

## Keynote Address

Apr 30, 1990



In-Depth Reports

**S**uperpower relations in the Middle East is an especially timely and provocative topic -- timely because superpower relations clearly are changing, and provocative because the consequences from those changes are far from self-evident.

On one hand, the lessening of the tensions between the superpowers, especially the declining role of the Soviet Union in the Third World, can contribute to peace and stability. But, on the other hand, the great independence of the Third World countries from superpower rivalries and superpower control can increase tensions and dangers.

This independence, combined with the growing technological sophistication of many Third World nations, poses new threats to our friends and ourselves. In particular, the proliferation of unconventional weapons, including chemical, biological and nuclear, could well make several regions of the world increasingly unstable and dangerous. According to our published estimates, by the year 2000, over 15 nations will have ballistic missile capability, and many of these nations are located in the Middle East. Although some of the missiles under development are crude and inaccurate, many have capabilities well beyond battlefield range and can strike in a matter of minutes.

Until recently, the probability that ballistic missiles might carry nuclear weapons was the principal focus of the United States' concern. But the recent war between Iran and Iraq suggests that a country with both ballistic missiles and chemical warfare capability might combine the two with devastating effect on civilians. By breaching the ban against the use of chemical weapons, a ban that has been in existence since the Geneva Protocol of 1925, Iraq and, subsequently, Iran have helped bring the issue of chemical weapons proliferation to the forefront of the U.S.-Middle East agenda.

### The New Multipolar Context

Concerns about the proliferation of chemical weapons recently became especially acute. President Saddam Hussein of Iraq boasted that he had acquired advanced chemical weapons and threatened Israel directly: "We will make the fire eat up half of Israel if it tries to do anything against Iraq." Iraq has also moved launchers for its SCUD-B missiles to western Iraq, closer to Israel's borders.

In the past, the Arab-Israeli conflict took place within a bipolar strategic context, a context in which the Soviet Union provided the Arab states with many of the weapons with which they attacked Israel, while the United States provided Israel with most of the advanced weapons that it needed to defend itself. The bipolar context sometimes exacerbated regional tensions, but it also provided a certain degree of stability, predictability and rationality to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Today, by contrast, we seem to be moving from a bipolar to a multipolar context, a context in which both Israel and Arab states such as Iraq, Syria and Libya, are capable of producing weapons of mass destruction on their own. Therefore, even if Soviet new thinking results in new, more responsible behavior, the Middle East could well become a much more dangerous place over the next few years. The acquisition by certain Middle East countries of unconventional weapons, combined with advanced delivery capability, could well change the strategic environment

in the region for the worse.

#### A Plan for the Future

What should we be doing to cope with these new dangers? Several steps are called for. First, we must continue to try and advance the Arab-Israeli peace process. The United States has repeatedly stated that the objective of the peace process is a comprehensive settlement achieved through negotiations, based on UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338. In our view, these negotiations must involve territory for peace, security and recognition for Israel and all states of the region and Palestinian political rights.

At the same time, President Saddam Hussein's threats remind us that however important the Palestinian dimension may be to a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the conflict between Israel and the Arab states is at least equally important and must also be addressed.

Moreover, we cannot simply assume that progress on the Palestinian issue automatically leads to progress on the Arab-Israeli issue. That is why the Bush Administration believes it is important that key Arab states reach out to Israel and provide the kind of supportive environment necessary to a viable Israeli-Palestinian dialogue. The repeal by the UN of the infamous Zionism-is-racism resolution would also be a very helpful step in fostering that kind of supportive environment.

Second, we must redouble our efforts to curb the widening trend to missile and unconventional weapon proliferation in the Middle East. Our own leadership in the eight-nation Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) is absolutely crucial. Established in April 1987, the MTCR was designed to limit transfers of technology and equipment that could make a contribution to nuclear-capable missiles.

The Soviet Union has stated that it will observe the MTCR guidelines. China has not accepted the guidelines, but has undertaken to act responsibly in the missile area and not to export medium-range missiles to the Middle East. I urge both the Soviet Union and China in the strongest possible terms to exercise restraint in this area. We will also work to ensure that our allies have responsible export control practices, with tough laws that are enforced rigorously.

Third, we will intensify our own efforts to halt the proliferation of chemical weapons to the Middle East and elsewhere. One part of this effort entails working out a bilateral agreement on chemical weapons with the Soviet Union. Such an agreement would, among other things, require the United States and the Soviet Union to reduce their chemical weapon stocks to equally low levels.

#### Interdiction and Deterrence

A second part of this effort is focused on interdiction. Working within the 20-nation Australia Group, the United States has sought to stop the flow of the so-called chemical precursors that could contribute to chemical weapons programs of nations that appear intent on acquiring these weapons.

Finally, we believe that the best long-term solution to the problem of use or threat of chemical weapons and the dangerous proliferation of these weapons is the achievement at the earliest possible date of a comprehensive, effectively verifiable and truly global ban on chemical weapons. But now that some nations are on their way to acquiring a substantial chemical weapons arsenal and an effective delivery system, we have to look beyond interdiction.

We need to focus on deterrence to defend against the use of chemical or nuclear weapons by Third World countries. Deterring nations that possess chemical weapons means convincing them that the international opprobrium against possessing and brandishing these weapons outweighs any potential benefits.

Unfortunately, the world's record in condemning Iraq's threat to use chemical weapons is not very encouraging. The United States reacted to President Saddam Hussein's recent threats in the most forthright and unambiguous way.

We denounced the threats as inflammatory, irresponsible and outrageous. But where was the rest of the world? Where was the international community, working through the international organizations?

It is time for the international community, led by both superpowers, to take an unequivocal stand against the acquisition and the use of chemical weaponry. Let me be perfectly clear about this: unless the world community is much more outspoken in condemning chemical warfare activities, the prospects for deterring Iraq and other nations are dim.

We also need to work more aggressively to defend ourselves and our allies against missile attacks. As I have already said, our efforts to impede the flow of ballistic missile technologies to countries that currently lack such capability is crucial and must continue.

#### Deterring Demand

Beyond these supply side controls -- which are imperfect at best -- active strategic defenses are clearly needed to diminish the incentives for acquiring offensive missiles, thereby deterring acquisition on the demand side as well. We learned this lesson ourselves when our commitment to the development of strategic defenses added a whole new set of negotiating incentives for the Soviet Union during the previously stalled talks in Geneva on offensive weapons reductions. Indeed, we are now hearing new voices in the Soviet media calling for a truly cooperative transition to greater reliance on defense for deterrence.

This is precisely what we have been proposing at the defense and space talks in Geneva for years. If the Soviet leadership heeds these voices of reason, we will see still more movement toward reductions of offensive arsenals on which we and the Soviets have traditionally relied for deterrence.

Most surprisingly of all, we are beginning to hear some new sentiments from long-time critics of strategic defense in our own country in response to the threat of missile attacks by Third World nations on the United States and its allies. I predict you will hear more appreciation of the case for defense against missiles, both at home and abroad, as the ballistic missile threat grows and as our means to deal with it defensively mature. That is why it is important for the Congress to fund the President's SDI request, and for friends like Israel to renew their commitment to defense.

#### Strategic Defense

These are not new issues. The ballistic missile problem in the Middle East has been a developing trend now for over a decade. Indeed, I sponsored legislation four years ago designed to share the workload and the benefits of advanced strategic defense with our allies whose exposure to the menacing spread of missiles is far more immediate than our own. I was impressed then, as I am now, with how quickly Israel seized this opportunity.

Israel's Arrow program is a direct product of these policies. Its first phase of technology demonstration, now entering the actual experimentation stage, has proceeded at modest costs and is ahead of schedule. But as the first phase nears completion, Israeli leaders are faced with a key decision: should they commit themselves, with our continuing assistance, to the determined pursuit of strategic defense technology, or should they leave the Arrow program on a more relaxed pace and focus their investment primarily on retaliatory deterrence and passive means of protecting their citizens?

This is an important decision. I personally believe strategic defense should be a big part of the deterrence equation for both of us, and I urge the Israelis to integrate such thinking into their plans and doctrines for the near future. The President and I will do all in our power to help allies like Israel develop the capability to defend themselves against both unconventional and conventional weapons.

Pursuing the peace process, strengthening nonproliferation regimes, negotiating an effective chemical weapons ban, stemming the dangers of proliferation, and deterring and defending against unconventional weapons are some

of the measures that we must take now. Of course, even if all these steps are taken, it may prove impossible to put the genie of unconventional warfare back into the bottle.

On the other hand, the great lesson of the revolutionary year of 1989 is that dramatic changes in international affairs are possible. I believe our decision to develop SDI helped lay the groundwork for these positive changes in East-West relations. Now I hope that a similar pattern can emerge in the Middle East.

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆  
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



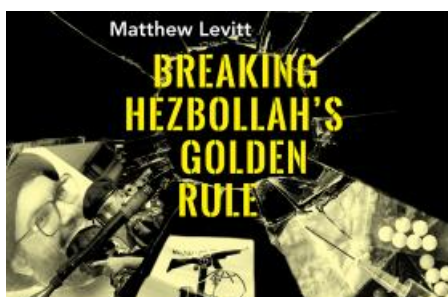
BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

## TOPICS

Arab-Israeli Relations (/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

Proliferation (/policy-analysis/proliferation)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)