

# The Middle East: Challenges Born of Success

By CHAS. W. FREEMAN, JR.



U.S. Army

**Massed tanks in Saudi desert.**

**L**ike Caesar's Gaul, the Middle East can be divided in three parts, each presenting a unique challenge to U.S. interests and strategy. Each has its own history of active American involvement and all are undergoing significant change in the post-Cold War era, in part reflecting the successes of past and present policy. Ironically, these successes are already giving rise to new challenges to our interests and strategy.

## **The Maghreb and Southern Mediterranean**

The westernmost part of the Middle East is the Maghreb—those north African countries on the southern

shore of the Mediterranean (Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco) plus Mauritania. They have been of strategic concern since early in American history and were the scene of our first trans-Atlantic intervention. In 1815, provoked by repeated acts of piracy, Congress declared war on Algiers. The Navy and marines responded successfully there as well as in Tunis and Tripoli, assuring freedom of navigation in the Mediterranean and the safety of our citizens.

World War II underscored the geostrategic relationship between the Maghreb and Europe. America fought with Britain and France to secure the

southern littoral of the Mediterranean and to prepare for the reconquest of Western Europe. Crises in the eastern Mediterranean, Arabian Gulf, and central Africa during and after the Cold War were accompanied by repeated reminders of the importance of the Maghreb in military movements to the central and eastern Middle East as well as to sub-Saharan Africa.

Consistent with the past, U.S. strategic interests still are focused on maintaining stability, denying the Maghreb to an enemy that could threaten Europe's southern flank, suppressing wanton acts of lawlessness and terrorism, preserving military access and transit rights, and safeguarding our citizens. Strategic partnerships

with Morocco and Tunisia (and Egypt) have bolstered friendly governments, maintained access and transit rights, and constrained a radical regime in Libya while containing the political chaos in Algeria. These relationships have been the basis for a little-noted yet significant American policy success—prevention of a much worse situation than now exists in the Maghreb. U.S. influence there has rested so far, however, on extending significant economic and military support to Morocco and Tunisia. But the collapse of funding for aid is challenging all parties to find a new basis for cooperation in pursuit of shared strategic interests.

The spread of political Islamic movements in North Africa has increased strategic concern in Europe, especially in Spain, France, and Italy, that is reflected by NATO. The Atlantic Alliance is a forum in which U.S. policies toward the Maghreb can be coordinated with European partners. So far NATO, however, distracted by events in the former Yugoslavia and integrating Central and East Europe into a system of cooperative security, has not forged a plan to bolster moderates and contain extremism in the Maghreb. Until Europeans and Americans do so, they will be less than adequately prepared to deal with events on NATO's southern flanks.

### **The Levant and Eastern Mediterranean**

At the center of the Middle East is the Levant, comprising countries that border the eastern Mediterranean—Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and the other parts of the former British League of Nations Mandate in Palestine (Jordan and Israeli-occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza). Prior to the Cold War, American involvement in the Levant was largely cultural, educational, and philanthropic. This has been altered by the end of British and French dominance, the destabilizing effects of wars over

the founding and expansion of Israel, and the concomitant extension of Soviet influence to Arab nationalist regimes in Egypt and Syria. For more than four decades the Levant has been a principal focus of U.S. security policy.

Over the course of forty-odd years, the Levant has been the scene of the most kaleidoscopic shifts in American relationships in the world. The

### **U.S. relations with the Palestinians have undergone startling shifts**

U.S. posture of neutrality in dealing with Israel and Egypt as evidenced in the Suez crisis of 1956 gave way to alignment with Israel in the early and mid-1960s, coupled with efforts to check Soviet backing of Egyptian ambitions for hegemony in the region. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the United States had ended its arms embargo on Israel, displaced France as principal military backer of Israel, and adopted a policy of containment toward Egypt and Syria. With the Camp David accords in 1979, however, the United States began to provide a huge amount of aid to Egypt. Since then, American policy in the Levant has featured a pattern of massive subsidies to Israel as well as Egypt, strategic partnerships with both countries, and the positioning of forces in the Sinai through the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO).

U.S. relations with Syria have changed significantly over this time. Years of hostility and lack of contact were suddenly replaced by military cooperation in the Gulf War of 1990–91. Since then Washington has engaged in an active dialogue with Damascus. Improved prospects for peace between Israel and Syria have even led to talk of a U.S. military presence on Syrian territory on the Golan Heights if Israel returns this strategic real estate. American relations with Lebanon over this

period have ranged from warm support and successful military intervention to block Egypt from overthrowing the Lebanese government in 1958 to the tragically unsuccessful intervention to back the withdrawal of foreign forces from Beirut in 1983. Nonintercourse with Beirut in the mid and late 1980s was followed by a modest flow of U.S. equipment to Lebanese forces in anticipation of a withdrawal by Syrian and Israeli forces as well as by Iranian irregulars. American financial and military support for Jordan, a fixture of Middle East policy for over forty years,

ended abruptly in 1990 after Jordan's de facto alignment with Iraq in the Gulf War. It then resumed (greatly reduced by U.S. budget constraints) as Jordan crafted a peace with Israel. Amman's only substantial "peace dividend" seems likely to be forgiveness of its debt by Washington.

U.S. relations with the Palestinians have undergone startling shifts in the last five decades. Sympathy and generous assistance to Palestinians displaced by Israel's violent establishment of its independence gave way to hostility and ostracism of Palestinian elites as they turned to terrorism in their struggle against Israel and its Western backers. America now carries on an active dialogue with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and leads international efforts to help Palestinians establish effective administration and reconstruct the economy in the territories being turned over to them by Israel.

This remarkable history of shifting alignments in the Levant was produced by the Arab-Israeli conflict interacting with the U.S.-Soviet Cold War rivalry. In the early days of the Cold War, the Soviet Union courted radical Arab nationalism and exploited Arab animosity toward Israel to garner influence in Arab capitals. Within a decade Moscow emerged as the dominant supplier of arms and ideological tutor of Israel's enemies. In response, the United States forged relations with regimes that were hostile to communism and Arab socialism, such as the conservative monarchies, while drawing steadily closer to Israel.

Israel's pioneering spirit, robust democracy, and military prowess

---

**Ambassador Chas. W. Freeman, Jr., is a distinguished fellow at the U.S. Institute of Peace. He served previously as assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs and as U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia.**

against daunting odds earned the admiration of most Americans, while the fanaticism and terrorism practiced by Israel's most active enemies cost dispossessed Arabs whatever Western sympathy they might otherwise have gained. The commitment of American Jews and Christian fundamentalists to restored Jewish rule in the Holy Land reinforced U.S. relations with Israel. As the stridently anti-Israeli regimes in Nasser's Egypt, Syria, and Iraq moved into the Soviet orbit, the U.S.-Israeli relationship fell into in a Cold War context easily understood even by those Americans with no emotional attachment to the Jewish state.

By 1988, the apparent emergence of Israel as the primary enemy of the Soviet Union and its allies in the Middle East led the United States to formalize its defense commitments to Israel. A memorandum of agreement on strategic cooperation signed in that year committed the United States to guarantee Israel's security and assure its military supremacy over actual and potential enemies indefinitely. This agreement is the basic charter of America's defense relationship with Israel. The premises on which this charter was based, however, are now being rapidly overtaken by successes in U.S. and Israeli diplomacy that are reshaping the Levant. The end of the Cold War eliminated both the Soviet Union and all significant non-Middle Eastern sources of support for Arab hostility to Israel. Resolute and persistent American diplomacy helped foster the circumstances in which the PLO could embrace peace with a Jewish state that it once vowed to destroy. By doing so, the PLO has acknowledged that cooperation rather than confrontation is now the realistic path to Palestinian self-determination. Israel enjoys normal relations with Jordan as well as Egypt. Prospects for an eventual peace with Syria, followed by normalized relations with Lebanon and the end of Iranian influence there, seem increasingly sure.

Both Israeli and Arab extremists can be expected to sabotage the emerging peace between Israel and its neighbors. All evidence to date suggests,

however, that they are unlikely to succeed. Israel is already to some degree accepted by every Arab state and people as a legitimate part of the Middle East. For the first time since 1949, there is no credible threat to its survival as a prosperous democratic state. Eventual peace with Syria and Lebanon will lay a firm foundation for its political and economic integration into the broader region. This prospect looms as an historic victory for Israel and a signal diplomatic achievement for the United States.

As peace percolates into the Levant, however, U.S. strategic partnerships with both Israel and Egypt increasingly find themselves in need of new rationales for their sustainment. Support for Israel can no longer be justified in terms of countering the Soviet Union. The Arab threat to Israel is already greatly diminished. American involvement in securing Israel's borders with Syria, if this emerges as a condition of peace between the two as it did between Israel and Egypt, will assure continuing American involvement in Israel's defense. The threat to Israel will not disappear overnight, though it is likely to diminish in time. In this regard, the prospect of continued Iranian hostility toward Israel is worrisome but much less immediate than past threats. In short, threat analysis will shortly no longer provide a rationale for U.S. subsidies for Israeli defense at anything like previous levels. Similarly, sixteen years after Camp David, U.S. aid to Egypt is difficult to justify as necessary to consolidate peace between Israel and Egypt. The U.S.-Egyptian strategic partnership, like its Israeli counterpart, must find new foundations.

Crafting new underpinnings after an Arab-Israeli peace accord will not be easy but may prove less difficult than some imagine. Israel's emergence as an accepted part of the region should do away with the political sensitivities that have precluded U.S. inclusion of Israel in dealing with regional security issues involving Arab and Islamic states. Equipment and munitions prepositioned in Israel by U.S. European Command (EUCOM) may, for the first time, be usable in the Central Region. Greater security may persuade Israel to risk a more mutually beneficial

relationship with the United States, including combined air and ground exercises, a feature of all our other strategic partnerships. It will also make sense in time to realign the Unified Command Plan (UCP) to reflect Israel's emergence as an accepted part of the region in which geography has placed it.

Egypt's multi-faceted role as the demographic and cultural center of the Arab world, as an important Mediterranean and Red Sea country, and as one of Africa's few regional powers has yet to find full expression in its relations with America. Nor have Egyptian and U.S. forces created a firm basis for cooperating in areas of mutual concern. Egypt is situated between the Maghreb and Red Sea/Arabian Gulf subregions of the Middle East. Its contributions to the coalition victory over Iraq reflected longstanding concerns about the stability of the Arabian peninsula. It also has vital interests in the Horn of Africa, as operations in Somalia and action vis-à-vis Sudan have recently demonstrated. The stability of the area around Egypt is also of great concern to the United States. The downsizing of the Armed Forces may serve to make military partnership with Egypt, as with Israel, even more desirable than in the past.

The United States needs to open dialogue with both Israel and Egypt on mutually beneficial bases for security cooperation. Economic and military assistance are vital to both countries though increasingly unpopular in America. Without a mutually agreed basis for these relationships after a comprehensive Middle East peace is achieved, the U.S. public is likely to question the need for huge subventions to Israel and Egypt, not to mention new subsidies that Syria and Lebanon may demand as the price of peace. Israel and its Camp David peace partner Egypt already absorb the bulk of American economic assistance worldwide and nearly 100 percent of military assistance. The continued decline of U.S. assistance globally will accentuate the privileged position of Israel and Egypt. Even if these two states agreed that aid could be reduced to reflect diminished regional threats and

*USS George Washington*  
heading north through  
Suez Canal.



U.S. Navy (Todd Summerlin)

limit unhealthy reliance on subsidies from Washington, a new rationale will be required to justify continued aid at acceptable levels.

### The Gulf and Red Sea

The easternmost subregion includes the countries bordering the Arabian/Persian Gulf and Red Sea (Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, and Sudan). American military involvement there dates from World War II. Access to and transit of the Gulf/Red Sea was essential to power projection into the China, India, and Southeast Asian theaters of war against Japan. The Suez Canal's closure due to conflict between Israel and Egypt brought major changes in the global shipping

industry, shifting traffic away from the canal. As the Cold War passed into history, however, Operations Desert Shield/Desert Storm again underscored the military importance of the Suez Canal and Red Sea corridor. By the late 1980s, moreover, tens of thousands of civil and military transports were tran-

### growing dependence on Gulf oil greatly added to the strategic significance of the region

siting Egyptian and Arabian airspace annually between Europe and Asia. The Gulf War also dramatized the military importance of these routes.

Following World War II, the growing dependence of the American and global economies on Gulf oil greatly added to the strategic significance of

the region. This point came into painful relief when the Gulf states instituted an oil embargo to exact a price for massive U.S. assistance to Israel in the Arab-Israeli war of 1973. The cumulative costs to the American economy alone, in terms of inflation and lost economic growth, have never been reckoned but must be counted in the trillions of dollars.

As the traditional epicenter of Islam the Arabian peninsula has also become more important with the emergence of political Islam. The Saudi monarchy's irreproachably tolerant management of holy places in Mecca and Medina deprives extremists of a platform from which to preach *jihad* against the West. America and its European allies, as well as moderate Muslims everywhere, have a stake in the continuation of temperate rule over the holy places.

In sum, U.S. interests in the Arabian Gulf and Red Sea region have centered on oil, transit, and Islam for many years. These interests have found consistent expression in policies that sustain a balance of power and deny control of the region to the enemies of the industrialized democracies. From the late 1960s to the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979, American strategy foresaw partnership with Iran as the means to deal with instability. Reliance on cooperation with Saudi Arabia, through the possible use of Saudi facilities, was seen as a further means of coping with an overt threat from the Soviet Union. Khomeini's Islamic revolution ended all possibility of cooperation with Iran and was followed by Moscow's decision to invade Afghanistan. The U.S.-Saudi partnership evolved as the two countries cooperated in providing crucial assistance to the Afghan mujahidiin.

Since World War II, the United States, with the cooperation of Bahrain, had maintained a small naval presence in the Gulf. With the British withdrawal in the mid-1960s, this force became the only permanent foreign presence and a key factor of regional stability. Washington responded to Moscow's flanking of the Gulf in Afghanistan by declaring a vital interest in strategic denial of outside powers (Carter Doctrine), prepositioning equipment and munitions in Oman and Somalia, and reorganizing its command structure by eventually establishing CENTCOM. This expansion of American presence was controversial among smaller Gulf states. Ironically in light of subsequent events, the most vociferous objections came from Kuwait.

The bloody, eight-year war of attrition between Iran and Iraq absorbed the energy of the Iranian revolution and effectively prevented its export to Shias in the Arabian peninsula. The Gulf Arabs perceived a vital interest in preventing Iranian victory over Iraq and in maintaining a balance of power between the two that could check their ambitions for regional hegemony. This was also an interest of the United States. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other Gulf states offered substantial aid while American intelligence supported Iraq in staving off defeat by its more

populous neighbor. The abiding U.S. interest in the secure flow of Gulf oil, meanwhile, found expression in the naval escort of Kuwaiti tankers as the fighting extended to the waters and airspace over the Gulf.

The war ended in August 1988 with both sides exhausted although Iraq clearly emerged as the dominant regional military power. Gulf Arabs and the world should not have been surprised by Baghdad's decision two years later to take advantage of its un-

### America can only adopt a policy of containing Iran and Iraq

matched military strength. Iraq's judgment that it could get away with annexing Kuwait was facilitated by the apparent loss of interest in the Gulf by the superpowers as the Cold War ended. The 1989-90 collapse of the Soviet empire and the Soviet Union itself freed Iraq of any need to defer to Moscow. Meanwhile, given the end of the threat to the Gulf, the Carter Doctrine seemed to lose its relevance. As Iraq blustered against Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates over the spring and summer of 1990, some in Washington were openly advocating the removal of the U.S. naval presence from the Gulf.

Baghdad's various miscalculations culminated in a failure to withdraw before Desert Storm ejected its forces from Kuwait and reduced them to a level which Iran might once again hope to balance and constrain. U.S. forces and the coalition they guided accomplished both their assigned objectives. In military terms it was a triumph of epic proportions, but its political result was less gratifying. As Basil Liddell Hart, among many other students of strategy, pointed out:

*The object of war is to obtain a better peace. . . . It is essential to conduct war with constant regard to the peace you desire. . . . If you concentrate exclusively on victory, with no thought for the after-effect, you may be too exhausted to profit by the peace, while it is almost certain that the peace will be a bad one, containing the germs of another war.*

The coalition was unable to set objectives beyond the lowest common denominator agreed to by consensus (liberation of Kuwait, reduction of Iraqi military potential). This left the victors without a vision of a post-war Gulf. With no strategy for war termination, the coalition made no effort to extract an Iraqi endorsement of peace terms or recognition of the political consequences of defeat. (The meeting on March 2, 1991 with Iraqi commanders at Safwan was a military-technical discussion and not a political negotiation. The United Nations was left to proclaim terms *ex post facto* and struggle to gain Iraqi compliance with them.) The failure to

translate military humiliation into political disgrace for Saddam Hussein enabled him to avoid the personal consequences of the debacle. Without a vision for post-war Iraq, the coalition mounted a halting, ad hoc, and tragically ineffectual response to the Shia and Kurdish rebellions that followed the war. Saddam remained in power to plot revenge against his American and Gulf Arab enemies.

Meanwhile, the lack of an agreed concept for a post-war security structure to deter further Gulf conflict at reasonable cost meant that no such arrangement emerged. The absence of thorough regional plans for U.S. prepositioned war reserve materiel left this issue to piecemeal arrangements with individual members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The conflict ended with Saudi Arabia financially exhausted and Kuwait preoccupied with the huge expense of reconstruction. No arrangements to share the costs of security for Gulf Arabs have yet been worked out with them or with European and Asian allies. It is difficult to argue that our stunning military victory has been translated into a "better peace."

Saddam's continued leadership of Iraq, combined with the absence of dialogue with Iran, has precluded a strategy of balancing these two giants against each other. Such a tactic remains the preferred option for the Gulf Arabs. They cannot return to it, however, until Saddam's feud with them is ended by his removal from power. No plan for accelerating such a succession

in Baghdad seems to exist. As a result, America can only adopt a policy of simultaneously containing Iran and Iraq. Dual containment is much more expensive and fatiguing than balancing Iraq against Iran. It also yields the initiative to Baghdad (which can produce a war scare and hurried U.S. deployment to the Gulf whenever it desires) or Tehran (which can do likewise). The expense of unanticipated deployments to the Gulf can no longer be easily recouped from Saudi Arabia and the other states. The United States has, however, been very reluctant to confront the reality that it must increasingly bear the cost of our operations in the Gulf alone or—as may be infeasible in practice—arrange for allies outside the Gulf to help defray the expense. (After all, their interests in the resources and stability of the region that we are protecting are as great as our own.)

As long as Saddam is in power, Saudis and other Gulf Arabs are likely to grudgingly go along with dual containment. But as long as there is no credible GCC collective security structure, the threshold at which GCC members can summon American help will remain low. U.S. forces will thus be at the beck and call of both Baghdad and Tehran. While there is no concerted effort to establish broad interoperability among GCC forces as well as among U.S., Egyptian, and GCC forces, the effectiveness of our security partnerships will be reduced. The defense of the Gulf will thus continue to fall disproportionately on America. As long as Washington willingly shoulders most of the burden, our European and Asian allies will be more interested in exploiting arms and other markets than in sharing responsibility for defense of common interests. As long as there is no comprehensive GCC approach to prepositioning U.S. equipment and munitions, there will be a substantial risk that our forces may not be able to go into action in time and in sufficient mass to prevent the conquest or intimidation of a GCC member country by either Baghdad or Tehran.

Dealing with these dilemmas requires that the United States and the GCC reach agreement on a revised, comprehensive basis for defense cooperation. Such an agreement must then gain the support of the industrialized democracies. Both tasks have been seen as so difficult that neither has been attempted. What is certain, however, is that neither will be achieved, in whole or part, unless an effort is made. In the meantime, there is no obvious alternative to current policy in the Gulf despite the risks and expenses it entails.

Americans like to solve problems and move on. In foreign affairs, however, the resolution of one problem often gives rise to another. That is the case in the Middle East. The United States faces—or is about to face—a challenging new agenda in all three parts of that region.

Continued success in containing unrest in the Maghreb cannot be assumed. Circumstances have changed and the resources are no longer available to carry on as before. We need a concerted approach and division of labor with our European allies to bolster the security of our friends in the Maghreb, contain spillover from the political chaos in Algeria, and ensure that neither Algeria nor Libya emerges as a significant threat to Europe. NATO is the appropriate place to do this.

The prospect of increasingly normal relations between Israelis and Arabs brings a need to rethink, reformulate, and readjust our security relationship with both Israel and Egypt. The current pattern of U.S. relations has served all three parties well, but it is neither sustainable nor relevant to the challenges and opportunities that will be born of peace. America needs to work out mutually advantageous frameworks for defense cooperation suitable for changed circumstances with both Israel and Egypt. The beginning of dialogue with both should not be long delayed.

Finally, we cannot afford to rest on our laurels. The United States needs a more equitable and effective pattern of regional defense cooperation and deterrence both from and with the GCC. Nor should we continue maintaining Persian Gulf security essen-



The author with Jordan's JCS Chairman.

DOD (R.D. Ward)

tially alone, with minimal or no contributions from other industrialized nations whose interests are equally at risk and perhaps more so. A realistic discussion of dividing defense responsibility with the GCC and our European and Asian allies is both urgent and long overdue.

**JFQ**