

# THE MIDDLE EAST IN 2025: IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY\*

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Conjuring a world 20 years from now is a very difficult task; imagining the volatile Middle East is even more hazardous. Uncertainties regarding the global distribution of power, the shifting capabilities of, and alliances among, regional states and groupings, unforeseen regime changes, the ups and downs of radical — particularly Islamist — trends in the region, when taken together, would deter even the most experienced forecaster. Waving these problems aside, I will advance a set of projections, although the prognosis will be broad enough to accommodate a substantial degree of variation in matters of detail without detracting from the long-term validity of the predictions themselves. I will begin by laying out a perceptual map of the Middle East 20 years hence before discussing their implications for American policy.

## ENERGY

Oil and gas provided close to 50 percent of global energy consumption in 2004.<sup>1</sup> The most credible statistics demonstrate that the Middle East, especially its Gulf subregion, will continue to be the

indispensable producer and supplier of world energy well into the future. Despite the recent enthusiasm about Central Asian, Caspian and Russian oil, proven reserves in all three places are paltry when compared to those in the Gulf. Middle Eastern oil reserves account for 66 percent of the world's proven reserves, with close to 62 percent located in the Persian Gulf and over 22 percent in Saudi Arabia alone. Iran is second with 11 percent; Iraq, Kuwait and the UAE are close behind, ranging between 8 percent and 10 percent each. By contrast, Russian proven reserves are 6 percent and the reserves of the former Soviet states taken together do not exceed 10 percent of the total.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the costs of exploration are much lower in the Gulf. The Gulf's exportable oil capacity — that is, production minus consumption — is enormous. It would not be far off the mark to assume that, if only exportable reserves were measured, the Gulf's share would go up to at least 80 percent of the world's total. This makes the Middle East indispensable to the health of industrial economies. In addition, Saudi Arabia is the only oil-exporting country that has a respectable

spare production capacity and is committed to augmenting it.

The same story is repeated, although not in such spectacular fashion, in the arena of natural gas: over 40 percent of proven reserves are located in the Middle East, with Iran and Qatar providing 30 percent between them. Russia, with over 26 percent of proven gas reserves, leads the pack, but no other country comes close to Iran and Qatar as a source of exportable natural gas.<sup>3</sup> There are also clear indications that new pipelines and technology will boost Middle Eastern gas production and exports to unprecedented heights and sharply increase its profile in the global gas trade within the next 20 years, particularly if oil production or reserves stagnate and prices become economically unsustainable.<sup>4</sup>

According to knowledgeable analysts, the current spike in prices is not going to be temporary.<sup>5</sup> It is not short-term stimuli, such as war and revolution, which have created the current shortage and consequent increase in prices. It is the sharp increase in demand, especially the spurt in Chinese oil consumption, which rose 16 percent and accounted for almost one-third of the increase in global demand in 2004. China has become the world's second-largest importer of oil, half of it from the Middle East. Global demand overall has also been growing; the year 2004 saw the largest growth in volume since 1976 and the most rapid growth rate since 1986.<sup>6</sup>

The growth in demand is likely to continue apace, with the Energy Information Administration's *Annual Energy Outlook 2005* projecting a 40 percent growth in oil demand by 2025.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that supplies will be tight, if not dramatically outstripped by demand, for the next several years. Saudi

Arabia, traditionally the only country with spare production capacity, is currently producing close to its limit of 10.5 mbd, including spare capacity. Its plans to increase capacity to 12.5 and then 15 mbd will take years to materialize, however, and by then it may not be enough to meet increased demand.<sup>8</sup> It seems oil is going to be both more costly and scarcer over the next several decades, further enhancing the strategic importance of the Middle East, particularly the Gulf. The clout not merely of the oil producers, but of important regional states with the capacity to disrupt oil flow, is, therefore, bound to increase in the next two decades. Instability in Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq will have much greater impact on the global economy in the future than has been the case so far.

## IRAQ

Iraq is likely to suffer from continued instability and looks well on the way to breaking up into a Kurdish and an Arab political entity. The current state of near civil war between Sunni and Shia Arabs, the continuing insurgency against the American occupation, and the Kurds' insistence on maximum autonomy for Iraqi Kurdistan are likely to result in a two-entity "solution." The Kurdish entity will probably remain in an anomalous position, much like northern Cyprus, with its sovereignty recognized by only a few. The Arab rump will continue in a state of internal turmoil as the rift deepens between Shia and Sunni Arabs, a dichotomy sharpened by U.S. policies. Washington initially chose the Shia over the Sunnis on the mistaken assumption that Saddam's was a Sunni regime and that Sunnis were therefore closely identified with the old order. This created a self-

fulfilling prophecy, alienating the Sunni population and augmenting the support base for the insurgency carried on by a mix of Baathists, Iraqi nationalists and foreign and indigenous Islamists. The American administration has lately tilted toward the Sunnis, afraid that Shia dominance in Iraq might translate into Iranian hegemony, thus alienating many of its erstwhile Shia friends. Washington has, therefore, not only made enemies on both sides of the sectarian divide; it has fed the Sunni-Shia competition that now borders on civil war.

The American design for Iraq already has failure written all over it.<sup>9</sup> The U.S. occupation has not only exacerbated ethnic and sectarian divisions; they have made insecurity all

pervasive. They have done so partly by tearing down the structure of the Iraqi state and creating an institutional vacuum into which transnational Islamist militants

moved, transforming lawless Iraq into a surrogate for Afghanistan, their original home base. Failed states invariably become safe havens for conflict entrepreneurs, including terrorist groups. It is a great irony that the United States, which was partially responsible for the failure of the Afghan state, is almost totally responsible for state failure in Iraq.

Furthermore, the invasion of Iraq has strengthened the sentiment, already shared by substantial segments of the population in the Middle East, that the United States is engaged in a war not so much against

terrorism as against Islam. The Iraq War has come as a boon for Islamist extremists such as Osama bin-Laden and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi by acting as the greatest advertisement for their cause among potential recruits. Al-Qaeda's strategy of polarizing the "Muslim World" and the "West" has been the chief gainer from the invasion of Iraq.<sup>10</sup>

Faced with insurmountable security and political problems and with domestic opinion increasingly opposed to the war, the United States can be expected to disengage from Iraq militarily over the next couple of years, repeating the Vietnam story, but with a different ending. In Vietnam, the North Vietnamese were

waiting to take over and unify the country once the Americans left. There is no such unifying force in Iraq, which is likely to descend further into civil strife and possibly into anarchy. Such an eventuality may

invite Turkish military intervention if the Kurds of northern Iraq declare independence.<sup>11</sup> Iranian influence is also bound to increase in the predominantly Shia south, as the Sunni-Shia division continues to intensify.

The weakening and possible division of a major Arab state will reinforce the commonly held opinion in the Middle East that the war was waged to control the oil and to ensure Israeli dominance of the region — and not necessarily in that order. The continuing presence in key positions in the administration of figures with close ties

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to Israel, and especially to the Likud, augmented by the influence of the Christian Right, which is in tactical alliance with the Israeli lobby on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, has heightened such suspicion.<sup>12</sup> This view has attained greater credibility in light of pressure currently being exercised by the United States to destabilize the regimes in Iran and Syria, both considered by many Arabs and Muslims to be next on the Israeli hit list.<sup>13</sup>

The failure of the American venture in Iraq is likely to sharply erode U.S. credibility in the region. The United States will find itself in a paradoxical position: while its military-technological lead continues to widen globally during the next two decades, its political influence in the Middle East and probably around the world will likely plummet as a result of the unilateralist Iraqi misadventure. A military and political retrenchment, similar to that following the Vietnam War, may ensue. Isolationism, one might recall, is the other side of the unilateralism coin.

## IRAN

With the United States in retreat from the Middle East and Iraq in turmoil, Iran is likely to be a key player in the Middle East in the next two decades. Its oil and natural gas reserves, its relatively sophisticated industrial and technological infrastructure, and a population that will be almost totally literate in the next decade or two will together reinforce Iran's role as the preeminent power in the Gulf and one of two or three major powers in the larger region. Iran is also likely to acquire a credible nuclear-weapons capability within the next two decades. The International Institute for Strategic Studies in London has recently projected in a "Strategic

Dossier" that Iran will be in a position to produce its first nuclear warhead five years from now if it decides to go full speed ahead. Even if it is hampered by technological factors, it is likely to achieve a nuclear capability within the next decade or two.<sup>14</sup>

Unlike North Korea and Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Iran is a relatively open society; its policies are subject to influence from the broader public. It is noteworthy that Iran's nuclear aspirations receive support from almost all shades of opinion in the country. Several factors explain this, including Israeli's nuclear and missile capabilities, the earlier threat of Iraqi WMDs, and the existence of nuclear weapons and delivery systems next door in Pakistan, with which Iran has an ambivalent relationship due to Pakistan's closeness to Saudi Arabia and the United States.

The chief reason behind Iran's drive to acquire nuclear weapons, however, is a desire to achieve a deterrent against unwanted intervention by the United States.<sup>15</sup> American military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq and the escalation of anti-Iran rhetoric, including labeling it part of the "axis of evil," seem to have convinced Tehran that American interference can only be deterred by the acquisition of a nuclear capability. Nuclear weapons — however crude — and nuclear-capable delivery systems — however rudimentary — are perceived by Tehran as the only equalizers against America's high-tech conventional weaponry, deployed so effectively in the two wars against Iraq. The sensitivity with which the United States has approached North Korea, as compared to the belligerency demonstrated by Washington in its treatment of Iraq, has further augmented the value of nuclear

weaponry in Iranian eyes.<sup>16</sup>

Paradoxically, the American-engineered regime change in Iraq has made Iran a key player there, especially through its religious and political affinities with much of Iraq's political class. People who had sought asylum in Iran during Saddam's rule lead the two major Shia political formations in Iraq. The main Shia militia, the Badr Corps, was trained and equipped by the Iranians. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the leading Iraqi Shia cleric and no doubt an Iraqi patriot, is originally Iranian and speaks Arabic with a pronounced Persian accent.<sup>17</sup> Washington has added to its problems in Iraq by gratuitously alienating Iran despite the fact that Tehran, while keeping a low profile, was willing to cooperate with the United States in Iraq, as it had done in Afghanistan.

Iran comes close to being an open polity when compared to many of its Middle Eastern neighbors.<sup>18</sup> Iranian domestic politics is likely to evolve over the next two decades towards a greater consolidation of democracy, although with unique Iranian characteristics that will include some degree of supervision by the Shia clergy but of a far less intrusive character than is the case today. The issue of the Shia clergy overseeing the functioning of the elected representatives is not a new one in Iran. It goes back to the debates at the time of the Constitutionalist revolution of 1905-1906, whose gains were aborted thanks in great measure to the usurpation of power by Reza Pahlavi, father of the last shah. There are differences today on the issue of clerical involvement in politics among the senior clerics, as there were in 1906. Leading clerics, including Grand Ayatollah Montazeri and Ayatollah Jalaledin Taheri,

consider the clergy's involvement and the use of Islam in the running of the country a serious mistake. Among other things, it has the potential to bring Islam into disrepute.<sup>19</sup>

It appears on balance that time is not on the side of the hard-line clergy. Their legitimacy, and consequently their authority, is being slowly but surely eroded. The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president also signals the importance of economic concerns among the Iranian electorate, fed up with the corruption of the ruling elite, which is made up, among others, of clergy-turned-entrepreneurs. The liberal reformists, obsessed as they were with issues that appealed primarily to their upper-middle-class supporters, such as women's dress, completely failed to fathom the depth of the economic discontent on which Ahmadinejad rode to power. The masses voted against the classes, including the economically entrenched clergy. Despite the new president's less-than-diplomatic posturing on foreign-policy issues, his election augurs well for Iranian democracy, demonstrating the power of the average voter to punish the elites. It will help keep politicians and the clerics on their toes.<sup>20</sup>

## SAUDI ARABIA

As Iran consolidates its democracy and stabilizes politically over the next two decades, Saudi Arabia, the key oil state, is likely to chart a rather tortuous political course. The regime is already caught between Wahhabism from above — the conservative establishment — and Wahhabism from below, the religious radicals.<sup>21</sup> An increase in oil revenue will help the regime to take the edge off some of the radicalism by increasing its capacity for social spending and employment

creation. However, it is likely to face increasing demand for political participation as well as for recognition of the diversity within Saudi society, suppressed since the Wahhabi conquest of the peninsula. The Shia of the oil-rich east have already become more vocal in their demand for a share of the public space. Hijaz in the west, home to the two holiest places of Islam and traditionally uncomfortable with Wahhabi orthodoxy, has also shown signs of greater cultural assertiveness. This could be a harbinger of political dissent.

The House of Saud is unlikely to be ousted from power in the next two decades for the simple reason that there is no cohesive alternative to the regime. However, it will have to make major compromises and concessions, including loosening its control over the political life of the country. It will have to become more responsive to societal demands and popular opinion, including in the field of foreign affairs, in order to survive. This could lead to radical revivalism or an assertion of liberal tendencies already present in the kingdom — or both.<sup>22</sup> However, political liberalization will inevitably mean that anti-Americanism, which is very high at the popular level, will find echoes in regime policies and may increasingly lead the regime to distance itself from Washington politically. This has the potential to affect both the energy and security arenas; a new compact may have to be negotiated between Washington and Riyadh in both these spheres.

## TURKEY

Turkey has been a loyal member of NATO for more than 50 years, with the second largest standing army in the alliance. It has been knocking at the gates of

the European Union since 1987 but has been denied entry. Most Turks have found this galling, especially in light of the accession of latecomers, including members of the erstwhile enemy camp, while Turkey has been forced to wait. This has been the case despite the reforms introduced by the Turkish government in the past several years to meet the Copenhagen criteria for admission into the EU. It has sent a signal to many Turks that Europe is still considered synonymous with Christendom. “Turks are good enough to die for Europe but not to live in it” is a popular remark one hears in Turkey. In the perception of most Turks the major reason they are denied entry is their Islamic faith. This feeling is reinforced by the rhetoric emanating from influential quarters in France, Germany and Austria and by the entry into the EU of the Greek part of Cyprus, despite the Greek Cypriots’ refusal to accept UN terms for reunification of the island. Turkish Cypriots had accepted the terms by a wide margin in a referendum.

It is plausible to assume that 20 years hence Turkey will either still be waiting at the EU gates or will have withdrawn its application in disgust. No matter what the outcome, Turkey’s candidacy has done the country one great favor: It has furthered the democratic process by sidelining the military and improving human rights. Democratic consolidation in Turkey seems to have taken on a life of its own and is likely to continue apace over the next two decades irrespective of what happens with regard to the EU.<sup>23</sup>

The emergence of the post-Islamist Justice and Development party (AKP) as the leading advocate of political and economic reform is a further healthy development that signifies two things. The

first is that mainstream Islamists have accepted the rules of the game, including secularism, and have repackaged themselves as conservative democrats akin to the Christian Democrats of Western Europe. Second, the artificial dichotomy created by the Kemalist elite between secularism and the country's Muslim identity has been revealed as an excuse for authoritarian rule.

Over the next 20 years, Turks will become increasingly self-confident in their Muslim identity. The European rebuff, when combined with the popular assertion of "Muslimhood" — as distinct from Islamism — will push Turkey into reevaluating its relationship with the Middle East, including its policies toward the major problems besetting the region.<sup>24</sup> The two wars against Iraq had already begun this process, but it will be accelerated, prompted among other things by the creation of a de facto Kurdish state (against which Turkish, Iranian and Arab interests will coincide), and increasing dependence on Arab and Iranian oil as industrialization proceeds apace.

American disengagement from Iraq and possible retrenchment from the Middle East following the Iraqi fiasco will also stimulate Turkey to demonstrate greater strategic autonomy from U.S. policies in the Middle East.<sup>25</sup> The decreasing role of the military in policy making will negatively affect Turkish-Israeli relations, as will the differences between Turkey and Israel over Iraqi Kurdistan, which Israel supports clandestinely.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, popular support

for the Palestinian cause will also be increasingly reflected in policy as Turkish democracy consolidates. While there is little evidence currently that Ankara has nuclear ambitions, such aspirations cannot be ruled out as Turkey becomes more deeply engaged in the Middle East and simultaneously upgrades its already respectable technological infrastructure.

### ISRAEL-PALESTINE

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is likely to intensify as well as undergo a major paradigm change over the next two decades. The Israeli withdrawal from Gaza will not presage a negotiated peace leading to Palestinian statehood, as the Israeli government explicitly rejected a negotiated withdrawal from the Gaza strip. It is clear

that the move is a unilateral jettisoning undertaken by Israel for demographic reasons and as a result of Israel's incapacity to control the increasingly

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militant 1.3 million Palestinians, most of them children of refugees of the 1948 War and the Palestinian displacement that accompanied it. Moreover, there is no indication that the trajectory of Israeli policy toward the occupied territories is likely to undergo substantial change. Ariel Sharon seemed to have received a green light from the Bush administration to continue creating new facts on the ground in the West Bank in return for withdrawal from Gaza.<sup>27</sup> His successors are more than likely to continue down that road. Israeli efforts at expanding settlements, vivisectioning the West Bank into cantons by

constructing Israeli-only roads and barriers well inside the West Bank that effectively cut off Palestinian enclaves from each other, and cordoning off Arab Jerusalem from its hinterland, all continue unabated.<sup>28</sup>

The situation is likely to evolve over the next couple of decades to a point at which it will be impossible even for the most moderate Palestinian leaders to justify to their constituents continued efforts toward a two-state solution. In fact, as a consequence of Israeli settlements and the expropriation of Palestinian land, a viable Palestinian state may no longer be possible.<sup>29</sup> Soon most politically conscious Palestinians will come to the conclusion that the only feasible option left to them is to accept a one state solution between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River encompassing both Jewish and Arab populations. Consequently, one can envisage a radical shift in Palestinian strategy symbolized by an increasingly vocal demand to live in a single state, call it Israel if you will, as equal citizens with the same political and civil rights as the Jewish citizens of Israel.

This will confront the Israeli leadership with the stark choice between incorporating the Palestinians as full citizens or ruling over them indefinitely as occupied people circumscribed within “reservations,” as the West Bank enclaves and Gaza will increasingly come to be seen around the world. Given the radical transformation in international sensibilities in the past half century, the 1948 formula of “population transfer” will not work in 2010 or 2020. Neither will the unilateral jettisoning of heavily populated parts of the West Bank, which constitute about 42 percent of the territory according to Israeli calculations. This will be the case for the simple reason that there

will be no takers. The Palestinian Authority, Israel’s last best chance, would have collapsed because of the untenable nature of its position simultaneously as a resistance movement and a buffer between the occupiers and the occupied.<sup>30</sup> Mahmoud Abbas is likely to be the last Palestinian leader who would try to be both De Gaulle and Pétain at the same time. If the wily Arafat failed in squaring that circle, Abbas is almost certain to suffer the same fate.

The Israeli and American reactions to the Hamas victory in the Palestinian elections of January 2006 are likely to speed up the process of the collapse of the Palestinian Authority rather than force Hamas to recognize Israel immediately as a precondition for negotiations. Many Palestinians believe that the PLO squandered its major bargaining chip by recognizing Israel in the absence of a final settlement and Israel’s simultaneous recognition of a Palestinian state. Hamas is unlikely to follow the same route to a dead end. However, there have been clear indications that Hamas is willing to enter into a long-term truce with Israel if the latter withdraws from lands occupied in 1967.<sup>31</sup> This could have been interpreted as a first step on Hamas’s part toward eventual acceptance of a two-state solution, with mutual recognition coming at the end of the process.

The Israeli and American responses to Hamas’s attempt to soften its position have been so negative that Hamas is likely to return to its hard-line rhetoric so as not to lose credibility with its base by looking more and more like the PLO, which was willing to negotiate with Israel under the most disadvantageous terms. Such a scenario is likely to make the one-state solution even more appealing to large



segments of Palestinians, once they realize that a negotiated settlement leading to Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories is out of the question.

It is this scenario that prompted Sharon and now Ehud Olmert to advocate drawing Israel's boundaries unilaterally and jettisoning heavily populated Palestinian territories. However, the absence of a negotiated settlement, the collapse of the Palestinian Authority, and the impossibility of sealing off the West Bank will force Israel to eventually reoccupy the unilaterally jettisoned territories, which are likely to become hotbeds of radical militancy. There is the clear possibility that in the next two decades the Israeli-Palestinian dispute will return to a state of civil war reminiscent of, but far more virulent than, that of the British mandate of the 1930s and 1940s.

### **POLITICAL ISLAM**

One counterintuitive trend that is likely to come to fruition in the Middle East in the next 20 years is the role of moderate and mainstream Islamists as important vehicles for democratization.<sup>32</sup> Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Iraq, Tunisia and Morocco all seem to be demonstrating the validity of this assertion to various degrees and in different ways. Democratization and political openings that provide mainstream Islamist groups avenues for legal political participation usually end up taming Islamists. They then tend to shift their strategy from Islamism, which seeks the imposition of Sharia law, to "Muslimhood," which aims not so much at Islamizing state and society as reflecting society's Muslim identity through the infusion of Islamic normative values and Muslim political sympathies into state policy.

Islamism — Islam as a political

ideology — thrives in a state of opposition to oppressive, authoritarian regimes, as it becomes the major vehicle for the expression of political dissent.<sup>33</sup> Once free political participation is permitted and Islamists have the opportunity to attain or share power, the hollowness of the slogan "Islam is the solution" becomes quickly apparent. Moreover, Islamist sympathizers, most of them lukewarm about Sharia law, now feel confident that Muslim normative values can be reflected in state policies through democratic means and lose interest in extremist platforms that they had come to support because of lack of alternatives under authoritarian rule. Turkey is a good example of this phenomenon, but one can see this happening in other countries as well. Post-Islamist tendencies are evident in Egypt in the effort of the Wasat (Center) party, several of whose founders were Muslim Brothers, to gain official recognition.<sup>34</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood itself, shedding its radical image of the 1960s, would like nothing better than to be recognized as a legal political party so that it can enter the electoral fray. The performance of Brotherhood-supported candidates in the recent parliamentary elections in Egypt, despite regime repression, is bound to strengthen this trend among Egyptian Islamists. Such post-Islamist but normatively Muslim tendencies are likely to proliferate in the Middle East as countries begin to democratize, and political participation becomes the norm. Participation in the political system enforces responsible behavior that no amount of regime repression can achieve.

### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

What do all of these projections imply for U.S. policy toward the Middle East

over the next 20 years? Taken together they point to the need for U.S. policies that come to terms with these projected trends. First, given that feasible alternatives to oil and gas as major sources of energy at affordable prices are not likely to appear within the time frame of this paper, Washington should begin treating oil suppliers not as clients or supplicants but as equal partners. This means it should be sensitive to their domestic opinion — which will increase in importance as these countries move towards greater popular participation in governance — as well as to their long-term strategic and economic interests. This becomes all the more important because energy is going to be a suppliers' market for some decades. The industrialized countries will face stiff competition for the scarce energy resources of the Middle East from China, India, and in a decade's time from countries such as Turkey and Brazil.

Second, the United States will have to accept Iran's rise to regional preeminence and begin building bridges to it.<sup>35</sup> No legitimate and stable structure of regional security can be established in the Middle East and the Gulf without Iran's willing participation. It is almost inevitable that Iran will acquire a nuclear capability, even if it is cloaked in a policy of deliberate ambiguity, much like that of Israel or of India and Pakistan until 1998. Attempts to destroy Iran's emerging nuclear capability by attacks from the air are likely to be counterproductive and provide Iran with the excuse to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. As two leading Washington-based analysts of Iran point out,

The costs, uncertainties, and risks of waging an air campaign to destroy

Iran's nuclear sites are too great to make it anything but a measure of last resort — the hopes of some in the Bush administration notwithstanding. Because Tehran has managed to conceal major nuclear facilities, it is unclear by how much even successful bombing could set back the country's nuclear development. Moreover, no matter how little damage it suffered, Iran would likely retaliate. It has the most capable terrorist network in the world, and the United States would have to stand ready for a full onslaught of attacks. Perhaps even more important, a U.S. military campaign would probably prompt Tehran to unleash a clandestine war on U.S. forces in Iraq.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, an aerial attack on Iran after the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan will take anti-Americanism in the Muslim world to unprecedented heights and multiply the threat of terror attacks on the United States and its allies. Therefore, creative compromises on the nuclear issue will be necessary. Washington has demonstrated in the case of India that it can engage in such creative compromises. It accepted it as a de facto nuclear-weapons state and promised to supply it with dual-use technology while convincing Congress to lift restrictions and by getting around the restrictions imposed by the London Suppliers Group. The United States will have to do much the same in the case of Iran or, at the very least, desist from putting undue pressure on Tehran to roll back its nuclear program.

Once Washington gets over its accumulated prejudices, it will realize that Iran is basically a status quo power. It has too much at stake in the stability of the region to engage in adventurism unless it feels

pushed to the wall. This lesson should have been clearly drawn from Iran's behavior in the past four years in relation to Afghanistan and Iraq. In both cases Iran could have acted as a spoiler but did not. In fact, Iran facilitated the achievement of American goals by supporting the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan and by advising Iraqi Shia leaders to work with and not against the U.S. occupation authority. Washington missed an opportunity to build on Iran's cooperation and instead included it in the "axis of evil." It may still not be too late for a change of course on Iran by this or a subsequent administration, despite the current bellicose rhetoric.

Third, the United States must give due respect to Turkish interests in the region. This will apply with particular force to the Kurdish issue, which has enormous potential to complicate U.S.-Turkish relations. Turkey is likely to emerge as a formidable power straddling the Middle East and Europe, as well as a potential model in a loose sense for the future development of Middle Eastern and Muslim polities. Domestic lobbies in the United States that denigrate Turkey's importance or attempt to obstruct the further development of U.S.-Turkish relations will have to be ignored. Turkey, like Iran, is a pivotal power in the region, and no durable structure of regional security can be established without its participation.

Fourth, it is essential that the United States change its policy of unquestioning support to Israel and use of double standards, including on the issue of Israel's noncompliance with UN Security Council resolutions concerning Jerusalem, Jewish settlements and its treatment of the occupied population. The United States should begin to treat Israel as a part of its foreign-

policy calculus toward the Middle East rather than as an extension of domestic American politics, despite the pressure generated by both AIPAC and the Christian Right. Israel's security should be underwritten by the United States on Washington's terms and not those dictated by Israel. The almost craven support extended to Ariel Sharon's policies by the Bush administration has left the distinct impression in many quarters that Israel no longer acts as America's proxy in the Middle East (which was the perception during the Cold War years and into the 1990s, and which the Arabs could understand if not appreciate) but that America now acts as Israel's proxy in the region. Nothing has hurt American standing in the Middle East more than this perceived reversal of roles with the tail appearing to wag the dog.<sup>37</sup>

U.S. policy towards Israel-Palestine will face graver challenges if nothing is done to change course immediately. Time for a solution based on the two-state formula is running out fast, thanks to Israel's policy of creating new realities on the ground in the West Bank. Washington will have to face much more wrenching choices once the Palestinian Authority collapses totally and the Palestinian demand shifts to a binational one-state solution.

Fifth, if Washington were to demonstrate greater acceptance of Muslim/Islamist political formations as legitimate political players in the Middle East and as essential participants in the political process within countries, it would both reduce Islamist hostility toward the United States and neutralize the argument made by authoritarian rulers that without them the Islamists would turn the region into a

hotbed of anti-Americanism. It would also curb the growth of Islamist extremism that feeds transnational networks like al-Qaeda. The participation of Islamist political formations in open polities and the shift toward post-Islamism taken together will narrow the operational space for transnational extremist organizations and substantially reduce, if not eliminate, their recruitment pool in the Middle East. Therefore, while in the short run Washington may face greater problems in its relationship with some of the Middle Eastern governments that succeed today's authoritarian rulers, in the long term such changes will help the United States meet the terrorism challenge much more effectively than is possible either by military means or by supporting authoritarian regimes that claim to combat Islamism.

In short, it would be productive for the United States to abjure an overweening posture in the region, disavow unilateral

intervention, and work with the major regional states, such as Iran and Turkey, not merely to ensure energy supplies at affordable rates but to prevent this strategic region from turning irretrievably hostile to wider American strategic and economic interests. An essential precondition for such a collaborative endeavor would be to respect the strategic autonomy of important regional states and demonstrate sensitivity to popular opinion on issues such as Palestine that Middle Eastern populations consider to be vitally important. Public diplomacy cannot succeed unless the substance of policy undergoes an urgently required transformation. It is essential that the United States evolves a new paradigm and change the direction of its policies toward the Middle East immediately if it is to regain a position of trust and safeguard its strategic interests in the region. It may be much too late by 2025, or even by 2015.

\* An earlier version of this paper formed the basis of a Sesquicentennial Lecture at Michigan State University to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the university's founding

<sup>1</sup> *Putting Energy in the Spotlight: BP Statistical Review of World Energy*, June 2005.

<sup>2</sup> *Putting Energy in the Spotlight*. For a well-argued case regarding the importance of the Gulf, especially of Saudi Arabia, to world oil supplies, see Shibley Telhami and Fiona Hill, "America's Vital Stakes in Saudi Arabia," *Foreign Affairs*, 81(6), November/December 2002.

<sup>3</sup> *Putting Energy in the Spotlight*.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Yergin and Michael Stoppard, "The Next Prize," *Foreign Affairs*, 82(6), November/December 2003.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Colin J. Campbell and Jean H. Laherrere, "The End of Cheap Oil," *Scientific American*, March 1998; and Peter Maas, "The Breaking Point," *New York Times Magazine*, August 21, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> *Putting Energy in the Spotlight*. For the impact of Chinese dependence on Middle Eastern oil on China's policy toward the Middle East, see Jeffrey A. Brader and Flynt L. Leverett, "Oil, the Middle East and the Middle Kingdom," *Financial Times*, August 16, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Energy Information Administration, *Annual Energy Outlook 2005*, accessed through the internet at <http://www.eia.doe.gov/oiaf/aeo/forecast.html> on September 19, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Jad Mouwad, "Such Good Friends, Again: Why America is More Dependent than Ever on Saudi Arabia," *The New York Times*, August 6, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> "The beginning of wisdom is to recognize that the ongoing war in Iraq is not one that the United States can win. As a result of its initial miscalculations, misdirected planning, and inadequate preparation, Washington has lost the Iraqi people's confidence and consent, and it is unlikely to win them back." James Dobbins, "Winning the Unwinnable War," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2005.

<sup>10</sup> For an incisive analysis that leads to similar conclusions, see Mark Danner, "Taking Stock of the Forever War," *The New York Times Magazine*, September 11, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> According to a knowledgeable military historian, "Should the Kurds actually attempt to form Kurdistan,

there is almost no question that the Turks would invade Northern Iraq.” Edward J. Erickson, “Turkey as Regional Hegemon—2014: Strategic Implications for the United States,” *Turkish Studies*, 5(3), Autumn 2004, p. 41.

<sup>12</sup> For a persuasive and well-documented argument that pro-Israel neocons were the primary advocates of a belligerent American policy aimed at regime change in Iraq without regard for its impact on the future of Iraq and the Arab world because they saw it as enhancing the Israeli position in the Middle East vis-à-vis the Palestinians and its Arab neighbors, see John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Faculty Research Working Paper Series, March 2006, accessed on the Internet at [http://ksgnotes1.harvard.edu/Research/wpaper.nsf/rwp/RWP06-011/\\$File/rwp\\_06\\_011\\_walt.pdf](http://ksgnotes1.harvard.edu/Research/wpaper.nsf/rwp/RWP06-011/$File/rwp_06_011_walt.pdf) on March 19, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> For a well-reasoned article that demonstrates the counterproductive nature of the Bush administration’s policy toward Syria, see Joshua Landis, “Don’t Push Syria Away,” *The New York Times*, September 17, 2005. For a stringent critique of American policy toward Iran and a plea for greater pragmatism, see Fareed Zakaria, “Talk to Tehran,” *The Washington Post*, August 16, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> *Iran’s Strategic Weapons Programmes – A Net Assessment*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> The Iranian search for deterrence against American intervention has a close parallel with a similar consideration that prompted Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s decision to detonate India’s first nuclear device in 1974. The decision to do so was taken in early 1972 following the sailing of the American nuclear carrier, the USS Enterprise, into the Bay of Bengal in December 1971 during the Bangladesh War in a failed attempt to prevent India from bringing the war to a favorable conclusion. New Delhi reached the conclusion that only the acquisition of nuclear weapons would send the signal to Washington not to repeat such a venture when Indian vital interests are involved.

<sup>16</sup> “When the Bush administration invaded Iraq, which was not yet nuclearized, and avoided using force against North Korea, which already was, Iranians came to see nuclear weapons as the only viable deterrent to U.S. military action.” Kenneth Pollack and Ray Takeyh, “Taking On Tehran,” *Foreign Affairs*, 84(2), March/April 2005.

<sup>17</sup> For a thoughtful and balanced study of Iran’s influence in Iraq after the American invasion, see International Crisis Group, *Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence?*, Middle East Report No. 38, March 2005.

<sup>18</sup> For a perceptive analysis of the complex nature of Iranian politics and crosscutting cleavages within the country, see Ali M. Ansari, “Continuous Regime Change from Within,” *Washington Quarterly*, Autumn 2003.

<sup>19</sup> For one report, see Nicholas D. Kristof, “Overdosing on Islam,” *The New York Times*, May 12, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> For a fine preliminary analysis of Ahmadinejad’s election, see International Crisis Group, *Iran: What does Ahmadi-Nejad’s Victory Mean?*, Middle East Briefing No. 18, August 2005.

<sup>21</sup> For an account of pressures and counterpressures operating on the Saudi regime, see Michael Scott Doran, “The Saudi Paradox,” *Foreign Affairs*, 83(1), January/February 2004. Also, see International Crisis Group, *Saudi Arabia Background: Who Are the Islamists?*, Middle East Report, No. 31, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> For liberal tendencies in Saudi Arabia, see Gwenn Okruhlik, “Empowering Civility through Nationalism: Reformist Islam and Belonging in Saudi Arabia,” in Robert W. Hefner (ed.), *Remaking Muslim Politics: Pluralism, Contestation, Democratization* (Princeton University Press Princeton, NJ, 2005), pp. 189-212.

<sup>23</sup> I have discussed this in greater detail in Mohammed Ayoob, “Turkey’s Multiple Paradoxes,” *Orbis*, 48(3), Summer 2004, pp. 451-463.

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of “Muslimhood” as distinct from “Islamism”, see Jenny B. White, “The End of Islamism? Turkey’s Muslimhood Model,” in Robert W. Hefner (ed.), *Remaking Muslim Politics: Pluralism, Contestation, Democratization* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2005) pp. 87-111.

<sup>25</sup> For Turkish military capabilities and prospects for strategic autonomy, see Edward J. Erickson, “Turkey as Regional Hegemon—2014: Strategic Implications for the United States,” *Turkish Studies*, 5(3), Autumn 2004, pp. 25-45.

<sup>26</sup> Mustafa Kibaroglu, “Clash of Interest over Northern Iraq Drives Turkish-Israeli Alliance to a Crossroads,” *Middle East Journal*, 59(2), Spring 2005, pp. 246-264.

<sup>27</sup> According to one Israeli analyst, Sharon is “the first to agree to evacuate settlements inside Eretz Yisrael, the Biblical land of Israel. He is the first to hand over territories without a formal agreement; but he is also the first to get American backing for the establishment of facts over the Green Line.” Nahum Barnea in *Yediot*

*Aharonot*, 21 February 2005, quoted in International Crisis Group, *Disengagement and After: Where Next for Sharon and the Likud?*, Middle East Report No. 36, 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Some of the best sources of objective analyses of the situation in the West Bank and Jerusalem are the reports periodically published by the International Crisis Group. For example, see International Crisis Group, *The Jerusalem Powder Keg*, Middle East Report No. 44, 2005. On Jerusalem, it concludes that “Perhaps, most significantly, current [Israeli] policies in and around the city will vastly complicate, and perhaps doom, future attempts to resolve the conflict by both preventing the establishment of a viable Palestinian capital in Arab East Jerusalem and obstructing the territorial contiguity of a Palestinian state.”

<sup>29</sup> The infeasibility of the two-state option and the argument for a one-state solution are most cogently stated in Virginia Tilley, *The One-State Solution: A Breakthrough for Peace in the Israeli-Palestinian Deadlock* (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2005). Also, see Tony Judt, “Israel: The Alternative”, *New York Review of Books*, 50(16), October 23, 2003, pp. and Gary Sussman, “The Challenge to the Two-State Solution”, *Middle East Report*, 231, Summer 2004.

<sup>30</sup> The crisis facing the Palestinian authority is well encapsulated in International Crisis Group, *Who Governs the West Bank? Palestinian Administration Under Israeli Occupation*, Middle East Report No. 32, 2004. The crisis has intensified since the publication of this report.

<sup>31</sup> Top leaders of Hamas, Khaled Meshaal and Mahmoud al-Zahar, have stated such views clearly in interviews soon after the Hamas electoral victory. For Meshaal’s position, see his interview with the BBC, “Hamas ‘Ready to Talk to Israel’”, accessed on the Internet at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/4692114.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4692114.stm) on March 6, 2006. For al-Zahar’s views, see his interview with CNN, “Hamas Leader Sets Conditions for Truce”, accessed on the Internet at <http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/01/29/hamas.interview/> on March 6, 2006.

<sup>32</sup> For a similar argument, see Reuel Marc Gerech, *The Islamic Paradox: Shiite Clerics, Sunni Fundamentalists, and the Coming of Arab Democracy*, AEI Press, Washington, DC, 2004.

<sup>33</sup> For details of this argument, see Mohammed Ayoob, “Political Islam: Image and Reality”, *World Policy Journal*, 21(3), Fall 2004, pp. 1-14.

<sup>34</sup> See Augustus Richard Norton, “Thwarted Politics: The Case of Egypt’s Hizb al-Wasat”, in Robert W. Hefner (ed.), *Remaking Muslim Politics: Pluralism, Contestation, Democratization*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2005, pp. 133-160.

<sup>35</sup> I had made this argument more than four years ago in Mohammed Ayoob, “South-west Asia after the Taliban”, *Survival*, 44(2), Spring 2002, pp. 41-68.

<sup>36</sup> Kenneth Pollack and Ray Takeyh, “Taking On Tehran”, *Foreign Affairs*, 84(2), March/April 2005.

<sup>37</sup> For a perceptive study of the influence of the Israel lobby on the making of U.S. policy toward the Middle East and its negative consequences for the United States, see John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, “The Israel Lobby”, *London Review of Books*, vol. 28, no. 6, March 23, 2006, accessed on the Internet at [http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n06/mear01\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n06/mear01_.html) on March 19, 2006. For an expanded version of the article that provides meticulous documentation, see John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Faculty Research Working Paper Series, March 2006, accessed on the Internet at [http://ksgnotes1.harvard.edu/Research/wpaper.nsf/rwp/RWP06-011/\\$File/rwp\\_06\\_011\\_walt.pdf](http://ksgnotes1.harvard.edu/Research/wpaper.nsf/rwp/RWP06-011/$File/rwp_06_011_walt.pdf) on March 19, 2006.

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## COMMENTARY

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To look forward almost a quarter century, it may be useful to look back for a similar period to see if any trajectories can be discerned. Patterns of change that have unfolded

over the past 25 years may not only have some bearing on the future, they may continue. It is improbable that if, indeed, trends have existed for a generation in national political and economic systems, in intraregional relations, in the roles of political Islam and political violence, in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and in U.S. involvement in the region, they will change profoundly or quickly. If such trends can be identified, therefore, they should provide useful baselines from which to assess future prospects.

### **National Political Economies**

In the early 1980s, the Middle East was still in the twilight of the nationalist era. One-party regimes or absolute monarchies held sway in virtually all Arab countries. Political liberalization had yet to commence in earnest. In the one Arab republic that had experimented with political reform in the 1970s, Sadat's Egypt, authoritarianism had quickly been reestablished. In the Gulf, only Kuwait had a functioning legislature. Turkey had recently experienced a military intervention into politics, and the high command retained substantial influence over Turgut Ozal's new government. The grip of Boumeddiene and the FLN in Algeria remained tight, Qadhafi's Libya was in an extremist, populist phase, and Tunisia was laboring under the whimsical authoritarianism of a virtually senile Bourguiba. Only Egypt had experimented with neoliberal economic reforms in the 1970s, but that experiment had also been short-lived. The established economic orthodoxy remained a teetering import-substitution industrialization, although by 1981, it was clear that this was a dead-end. The political courage necessary to recognize this and take appropriate action had, however, yet to be mustered.

Twenty-five years later, much has changed and, for the most part, changed for the better. Both monarchies and republics have liberalized, if not democratized, their polities. In the Gulf, only the UAE is still without elections of any kind, while elected representative bodies at the local or national level now exist in all other GCC states, as they do elsewhere in the region. Leninist parties and one-party states, with the partial exceptions of Libya and Syria, are now extinct. Although opposition parties continue to confront uneven playing fields, they are on those fields playing the game of politics everywhere outside of the Gulf and Libya. The first Arab change of government through a free and fair election in virtually half a century occurred in Palestine in January 2006. A free and fair election brought an Islamist party to power in Turkey in 2002. One marred by governmental interference nevertheless brought a sizable Islamist opposition into the Egyptian parliament in December 2005. Iran has had two dramatic presidential changes brought about through free and fair elections.

The record, in sum, is clear. Over the past quarter century, Middle Eastern political systems have undergone substantial liberalizations and are now embarking, if hesitatingly, upon democratization. There is nothing to suggest that this trend will abate, although it is unlikely to be unilinear. But despite probable delays and intermittent setbacks, it would be surprising if a generation from now democracy was not reasonably well established in some states of the region and had made further inroads in others. If it is true that democracies are less likely to wage war, especially against one another, than are countries with other forms of government, this change alone should have a substantial positive impact on

regional relations, to say nothing of the political well-being of the region's inhabitants.

Just as political markets are gaining ground at the expense of states, so are economic ones. The Arab socialisms that helped prop up dictatorships have gradually evolved into quasi-market economies. Although economic playing fields, like political ones, continue to be tilted in favor of the state and its allies, more and more private actors are playing the economic game. Private-sector shares of investment and output are steadily rising. Privatization of state-owned enterprises is now moving into the vital financial and even utilities sectors. Further reforms are necessary, such as in government employment, which remains too high as a percentage of total employment in most Middle Eastern economies. More important, residual effects of the legacy of socialism and side effects of the transition to neoliberalism, including poverty, inequality and unemployment, threaten to bring about backlashes against both political and economic reform. But the oil boom and its spillover into much, if not most, of the region—given the likely continuation of high energy prices, increased growth rates as a result of economic reform, decreasing rates of population growth and the benefits of enhanced intraregional and cross-Mediterranean trade—are likely to be sufficient to prevent political economies from being swamped by reactions to neoliberalism. Even the rise of political Islam, especially if it follows the Turkish model, will reinforce rather than undermine the momentum for economic liberalization.

Economic reform has, if anything, been more rapid and thoroughgoing than its political equivalent over the past 25 years. And, as with political reform, there is nothing to suggest that the pace is slackening. Indeed, as the benefits flow through from those reforms, the pace may well intensify. This, in turn, suggests that, while the region's poorer states are not going to overtake the wealthy, hydrocarbon-exporting ones, their economies should continue to expand at respectable rates, thus reinforcing further reform and growth while enhancing the size and status of private sectors and middle classes, both of which are important to the consolidation of democracy.

### **Political Islam**

Despite the February 2006 prognostication of the U.S. Defense Department in its quadrennial review that we are embarked on a "Long War" against terrorism, if the recent past is any guide, the overwhelming trend within political Islam is domestication rather than radicalization, or, to use Mohammed Ayoob's term, a shift from Islamism to Muslimhood. Twenty-five years ago, political Islam was in its infancy, being responsible in 1979 for the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the killing of Anwar Sadat in Egypt in 1981, the birth of Shia radicalism in the South of Lebanon in the wake of the Israeli invasion in 1982, and the launch of hostage taking, whether in Iran or Lebanon. Much more Islamist mobilization and violence was to follow, and it has by no means entirely abated, as Iraq attests. But, as Olivier Roy and other closer observers have noted, neo-Islamism has gradually replaced the more virulent and violent Islamism of the 1980s and 1990s in most countries of the region. The ballot box is proving to be more useful than the bullet, so one by one, country-based Islamist movements are abandoning the latter for the former. Transnational jihadis continue to roam the mountains of Afghanistan, the back streets of Baghdad, and the villages of northwest Iraq, but even in their strongholds, they are in



confrontation with tamer, but more enduring neo-Islamism. The history of revolutions, whether French, Russian, Cuban or Iranian, suggests that the wiser bet is always on the power and the limits imposed by a single state, rather than on the more romantic, internationalization of the revolution, as Trotsky and Che Guevara both discovered. States by their nature domesticate, turning revolutionaries into functionaries. And the lesson of the modern Middle East, probably also including Iraq, is that these states are here to stay. Muslimhood is thus also here to stay. The future of radical, violent political Islam is much more uncertain, despite what the Pentagon planners have to say.

### **Regional Politics and the Arab-Israeli Conflict**

Twenty-five years ago, large-scale, state-to-state warfare and protracted civil war were still a reality in many parts of the region. Indeed, from 1980 to 1988, Iran and Iraq were locked in total war. Almost simultaneously, Israel invaded Lebanon, which was by then in its seventh year of civil war. The PLO was in mortal combat with Israel, whether in Lebanon or as far afield as Tunis. Although Egypt had in 1979 made peace with Israel, no other Arab state had. Indeed, the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty shattered what remained of Arab unity. Calculations of the strategic balances in the region were done in terms of the numbers of aircraft, tanks and men at arms.

Despite the present turmoil in Iraq and continuation within historic Palestine of conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, the Middle East is somewhat less Hobbesian than it was a generation ago. All-out, state-to-state warfare between the Arabs and Israel now seems virtually unimaginable, as it does between any of the Muslim states of the region. Abiding hostility between Iran and Israel could trigger conflict, but the distance separating them renders total war impossible. Most border and other serious disputes between the countries of the Peninsula, including Yemen, have now been settled. Violent conflict between them seems less likely now than at any time in their modern histories. Jordan has made peace with Israel, and Syria protests that it would also like to do so. In any case, it is in no position to wage war. Lebanon is tense, but for more than five years has been free from Israeli occupation forces if the Shebaa Farms anomaly is ignored. The Arab world is not united, but it is also not divided by the single issue of Israel, as it formerly was. Iran under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad perplexes and challenges the other Muslim states of the region, but none contemplates a Saddam-style military venture against it. Nor, in so far as we know, does he contemplate one against them.

This leaves the imbroglio in Iraq and the never-ending Palestinian-Israeli conflict as sources of endemic, if not really large-scale violence. But, even here, it would be wrong to be too negative about what the situation will be like 20 years from now. As far as Iraq is concerned, the primary cause of violence — the presence of U.S. and allied forces — will be removed long before 2025 and probably well before 2010. Political fragmentation within the three principal communities (Shia, Sunni Arab and Kurd) suggests possibilities for coalition formation that ultimately will cross and blur those lines, making stable, nonviolent, intersectarian politics possible. The sheer fact that Iraq may possess the second-largest reserves of oil in the world is an enormous incentive for all parties to make sufficient concessions to permit the exploitation of that resource. And while it is all too

obvious that rationality does not necessarily prevail in politics, it is a better bet in this case than one on a continuation of insurrection and violence for another generation.

As regards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the distance already traveled is again a guide to both where we are now and where we are likely to be in the years to come. Although bloody and bitter, the struggle has now narrowed to the key issues, most vital of which is where the border between the two states is to be. Can it take another 20 years for a mutually agreeable one to be established? One could argue that it took a century to arrive at the present juncture, so another fifth of one is not so long, especially in a part of the world notorious for long memories. But that, paradoxically, is a short-term view of the situation. The progression of the conflict over the past 25 years, despite the breakdown of the Oslo process in 2000, suggests that the key parties have come to believe the issue can, in fact, be resolved. Difficult and unsatisfactory as that resolution may be to some, only a small minority on each side now reject the search for one through peaceful means, whereas rejectionist maximalists were probably still in the majority through some point in the 1970s. Betting on a resolution of this conflict has been a guaranteed way of losing money for more than a century, but the relative progress of the past 25 years suggests that good money bet now might recover some of the bad previously lost.

### **U.S. Role in the Region**

The United States started down the slippery slope of direct military involvement in the Gulf about 25 years ago. The Iranian revolution and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan triggered the creation of the Rapid Deployment Force, the forerunner to CENTCOM. Since 1979, the capacity to project U.S. military power into the entire region, as well as the capacity actually based there, has expanded prodigiously. It has become a major part of the problem, not the solution.

The “over the horizon” approach, in which U.S. military intervention was launched from outside the region, sparingly and in collaboration with local forces, had a huge political advantage and was sufficiently effective militarily for the challenges at hand. But the inexorable logic of military expansionism sucked U.S. forces into the region, where they are bogged down in Afghanistan and Iraq, serving no useful purpose in Egypt, exacerbating popular reactions in the Gulf and Yemen, and — by menacing Syria and Iran — stimulating political backlashes throughout the region. Previously, they had amply demonstrated their inappropriateness in Lebanon. The lavish provision of military assistance to Egypt and Israel is expensive, unnecessary and counterproductive to other U.S. political objectives in those countries and the region. The crushing defeat of Saddam’s old Soviet-style military simply underscored the fact that this type of warfare is anachronistic and need not consume the time and energies of military planners focused on the Middle East. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s trip to Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia in February 2006, for the purpose of enlisting those countries’ support in the war against terrorism, underscores that the future lies not with large-scale deployment of military forces, but with carefully constructed and operated, intelligence-driven and politically sensitive counter terrorism operations.

The increasing U.S. military adventurism over the past 25 years is the one trend

identified here that is not likely to continue, simply because it is not sustainable organizationally, economically or politically and is not appropriate for the threats faced by the United States. The overstretched U.S. military will have to be retrenched from its far-flung base structure. Its mission, we are instructed by the quadrennial review just mentioned, is going to be substantially altered, so force structures and postures will be profoundly affected. The deficit-ridden U.S. economy will, before the next 20 years have elapsed, be forced to seek balance through reductions in military expenditures. The political backlash against the American military presence offsets any advantages it has, especially when the primary threat is that of terrorism, not Soviet-era tanks. Thus the inexorable military logic that drove U.S. forces into the region will in the next 20 years have gone into reverse gear, with those forces being downsized, repatriated and transformed. Thus, a prime irritant in the politics of the region will be gradually reduced.

### **Conclusion**

If presently identifiable trends continue, the Middle East in 2025 will be a more democratic, economically developed and peaceful area than it is now. It is likely also to be one with a much-reduced U.S. military presence. But the Garden of Eden is unlikely to be restored to the region in 20 years — or ever, for that matter. It would be unwise to discount entirely the possibility of states failing, revolutions overturning established orders and violent state-to-state conflicts occurring. Instead of reaching accommodations with Muslimhood, the United States could take steps, including military ones, that would stimulate, rather than ameliorate, the putative clash of civilizations. But, from the vantage point of 2006, the likelihood of such disasters is less than it was in the early 1980s. The prospects for steady, sustained improvement in all vital areas have also improved. This change for the better is easily overlooked in a region which is still beset with problems, but they are less intractable than they were a generation ago.

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In 1973, I was a member of a research team commissioned to predict what the world would look like twenty (1993) and thirty (2003) years later. My brief was to examine economic, social, political and strategic trends in the Middle East and offer meaningful projections and “conclusions.” I don’t remember the details, but I do recall predicting that the likely large increase in population without commensurate economic development and political openings would exacerbate internal tensions at all levels, reverberate across borders, and contribute to political radicalism that might manifest itself in differing ways. (Islamic radicalism was not seen as the main radical trend in those pre-Iranian-revolution days, a caution that we should keep in mind when projecting “moderate” and “radical” Islamism as the key trends twenty years hence. Other, as yet unknown, movements may emerge by then.) I also recall hypothesizing that the Palestinian problem—the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict — would not be resolved, although limited agreements between

Israel and neighboring Arab countries were likely.

At the time, the members of the team working on this project were relieved that, although our research began in mid-1973, it did not conclude until early 1974, well after the October 1973 war and the significant shifts in Arab-Israeli relations as well as in the U.S. diplomatic role that resulted from that war. We all recognized how dreadful it would have been if we had written the report in mid-1973, only to have the October war upset our calculations and require that we start over again from scratch. Predictions are often based on configurations that can change overnight.

And so I read with interest Mohammed Ayoob's projections for the Middle East twenty years from now (2025). It is a region, he argues, whose strategic importance will be further enhanced by the ever-increasing value of its oil and natural-gas production. Stabilizing and democratically inclined Islamic movements will be key players in several countries even as radical Islam grows in some parts of the region. Turkey and Iran will be pivotal regional powers. Saudi Arabia will be strained by the results of internal political liberalism. And Iraq will divide into two states. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict will intensify, leading to the collapse of the Palestinian Authority and to demands by Palestinians to be incorporated into Israel as equal citizens. Ayoob then prescribes how the U.S. government should react, using words such as "must," "essential," and "needs to" in order to spell out policies by which the United States can regain respect and safeguard its interests.

Ayoob is brave to undertake this mental exercise, particularly as he rejects the easier solution of suggesting alternative scenarios. Nonetheless, there are problems with his approach — particularly the disjunction between his discussion of energy needs and production, his country-by-country delineation of political issues, and his prescriptive approach to U.S. policy. In the real world, these issues are intertwined. They affect each other and cannot be separated. Moreover, the shift from projection to prescription, when Ayoob addresses U.S. policy, is jarring.

Take, for example, the issue of energy. Ayoob presents a plausible case for the ever-greater importance of oil and natural gas from the Gulf states, which will make the Middle East even more important strategically to global political and economic interests than it is today. He does not link this oil power to the projections on internal stability or instability in the key countries or in their regional relations, beyond noting Turkey's likely increased need for Arab oil. He also jumps to the conclusion that "Washington must begin treating oil suppliers not as clients or supplicants but as equal partners."

While I heartily agree that such a paradigm shift on the part of the U.S. government is necessary in order to "regain a position of trust and safeguard its strategic interests," I see no evidence that this shift is likely to occur. The United States — ever since its World War II military interest in accessing oil and its Cold War effort to deny the Soviet Union control over Middle East oil — has had difficulty viewing the Middle East governments as having the right to own and control that resource. Instead, the United States and its allies have the "right" to that oil, by whatever means are necessary. Client states guaranteed access for many years. And yet, when the over-the-horizon approach collapsed in 1990, U.S. governments had few qualms about sending naval and ground forces directly into the

Gulf arena and keeping them there, seemingly indefinitely. Post-9/11, “boots on the ground” occupied Afghanistan and Iraq and expanded the U.S. strategic presence in Central Asia, certain Arab countries, and Africa (some of which, at least in west Africa, was linked to the need for oil). The “right” to a military presence has been little questioned (and duly camouflaged under the slogans of the “war against terrorism” and “spreading democracy”), even when its effectiveness is doubted.

There is no reason to expect that this mind-set will change. In fact, there seems a greater likelihood that the need for Middle Eastern oil and natural gas will deepen the control orientation and militarization of the U.S.-Middle East relationship. When Middle Easterners react in anger to that control (as in the case of Osama bin Laden regarding the U.S. presence in Saudi Arabia), this is most apt to be perceived as rejection of the U.S. slogans (which U.S. governments view as far-sighted policies) rather than as an anger that should cause the United States to reassess its fundamental strategy and relationships.

In that regard, Ayoob’s idea that Washington might return to isolationism seems misplaced. Granted, enhanced dependence on oil, which draws the United States deeply into the region, will be balanced by public disillusionment with the fiasco in Iraq and the backlash of increased anti-Arab racism in the United States as the Iraqis themselves are “blamed” for the inevitable U.S. flight from that hostile terrain. Moreover, financial and military crises are likely to beset the U.S. government, after the enormous overextension of its armed forces, the huge budget crisis that will hit well before 2025, and the buildup of a crushing debt burden. Nonetheless, the wish to retrench and wall off the North American continent against the evil “other” will be more than balanced by the need to access Middle Eastern resources and the need to retain the image of a superpower, albeit by 2025 quite possibly a superpower in decline.

One might also question Ayoob’s hope that the U.S. government will “demonstrate greater acceptance of Muslim/Islamist political formations as legitimate political players.” The current U.S. call for neoliberal democratization was premised on the idea that U.S.-friendly regimes would emerge from elections. This expectation has been dashed in recent months by Hamas’s victory in Palestinian legislative elections, the strong showing by the Muslim Brothers in the Peoples’ Assembly elections in Egypt (despite massive police action to intimidate voters), and the victory of a hardliner in the Iranian presidential election. Moreover, the fragmentation of Iraqi political life and its degeneration into a virtual ethno-religious civil war has undermined the U.S. government’s expectation that elections would stabilize that country. Ayoob notes that political liberalization in Saudi Arabia “will inevitably mean [an increase in] anti-Americanism.”

The United States already seems to be pulling back on its call for democratization, as it sees that the immediate results run counter to U.S.-perceived interests. Of course, as noted above, there is little or no understanding that it is U.S. policy that has exacerbated popular-level antagonism to the United States, and that changes in U.S. policy could moderate that antagonism. The likelihood is that U.S. governments will revert to relying on strongman regimes that promote economic neoliberalism while seeking to contain protest currents. As in the case of U.S. oil policy, that fosters clientelism and control rather than partnership on the basis of mutual respect.

Finally, I wonder if Ayoob's Israel-Palestine scenario is likely to materialize. He suggests that Israel's effort to unilaterally jettison its control over Gaza and a few other territories, to continue to create facts on the ground in the West Bank, and to "vivisection the West Bank into cantons" will fail. When the Palestinian Authority (PA) collapses, Palestinians will call for (and gain?) citizenship within Israel. While I agree that the PA is likely to collapse, I believe that Israel's imprisoning of Palestinians in canton-ghettos will accelerate and harden. The terrible hardships and eruptions of violence within those ghettos will be sealed off from Israel by heavily patrolled barricades. As a result, Israel will avoid the looming demographic "threat" of a Palestinian majority west of the Jordan River, a "threat" that would, otherwise, undermine Jewish Israeli hegemony.

Since the early twentieth century, raw power and the policy of *fait accompli*, rather than (short-lived) negotiations, have determined the outcome of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. The logic of indefinite conflict, contained by force rather than resolved through negotiations, appears most likely to continue to prevail. It will, of course, exacerbate tensions in the region, deepen hostility to the United States, and make Washington more fearful of losing its access to oil resources.

Thus, the basic issues will continue to be intertwined in the Middle East: energy, democratization, popular movements and strategic interests. I fear that the negative energy generated by the unilateral wielding of power by the United States and Israel will prevail, rather than the logic of cooperation — the "new paradigm" proposed by Ayoob. I hope that my predictions prove wrong and Ayoob's prove right, but I fear that will not be the case.

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Mohammed Ayoob provides a bold and provocative analysis of the state of Middle East in the course of the next two decades. The article contains some sweeping predictions for this troubled region as a whole and for the domestic political configurations of key regional players such as Iran and Turkey, as well as the role of the United States. Ayoob argues that the Middle East will continue to be a region of key strategic importance as a dominant supplier of oil and natural gas. However, he is pessimistic about Iraq and predicts that its future will be characterized by instability and fragmentation resulting in the division of the country into a Kurdish and an Arab state. The latter would be vulnerable to further fragmentation considering the difficulties of keeping the Shia and Sunni factions together if the breakup of the country actually occurred. Indeed, this is the main source of the current tensions in Iraq.

Furthermore, he contends that Arab Iraq will prove to be a fertile ground for the rise of Islamist extremism. He makes the important point that the invasion of Iraq has helped to strengthen the sentiment in much of the Middle East that the United States is engaged in a war not as much against terrorism as against the world of Islam. He also argues that the failure of the American venture in Iraq is likely to drastically erode America's credibility in the region. Ayoob is quite optimistic about the role that Turkey and Iran will play as key regional actors in the Middle East, while he is rather pessimistic about the possibility

of political change in Saudi Arabia. He also predicts that Israeli-Palestinian relations will be characterized by a continued stalemate. Finally, he draws attention to the positive role that moderate Islamists are likely to play in the democratization of the region, with Turkey's Justice and Development party (the AKP) proving to be a forerunner in this context. Based on his grand scenario for the Middle East in 2025, Ayoob goes on to derive a number of implications for U.S. policy towards the region. He suggests that the United States change its policy towards Israel, cooperate with key regional powers such as Iran and Turkey, and display greater readiness to accept Muslim/Islamist political formations in the Middle East.

While the paper contains a number of interesting insights concerning the future state of affairs in the Middle East, the scenario it outlines is implausible in a number of important respects. He assumes that possible failure in Iraq will inevitably result in a U.S. retreat from the region, thereby leaving considerably more space for autonomous action on the part of key regional actors such as Iran and Turkey. It would be extremely unrealistic for the United States to reduce its involvement, given its strategic interests in the region. It might have to reduce its direct military involvement in Iraq due to domestic pressures; however, it cannot totally end it until there is some kind of stability. Here one can identify a certain inconsistency in Ayoob's scenario: if Iraq continues to be characterized by pervasive instability and the Israel-Palestine conflict remains unresolved, this will perpetuate U.S. involvement in the region.

Ayoob has a rather benign view of Iran and exaggerates the degree of democratic opening in that country. The parallels between Turkey and Iran in terms of democratic deepening are certainly overdrawn. In spite of its limitations, representative democracy has been the norm in Turkey since 1950, and the country has been experiencing a process of democratic deepening in the recent era, with possible EU membership providing a major impetus to this process. This is strikingly different from the case of Iran, where political change and a certain degree of liberalization have been taking place within the parameters of a largely authoritarian regime. Indeed, the divergence between Turkey and Iran may increase over the course of the next two decades. While further democratic deepening is likely to occur in Turkey in the presence of an EU anchor, the impulse for democratization may remain much weaker in a largely isolated Iran. Ayoob also tends to underplay the possible dangers involved in Iran's active pursuit of nuclear program. He is right to point out that military action against Iran is likely to be costly and destabilizing from the U.S. point of view. Yet, one should not infer from this that the United States will simply adopt a passive stance, leaving Iran plenty of scope for independent action in the region. Such a passive attitude is all the more unlikely considering that the Iranian presence may contribute to the further destabilization of the existing divisions and conflicts in Iraq given the presence of a powerful Shia element in Iraq's troubled political landscape.

Similarly, Ayoob's analysis of Turkey needs further refinement in a number of important respects. Even if one accepts the optimistic projections for Turkey over the next two decades, one should not underestimate the kinds of conflicts that Turkey is likely to encounter along the way. Certainly, Turkey's secular versus Islamic divide will not simply disappear overnight, and one should not rule out the possibility of serious nationalist

backlashes during the critical decade of accession negotiations with the European Union. It is also important to take into account the possible destabilizing effects of further instability and fragmentation in Iraq on Turkish domestic politics. The possible emergence of an independent Kurdish state in Iraq may accentuate secessionist tendencies in Turkey as well as strengthen the already powerful nationalist sentiments.

At the same time, one could share Ayooob's optimism that closer links with the European Union, even if it fails to materialize in full membership at the end as he claims, will continue to exercise a stabilizing role on Turkey's democratic expansion in the domestic sphere and in its external relations, leading to consolidation of its role as a benign regional power. Considering the current state of democratic development in Turkey and given the nature of its external ties to the EU and the United States, the possibility of an independent military intervention in Northern Iraq in the foreseeable future appears to be rather remote, to say the least. Similarly, there are no plausible indications that Turkey will try to develop its own nuclear capabilities if we consider the threat stemming from its regional rivals such as Iran. Certainly, one would expect Turkey to act, by and large, in cooperation with the United States and the EU in the region as opposed to carving up a space of autonomous action for itself that would bring it into serious conflict with the key powers involved and in this manner significantly undermine its historically rooted Western orientation in the process. Hence, one needs to make a sharp distinction between Turkey and Iran in terms of the kinds of regional roles that the two countries have tried to play so far and are likely to play in the future.

Finally, Ayooob's analysis of the future role of the United States in the region fails to take into account key outside actors that are likely to be involved in shaping the future of this critical region. What will be the impact, for example, of key powers such as the European Union, Russia, and China on the region? How will they interact among themselves and with the United States and individual countries of the region, which might have tremendous bearing on the future trajectory of the region? Clearly such factors need to be given serious attention in any attempt to draw up a convincing scenario for the Middle East in the year 2025. Mohammed Ayooob's analysis is certainly insightful and thought-provoking, but it is open to serious criticism at the same time.

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Any prediction of political trends, even in the short term, is a risky undertaking, especially in as volatile a region as the Middle East. Mohammed Ayooob is aware of this risk, but the lessons of history, both recent and more distant, tend to argue in favor of his overall vision of the future. For example, his prediction that the Persian Gulf region will remain vitally important in the context of global energy supplies and hence will maintain its strategic importance for the industrialized world is correct. Of course, the discovery of a novel source of man-made energy would change this picture, but from the vantage point of 2006, such a development is not very likely.



## Turkey

In view of the growing pains and other difficulties that the European Union is experiencing, his prognosis that by 2025 Turkey still will not have become a full-fledged EU member is also quite likely. However, some of his other assertions about future trends in Turkey are questionable and not supported by recent Turkish policies under the government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and in light of other Turkish experiences.

Turkey under Erdoğan, after flirting with the idea of expanding ties with Iran and Syria, reverted to its previous policy of nurturing its military and other cooperation with Israel, as shown by Erdoğan's visit there in 2000. These relations to a great extent are the extension of Turkey's close ties with the West, best illustrated by its membership in NATO. Irrespective of whether Turkey joins the EU, Turkey's continued economic advancement is contingent on the financial, technological and other help from the United States, Europe and international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund. Despite considerable advances, the Turkish economy has serious vulnerabilities. By the same token, Turkey's military strength and the influence ensuing from it are largely the consequence of its Western ties and NATO membership. Thus, the option of breaking with the West is not a viable one for Turkey.

Moreover, Turkey tried a so-called Eastward Strategy by focusing on the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus in the 1990s, only to become disappointed — hence its return to Europe with greater determination. In addition, the very relative reduction in the power of the military and what the Turks call the “Deep State” has been in response to European demands. If Turkey fails to enter the EU, the military will reassert their still-vast influence. They will be helped along by the upsurge in Turkish nationalism that would likely follow an EU snub.

## Iraq

Regarding Iraq, the general observation that it will experience a long period of instability is justified. However, the prediction that Iraq will be divided into two neat entities, one Kurdish and one Arab, does not reflect Iraq's realities. For example, it is inconceivable that the Sunni Arabs will accept to live under a Shia-dominated Arab government. The war has painfully exposed the failure of building an Iraqi nation, loyalty to which overrides ethnic and sectarian allegiances. The sectarian violence that has escalated in the last few months is a reminder of this bitter reality. Even the Kurds are divided between the supporters of Jalal Talabani and Masoud Barzani, not to mention other smaller political and ideological factions.

Ironically, there is still a chance that Iraq's different factions may come to realize that their own interests would be better served within a unified Iraq albeit with administrative autonomy in various regions. If this were to fail, the more likely alternative would resemble Lebanon in the 1980s.

In assessing Iraq's future, one also should avoid a Vietnam-like scenario. The United States continued the war in Vietnam for seven more years after the anti-war protests began in 1968. Furthermore, the United States withdrew from Vietnam after the Chinese and Soviet threats had subsided, following the policy of *détente* and Nixon's opening to

China. Similar conditions do not prevail in the case of Iraq. On the contrary, a significant majority of the American public sees Islamic extremism and the acts of terror associated with it as a serious and long-term threat. This makes them more accepting of financial and human sacrifices to combat it. Additionally, Vietnam had no oil and was not in proximity to Israel, to whose security the United States is committed. In short, while, in all likelihood, the United States will reduce its military presence in Iraq in the next two years, a cut-and-run policy on the part of the United States is unlikely without first establishing a degree of stability in Iraq.

### **Iran**

The future, however, may well be decided sooner than the time span envisioned in the article, depending on how the current crisis over Iran's nuclear ambitions is resolved. Clearly, not only the West, but also Russia and China, are reluctant to see Iran acquire a nuclear-weapons capability. They disagree only on the nature of the instruments used to prevent this from happening. Thus, it is not very likely that Iran will have nuclear weapons in 10 or even 20 years. In fact, any kind of even medium-term forecast about Iran's future is futile because the current Iranian drama will have to unfold in a fairly quick succession of events. The United States appears determined not to allow the Iranian case to linger for years, as did that of Iraq. Moreover, the Bush administration would like to see the Iran question settled before the end of its mandate in 2008. Therefore, the United States will push to expedite the Iranian dossier in the UN Security Council.

Immediate sanctions are not on the agenda, and it is not very likely that the United States will obtain UN backed sanctions on Iran, although this is by no means impossible, especially if Russia and China refuse to use their veto power and merely abstain during the vote. Failing to get UN endorsement for sanctions, the United States will enlist the cooperation of its European and Japanese allies and others, such as Australia and Canada, to enlarge its own already existing sanctions on Iran. Administration officials have already mentioned that punitive action against Iran, be it sanctions or more drastic measures, may be carried out by a "coalition of the willing." Together with sanctions, the United States has also declared its intention to increase its financial and moral support to opposition forces in Iran, including to certain separatist elements within Iran's ethnic minorities.

Meanwhile, the Iranian government under the leadership of the hard-line president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has adopted a defiant posture in the face of these increased pressures and has been calling on the Iranian people to prepare themselves for a difficult period of struggle. However, other Iranian commentators and former officials have warned of the disastrous implications of an enlarged regime of sanctions for Iran's economy and society.

Moreover, although the Iranians believe that access to nuclear technology for peaceful purposes is their undisputed right, they are anxious about the consequences of the nuclear crisis. Additionally, after suffering eight years of war and 10 years of U.S. sanctions it is not clear how far the people will heed their president's call for more sacrifice. It must be noted that defending one's right to nuclear energy is not the same as defending one's territory against aggression, as was the case during the Iran-Iraq War.

Moreover, most Iranians have lost the religious and revolutionary fervor of the 1980s that enabled them to endure the hardships of the eight-year war.

Therefore, the likelihood of significant popular opposition should not be underestimated. A harsh government response could plunge the country into turmoil and even trigger a situation akin to civil war. By the same token, external pressure could have the opposite effect, enhancing religious and nationalist feelings and increasing popular solidarity with the regime. Either way, the most likely result, would be a further tightening of the social and political spheres, and a silencing of dissenting voices, including those of a significant number of clerics, notably those of former President Muhammad Khatami and Ayatollah Mehdi Karrubi, a former speaker of the parliament and presidential candidate in 2005. The process of Iran's democratization, already impeded in the last four years by the resistance of the hardliners, will further erode.

Thus, it is impossible to predict with even minimal accuracy the future of democracy in Iran. Indeed, extreme conditions of turmoil might lead the Revolutionary Guards to take power. There has already been a significant degree of politicization of the Guards, and Ahmadinejad has appointed many former officers to important posts, especially as governors of sensitive regions.

Furthermore, it is not at all certain that sanctions would resolve the nuclear dispute. If Iran insists on pursuing a nuclear program, the risk of some sort of military action against the country will greatly increase. The consequences of even limited military strikes confined to nuclear sites against Iran are extremely hard to foresee. What is clear is that they will be highly damaging to Iran and, in a worst-case scenario, could lead to the country's partial or complete disintegration. In the post-Soviet era, the United States and even some European countries no longer see a unified Iran as important for regional stability. On the contrary, some see Iran more as a potential rival for regional influence than a valuable buffer, which was Iran's historic role for two centuries. This change of attitude is attested to by the fact that the United States has always insisted on maintaining Iraq's territorial and political unity, while in Iran's case, it has only called for freedom for the Iranian people, a call that some Iranians have interpreted as support for separatist movements in Iran.

Moreover, it is not at all certain that military action could be confined to so-called "surgical" attacks, since Iran will take retaliatory measures. This could lead to the introduction of U.S., European and perhaps even some of the neighboring countries' troops. Certainly, a number of Iran's neighbors will allow the use of their territory or at least airspace for military actions against the Islamic Republic. In short, given the current crisis in Iran's relations with the West and the certainty of growing pressures on Iran, even very general and tentative predictions about the country's future are impossible, except to say that 2006 will be a fateful year. How and by what means the Iranian crisis is resolved will also have far-reaching consequences for the strategic and political map of a region extending from the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf.

The best alternative for all concerned would be a peaceful end to the crisis in a relatively short period of time. This, however, would require a great deal of political courage on the part of the Iranian government and a willingness to suspend nuclear

activities for at least five years. Alternatively, the West could accept a face-saving formula for Iran by, for example, giving security guarantees to Iran in exchange for its agreement to forgo enrichment activities. Given the political capital both sides have invested in their current positions, however, none of these options appear likely.

If sanctions or worse — military action — lead to centrifugal tendencies in Iran, neighboring states — notably Pakistan, Azerbaijan and even Turkey — will be affected. Turmoil in Iran will also intensify sectarian tensions from Iraq to the Gulf. The separation of Iranian Baluchistan would encourage the restive Pakistani Baluch to seek independence, and the separation of Iranian Kurdistan would breathe new life into the independence movement of Turkey's Kurds. The idea that Iranian Azerbaijan will be easily united with the Republic of Azerbaijan is pure fantasy.

The patchwork of independent regions that might emerge would lack any economic and political viability. This situation would present the West with the unpalatable choice of either taking responsibility for the security and viability of these new entities or allowing them to become no-man's lands, rife with civil conflict and breeding grounds for new types of terrorism.

Yet the reaction of regional governments and even people, especially in the Arab world, with the exception of Lebanon, Iraq and Bahrain, will be muted. The U.S. image may suffer further, but, as long as there is no change in the Middle Eastern regimes, its influence will remain strong. Indeed, instability created by turmoil in Iran would make regional countries, especially those in the Gulf, more dependent on the United States. If the Iraq War did not shake the U.S.-Gulf alliance, an attack on Iran is unlikely to do so.

The downside of this scenario is that the United States would have to shoulder more long-term responsibility for these countries and for the security of oil supplies. In the end, the cost might prove too high even for the United States. Therefore, it is vitally important that Washington and others correctly assess the costs of an unstable or divided Iran. They should avoid the fantasy that change as a result of pressure will be clean and easy, producing a democratic and pro-Western Iran.

The future of the Middle East, especially the Gulf region, parts of the Caspian and even South Asia, may well depend on how events in Iran unfold. This will be decided in the next two years, not 20. Without knowing the direction in which the current crisis will evolve, predictions are impossible.