

Prospects for Security in the Middle East

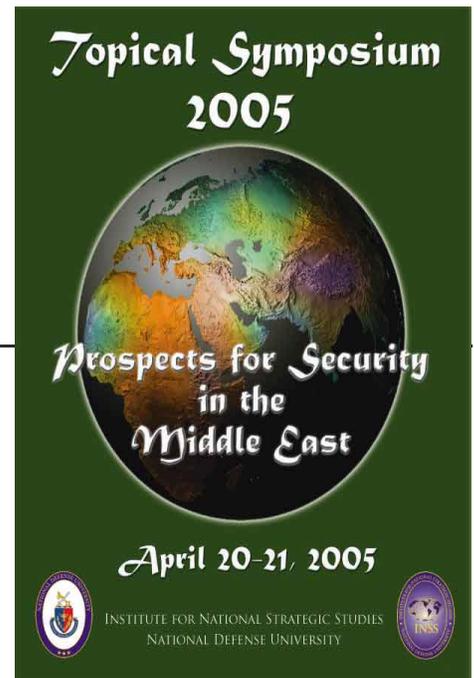
The Greater Middle East—the region stretching from Marrakesh to Bangladesh—is the epicenter of some of most pressing security concerns facing the United States. The issues are complicated and the solutions unclear. Is democracy compatible with Islam? Is reform possible in countries that have known only autocratic rule and monopolistic economies? Can there be transparent elections and accountable governments in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia? Can Iran's quest for nuclear "technology" be separated from a desire for full control of nuclear "processing," which is, in reality, a means of transitioning to nuclear "weapons aspiration"? Does America's pursuit of the war on terrorism, its role in post-Saddam Iraq, and perceived distancing from resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli peace process challenge regional stability, prevent creation of regional architecture, and heighten threat perceptions?

On April 20–21, 2005, the Institute for National Strategic Studies assembled regional experts, scholars, and government officials to explore these and other issues in a conference on *Prospects for Security in the Middle East* at the National Defense University. Participants focused on the impact of four key issues on U.S. and regional security: democratization and reform, proliferation and arms control, terrorism and other forms of extremism, and implications of a failed Arab-Israeli peace process for American and regional security. The panelists examined prospects for a regional security architecture and concluded with a look ahead to possible options for the United States and its regional partners.

For most speakers, the key questions were: What can the United States do to prevent nuclear proliferation, and how can it defeat extremists engaged in terrorism in the name of Islam? Participants agreed that American foreign and security policies toward and in the region would remain based on the traditional cornerstones of safeguarding world access to Middle East energy reserves, promoting American values, and protecting the State of Israel, while pursuing resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Added to these goals, however, was a new emphasis on creating the conditions for political reform and economic liberalization that would address some of the so-called root causes of political extremism and encourage the spread of democratic practices across the Greater Middle East. Panelists and participants in the conference reached several conclusions:

Democracy is a process and not an event. Elections do not guarantee democracy, but they can help promote transparent and accountable governments. A functioning democracy must be supported by the elements of good governance, that is, the rule of law, political and cultural self-determination, economic opportunity, and civilian control of the military. It is possible that elections in some Middle Eastern countries will produce, at least in the near term, less free or democratic societies.

Anti-Americanism is far stronger on the region's "streets" than it is among the region's leaders. Popular sentiment remains critical of the American "double standard"—actions and policies pursued in Iraq and in support of Israel and the region's



undemocratic regimes while the Iraqi people, Palestinians, and Islamic values are ignored. With one significant exception, most governments in the region still prefer close relations with the United States, despite the potential domestic risk of cooperation and collaboration. The exception is Iran, where the Iranian public appears to remain pro-American while the government—old and newly elected—are decidedly hostile.

Most governments in the Middle East prefer a regional security system built on the balance of power. Although the delicate security equilibrium was shattered by Iraq's attacks and invasions of its neighbors—Iran and Kuwait—the Arab countries of the broader region remain comfortable, at least in theory, with security assurances from outside the region intended to maintain the status quo and balance hegemonic threats from aggressive neighbors.

While the agenda did not cover every regional challenge or option for change, it served to highlight some of the key issues that affect regional security and stability and shape U.S. security policy. The Greater Middle East region is comprised of 20 countries that coalesce roughly into three subregions, each with unique perspectives on political, cultural, social, and security issues. The regions,

roughly defined, are the countries of the *Maghreb* (the western or North African region of Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria, Libya, and Egypt); the *Mashreq* (the eastern area of Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel); and the *Khaleej* (the Gulf, which includes Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Yemen). Depending on the issue, Turkey, Egypt, and occasionally Iraq play in several arenas. Some countries have great



wealth based primarily on oil and gas reserves and few people; others are people rich and resource poor. The region is linked, to a great extent, by a common religion (Islam), language (Arabic), culture (tribal), and historical hatred of occupation and exploitation by foreign powers, mostly Western. Many inhabitants feel threatened by the challenges to their traditional, and some would argue mythical, self-view by globalization and the need to compete in an international marketplace. They prefer to blame outsiders—the West, the United States, Israel, or crusaders for their woes; some depict their crises as threats to Islam and Islamic values rather than explore the inconsistencies in education, lifestyle, and opportunities that make for social unease at home. Others acknowledge that significant fault lies within their societies—as outlined by the United Nations Development Programme's reports on Arab Development 2002–2004—but lack the will or ability to change anything.

U.S. Security Commitments in the Region

Much of the discussion focused on the threats to U.S. and the regional security emanating from the Gulf region. These include a failed state in Iraq, a potentially nuclear-armed Iran, the presence of current and future hegemonic governments in Iraq and Iran determined to revive Shia political dominance at the expense of other populations, and backlash from failure to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. Panelists noted that most Arab governments appear willing to take small, meaningful steps in support of U.S. efforts, but they must balance these efforts against a public that sees cooperation as collaboration with a superpower that is uninterested in or unwilling to protect Arab interests. Iraq's neighbors are already seeing a spillover effect from the insurgencies in Iraq that now threaten their security much as the September 11, 2001, and March 11, 2003, attacks threatened the United States and Spain. Attacks by Islamist extremists have occurred in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain, and all governments feel increasingly threatened by an upsurge of extremists seeking regime change through violence in the name of Islam. The threat is underscored by Saudi terrorist Osama bin Ladin's accusations that these regimes are corrupt and the leaders apostates, making them valid targets for violence in his efforts to turn citizens against their governments.

The Gulf States have long preferred and encouraged the balance of power concept of regional security. In this post-Shah and post-Saddam era, that means American and international support in defending these security consumers against threats from a strengthening, probably nuclear-armed, Iran and, in the longer term, from a resurgent Iraq. Gulf State governments desire a U.S. military commitment that will protect them from Iranian or Iraqi domination, keep oil flowing to outside markets, provide military training and upgraded arms packages,

but not raise the ire of their citizens. They hope that the United States will understand their predicament, consult them on issues of mutual concern, keep a low military profile, and balance long-term American interests against short-term needs. Panelists acknowledged that American policies promoting political and economic reform and changes in education and the status of women and minorities conflict with local custom and risk weakening regimes currently compliant with our security posture.

Panel members also discussed the role of the U.S. military in regional security affairs. U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM), established in 1983, has been involved in 26 separate significant contingencies in its area of responsibility. Presently, USCENTCOM is fighting three wars simultaneously—Afghanistan, Iraq, and the war on terror—with over 200,000 military personnel. U.S. regional priorities—in particular those aimed at encouraging democratic reforms, combating transnational terrorism, countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and safeguarding the existence of Israel—run counter to the priorities of friendly regimes in the region, which see a threat to their well-being in their support for American goals and programs. One expert noted that U.S. regional security strategies are likely to remain focused on these issues for the long term. He estimated that even should U.S. force levels drop to 10,000, a network of “warm” bases would be maintained throughout the region. Moreover, given the current transformation process, the U.S. military will continue to plan for the presence of a fully integrated force capable of rapid deployment and power projection over long distances. In his view, such a posture will be necessary for the United States to fulfill traditional security commitments and counter the rising presence of China and India in the Gulf and North Arabian Sea.

Democratic Development and Security

Several speakers discussed the current U.S. policy view that democratic development in the Middle East

is key to a peaceful future and the ultimate solution to terrorism, especially in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine. (All three countries had recently held elections.) Panel members noted that Iraq's election and the creation of a new government was remarkable in that the populace took control of their society and began rebuilding government after long years of dictatorship. Agreement on the issues of federalism and the role of Islam will be difficult as Iraq's new leaders draft a constitution, but in forming a new government, they have already exhibited the willingness and ability to reach solutions through compromise. Other looming challenges are building strong security forces and engaging Sunni Iraqis that are not criminal Ba'athists or insurgency loyalists in the government and the writing of the constitution.

In Afghanistan, President Hamid Kharzai has made great progress in asserting the power of the central government. By offering government positions, choking the flow of illegal financial resources, and gaining the support of legitimate Afghan military and police forces, he has undermined the power of the warlords and made it clear that he is president of the entire country, and not just "mayor of Kabul."

The ultimate question for Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas is whether his government will be able to monopolize the use of force. The foundation of authority in any state is undermined if the government must negotiate with armed groups before taking action. Similar to Kharzai, Abbas will need to move cautiously and steadily but eventually must give rejectionist groups an ultimatum: participate in the legitimate political system or face the power of the state.

A careful analysis of Saudi Arabia's political system helps explain why democratization is not occurring in the Gulf, according to one academic participant. The Al Sa`ud have ruled Arabia with the help of three social groups—an ultraconservative religious establishment led by the *salafis* (Sunni Muslim descendents of Mohamed Abdel Wahab, who with the Royal Family's support impose their strict interpretation of the sharia

law on family, education, criminal, and business matters), government bureaucrats, and merchants. All have a symbiotic relationship with the Al Sa`ud and its many branches. The *salafis* are the religious and cultural regulators of Saudi society, capable of enforcing their brand of religious and social conservatism through the funding and legitimacy provided by the ruling family. The civil service supervises major elements of the economy, such as oil and petrochemicals, and seeks to transform Saudi Arabia into a world economic power. The merchants play a vital role in the management of the Kingdom and the smooth operation of day-to-day life. They run most non-oil industry economic activities and manage infrastructure development through contracts from and contacts within the family. The Al Sa`ud protects the civil service's modernist vision from the recalcitrant *salafis* and the merchants, who often must compete with members of the ruling family for contracts. Since all policy decisions must be approved by the ruling family, economic liberalization can only occur if the House of Sa`ud allows it, and this could chip away at the refereeing role of the Royal Family. A parliament, especially an elected one, at least theoretically provides a forum for disagreement between state interests and the public. Significant political reform would also usurp the power and arbitral role of the Royal Family, and this makes a rush to democracy unlikely.

Most panelists stressed that democratic institutions should be put in place in all countries of the region. Elections are a hopeful sign, but elections by themselves do not produce democratic rule. To achieve this result, the United States will have to be engaged in these countries for some time but must also leave when asked to do so by the legitimate governments. The future is uncertain strategically, and America will have to establish a rapid reaction force to respond to future threats.

A U.S. official noted that freedom promotion in the broader Middle East is now an essential component of American foreign policy and the key element in the long-term strategy

for winning the war on terror. During the Cold War, the speaker observed, America's relations with regional governments were defined strictly in terms of their anti-Soviet stance and preventing Communist expansion, regardless of a government's internal policies or democratic ideals. Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, however, the United States has recognized that rigid and repressive political systems are incubators for terrorism, and American policy has shifted toward creating and securing environments where freedom can exist and thrive. The speaker concluded that through the Middle East Partnership Initiative and Forum for the Future, the United States is now actively engaged with European allies, regional partners, and local private sectors to push forward social, political, and economic reform.

Several participants questioned the claim that there are fewer terrorist acts in democratic countries. These panelists found no startling differences among available data in the number of terrorist attacks in free versus non-free countries. They note that democratic India often leads the list in number of terrorist attacks. From this, they concluded that there is no evidence that spreading democracy as a counterterrorism strategy will be decisive in preventing future attacks. They also noted that Islamist extremist groups have the funds and mobilization necessary for success in elections. Instead, they argued that the United States should promote empowerment of alternative political groups that are currently suppressed by many regimes in the region. They also suggested a more detailed analysis of the data, separating state-sponsored, domestic, and international terrorist incidents, is needed to validate the thesis that democracy is an effective antidote to terrorism.

One panelist suggested that contrary to popular opinion both in the United States and the Arab world, Arab governments are not using the Arab-Israeli conflict as an excuse to limit democratic processes in their countries. He claimed that the repressive measures currently in use by Arab governments were adapted from British colonial laws enacted before the

existence of an Israeli state. Furthermore, he claimed that Britain established the precedent of foreign military intervention in Iraqi politics during the 1941 military coup. Regional governments often justify current repressive measures in the name of national unity and internal security. Most victims are Islamists.

Proliferation and Arms Control

The link between issues of regime change and proliferation raises a fundamental question. Is the character of a rogue state regime the key determinant of proliferation? Some participants argued that such linkage is refuted by history and that proliferation is not unique to a particular type of regime. A democratic government in Baghdad or Tehran would neither necessarily change the factors that motivate those countries to pursue WMD nor sway them from their pursuit. Regime intention (admittedly difficult to determine with certainty) was suggested as the lead proliferation indicator.

Libya was willing to give up its ambition to acquire WMD once the United States and Great Britain offered assurance of regime survival and an end to sanctions on Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi. The agreement was not conditional on the establishment of democratic government in Libya. Iranian leaders, however, believe the Bush administration has decided to link its nuclear programs to regime change, as it did with Saddam Husayn's Iraq. They do not believe Iran will be offered a "deal" similar to Libya's and, in any case, would not accept one. Iran will continue to pursue self-sufficiency in nuclear technology, including uranium enrichment and a policy of strategic ambiguity to mask its intentions and programs. Two questions remain: how much ambiguity the U.S. administration is prepared to accept and what might be the cost of Iranian acquiescence to limit its goals.

Panelists described the evolution of the various international agreements, established with strong support from the United States, to limit global WMD proliferation.

These nonproliferation regimes entail international norms and treaty obligations—compliance with which international institutions monitor. The hope was that these regimes would prevent states of concern from developing or acquiring prohibited weapons technology and WMD, or if such programs existed, convince those states to dismantle them. The underlying basis for this framework rested in the polarized politics of the Cold War and U.S.-Soviet relations. However, the process of globalization, which has led to a wide dispersal of WMD know-how and technology, coupled with the activities of rogue entrepreneurs such as Pakistani nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan,

options, such as the Kargil War or claims on Indian-held Kashmir. Potential triggers for a Pakistani nuclear strike include loss of territory, substantial loss of armed forces, threat of economic strangulation, and the undermining of domestic stability. Experts assessed that Pakistan is "highly unlikely" to authorize official transfer of nuclear technology to nonstate actors.

Dealing with Terrorism and Extremism

The war on terror has evolved into a series of transnational insurgencies fought by autonomous groups in contact with or allied with similar extremist factions, many probably have some al Qaeda linkage. Osama



who provided clandestine assistance to customers in the Middle East and elsewhere seeking to develop nuclear weapons, inject significant uncertainties into the process and undermine the framework. This development underscores the need for more flexible and action-oriented approaches to countering WMD proliferation, while closing loopholes and otherwise strengthening international nonproliferation regimes.

One regional specialist noted that Pakistan's primary motivation in pursuing nuclear weapons has been its overwhelming fear of India. Pakistanis view their nuclear arsenal as a vital national asset that deters India's conventional military superiority and nuclear capability. Pakistanis also believe their nuclear weapons program enhances their regional prestige, protects their autonomy, and provides an umbrella to undertake other military

bin Ladin provides an extreme religious and anticolonial explanation of why war is necessary against apostate Muslim and non-Muslim regimes and foreign occupiers. He "knows" why true Muslims are weak, have lost wars, and suffer economic, political, and social injustices—and he knows the answer, which is to fight the enemies of Islam, defeat globalization, and expose the "U.S.-Zionist conspiracy to destroy Islam and Muslims." His ideology, tactics, and tactical command and control structures have been adopted by many extremist organizations, allowing terrorists to operate without explicit instructions from a centralized leadership. Insurgents and terrorists operating in America, Iraq, Egypt, Israel, Great Britain, Spain, and Bali rely on mass-effect terrorism with maximum casualties to impress a global audience.

Both extremists and moderate Muslims understand that a war is being

fought for political influence and ultimate control of the Islamic world. The jihadists characterize the United States as the successor to older colonial powers—Britain and France. They warn Muslims everywhere that American military forces rape women and humiliate men. Given this characterization, the Abu Ghraib scandal and the assaults on Iraqi cities, such as Fallujah, appear to substantiate the jihadists' rhetoric, provide a boon for terrorist recruitment, and give al Qaeda the moral upper hand. In a region that remembers its history of colonial oppression, many seem willing to accept autocracy over democracy if their government shows independence from the West.

Other regional domestic issues contribute to the terrorism problem. The Greater Middle East region is comprised of weak states, some of which are city-states in actuality. The Syrian government of Bashar al-Asad is threatened by a weak economy, its forced withdrawal from Lebanon, lack of meaningful political or economic reforms, and a renewed threat from Islamist extremists who were nearly eliminated by his father, Hafiz al-Asad, in the Hama massacre of 1982. Southern and rural Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood originated in the late 1920s, has long been a center of Islamist insurgency; extremists murdered President Anwar Sadat and tourists in Luxor and Sharm al-Sheikh on the Sinai Peninsula. One terrorism specialist noted that Middle Eastern Muslims feel a sense of belonging to a transnational *ummah* (community of believers) while many view modern nation-states as illegitimate. This disconnect in perceptions of the *ummah* and the nation-state is exemplified in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government, he claimed, has failed to create a clear fault line between a status quo Islam that supports symbolic order and jihadist Islam. Saudi Arabia has the potential cultural and economic influence to play a moderating role should it want to do so but, the specialist concluded, does not feel the imperative to act against jihadism.

Panelists warned that the United States needs to break the connections that jihadists are establishing in the

global Islamic community. Their recommendations included building regional governments' capacity for governance, recognizing and strengthening their legitimacy, defusing regional flashpoints, controlling cultural confrontations, addressing social and economic disparities, and tactfully assisting moderate Muslims to counter the jihadists' appeal. The unresolved Israeli-Palestinian dispute continues to be a main engine of regional terrorism. The panelists concluded that resolution of this dispute would be the single greatest step toward ending terrorism. The United States, they emphasized, must concentrate its efforts around two organizing concepts—peace and reform. America has the ability to offer peace, but the administration's primary focus is reform first and then peace; the region's priorities, however, are the reverse—peace first and then reform. The panelists recommended that American and Arab governments work together to achieve both peace and reform simultaneously.

Regional Security Architectures

U.S. foreign policy in the region has shifted tactically from dual containment (of Iran and Iraq), threats of military intervention, and vague discussion of resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict to a more activist and direct approach that seeks to resolve emerging security threats and push hard on political reform. To this end, the United States has chosen to build on preexisting multilateral processes as well as creating new ones. An example of the later is the Broader Middle East/North Africa Initiative aimed at political, educational, and social reform.

Iran, for decades a focus of U.S. attention and concern, has survived many political upheavals throughout its history and has developed a unique political culture. First, Iranian governments, past and present, are consumed with sustaining the political system against external and ethnic threats, and religious challenges. Second, the Iranian social and political landscape is too diverse and heterogeneous to build a legitimate consensus, so the leadership encourages an environment of organized chaos involving

many factions, though few have real influence. Third, successful political leaders are skilled in the language of ambiguity; a keen ability to mask intentions and goals is a revered attribute. Fourth, diversification of formal structures of power is complemented with informal networks of power. Finally, every Iranian government is obsessed with attaining immunity from external threats and relies on redundancy in its formal structures to provide continuity in case some



part of the formal structure fails or is destroyed.

Iranians do not associate nuclear energy programs, including uranium enrichment, with weapons programs. Rather, they view a nuclear program as the legitimate right of an autonomous nation. The clerics will use the vehicle of secular nationalism to garner support for their nuclear policy. Moreover, the scholar concluded, any progress made in negotiations over the nuclear issue will be contingent on a dual track non-proliferation process with Israel.

Despite shared goals for a cohesive, secular, democratic Iraq that can act as a counterweight to Iran, unease prevails in U.S.-Turkish relations. One scholar noted that neither the United States nor Turkey has worked out a viable contingency plan should the Iraq experiment fail. Currently, the United States is not interested in discussing a hypothetical policy concerning a failed Iraq. Conversely, the Turks are concerned with developing a policy in the event Iraq becomes a failed state. For relations to improve

between the two countries, there will have to be a dialogue on contingency policy planning.

Implications of the Arab-Israeli Conflict for the United States

American support for Israel and perceived simultaneous neglect of the Palestinians has long been the prism through which the Arab world judges the United States. Former U.S. Department of State official Aaron David Miller, who spent the better part of two decades in negotiations with the Palestinians and Israelis, told conference participants that there is an equitable and durable solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.¹ But such a solution can only be achieved through a long, imperfect process of negotiation. Sadly, Israelis, Palestinians, and Arabs in general still see the struggle as a conflict over physical security and political identity. The United States must recognize that ending the conflict is a generational proposition.

Miller contended that U.S. diplomacy in the months ahead should be based on the following assessment of the conditions of the Israelis and Palestinians, particularly Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and President Abbas. The fundamental asymmetry between Israeli power and Palestinian weakness undermines any prospect of making the Oslo peace process work. President Abbas hopes to finish Oslo, but suffers from an absence of legitimacy. Israelis and Americans could enhance his authority by facilitating his ability to deliver politically and economically. Prime Minister Sharon does not believe there is a mutually acceptable two-state solution to the conflict. His objective is to improve Israel's tactical, political, and demographic position as best he can for the ensuing struggle.

Miller argued that the United States can neither recreate nor build a peace process upon 7 years of failed negotiations between 1993 and 2000. Neither can the U.S. pretend that it can build a process on 4 years between 2000 and the present of nonstop Israeli-Palestinian confrontation. Through the end of 2005, at least,

U.S. policy can only hope to manage the conflict. Following a successful Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, President George W. Bush seems poised to seek Israeli-Palestinian agreement to a state with provisional borders. Success of this initiative would hinge on Washington's willingness to press Israel hard on further settlement building and, subsequently, to draft and sanction a plan for the end game that lays out the parameters for resolving each of the four or five core issues in this conflict.

Challenges on the Horizon

The marked deterioration in U.S. relations with governments and people in the Greater Middle East is creating a regional vacuum that rising Asian powers—in particular, China, India, and Pakistan—are seeking to exploit. China and India, as growing energy consumers, have cemented their relations with the Gulf region's oil and natural phosphate producers. U.S. scrutiny of foreign investments and financial transfers since the events of September 11 and application of counterterrorism laws to prohibit money transfers to terrorist groups have restricted money flow from the region. Consequently, cash-laden Gulf investors as well as "charitable" private donors are now investing heavily in China. One speaker, a former diplomat who served in Saudi Arabia and China, predicted that America's regional presence will continue to diminish, but no other power will be willing to supplant the United States in its role of maintaining Gulf security.

Pakistan is a South Asian country with Middle East ambitions and hazardous paradoxes. It has democratic aspirations but is almost always ruled by the military. It is an ally of the United States but is deeply rooted in anti-Americanism. A specialist warned that a misstep by President Pervez Musharraf could return Pakistan to Islamist control. In his view, the Pakistani military could tire of Musharraf and give power to the Islamists or a deplorable economic situation may inspire Islamists to lead a revolution.

Many participants speculated on the impact American intervention

in Iraq was having on Iraq and the Greater Middle East region. Democratic processes in Iraq—elections, a relatively transparent political process, and the writing of a constitution—are progressing, and some governments are opening up the political processes, including municipal elections in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait where women have finally been given the right to vote (and a Cabinet post). In Iraq and its neighborhood, however, fear of Iraq under Saddam Husayn has turned into fear of Iraq without Saddam. Iran, Iraq, and the Arab Gulf states are closely watching the United States for proof of its enduring commitment to the region. While Iraqis fear the erosion of security and possible civil war caused by the insurgencies and soaring crime rate, its neighbors fear a failed state whose ethnic troubles and sectarian strife crosses their borders. They fear that Arab and Kurdish nationalists and foreign religious extremists who are now using Iraq as a deadly training ground will turn against them or that a crescent of Shia dominated countries from Lebanon through Syria, Iraq, and Iran will encourage their minority Shia populations to demand a share in power. In the long term, an Iraq expert predicted that Iraq will once again be oil-rich and will look to resume its traditional role of regional hegemon, a role sought now by Iran. It is also possible, she speculated, that the Gulf states will look once more to Iraq for security rather than the United States.

Note

¹ See Aaron David Miller, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict: Toward an Equitable and Durable Solution*, Strategic Forum 215 (July 2005), available at <www.ndu.edu/inss/strforum/SF215/SF_215_web.pdf>.

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