

## Middle East

### Back to Balancing in the Middle East A Strategy for Constructive Engagement

#### Background

A new Sunni-Shi'a fault line and a significant decline in U.S. influence frame the challenge to the next President's Middle East policy. That challenge requires both a return to balance of power diplomacy and a better balancing of interests and values to contain the Iraq civil war, strengthen the forces of moderation, prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power, and promote democratic reform.

An expanding arc of Iranian influence extends from Tehran over Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut. Radicals under this arc have gained strength by exploiting the United States' own mistakes—our ineffectiveness in Iraq, disengagement from the Arab-Israeli peace process, enabling of anti-democratic forces to gain power through elections, and inability to halt Iran's quest for nuclear weapons. But, the divide in the region is not a simple contest between extremists and moderates, or between Sunni and Shi'a.

#### Recommendations

The next President will face a Middle East in turmoil and an American public weary of engagement there. Not to remain engaged would have profound consequences for America's security interests at home and across the globe. Our next leader will have no choice but to return to balance-of-power diplomacy in the Middle East that includes these specific elements:

- a renewed effort at Arab-Israeli reconciliation that might also split the Syrian regime from Iran
- containment of the spillover effects of civil war in Iraq
- negotiations with Iran to attempt to head off its nuclear ambitions, including bilateral engagement to address broader concerns
- regional security arrangements to contain the Iranian threat and prevent a Middle East nuclear arms race, if necessary, sheltering our allies under a nuclear umbrella
- a political and economic reform agenda that helps create a new social contract between Arab governments and their citizens
- in less secure countries, an emphasis on building democratic institutions more



than holding democratic elections

## Key Facts

- in 1991, an international coalition ousted Saddam Hussein's army from Kuwait
- in February 2003, Iran announces it has begun to develop nuclear enrichment capabilities after removing international seals from its equipment
- in March 2003, the United States and allies toppled Saddam Hussein's regime but botched the post-conflict reconstruction, opening Iraq up to civil conflict and the region to wider Iranian influence
- in January 2006, the militant Hamas movement won Palestinian parliamentary elections that the United States insisted on holding, provoking an international freeze on aid to the Palestinian Authority and leading some to question the wisdom of democratic elections in the conflict-ridden Middle East
- in summer 2006, Hezbollah and Hamas kidnapped Israeli soldiers, provoking wider conflict, and a war between Hezbollah and Israel in Lebanon ended in stalemate
- in December 2006, the United Nations Security Council unanimously imposed limited sanctions on Iran in response to its continued noncompliance with international atomic energy safeguards

A full version of this proposal, as well as supporting background material, is available at [www.opportunity08.org](http://www.opportunity08.org).

## About the Author and the Project

### Martin Indyk

Martin Indyk, a former U.S. Ambassador to Israel and assistant secretary of state for Near East Affairs, is a senior fellow and director of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings. He is an expert on U.S. policy in the Middle East, U.S.-Israeli relations and the Arab-Israeli peace process. Indyk was a Special Assistant to President Clinton and Senior Director for the Middle East on the National Security Council.

### Tamara Cofman Wittes

Tamara Cofman Wittes directs the Project on Arab Democracy and Development at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy. She is also an expert on the Arab-Israeli peace process. Wittes was one of the first recipients of the Rabin-Peres Peace Award, established by President Clinton in 1997. She served on the Arab Reform Task Force at the Council on Foreign Relations.

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