valve explodes, it will be incredibly difficult to reverse the consequences.

All the above undermines the efforts by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia over the past years to de-escalate regional tensions and put relationships on a more cooperative footing. This includes rapprochement with Iraq and Türkiye and pushing for Syria to rejoin the Arab League. Regarding Iran and Yemen, Saudi Arabia has recently reiterated its commitment to peaceful regional relations, including welcoming the UN envoy’s statement on the Yemen Peace Roadmap as well as reiterating its commitment to the Beijing Agreement with Iran.

What is therefore required, now more urgently than ever, is a clear meeting of the minds of Washington and Riyadh when it comes to preventing further tragedies. The United States remains the most consequential actor when it comes to the medium to long-term security landscape in the wider Middle East. Yet, its policies over the past decades have been unbalanced, haphazard, and



uncommitted and have threatened the long-term stability of the region. Moreover, the US has not listened to the advice of its Gulf allies throughout this period. This must change, or the gap in perception between the two sides will continue to widen.

The more pressing issue is the need for a straightforward and clear commitment by the US to end the conflict in Gaza. The US is the only external actor with a measure of influence over Israel, but it has yet to use that influence effectively in ending the hostilities and promoting a more comprehensive and just political solution for the Palestinian issue. Instead of focusing on an Israel-only approach, what this involves is a genuine engagement with all its regional allies to defuse the situation and prevent further escalation. This can best be done if there is adequate and wide-ranging engagement with the Arab world, including with the GCC states.

So far, Washington has not uttered the word ‘ceasefire’ even once. This stands in contrast to most of the rest of the international community, including an increasing number of European countries and many Latin American countries, that demand an end to military operations as far as the current violence on the Palestinian-Israeli front is concerned. Any change in rhetoric heard from Washington so far has been inconsequential. This includes the most recent announcement from Israel of a tactical shift in fighting, a step that President Biden had pushed for.

The region now expects the US to demonstrate a real and substantive commitment to pursuing a ceasefire as every day this conflict remains, the threat of extremism and a widening regional conflict also increases. The time for shuttle diplomacy for the sake of conducting visits has clearly passed.

Additionally, there needs to be a clear commitment to the two-state solution with reference to the Arab Peace Initiative. At the 2023 Munich Security Conference, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken explained about the Ukraine crisis that “there is no neutral position when it comes to a war of aggression...there is no balance.” However, these same principles are not being applied by the US when it comes to Gaza and the wider Middle East.

The US refused to listen to the advice of the GCC states twenty years ago in Iraq; Unless it quickly begins to shift its course, it risks making those same mistakes again. Saudi Arabia, as well as most of other Arab states, see no wisdom in the current US regional policy and cannot support an unwise policy. It's not defiance to the US, but a rejection of a short sighted, non- fruitful policy.

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