INTRODUCTION

# THE DIPLOMATIC IMPLICATIONS OF THE GROWING IRANIAN THREAT

**Dr. Dore Gold**

President Bush (center), flanked by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert (left), and Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas (right), listen as Abbas speaks during the opening session of the Mideast conference at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., Nov. 27, 2007.

Profound changes in the interests and concerns of states across the Middle East characterize the period beginning with the Second Lebanon War in July 2006, progressing through the November 2007 Annapolis conference, and reaching into the final months of the Bush administration. Today, Iran stands out as the most urgent threat to the stability of the region, given the pace of its nuclear weapons program, its project to foster subversion throughout the Middle East, and its desire to galvanize Islamist groups under its umbrella to join its renewed revolutionary struggle.

Iran's current race for regional supremacy is not a new phenomenon. However, after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, it was largely overlooked. The conventional wisdom throughout much of the Western alliance had been that Israel's conflicts with its neighbors were one of the principal sources of regional instability. The Palestinian issue, in particular, was said to be a foremost "root cause" of the region's problems.[1] U.S. and European diplomats had constantly heard this message from their counterparts in the Arab world. As a consequence, Western policymakers, particularly in Europe, stressed the urgency of settling the Palestinian question – while downplaying the challenge posed by Iran.

Yet even at that time, there were and continue to be very compelling reasons for shifting this order of priorities. Already in August 2002, representatives of the Iranian opposition disclosed that Iran was secretly building two nuclear sites that could have military applications: the Natanz facility for uranium enrichment, and the Arak heavy-water production plant with a heavy-water nuclear reactor, both of which could eventually supply Iran with weapons-grade plutonium.

A year later the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported that Iran was indeed planning on converting thirty-seven tons of "yellow cake" (U3O8) to uranium hexafluoride (UF6) gas that was intended for the centrifuges at Natanz, where it could be enriched to weapons-grade uranium.[2] Conversion was indeed started in August 2004. The IAEA also revealed in 2003 that its inspectors had already found in Natanz particles of highly-enriched uranium – up to 90 percent enriched – that were only appropriate for use in a nuclear weapon, and not in any civilian nuclear program.[3] Despite the confusing language of the 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that suggested Iran had halted the weaponization portion of its nuclear program back in 2003, Defense Secretary Robert Gates still asserted in April 2008 that Iran was "hell bent" on acquiring nuclear weapons.[4]

The steady progress of the Iranian nuclear weapons program was paralleled by Iran's development of ballistic missile technology and other long-range delivery systems. In 2004, Iran boasted that its missiles had a 1,250-mile range, putting parts of Europe within striking distance for the first time.[5] In the late 1990s, Western intelligence agencies had discerned Iran's interest in old Soviet-era space-lift propulsion systems, which revealed something of its strategic intent to develop heavy booster rockets in the future. Indeed, Iranian officials did not hide their plans to acquire a domestic, multi-stage space-lift capability that could eventually enable Iran's missiles to reach North America. In October 2007, Lt. Gen. Henry Obering, chief of the U.S. missile defense program, predicted that Iranian missiles could threaten the U.S. sometime before 2015.[6] Iran, in short, had become the most pressing issue on the international agenda that required decisive allied action.

However, even after Iran declared in August 2005 that it would unilaterally resume the uranium conversion and enrichment activities that it had frozen less than a year earlier as part of the Paris Agreement with the European Union, European officials nonetheless called for continuing diplomatic dialogue with Iran. For nearly four years EU officials blocked U.S. efforts to confront Iran by referring its nuclear file to the UN Security Council. Indeed, the EU foreign policy chief, Javier Solana,

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (left), inaugurates a heavy-water nuclear facility in the central Iranian town of Arak, Aug. 26, 2006. The heavy-water production plant went into operation despite UN demands that Iran roll back its nuclear program.

stated explicitly in October 2006 that the European "dialogue" with Iran had to continue even if their nuclear talks failed.[7]

At the same time, the Europeans pressed Washington for further diplomatic progress on the Arab-Israeli peace process even while the PLO leader, Yasser Arafat, who was deeply implicated in the 2000-2004 terror war, was still in control. Ultimately, the Bush administration in 2003 acquiesced to the EU's inclusion in a diplomatic "Quartet" for advancing Middle East peace, and to the promotion of a phased "Road Map" for creating a Palestinian state.[8] The net effect of this dual track diplomacy would be destabilizing, for it would put Israel's defensive capabilities on the negotiating table without adequately addressing the offensive capabilities of Iran across the region.

There were important circles in the United States that sought to adopt Europe's priorities both for Middle East peacemaking and managing the Iranian issue. The need for a dual diplomatic approach was indeed one of the principal conclusions of the December 2006 Baker-Hamilton commission report, which asserted that "[T]he United States will not be able to achieve its goals in the Middle East unless the United States deals directly with the Arab-Israeli conflict."[9] While the report detailed the need for Israeli concessions to advance Arab-Israeli peace, it also proposed that the U.S. and its allies "should actively engage Iran."[10] It was hard to believe its authors were fully cognizant of the significant role nuclear weapons would play in empowering Iran to take bold action across the region and the likely chain reaction that an Iranian nuclear capability would set off, as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other states scrambled for nuclear programs of their own.

## Flush with oil revenues that rose from $32 billion in 2004 to $70 billion in 2007, Iran was making a bid for regional hegemony across the Middle East.

This dual approach of Baker-Hamilton – advocating Israeli territorial withdrawals while accommodating Iran – articulated an old policy paradigm for the Middle East, which the report's authors essentially tried to rejuvenate. But reality had changed across the region. The Second Lebanon War – and its southern front in the Gaza Strip – was launched precisely from territories from which Israel had already withdrawn. Neither Hizbullah nor Hamas were primarily motivated to wage war against Israel because of local territorial grievances. They acted in response to the wider considerations of their Iranian patron. It was Iran, and not the older territorial issue, that provided the root cause of a new Middle Eastern war in 2006.

It could be argued that the Palestinians' territorial grievance against Israel had not been fully addressed by the Gaza disengagement, as the West Bank was still under Israeli control. But if, indeed, the territorial issue had been uppermost in the minds of the Hamas leadership that came to power in early 2006, one might have expected Hamas to transfer its conflict with Israel to the West Bank, while leaving post-disengagement Gaza completely quiet. Clearly, the Palestinian leadership did not adopt that logic and instead used the Gaza Strip as a launching pad for rocket barrages into Israel.

For that reason, the implications of the Second Lebanon War go far beyond Israel and its immediate neighbors. Flush with oil revenues that rose from $32 billion in 2004 to $70 billion in 2007, Iran was making a bid for regional hegemony across the Middle East.[11] The summer 2006 war was only a small subset of a much larger effort on the part of the Iranian regime to achieve regional hegemony through Arab Shiite communities that it hoped to penetrate by using elements of its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The Second Lebanon War has probably been misnamed and might instead be called the First Iranian-Israeli War.

## The Sunni "Awakening"

Sunni-Shiite violence that plagued Iraq in the years following the United States' 2003 invasion was a harbinger of a new Middle Eastern reality that the Hizbullah-Israeli war, just three years later would confirm, and which has caused a major transformation in how Israel's neighbors perceive the Iranian threat. It was King Abdullah II of Jordan who first sounded the alarm in December 2004 when he spoke of an emergent "Shiite crescent" that might encircle the Sunni Arab world, beginning in Iran, moving to the newly empowered Shiite majority in Iraq, on to Syria, whose ruling minority Alawis are viewed as true Muslims by some Lebanese Shiite clerics, and finally reaching Lebanon, whose Shiite population is growing in size and power.[12]

But this is only part of the threat the Arab world perceives. The Arab Gulf states are home to substantial Shiite communities, such as Kuwait, where Shiites account for 30 percent of the population.[13] A ring of Iranian-supported Iraqi and Lebanese Shiites were involved in bombing attacks on foreign embassies in Kuwait in the 1980s as well as in an attempted assassination of the Kuwaiti emir. The United Arab Emirates has a 16 percent Shiite component,[14] while Bahrain has an absolute Shiite majority which has been estimated to be as high as 75 percent of its population.[15]

Bahrain's Shiite majority had engaged in fierce rioting in 1994-95; the Bahraini government provided Washington with evidence linking Bahraini Hizbullah, which the authorities argued was seeking to overthrow the Bahraini government, with the IRGC's Qods force.[16] New Shiite riots broke out in December 2007, at which demonstrators called for the death of the ruling al-Khalifa family. Bahrain is likely to remain a magnet for pro-Iranian subversion, especially since it became the headquarters for the U.S. Fifth Fleet in 1995.

Saudi Arabia's three million Shiites are a minority, but they are close to constituting a majority in the strategically sensitive Eastern Province where most of the kingdom's oil resources are concentrated. A Saudi branch of Hizbullah – known as *Hizbullah al-Hijaz* – was involved in the 1996 Khobar Towers attack, where 19 U.S. servicemen were killed. Saudi Hizbullah had been trained in IRGC camps in Iran and Lebanon and coordinated the 1996 attack from Syria.[17]

There is also a substantial Shiite population in Yemen, known as the Zaydi sect, which, though it follows the "fiver" tradition of succession from Ali, as opposed to the "twelver Shiism" of Iran, still has been a target of Iranian political-military activism. President Husni Mubarak further fueled the speculation about a growing Sunni-Shiite rift across the Arab world in April 2006 when he remarked on the Dubai-based *al-Arabiyya* television network: "The Shiites are always loyal to Iran. Most of them are loyal to Iran and not to the countries in which they live."[18]

Most Shiites are not ready to overthrow Sunni regimes. Their clerics traditionally have adopted a "quietist" tradition towards political authorities, despite the discrimination they might have faced from Sunni rulers. But if Iran is undertaking a second Islamic Revolution, and is seeking to expand its influence through the radicalization of Shiite communities, as argued elsewhere in this monograph, the stakes for the Middle East and the West are enormous.

This Sunni-Shiite rift, according to recent experience, can move in very different directions. There are signs of increased tensions between the two communities in the Islamic world, not only in Iraq but also in Lebanon. There are reports that Sunni Muslim clerics in Saudi Arabia have charged Shiites with seeking to convert Sunnis. Similar concerns have been voiced in Egypt and Jordan. Given this charged environment, it is easy to understand how some Sunni leaders have become preoccupied with Shiite assertiveness as a new existential threat.

Considering the intensity of the fears among Sunni leaders of a potential Shiite encirclement led by Iran, the idea sometimes voiced in U.S. policy circles that Washington needs Israeli diplomatic concessions to be made to the Palestinians in order to cement a regional alliance of Sunni states against Iran does not have much credibility. Certainly, Saudi Arabia does not need Israel to concede territory in the West Bank in order to be convinced to defend itself from Iran's quest for supremacy in the Persian Gulf.

## Islamist Cooperation for Common Enemies

While Iran pursues a campaign of Shiite empowerment in its quest for regional control, Tehran also has demonstrated for many years its ability to work with Sunni Islamists. Its relations with Palestinian Sunni groups like Islamic Jihad and Hamas are only one example. Its Lebanese proxy, Hizbullah, reached out to Sudan's Hasan Turabi in 1991. Iranian regime ties were created with Egyptian and Algerian Islamists. In the mid-1990s, IRGC units intervened in Bosnia where they set up training camps.[19] Iran even has reached out and assisted minority Sunni groups in Azerbaijan against its pro-

King Abdullah II of Jordan (right), receives Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak (left), on his arrival in Amman, Jordan, Sept. 26, 2007.

Western Shiite government.[20] During the Second Lebanon War, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood gave full public backing to Hizbullah, even while Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi clerics condemned the Shiite group.

**Certainly, Saudi Arabia does not need Israel to concede territory in the West Bank in order to be convinced to defend itself from Iran's quest for supremacy in the Persian Gulf.**

Finally, as the *9/11 Commission Report* disclosed, Iranian cooperation with Sunni radicals included al-Qaeda: "Iran facilitated the transit of al-Qaeda members into and out of Afghanistan before 9/11, and...some of these were future 9/11 hijackers."[21] The report adds that "al-Qaeda members received advice and training from Hizbullah."[22] After U.S. forces vanquished the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, many in the al-Qaeda network obtained refuge and assistance in Iran.

More recently, U.S. intelligence agencies intercepted communications between al-Qaeda's leadership in Iran and the Saudi al-Qaeda cell that detonated three truck bombs in Riyadh on May 12, 2003.[23] In short, the conviction held by many that, in the world of international terrorism, organizations that represent different religious or ideological factions cannot cooperate, is routinely disproved in practice. Militant Sunni and Shiite groups sometimes compete with, and even kill, one another; however, when facing a common enemy, they regularly collaborate.

Cooperation between radical Shiite and Sunni Islamists also encourages the prospect for understanding and cooperation between Israel and the Sunni Arab world. The prospect that Iranian adventurism will be launched under a nuclear umbrella poses a frightening challenge to Arab states, no less than it does to Israel, as Iranian sponsorship of international terrorism has not only affected Lebanon. It has also threatened the security of countries across the Middle East.

## Reassessing Diplomatic Paradigms

These changes – in both the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and in the wider regional arena – are nothing short of revolutionary for future developments in the Middle East. A consensus in many quarters has emerged that Iran is the true "root cause" of instability in the region. Therefore, the paradigm characterized by the Israeli-Palestinian territorial dispute that has primarily informed U.S., European, and Israeli diplomacy since the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference requires rethinking; it certainly need not be uncritically reasserted, as it appeared to have been in the lead-up to the 2007 Annapolis Peace Conference and in its aftermath.

Setting aside the issue of Iran for a moment, this kind of paradigm reassessment is particularly necessary in view of the failure of past peace process strategies: Israel tried the Oslo process for a decade and received a wave of suicide bombings in return. Then it tried Gaza disengagement and received an Islamist presence that exploited the opening of the Philadelphi route along the Egypt-Gaza border to smuggle arms on a scale that had not been witnessed before. The Gaza disengagement completely backfired. The West, which had enthusiastically backed the Gaza disengagement, did not obtain the foundations for a stable Palestinian state as it had hoped, but rather a new sanctuary for al-Qaeda affiliates and a Mediterranean beachhead for Iranian influence, as well.

The Bush administration does not seem to have absorbed the magnitude of the transformation that has been occurring in the Middle East. In convening the November 2007 Annapolis Peace Conference, it appeared to be rejuvenating the ideas that informed much of the high-profile Middle East diplomacy of the 1990s. By inviting the Sunni Arab states to Annapolis, the U.S. assumed that the fact that Israel

and the Arab states both were contending with a mutual Iranian threat might cause the parties to be more prone to reach a peace accord. However, there were serious reasons to doubt whether this strategy would work.[24]

The paradigm characterized by the Israeli-Palestinian territorial dispute that has primarily informed U.S., European, and Israeli diplomacy since the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference requires rethinking.

Annapolis did not produce any breakthrough in the relations between Israel and the Arab world. It did not break any new ground beyond what had been achieved in the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference and the multilateral negotiations that it generated more than a decade ago. In 2008, the Arab Gulf states were not interested in talking with U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice about how to normalize their ties with Israel; they wanted to know what the U.S. would do to block Iranian expansionism. Iran was their top priority – not the peace process. And when they failed to obtain the assurances they sought from Washington on Iran, several Sunni Arab states, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, scrambled to upgrade their ties with Tehran. So the need to reassess Western diplomatic strategies in 2008 was even more urgent than in 2006.

What seems clear is that the policies that did not bring peace in 1993 or in 2005 could seriously undermine regional stability if they were blindly repeated in 2008. Israeli pullbacks at the present time in the West Bank will fuel *jihadism* among the Palestinians rather than reduce its intensity, and withdrawals will not reduce the aggressive hostility of the Iranian leadership, but only reinforce its conviction that its ideology and tactics are on the winning side of history. The lessons of past errors point to the importance of incorporating a number of critical new components into future policies:

### 1. The Vital Importance of Defensible Borders for Israel

Should Israel be pressured to relinquish control of the strategically vital Jordan Valley, the very same weaponry that has been pouring into the post-disengagement Gaza Strip would find its way to the hills of the West Bank. As a result, a large concentration of short-range rockets and surface-to-air missiles would likely be deployed within striking distance of Israel's major cities and its largest airport situated near Tel Aviv. A West Bank penetrated by Islamist groups armed with short- and medium-range rockets would also create a compelling incentive for global terrorist networks to base themselves in Jordan, which they would try to transform into a logistics and staging area similar to the one they have built in Sinai to service Gaza.

One obvious result of such a course of events would be an upgraded threat to the internal stability of Jordan. With the growth of Sunni *jihadism* in western Iraq in the past, al-Qaeda offshoots have already tried to transplant themselves to Jordanian soil in cities like Irbid. An Israeli security vacuum in the Jordan Valley would undeniably restore and accelerate this trend, undermining the security of a key Arab state that has been an important Western ally in the war on terrorism. For this reason, among many others, Israel must continue to insist on its right to defensible borders in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 242 and the April 14, 2004, letter presented by President George W. Bush to former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

### 2. Preparing for an Eventual Western "Drawdown" from Iraq

It is reasonable to assume that the U.S. and its coalition partners will eventually reduce and ultimately withdraw their forces from Iraq. Regardless of the timetable of a Western pullout, the critical question affecting the future security environment of the Middle East is whether the U.S. is perceived as having accomplished its mission before any drawdown or whether it is seen as having been forced to withdraw prematurely.

Despite the accomplishments achieved in 2007 by U.S. forces under the command of General David Petreaus in stabilizing al-Anbar province and much of the Baghdad area, there are multiple forces at work today in Iraq that will seek to exploit a U.S. withdrawal to serve their political agendas. Sunni *jihadists* will present any Western pullout as their own victory and will seek to renew their influence in western Iraq after the U.S. leaves. A process of transferring *jihadi* military efforts to neighboring Sunni-dominated countries, which already began in 2006, is likely to accelerate under such conditions. This had been proposed by Osama bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in a message to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi that was intercepted by U.S. intelligence in 2005.

There is also an Iranian component to any potential coalition pullout from Iraq. Tehran will seek to build up its influence with the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad, Arab Shiite and Persian Shiite differences notwithstanding. Using its newfound status in Iraq, Iran will be well placed to

This image provided by the US Navy shows the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Nimitz (background), and amphibious assault ship USS Bonhomme Richard (LHD 6) (center), transit alongside Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis (foreground), in the Gulf of Oman, May 22, 2007.

build up over time a combined Iranian-Iraqi coalition against other Middle Eastern states and project its power against Israel from the east, using Hizbullah-like units. Iran can be expected to reinforce Hamas in Syria for operations against Jordan, as well. How these developments will actually unfold will depend on whether the Western disengagement from Iraq is precipitous or occurs only after the country is mostly stabilized.

### 3. A Greater Iranian Military Challenge

Since the end of its eight-year war with Iraq in 1988, Iran has concentrated its military buildup and focused its expenditures on its naval forces and its ballistic missile/non-conventional capabilities. Its regular conventional forces still possess mostly outdated weapons.[25] Despite its limited investments in Russian combat aircraft and air defense systems, Iran's numbers of front-line aircraft and tank forces are smaller than in the case of other Middle Eastern armies. Thus, besides its proven capabilities in regional subversion and support of terrorism, the Iranian challenge is likely to express itself in those areas where its military strength is more pronounced.

In 2008, the Arab Gulf states were not interested in talking with U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice about how to normalize their ties with Israel; they wanted to know what the U.S. would do to block Iranian expansionism.

In the context of an eventual U.S. disengagement from Iraq, such an Iranian military challenge may express itself in efforts to openly challenge U.S. forces. For example, in January 2008, Iranian speedboats belonging to the IRGC became involved in an incident with the U.S. Navy near the Straits of Hormuz. A U.S.-flagged cargo ship contracted by the U.S. Navy fired warning shots at two small Iranian boats in the central Persian Gulf in late April 2008. According to U.S. military sources, Iranian patrol boats have been equipped with Chinese C-802 anti-ship cruise missiles; an Iranian version of the C-802 was in fact used by Hizbullah against an Israeli Saar 5-class missile boat, the INS Hanit, during the Second Lebanon War. This same weaponry could be used by the IRGC against the U.S. Navy in the Persian Gulf.

Iran has a history of harassing and even confronting U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf going back to 1987, when Iran mined sea lanes in the area and a U.S. frigate, the USS Samuel B. Roberts, was almost blown in half. The U.S. delivered an overwhelming retaliatory strike against the Iranian Navy and the Revolutionary Guards.[26] Iran may also choose to test U.S. resolve by provoking America's Arab Gulf allies: Iran occupies islands belonging to the UAE and it dispatched fighter bombers during the 1980s in the direction of the Saudi oil facility at Ras Tanura. Circumstances have changed today, but there has been a proven radius of Iranian activities in the past at times of tension.

How the U.S. and its Western allies should confront the future Iranian challenge is a matter of dispute. European powers may believe that even if Iran obtains nuclear weapons, they can ultimately rely on deterrence like in the Cold War. Washington is far less certain. The applicability of Western deterrence models to a nuclear Iran is highly questionable, given that part of the revolutionary leadership believes that the imminent return of the Twelfth Iman – as the *Mahdi* – can and should be accelerated by triggering global chaos. At the lower end of the spectrum of conflict – subversion and terrorism – classical deterrence will be irrelevant. Unquestionably, Iran will be even more emboldened to engage in this activity should it cross the nuclear threshold and acquire an operational nuclear weapons capability.

### 4. The Ineffectiveness of the UN and International Security Mechanisms

The UN in 2007-2008 has been incapable of dealing resolutely with the Iranian nuclear program. The UN Security Council, immobilized by the lack of consensus among the Permanent Five members, repeatedly refused to confront Iran directly over its violation of the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation

Treaty. It took some four years, starting in 2002 when Iran's clandestine nuclear program was first revealed, for the UN Security Council to adopt Resolution 1696 that made a suspension of Iranian enrichment activities mandatory. The succession of UN resolutions that followed were so anemic that Iran knew it could defy the UN cost-free.

During the same period, the UN was ineffective in Lebanon as well. While adopting UN Security Council Resolution 1559 in September 2004, which called for "the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias," the UN subsequently took no measures against Hizbullah and its Iranian backers, thereby contributing to the outbreak of the Second Lebanon War. Resolution 1701 of August 2006, prohibiting the re-supply of Hizbullah after the war, has been grossly violated by Syria and Iran virtually since the day it was adopted, but again the UN has taken no action in response. Today, Hizbullah has more rockets in its arsenal than on the eve of the Second Lebanon War.

## 5. The Need for a Middle East Security Process

It is notable that, in anticipation of a U.S. pullout from Iraq, Saudi Arabia has begun erecting a security fence along its border with Iraq. Israel and many of the Arab states will find that they share mutual threats and thus should establish some modicum of security cooperation. Of course this should be a quiet exercise without any high-profile ceremonies in Washington. Too much has been made of the notion of joint Israeli-Saudi interests after the Second Lebanon War and the likelihood that these mutual interests might lead to a breakthrough in the peace process. Clearly, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states do not need Israeli territorial concessions to defend themselves against Iranian aggression.

Nevertheless, both Israel and Saudi Arabia share a common interest in a stable Jordan that does not become a staging ground for radical groups seeking to infiltrate their countries. These shared interests, among others, should be discussed quietly between the two countries' defense establishments. Both countries will also have an increasing interest in new U.S. security guarantees as Iran moves closer to an operational nuclear capability. Under such circumstances, models of extended deterrence that were applied to NATO Europe during the Cold War may have to be considered for the Middle East.

Generally, a new Middle East security process could also bring about an improvement in relations among the Sunni Arab regimes, including new patterns of cooperation in Jordanian-Palestinian relations. In the past, Jordan's primary internal threat came from its large Palestinian population. Presently, Jordan has to cope with radical Islamic movements that have penetrated populations that have been the bedrock of the Hashemite regime, like the Transjordanian Bedouin (Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's group). Moreover, despite the influence of Hamas, both Jordanians and Palestinians are Sunnis and thus share (along with Saudi Arabia) a common interest in stemming radical Shiite activism coming from Iran. Should Shiite Iraq come to be dominated by Iran in the future, the Jordanian-Iraqi border will become a front line in the defense of the Sunni Arab states.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (left), shakes hands with United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon at UN headquarters on Sept. 24, 2007.

Israel must continue to insist on its right to defensible borders in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 242 and the April 14, 2004, letter presented by President George W. Bush to former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

If moderate Palestinians collaborated with Jordan to form a security community to confront mutual enemies, then relations would be established that could be beneficial to the kind of political structures they might choose to share once the renewal of an Arab-Israeli negotiating process becomes possible. But a Middle East security process must precede a peace process for these kinds of alliances to take shape, as any Israeli-Palestinian understandings

Gen. David Petraeus testifies on Capitol Hill on Sept. 11, 2007.

that are brokered under present circumstances will be undermined by Iranian destabilization efforts underway across the Middle East.

## Conclusions

The fragile regional situation across the Middle East represents an enormous challenge for the Western alliance. During the last century, the U.S. defined its national interest as preventing the emergence of a hegemonic power that would dominate Europe. This provided the geo-strategic underpinning for U.S. involvement in the First World War, the Second World War, the Cold War, and for the emergence of NATO. Today, Europe is stable and the primary threats to international peace and security emanate from the Middle East, in general, and from Iran, in particular. But unlike the previous century, today the Western world lacks a strategic consensus on the need to confront Iran.

While Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy may have a value in its own right, it will not help stop the advance of Iranian power. Indeed, as the Gaza disengagement demonstrated, if the Israeli-Palestinian channel is mishandled, as it was in 2005, it can even facilitate Iranian expansion and that of its proxies. In contrast, neutralizing the Iranian threat, by weakening Iranian allies among the Palestinians, could very well help foster future Arab-Israel peace accords.

As two noted American observers on the Middle East have commented: "It is not the Palestinian issue that will decide the balance of power in the Middle East, but the fate of the failing states of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon, where Iranian influence has found ample room to expand."[27] Former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer has made the same point. He noted in May 2008 that the "most important change" in the Middle East has been "the shift in the region's political and military center of gravity." He explained this development as follows: "While Israel, Palestine, and Lebanon defined the most important hot spots in the old Middle East, regional power and politics in the wake of the Iraq War is now centered in the Persian Gulf. The dominant conflict is no longer the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, but the threat of confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia for sub-regional supremacy and between Iran and the U.S. for regional hegemony."[28]

The new regional transformation illustrated by the Second Lebanon War requires the acknowledgment of these new realities and demands new political thinking. Israeli-Palestinian peace strategies that did not work in the 1990s have even less of a chance of producing positive results today. Arab-Israeli diplomacy will only work if the emergence of a new regional paradigm is recognized by the West and incorporated into future policies proposed for confronting Iran and stabilizing the Middle East.

## Notes

1. Michael Scott Doran, "Is Palestine the Pivot?" *Foreign Affairs*, author's update from *ForeignAffairs.com*, March 15, 2005, http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20050316faupdate84276/michael-scott-doran/is-palestine-the-pivot.html.
2. John Bolton, *Surrender Is Not An Option: Defending America at the United Nations and Abroad* (New York: Threshold, 2007), p. 155.
3. Craig Smith, David E. Sanger, "Alarm Raised Over Quality of Uranium Found in Iran," *The New York Times*, March 11, 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/11/international/middleeast/11NUKE.html.
4. *AP*, April 21, 2008.
5. During the late 1990s, Western intelligence agencies ascertained that Iran was procuring rocket engine components that had been used to power old Soviet space-lift vehicles. Lee Kass, "Iran's Space Program: The Next Genie in a Bottle?" *MERIA: The Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 10, No. 3, September 2006. Robert Galluci, "Iran-Russia Missile Cooperation: A United States View," in Joseph Cirincione, ed., *Repairing the Regime* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 188.
6. "Iran Could Strike U.S. by 2015, U.S. Official Says," FOX News, October 3, 2007, http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,299189,00.html.
7. Sabina Castelfranco, "Solana: Dialogue with Iran Must Continue," *Voice of America*, October 5, 2006, http://www.voanews.com/tibetan/archive/2006-10/2006-10-05-voa3.cfm.
8. Glenn Kessler, *The Confidant: Condoleezza Rice and the Creating of the Bush Legacy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007), p. 125.
9. James A. Baker and Lee H. Hamilton, Co-Chairs, *The Iraq Study Group* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), p. 54.
10. *Ibid*., p. 50.
11. Energy Information Administration, U.S. Department of Energy, "Country Analysis Brief, Iran." Iranian Oil Minister Hossein Nozari stated Iran earned $70 billion from crude oil exports from March 2007 to March 2008, in "Iran Oil Exports Sets Post-Shah Revenue Record," *WorldTribune.com*, March 25, 2008, http://www.worldtribune.com/worldtribune/WTARC/2008/me_oil_03_25.asp.
12. Robin Wright and Peter Baker, "Iraq, Jordan See Threat from Iran," *Washington Post,* December 8, 2004.
13. Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook: 2006*, www.cia.gov.
14. *Ibid*.
15. Vali Nasr, "When the Shiites Rise," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2006, p. 65.
16. Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2004), pp. 280-281.
17. *Ibid*., p. 282.
18. "Egyptian President Husni Mubarak: Shiites Are More Loyal to Iran than to Their Own Countries," *MEMRI-TV*, April 8, 2006.
19. John R. Schindler, *Unholy Terror: Bosnia, Al-Qaeda, and the Rise of Global Jihad* (St. Paul: Zenith Press, 2007), p. 137.
20. Amir Taheri, "The Sunni-Shiite Terror Network," *Wall Street Journal*, March 29, 2008, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB120675195927473485.html.
21. *9/11 Commission Report* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), p. 241.
22. *Ibid*., p. 240.
23. Douglas Jehl and Eric Schmitt, "Aftereffects: Havens; U.S. Suggests a Qaeda Cell in Iran Directed Saudi Bombings," *New York Times*, May 21, 2003, http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E03EFD8113EF932A15756C0A9659C8B63.
24. Vali Nasr and Ray Takeyh, "The Costs of Containing Iran," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2008, p. 90.
25. Brig. Gen. (res.) Yossi Kuperwasser, *Halting Iran's Nuclear Weapons Program: Iranian Vulnerabilities and Western Policy Options* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2008).
26. David B. Crist, "Iran's Small Boats Are a Big Problem," *New York Times*, January 20, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/20/opinion/20crist.html.
27. Nasr and Takeyh, *Foreign Affairs, op. cit.*
28. Joschka Fischer, "Is the Middle East State System About to Disintegrate?" *Daily Star* (Beirut), May 5, 2008, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=5&article_id=91696.