

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

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Summary

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 even between Sunni and Shi'a.

Because the United States is no longer dominant in the region, the next President will have no choice but to return to balance-of-power diplomacy. Recognizing the complexity of Arab allegiances, the United States will need to cement and sustain a moderate coalition that can counter Iran's regional ambitions. Its strategy should include these 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, and if necessary, shelter 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 and
- in less secure countries, an emphasis on building democratic institutions more than holding democratic elections

Context

When President Bush explained his new “surge strategy” in Iraq to the American people in January 2007, he defined the challenge to the United States that is playing out across the broader Middle East as “the decisive ideological struggle of our time. On one side are those who believe in freedom and moderation. On the other side are extremists who kill the innocent and have declared their intention to destroy our way of life.”

The problem with this good-*versus*-evil construct, applied to the conflicts that wrack the Middle East, is that it does not describe the decisive struggle as it is seen by the regional players. If the next President is to fashion a more effective strategy for protecting and promoting American interests, he or she will need to start with a more precise assessment of what is happening there, and then determine what the United States can and should do about it.

Regional Trends

That assessment will need to take into account two broad trends in the region. *First, an emerging struggle for power between Shi’as and Sunnis.* For centuries, this sectarian rivalry has lurked just beneath the surface. Now it has broken out in full force because the sectarian killing in Iraq has fed, and been fed by, a regional contest between an Iranian-led Shi’a bloc and Sunni Arab states led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Each bloc encompasses both moderates and extremists, severely complicating

the effort to pursue a coherent American strategy to bolster moderates at the expense of extremists.

Second, the declining ability of the United States to influence events in the region.

America's influence was at its height after the successful application of force: first in 1991, when it kicked Saddam Hussein's army out of Kuwait, and then in 2003, when it toppled his regime. This influence was magnified by the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, which left America as the world's sole superpower. America's dominance is now on the wane, however, sapped by failure in Iraq, war-weariness at home, the administration's determined neglect of the Arab-Israeli peace process, and Russia and China's expanding influence in the region. This loss of dominance means that the next President will have to return to a balance-of-power approach, with all the imperfections and moral dilemmas that implies. And, it means that the United States will have to pursue, with flexibility and compromise, multilateral approaches to the region's many problems.

The next President will face, in the Middle East, a potentially dire situation. Civil strife in Iraq, Lebanon, and Gaza could spill over and destabilize neighboring states. Iran's determined pursuit of nuclear weapons could provoke a nuclear arms race. Although, ideally, the United States should wean itself off Arab oil, energy independence will take at least a decade to achieve. In the meantime, and because the global economy will still rely on oil and gas, the United States will retain a vital interest in the free flow of energy supplies from the Persian Gulf, at reasonable prices. It will also retain an abiding commitment to the security and well-being of Israel and Arab allies. In these circumstances, even if U.S. military forces are pulled back from Iraq, wholesale disengagement from the region will not be feasible.

Strategic Aims

The next President will have to fashion a strategy to protect American interests at a time of greater conflict and declining influence. That strategy should aim toward the following objectives:

1. Containing the civil war in Iraq, to prevent the implosion taking place there from exploding into a wider regional conflict
2. Strengthening the forces of moderation in the Arab world, so they can counter Iran's influence and blunt the impact of regional radicals. This includes energetic re-launching of the Arab-Israeli peace process as the cement for a virtual alliance between Israel and its Arab peace partners against Iran and its proxies.
3. Preventing Iran's development of nuclear weapons and, should that fail, developing a security framework that will deter their use and avoid a nuclear arms race in the Middle East
4. Pursuing a longer-term agenda of political and economic liberalization that will help meet the aspirations of the people of the region, thereby reducing the appeal of regional radicals and helping ensure the stability of regimes that share America's strategic interests.

American and Arab Interests: Close, but not Congruent

It took a war to expose the new Sunni-Shi'a sectarian fault line. For some time, Sunni Arab leaders in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan had been warning that a "Shi'ite arc" was spreading its influence across the region. Iraq's descent into civil war and Iran's defiant pursuit of nuclear weapons fed these Arab concerns. But it was only in 2006, when Hezbollah provoked a confrontation with Israel in Lebanon and when Damascus blocked Egypt from organizing a prisoner exchange to calm tensions in Gaza, that these leaders rang alarm bells. For them, it was simply unacceptable that a Shi'a-dominated, historically Persian Iran should blatantly interfere in Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine and become the arbiter of Arab interests. They decried the Shi'a axis that appeared to stretch from its base in Tehran to the Shi'a-led government in Baghdad to the non-Sunni Alawite regime in Damascus and on to Hezbollah in Beirut. When, just before year's end, cameras caught Shi'a guards jeering at Saddam Hussein on the gallows, the broader Sunni Arab public began to share their leaders' concerns.

Differing U.S.-Arab Perceptions

From Washington's perspective, this new fault line appeared to divide the region's moderates from its extremists. Indeed, the Lebanon War in the summer of 2006 looked like a proxy war between two sets of forces, each presenting competing visions of the Middle East's future. Hezbollah's dynamic leader, Hassan Nasrallah, and Iran's populist president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, put forward a vision of the region defined by unending "resistance" (meaning violence, terrorism, and perpetual confrontation) against Israel, the United States, and *status quo* leaders across the Arab world. Nasrallah and Ahmadinejad argue for the redemptive value of violence and offer the false promise of justice and dignity for Arabs humiliated by the long history of defeat at the hands of the West and Israel. It was violence, they assert, that forced Israel to withdraw unilaterally from Lebanon in May 2000 and from Gaza in August 2005. It is defiance, they say, that has enabled Iran to proceed with its nuclear program in the face of American-led international opposition. And, in their view, violence and defiance enabled Hezbollah to stand proudly in 2006 against the Israeli army and U.S.-inspired UN Security Council resolutions.

To moderate Sunni Arab leaders—including Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, Jordan's King Abdullah II, and Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, all friends of the United States—the Iranian-led challenge *is* deeply threatening, on multiple levels. Even on the streets of these leaders' own cities, they are less popular than Nasrallah and Ahmadinejad. The radicals' message of resistance is always combined with denunciations of Sunni Arab leaders for sheltering fecklessly under an American security umbrella and making humiliating deals with Israel. In Lebanon, the Iranian-Syria-Hezbollah axis openly attempts to topple the moderate Sunni-led government. In the Palestinian territories, the Shi'a axis provides critical backing for Hamas and Palestine Islamic Jihad, groups that reject an Israeli-Palestinian peace to which the Sunni leaders are committed.¹ In Iraq, Iran is aiding and encouraging the Shi'a militias in ethnic cleansing of Baghdad and southern Iraq and threatening to establish a virtual Shi'a state on the borders of

¹ In 2002, at an Arab League Summit in Beirut, leaders of all Arab states endorsed the Saudi peace initiative of then Crown Prince Abdullah, which offered Israel peace, recognition, normalization, and an end to the conflict, if it withdrew from all the Arab territories occupied in 1967 and agreed to the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza.

Saudi Arabia and Kuwait—a menacing prospect.² Most alarmingly, Iran is attempting to achieve military dominance through a nuclear program that could put it in possession of nuclear weapons within five years.

Given these Arab concerns, the Shi'ite rise presents the United States with a measure of opportunity. The only way Sunni Arab leaders can counter Iran's bid for regional hegemony is by securing U.S. action strengthening the Lebanese government and the Palestinian presidency of Mahmoud Abbas, promoting an effective Israeli-Palestinian peace process, preventing an Iranian takeover in Iraq, heading off Iran's nuclear program, and enhancing their own security capabilities.

However, these Arab leaders do not share Washington's antipathy for *Sunni* extremists, preferring to co-opt them rather than see them fall into the waiting arms of Iran and Hezbollah. Hamas, for example, became steadily more dependent on Iran for funding and training when Arab leaders acceded to the Bush Administration's insistence that they cut off their support for the militant Islamist organization. But, with the emergence of this new Sunni-Shi'a fault line, the Sunni leaders want to woo Hamas away from Iran and bring it back to the Sunni side. Similarly, they will not support a renewed American effort to suppress the Sunni insurgency in Iraq if it leads only to unfettered Shi'a supremacy there. They may now be looking to support an effort by the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood to destabilize President Bashar al-Assad's Alawite regime in Syria (Alawites are a minority in mostly Sunni Syria)—a tactic that might appeal to regime-change advocates in the Bush Administration but could unleash havoc in the Middle East heartland.

Support Moderates

The challenge for the next President will be to cement and sustain a coalition of moderate forces in the Middle East to combat the newly emerging radical forces and the harsh vision of the region's future that they represent. But U.S. strategy will need

² These Sunni Arab states backed Saddam Hussein during the Iraq-Iran War of the 1980s for the express purpose of blocking the establishment of an Iranian foothold in southern Iraq. Saudi Arabia invested \$60 billion in that successful effort, only to be repaid by Saddam's invasion of Kuwait after he had beaten back the Iranian onslaught.

to take into account that America's main Arab allies have divergent objectives from ours.

Exploit Differences Between Iran and Syria

American interests would be better served by an effort to exploit the differing interests of the Syrian and Iranian regimes than by an attempt to overthrow Bashar al-Assad. The Alawite regime is conscious of its uneasy position atop a Sunni populace that could become restive if the regime plants itself firmly on the Shi'a side of the fault line. This may explain why the Syrian president is calling for peace negotiations with Israel, while the Iranian president calls for Israel's destruction.

Support Pluralism in Iraq

Similarly, the United States should seek neither Shi'a nor Sunni supremacy in Iraq, but rather a pluralistic regime capable of protecting the interests of all of Iraq's communities. Although the descent into civil war may have made this objective impossible to achieve, America cannot become involved in an effort to rescue the Sunni insurgents there, any more than it can condone Shi'a suppression of the Sunni community accompanied by the establishment of an Iranian sphere of influence.

Returning to the Balance of Power

One complication to the challenge of developing a coherent and effective American strategy for the Middle East lies in the decline of Washington's ability to influence events there. During the era of American dominance in the region, from 1991 to 2006, the United States was strong enough to preserve its regional interests without depending on the balance of power in the Gulf between Iran and Iraq. Earlier, Washington had sought to maintain a favorable balance, supporting first Iran under the Shah and then Saddam Hussein's Iraq during his 1980s war with Iran's ayatollahs. The American dominance achieved by the eviction of Saddam's army from Kuwait and the collapse of the Soviet Union enabled the Clinton Administration to avoid a balance-of-power game in favor of a policy of containing both Iran and Iraq. Dual containment

might have been sustainable, had Clinton achieved the breakthrough he sought with respect to a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace, which would have isolated both rogue states. But, after Clinton's peace efforts collapsed in 2000, President Bush chose another way.

The failure of the Bush Administration's efforts to transform the region through regime change and democratization has disastrously affected America's position in the region, in three ways:

- *First*, Iraq's disintegration during the Iraq War clearly has tipped the balance in favor of Iran, while dealing a blow to America's image of invincibility and tarnishing its values.
- *Second*, President Bush's equating of democratization with early elections, even where political institutions, parties, and a democratic culture were weak, advantaged Islamist parties like Muqtada al-Sadr's supporters in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in the Palestinian territories. With superior organization, an anti-American, anti-regime message, and only a feeble central government to counter them, they were able to exploit elections and enter government with their militias and terrorist cadres intact. From there they have succeeded in further eroding the state institutions of Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Authority, advancing radical agendas and pushing those states to, or even beyond, the brink of civil war.
- *Third*, the Bush Administration's determined disengagement from the Israeli-Palestinian peace process contributed to Hamas's rise to power in the Palestinian Authority. Israel's decision to pursue a policy of unilateral withdrawal reinforced Hamas and Hezbollah's claim that violence was the only way to make gains against Israel. All this further undermined President Abbas, who was committed to negotiating a two-state solution with Israel. Moreover, President Bush's failure to engage in any serious effort to end the Palestinian *intifada* and promote a solution to the Palestinian problem convinced Arabs and Muslims region-wide that the United States cared little for their concerns. Compounded by images of torture at Abu Ghraib and reports of mistreatment at the military prison at Guantanamo Bay, these developments generated a deep anger at the

United States that compromised the ability of Arab regimes to work with Washington.

While American influence waned, Russia and China were emerging as independent players in the Middle East in ways that vastly complicated U.S. diplomacy. President Vladimir Putin's Russia made lucrative deals to supply nuclear and missile technology to Iran. China's interest in secure lines of energy supply from Iran, its nearest Middle Eastern neighbor, made it as cool to sanctions as Russia has been. Both states seek to sell arms in the region. Neither appears to be mounting a fundamental challenge to American primacy in the Gulf, but both are happy to see America bogged down by security commitments while they secure preferential energy and trading relationships with regional states. Unconstrained by a weakened America, Russia and China effectively undermined the one serious effort by the Bush Administration to use diplomacy to achieve one of its goals in the Middle East: heading off Iran's nuclear program.

The Diplomatic Agenda

The consequences of declining American power are that the United States now finds itself in the position of *demandeur*. We no longer can insist, as President Bush's rhetoric suggests, that "you're either with us or against us." Recognizing the limits of military power—demonstrated in Iraq and in Israel's experience in Lebanon in the summer of 2006—the United States is forced to turn to diplomacy. But, it does so when its adversaries in the Middle East are less fearful of American power and see less need for America's favor, and when its allies are no longer sure that America is a reliable partner. That's why Iran could spurn Secretary Rice's offer of negotiations over its nuclear program and scoff at the weak UN sanctions that resulted.³ And that's why, while President Bush rattles sabers at Iran and tries to block international aid to a Hamas government, the Saudis are trying to work with Iran to defuse the crisis in Lebanon and with Hamas to defuse the crisis in Gaza.

³ Contrast this with Iran's quiescent behavior after the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, when they halted their mischief-making momentarily and instead sought a "grand bargain" with the United States. Bush's spurning of that initiative mirrors Iran's response to Rice's initiative three years later.

Build a Moderate Middle Eastern Alliance

The United States now must return to a balance-of-power approach to the region, building a counter-alliance to the Iranian-Syrian-Iraqi Shi'a-Hezbollah alliance and correcting the tilt in Iran's favor that was the unintended consequence of the misadventure in Iraq. As before, this approach inevitably will put the United States in league with unfamiliar and unreliable allies, creating moral dilemmas and policy inconsistencies. The next administration will not enjoy the luxury of staying above the fray and demanding that local actors read from America's script.

Pursue Diplomacy with Iran

By necessity, the two major arenas for diplomatic activity will be the effort to head off Iran's nuclear weapons program and the attempt to resurrect a meaningful Arab-Israeli peace process. Although Secretary Rice's two-year effort to pressure Iran to suspend its uranium enrichment resulted in only a weak UN sanctions resolution and no suspension of Iran's nuclear program, diplomacy has by no means run its course. The unanimous vote of the Security Council, combined with the threat of stronger sanctions, triggered unprecedented public criticism within Tehran of Ahmadinejad's confrontational approach. The stigma of international isolation that accompanies UN sanctions, however weak they may be, does not sit well with Persian pride. Nor is confrontation with the international community welcomed by many of Iran's more prudent leaders. Consequently, those Iranians who argue for a more sophisticated "stealth" approach to nuclear weapons acquisition, designed again to divide America from its European, Russian, and Chinese partners, may well become ascendant again. If they do succeed in outflanking Ahmadinejad or reining him in, Iran's enrichment efforts may be temporarily suspended, and negotiations could resume.

Should negotiations resume, America should insist that the talks not be restricted to the nuclear file, because there are so many other troubling aspects of Iranian behavior that need to be addressed: support for Iraqi Shi'a militias; sponsorship of terrorism; interference in Lebanon; and opposition to Israel and the peace process, to name a

few. The negotiations should be bilateral, not multilateral, given that, regrettably, America's other negotiating partners will always accept a lower price for any deal.

Re-engage in Arab-Israeli Diplomacy

In the Arab-Israeli diplomatic arena, the Iranian threat provides a new impetus to progress, as Israeli and Sunni Arab leaders now share an interest in showing that negotiations can work better than resistance. The involvement of Arab states, via the Saudi initiative, can provide a boost to President Abbas and an incentive to Israelis looking for a reliable Arab partner. The willingness of Israeli and Palestinian leaders to discuss a "political horizon" that would delineate the elements of a final agreement is also a positive development, since it will give both sides greater reassurance about the endgame, as they take interim steps to build confidence in a partnership for peace. Here, too, the Iranian threat has helped to fuel the process, as Palestinian moderates are as concerned about Iranian interference in their internal affairs (through the backing of Hamas and Palestine Islamic Jihad) as Israel is concerned about Ahmadinejad's nuclear threats.

As America takes advantage of these circumstances through a sustained engagement in Arab-Israeli diplomacy, it will need to be realistic about the obstacles to progress. After six years of neglect of the peace process, Palestinians are left with crumbling institutions, a Hamas government opposed to Israel's existence, and an incipient failed terror state in Gaza. On the other side, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has lower approval ratings than President Bush; unless Olmert can rebuild his standing, he will hesitate to take the substantial risks inherent in negotiating a deal that would dismantle more than 100 settlements in the West Bank, tamper with Jerusalem, and rely on a Palestinian partner with a dubious ability to deliver on any commitment.

Nevertheless, a diplomatic process can help to put the peace train back on track and moving forward, if it:

- focuses on rebuilding Palestinian economic and security capabilities (at first, via the institution of the Palestinian Presidency)

- defines a political horizon for Palestinians and Israelis and
- engages the Arab states

Such a process will boost American prestige, make it easier for Arab leaders to cooperate with the United States and Israel, and increase Iranian isolation. This process also will pressure Syria to join the process or face similar isolation.

Contain the Impact of Iraq's Chaos and Iran's Rise

To be effective, American diplomacy needs to be backed by a security strategy that buttresses America's regional allies against the combined threats of growing instability and a potential nuclear arms race. The United States already has strong security relationships with Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), our partners in the virtual alliance against Iranian ambitions. To maintain our partners' security, we now must successfully manage the challenges posed by Iraq's descent into civil war and Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons.

The United States needs to develop a containment strategy to prevent the implosion in Iraq from exploding into a regional conflagration. Iraq's civil war easily could destabilize its neighbors: Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia could decide to intervene in the civil war; and massive refugee flows could overwhelm Jordan and Kuwait, among others. Containment of the civil war will require maintaining an American troop presence on the Iraqi periphery, probably at reduced numbers, for some time to come.

Expand Security Agreements

Iran's determination to continue its nuclear program is already sparking preparations by Israel for a possible preemptive strike and by Iran's Arab neighbors for their own nuclear programs. If diplomacy fails to head off Iran's nuclear program, America may have to resort to a preemptive strike of some type. At best, however, such a strike would only delay Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons; it alone will not be sufficient to prevent a regional nuclear arms race.

The next President should enter into discussions with America's regional allies—Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and the GCC—to develop security agreements that would extend an American nuclear umbrella to them in return for their commitment to actions that bolster this virtual alliance (such as visible support for Arab-Israeli peacemaking, internal reform, and security cooperation). The purposes would be to prevent a nuclear arms race and deter Iranian nuclear aggression. Although such a NATO-like security framework for the Middle East will be controversial at home, it will be all but unavoidable if nuclear diplomacy fails.

Promote Democratic Reforms

In forging a realistic new American strategy for the Middle East, it would be easy to jettison the Bush Administration's efforts to advance Arab democracy. After all, the Sunni leaders whose regimes America seeks to liberalize are the very ones whose support is most necessary to deflect Iran's bid for hegemony. How, then, can we insist that they undertake political and economic reforms that are inherently destabilizing?

Use Persuasion to Show Moderates They Must Reform

Bitter experience teaches that repressing the region's radicals does not remove the threat they pose; instead, repression in one country often pushes radicals to safer havens from which they can wreak more terrible damage. The appeal of Islamist radicalism lies in its ideology of revolutionary resistance to the stagnation and suffering in many Arab societies today. Countering that ideology requires a positive alternative vision of the future, one in which moderation, tolerance, and peace provide more benefits and opportunities than resistance and violence.

To marginalize the radical rejectionists, this vision must encompass prospects for realizing Palestinian national aspirations. But this vision must also present the vast majority of Arabs outside Palestine with the opportunity to shape their own future. This promise can only be fulfilled through far-reaching political, economic, and social reforms that create a new social contract between Arab governments and their citizens.

Arab leaders keenly feel the threats from radical Islam within their own societies. The corruption, inefficiency, and nepotism pervasive in the moderate regimes have produced economic stagnation and an increasing inability to deliver basic government services to a burgeoning population. Islamists capitalize on this failing with charitable networks that provide efficient social welfare to the needy. Moreover, for decades, Islamist movements in Jordan, Egypt, and other U.S.-allied states have steadily built up their grassroots popularity by attacking the passivity of these regimes in the face of American and Israeli policies that are portrayed negatively. These movements benefit from the apparent successes of Nasrallah and Ahmadinejad. Likewise, the critique local Islamists provide of regime performance at home and abroad echoes the rhetoric trumpeted by Iran and Hezbollah.

In this environment, U.S. efforts to persuade Arab leaders of the need to reform should resonate; the task is not as difficult as it may appear. The leaders are increasingly aware that the sheer size of the restless and underutilized youth cohort in today's Arab world combines with the relentless demands of a globalized economy to produce mounting expectations. More than half of the Arab world's population is under the age of majority. While current rulers can still manipulate political institutions, buy support with government resources, and call in their security forces when all else fails, their capacity to play this game is increasingly challenged. By increasing repression, they would run high risks of alienating supporters. By relying primarily on U.S. military and economic support, they would tarnish their image as defenders of Islam and Arab interests.

For now, though, Arab regimes believe that the best way to tamp down the threat from domestic Islamist oppositions is to work at resolving regional conflicts like Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine, relieving them of the burden of addressing domestic grievances. While the United States should work with them to resolve regional conflicts, the next President also needs to help them understand that the best insulation against the destabilizing effects of domestic Islamist movements is to repair the frayed social contract between citizens and state.

Make Reform a Foundation of Partnership

To extract Arab rulers from this dilemma, and to be sustainable and effective in countering the region's radical axis, American-Arab cooperation must rest on a new foundation of partnership among the United States, moderate Arab governments, and their mostly moderate citizens—a partnership designed to produce a better future for the people of the Middle East.

Provide Material Support for Reform

Reform will come about only through the willingness of Arab regimes to undertake necessary changes. We have no alternative but to work with them. *The American role should be to reduce the risks and costs of undertaking essential, long-delayed reforms through material incentives, disincentives, and dialogue.*

- With Egypt's economic aid scheduled to zero out in 2008, new aid through a "Democracy Challenge Account" could provide incentives to Arab states willing to take risks for reform.
- Democratic activists and politicians in the Arab world don't fear an American "kiss of death," but rather American abandonment. As we did in South Korea and the Philippines, the U.S. government should provide visible support to democracy movements while maintaining good official relations with Arab governments.

Test Islamists' Willingness to Moderate

Under current conditions, the Islamist movements will be the first beneficiaries of any new political openings. But broader political freedoms will allow non-Islamist alternative voices to emerge, and force Islamist movements to clarify their political agendas. If they advocate radical actions and views, or if they pursue violence or other anti-democratic means, they will become legitimate targets for state action. While countenancing such targeted crackdowns, we should not accede to any regime's excuse of radical Islamist activity for repressing *all* dissent. The United States can

support harsh measures against domestic opposition movements, but only when they have demonstrated political irresponsibility—and when moderate alternatives exist.

In the Middle East, cultivating moderation is essential to building democracy, and cultivating democracy is essential to building moderation. If, over time, limited political openings are perceived as window dressing on autocracy, then moderates will be discredited, while the radicals will grow in popularity.

Focus on Our Strongest Allies First

Building democracy and moderation together requires focusing democracy-promotion efforts on those societies—like our allies Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan—with strong, capable governments and relatively “tame” domestic Islamist movements.⁴ In such societies, immediate security concerns are lower for both government and citizens, radical arguments have the weakest hold, and Islamists have the greatest incentive to remain peaceful and moderate in exchange for the ability to play a public role in politics and society. There, regimes are strong enough to tolerate freedom of expression and association, while citizens are open to moderate alternatives to Islamic radicalism.

In weaker states, like Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq, the priority should be on state-building, rather than democracy promotion. In these settings, only when communal security is assured by neutral and reliable state institutions will the militancy of local radicals lose its claim on public loyalty.

The United States will need to be consistent and candid with Arab allies, voicing expectations about reform priorities and policies and integrating reform into the framework of bilateral relations as a precondition for long-term, reliable, and stable U.S.-Arab cooperation. *America will be required to offer Arab states a great many security guarantees to offset the harmful consequences of Iraq's chaos and Iran's*

⁴ Islamist movements in these countries have largely shifted tactics over the years away from violent opposition, and most now operate within red lines established by the regimes. But as radical regional voices gain strength, and Arab regimes lose legitimacy, local Islamists feel greater temptation to push the boundaries of peaceful dissent. The longer politics remains tightly controlled, and the worse the regional environment becomes, the greater the incentive of local Islamists to radicalize in both their ideology and their actions.

ambitions; Arab states should be expected to match this U.S. investment by making the changes necessary to build internal stability.

Concluding Observations

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. To protect those interests, the United States will have to reinvent a diplomacy backed by security guarantees and the threat of force, in the service of a strategy designed to protect our allies, counter our adversaries, and promote a more peaceful and stable region with governments accountable to their people.

This monumental challenge will require creativity, flexibility, and a willingness to work with partners whose purposes may not always be consonant with our own. We will have to abandon the ill-fated combination of naïveté and ideology that has characterized the Bush Administration's approach, in favor of a pragmatic realism that brings American values into balance with American interests.

About the Author and the Project

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Additional Resources

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