“Crescent of Crisis: Prospects for the Greater Middle East”

Dr Philip H. Gordon, Senior Fellow for US Foreign Policy, The Brookings Institution, Washington, DC: Thank you, Anthony, and thanks to ASPI and Peter Abigail for inviting me here, it’s great to be here. Ashley Tellis yesterday made a comment about the rise of Asia and its technology. I’m afraid that I may unwittingly illustrate that following Chung Min, who had all of these lovely colour slides and moving pieces. I don’t even know how to use PowerPoint, so I’ll do the Asian thing and apologise for that – but I’ll bring a couple of thoughts about the Middle East, even if I can’t show you what they look like.

The title of this panel is, ‘Crescent of Crisis’, and maybe I’ll start by just a word on that. Last year we ran a project and wrote and edited a book, a volume called *The Crescent of Crisis* in which we brought together some top specialists on the Middle East. We met in Paris and we looked at Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan – it really is a geographic arc of crisis, to go back to Brzezinski’s term of nearly 30 years ago – and assessed this question of prospects for the greater Middle East. Since we met in Paris we called it the ‘*Croissant* of Crisis Project’ – but frankly that was about the only thing funny about it because in all seriousness the prospects did not seem very good at the time, and I’m afraid I’m here to say today that they don’t look terribly good now.

What I will try to do is begin with a snapshot of what the Middle East looks like now and why I suggest that the prospects aren’t very good. If you will permit, I will do that from a US point of view, which I think is legitimate, partly because the US plays such a central role in what’s going on in the Middle East, and partly because maybe I have a bit more light to shed on that coming, as I just have, from Washington.

What’s the snapshot? In Iraq we have an incipient civil war, dozens of Iraqi civilians dying every week, 140,000 US troops trying to prevent it from becoming a fully fledged civil war, possibly failing, and spending almost 300 million dollars per day in their efforts to do so. Next door in Iran we have a fundamentalist Islamic regime more secure in its power than ever, defiantly pursuing a nuclear weapons program. Iran is spreading its influence throughout the region, in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon,

Palestine, and raising the spectre of a very serious Sunni-Shi'a split that could even become a violent, and already is violent in Iraq and elsewhere.

In Palestine, the Palestinian Authority, we have an elected government that openly supports terrorism and violence, calls for Israel's destruction, supports suicide bombing. No peace process exists between Israel and its Arab neighbours. In Lebanon, an already fragile government has further been destabilised by the recent war between Hezbollah and Israel, from which Hezbollah emerged strengthened – whatever happened on the ground, it emerged as heroes to many in the Muslim world. In Syria, we still have an anti-American dictatorship, Damascus the home to a range of terrorist groups and a country that maintains very close ties to Iran. In Afghanistan, the Taliban are making a comeback and violence is increasing, opium production is up 50 per cent over last year.

In Turkey there is a renewed violent campaign by the PKK, Turkish-US relations are strained and Turkey's path to the European Union seems to be in trouble. In Pakistan we have a dangerously unstable situation, repeated attempts at the life of President Musharraf, and the spectre of an unstable Islamist nuclear power. In Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan, the process of democratisation that some seem to think or hope for in 2005 has clearly stalled, which, frankly, maybe a good thing because on past evidence in Iraq and in Palestine, free elections would produce a victory for Islamists, if not for those supporting terrorism.

So that's a quick snapshot of the greater Middle East. I think you get the picture, and it's not a terribly pretty one. It suffices as a partial answer to the subtitle of this presentation about the prospects for the greater Middle East. But I owe you a bit more than just a snapshot and what I would like to try to do is look a bit more in detail at some of these situations and the trends that are underlying them. Taking a step back again, if you will permit it, in the context of US foreign policy and the way the US is approaching the region, going back to 9/11, the fifth anniversary of which we just observed, and asking what went wrong. Why does this region seem to be even more troubled than it was five years ago? What are the sources of the crisis in the region and is there anything we can do to make it better – 'we' collectively – or at least to avoid making it worse?

So let's go back, if we might, five years to 9/11, which is when the United States and the world over woke up to the degree to which the greater Middle East was in trouble, and look at the evolution of the situation on the ground and our dealings with it. From a US point of view what happened after 9/11 was that the 'old deal' we had with the greater Middle East and its leaders ended. By 'old deal' I mean an American approach to the region that basically said to the governments in the region, 'If you sell us oil, purchase our weapons and don't undermine the general stability of the region you can govern your countries pretty much the way you like'. I don't want to caricature too much but that was the basic summary of US policy – we wanted stability, and stability meant no clashes between states and what happened internally was really their business.

I think after 9/11 Americans decided that that this approach was no longer in our interest, that the consequences of the old deal made America unsafe and that the autocracies with which the United States maintained such good and strategic relations were actually creating circumstances that threatened our own and global security and actually further undermined the situation in the region. The lack of freedom and democracy was producing a lot of resentful, angry young men, some of whom turned to terrorism, and if they couldn't topple their own dictators directly they would attack western and international targets, including in the United States.

I have just finished reading Lawrence Wright's book, *The Looming Tower*, which I highly recommend to those of you interested in this question. It's the story, after five years of research, of the Al-Qaeda organisation and its origins, and it really gives you a good sense of the feelings of humiliation and frustration of a lot of these angry young Muslim men who saw after the colonial period ended the hope placed in secular, nationalist, socialist regimes and how that hope faded as those regimes became corrupt, authoritarian and, frankly, in many cases failed. Consider the comparison between the Middle East and other parts of the world – for example as we were discussing earlier the rise of Asia, which spectacularly succeeds and surpasses the Middle East. In the region itself, Israel, which 60 years ago doesn't even exist, suddenly exists, becomes more powerful and rich than all of its neighbours, with western support. All of that creates enormous frustration, indeed even humiliation,

among many in the region and leads in certain quarters to the notion that ‘Islam is the solution’, and even a justification for violence.

That is the sort of realisation that I think struck many in the west, certainly in the United States, certainly in the Bush administration, which decided that the only way to make the United States and the world safe, and the Middle East safe and at peace, was to transform it. Thus you got, in 2001, 2002, the so-called ‘Bush doctrine’, the notion that America was at war, that it had to go on the offensive, possibly pre-empt, and perhaps, most importantly, that spreading democracy and freedom to this part of the world was necessary to make the world safe. This wasn’t an entirely new US foreign policy, the United States had always been relatively unilateralist, often assertive, always supportive of democracy – but it was new in the sense of the degree to which it went. It was one thing to support the possible hypothetical preemption or the notion of spreading democracy in general, but it was quite another to actually physically go and try to transform the region as the United States did with the invasion of Afghanistan, and, even more importantly, the invasion of Iraq.

That was the plan five years ago – but as my snapshot suggests it doesn’t seem to be working as planned, and it may be worth a bit as an explanation as to why. The administration and its supporters, of course, would assert that you just need time, and that transforming the greater Middle East is something that can’t be done in a few years. We just need to keep at it. Others, in a critique that’s emerging from the right of the Bush administration, say that Bush’s approach to the Middle East is more or less right but it needs more energy and resources. That’s the line of former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich and others who see what is going on now in the world as an incipient World War III, and we need to think of it as such. Gingrich says that we need more ‘energy, resources and intensity’. Bush is right, Gingrich says: his strategies are ‘not wrong but they’re failing’.

I’m afraid I think the problems in the region are greater than that and even with more US energy and intensity we would be destined to fail. Let me pick that up by looking at some of the particular challenges – again, I can only be brief on some of these but I want to separate them out, mention a few particular ones and hopefully we can come back to any of them in the discussion. Beginning with Iraq, the initial assumption of

the administration was that Iraq would be the key to the rest of the region, but in a positive sense. We know that the particular justification of the Iraq war was the weapons of mass destruction issue but behind that was a much greater idea which was that toppling Saddam Hussein and installing a democracy in Iraq would lead to democratisation throughout the region, which links back to what I described as the 'Bush doctrine', as the key to peace, eliminating the source of frustration and humiliation of the people.

It was supposed to have a positive and a negative effect. The negative effect would be to send a message to other dictators in the region that they'd better get with the program and respect American power. The positive message was to be to create a decent democratic society in Iraq that would be a model and an inspiration for neighbours. This would also, according to the theory, lead to peace between Israel and its neighbours. You remember the phrase about the road to peace in Jerusalem passing through Baghdad as the Palestinian side would also come to respect US power.

Of course, none of this has happened and instead of the model democracy that was supposed to be created in Iraq we have a bleeding, open wound which is sapping American strength and morale and providing inspiration and training to Jihadists. There's a great debate in Washington now about whether the Iraq war was a good idea badly implemented, with all the critiques of planning and how it was gone about, or simply whether it was really fundamentally impossible to transform Iraq and turn it into a democracy. I have to say I am more or less in the latter camp. That is not at all to question or to doubt the critique of the mistakes that were made, and again, put on your reading list Tom Ricks' *Fiasco*, the *Washington Post* journalist, and Michael Gordon's *Cobra II*. Especially when you read *Fiasco* you can no longer doubt that mistakes were made.

But that doesn't necessarily lead to the conclusion that had they not been made everything would have turned out fine. I think when you step back and look at the situation that we were trying to address, 30 years of dictatorship, competing ethnic and religious groups, neighbours who want to have an influence, understandably, in this important country, unevenly distributed resources – that is to say oil in some parts of the country but not in others – and a deep resentment of westerners and foreigners,

the idea that even if we had gotten everything right, whatever that means, could have produced the stable democracy we wanted I think is seriously to be questioned. That debate will go on, you can never win it or prove your point, but I think more Americans are now coming around to the view that the bar was set too high and we couldn't actually do what we set out to do.

Is the failure in Iraq definitive and is civil war inevitable? I still don't think so. But it is true, and we have to be honest, that the problem has now evolved from a largely anti-American insurgency – which still goes on – into an incipient civil war. Even President Bush has really stopped claiming progress in addressing these issues and is simply asserting now that to leave would make the situation even worse. I fear he is right about that. Success, if you redefine success to just a minimum of stability, I think is still possible – but so, frankly, is total failure with all sorts of consequences for the region.

This brings us to Iran, because the things are related. Before the Iraq war it was Iran that was worried. There was rising opposition to the regime and the Iranian regime in 2002 was putting out feelers to the United States about a possible new relationship. Now I think the situation has been reversed, partly because of consequences in Iraq, and everything seems to be going Iran's way. Knowingly or not, the United States did Iran an enormous favour: it got rid of Iran's rivals and enemies to the east in Afghanistan, and then it got rid of Iran's rivals and enemies to the west in Iraq, effectively putting Iraq under the influence of the majority Shi'a and therefore of Iran. It's like a gift from Washington. Americans had persuaded themselves that because the Iraqi Shi'a had fought with Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war, that they would be more Iraqi than Shi'a and Iranian influence would be limited. That view, in retrospect, turns out to have been quite naive and getting rid of the Sunni minority government in Iraq has inevitably lead to the rise of the Shi'a, who are in fact close to and significantly supported by Iran.

With the US entirely bogged down militarily in Iraq, oil at $60 a barrel, Iraq under Iranian influence, Iran really feels the wind at its sails. It is true that the price of oil has fallen about $10 a barrel over the past month or so, but it's still $40 a barrel more than it was when this all started. If Iran is producing four million barrels a day, that's

US$40 million per day for every 10 additional dollars per barrel that you get. If it's $40 per barrel more than it was before, that's a very rough estimate of over $50 billion per year for Iran. You can have an awful lot of influence in the region and the world with an extra $50 billion.

United States policy toward Iran has evolved significantly, and I think wisely. It has moved along a spectrum from a few years ago where the attitude was: 'Iran is part of the axis of evil, we will not reward bad behaviour. Our power will transform this regime', to a recognition that that's not going to have any effect. Now the US has progressed significantly in the direction of being willing to provide incentives and direct talks with Iran. But, frankly, under the circumstances I just described there's no evidence that that is actually paying off and that Iran is willing to play ball. The UN Security Council just last week extended the deadline yet another time for Iran to suspend uranium enrichment and there seems very little reason for Iran to really back down. So let's be clear, we're talking about nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. If Iran gets nuclear weapons I think all bets are off in the region: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey… If you think it through, if the international community is willing to allow Iran to have nuclear weapons, who is it not going to be willing to allow to procure nuclear weapons? This would have a very serious impact on the region and on the dynamic I described before about the Sunni-Shi'a split. If you're a Sunni government or regime in the region and you see the Shi'a in Iran becoming a nuclear state, I think you have to think about your own attitude towards nuclear weapons as well.

Nor are prospects for Israel particularly good. Arguably, they're as bad as they've been since 1967. When it came into office, the Bush administration decided that its initial policy on Israel would simply be to do the opposite of what the Clinton administration did. Bush came in, was determined not to get bogged down in endless negotiations over an Arab-Israel peace, and concluded that the way to bring peace in the Middle East between Israelis and Palestinians was to show American strength, strongly back Israel and support democracy in the region. Well, we supported democracy in Palestine, we supported free elections, and what we got was a Hamas-led government that doesn't recognise Israel and supports violence against it and the peace process seems to be dead. Even worse, on the northern front, which we had neglected for a while, Hezbollah laid a trap for Israel with the killing and capturing of

Israeli soldiers and Israel fell right into it, with US support. A bombing campaign that was driven more by an attitude that Israel had to 'do something' than by any coherent strategic plan has led to the empowerment of Hezbollah within Lebanon and throughout the region and a much more united Muslim world against Israel and the United States. Instead of the Sunni world worrying itself about the rise of Iranian Shi'a-supported Hezbollah, the Sunni world turns on Israel, turns on the United States, and we have an even greater problem on our hands.

In Lebanon itself, prospects and trends are also not particularly good. They had been quite good under the leadership of prime ministers Rafik Hariri, rebuilding the country and overcoming decades of civil war. Even after Hariri's tragic assassination there were signs of hope, with millions of Lebanese pouring into the streets, the UN Security Council coming together to demand that Syrian troops withdraw from the country and progress being made towards a stable, truly Lebanese government. I'm afraid that the Israel-Hezbollah clash over the summer has set that back. A million displaced Lebanese, damaged and destroyed homes, $3½ billion worth of infrastructure destroyed, $2½ billion in capital flight, huge immediate aid needs and massive lost revenues due to problems for the economy and tourism. On top of that is the strengthened role of Hezbollah in Lebanese politics and a potential return to the instability of the past, all of which is vividly illustrated over the past week with the duelling demonstrations between Hezbollah and the Maronite community.

Hopes in Syria have also been dashed. There were many hopes that the younger Assad, Bashar al-Assad, who had studied in London, would be the sort of reformer that the Americans and others wanted to see in the region. Instead, Syria continues to support anti-Israel terrorist groups out of Damascus and the western international isolation of Syria has led only to its embrace or partnership with Iran and continued support for Hezbollah. It raises the question of the international approach to these different problems when they're all put into the same camp and no choices are made. You can't engage with the Syrian regime and promote democracy in Syria at the same time.

In Afghanistan, I'm afraid the trend is also not particularly good. The line in Afghanistan, which I visited last December, had been that the situation was bad,

because the baseline was so poor, but that the trend was good. The US commander in the region, Karl Ikenberry, likes to say, and still says, when you think about Afghanistan don't look at the picture, look at the movie. Sadly, I think while that was probably true a year ago the movie doesn't look very good either now. Suicide bombings, which were virtually unheard of in Afghanistan in the first few years of the international presence, are now proliferating. More than three-fourths of all suicide bombing in Afghanistan since the war in 2001 have taken place over the past year. In other words, in 2002, 2003, 2004, even through half of 2005, they were not a significant occurrence; since the summer of 2005, more than 75 per cent of them have gone off. The Taliban, which once seemed destroyed, is resurgent. Poppy production is up by 50 per cent. NATO is doing a valiant job trying to keep a lid on the violence but troop commitments are falling short.

There are a number of countries I haven't yet talked about, and won't for reasons of time: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordon, Gulf States, Pakistan. But I do think it's fair to say across the board there that while none of those are as visibly and immediately unstable as those that I've been speaking about there is no reason to believe that things are moving in a positive direction in any of them. The democratisation that seemed to be happening now seems to have been a mirage or something done in order to keep the Bush administration temporarily happy. I can say that a senior colleague of mine at the CIA says of all of the countries that I have mentioned briefly or at more length, it is Pakistan that is the one that most keeps him up at night.

All of that is a way of, again, answering the subtitle in this presentation and a way of saying that the prospects for the greater Middle East are not very good. And this is the point in the talk where I'm tempted to say that the rest of my speech is a detailed plan for resolving all of these problems…but we are unfortunately out of time and I won't be able to share that with you this morning. That is what I would like to say but I don't suppose that would be fair and I owe you a bit more than that. Instead I will conclude not with a detailed plan for solving these but with some brief thoughts on how to think about these issues.

Firstly, and this is banal but it's also true, we do have to be patient. The greater Middle East that I've described really is in deep-seated crisis and these problems are

not going to be fixed tomorrow. There was initially much American impatience and optimism, partly as a result of this great decade we had in the 1990s when we were growing militarily and technologically and economically and our enemy disappeared – Americans always want to look positively at the future – but 9/11 happened to come at a moment when we actually thought we had good reason to believe that we were capable of transforming the world. Americans are starting to doubt that now. So we do have to be patient on this.

A somewhat more hopeful sign than everything I've said so far is that in the long run one part of this problem – Islamism, Jihadism, whatever you want to call it – is an ideology that will fail in the long run, as other extremist ideologies have failed. Communism was another utopian ideology that we had to face. It was a great challenge. We felt for many years early in the Cold War that it was insurmountable, that communism was rising, and we didn't know what to do. But in the end it did fail. People who practised it realised it was failing and they got rid of it. It took 70 years though and I think that's what we have to accept here as well. We're talking about a generational problem rather than something we can fix in a couple of years. But we should be a bit more hopeful than we sometimes get on the heels of presentations like the one I've just made. I really don't think that returning to seventh century utopia on the Arabian peninsula is going to be the thing that persuades this swathe of humanity that that's the way that they want to live. Where political Islam has been tried in places like Iran and Sudan it already has failed and become unpopular. I think if we stick to our guns and believe in our own ideology we can have a little bit more hopeful attitude about some of this, but we have to realise that it may take some time and some disagreeable things may happen in the meantime.

Second, and I've alluded to this before, I would say we have to think about this greater Middle East not as one crisis but as a number of different ones. I think that is helpful both conceptually and in terms of the policies that we pursue. The Bush administration approach seems to lump it all into one problem and you get all these references to 'the enemy' or 'the war that started on September 11th 2001', or 'Iraq as the central front in the war on terror', as if everything that I've described here is just one single problem. But as I suggested already, it clearly isn't. You have Sunni and Shi'a fighting each other in Iraq, you have Arabs and Persians who are historic rivals,

you have groups like Hezbollah and Hamas which have very specific national aims that don't necessarily have to do with the broader picture, you have autocratic secular regimes and you have Islamist non-state actors. They're all very different problems. If you see it all as one problem and you have to defeat that problem then you're failing to decide what's most important to you and in your desire for consistency you're unable to make compromises with some pure approach and deal with problems in a more pragmatic way.

Third, I think we can no longer afford to remain immobile on the Arab-Israel front, and immobile is pretty much what we have been for the past five years or so. A more engaged policy on Arab-Israel peace might not work – it didn't work when the Clinton administration tried it and it might not work now. But we shouldn't underestimate the cost of appearing indifferent on this problem. I think Americans tend to argue – to be sure with some justification – that even without the question of Israel and Palestine there would be terrorism, there would be Jihadism. 9/11 was planned during very serious Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, that's true, but that shouldn't be an excuse for not being engaged in trying because the reality is that this is fuel for the broader conflict. I described some of the ways in which it caused different problems for us before, as with Hezbollah or as with the broader Al Qaeda phenomenon, and I think it is absolutely essential, with US leadership and support from others around the world, to do more and not pretend that it somehow doesn't matter what's happening between Israel and Palestine. Frankly, even trying and failing would be better than not trying at all.

Finally, I've been talking a lot about the United States here, for reasons that I tried to justify, but I would end by emphasising the role of the entire international community on this set of problems. None of the problems that I address can be handled by the United States alone, contrary to what many Americans may have thought a couple of years ago and would still like to believe. Only a united international front can offer the right package of carrots and sticks to deal with the uranium nuclear program; only a united international front with legitimacy and resources and commitment can provide adequate support for the government of Iraq; only an international united front with legitimacy and resources and troops can provide adequate support for the government of Lebanon; only a united international front with all of those things can

provide the troops and the finances to win in Afghanistan. So whatever you think of US policy over the past couple of years, the reality is that this is a region that affects everybody all around the world, including, it goes without saying, Australians – with their global economic interests and their desire to ensure the security of their citizens and their values and their humanitarian concerns. In that sense, Australians and everybody have a huge stake in all of the great problems that I've discussed.
Thank you very much.