

The Future Security Environment of the Middle East

Prepared Testimony before the Defense Review Threat Panel of the House Committee on
Armed Services

September 28, 2005

Dr. Daniel Byman
Director, Center for Peace and Security Studies, Georgetown University
Senior Fellow, Saban Center for Middle East Policy, the Brookings Institution
Email: dlb32@georgetown.edu

The Future Security Environment of the Middle East

Chairman Hunter, Ranking Member Skelton, Members of the Committee, and Committee staff, I am grateful for this opportunity to present my testimony.

For decades, wars, civil strife, and military coups have plagued the Middle East, making it one of the world's most dangerous regions. The rise of terrorism and nuclear proliferation in the last decade has only intensified the danger of this perilous place. When you add to this lethal brew the fact that almost all regimes except Israel face challenges to their legitimacy, you have the potential for continued violence and instability in the decades to come. The United States can neither ignore this instability nor engage the region selectively as it does with Africa. The Middle East's oil reserves, its proximity to Europe, and its role in the emergence of anti-U.S. catastrophic terrorism make it a key factor in the U.S. security equation.

Added to this constant level of danger is an elevated level of U.S. involvement, both military and political, in the region. The United States has long tried to arbitrate the Israeli-Arab dispute and sought to preserve oil price stability by acting as the regional hegemon in the Persian Gulf. Today -- with the massive U.S. military presence in Iraq and an increased U.S. involvement in the politics in Egypt, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, and other parts of the region -- our involvement has reached even higher levels.

The good news for the United States is that many of the traditional U.S. problems, particularly interstate war and state sponsorship of terrorism, are declining. Israel's ability to withstand a conventional military attack is at the highest point in the state's history. With the overthrow of Saddam Husayn's regime and the emergence of an Iraq torn by civil strife, U.S. allies in the Persian Gulf also are at little risk from invasion. The bad news is that the region is at grave risk from internal instability. Economic problems and limited regime legitimacy are now constant concerns, and the lack of strong institutions in the region make democratization especially difficult.

This prepared statement first reviews the military strengths (or, more accurately, weaknesses) of key states in the Middle East and discusses the unconventional options open to them, particularly with regard to nuclear weapons and the sponsorship of terrorist group. It then addresses six problems that are likely to pose challenges for U.S. policy in the years to come:

1. the legitimacy crisis that many regimes in the region face;
2. the spread of anti-U.S. terrorist groups;
3. the future of the Palestinian territories;
4. the problem of the Iranian bomb;
5. the future of Iraq after a U.S. withdrawal; and
6. the growing role of China.

The statement concludes by briefly noting key considerations for U.S. policymakers.

The Limited Military Capabilities of Middle East States

Governments in the Middle East continue to spend lavishly on their militaries; defense spending for the region reaching slightly above \$50 billion this last year. The

International Institute of Strategic Studies reports that Saudi Arabia spent almost \$19 billion on defense in 2003, with Israel spending \$10.8 billion, Iran \$3.0 billion, Egypt \$1.7 billion, Syria \$1.5 billion, and Libya slightly less.¹ Several states in the region, particularly Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have also made major purchases of advanced U.S. and other Western weapons systems in recent years.

A review of the weapons systems in the region indicates that in the last 15 years the gap in military strength is growing in favor of U.S. allies and that this gap is likely to grow even greater in the years to come. Recent acquisitions of arms by U.S. allies in the Persian Gulf, such as the UAE's purchase of 80 F-16 Block 60 fighter/attack aircraft, for example, involve some of the most sophisticated systems in the U.S. arsenal. Iran and Syria, in contrast, have dilapidated weapons systems and have made few major purchases in recent years. Syria in particular is too poor to buy sophisticated aircraft or armored vehicles in large quantities even if a supplier were to be available. U.S. allies have also benefited from training with the U.S. military (though they still remain quite poor at many basic skills), while U.S. adversaries have not received outside assistance commensurate with that of our allies

Military spending and numbers and types of advanced weapons systems, however, are poor guides to the actual military strength of most militaries in the Middle East. With the exception of Israel and Turkey, Middle Eastern militaries – both allies and adversaries -- suffer from a host of problems that make them far weaker than their strength on paper would suggest. The most egregious weaknesses include:

- *Manpower limits.* Because of the region's poor education system, particularly with regard to technical skills, regional militaries have few officers and even fewer conscripts who can take advantage of the technology essential to modern weapons systems. It is unlikely that the UAE will be able to produce 80 trained pilots for its new F-16s for many years to come if ever. The cost of producing pilots would be the weakening other branches of its military.
- *Poor training.* Many Middle Eastern militaries do not properly invest in training. Exercises are often rote, and deviation from the exercise script is discouraged. As a result, these militaries are unprepared for the battlefield, particularly if creativity and flexibility are required.
- *Politicized militaries.* The military leadership of Iran and many Arab militaries contains many serious military officers, but among their ranks are also many political hacks who attained their position not because of their military skill but because of their political loyalty or their links to key regime figures. The Saudi military is laden with royal family members, many of whom have are corrupt or inept. Syria ensures that key military positions are held by regime loyalists, particularly those from the same sectarian group and even clan as the ruling Asad family. These officers were placed in their positions in part to prevent a military coup: the result is a weakened with a diminished ability to strike against external enemies.

¹ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2005).

- *Poor tactical leadership.* Middle Eastern militaries give non-commissioned and junior officers little responsibility or status. Egyptian colonels do the same job that U.S. lieutenants do. As a result, small units are unable to handle problems independently and constantly seek guidance from central authorities.
- *Weak communication, logistics, and other non-glamorous military functions.* Militaries such as Egypt have spent heavily on modern weapons systems but have not invested in the necessary maintenance, logistics, or communications capabilities. As a result, weapons are often unfit for use because they are chronically broken or properly coordinated with one another.
- *A wide range of suppliers.* Many Middle Eastern militaries use a wide range of suppliers to gain political influence with various supplier countries around the world. On some occasions they change vendors because different suppliers offer different opportunities for corruption. U.S. adversaries such as Iran and Syria also use multiple suppliers because they cannot easily obtain Western systems. Even those from Russia or China cannot be consistently accessed due to U.S. pressure. Iran, for example, has dated U.S. systems from the 1970s, as well as systems from China, Russia, and other countries. Even when they are of high quality (and Chinese systems in particular often are not), such different systems are nightmares for training, logistics, and maintenance.
- *Poor combined arms.* Many Middle East militaries are not able to achieve the maximum effect from different arms of combat. Their air forces do not train with their armies, and even within the armies, the infantry, armor, and artillery do a poor job of coordinating their activities. As a result, they are not able to take full advantage of the firepower and systems available in their arsenals.

Israel is in a league of its own in terms of the quality of its military. On paper, the Israeli military is far superior to its rivals. For example, the Israeli Air Force not only has some of the most advanced U.S. platforms, but it also has highly advanced avionics packages that greatly enhance the capabilities of the planes. But Israel's advantages go well beyond this. Its officer corps is highly skilled, and its conscripts would be highly motivated in any foreseeable conflict against an aggressive neighbor. By any standard the Israeli Defense Force is adept at marksmanship, combined arms, small unit initiative, tactical intelligence, and other vital parts of military effectiveness. Israel is also one of the world's leaders in military innovation and has demonstrated a remarkable ability to exploit its weapons systems to maximum effect. Israel is also the only state in the region that can take advantage of modern information technology and how it can be exploited on the battlefield. Together, technical skills and advanced weapon systems give Israel a decisive advantage over any conceivable combination of opponents.

One caveat is in order. Although most modern systems require more training and technical skills, others may emerge that make tasks that are currently complex quite easy. The most advanced Russian surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), for example, require only modest training, yet the missiles are deadly to even the most advanced U.S. fighters and

bombers. These SAMs would reduce the advantages the United States and Israel have from their air superiority in any likely conflict. In the future, other systems may be developed that would enable low-skill militaries to use them with devastating effects.

Alternatives to Military Power

Because of the weaknesses of their conventional forces, aggressive regimes seeking to strike U.S. allies or otherwise change the status quo will find it difficult to use their militaries to achieve their objectives. Israel and Turkey, two close U.S. allies, are the strongest states in the region and can rebuff any attacks with relative ease. Even weaker allies like Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia can pose difficulties for potential aggressors like Iran or Syria given these potential aggressors' profound military problems.

When U.S. power is added to this equation, the unlikely becomes almost impossible. Even a limited application of U.S. airpower would make it far harder for an aggressive state to use its conventional military superiority to its advantage: the United States could destroy massed armored or mechanized forces with relative ease. Added to the mix is the large U.S. military presence already in the region. Rapid deployment capabilities that enable the United States to place forces in the region quickly render any attack even less likely.

Aggressive states have two options to offset their conventional weaknesses: terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. From the perspective of the threats posed by Middle East *states*, the outlook on terrorism is surprisingly bright. Of the major regional sponsors of terrorism in the last twenty years – Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, and Syria – only Iran and Syria still are major supporters of terrorism. Even in these cases, the level of support is far less than the 1980s. Although state-sponsored support for terrorism has vast implications for U.S. interests in the region, particularly in regard to the security of Israel, it is worth noting that these states are not now using terrorists directly against U.S. personnel or facilities. One exception, however, is Iran, a country that conceives of terrorism in part as a deterrent against the United States and would use it directly against Americans in response to a U.S. attack or other perceived offense.

This shift away from state-sponsored terrorism stems from two main sources. First, the regimes in the Middle East are far less ideological than in the past, with various revolutions having waned or been overturned. Iran's revolutionaries remain in power, but their grandiose dreams of spreading the Iranian model around the world are now largely gone. Libya has abandoned much of its uncritical and often bizarre support for revolutionary causes around the world, as has Sudan. The Taliban, of course, continued their backing of terrorism until their overthrow by U.S. and Afghan forces in 2001. Second, outside pressure – led by the United States – has made regional governments far more concerned that support for terrorism would lead to retaliation, both military and economic.

The picture on weapons of mass destruction (WMD), particularly nuclear weapons and viral biological agents, is also brighter than it was at the end of the Cold War. Iraq and Libya have given up their WMD programs. With the worrisome exception of Iran (discussed below), no potential adversary state in the region has an active nuclear program.

Information on active biological programs is scarce. The Monterey Institute reports that Iran and Syria have developed biological programs, developing agents such as anthrax, botulinum toxin, ricin, and foot and mouth disease. Other states such as Libya and Egypt may also have done research into biological systems.² Because of the potential lethality of these systems and their ability to give states dramatically increased options for the use of force, the status of biological programs should remain a top intelligence priority.

Six Potential Dangers

The above review of traditional security problems may offer grounds for guarded optimism. In reality, however, security worries in the Middle East are shifting rather than declining. Many of the problems the United States will face in the future involve internal weaknesses of regional states, transnational actors, non-traditional military threats, and the role of new external players in the Middle East, particularly China.

Crises of Legitimacy

With the exception of Israel, all the regimes in the Middle East face challenges to their legitimacy in the coming years. The legitimacy gained from Arab nationalism or, in Iran's case, the Islamic revolution, is diminishing. Lineage is still used by monarchies to promote their legitimacy, but this practice is being strained in countries where the governments are not providing jobs and opportunities for their citizens.

The democratic waves that have swept much of the world have not swept over the Middle East. The Middle East is the most oppressed region of the world, and prospects for change are poor.³ With the partial exception of Lebanon, none of the governments are true democracies, with rampant electoral problems including severe restrictions on who can run for office, blatant electoral fraud, intimidation of opposition candidates, the use of the judiciary to intimidate regime opponents, and a lack of political institutions. Civil society in the Middle East is exceptionally weak and, in most countries, the law is subject to the whim of the powerful.

The path to representative government is also not clear. As a result, voters frustrated with corruption, economic stagnation, or other problems lack peaceful ways to effect regime change. Nor will a greater popular voice in decision making inherently lead to benefits for the United States. Where elections have occurred, Islamists, not pro-Western liberals, have done the best. The Islamists embrace elections as a route to power, but some have illiberal agendas, not only in regard to the role of women but also on vital issues such as civil liberties and economic reform.

The regional economies also face deep fundamental problems. Although the recent surge in the price of oil has provided considerable respite in several cases, particularly for Saudi Arabia which faced an economic crisis in the late 1990s, deep structural problems remain. Economic growth outside the oil sector is poor – by some measures, it has been negative in the last twenty years. Many countries are mired in debt. Corruption is rampant. Transparency International's latest survey of corruption gives

² Monterey Institute for International Studies, "Chemical and Biological Resource Page" (2002). Available at <http://cns.miiis.edu/research/cbw/possess.htm#14>. Accessed on September 18, 2005.

³ "The State of Human Development in the Arab Region," *Arab Human Development Report 2002* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2002), pp. 25-34.

poor scores to most Middle Eastern countries (with the small monarchies of the Arabian peninsula and Jordan being noteworthy exceptions).⁴ Unemployment rates are typically 15 percent or higher, and underemployment is considerable. Poverty is also growing in many countries. Cities are overwhelmed with new migrants, and their infrastructures and social services cannot keep up with growth. The region is also exhausting its limited water supplies and degrading the overall environment, making it hard to sustain the limited gains of recent years. Even the tremendous oil wealth of some states has had its downside, leading them to adopt policies that focus on import substitution and rely on a command economy, stifling economic growth that is not linked to the oil sector.⁵

A demographic crisis compounds these problems. With the exception of sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East has the fastest population growth rate in the world. Several states, notably Egypt and Iran, have brought down their birthrates considerably in recent years to under two percent and under one percent respectively after years of massive population growth.⁶ Many other states, particularly those in the Persian Gulf and the Gaza Strip, have extremely high rates of population growth, requiring an extremely rapid rate of economic growth to absorb the new entrants to the workforce.

Profound economic reform is necessary for area regimes to begin a path to sustained growth. Yet these reforms would be politically destabilizing. In the near term, such reforms might increase unemployment or other social dislocations. In addition, they would certainly alienate elites who have benefited from corruption and crony capitalism, making them more likely to oppose the existing leaders.

None of these problems necessarily means revolution. Middle Eastern regimes have demonstrated a remarkable ability to weather economic and political problems and maintain power. Nevertheless these problems create the potential for civil strife by allowing governments to change dramatically, with new elites and new leaders emerging. From a U.S. point of view, these problems also mean that regimes will focus their foreign policies increasingly on ensuring domestic stability. Cooperation with the United States, always unpopular, may become even more problematic.

Continued anti-U.S. Terrorism

The September 11, 2001 attacks demonstrated the danger that terrorism emanating from the Middle East can pose to the United States. Almost 3,000 people died on that day because of the hatred and machinations of the people of the region, not their governments. Today, much of this danger goes beyond the Middle East as traditionally defined and includes South Asia, Southeast Asia, parts of Africa, and Europe.

The Middle East, however, remains the heart of much of the problem and this is likely to remain an issue in the future. The *jihadists* have proven skilled in blaming the region's many problems on the United States. Bin Ladin's message -- that the United States, as opposed to regional regimes, was responsible for the economic and political problems of the region -- had at best limited penetration in the Middle East, even as late

⁴ "Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2004," Available at http://www.transparency.org/cpi/2004/dnld/media_pack_en.pdf. Accessed on September 25, 2005.

⁵ For an excellent overview of these problems, see Alan Richards, "Economic Reform in the Middle East: The Challenge to Governance," in Nora Bensahel and Daniel Byman, eds. *The Future Security Environment in the Middle East* (RAND, 2003), pp. 65-80.

⁶ *CIA World Factbook 2005*, available at <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ir.html>.

as September 2001. But the Iraq war and the plunging popularity of the United States have made Bin Ladin's arguments credible to increasing numbers of people in the Middle East. The numbers of recruits and supporters of terrorist movements have grown since September 11.

It is possible that several Middle Eastern terrorist groups may shift their focus from local regimes to the United States in the coming years. In Iraq, such a mix of anti-regime and anti-U.S. terrorism has already demonstrated its lethality. Thus far, groups like the Palestinian HAMAS or the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria have concentrated on local regimes, not on killing Americans. Should these fighters embrace Bin Ladin's call for striking at the United States, it would greatly add to the cadre and network of the anti-U.S. *ihadists*. Parts of the Algerian Islamist militant community have already moved toward embracing a broader, more global agenda.

Regimes in the Middle East have so far kept a lid on terrorism and dissent primarily through repression. As long as the regimes remain relatively strong, this remains a viable if brutal approach. Should the legitimacy crisis grow more extreme in countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, violent radicals will have far more opportunities to recruit and carry out operations.

The Empty Palestinian State

As part of its interest in helping ensure the security of Israel, the United States must also confront the weakness of the Palestinian state. Even with leaders like President Mahmoud Abbas (a decided improvement over Yasir Arafat), the Palestinian area is likely to remain unstable and the conflict with Israel will continue.

Palestinian military forces are non-existent, and security forces are weak, poorly trained, and divided into rival factions. Years of conflict with Israel have further reduced their effectiveness. Today, their ability to crack down on radical groups like HAMAS is uncertain at best.

Divisions among the Palestinians are profound. Among the many conflicts among Palestinians are: the split between the leadership that was in exile with the late leader Yasir Arafat and the leadership that emerged from those who remained in the West Bank and Gaza Strip; the split between those who embrace the religious agenda of HAMAS and Palestine Islamic Jihad and those who prefer the corrupt but secular leadership; and the split between the "old guard" of all of these movements and younger activities, many of whom emerged during the second *intifada*. If anything this list overstates Palestinian unity. Because the government is so weak, basic civil functions are often carried out on a local level, leaving major urban areas with dozens of power centers and numerous, but weak, leaders.

Such weakness and decentralization mean that any peace settlement is likely to be victimized by terrorist spoilers who oppose it. Opposition may come from a genuine opposition to a negotiated settlement, from the wishes of an anti-peace patron like Iran, or from a desire to see a rival leader discredited or embarrassed. Terrorist attacks are likely to continue before and for years after the signing of any deal.

Because violence will not abate with the signing of a peace treaty, Israeli pressure on suspected terrorist groups is likely to continue. The Palestinian government will be too weak to enforce order, so Israel will feel compelled to act directly and assassinate or arrest suspected terrorists. Because Israel frequently resorts to economic punishments,

travel restrictions, or other measures that have effects beyond the terrorists and their immediate supporters, many Palestinians are likely to remain trapped in this broader conflict. This combination of direct action and economic punishments will in turn make it more difficult for moderate Palestinian leaders to truly embrace any peace negotiations.

Palestinian poverty increases the risk of instability even further. The rather conservative CIA estimate of unemployment in the Gaza Strip is at 50 percent, with over 80 percent of the population living below the poverty line. By comparison the West Bank is better, but still abysmal, with unemployment running at over 25 percent and almost 60 percent of the population below the poverty line.⁷

Peace alone will not cure these economic woes. The Palestinian economy has historically depended heavily on remittances from Palestinians abroad and on employment in low-skilled jobs in Israel. Palestinian employment in Israel is not likely to return to levels of the 1990s, as security-conscious Israelis are turning more to workers from other parts of the developing world. Even more worrisome, the corruption and violence rampant in the Palestinian territories discourages foreign investment making it hard to revitalize the economy.

The Iranian Bomb

The current U.S. efforts to punish Iran for its violations of its Non-Proliferation Treaty obligations highlight the risk that Iran might acquire a nuclear weapon in the years to come. For now, an actual weapon appears years off, and there are many possible problems that may further delay the deployment of a bomb. But planners should anticipate the possibility that by 2015 Iran will have one or more nuclear weapons. For many years, the United States hoped this possibility would be offset by the emergence of a government led by pro-U.S. reformers, a development that, for the near-term at least, appears highly unlikely. In fact the opposite has occurred: conservative Iranians have consolidated their power in the last five years.

Iran is not likely to use its nuclear weapon directly against the United States or any regional target, including Israel. Although Tehran still seeks influence in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq and with other immediate neighbors, its foreign policy has become far more cautious since the heady days of the Islamic revolution over twenty five years ago. In general, Iran has demonstrated a healthy respect for American military power.

The biggest risk is that a nuclear weapon would make Iran more confident and aggressive. A nuclear-armed Iran would be far harder to the United States to coerce. Tehran could become more aggressive in Iraq or Afghanistan, increase pressure on the Arab kingdoms of the Persian Gulf, or bolster terrorism against Israel secure in the knowledge that it is protected from U.S. retaliation by its atomic arsenal. Pakistan appears to have used a similar calculus in its decision to escalate the Kashmir insurgency and support anti-India terrorism after it developed its nuclear program.

The Weakness of Iraq

⁷ *CIA Factbook 2005*, available at <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/gz.html#Econ> for the Gaza Strip and <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/we.html#Econ> for the West Bank. Downloaded on September 25, 2005.

The future of Iraq is uncertain in the near-term let alone the long-term. Iraq could emerge as a model of democracy for a region that is one of the least free in the world. On the other hand, Iraq could also splinter into three or more fragments or collapse completely. It is even possible that a new military dictator could take power, riding into Baghdad with the support of Iraqi soldiers trained, armed, and recruited by the United States to fight the local insurgents. But even a democratic or military government is likely to be weak and would find it difficult to stop violence within its territory. In addition, Sunni-Shi'a tension will continue, with *ihadists* from outside the country fanning the flames of sectarian violence.

Such weakness has many ramifications. Truly massive civil strife is a possibility, with the conflict generating tens of thousands of deaths and even more refugees and internally displaced people. Because many in the Arab world will blame problems in the post-Saddam Iraq on the United States, U.S. credibility would suffer, regardless of the accuracy of various allegations.

Iran is also likely to maintain a strong influence in Iraq. Tehran has vital strategic interests in Iraq, reinforced by ideology, history, and close ties among the clerical establishment. Should violence grow, particularly if it leads to an all-out sectarian civil war, Iranian intervention may increase dramatically as it seeks to help its Shi'a co-religionists (particularly those among their ranks friendly to Tehran). Such an intervention in turn could prompt Iran's rivals to step up their interference in the country, thus escalating the crisis.

A weak Iraq could also emerge as a major haven for anti-U.S. *ihadists* who use the country as a new Afghanistan and send terrorists on missions to Europe, the United States, and neighboring countries such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan. These countries are not on the verge of civil war, but even a small number of terrorists sent could dramatically increase civil strife, harm economic growth, and make the regimes hesitant to embrace political reform. Already European counterterrorism officials are gravely concerned with the influence of veteran *ihadists* when they return from Iraq.

The Emergence of China

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has been the uncontested outside security power in the Middle East. The remaining powers that played a significant role, particularly Britain but also France to a degree, were U.S. allies, despite many differences on specific policies.

Such unilateral dominance may change in the years to come. China in particular may play a greater role as its energy needs increase. China, like the United States is a net energy importer, and its rapid economic growth will give it a massive appetite for the region's oil. Already China has tried to improve ties to Iran and other oil-rich countries as part of a strategy to ensure a supply of energy. As China becomes more of a commercial power, it is likely to try to increase influence with key oil producers such as Saudi Arabia. Beijing may also expand its naval forces to give it the ability to project power to the region. China might also increase its arms sales to the region as a way to curry influence, as well as to make its domestic arms industry more profitable.

If China does emerge as a major regional player, this will have profound implications for the United States. Middle Eastern states, particularly adversaries such as Syria and Iran, have in the past tried to balance U.S. pressure with the support of another

patron. For years the Soviet Union filled this role, and the collapse of communism made both Iran and Syria acutely aware of their isolation and, in both cases, reduced (though hardly ended) some of their most roguish behavior.

If Iran, Syria, or other hostile powers were confident that they could resist U.S. pressure, their willingness to support terrorism, meddle in Iraq, or otherwise hinder U.S. influence would increase. Even U.S. allies such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia would probably make overtures to China as a way of resisting U.S. pressure on issues such as democratic reform. The United States, for its part, would have to factor in Beijing's position as it weighs how to approach the Middle East.

Conclusions

The above survey suggests that future security problems in the Middle East do not concern conventional military power but rather internal instability and unconventional forms of power such as nuclear weapons or terrorism. Much of the U.S. strategy for the region, however, is predicated on preserving the strong U.S. military presence in the region, a presence that often will accomplish little and at times may even backfire. In particular, the presence of U.S. military forces in many countries goads *ihadists* and lends credence to their propaganda that the United States, not local regimes, are to blame for the region's many problems. At times a significant U.S. force is necessary, but U.S. planners should recognize the tradeoffs inherent in such a presence.

The legitimacy crisis in particular deserves U.S. attention. Steady efforts to promote reform are necessary, even while recognizing that the road ahead is bumpy and that U.S. influence is likely to be limited. The United States must also try to build the institutions that are part of strong democracies, such as an independent judiciary, a free media, and a strong civil society. For now, U.S. friends in the region are few, and area regimes, however corrupt and autocratic, are far more pro-American than any likely alternatives. Before the United States presses hard for reform, it must work to ensure that pro-U.S. voices are louder and better organized than they are today.

Part of an effective strategy for the Middle East also requires actions outside the region. In the years to come, the U.S.-China relationship is likely to have a profound impact on U.S. influence in the Middle East. Similarly, the U.S. relationship with Europe must be strong to reduce the likelihood (or delay) and Iranian bomb and to ensure effective action to counter terrorist groups.

Taken together, the region's many problems and the difficulties of finding solutions will ensure that the Middle East remains at or near the top of the U.S. foreign policy agenda for decades to come. Some of these problems cannot be avoided, but all of them can be better managed through foresight and careful planning.