**Beirut Institute e-Policy Summit Circle 32**

Raghida Dergham with esteemed guests Joel Rayburn, Abdel Rahman Al Rashed, Andrey Bystritskiy, and Matthew McInnis

Morning Washington DC, I have from there Joel Rayburn and I have Matt McInnis. Welcome. I know it's morning, but it's not too early morning. Welcome to Beirut Institute Summit e-Policy Circle number 32. I have from Moscow, good afternoon Moscow, Andrey Bystritskiy. Thanks for joining us again. It is great to have the Valdai Club represented with us. And also a good afternoon, late afternoon, to Dubai I believe, where Abdel Rahman Al Rashed is, and Abdel Rahman Al Rashed is not only an old friend, he is always an inspiring boss for all of us in the media. So welcome to, as I said, the 32nd session of Beirut Institute Summit in Abu Dhabi. The e-Policy Circles have been quite useful as a global conversation, and they couldn't have been so successful without the input of people like you. For that I am grateful, but I don't want to take too much of your time at your expense, so therefore, four minutes to each of you, and then we engage in a conversation. Joel Rayburn, thank you for joining us again. There you go four minutes to you please.

**Joel Rayburn:** Okay, well, it's my pleasure, Raghida, thank you and the Beirut Institute for putting together these very informative policy sessions. I would like to just – I'd like to start with something that, by reminding everyone of something that I was involved in, in the previous U.S. administration, and that is that four years ago, and three years ago, during this week in both 2017 and 2018 Bashar Al Assad attacked Syrian men, women, and children with chemical weapons. And in both of those years, 2017 and 2018, the United States actually took military action to deter the Assad regime from continuing atrocities like that. And in the second instance, the United States was joined by French and British allies. I start with that, not just to point out that there continue to be very important issues of global concern in the northern Middle East. But also, to point out, I would point out that the Trump administration was an administration that did not have Syria on its mind, when it came into office. It did not have a particular interest, it thought, other than in pursuing the campaign against Daesh, which was focused on Iraq at that time. But the northern Middle East has a way of reaching out and grabbing your attention if you're in a capital, like Washington, or London, or Paris, or in the Arab world. And I would say that it seems that we're in another window of time like that. When I think the Western capitals and maybe some Arab capitals, there's a desire to move on to other issues than those that have been so thorny, over the last decade, and even more, really two decades. And I understand that sentiment, we all would like to not have to deal with conflict. But I would just caution policymakers now that the northern Middle East-Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, indeed, even Jordan- it's a region that's too important to be to ignore, you cannot ignore it. You may try to ignore it, but if you do try to ignore it, it will reach out and grab your attention and force you to formulate a policy if you don't have one. Now, having said that, those are lessons from the last decade or two, I do think we need to be looking forward. And there are some trends that I think need to be highlighted. But the first one is that the Syrian conflict in particular, I'll talk about that, is far from resolved. The internal conflict is a political conflict, first and foremost. The Syrian war started with a political conflict, its causes are political. And so, its resolution has to be political. So, until there is a political resolution to that conflict, it will burn on and on. But I would also say, Syria, and to some degree, Iraq, both of these remain strategically significant geopolitical battlefields. There are active wars and proxy wars going on in both of those countries. And they're also fields of very significant geopolitical competition. So, I think the great powers and the middle powers, great powers of the world and the middle powers in the world, are going to have to remain very intensely engaged in this region of the northern Middle East in the years to come. I would say that the approach, if you're a Western policymaker, if you're a U.S. policymaker, the approach to these conflicts has to be comprehensive. They can't be reduced to an issue just of counterterrorism or an isolated issue just of humanitarian assistance. Those are just symptoms of the underlying conflicts, both the internal conflicts and the geopolitical conflicts, and until the causes are addressed, the symptoms will just return over and over again, as we've seen in both Iraq and Syria. That's about four minutes for me Raghida. I know there's a lot more to say about this, but I will, I'll stop as the initial salvo right there.

**Raghida Dergham:** I would do just a quick follow-up with you. Do you think that the President Bashar Al Assad is out of the woods? That means he's safe, he is already rehabilitated, if you will. And it's further guaranteed that he will be safe, let's put it this way. If that Vienna meeting produces a very good new page between the United States and Iran, let's just say details later, but do you think he's out of the woods? Is he you know, for good?

**Joel Rayburn:** No, I don’t. The Assad regime is internally very brittle, very weak. Their own choices have made them weaker, month, by month, by month. And **I would say that the regime in Damascus for some time now has been in a slow-motion process of collapse. Also, I think that there is simply no sentiment for normalization with the Assad regime, as it is, in the Western capitals, certainly not here in the United States. The sentiment against the Assad regime runs very strong, I would say stronger now than it did four years ago, even in the U.S. Congress, for example. And I know that the European capitals remain very staunchly, they're rigid in their position, concerning normalization with the Assad regime.**

**Raghida Dergham:** Thank you, Joel Rayburn. I'm gonna go to Abdel Rahman Al Rashed. I'm gonna give you four minutes and when you finish, please address the issue, if that normalization process with the Bashar Al Assad regime is in fact happening by some Gulf states, Arab Gulf states, or not. But we have had some signs, if you don't mind elaborating on that after you finish with your four minutes, because you will not say what you want to say in the first four minutes. Please go ahead.

**Abdel Rahman Al Rashed:** Thank you Raghida. I'm honored to be with you, and thank you to be with respected guests as well. Well, I don't know if I will probably it’s more exciting to talk about Syria or the conflicts there, then probably talking about oil and the Gulf. But anyhow, I'll try to be brief so we can jump to the Syrian issue. **I believe for the coming few years, it will be mostly dominated again by the oil security issue, which is the flow of oil to the Asian Pacific and in particular to China. So, I believe now we are just starting to see more of some sort of signs of clear conflict between China or the United States. And at the same time, we are getting mixed signals from Washington DC. In one way, they are not very happy to see that the Chinese are expanding, moving, have a military presence somewhere in North Africa. They are not happy to see the Chinese are tickling and communicate with their allies in the region. They're not even happy to see the Chinese are making deals with their enemies, which is Iran. So, the United States what we see or what we perceive today, they want to stay in the region, politically speaking. At the same time, they are reducing, already reducing, their military presence in Iraq, Syria, in the Gulf waters as well. China, on the other hand, it's increasing, it's slowly moving into the region. We see more Chinese companies working in different countries with Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, and obviously, China in Sudan. If you look to this part of the region, the Chinese have made some progress right now. Whether it's military progress or economic progress. And the reasons for that is obvious. China now is the biggest importer of oil in the region. United States now is not anymore an important player in the oil game in the Middle East, because it's a competitor, it's an exporter, actually**. So, this is really historical changes what we see today comparing what has been in the region for the past 50 to 70 years ago. Now that the Americans, they look at the region, from all your security, not as oil import-export issue, but in terms of their competition with the Chinese, and obviously those who can't control the oil fields or control the oil waterways, they can somehow have more say in international politics and we believe the Chinese right now are inheriting the same old game, which is trying to be a broker between the Arabs and the Iranians, between the two warring sides. And whether the Chinese can succeed with what the Americans have failed in doing. This is to be seen in the future. But it's very complicated really**, the Chinese probably they don't understand the complication of the regional conflicts, in terms of either religious or in terms of economics, or in terms of fighting over resources, or hegemony.** We look at obviously the Russians as well. So, **the Russians are playing, I wouldn't, I don't think they are really a major factor in deciding the future of the Gulf area, but they are they are important. They are they are very smart players, they have good relations now with the Iranians and the Gulf countries as well. They are arms suppliers, they are sovereign fund investors. They are they are everywhere around the region. But we haven't seen yet a clear policy of the Russians. What side are they going to end up with? They have to take a side, either with the Gulf countries or with the Iranians, and similar.** So, but anyhow we can talk more later if you want.

**Raghida Dergham:** Very good. Thank you very much, Abdel Rahman Al Rashed. Andrey Bystritskiy, again, I'm going to put the thought in your head, after your four minutes. Do the Russians feel that they have to take a side? Or do they feel that they are the broker that can bring all sides together? Think of that for after your four minutes. Please go ahead, Andrey Bystritskiy.

**Andrey Bystritskiy**: Thank you very much. Do you remember the GM container ship stucked in the Suez Canal? This stuck container ship turns out to provide that government optimization. The Suez Canal was not of course designed to accommodate ships the size of a small city. Moreover, it's turned out no one really thought about what to do in the event of an accident involving this class option. To extend this analogy we can see is it's an old elite primary resource, claiming the leadership of the Western gold and trying to push the ships of the new world through the Suez Canal of current policy. This can lead to consequences much more serious than that of container ships being stuck off the coast of the Sinai Peninsula. Thus, the latest statements by this United States administration seems to have been made by people who live, to some extent, in an imaginary world in which Western countries, and primarily the United States, maintain moral, political, economic and military leadership. The trouble however with the kind of imagination that would generate such illusions is not so much in the desire for divination. So, what else is new? The trouble with this aspiration has nothing to do with the plans for the future, with development, or with promising models of globality. On the contrary**, there is a feeling that many Western politicians are stuck in the past trying to reproduce the construction of the times of the confrontation between the United States or in Soviet Union. That time has passed. We need new narratives and new understanding that the world is indeed becoming multiple. That globalization, inevitable for the development of mankind, has taken new paths that are now many-sided.**

**Raghida Dergham:** Please come closer. Don't go further.

**Andrey Bystritskiy:** Yes, my speech is nothing without sound. I agree. It is all growing out of the regional associations and alliances. Naturally, the Middle East with its fragmentation and diversity, faces the need to rethink its identity, its various roles in the world as a whole, its role in the surrounding world, and on its own develop. **The main question is, do we need United States, for instance, for our problems in Eurasia? Maybe not.** United States is nice country, but in United States a lot of problems. But there are Russia, China, India. Why the United States? Who wants it? They nice people, fantastic. I respect that. They brilliant guys, they have fantastic rockets. They have a lot of ideas, even Elon Musk, and a lot of nice people. But why do we need them? Maybe they need us.

**Raghida Dergham:** Okay, all right. Okay, I've got you. Thank you very much Andrey Bystritskiy. Matt McInnis, you're nice people, but, they don't need you. They don't need you there. So, I know again, I'm throwing things at you before your four minutes. You could address that after your four minutes, or right away. It's up to you, Matt McInnis, please, four minutes to you.

**Matt McInnis:** Good afternoon. Good morning to everyone. Raghida, thank you for inviting me to this. This is a great panel. And I certainly take, looking at the current administration's Iran policy and what they're looking to do with potentially reentering the JCPOA, their meetings and ongoing and Vienna, major meetings yesterday, and there will be more coming up later this week. You know, the expectations, frankly, **I don't see anything that's going to really stop both sides from trying to at least de facto get back into the JCPOA. I don't know if it'll be any kind of formal agreement that they could get to that. I do think there's a lot of domestic opposition to that frankly, maybe even on both sides, certainly here within the U.S. But I can't perceive a situation where we're going to have Iran and the U.S. simply continue to escalate right now.** And so, I think it's where we're heading. You're saying Iran, made the announcements, that it's going towards 55 kilograms, 20% enriched uranium, which is a very fast pace, we don't know that's actually true. The IEA has not verified these statements. But you can see a lot of actions from on Iran’s side, you know, to really put more leverage, more pressure on the U.S. and the international community is desperate for sanctions relief. **As much as they may claim maximum pressure, you know, had failed, maximum pressure had a very significant impact for them. And I think that they are, they're looking for a way out. And I hope that the Biden administration does not waste that leverage that was built up under the Trump administration.** Moving on to things that I really, you know, am concerned about in the region as a whole. Basically, **this Iran is the major culprit here too, but the proliferation of weapons throughout the region, particularly weapons to non-state actors. What we've seen with the Houthis, obviously, with Lebanese Hezbollah, we're seeing with the Shia militias in Iraq. That's been an ongoing problem, I think, in the last few years. There's been a broader international recognition that we need to do more to prevent the proliferation of very sophisticated drones, missiles, and other, you know, air defense, and other equipment around the region, without, again, it's not tied to states this, these are non-state actors.** And what's been particularly concerning in the last few months is this evolution of some of these non-state actors like Kata’ib Hezbollah in Iraq, actually launching, you know, overt military strikes against Saudi Arabia, and potentially targeting other Gulf states, we're seeing that. That's a real kind of change over the last year or so, we're seeing these proxies, you know, kind of shake off plausible deniability. Iran is making clear messages to states in the region that it’s willing to take much stronger military actions against its rivals, against its competitors, and I think this is a really concerning trend. Nothing that, you know, the Biden administration isn’t going to deal with, and we dealt with this in the Trump administration. Our partners and allies in the region, you know, they're going to be increasingly taking their own path on some things, and this is where it comes down to, you know, the U.S.’s role, how we need to, you know, still provide, you know, leadership in the region. But, you know, our allies are calculating between Russia, China, us, Iran, and I think this is something that is going to continue to change the dynamics in the region quite a bit. And in particular, it's been interesting, you know, with Russia's, you know, significant entry into Syria and into the rest of the Middle East, back in 2015. That has started a larger shift. I think it's certainly within the Levant and the eastern Mediterranean. What's been very, you know, interesting and concerning to watch is this growing competition, as well as, at the times, the cooperation between Russia and Turkey, and how that is spreading into areas in the Caucuses. We saw this play out during the Nagorno-Karabakh, or in, you know, in the last year. And I think this is something that we have to, you know, pay close attention to. And finally, wrapping up the China-Iran relationship. I know that their economic agreement has been in the news. And, you know, Raghida you have written about this. **You know, I see China and Iran have, you know, been working on this deal, frankly, for a number of years and, you know, China has investments all around the region. They're not putting all their eggs into the Iranian basket. But they do see this as a way to improve their overall position in the region and continue to assert their influence and pushing back against U.S. and Western roles there in the region.** With that, I’ll close.

**Raghida Dergham:** Thank you very much. Let's try to unpack some of these issues one by one, if possible. Let me start with the Vienna Talks. Let me hear from you first. What is your prediction Matt McInnis? What is your prediction, that by the time we get to it, before the elections here in Iran, or apart from the elections in Iran, you think that the Biden administration is desperate enough to have any deal, success story, or the foreign policy success story, that it's going to give in to what the Iranians are demanding? Or do you think that there are hurdles that are insurmountable? Go ahead, Matt McInnis. And what happened in Vienna? If you know what happened?

**Matthew McInnis:** I mean, we understand that there was a, you know, there were meetings of the parties to the deal, the U.S. was there, kind of in the background, and we understand that, you know, that there's been, I'm sure, a lot of engagement on the sidelines there. And, you know, there's decisions, you know, to, you know, at least we're hearing reports, that, you know, all sides do think that they are moving towards some type of new arrangement. You saw President Rouhani, you know, describe it as you know, as a positive constructive activity. There a bit this past week. You see the U.S. has not made, you know, significant comments about it. But I think that there, you know, and I'm not anticipating major breakthroughs, if you're looking for that right now. But you do get the overall sense that both sides are looking for a way to get back in and it's a question of sequencing, who's going to go first, what sanctions are going to come off. **I wouldn't be surprised if you see things, particularly the banking sanctions on Iran, or the Central Bank of Iran, financial sanctions, I think those are going to be a high target for both Iran and the U.S. to talk about. So, I think that you're inevitably going to see some relaxation of the sanctions. I don't see how that's gonna change.**

**Raghida Dergham:** I see. Quickly before I, just very quickly, because I want to go to Abdel Rahman Al Rashed on that. So, the sequence in which you're talking about, will there be, or is there, any secret understanding as to when will they touch upon, let’s just say, the missiles on one hand, but more importantly, more focused, my question is on the regional behavior. You spoke of what you call the weapons to non-state actors, etc. Can you quickly just give me a 30 second answer on this? Is there an understanding as to when will they speak of regional behavior of Iran?

**Matthew McInnis:** Sort of the U.S. side is saying it wants to talk about that, and I think that they are hoping to. The Iranians have been pretty clear that they do not want to do that, and, to be frank, as much as I expect some reversion to the JCPOA this year, I don't expect there to be progress on the comprehensive talks. I think Joel's absolutely right, earlier on, that **we need to have addressed the full spectrum of Iran's activities. But I think we're gonna see the Iranians really dig in their heels. And I'm afraid that we're going to give up too much of our leverage to try to negotiate something more.**

**Raghida Dergham:** Abdel Rahman Al Rashed. What do you say about this? And I know that the Arabs are not at the table in any way right now and there's no signs that that they will be, even in step one and step two approach to the talks between the 5+1 and Iran. Can you address this, please Abdel Rahman Al Rashed?

**Abdel Rahman Al Rashed:** Well, it's really this is the most sensitive topic right now. Because everything depends on the outcome of the possible or potential negotiation between the Americans and the Iranians, and the outcome. Whether they would have a deal with the Iranians or not. I think the result will be quite devastating if the Obama legacy will continue in terms of all they care about is just the nuclear deal and that's it**. If the behavior of the regime in Tehran will not be limited cleanly, in all the areas of the western side of Iran, which is the Gulf, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Reza. If Iran does not stop meddling in these places, I think, you know, we, I think the Americans will have serious problem with their allies, who will tend to go more to other countries, superpowers in the world, like the Chinese, the Russians.**

**Raghida Dergham:** So, can a country like Saudi Arabia afford to just say, well, I've had it with you, the United States. I'm going to China way, I'm going towards Russia.

**Abdel Rahman Al Rashed:** No, no, it's not necessarily either or. We're not at the Cold War era where you have to have a place, here or there. There are not necessarily the two old camps. You still can have relations, minimalist relations with Americans, and more military was some sort of political or strategic with other countries like the Chinese and the Russians. But I think this is going to be there on the expense of the American interest here. They will, they will win Iran, but they will lose at least five countries in the region.

**Raghida Dergham:** I see. Very interesting. But one more time, Abdel Rahman Al Rashed, you said that the Russians probably you meant also the Chinese that they have to take a side. Do you think the Russians or the Chinese are going to take a side with the Arab Gulf states and say, farewell Iran.

**Abdel Rahman Al Rashed:** No. **China, they don't have to have sides because China is a big chopper in their area. They are the man with the money. They are the ones who will be able to finance all countries in the region. They are the ones who will now import almost one million barrels a day from Iran, two million barrels from Saudi Arabia. They can afford to be friends with both sides. The Russians, actually not. They are competitors. They sell oil. They don't import oil. So, eventually the Russians have to take sides, in my opinion. Yes.**

**Raghida Dergham:** I see. Is it risky? Do you think so? Do you think that you really must take sides? Or is there any possibility that the Russians would consider taking sides? Because we know that the Russians are trying to play a bigger role to be a broker between Israel and Syria, Israel and Iran, Israel, and probably Hezbollah, Israel and the Arab Gulf states even. So, they want to be a broker. So do you think that the day will have to come that Russia would take a side, if obliged to? And which side would that be? Would that be Iran, or the Arab Gulf states? Andry Bystritskiy.

**Andrey Bystritskiy:** Thank you very much indeed for your question. Of course, **Russia prefer don't take a side. Russia prefers to find balance between all countries and to be friends for countries in the region. And not only this region, even not to be friends with United States. Anyway, I don't agree that Russia has to take sides, must to take sides. No. It seems to me that main Russian ideas, I mean, Russian motivation is to find balance and security in the south from Russia.** And its main idea, it's historically it's very clear, because last 300 years, it was Russian dream, to find balance, of course, and to play important role, no doubt. But the main idea is to help countries to find solutions. To give them frame for dialogue or conversation, and so on and so on. **Of course, Russia is not China. China is a huge country, superpower, real superpower, with money, with opportunities. And China now is a new player in this region, not new totally, but their role, and the position of China, this role is increasing.** And China, definitely it's absolutely clear, is trying to play a more important role to take under control of a lot of protests in this region.

**Russia is trying to find a global solution-**

**Raghida Dergham:** And what Andry Bystritskiy? What is Russia trying to do? Find what?

**Andrey Bystritskiy:** Excuse me, maybe it's not enough. To find a global solution for this region. A global solution, including China, United States, India, Turkey, Western Europe. This its main idea. Of course, there are a lot of sub-solutions, if you like in this region between China, Iran, and Russia, for instance. But at the same time, as a general idea, from my point of view, of course, I can make mistakes, but from my idea, the main idea is finding global and relatively mutual solutions.

**Raghida Dergham:** Okay, Joel Rayburn. The Russians in Syria: have they won or there is still a potential quagmire?

**Joel Rayburn:** Listen, the relationship that the United States has with Russia is very stormy. It's very difficult. But on Syria, you know, it's essential right now, it's not going to be that way for a long time, I think. If we were having this forum in 10, 12, 15 years, Raghida, I mean, I think we love our Russian colleague, but he would not be here. **Because Russia, let's put it in perspective. Russia is a country with a very small economy, smaller than that of Italy, about half the size of that of India, 1/10, the size of that of the United States and China. It has a small and declining population relative to the United States, India and China. And I just don't think that Russia is going to be able to sustain influence 10, 12, 15 years down the road. That's not to say they're not, they don't play an important role now. But I think more and more they're playing, the role they're playing is not constructed. I don't think people trust them as a broker. They're playing a spoiling role. And in Syria, they had a strategic objective, little over five years ago, of spending six months to try to extricate their last remaining Middle Eastern client state from an internal conflict, and they and they were unable to do it. I think last year, we saw the Russians hit their ceiling, on influence in the Syrian realm. They suffered a military setback at the hands of Turkey, then they had another military setback at the hands of Turkey, and Libya, and Nagorno Karabakh. So, I think we've already passed the apogee of Russian influence. I think that it's inevitable at some point that the Russians will have to accept some kind of transition in Syria, because otherwise, that regime is just going to collapse on its own and the Russians can't really change that.**

**Raghida Dergham:** Will they transition out? Will the Russians transition out of Syria? Is this what you mean?

**Joel Rayburn:** No, no, I mean, a political transition in Damascus, as called for in UN Security Council resolution 2254.

**Raghida Dergham:** So, I hear you say basically, that the role that Russia is interested in playing, which is the big global solution, the broker, the big role, regionally and internationally. I sense that you're thinking this is too big for you?

**Joel Rayburn:** Yeah, I think it's counterproductive, even for Russian interests. **I mean, they've alienated a lot of people, a lot of a lot of countries in the in the Middle Eastern region. So, I don't think that's sustainable. I mean, it would be better if they would, if they would contribute to a constructive solution at some of these conflicts, rather than doing things like sending the Wagner Group and the Prigozhins, mercenaries, to make things worse, or continuing to threaten to invade their neighbors, and so on. I just don't see this as, this is not something that is sustainable and it causes sort of a collective backlash from other states, just as just as a matter of course**. Let me make one point, Raghida, which is that we were wondering all along, in 2019, in particular, in 2020, whether when we instituted the Caesar Act sanctions, whether Russia was going to come to Bashar Al Assad's rescue and bail out the regime in Damascus. And I think we've seen that that's not going to happen. So, I think the Syrian regime, it's in an economic meltdown, it's largely of its own making, and has a lot of causes. It has the fact that Syrian regime, **Assad regime was milking the Lebanese financial sector for decades and now they can no longer do that, because Beirut has run dry as a source of milk for them. And so, they're suffering in Damascus as a result. The Assad regime, as it came under the pressure of shortages, its own internal corruption and greed and economic mismanagement and stupidity led to a lot of loss in that economy. And then more recently, the fact that, I think, the countries of the region in the Mediterranean have disrupted a lot of the Assad regime’s Captagon trafficking, which means that there's a shortfall of revenue going to the Assad regime.** Those things are all economic problems the Assad regime is all making, and Russia has shown either it cannot, or it will not, bail Assad out from his own choices.

**Raghida Dergham:** Joel, Joel Rayburn, one more thing. The Caesar Act-do you think the Biden administration will eliminate the Caesar Act, and the Magnitsky Act, please. But because there are those from the Gulf that thought that the Caesar Act should be taken out of the way in order to rehabilitate the relations with between Arab Gulf states and Syria.

**Joel Rayburn:** Well, **the Caesar Act is a law. It's a law that was passed by Congress. It was a law that had the support of more than 420 members of Congress, is my recollection. It's one of the most popular pieces of legislation that’s come through Washington in recent years. It's not going anywhere. People who are lobbying against the Caesar Act are wasting their time.** That part of the U.S. approach to Syria is not going to change. There's a huge and very strong caucus in Congress in support of the Caesar Act. And again, people who are, arguing for the United States to discard the Caesar Act are going to have to go and change the minds of more than 400 members of Congress. It's not-

**Raghida Dergham:** And the Magnitsky Act?

**Joel Rayburn: Magnitsky, I think, is in the same place. I mean, there is no discussion here**. Matt can back me up on this. There is no serious discussion in Washington of somehow removing the Global Magnitsky Act or the Caesar Act? Nothing. Zero.

**Raghida Dergham:** Matt, what do you think? He asked your opinion. Matt McInnis?

**Matthew McInnis:** Yeah, no, I think Joel's absolutely right. I would be very surprised if we saw moves in Congress, or pushed by the White House to push back on both Magnitsky or Caesar. Honestly, the tool is really whether the Biden administration is going to implement those laws effectively. It is more of a case of enforcement, and more rather than a repeal of those acts, I just don't see that happening.

**Raghida Dergham:** Right. Abdel Rahman Al Rashed. Can we switch to the second big story of the last 10 days? Which is that China-Iran pact? Okay, well, some people dismissed it. In fact, in even in the US, many people said, ‘Oh, it's not very important. This is not ever going to happen.’ And for those of us who've been writing about it for a while, we said ‘Yes, it is happening so, take note.’ Now it is, you know, it's a serious pact. We don't even know all the details. We don't even know, the secret parts of it. What impact would it have on the relationship between Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, you know the major Arab countries, with China? I mean, again, talking about having your cake and eating it. The Chinese are sort of in that position. They are now a major player with Iran, protector of Iran, I argue anyway. What is going to happen Abdel Rahman Al Rashed with the reaction? When will the Arab Gulf states say, look, we do have leverage too. You need to influence the Iranians to have better behavior in order for us to continue these huge economic relations? Or, are you tied up that you cannot do that? Abdel Rahman Al Rashed.

**Abdel Rahman Al Rashed:** No, actually **we are not in a very strong position to dictate on China to be honest. They import most of our oil. Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, all of them actually, whether gas or oil. And we are a big market for them, I mean, relatively speaking. So, the agreement between Tehran and Beijing will test this kind of relationship between China and the other Arab countries. So, I think the Chinese now, what they are proposing, they are trying to say, let's have peace between our trade partners. This is in theory sounds okay, sounds good, but the reality is almost impossible to implement.** We have two different regimes completely, like North Korea and South Korea. It's not easy to have peace between the two countries, or trust at least. So, either the Chinese right now will increase importing oil from Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries. We're talking about right now China needs 13 million from all over the world. And it will be 16 million barrels by the end of this decade, which is very soon. So, **the Chinese are desperate to have oil from countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran will not be enough to get, to supply them with oil. Saudi is probably the biggest, most important to the Chinese. Now, China is not the only important one. Raghida here. Remember, India, which is not on good terms with China, and is a competitor in the energy market, as well. Also to compete with China very soon on this in the Gulf waterways. So I assume we will have little leverage, but not much leverage**. I think the Chinese, the Chinese-

**Raghida Dergham:** On leverage, Abdel Rahman Al Rashed, you can choose to you can use that leverage not to push the Chinese against the Iranians or dictate to them what to do with Iran, but at least to say, here's the chance of how you can influence the Iranian behavior in the Arab geography, if you will. Why won’t you?

**Abdel Rahman Al Rashed:** Well, **the problem is with the Iranians, they're not pragmatic enough you can deal with them. So, the Chinese will have difficulties. How are the Chinese going to convince the Iranians to stop meddling in Iraqi affairs, or threatens Saudi Arabia, or Emirates, you see? These countries are extremely important to China.** What's sort of, are the Chinese going to do like the Americans what they did in the 80s? And the 90s? And the 21st century? **Are they going to wage wars? I don't think the Chinese will do that, will go that far. But the Chinese now they have military base in Djibouti. There, they are showing some military muscles, but it's just for the waterways, they are not really, I don't think Chinese will be a major active military power in the region.**

**Raghida Dergham:** Alright, Joel Rayburn, I really want you to comment on this. And Andry Bystritskiy I'm going to come back to you, I promise you and give you much more time. But I need Joel Rayburn with the military background that you have. Can you address what Abdel Rahman Al Rashed just said.

**Joel Rayburn:** Do you mean the whether the Chinese will have a military presence in the Middle East?

**Raghida Dergham:** And what does that mean for the U.S.?

**Joel Rayburn:** Well, it's I think it's very difficult to see that. It'd be very difficult for the Chinese to project power like that anytime soon. But I would say that this is, **for sure there is a there is a competition that's growing between the United States and China, and it's now manifesting itself in all the regions of the world. But the main geopolitical problem in the Middle East right now is the Iranian regime’s military expansion into the Arab world, into the northern Middle East, and also into western Arabia. And this is something the Chinese, I think it's beyond their means to address. And it's something that is an existential danger to the countries that Abdel Rahman is talking about. So, this is a problem that is in our faces, right now. The Iranian regime, mounting military expeditions to try to control the northern Middle East and reach through the northern Middle East to the Mediterranean, to militarily control the Strait of Hormuz, and militarily control the Bab-el-Mandeb and be able to try to militarily choke, if they choose to the economic relationship between Europe and the Far East with the Middle East in between**. This is something it's not sustainable, it's not acceptable to any of those regions. But this is a con-

**Raghida Dergham:** But I'm sorry, go ahead. Finish your sentence.

**Joel Rayburn:** No, no, I'm done.

**Raghida Dergham:** What was the last thing you said? Because I spoke over your voice, which is not nice.

**Joel Rayburn:** No, I was saying that, **I was saying that this situation, which seems to be the aim of the generals of the Revolutionary Guard, to be able to have militarily destabilizing influence in the Mediterranean, the Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Hormuz is unacceptable for the rest of the world. So, it's not something that can stand.**

**Raghida Dergham:** And do you think that the Arab Gulf states are using any leverage they have? Or you don't think they have any leverage to be used?

**Joel Rayburn: They do have leverage, and they will have to use it. Because I think, unfortunately, the JCPOA, a nuclear agreement between Iran and other powers addresses none of these. But this is the problem of the moment. And it's an existential problem for the countries of the Middle East. And it's a huge strategically significant problem in terms of power and economic power for both Europe and the Far East. And so it this is the question that is going to thrust itself upon us and not the minutiae of the JCPOA?**

**Raghida Dergham:** Andry Bystritskiy? What does Russia think about that China-Iran pact? I mean, Iran is supposed to be your ally, basically, in Syria and Russia is very protective of Iran. Why do you think that you complement each other with this relationship between China and Iran? Or is this sort of distribution of roles between China and Russia regarding the region? Please, Andrey Bystritskiy, but come closer so that we can hear you better.

**Andrey Bystritskiy:** I’m as close as possible. Next position, I will be in the screen. Of course, I will be happy to be closer to you. Don't worry, I think it will happen. It’s inevitable. But first of all about Russia and China and Iran. I have mentioned that, it's a very serious question. During the conference you mentioned it, the Middle East awakening and something else. The discussion about triangle Russia, Iran and China took place. And it was very interesting. Of course, it's a new challenge for Russia. It's a new challenge. China, of course, **it's no doubt China is paving the way for a new future in this region, maybe for the new future for whole world. Because China has a plan, has strategy, has ideas. They're very big, very serious. And instead of U.S. Congress, the Central Committee Party doesn't adopt laws as part of the rest of the world, and it's important. China, he is very soft, but not so arrogant, like United States, for instance**. No, no crazy exceptionalism. And China is not pretending to be openly the observer. No, no, no China is very modest. They try to play a role, ‘okay, we’re good guys, we can help’. Of course, it's a real challenge. But from my point of view, as the whole of the region is changing before our eyes, we must understand the Middle East in the context of the new world. **Because, it's an additional question, whether the Middle East has agency. It's very important.** For Russia, it's extremely important, because, again, we can think about Russia, what you like, but at the same time, from my point of view, generally, we mean Russian intentions to try to combine balanced, and safe and comfortable for Russia to world. Russia is not a strong country, Joe is absolutely right. Not so big, not so powerful. But at the same time, Russia is not nothing. Russians has some friends, ideas, understandings of the world. Anyway. The problem is, it is the main problem of Chinese challenge, no stable balance of power can be achieved today. In the near future, we will live in the system of and have alliances, it's very important. China, for my point, has understood it. And they tried to play in the new world configuration. And in this instance, as the United States, China, Western Europe or Russia will have to maneuver, seek support from, and compete with one another. It's very complicated. It's like medieval war. Very flexible, very unstable. Seriously, it's a serious challenge. China is extremely important country in the contemporary world, it's, we should be extremely careful and smart in this case. Thank you.

**Raghida Dergham:** One quick question for you Andry Bystritskiy, but really quickly. How is it going? What you're trying to do between Israel and Syria? You're trying to bring them together behind the scenes and how is it over with Iran? You are, I think it's even at the level of President Putin, that attempts are made to somehow pave the way for better understandings behind the scenes or upfront, whichever it is, between Iran and Israel. How's that going?

**Andrey Bystritskiy:** Oh, I know what I know. But first of all, Russian administration and President Putin say, very close to Israel and support Israel in all sense. There are a lot of connections between Russia and Israel, because there are a lot of Jews in Russia and in Israel, a lot of connections, families, and so on. So, I think, a quarter or maybe one third of population in Israel is from Russia, or from Soviet Union.

**Raghida Dergham:** Well, is it going well? I mean, are you succeeding? Or is there a big resistance on the part of Syria? Is Syria, eager to have normalization?

**Andrey Bystritskiy:** Syria, now is between three forces, Tokyo, Russia, Iran, of course, illegal U.S. troops on the east of Syria, but it doesn't matter in our conversation. But Syria has to seek Russian support, of course. Iranians agree. Okay, it's really complicated balance. And I think it's the art of the power of diplomacy.

**Raghida Dergham:** All right. Okay. That all right. Let me go to Matt McInnis. Matt, did I ask you about your, you're the expert on that, on the China-Iran pact. Did you say what you wanted to say about that? Because, again, I just want to understand why is it not so worrisome for the United States? Is it possible that China might use its relationship with Iran to temper down the Iran and the Iranian behavior, and to use it as a chip in it's saying to the United States, ‘look, I can influence the Iranians, I can do this, because I now extend protection to the regime in Tehran.’

**Matthew McInnis:** Yeah, I mentioned some of this in my opening remarks. But you know, I, again, they've been working on this particular pact for some time. And you remember, when some of the first leaks came out, last year about it, you know, the Chinese actually didn't really want this to get out. This was something that the Iranian side leaked, because I think China is worried about being seen, you know, taking sides in the current conflicts and competition right now in the region. So, you know, **China's trying to be careful with it, it’s playing all sides, I do think what's going to what's going to be interesting to watch, especially during the JCPOA related negotiations is, firstly, China didn't play a huge role in this**, you know, Russia was really kind of, you know, between Russia and the U.S., moderated by the Europeans. But, you know, the, drivers were really us and Russia and Iran, to get to the agreement back in 2015. And certainly, I expect most of that to be similar this this round versus bilateral discussion. The Russians are involved, the Europeans are involved. **If China starts taking this relationship with Iran as a more serious thing, and they try to, frankly, assert themselves as more and more explicit defenders of Iran in these types of larger international fora, or, you know, broader concerns like that, that's where I can see a real change. I don't see this as like a new military alliance, per se, I don't think China would ever want to get drugged into something that kind of commits them to defend Iran.** In this situation, I would be very surprised. But it is interesting what China is trying to do in the region, on the military side that you were talking about earlier with Joel and Abdel. That, you know, I do think that they're going to have investments in freedom of navigation, you know, with their base in Djibouti. It's gonna be very interesting what the Iranians, the Iranian relationship with the Houthis and security in the Red Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb. That's going to be, that could be an interesting flash point between the Iranians and the Chinese.

**Raghida Dergham:** I'm going to give you 30 seconds to do your concluding remarks, because I want to go around. But before can you give me another 20 seconds on the third very major event of this week, which is what happened in Jordan? Take 20 to 30. Go ahead, Matt McInnis.

**Matthew McInnis:** Not a Jordan expert, but certainly, you know, Jordan is really critical for stability in the Levant and in the eastern Mediterranean. If we saw something really changed there, that could be very difficult for U.S. and our allied interest. So, I hope we are not heading into a period of significant stability there in Amman.

**Raghida Dergham:** Now that's another 30 seconds for your last remark.

**Matthew McInnis:** Oh, for me? Yeah, again, I just think that the Biden administration has a lot on his plate. I know. And I anticipate the Middle East, Biden doesn't want the Middle East to be the dominant issue, but as Joel said earlier on, it'll drag you back in. And I'm really hoping that the administration takes seriously the need to address Iran’s activities throughout the region, that we're not going to have stability unless we can find ways to address that both ourselves and with our partners and friends in the region. So, for me, this is you know, we have a tall order. There's a lot we have to do right now. But I do hope the Biden team understands what they're facing.

**Raghida Dergham:** Abdel Rahman Al Rashed, Jordan, and concluding remarks. But Jordan first.

**Abdel Rahman Al Rashed:** I think Jordan confirmed, you know, the feeling in the region of 2011, after the Arab Spring, so nobody really wants any more restraint. So, that old Spring, nobody wants it right now. We still suffer from what happened either in Yemen, or Libya, or Syria. So, I believe people just immediately jumped and they said, ‘Look, stability matters. It comes first’ And this is exactly the message now everyone is talking about. We definitely need a stable Jordan. Doesn’t matter how and why, doesn’t matter where people stand. And I think King Abdullah is, has proven over the years, he was able to manage the economy and the country with minimum resources to the best. So, I think he, Jordan is just a short clip.

**Raghida Dergham:** But, before you give me your concluding remarks, but you know, you have read and heard plenty of outside interference in what happened in Jordan, and from that pointed fingers at Israel, some pointed finger at Saudi Arabia. What I mean, yeah. Tell me-

**Abdel Rahman Al Rashed:** I think people, people will throw dirt at each other and the region, so they will accuse each other. The last word should be by the Jordanians. Jordanians should say at the end, if there was any foreign meddling they should say who did. I am sure you know, all the names being thrown around these days, not true.

**Raghida Dergham:** 30 seconds to you. Thank you very much Abdel Rahman Al Rashed. 30 seconds to Andry Bystritskiy, for concluding. No, stay stay with me. Just stay with me Abdel Rahman Al Rashed for another two minutes, one minute. Okay? Before you go. Andry Bystritskiy, 30 seconds, please. We're almost done.

**Andrey Bystritskiy:** About Jordan. I am absolutely sure you know very famous book by Michel Foucault, ‘Psychiatric Power Authority’ about medicine power. It's very strange situation. About Middle Eastern region in conclusion, I'm absolutely sure we have to overcome today our problems. And I’m absolutely sure that all main players in his region should be together. Of course, I understand a lot of conflicts, a lot of problems. But there is only one way we could be together. Thank you.

**Raghida Dergham:** Thank you very much Andry Bystritskiy. And last word to you Joel Rayburn. Again, Jordan and concluding remarks, please.

**Joel Rayburn:** On Jordan, it looks like the situation is going to be handled inside the royal family, which I think is appropriate. For me, the takeaway here in Washington was that the United States can't take anything for granted in the Middle East. And it can't over focus on one particular issue like the JCPOA. I would say that, though the biggest problem for the United States for the Arab countries and for the West in the Middle East is, as I mentioned, this unprecedented military expansion of the Iranian regime into these territories. Unless until that problem is solved, resolved, and there is a rollback of running military influence. There will be no normalization between Israel and the Assad regime, for example, that is helping to enable that, that Iranian military invasion of the Middle East and people who think otherwise are getting too high on the Assad regime’s Captagon.

**Raghida Dergham:** Thank you very much, gentlemen and I hope to see you in Abu Dhabi for the 4th edition of Beirut Institute Summit, hopefully. We're aiming for October.

**Andrey Bystritskiy:** Yes, now electricity in Beirut is finished. Thank you gentlemen. See you bye bye.

**Joel Rayburn:** Yes. There'll be no power outage in Abu Dhabi when we meet there.

**Andrey Bystritskiy:** Yes, we should bring power together when we meet in Abu Dhabi. Okay, nice to meet you colleagues.

**Matthew McInnis:** Nice to meet you. Thank you very much.