

The Next Turbulent Zone

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Jan 1, 2000

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Articles & Testimony

After a half-decade in which the Balkans, Central Africa, and East Asia were the hottest spots on the globe, the Middle East--including North Africa--is likely to assert itself over the next five years as a zone of turbulence. Some of the turmoil will be fueled by the irredentism left over from the Arab-Israeli dispute, especially among disgruntled Palestinians and Islamists opposed to the very idea of peace (see sidebar, "[Arab-Israeli Peace Process \(templateC06.php?CID=632\)](#)"). However, the lion's share of the region's instability will be generated by internal upheavals within Middle Eastern and North African countries and the stubborn refusal of so many in the region to join the new millennium's globalization revolution. The region will enter the 21st century with new, untested leaders from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf, stagnant economies that produce little that the world wants, and frightening, high-technology weaponry with the potential to bring local conflicts to America's shores.

In addition to the old disputes and conflicts that the new century will inherit, the coming period will be characterized by a leadership challenge, a globalization challenge, and a proliferation challenge. These three trends, expected to intensify over the next five years, will place an unprecedented set of internal tensions on pro- and anti-western regimes alike.

The Leadership Challenge

For the last quarter-century, the longevity of Middle Eastern leaders has belied the region's notorious reputation for instability. In fact, with rulers as disparate as Hassan II of Morocco, Qaddafi of Libya, Hussein of Jordan, and al-Assad of Syria, the Middle East could until 1999 claim a leadership cohort older and longer-serving than any other region in the world. This is changing. A trend that began with the bloodless coup in Qatar in 1995 and the Israeli election of 1996 picked up steam in 1999 with a new generation of leaders coming to power in Jordan, Bahrain, and Morocco. Succession talk is already at fever pitch in Syria, Saudi Arabia, and the Palestinian Authority, all ruled by ill, elderly men. Even Egypt, governed by a septuagenarian, is not immune. And many hope that Iraq will soon join the list of countries due for a leadership replacement, since "regime change" became an official U.S. policy goal in 1998 (see sidebar, "[Saddam's Shakiness \(templateC06.php?CID=631\)](#)"). By the end of the next decade, the actuarial tables will make the Middle East look different from any time in the last generation.

While the local situations differ from country to country, the new crop of Middle East leaders will all face a common problem: how to maintain their uncertain hold on power and build legitimacy in the shadow of their generally

imposing predecessors. The outcomes will differ. In some countries a weakening of the central government may permit latent ethnic and religious animosities to emerge with ferocity. This is especially the case among three states long inimical to U.S. interests in the region: Iraq, divided among Sunni Arabs, Sunni Kurds, and the majority Shi'ite Arabs; Syria, where the minority Alawite sect governs a largely Sunni Muslim country; and Sudan, where Sunni Muslims battle Christians and animists for control of the country's large southern region. Anti-Western regimes that have proved resistant to change, such as Syria and Libya, may collapse in a Romania-like spasm of violence--or find a way to survive this set of challenges.

While pro-Western regimes are still likely to rely on U.S. security guarantees for their defense, some will grow progressively less willing to provide active support for U.S. political and military initiatives and may seek medium-term security in reducing regional tensions (e.g., a deepening of Saudi rapprochement with Iran). Some of these countries will succeed by responding flexibly and creatively to the challenge. But those whose regimes remain closed, autocratic, and highly centralized are likely to grow defensive and inward-looking. Ironically, history suggests that the monarchies (e.g., Jordan, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia) have the best chance of absorbing and dealing with change, while the region's pseudo-republics such as Syria and Iraq--almost all born in violence and radicalism--are the least capable of nimble responses.

Almost everywhere, however, the byword will be uncertainty. For U.S. policy, there are at least three key implications:

- Allies in the Gulf and North Africa will need patience, support, assurance and, at times, "tough love" on economic and political reform to help make a peaceful and secure generational transition.
- Opportunities will exist, at least on the margin, to promote pro-Western changes in traditionally adversarial regimes, such as Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Libya. The United States should reach out to the "people" by promoting freer markets, freer communication, and freer travel (see sidebar, "[Iran's Upheaval](#)" ([templateC06.php?CID=630](#))). In times of transition, ideas and values matter enormously.
- Post-Arafat, the Palestinian Authority (or its successor entity) stands a chance of emerging as a laboratory of democracy in the Arab world. By focusing on the need for good governance, transparency, and accountability, the United States can help develop a regional partner that is pro-Western, pluralist, and democratic. Washington has the standing to tell the Palestinians that democracy and security can be advanced simultaneously; making them mutually exclusive creates a false choice.

The Globalization Challenge

Each of the region's new leaders will inherit a country suffering from systemic economic malaise and the cultural/ideological challenge posed by the spread of globalization. The malaise is the result of decades of failed economic policies and a sustained depression in world oil prices. The anxiety over cultural dislocation emanates from both the "regime" and the "street." Both the governors and the governed share a reluctance to open themselves to free trade, open communication, and the risk-taking spirit of the 21st-century economy. The regimes fear that globalization will empower the citizenry against them; much of the general population fears that the heady mix of Internet linkups, satellite dishes, and cable television will threaten its traditional way of life.

As the rest of the world gallops into globalization, miniaturization, and information-based economies, the Middle East and North Africa remain largely impervious to change. As a result, the region is becoming less relevant, at an alarming rate, to the global economy. According to the World Bank, Middle Eastern economies are growing at only two-thirds the pace of other developing countries, even more slowly than those in sub-Saharan Africa. Per capita incomes in Arab countries did not grow at all from 1985 through 1995, when developing countries as a whole registered a 32 percent increase (80 percent in East Asia). And Middle Easterners themselves are investing far too

little to reverse these trends. For example, literacy in the Arab states is no higher than that in sub-Saharan Africa, even though Arab states have more than twice the income. Part of the problem is that Middle Easterners hold a larger portion of their wealth abroad--\$350 billion--than do people in any other part of the world. The result, concludes one World Bank report, is that the Middle East has been "disengaging from the world economy."

At the same time, Middle Eastern countries are conspicuously absent from the global tide toward freedom and democracy. While some small countries have registered notable progress, such as Kuwait and Yemen, the Middle East is today the world's most undemocratic region. According to Freedom House, not one of the 23 Arab League members (nor Iran) is among the 88 countries in the world that are designated as "free." Of the 13 most repressive countries in the world, the Middle East is home to six.

The exceptions to both trends--economic and political--are, of course, Israel and Turkey.

Israel is the region's economic and technological powerhouse. While some in the region want to emulate Israel's embrace of globalization--there are pockets of progress in Egypt, Jordan, and elsewhere--too many view the Israeli high-tech juggernaut with fear and dread. The Arab world's cool response to former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres' concept of a "new Middle East," animated by a regional market rather than ancient animosities, is typical of the weak cooperation in the region. Sadly, it denies many their best chance of hitching a ride on the globalization train.

Similarly, Turkey presents a model of a healthy Muslim-majority democracy with a thriving economy that Central Asian republics are more keen to emulate than are Middle Easterners. For the United States, Turkey is a "pivotal state" critical to the success of U.S. policy in Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Ensuring the continued vitality of Turkey--both for its own sake and for the powerful demonstration value to the Muslim world--is an important U.S. interest. Ironically, at a moment of growing strategic significance to the United States, Turkey is facing a triple threat of Islamism, rising Kurdish national consciousness, and--after the devastating 1999 earthquakes--a crisis of confidence in the institutions of state. Combined, these threats have thrust Turkey into one of its most fragile political moments since the founding of the secular republic in 1923.

The Proliferation Challenge

One arena in which Middle Easterners do, regrettably, set the pace is in the most chilling threat to U.S. security in the next century--the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the means to deliver them. After having faced the awesome conventional superiority of U.S. forces in the Gulf War (and the power of a U.S.-supplied military like Israel's), ' regimes across the Middle East have diverted their dwindling revenues away from traditional military spending into developing or acquiring vast supplies of unconventional arms. The result is a great race for strategic equalizers--chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons and the ballistic missiles that can dispatch them to their targets in a matter of minutes. The most serious threats are as follows:

- U.S. intelligence sources confirm that the next decade may witness Iran's acquisition of a nuclear-weapons capability and/or an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of reaching the continental United States. This would radically change the nature of the Iranian threat. In that event, the focus of U.S. efforts would need to move from prevention and postponement to defense, deterrence, and possible aggressive preemption.
- The absence of any inspection of Saddam Hussein's Iraq since late 1998 requires any prudent planner to assume that the Iraqi dictator has restarted his once-vast program to develop weapons of mass destruction. Having already attacked four countries--Kuwait, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel--Saddam is unlikely to give up his predatory behavior. The only uncertainty is the method of his next revenge attack--through conventional war, ballistic missile attack, or terrorism with weapons of mass destruction.
- The marriage of proliferation and international terrorism is an especially frightening prospect. Whether it is the

seepage of nuclear materials from the former Soviet Union, the long arm of Hezbollah (which has already reached to Latin America), or the teaming-up of global terrorist Osama bin Laden and rogue leaders like Saddam, there is a growing possibility that Middle Eastern terrorists might strike with weapons of mass destruction against overseas American targets or even inside the United States itself--leaving no "fingerprints" or claims of responsibility.

Responding to these and other security challenges emanating from the Middle East requires a mix of unilateral measures and cooperative efforts with U.S. allies. Already, the United States has beefed up its own counterterrorism capability, taken measures to arrest the illicit flow of weapons technology, and begun to address the need for effective counterproliferation. Much more needs to be done, especially in the realm of missile defense.

Washington is uniquely placed to capitalize on the common interests among moderate, pro-Western states that have heretofore been divided by their own local conflicts, especially the Arab-Israeli dispute. States like Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey all share profound concerns over terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and missile proliferation. Individually, many have also expressed interest in such projects as a regional anti-missile defense initiative. Such an undertaking could start as a modest intelligence coordination effort supported by the United States and expand to a regional, real-time early-warning system and, potentially, to an even bolder integrated anti-missile system. Success, however, will require that Washington pay special attention to Egypt. Without high-level U.S. tending, the Egyptians will scuttle any regional missile defense initiative with highly publicized demands for Israeli concessions on nuclear issues.

These three challenges--leadership, globalization, and proliferation--will provide the new prisms through which to view regional political upheaval over the next decade. Until leadership changes and domestic politics sort themselves out, the Middle East and North Africa are likely to be increasingly inhospitable to major U.S. initiatives. But by the end of the next decade--when seismic internal change is likely to be completed in most major states--the region stands a good chance of being more peaceful, stable, and pro-West than it is today. The challenge for Washington is to manage this potentially turbulent transition in a way that protects U.S. interests and allies. ❖

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