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CHANGING U.S. INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Steven R. David

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Middle East Countries are Prone to War

The end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the very specific, recognizable threat of the Soviet Union does not mean that the United States can become complacent. There are threats whose impact may be less catastrophic than was the case with the Soviet Union, but whose likelihood of occurrence is far greater, and these threats could hurt. Now is the time to focus on those problems that are likely to get worse, now that the Soviet threat is gone. The threat posed by the Middle East is one.

The Middle East poses a threat first because most Middle East countries are prone to war. War does not necessarily hold the same risks for Arab leaders, as illustrated most recently in the Gulf War. Saddam Hussein was the clear loser in that war and yet he remains in power. For a Middle Eastern leader contemplating war, the fact that one can lose and still remain in power is probably reassuring. The absence of such constraints on leaders going to war in the Middle East is especially critical because nearly all Middle Eastern states are

led by a narrow elite that tends to be alienated from the population at large and focused on meeting its own interests. The most important interest of Middle Eastern leaders is staying in power, which not coincidentally means staying alive. Middle Eastern leaders realize that if they lose power they do not go off to Texas to write their memoirs but are hanged in the main square, so they are going to do what it takes to stay in power. If they feel that going to war will enhance their personal prospects of remaining in power they will do so even if it is not in the national interest. A major mistake, certainly of American political scientists and some American policy people also, is too often asking what is in Iraq's interest, or Iran's interest, or Syria's? The real question is what is in Assad's interest? What is in the leader's interest? One has to personalize the question because the determinant of war and foreign policy in general is usually made by a single man and his major concern is staying in power. If war is more likely to serve the interests of a single individual leader or narrow elite rather than the country as a whole, then war

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor.
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becomes more likely. That is the way it was in modern Europe and this is the way it is in the Arab world today.

The Increased Likelihood of Conflict

The end of the Cold War may well heighten the chances of Middle Eastern conflict. It might help ease some tensions — the Middle East peace talks are an example — but all in all, it is likely to lead to greater conflict for a number of reasons. First of all, most conflicts in the Middle East are indigenous. The United States and the Soviet Union may have exacerbated these conflicts, but by and large they were due to problems in the region that are not going to disappear if the superpowers disappear.

Secondly, the lessening of Soviet and American influence will remove an important constraint on interstate warfare. For the most part, the superpowers acted to restrain war in the Middle East because war was never really in their interests. At times, conflict and tension may have been intentional, but not war. War had incalculable risks that neither superpower wished to endure. The Soviet Union did its best to restrain Egypt from going to war prior to 1973. The United States tried to restrain Israel from going to war in 1967. And once war broke out, the superpowers did their best to end it. In 1956, 1967, and 1973, the wars were ended largely because of superpower involvement and intervention. Once the superpowers are gone it is not clear just how these wars will end once they begin.

Threats to the Flow of Western Oil

If conflict and war are going to persist in the Middle East, why should the U.S. and the West in general care if the Middle East is prone to instability and war? Part of the answer is because the Middle Eastern states are increasingly capable of threatening the U.S. and its allies in two important ways — with the cutoff of oil and with weapons of mass destruction.

American dependence on imported oil has increased to the point where the United States now imports more than half of the oil it uses. U.S. allies in Western Europe also import more than half their oil and the Japanese virtually all of theirs. The demand for oil is likely to rise in the future according to every projection. There are a number of newly industrialized countries in East Asia whose demand for oil is increasing as their economies increase. In China, for example, the economy is increasing by over 10 percent per year. Progress in energy efficiency remains limited because the price of oil remains so low. According to one report, a gal-

lon of gasoline in the United States, adjusted for inflation, now costs less than ever. When Americans are paying \$1.15 for a gallon of gas, their desire to conserve, to not buy large cars, and to worry about fuel efficiency obviously declines. Yet while demand is likely to increase, supplies are likely to decrease, and there are no big new oil fields on the horizon.

Two major producers, the United States and the former Soviet Union, are experiencing major declines in production. A major portion of the shortfall that is likely to result will have to be met by the Persian Gulf, which possesses 70 percent of the world's oil reserves. Even if the U.S. reduces its dependence on Persian Gulf oil, any disruption in supply is going to produce a mad scramble, market price increases, and obvious damage to American and Western interests.

There are many who say that American dependence on Persian Gulf oil is really not a problem. First, they note that the oil-producing countries must sell their oil in order to reap the benefits. The oil does them no good in the ground. It is also claimed that the International Energy Agency will prevent any selective oil embargo as occurred in 1973 against the U.S. and the Netherlands.

Even large price increases are not likely to occur, according to this argument, but would be corrected by the market, spurring importing countries to search for non-OPEC sources of production, develop energy alternatives, and reinstate conservation. Japan is held out as an example of a country somewhat complacent about the threat of the oil weapon. The Japanese were not very worried about Saddam Hussein's seizure of Kuwait. They simply expected to pay a few dollars more for the oil, but were sure that Saddam Hussein would have to sell it just as the Emir of Kuwait sold it, and they were prepared to absorb the extra cost.

This complacent view is mistaken for two reasons. First, conflict within and among the Persian Gulf states may prevent the production and sale of oil regardless of economic costs. There have been sixteen disruptions of Persian Gulf oil since 1950. Saudi Arabia is especially vulnerable to internal unrest from Shiites, Palestinians, and fundamentalists. As was seen in the Persian Gulf conflict, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states are also very vulnerable to external threats. So even though the Saudis may want to sell their oil, if the oil fields are ablaze and the pumping stations are destroyed, they might not be able to do so. It is hard to envision Saudi Arabia ever being strong enough to protect itself against a determined Iraqi or Iranian assault. That is why the U.S. will have to be engaged

in the Middle East for the foreseeable future.

Secondly, the impact of culture and religion also undermines the economic argument. It is wrong to assume that whoever controls the Persian Gulf oil will seek to maximize profits. If fundamentalists of some group seize power they may seek to recreate the idealized society of the Prophet Mohammed and keep out the corrupting influence of the West that is involved in producing or selling oil. There are a whole host of ways in which religion and culture may induce countries not to sell their oil and the notion that they are simply going to try to maximize profits is an ethnocentric and possibly mistaken one.

The Threat from Weapons of Mass Destruction

Western interests in general are also threatened by the spread of weapons of mass destruction — nuclear, biological and chemical — in the Middle East being developed by Libya, Iraq, Iran, and Algeria. Obviously a small number of nuclear weapons directed against the U.S. or its allies could cause catastrophic damage. This remains the one major physical threat to the United States that exists in the world today.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, instead of making things better, has made the danger of nuclear proliferation even more likely. The old Soviet Union did help stop the spread of nuclear weapons. Now that it is gone its restraining influence is also gone. In its place is a lot of nuclear materiel, all of which can bring a lot of money in the world marketplace. The prospect of former Soviet scientists either selling materiel or their expertise is not something that can be dismissed lightly.

Biological weapons are reportedly being developed by Iraq and Syria, and virtually all the countries in the Middle East including Israel are developing or have developed chemical weapons. All of these countries are also developing ballistic missiles to deliver their nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. Missiles are especially worrisome because there is no defense against them. Some reassurance was given by the presence of Patriot missiles in Israel and Saudi Arabia, but recent evidence indicates that at most they may have intercepted one or two of the Scuds. It may have been psychologically reassuring, like the anti-aircraft guns in London during the Blitz. Many of the guns could not actually reach the enemy aircraft but they sure sounded good and reassured the people. Since there is no defense against ballistic missiles, their deployment increases the chances of preemption.

As the range of ballistic missiles increases, America and its allies can become targets, not only of ballistic

missiles but of cruise missiles as well. Cruise missiles have less of a psychological impact, but they might be even more worrisome. They are essentially very accurate flying torpedoes that can carry nuclear, biological or chemical weapons. They are very hard to shoot down, can be built in great numbers, and can cause a great deal of damage.

Some argue that the spread of especially nuclear weapons to the Middle East need not be of major concern to the U.S. because nuclear weapons will, in essence, require a dynamic of pragmatism, caution and deterrence that will recreate the U.S.-Soviet relationship. Just as the United States and the Soviet Union did not go to war, in large part because they recognized that any war would be catastrophic, so Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Israel will no longer be going to war with each other every decade or so. Nuclear weapons give us what leaders before World War I did not have, a crystal ball to see the costs of the conflict that lay ahead. If the leaders of the Middle East have this crystal ball, these nuclear weapons, so the argument goes, the result will not be nuclear war but peace.

This complacency regarding the spread of nuclear weapons is not well-founded since nuclear deterrence simply might not work in the Middle East. Conflicts there are of a much greater intensity than that between the United States and the Soviet Union. There also may soon be a large number of countries in the region with nuclear weapons, all of whom having disputes with one another. What then happens if a country becomes subject to a nuclear attack? Do they retaliate against every probable enemy or just one? If retaliation cannot be guaranteed, deterrence is undermined.

Deterrence is persuading an adversary not to do something that he is capable of doing by threatening him with unacceptable consequences if he does it. Yet it is not clear that the U.S. can credibly communicate the threats by which it might seek to deter Middle Eastern states from doing things that they are capable of doing. It is therefore very much in America's interest to make sure that these states do not obtain non-conventional warfare capabilities, and if they get these capabilities, the U.S. must at least be able to defend itself.

There is also the increasing danger of accidental or unauthorized war due to less developed systems of command and control in many of these countries. Because of fear of a preemptive attack, the authority and ability to launch these weapons is given to lower-ranking individuals who might launch them on their own initiative. The prospect of terrorists or

irrational leaders using these weapons is just as real, though one does not have to believe that irrationality is more likely in the Middle East than elsewhere to accept the notion that the more leaders with fingers on the nuclear trigger, the more likely it may be that one of them will be irrational. It is certainly not unthinkable that such a person would exist in the region.

Obviously, the spread of nuclear weapons to Middle East countries prone to war could threaten the United States and the West in several ways. Their mere possession could deter American intervention to protect the oilfields. If Saddam Hussein had been a bit smarter and waited a couple of years, at least to the point where he had nuclear weapons, it is not at all certain that the United States would have responded to his invasion of Kuwait by placing half a million troops in a relatively concentrated area. The nuclear factor certainly would have complicated the decision to do so.

A local nuclear war in the Persian Gulf could destroy all the oil facilities and create environmental havoc. Most importantly, the threat or actual use of nuclear weapons between states can hurt the United States and its allies. American allies such as Israel or Egypt could be targeted for nuclear assault, and once the weapons increase in range the United States itself could be a target.

Iran remains another potential problem. An Iran with nuclear weapons and with the capability to deliver them to countries in the region is a very frightening prospect.

What Should the U.S. Do?

What then should the U.S. do about these potential dangers? Militarily, the United States needs to retain the option for massive intervention in the region similar to its intervention in Kuwait to defend the oil fields. The post-Cold War euphoria must not allow the United States to reduce its armed forces to the extent that it could not launch another Kuwait-type involvement. The United States must work hard as well to stop the spread of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction to Middle Eastern countries. It should enhance international norms, strengthen treaties against the spread of nuclear weapons, and work on safeguards. A list should be maintained of certain individuals and groups that under no circumstances should be permitted to develop nuclear weapons. If they are close to getting nuclear weapons, the United States, hopefully with the cooperation of the U.N., but if not, then on its own, should work actively to prevent these leaders or groups from getting control of nuclear weapons.

If deterrence is not working, the only other options are preemption and defense. Preemptive strikes against nuclear capabilities may be called for. In terms of defensive systems, the development of light ground-based systems is required for countering ballistic missiles, not Reagan's Star Wars program but something much more modest. The U.S. certainly has to improve its air and coastal defenses and improve safeguards against smuggling.

Diplomatically, the United States needs to be actively engaged in the Middle East peace process. The U.S. cannot impose peace, nor should it, but it can act as a catalyst. The Arab-Israeli conflict is not the only source of instability in the Middle East but it is an important one, and so it is important for the United States to do what it can to foster a settlement.

Economically, the U.S. must continue to work towards energy independence. There is no excuse for the United States or the rest of the Western world being so dependent on a group of feudal sheikdoms whose only certainty is that they are going to be the source of internal and external instability in the decades to follow.

Perhaps in the short term the U.S. might even want to increase its dependence on Persian Gulf oil. Let them pump out as much cheap oil as they can. The U.S. should buy it and store it or convert it in some way. But at the same time there must be a concerted effort to develop alternatives to Persian Gulf oil, whether through new oil exploration or alternatives to oil itself.

Most importantly, the U.S. must continue to recognize that the Middle East matters; that the end of the Cold War has eliminated some concerns but heightened others; that the worst policy for the U.S. is to let the end of the Cold War lull it into isolationist complacency. America spent the Cold War worrying about threats whose probability was very small but whose occurrence would have been catastrophic, for example, a Soviet invasion of Western Europe or a U.S.-Soviet nuclear war. Most of the American defense budget was focused on this probability. Certainly most of the academic literature was focused on these remote but catastrophic threats. Now the United States has to worry about threats whose consequences may be less catastrophic but whose likelihood of occurring is very great, such as the threat of nuclear weapons or cut-off of the oil supply. Nowhere are these threats more likely to emerge than the Middle East and the United States ignores this reality at its own peril.

A lot will depend on the political climate in the

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United States. America now seems very much locked into a domestic agenda — issues like health care and dealing with the deficit have grabbed the attention of the American public. To combat a growing sense of isolationism, it must be brought home to the American people that these are not just abstract problems or even humanitarian problems but problems that affect the quality of life in the United States, that directly threaten U.S. interests. With no extra money and simply redirection of attention, the United States might be able to do something about them.

Steven R. David is Professor of International Politics at Johns Hopkins University and is currently visiting Israel in the Academic Specialist Program sponsored by the U.S. Information Agency. He is the author of *Choosing Sides: Third World Alignment and Realignment*, and specializes in the role of the Third World in world politics. This *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints* is based on his presentation at the Jerusalem Center Fellows Forum.

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Netanel Lorch, one of Israel's most prominent military historians, served as Secretary General of the Knesset from 1972 to 1983, following a distinguished career in both the Israel Defense Forces and the diplomatic corps. He is a former President of the International Association of Secretaries General of Parliaments.

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