



Three prescriptions for the Middle East

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Joe Biden will have his hands full when he assumes the mantle of the presidency on Jan. 20: COVID-19, the economy and trying to heal some of the wounds that divide our polarized country.

Last month's assassination of Iran's top nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, is also a reminder that the Middle East is a tinder box that can easily and unexpectedly explode. Iran is blaming Israel and vowing retaliation, but there is always the risk of the U.S. being drawn into the fray or being targeted — especially with President Trump apparently having considered taking military action against Iran earlier in November. Nothing in the region is uncomplicated, but there are three prescriptions for reducing risks and increasing U.S. national security.

It is widely believed Biden will try to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) — more commonly referred to as the Iran nuclear deal — and Iran claims it would return to the deal if Biden drops sanctions. Without debating the merits of the conditions of a deal, a return to the JCPOA would at least place constraints on Iran's nuclear ambitions — which are now unchecked. But any deal (or lack of a deal) with Iran must be put in a larger strategic context. It cannot be emphasized enough that Iran is not a direct military or terrorist threat to the American homeland, which is the paramount concern for U.S. national security.

Moreover, even in the most extreme case of Iran eventually becoming a nuclear power, the far larger and superior U.S. strategic nuclear arsenal would be a powerful deterrent. It is important to remember that the U.S. deterred both Joseph Stalin and Mao Tse Tung, both of whom were considered “crazy” in their time — and it continues to deter both Russia and China today. Similarly, North Korea's Kim Jong-un is also deterred. Tehran would have to be suicidal to consider a nuclear attack against America. Quite the contrary, the mullahs have demonstrated they are more interested in survival than immolation.

Biden has promised to end America's forever wars. This can't happen fast enough. Neither Iraq nor Afghanistan are critical to U.S. national security. The mission in Afghanistan was effectively accomplished shortly after the invasion that decimated Al Qaeda and punished the Taliban for providing harbor to the militant group. The original invasion of Iraq was an unnecessary war and the subsequent mission of denying ISIS a caliphate in Iraq has been accomplished.

U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan will not make either country miraculously peaceful overnight, but lingering in both countries only makes U.S. troops targets. The violence will likely continue but the important takeaway is that the violence in Iraq and Afghanistan represents a multi-faceted civil war within Islam: radical vs. moderate; Sunni vs. Shia; modern vs. traditional; and wealthy vs. impoverished. This is not America's war to fight or win. Only Muslims can determine the outcome.

Finally, America's relationships with the oil-rich Gulf countries need to be reassessed and recalibrated. These countries are not allies in the same vein as our European NATO allies. We are not bound to them in the same ways. It is important to recognize that these are relationships originally forged for convenience — and that convenience was oil. But today, oil is a global commodity driven by supply and demand — not by the U.S. having cozy relationships with oil-rich countries.

More importantly, these relationships are fraught with peril. If a Biden administration makes strengthening democracy part of its global agenda, it will have to explain supporting undemocratic and often oppressive regimes such as Saudi Arabia. One thing Biden can do immediately to demonstrate that the U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia is not unwavering is end U.S. support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen — another civil war — which serves no purpose for U.S. national security but makes America an easy target for Muslim outrage and anger. From a larger strategic perspective, the U.S. must not delude itself. Saudi Arabia acts on behalf of its own interests, not the United States'. And oftentimes, those interests run counter to and the resulting actions are detrimental to U.S. national security.

When he introduced his national security team, President-elect Biden stated, “We cannot meet these challenges with old thinking and unchanged habits.” That will be of paramount importance in the Middle East and these prescriptions represent exactly that.

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