

Security, Reform, and Peace:

The Three Pillars of U.S. Strategy in the Middle East

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Brief Analysis

The United States is facing an extraordinary moment of challenge in the Middle East, one that demands an integrated U.S. strategy built on a set of three pillars: security, reform, and peace. The security agenda is the most pressing, but it alone is not sufficient. If the United States wants not just to combat the threats it faces in the region but also to change the regional dynamic which produces such threats, the administration should also pursue political, social, and economic reform in Middle East countries and the promotion of a secure Arab-Israeli peace.

FIRST STEPS

The Bush administration's most pressing Middle East priorities for 2005 are:

- speeding the training and fielding of new Iraqi security forces while building the structure of a free and representative Iraqi government,
- coordinating strategy on Iran's nuclear program with key European and Security Council powers,
- developing and implementing a comprehensive strategy to fight the ideological war against Islamist extremism,
- injecting presidential leadership into calls for political reform, and
- investing in Palestinian political and security change and a peaceful and orderly Israeli disengagement from Gaza.

As it pursues these policies, the administration should also reject calls to set a specific timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq, to embark on a unilateral initiative to "engage" Tehran as a way to address Iranian nuclear ambitions, or to propose an early resumption of Israeli-Palestinian "permanent status" negotiations.

SECURITY

Iraq. America's vital national interest is to leave Iraq as a stable country with a government that poses no threat to other states or to wider U.S. interests. The best way to achieve this is to support the emergence of a federal, unified Iraq that has a reasonably well-functioning, representative government, committed to the rule of law and protection of minority rights. Iraq's recent elections and the expected formation of an Iraqi transitional government are important steps in this effort, which needs to include a process of drafting a constitution that is as inclusive as possible. The United States will have to retain high numbers of troops in Iraq well into this process, but the long-term success of U.S. policy will depend on the size and capability of Iraq's own security forces. Hence, the equipping and training of Iraqi forces is to be viewed as "job one." As for U.S. troops, their continued deployment should be determined by the achievement of objectives, not by arbitrary dates on the calendar. Throughout, U.S. policy should be that once an elected Iraqi government is in place under the authority of a ratified constitution, and the country's security situation is under control, the United States would begin to phase out its military presence; this process could begin earlier if requested by the Iraqi government. Along the way, the administration should also make clear that it has no desire to maintain -- either by force or agreement -- long-term military bases in Iraq.

Iranian Nuclear Proliferation. Proliferation -- including the dangers posed both by terrorist groups and adversarial

states -- is the most serious threat to U.S. national security. Among Middle East states, Iran poses the most difficult and urgent challenge. It not only has an ongoing pattern of problematic behavior -- especially its patronage of terrorist groups -- but Iranian nuclear proliferation could constitute a "tipping point" in the Middle East, with states from Saudi Arabia to Egypt and possibly Syria and Algeria likely to respond with efforts to acquire nuclear capability and threatening the nuclear nonproliferation regime. Stopping Iran short of achieving a nuclear weapons capability -- by diplomacy if possible; by other means, if necessary -- is a vital U.S. interest. In this regard, the most important role for Washington in preventing Iran from achieving this status is to reach a consensus with Europe explicitly stating U.S. willingness to take actions -- both positive and negative -- toward Iran based on how European talks with Tehran proceed. While Washington should reject the idea of engaging Iran unilaterally in negotiations separate from the Iran-Europe talks, the urgency of stopping Iran's nuclear weapons development may require that these talks be converted into multilateral talks formally involving the United States in the European discussions with Iran, if there was a transatlantic consensus that U.S. participation would ease the way for a verifiable agreement that terminates Iran's programs to acquire a nuclear weapons capability. Achieving international consensus on Iran should not, however, come at the cost of curtailing support to Iran's freedom-seeking opposition, nor should it require forswearing military options to address the problem.

Terrorism. While significant progress has been achieved on the tactical side of the global war on terrorism since September 11, this can be strengthened by pursuing the universal delegitimization of terror, incorporating groups such as Hizballah and Hamas in global antiterror efforts, and enhancing efforts to target the finances and dawa (religious outreach) efforts of terrorist and front operations. On the strategic side, confronting the ideological challenge of Islamist extremism through a long-term effort to reform regimes and reach out to Muslims opposed to radicalism needs to be a central response.

Energy. As part of a larger energy policy initiative, the administration needs to exert leadership to develop a practical program to reduce U.S. vulnerability to Middle East energy shocks.

REFORM

To strengthen the strategic dimension of the global war on terror, the United States needs to undertake a dual-track effort to reach out to the millions of Muslims repelled by Islamist extremism and to promote a strategy of reform of Middle Eastern societies so as to marginalize Islamist extremists and deprive them of grievances they use to expand their base of support. This would include a systematic, coordinated effort to restrict the flow of recruits to radical groups. Success here requires a country-specific strategy of working with local allies -- both in government and among those arrayed outside it -- to promote fundamental change through incremental, evolutionary, yet persistent progress. In policy terms, the administration should integrate political reform, liberalization, and democratization as central elements in U.S. bilateral relations with key states; presidential leadership is essential. Bureaucratically, this effort will require a comprehensive reengineering of how the U.S. government reaches out to foreign publics to identify, nurture, and support current and potential allies, advocate U.S. policy, and promote American values.

PEACE

On the Arab-Israeli peace process, the administration should invest high-level activism to take advantage of a critical window of opportunity occasioned by two factors -- Israel's policy of disengagement from Gaza and the northern West Bank and the emergence of a new Palestinian leadership that appears definitively to reject violence as a tactic to achieve independence. The goal of U.S. policy is to progress toward a two-state solution that provides security and peace for Israel, dignity and satisfaction to Palestinians, and isolation to those who choose a rejectionist path. This can best be achieved by focusing on three main tasks: assisting Israel as it takes substantial risks to implement disengagement; supporting Palestinians as they seek to fill the post-Arafat political vacuum with a set of representative, legitimate, accountable institutions; and marshaling the goodwill of regional and international actors

to help the Palestinian Authority replace Israel's military occupation of Gaza with an administration whose commitment to accountable, transparent, peaceful, and orderly governance can provide the bridge to further implementation of the Roadmap and an eventual resumption of permanent status negotiations. Suggestions that the administration should enunciate a bold, new strategy for peace should be rejected, since the very articulation of such ideas may undermine the delicate politics that permits Israeli disengagement and Palestinian reform to come to fruition. In addition, the United States needs to engage in active dialogues with Arab states, Europeans, and others to ensure their full contribution to this process, especially in terms of delegitimizing terror, investing in Palestinian reform, and underscoring the benefits of peace to all parties.

These recommendations constitute an American agenda for action in the Middle East. In each case, American leadership is essential for success but America alone cannot achieve these goals. Thankfully, many countries are prepared to join with us as allies in addressing these challenges. However, perceptions of threat and willingness to take action against them can differ from capital to capital. In order to succeed in confronting these challenges, the president will need to lead a diplomacy that strengthens existing alliances and relationships with international institutions, broadens them whenever possible, listens seriously and sympathetically to the views of our allies and friends, and welcomes the opportunity to explain candidly to all -- ally, friend, competitor, and foe -- the rationale and urgency that compels America to act. ❖

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