

Planning for a More Stable Middle East

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Brief Analysis

The Gulf War will transform the Middle East and America's relationship with it. While seeking success today, the United States must also focus on promoting long-term prospects for regional stability. A critical objective should be forging a more stable balance of power in the Middle East so that no hostile state can dominate this area of vital concern.

In the wake of the Gulf War, the United States will retain most of its traditional interests in the Middle East:

- Access to Mideast oil at reasonable prices.
- Supporting Israel's survival and security, and protecting Turkey and friendly Arab states from external threats.
- Promoting regional stability, conflict resolution, and arms control.
- Protecting American citizens and property and preserving freedom of the seas.

Whereas combatting Soviet influence was once a top American priority, a common interest in settling regional conflicts has developed. The question today is whether this interest can grow, or whether it has reached its limits.

The origins of the current crisis provide useful lessons for developing a policy designed to foster a more stable regional balance. Iraq had numerous motives for seizing Kuwait. But the most important factors permitting Saddam Hussein to realize his ambitions were the breakdown of the regional balance following the Iran-Iraq War, the failure of the United States, the Europeans, and Arab states to respond effectively, and Iraq's misperception of the new international setting.

Towards a Stable Balance in the Gulf: General Principles

In the Gulf War's wake, the United States must work to create and maintain a more stable balance of power that can protect American friends and preserve the free flow of oil. An international structure to establish a stable political military balance in the Gulf region would include the following elements:

- A balance of power that precludes regional domination by any hostile state. A primary U.S. objective should be reconstituting the military balance at a lower level of armaments, while discouraging the expansion of other regional powers like Syria and Iran. The United States cannot permit a local hegemon to threaten the entire region.
- Limitations on local military capabilities, especially weapons of mass destruction. Despite the difficulty of reducing military expenditures in this area of tension, efforts must be made to address the issue in the context of every negotiation. Iraq's indiscriminate use of ballistic missiles against civilian targets adds urgency to this concern.
- Regional arms control arrangements, particularly bilateral efforts between Arab states and Israel to promote communication in periods of crisis.
- International mechanisms for crisis intervention. The United States should exploit the opportunities created by this crisis to constructively utilize collective international arrangements.
- Improvements in U.S. military capabilities. The United States must maintain a rapid deployment capability for

unilateral action at the outset of crises, and will need to focus on the acquisition of "long-reach" capabilities such as cruise missiles and anti-tactical ballistic missiles.

- Resolution of regional conflicts. The United States should focus renewed attention on promoting an Arab-Israeli peace process, capitalizing on the current coalition effort to bring Arab states like Saudi Arabia and Syria to the table. Rather than operating in the context of a UN-sponsored international conference -- which in Israeli eyes would be a kangaroo court -- the United States should seek to retain its central role in peacemaking efforts while working with others to convene regional talks.

Lessons Learned

Many lessons remain to be learned from the current crisis, but it is not too early to draw some preliminary conclusions:

- U.S. leaders must be clear both to regional states and the American public about what U.S. interests are in the Middle East and what types of actions would cross red lines, thereby necessitating a U.S. response. The United States never told Iraq or anyone else that invading Kuwait would be seen as a threat to vital American interests. This error must be avoided in the future.
- The United States must continue to play a direct role in both the security and diplomacy of the Middle East if it is to affect how U.S. interests are served. The United States will not be able to rely entirely on international institutions or local arrangements to protect American interests.
- It will be extremely harmful to allow Iraq or any other power to attain regional hegemony in the wake of this war. Any hostile state that dominates the region will threaten its stability and American interests.
- The United States must be even more wary than in the past about policies that accommodate the revanchist concerns of local states. The United States did not seriously try to deter Iraq in 1990 because it did not recognize the need for such deterrence. Even as the United States considers closer relations with states like Syria, it must avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.
- America's defense requirements in the region will be proportional to the strength of local militaries. While the United States should plan to be largely self-reliant in the early stages of future crises, the level of required U.S. defense investment will depend on the outcome of the Gulf War. If Iraq's military strength is broken and regional arms restraint takes hold, the United States will be able to limit its own military needs. But if local militaries continue to grow and modernize, the United States will have to devote an increasing share of its defense resources to insuring that it will be able to counter them effectively.

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