NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

2005 Topical Seminar

"PROSPECTS FOR SECURITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST"

April 20-21, 2005

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Introduction – The Region Today and How it views U.S. Security Commitments

The Middle East has been and remains a region of vital American interests --- yet how we define our interests and our concerns is very different from how the region would define these words. Our focus is on regional stability and in the Gulf, specifically, on the importance of the continued free flow of oil to global markets. We see threats from the development of WMD capabilities (a nuclear Iran), terrorism, and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Arab leaders and publics are also concerned about regional instability; but they focus first on the Arab-Israeli conflict and the emotion that issue brings to bear on other interests, foremost their ability to have a close relationship with the U.S. Iranians are concerned about national and regime security; for the Gulf it is tribal security, the role of Shia in the political system and the imbalance of power. All Arab regimes are concerned with the economic, social, and political consequences of their failure to meet public expectations --- be it defending successfully Arab causes or creating a better economic life.

Our military presence in the Middle East region continues to be hotly debated and divisive; contradictory is another completely appropriate word. Many Arab governments and even their publics both want us there and want us gone! How can this be? Simply said, they recognize their need for a US military presence for regional security; but they feel and fear the intensity of popular animosity toward the US in the region and see a very visible American military presence as exacerbating that hostility.

The United States decision to send American ground forces into the heartland of the Arab and Islamic Middle East is a defining event of significant importance. Many issues, long dormant or under some control, are now in motion. What all this means for the region is, as yet, unknown; but one fact is certain. While we and other actors in the region can influence developments, none of us control the outcome. Our actions, therefore, must be wisely and carefully considered with much more sensitivity to the culture of the Middle East than we have thus far shown. The Middle East region is seething and we would do well to act with that in mind.

Among the many factors and issues in motion are:

---Relationships among the regional states

---Historical issues between Persians and Arabs

---Historical divisions between Sunni and Shia Moslems

---Rise of militant and terrorist organizations

* Targeting the US and the West
* Targeting regional Arab governments

---Tensions between governments/leaders and their publics

* Over policies such as ties to the US and failure to defend Arab interests (the Palestine question)
* Over economic issues such as high unemployment and low growth rates

---Prevailing sense of humiliation, degradation and impotence throughout the region

This environment and these factors in motion impact on our security interests in the region as well as the responses and actions of our friends and allies in the region. Critical to the complexities is the omnipresent, even omnipotent, impact of mass media, satellite television and the internet which strew information in massive volumes --- regardless of veracity --- into homes and mosques. Vivid pictures and sensational broadcasting, often draped in emotional language and religious overtones, outpace any government's effort --- Arab or American --- to report the facts. It is increasingly difficult for Arab leaders to ignore the emotional reactions of their publics, particularly as they try to manage their important relationship with the U.S.

ME – Arab-Israeli Conflict

The Arab-Israeli conflict is the key issue in the region. It is a factor in virtually every other issue. Emotionally the Arabs see themselves as victims and accuse the United States of failing to apply our own principles in addressing the conflict. As they perceive American policy as one sided and biased, there is huge pressure on governments to distance - and even sever - relationships with the US. It endangers the cooperation we badly need as we address our priority issues in the region from the free movement of oil to terrorism and WMD. It is critical to US interests in the Middle East that there be process and progress toward a solution. Tension in the region increases palpably when there is no peace process underway; and tension subsides when there is.

In June 2002 the President laid out his vision of a two-state solution --- two states, Palestine and Israel, living side by side in peace and security. That vision has been reiterated repeatedly by the President and most recently by Secretary Rice during her trip to the Middle East. This two state solution is at the core of American policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Visions are not enough, however. The parties to the conflict and the international community have endorsed a roadmap --- a means for reaching the two state solution. President Bush's meeting in Aqaba, Jordan, in 2003 with Israeli PM Sharon and

Palestinian PM Mahmoud Abbas was a hopeful moment; but we know now that it was not enough. Efforts foundered due to the ongoing violence and a failure of leadership.

Without question the environment in the region is once again encouraging --- though any predictions of success must be cautious and tentative. President Bush in his State of the Union address in February asserted that peace in the Middle East was "within reach." Both the President and Secretary Rice describe the present moment as "a time of optimism." These sentiments were voiced once again during Prime Minister Sharon's visit to Texas last week.

On the Positive side:

1. Palestine:
   ---The election of a new Palestinian leadership (Mahmoud Abbas)
   ---Municipal elections in several West Bank towns
   ---Parliamentary elections scheduled for this summer
   ---Tentative understandings with Hamas and Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ) regarding security issues
2. Israel:
   ---Sharon's determination to withdraw settlers from Gaza (and four West Bank settlements)
   ---An active dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian officials
   ---An Israeli decision to withdraw from several West Bank Arab towns
3. The Arabs:
   ---Egyptian and Jordanian support for training Palestinian police and security forces
   ---Egyptian efforts to bolster inter-Palestinian talks
   ---Renewed Arab support for a just settlement

On the negative side:

1. The Palestinian Authority has not yet dealt with core security issues including building a security force capable of maintaining law and order as well as a decision to utilize such a force against dissident Palestinians.
   ---Failure to do so can destroy the process
   ---Much needs to be done to reconstruct a semblance of Palestinian governmental structure and civil society
   ---Hamas, PIJ, and other Palestinian groups and Hizballah remain "wild cards" --- unknown and uncertain participants in the peace process
2. Sharon's ultimate intentions on the West Bank remain questionable.
   ---Settlement expansion continues and contradicts the roadmap and assurances received from the Israeli Government ---What is an acceptable viable Palestinian state?
   ---What is the ultimate role for the Palestinians in Jerusalem?

US engagement is critical. The US-Israeli relationship is deep and abiding. We owe it to our close ally to work for a solution that brings Israelis peace and security. March 2005

was the first month in four years that there were no Israeli deaths at the hands of terrorists! We must work to insure that this is the normal state of affairs.

Secretary of State Rice's visit to Jerusalem and Ramallah and her participation in the London Conference on assistance to the Palestinian Authority sent a message to the region that she intends to be involved in our efforts to support a peace process. The Administration's commitments to additional assistance to bolster economic development in the Palestinians territories and to support the reconstruction of the Palestinian governmental structure are actions that reassure the Palestinians of our serious engagement.

Even as senior US officials reiterate the US commitment to work for a just solution, questions remain, especially in Arab eyes, as to whether the US is serious and to what extent the US will engage. In my opinion several US actions have undercut the President's commitment to a two state solution, for example, remarks that some of the Israeli settlements on the West Bank will remain and that we do not see the likelihood of Palestinians returning to their homes in present day Israel (the so-called "right of return"). Nevertheless, US engagement is critical and necessary if there is to be progress and a resolution. I hope the Administration will see it that way.

In conclusion it is important to accentuate the positive and there are adequate reasons to see the possibility now for progress. The process may well be different from what we have seen in the past. An overall agreement may simply be too difficult at this point in time. Agreements, however, on such immediate issues as security and restoration of PNA control over most of the Arab West Bank will go a long way to rebuilding an essential base of confidence that needs to exist for agreement on the more difficult aspects of peace.

We have no choice but to persevere; we have much to lose if we do not. Arabs throughout the region focus constantly on our actions regarding the Palestinians. The Arab popular reaction, in turn, impacts on the ability of their leaders to develop and maintain the close relationships that we need in the region to address our many interests.

IRAQ

The situation in Iraq continues to fester. The insurgency goes on. No matter what people say, the resistance is deeply embedded and will continue to undercut US efforts to establish stability in Iraq. Beware of the number counters! On the positive side a meaningful political process continues to unfold. The January elections for the 275-member assembly were a remarkable demonstration of the Iraqi public's will to march toward a better future. The recent election of a Sunni Speaker and two deputies in the Assembly, the selection of a Kurdish President and two Vice-Presidents, and the appointment of a new Prime Minister (a Shia) underscore Iraqi determination to move forward politically and to include all segments of Iraqi society in the political process.

The next step in the process is the important task of drafting a constitution and holding elections for the permanent parliament.

I believe the Iraqis can manage this political process and do so within a unified Iraqi state. There are compelling reasons why the Shia and the Kurds will work assiduously to bring the Sunni community into the political process (including Sunni participation in the next round of elections). It will take time and the road will not be smooth. We need to be prepared for the political compromises within the Iraqi body politic that must take place. We must continue to develop the capability of the Iraqi police and security forces to assume responsibility for law and order. Our military presence must remain for an uncertain period of time; but we must leave at some point and sooner is better than later.

Our Commitments in the Arabian/Persian Gulf

Throughout the region Arab populations are watching our actions in Iraq. Foremost Arabs do not want a western "occupying" force in their region. Yet, they are torn between fear that we might depart too soon leaving Iraq in chaos with dire consequences for the region and deep concern that we intend to remain indefinitely. Our Arab allies, particularly in the Gulf, have long seen Iraq as a bulwark against Shia and Persian Iran. They see that bulwark shattered and fear the consequences of an Iran that is finally "over the Zagros Mountains," referring to the natural geographic barrier that is the traditional defensible border between the Arab and Persian lands.

IRAN

US-Iranian relations remain antagonistic at best. The US remains deeply concerned over several Iranian policies:

---Internal Repression/lack of human and civil rights
---Activities inside Iraq
---Support for terrorist/extremist groups
---Efforts to subvert ME peace efforts
---Development of WMD, especially a nuclear weapons capability

My concern is the absence of a focused US policy. Several American experts on Iran question whether there is a policy at all --- or a policy that goes beyond confrontation.

The Administration begrudgingly supports the current European efforts to negotiate terms with Iran over its nuclear program. After some hesitation the Administration agreed to modest enticements that the Europeans could offer the Iranians to obtain Iran's cooperation.
In the final analysis, however, Iran is focused on the US and on our policies and actions in the Gulf --- not the Europeans. Hence, in my view, the Europeans are correct when they say that Iran wants to know where the US stands on different issues of strategic concern to Iran. Most importantly, Iran wants US recognition of their regime and security interests in the Gulf and the region.

I am doubtful at this point that the Administration will respond. In fact we should be calculating how we might best obtain changes in Iranian behavior on issues of concern to us. If not, we have only a policy of negativism. Events then drift --- usually in the wrong direction. There are fewer options and the prospect for further confrontation increases.

Our Arab Gulf friends are worried about precisely that last point --- US-Iranian military confrontation. The Gulf has witnessed three wars in the last 25 years, since 1980 with the beginning of the Iraq-Iran War. They long for an end to regional hostilities and a return to balance of power in shaping regional security policy. They also believe it is incumbent that they have a tolerable relationship with their largest neighbor. Many of our Gulf allies have large Shia populations and are concerned over Iran's ability to use this common religious tie to subvert their states. Their worst nightmare is that the US is determined on war with Iran and, further, that Israel will act --- either with or without US approval --- to try to destroy Iran's nuclear program. Popular reaction would be fierce and the stress would be most severe on these counties' relationship with the US.

DEMOCRACY

The seething in the Middle East today includes a desire by many people in the region for change in their political systems --- change that would include more transparency and openness, more popular participation in the political process, and more public influence over the decisions made by their leaders and governments. This desire is not the French people on the ramparts in revolutionary Paris. Let's be honest about that.

People do want change, but the US hand brings heavy baggage --- most particularly a fear that in reality the US is using democracy solely for its own national interests. For example, the US wants to topple Arab regimes at odds with America like Iraq, Iran and Syria but tolerates and ignores Arab regimes that have oil and promise stability. People also fear that US democracy means changing their society and culture --- and some interpret that as an attack on Islam (since we argue for a secular state). Vivid in the popular mind are the TV sitcoms and Hollywood movies that portray (in the eyes of the Arab viewer) a degenerate life style, a defilement of traditional family values and religion.

A year ago an observer might have stopped with that description; but today one must go further. The President's repeated emphasis on the importance of freedom and democracy is, in fact, taken more seriously today than when the message was first delivered. Arabs in the region who favor change and were earlier under attack by elements both opposed to change and to the United States are recovering. Successful elections in Iraq (under occupation and despite its insurgencies) and in Palestine (under occupation) permit the advocates of change to say "If it can happen there, why not here?"

Some other recent developments are worth noting. The Third Arab Human Rights Report, just released, embraces liberal democratic ideals --- arguing that they are universal values and change must come now. The announcement in Egypt that the

upcoming Presidential elections will be by popular vote among several candidates and the extremely restricted, but first ever, municipal elections in Saudi Arabia are indications that leaders in the region sense the demand for change. Lebanon is a different set of circumstances; we cannot but see in recent events a determination by the Lebanese people to express their views publicly even in the face of some fear and concern about Syrian retribution.

Such is the region in which we must operate. Such is the region to which we are drawn by significant historical, religious, and cultural links. Such is the region that posses enormous energy resources on which the world depends. The United States has no alternative to serious and meaningful engagement. Our vital national interests are at stake.