



MIDDLE EAST WEEKLY

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Middle East in a Week

Regarding international relations and world politics, the Middle East may be the most controversial region in the current times. On the one hand it sits on most of the world's oil reserves, while on the other hand, it inhibits the followers of the most controversial religion in the world, Islam. These matters combined have created a region filled with drastic events. Every day, there are new wars erupting in the region and every day, there are new ways through which the west and the far east try to increase their influence in the region. This region inhibits 411 million people out of which 28 % are under the age of 25 years old. This newsletter tries to give weekly updates on the important issues in the Middle East and combining them with some analysis, hopes to have a role in changing the region's situation to the better.

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IRAQ UNDER ATTACK; BY WHO?¹

Just recently an Iraqi airbase was bombarded heavily. At least five rockets hit the Iraqi military airbase at Balad north of Baghdad, wounding two Iraqi soldiers, the Iraqi military said in a statement. Security officials had said earlier that the Katyusha rockets had fallen on the area of the base that houses US contractors, and that no casualties had been reported. No group immediately claimed the attack on Sunday, but armed groups that some Iraqi officials say are backed by Iran have claimed similar incidents in the past. US officials have blamed Iranian-backed militias for regular rocket attacks aimed at US facilities in Iraq, including the US Embassy in Baghdad. The last attack on the Balad airbase was on April 4, when at least two rockets fell in the sparsely populated surrounding area. The incident was the latest in a string of attacks targeting mostly US installations in Iraq in recent weeks.



IRAN READY TO MAKE UP WITH SAUDI ARABIA²

There is a long history of hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia. One being a Shia majority and the other a Sunni majority. Just recently, the former has claimed that it is willing to hold talks to ease the tension between the two countries. Iran's foreign ministry has said the country is open to direct talks with Saudi Arabia after media reports said the two regional rivals recently held secret talks in the Iraqi capital, Baghdad. Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh on Monday refused to confirm or deny the reported talks on April 9 in Baghdad, but added that media outlets have used "contradictory quotes" and have had a history of fabricating news, referring to reports by the London-based newspaper Financial Times and news agency Reuters. The two countries have not had formal diplomatic ties since January 2016 when Saudi Arabia's embassy in Tehran was stormed after a prominent Shia Muslim leader was executed by Riyadh. The talks also reportedly touched on Lebanon, which is in political and economic turmoil, and where Arab states are concerned about the influence of the Iran-backed Hezbollah movement.



SYRIAN GOVERNMENT ACCUSED OF CHEMICAL ATTACKS³

In 2013 and 2017, the Syrian government has reportedly conducted chemical attacks on its own soil. Four NGOs have just filed complaints against it in Sweden. In the complaint filed with Swedish police, the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), Civil Rights Defenders, Syrian Archive (SA), and the Open Society Justice Initiative (OSJI) accuse Syrian officials of chemical attacks using sarin gas, in Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib province in 2017 and Ghouta near the capital Damascus in 2013. “By filing the complaint, we want to support the victims’ struggle for truth and justice,” Hadi al-Khatib, founder and director of Syrian Archive, said in a statement. “We hope that a Swedish investigation into these crimes will eventually result in trials and convictions of those who ordered and carried out these attacks. Sweden can and should contribute to putting an end to the current state of impunity in Syria,” he added.



TALKS AND TALKS TO WHAT END?⁵

Given the latest reports, the expert groups in Vienna are getting closer to an actionable and desirable result to restore the JCPOA. Continuing talks in Austria’s capital to restore Iran’s 2015 nuclear deal with world powers are getting closer to yielding actionable results as more progress was achieved on Tuesday. The remaining parties to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – Iran, China, Russia, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom, together with the European Union – agreed during a Joint Commission meeting in Vienna’s Grand Hotel to form a third expert working group to focus on “practical steps” required to restore the accord. Two working groups have spent the past few weeks working on drafting a comprehensive list of the sanctions that the US would need to lift, and the nuclear steps Iran would need to reverse in order for all sides to go back into full compliance with the deal. Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, Iran’s lead negotiator, said following the meeting that talks are continuing despite difficulties and challenges. He also warned that “whenever the talks veer toward demanding too much, killing time, or illogical bargaining, negotiations will be stopped” by the Iranian delegation.



MARIB; A MILESTONE FOR PEACE⁴

The US envoy on Yemen, Tim Lenderking, labeled the fighting in Marib ‘the single threat to peace efforts’. Iran’s support for Yemen’s Houthi movement is “quite significant and it’s lethal”, US Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking said on Wednesday, as he called a battle for Yemen’s gas-rich Marib region the single biggest threat to peace efforts. Lenderking told US lawmakers that Iran supports the Houthis in several ways, including through training, providing lethal support and helping them “fine-tune” their drone and missile programs. Iran has denied supporting the Houthis. A spokesman for Iran’s mission to the United Nations in New York dismissed Lenderking’s remarks as unsubstantiated claims against Iran. “Iran has, time and again called for a peaceful settlement of the conflict in Yemen,” the Iranian spokesman said. “In contrast, the US has been providing the deadliest weapons to those who are using them to kill innocent men, women and children on a daily basis.” The United States should “leave the matter of finding a resolution to the senseless conflict in the capable hands of the regional countries,” the Iranian UN mission spokesman said.



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