
FOCUS ON THE Middle East

By HANS BINNENDIJK

Events in the first half of this decade have significantly strengthened America's strategic hand in the Middle East, but several long-term trends threaten to undermine this progress and once again make the region dangerous to Western interests. The type and extent of future U.S. military engagement in the greater Middle East could be determined by the direction of these trends. It is for this reason that we focus on the region in the JFQ Forum in this issue of the journal.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the withering of its bilateral security ties abroad have severely reduced Moscow's ability to affect regional events and have modified the orientation of countries such as Syria and Yemen. Without this competition the United States emerged as the principal external actor in the region. This advantage was reinforced by the outcome of the Persian Gulf War in 1991 and our continuing effort in defense of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Washington invested its diplomatic advantages wisely and helped broker peace agreements between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization and between Israel and Jordan. Peace efforts continue with Syria. The American role has seldom been as dominant.

But there is heightened concern in the Middle East over a combination of internal economic, social, and political problems which eclipse traditional security concerns. As these problems have grown, radical groups have used religion as a political weapon to destabilize pro-Western states and to spread terror not only to Cairo and Algiers but to Paris and New York. At the same time, states in the region continue to pursue weapons of mass destruction to offset conventional military weakness, with delivery

systems that can strike U.S. forces abroad. Should Islamic, anti-Western regimes take power, or Iran and Iraq have a free hand, U.S. interests would suffer a serious setback.

These factors have altered the region's geographic parameters. The narrow Cold War perspective which viewed the Middle East as limited to the Levant and the Persian Gulf is obsolete. The emerging concept of a "greater" Middle East encompasses the territory between Turkey in the north and the Horn of Africa in the south, and between Morocco to the west and Pakistan to the east, and recognizes the strategic impact of events in areas adjacent to the traditional boundaries of the Middle East. Some even include Central Asia as part of the region.

Despite positive developments and dangerous prospects, core U.S. strategic interests in the area remain essentially what they were during the Cold War. Protecting access to Persian Gulf oil, maintaining peace between Israel and its neighbors, and limiting radical political movements remain vital U.S. interests. What changed significantly is the political context of these challenges. While a considerable consensus remains between American and regional views regarding security threats, the shift towards domestic priorities by key governments could begin to undermine this consensus.

The United States protects its vital interests in the Gulf with a diplomatic policy of dual containment, backed up by the U.S. Central Command. This policy, which labels both Iran and Iraq as hostile to Western interests, has thus far effectively isolated the region's most immediate security threats. There are recent indications that the regime of Saddam Hussein is under intense pressure. But dual containment is a unilateral initiative with only limited support from Europe and Japan. Should sanctions against Iraq be eased by the United Nations, or should Russia supply Iran with fissile material, the dual containment policy could break down and our Gulf allies would be increasingly threatened. Dual containment also does not address the potential for instability that exists among the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The U.S. military presence which provides them with external protection would be of little avail against internal upheaval.

In the event that it must again respond to a challenge from Iraq or another renegade nation, CENTCOM has taken significant steps with the cooperation of GCC states to bolster its theater military posture and to reduce its long lead-time for transporting equipment and weapons to the region. As *Vigilant Warrior* illustrated in October 1994, our ability to mobilize expeditionary forces

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and deploy them has improved rapidly and dramatically. Nevertheless, with U.S. force reductions in Europe and elsewhere, a repeat of the massive Desert Storm buildup would significantly strain the U.S. force structure. In addition, the continued military enforcement of the Iraqi cease fire through Operations Southern Watch and Provide Comfort II constantly stress our forces. To reduce this tension and enhance the durability of these missions, more efficient means to accomplish these tasks may need to be devised.

The second vital American interest in the region—maintaining the Arab-Israeli peace—is also protected by both diplomacy and military engagement. The successes in the Middle East peace process will probably be an important diplomatic legacy of the Clinton administration. But the process is not complete and existing successes are under attack. The recent assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by an Israeli extremist robs the peace process of its most important leader. We can only hope that the outrage it has engendered throughout the world will stimulate rather than retard the peace process. Much may now depend upon whether the position of moderates within Israel can be strengthened and whether Syrian President Hafez al-Assad is willing to compromise over the Golan.

In the Middle East peace process it is success that brings U.S. military engagement. The United States continues to deploy two battalions as peace monitors in the Sinai. Peace between Israel and Syria will probably mean deployment of additional peacekeepers to the Golan Heights. Despite criticism of such a deployment, American peacekeepers on the Golan would likely be quite secure. If a deployment is required, the United States will have an opportunity to consolidate the Sinai and Golan operations and provide a more cost effective monitoring force.

While there are prospects for success in U.S. Persian Gulf policy and the peace process, the most alarming development in the greater Middle East is the growth of Islamic extremism in Algeria, Sudan, Egypt, and elsewhere. In its most extreme form resurgent Islam is an ideological, xenophobic, populist movement that seeks to overthrow moderate regimes, endorses anti-Western strategies, and advocates the supremacy of Islamic parties. Extremists represent a special challenge to governments by threatening their legitimacy on religious as well as political grounds.

While militant Moslems may have strong religious beliefs, many deliberately use Islam to further political agendas. With the failures of Marxism and pan-Arab ideologies, many radicals view

Islam as the vehicle with which to contest government policies and gain control of governing institutions. While some connections and common interests exist among these radical groups, they do not constitute a monolithic movement. Nor are they representative of Islam. The United States and its Western allies can work with the great majority of Moslems, who do not support a radical anti-Western agenda. In any case, it would be both fallacious and counterproductive for America or its treaty partners to develop policies which could be perceived as anti-Islamic.

Given rising economic, social, and political difficulties confronting friendly governments in the Middle East there is little the United States can do militarily to ameliorate the present situation. We must continue to support friendly governments who are in direct conflict with extremists while urging them to deal with underlying economic, social, and political issues. We must recognize the potential costs to our long-term security interests if the extremists succeed, and we must also begin to develop contingency plans. For example, we might well be called on by France to help evacuate people should extremists take over in Algeria. We could also find ourselves caught in the middle of internal unrest in Egypt or the Gulf.

These challenges are all addressed in greater detail by authors of the articles in JFQ Forum. They take a broad, long-term view of the emerging threats that Western governments as well as joint force commanders and planners may have to face in the region.

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