

# Conceptualizing U.S. Strategy in the Middle East

May 17, 1994



In-Depth Reports

In many ways the Middle East is a paradigm for our nation's approach to the post-Cold War era, and it is both our challenge and responsibility to build a regional environment in the Middle East in which the promise of future peace and hope can be realized.

In essence, the Middle East now faces a choice between two futures. In one, extremists wielding weapons of mass destruction hold sway over a region torn by intercommunal and interstate conflicts, and could pose an existential threat to Israel and other U.S. allies in the region. The alternative path yields democratic progress, the free movement of people and goods, and a dialogue leading to regional security. The choice, very clearly, is between violence or peace, regression or freedom, isolation or dialogue.

There are examples of both paths today. Efforts to unify Yemen suffered a blow when northerners and southerners chose the battlefield over the negotiating table. At the same time, in a step critical to ending a prolonged conflict, Israeli soldiers peacefully transferred authority in Gaza and Jericho to Palestinian authorities.

In the middle of this era of turmoil and hope, the United States cannot afford to be a bystander. Despite the end of the superpower rivalry, the region remains of vital interest to our nation. The free flow of oil at reasonable prices from the Gulf, the security and well-being of Israel, a secure and lasting Arab-Israeli peace, the stability of friendly Arab countries, the need to contain the reactionary backlash states of the region (Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Sudan), and efforts to curb the spread of weapons of mass destruction -- all of these reasons give our nation a very real stake in ensuring a more peaceful, prosperous, and democratic future in the Middle East.

We do not seek, however, to dominate the future of the Middle East. Too much of the troubled history of the region has been preoccupied with a struggle for mastery, and too little effort has been devoted to a cooperative effort to promote common interests and shared values in a better future for all peoples of the region. Nor do we see this battle for the future of the Middle East as a post-Cold War clash of civilizations, in which Western liberal democratic traditions are pitted against ostensibly opposing civilizations based on Islam and other religious traditions.

**Fundamentalism vs. Extremism** Some theorists have suggested that there is no common ground for understanding between the West and the rest -- only the prospect of confrontation and conflict. They assert that the United States, as the sole remaining superpower, should lead a new crusade against Islam. In the quest for a new ideology to rally against, they believe, fundamentalism would replace communism as the West's designated threat.

The Clinton administration strongly disagrees. There is indeed a fundamental divide in the Middle East, as there is throughout the world, but the fault line does not run between civilizations or religions. Rather, it runs between oppression and responsive government, between isolation and openness, and between moderation and extremism, and it knows no distinction by race or by creed.

In South Africa and China, Burma and Russia, Gaza and northern Iraq, the universal language of personal and political freedom is being spoken by brave men and women who are fighting for human rights and democracy, and the dramatic global changes of the past four years demonstrate that this language is capable of transcending the past

and transforming the future.

This is as true in the Middle East and the Muslim world as it is elsewhere. Our foe is oppression and extremism, whether in religious or secular guise. We draw the line against those who seek to advance their agenda through terror, intolerance, or coercion. The United States will continue to steadfastly oppose acts of terrorism aimed at stopping the peace process or denying the people of the Middle East a future of hope. The enemies of peace have not hesitated to use violence to advance their goal, but this administration has affirmed that it will not allow them to succeed.

We also reject the notion that a renewed emphasis on traditional values in the Islamic world must inevitably conflict with the West or with democratic principles. These values of devotion to family and society, to faith and good works, are not alien to our own experience. It should come as no surprise that citizens throughout the Middle East and North Africa are testing and debating the role of these values in society and government. People in the region and indeed around the world are searching for ways to achieve responsive government, guarantee basic human rights, and guide their daily lives. That so many of them look to religions such as Islam is neither unusual nor unique. This is a universal quest; Islam is not the issue.

Confronting the Extremist Threat Today, the real conflicts which offend the conscience of the world are manifestly not conflicts between civilizations. In Bosnia, we are opposing hatred and the use of force. Our enemy is bigotry and ruthless nationalism. Serbian leaders may seek to legitimize their conquest with claims that they are staving off a Muslim threat to the West, but the world should not accept such patently false claims. Certainly the United States will not accept it. We support a democratic Bosnian state in which Muslims and Christians can live together in peace. We believe that the West has an interest in demonstrating that such a state in the very heart of Europe is welcome and can survive and prosper.

Saddam Hussein's explanation for his invasion of Kuwait -- that it was necessary to defend Islam against a Western invader -- was as transparent as Milosevic's claim of a civilizing battle is today, and fooled no one. The Gulf War was seen for what it was: a bid for conquest and regional supremacy defeated by an unprecedented coalition of Islamic and non-Islamic nations.

In the wake of that war, the United States has been forced to deal with two hostile regimes in the region -- secular Iraq and fundamentalist Iran. Elsewhere in the region, we oppose the extremist policies of secular Libya and fundamentalist Sudan, and we watch carefully from Algeria to southern Lebanon, from the West Bank and Gaza to Egypt and Jordan, where extremists threaten to divert the region to the old path of violence.

There should be no doubt: Islamic extremism poses a threat to American interests. There are forces that use the cover of Islamic revival to suppress freedom, to withdraw from the world, and to justify hostilities. These movements threaten the United States and the global community of nations because they speak in a powerful and all too seductive language, the age-old cant of hatred, fear, and prejudice. But above all, as the world has learned, they threaten the future of the Middle East.

Although the circumstances vary, the phenomenon of extremism around the world flows from common sources -- disillusionment, a failure to secure basic needs, and dashed hopes for political participation and social justice. Widespread disenchantment breeds an extremism by no means unique to the Middle East or the Muslim world. What distinguishes Islamic extremism is that it uses religion to cover its real intentions -- the naked pursuit of political power.

In the midst of this challenge, the United States must join hands with willing nations and build regional bulwarks against extremism. From Turkey to Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to Indonesia, we are maintaining long-standing alliances and friendships with both secular and fundamentalist states with Muslim populations. In addition, we are

cultivating relations with newly-independent Islamic states in Central Asia like Kazakhstan.

Using Peace to Curb Radicalism In confronting these challenges, we must energetically pursue Arab-Israeli peace, actively contain those states and organizations that promote or support religious or secular extremism, and help form a community of like-minded Middle Eastern states that share our goals of free markets, democratization, and controls on the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems.

Each of these elements complements and reinforces the other. Progress in Arab-Israeli peacemaking helps put the extremists on the defensive and increases their isolation. In turn, undermining extremist forces makes it easier for the peacemakers to proceed. When peacemaking and containment work, moderate governments find it easier to bolster their legitimacy and confront the extremists within their midst. Those moderate states are then able to build mutually-reinforcing relationships that hold the promise of greater regional stability.

Actively pursuing peace in the Middle East is one of the Clinton administration's highest foreign policy priorities and the cornerstone of our efforts to help transform the region. If after so much hatred and strife Arab and Jew can live in peace in the Holy Land, they will be able to direct their immense talents and resources to the task of progress. This will set an example and create a peacemaking dynamic that could positively influence all of the other conflicts in the region.

What happened in Gaza and Jericho is, therefore, both simple and profound. In a literal sense, Palestinian police took over responsibility for maintaining order from the Israeli army. But this simple transfer of authority also symbolized the transformation of relations between Palestinians and Israelis. For the first time in their history, Palestinians have achieved the right and responsibility to govern themselves. For the first time in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Israelis and Palestinians have agreed on practical ways to pursue peaceful coexistence in the Holy Land.

We are all acutely conscious of the difficulties and dangers involved in this process. Between the historic handshake on the White House lawn last September and the Cairo signing nine months later, there have been constant reminders that the forces of extremism and reaction are determined to kill the hope of peace, and we cannot -- we must not -- allow them to succeed.

Some may question the wisdom and viability of the course that Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat have chosen, but this is not the moment for second-guessing. Israelis and Palestinians decided that the status quo was intolerable and that peaceful reconciliation is preferable to endless conflict and violence. They deserve more than just the benefit of the doubt; they deserve support and encouragement. If they are allowed to fail, hopes for a peaceful Middle East will be dashed. And who can say how many more lives will be lost, how many more families torn apart, how many more battles will be fought before courageous leaders can again try to build peace?

Nor can we afford to simply stand back and watch history unfold in Gaza and Jericho. The complexities of peacemaking are only beginning to be revealed. The Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles (DOP) calls for the eventual extension of Palestinian self-government to the rest of the West Bank. Elections in the West Bank and Gaza should take place this year. And no later than two years from now Israel and the PLO will begin final status negotiations. Difficulties will arise at every step of these negotiations. They involve making peace between a state and an organization comprised of very diverse elements. They include the most complicated conflicts to resolve and the easiest to disrupt. A permanent regional peace cannot be constructed on this fragile foundation alone.

The Key to Regional Stability Given these difficulties, we have decided to press ahead with efforts to achieve a breakthrough to a comprehensive peace this year. A decisive Syrian-Israeli agreement would allow Jordan and Lebanon to resolve their differences with Israel in a short order. Full normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab states of the Maghreb and the Gulf would quickly follow. In short, the logjam would be broken. An Israel-Syria peace would thus shore up the agreement between Israel and the PLO and greatly advance U.S. efforts to widen

the circle of peacemakers, bolster the network of Middle East moderation, and construct a bastion against backlash states.

Syria plays a critical role in the wider sweep of regional peace. Historically, its alliance with Iran and support for rejectionist groups have given the forces of extremism a vital base in the Middle East. By invoking Arab nationalism, Syria has given those forces an important claim on legitimacy. Syria has used its influence both for ill, as when it rejected Sadat's peace with Israel, and for good, as when Damascus joined the Gulf War against Saddam Hussein and, most importantly, when it entered into direct bilateral negotiations with Israel.

Thus, when President Assad took the significant step of announcing in Geneva with President Clinton that Syria had made, in his words, a "strategic choice for peace" with Israel, his nation's erstwhile extremist allies quickly grew very nervous. Palestinian rejectionist leaders, fearful that they would lose their bases in Lebanon and Syria, went off to Libya in search of new havens. Hezbollah leaders argued how best to pursue an extremist agenda in an era of Israeli-Lebanese peace. Iranian officials hurriedly visited Damascus but apparently left empty-handed, and when they got home, the Iranian clergy began criticizing the leadership for failing to prevent the emerging isolation of their nation.

In spite of these encouraging signs, we do not underestimate the risks and costs involved in achieving an Israeli-Syrian peace. As Prime Minister Rabin has noted, the wrenching internal debate in Israel will make the price of peace with Syria painful indeed. Although it would be hard for the United States to ease that pain, President Clinton has repeatedly said that we can and will help Israel minimize the risks at hand.

First, we will insist that the peace be a real peace: not just the absence of war, but a qualitative change in relations between Israel and Syria. This includes full diplomatic relations, an end to the Arab boycott, open borders for people and trade, and promotion of joint economic projects. As President Clinton noted in Geneva, we already have good reason to believe that Syria is now committed to real peace in the way that Israel and others define it.

Second, we will insist that peace be secure. The United States stands ready to participate in the security arrangements that the parties will negotiate. Specific discussions on what form that participation may take have not yet begun, but our commitment is firm. And just as we have acted this past year to fulfill the president's pledge to sustain and enhance Israel's qualitative edge, so we will act to bolster Israel's early warning capability and ability to handle longer-range threats to compensate for strategic advantages it may choose to give up for peace.

Finally, we will insist that peace be comprehensive. We will work hard with Jordan and Lebanon to ensure that their negotiations with Israel result in peace agreements. And we will insist that the wider Arab and Muslim worlds end their boycott and fully normalize their relations with Israel.

Changing the Political Paradigm By its very existence, the coalition that fought and won the Gulf War changed the strategic environment for peace between Israel and her neighbors. Imagine the impact of such a peace on the strategic environment in the wider Middle East. Iran, Iraq, and the groups they support will be increasingly isolated. Iran would be denied the means to foment trouble in the Middle East heartland. Its message of hatred and call for the destruction of the "Zionist entity" will appear before the world as an empty and anachronistic threat. Similarly, Saddam Hussein's hopes of mobilizing the Arab world behind an anti-Israeli banner will be dashed.

Through the peace process, a new regional environment will be created -- even now it is taking form -- in which moderate Islamic states from Turkey in the north to Saudi Arabia in the south, and from Morocco in the west to Pakistan in the east -- will constrain the capacity of rogue states and organizations to extend their influence and their message of hate and violence. With Syria and all other states in this camp at peace with Israel, the Middle East balance of power will shift decisively in favor of moderation. The extremists will be denied the claim that they are the wave of the future. They will have to confront the reality of their failure.

This widening circle of peace will also help governments find the strength to counter extremism at home as well as

abroad. Governments will have the opportunity to counter disillusionment with the demonstrated results of peacemaking. Resources will be freed to provide for the basic needs of their people, rather than the destructive requirements of war. Regional economic development -- using technologies and capital previously denied by boycotts and conflicts -- will begin to offer the taste of a better life. And once governments are able again to concentrate on the economic well-being of their people, they will feel more secure in meeting their citizen's demands for greater political participation and accountability.

Middle Eastern realities will inevitably intrude to temper this vision. We do not underestimate the difficulties involved in peacemaking or the resilience of the extremist forces that prey on the region. But there is space in our memory for more than just the massacre in Hebron, the car bomb in Afula, the invasion of Kuwait, and the revolution in Iran. We have already witnessed two signing ceremonies on the lawn of the White House: the Camp David accords and the Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles. We know that a peaceful and prosperous future for all of the people of the Middle East is more than a mere mirage. The Clinton administration is well aware of the daunting task involved in transforming the Middle East, but we relish, welcome, and embrace this challenge.

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