Contemporary Security Challenges in the Middle East

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AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE MIDDLE EAST

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It is indisputably the case that the Middle East writ large represents a critical foreign policy focal point of the United States. Although the region has held an important place in U.S. policy considerations for several decades, due in no small part to its role as an oil exporter, political and security events of the last several years starkly underline the pivotal role and herculean challenges the Middle East currently poses for U.S. interests. No other region of the world consumes as much U.S. blood, treasure, or policy attention as the Middle East. It is useful to briefly survey the various Middle Eastern issues that engage such a level of U.S. attention. U.S. interests in the Middle East are driven by two engines, one practical and one more idealistic. The first engine, as alluded to above, is a heavy reliance on world oil. The second motive force is the belief held in influential quarters of the Bush administration that democracy can be installed in the Middle East from afar and, with proper nurturing, can be expected to grow and spread in the region. With these two factors in mind, one of necessity and one transformative, it can be argued that there are at least five major issues anchored in the Middle East that occupy U.S. decision makers and the formulation of a national security strategy. These issues are Iraq, weapons proliferation, active international Jihadist or Islamist terrorism, Middle Eastern oil, and the Israel-Palestine question.
Iraq

Iraq has been since 2003 the clearest manifestation of U.S. physical engagement in the Middle East. The events leading the Bush administration to invade the country, as well as the invasion itself and its aftermath, have been well documented. Now militarily occupied but by no means pacified, Iraq has arguably become a black hole for U.S. policymaking attention, drawing all into its orbit. The U.S. attempt to remake post-Saddam Iraq into a benign and democratic regional model has to date cost a huge amount of money and claimed thousands of American lives, mostly in the period after hostilities were prematurely declared over. The continuing murderous internecine strife between Sunni and Shia insurgents, combined with a deadly international terrorist presence and rampant criminality, have been a drain on U.S. resources and patience, and trying to establish the best course of future action has evolved into an overriding domestic political issue as no military engagement has since the Vietnam War. As of mid-2007, the future of Iraq and its post-Saddam, U.S.-installed political system remains uncertain, but whatever the ultimate political outcome, the inability of the United States to rapidly and effectively exert hard power to pacify the country, combined with a perception of American heavy-handedness, has eroded the U.S. image internationally for years to come. The negative impact of the U.S. presence in Iraq on public attitudes is especially severe in the Middle East, and independent opinion polls strongly suggest that the United States has a massive image problem with the populations of the region. A significant portion of the Muslim world, for example, is convinced that U.S. military action in Iraq (and to some degree elsewhere, including Afghanistan) is primarily motivated by a desire to attack Islam.

In strategic terms, the United States desires an Iraq that is sufficiently stable to accomplish two goals: first, guarantee the survival of a democratic and generally pro-U.S. government and, second, permit the withdrawal of American troops from the country as soon as practicable, while avoiding the appearance of having been forced out. To increase the chances of achieving these foreign policy goals, the United States has attempted to enlist the support of various “friendly” countries in the region, such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia, as buffers to insurgent support and as allies of the new Iraqi government. These efforts to utilize long-standing regional allies have arguably, to some modest extent, been successful. Saudi Arabia agreed in April 2007 to forgive 80 percent of Iraqi indebtedness, a not insignificant development. For its part, Jordan has attempted to buttress a stable post-Saddam Iraq in various ways, including through public diplomacy portraying the Iraqi government as legitimate. Still, support for Iraq by these and other players in the region has been only partial and often muted.

Effectively engaging more hostile regional powers such as Syria and Iran, as publicly recommended in late 2006 by the Iraq Study Group, has been substantially more problematic. For one thing, it is hardly transparent that either Syria or Iran necessarily regard their national interests or regional ambitions as best served by a stable Iraqi democracy enjoying strong ties to the United States. Indeed, it may well be
that, in the short term at least, these two countries perceive more political advantage in a continuing atmosphere of boiling and deadly instability within Iraq as long as the violence does not leak across their borders. At the same time, Iran and to some degree, Syria may see foreign and internal policy profit in continuing strife that whittles away at the U.S. image of omnipotence in the region. This proclivity may arguably be playing with fire, but certainly some decision-making segments in Iran and Syria view a United States tied down in Iraq as a United States that is unable to apply military force elsewhere, such as against Iranian nuclear facilities or Syrian infrastructure supportive of Hezbollah in Lebanon. At any rate, Iraq is unquestionably a major focus of American policy attention in the Middle East and will, in all likelihood, continue to be for some years. It remains unclear as to how far future U.S. administrations may be willing to go to prevent demonstrable failure in Iraq. A total abandonment of Iraq seems nonetheless unlikely and, given the United States’ role in setting the stage for the current Iraq troubles, we should expect any administration in Washington to attempt to find a policy solution permitting current Iraqi political institutions to survive (even if in a hollow form) and to prevent an Iraqi descent into a long night of anarchy or unbridled civil war. The widespread fear, of course, is that an implosion in Iraq will ultimately result in an explosion damaging to American interests throughout the region.

The Middle East and Weapons Proliferation

As severe as its implications are for U.S. policy interests, the continuing Iraq strife does not stand alone, however, and is connected to another issue that occupies U.S. policy concern, the theme of weapons proliferation and weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The weapons proliferation issue was originally cited by the U.S. administration as one of the primary grounds for launching the war to oust Saddam Hussein and his paladins, but the topic has a broader regional resonance as well. Although postbellum information suggests strongly that Saddam Hussein did not in fact possess weapons of mass destruction in 2003, it also appears to be true that he intended to produce an atomic bomb in the 1990s and nearly succeeded in doing so before discovery of his covert program. Separately, it is no longer disputed in reputable circles that Saddam had in fact deployed chemical weapons against domestic opposition targets. The possession of such weapons in the hands of as grand a miscalculator as Saddam would surely be recognized by most objective observers as an unwelcome development.

From the U.S. perspective, the fall of Saddam did not end the issue of weapons proliferation in a Middle Eastern context. Plagued by a history of conventional war, civil war, and brutal episodes of unconventional war, terrorism and other violence, the Middle East often seems to teeter on the edge of major instability. The introduction of nuclear weapons or deliverable biological or chemical agents into this environment could well transform a local or regional crisis into a matter of global security concern, not least from the perspective of the United States. This potential security threat did not vanish with the overthrow of the Iraqi B’aathist regime, as it
was never an issue restricted to Iraq. Current focus is on the possible acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability by Iran. Opaque Iranian intentions, in turn, run the risk of sparking a nuclear arms race in the region, with the possibility of Saudi Arabia and Egypt seeking to develop their own arsenals as a Sunni counterweight to a perceived Shia military challenge; secular Turkey may harbor nuclear ambitions as well. The United States, like most Western countries, would like to prevent such a scenario from developing and has signaled with varying degrees of clarity that it is willing to go far to prevent a nuclear-weaponized Middle East.

**Terrorism**

Although often described as an international phenomenon, terrorism is, in point of fact, harnessed importantly to the Middle East per se, and remains a persistent challenge for U.S. interests. It is simply not true that the United States is importantly threatened by the activities of, say, the FARC in Colombia or the New People’s Army in the Philippines, no matter how reprehensible the actions of these groups might be. Purely local or regional non-statist groups that employ terrorism as a weapon of choice generally are more of a nuisance than a real challenge to U.S. interests. Terrorism as a standing threat to U.S. citizens and security policy in the present century properly refers to Islamist- or Salafist-inspired terrorism, phenomena that are perhaps best described as major export products of the Middle East. It should be recalled that the signal event of this type of terrorism, the attacks of September 11, 2001, against New York and Washington, were acts perpetrated solely by Middle Easterners, almost all of them Saudi nationals. Al Qaeda, though currently maintaining a center of gravity in the Afghan-Pakistan border area according to open sources, is fundamentally a core Middle Eastern organization measured in terms of the origin of its leadership, influences on its thinking, and major sources of its funding. The native language of Islamist terrorism is Arabic, and its motive force, while recognizing that the issue of motivation is complex, is essentially Koranic in its justifications.

Although Islamist terrorism originates in the Middle East and has a clear and chronological Middle Eastern narrative and tradition, it has a demonstrated capability to strike against U.S.-related targets internationally, both inside and outside of the Arab world. This is testified to by two massive embassy bombings in Africa, attacks on U.S.-affiliated hotels in Asia, numerous hostage-taking episodes, and the murder of Americans in various countries. Islamist terrorism—with al Qaeda as the poster child—represents a real threat to the security of American citizens; al Qaeda chief and founder Osama bin Laden has explicitly authorized the killing of U.S. civilians wherever they can be located and attacked. Thus, the arguably poorly titled “war on terror” is at root not an offensive doctrine (though often understood as such) but should more appropriately be seen as in deference to the ancient Roman maxim “The welfare of the citizens is the highest duty.” But stripped of its emotion and the often breathless and superficial media coverage, precisely how much of a strategic threat is Middle East-rooted Islamist terrorism to U.S. policy interests?
To be sure, bin Laden and his cohorts are responsible for the deaths of thousands of U.S. citizens, most of them civilians. But if we extract from the equation the victims of 9/11 (while noting that as of 2007, a terrorist attack on that scale has not been repeated anywhere in the world) and the military deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan (which are surely more the result of an active insurgency than conventional terrorism), American deaths from Islamist terror number “only” in the hundreds. As horrendous as these deaths are, do they objectively translate into a fundamental or notable challenge to U.S. security emanating from the Middle East? I suggest that the answer must be yes, not because of terrorist events that have transpired to date but because of what could in the future transpire if Islamist terrorist networks are able to successfully harness and use weapons of mass destruction.

It is broadly accepted in the international intelligence and counterterrorist community that al Qaeda and like-minded organizations want to acquire the capability to kill large numbers of civilians in the United States, and possibly in other countries as well. Indeed, some incipient experiments with chemical and biological weapons appear to have taken place in Afghanistan before the fall of the Taliban regime. Similarly, al Qaeda appears to have had an interest in creating some sort of a nuclear weapons capability and was interested in acquiring key components such as highly enriched uranium. The available evidence suggests that they have not been at all successful in this endeavor, and the fabrication of a nuclear weapon may well be beyond their wherewithal. It is much more likely that an Islamist terrorist organization would be able to employ chemical or biological weapons or what is generally known as a “dirty bomb” or radiological dispersion device. Use of a dirty bomb, or weapons-grade anthrax, or a large chemical device, represents a credible and grave security threat. The psychological impact of such an unconventional attack, including on international financial markets, would also be severe. Accordingly, to the extent that Islamist groups are seen as anchored in the Middle East, they will continue to represent a major and perhaps overriding U.S. policy concern in the region. At the same time, the fear of an attack with unconventional weapons is likely to increase the level of U.S. cooperation with nonhostile regimes in the neighborhood in order to prevent such an event from occurring. As a direct result of this concern, bilateral and multilateral intelligence-sharing arrangements between the United States and Middle Eastern countries appear to be robust.

Oil

The importance of Middle Eastern oil to world fossil fuel supplies remains another compelling factor for the continuing criticality of the region in terms of U.S. security concerns. As has been amply demonstrated by the volatile oil prices of 2006 and 2007, the international oil market responds nervously and immediately to any evidence of tension or instability in the Middle East. Signals of chaos in Iraq, brinksmanship from Iran, and incipient signs of internal instability in Saudi Arabia have all had unambiguous and negative market impact. Not only prices are affected. Periods of increased tension or outright hostility between the United States and Iran, for
example, could conceivably result in the mining or closure of the Strait of Hormuz, a primary, exceedingly narrow, and vulnerable oil export route from the region. The collapse or degradation of rule by the House of Saud, with the attendant disruption to oil supplies and facilities in the kingdom, would also have dramatic repercussions.

Without question, the vast oil reserves in Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries are viewed by the United States as a resource of critical strategic importance upon which the U.S. national economy is dependent. Accordingly, ensuring stability in the region to permit the oil to flow without interruption is a primary and essential U.S. national security goal, as it has been for decades.

The governments of Saudi Arabia and other regional Arab powers with oil reserves are, of course, just as interested in remaining oil suppliers as Western countries (and increasingly China and India) are in remaining consumers. Yet, real potential for oil supply disruption remains. Present indicators suggest that the most likely threats to Middle Eastern oil are from international terrorist circles or a state-on-state war. Thus, a successful terrorist assault on a large refinery in Saudi Arabia could have a severe impact on oil production as well as an even more damaging psychological impact on international markets. Whereas al Qaeda had in previous times stated that Arab-owned oil facilities were not a legitimate target, that edict appears to have changed more recently. Indeed, terrorists have already plotted and attempted violent assaults on oil facilities in Saudi Arabia and Yemen, if so far without any notable success. These unsuccessful attacks may well have been intended to test the vulnerability of oil production compounds, however, and may serve to provide “lessons learned” for more refined terrorist plans in the future. The successful preemption of a major planned attack on Saudi refineries in April 2007 suggests that terrorists continue to regard attacking Saudi oil as a vital strategic goal.7

Again, even a partially successful attack—one causing a temporary reduction in oil supplies—would negatively impact U.S. and international security concerns. The same holds true of any conventional military conflict in the area. Iranian assertiveness resulting in a military clash with an Arab state in the Gulf would immediately threaten the unimpeded production and transport of oil. The concern of the Jordanian King Abdullah II about a burgeoning “Shia crescent” is not unrelated to fear of Iranian-sponsored attempts to alter the prevailing status quo in the region, empowering or “protecting” Shia minorities.8 Such an Iranian intent, in precisely such a volatile regional environment, would run a risk of erupting into a major shooting war based on some unforeseen miscalculation or incident. Any U.S. administration will be guided by a strong desire to prevent disruptions of the oil supply. If war were to threaten regional stability, and with it the oil markets, the United States can be expected to intervene militarily with the goal of stabilizing and cooling the situation as rapidly as possible. This includes the possibility of preemptive U.S. action if a regional war is regarded as unavoidable.

The United States has been a strong and reliable supporter of the state of Israel since the inception of the latter, not least because Israel is the only recognizably democratic state in the immediate area. Israel, in turn, has unquestionably been the most consequent supporter of U.S. policy in the Middle East. In spite of occasional differences,
the United States is committed, at an absolute minimum, to Israel’s survival, legitimacy as a nation-state, and right to exist. It is precisely this foreign policy bottom line that causes the United States so many problems with Arab actors in the Middle East, who continue to regard Israel with various degrees of fear, loathing, and contempt. The generally accepted belief that Israel is a nuclear weapons power has also not soothed Arab feelings. The issue of the Palestinians seems an epicenter of Israel’s difficulties in the Arab and Islamic world. Due to its close and long-standing relationship with Israel, the United States has assumed some ownership of the Palestinian problem as well, and is widely expected by the international community to play a role in resolving, or at least defusing, the contentious issue. The level of U.S. engagement on Israel-Palestine has waxed and waned. Nonetheless, it is safe to assert that any administration in Washington would like to see an end to Israeli-Palestinian animosity and some sort of two-state solution, with details to be negotiated.

It is possible that the United States will be able to preside over an acceptable settlement of the Palestine issue and that a formula will be worked out to satisfy Israelis, Palestinians, and other Arab parties in the Middle East. Realistically, however, great hurdles to a lasting peace remain, and difficulties are not reduced by the mutual suspicion and, often, hatred with which Palestinians and Israelis view one another. There are reasons to suspect, however, that below the surface issue of Palestine, another problem is concealed. That is, neither most Palestinians nor most Arabs have really accepted the legitimacy of a Jewish state in the heartland of Islam. Although it is possible that widespread and often primitive prejudice against Jews would recede with a fair and equitable Palestinian solution, it is not a certainty. It is imaginable that, with the Palestinian issue resolved, Israel will remain a pariah state in the Middle East and that any acceptance of its right to exist will be grudging and provisional. Nonetheless, with or without a solution to the Palestinian issue, and even with likely future Washington–Tel Aviv disputes over the details of securing a peace arrangement, the United States will continue to be a protector of Israel’s right to exist and, accordingly, a lightning rod for Middle Eastern elements who do not regard this prospect with equanimity.

U.S. Regional Interests as a Whole

In sum, the United States has a broad tapestry of interests in the Middle East at the beginning of the twenty-first century. To a notable degree, the above-mentioned five issues facing the United States in the region are interrelated. For example, Iraq, a cauldron of violence and instability, is also an important oil-producing country. Iraq is also currently a major theater of Islamist terrorism, as embodied by al Qaeda in Iraq, and many of the terrorist exertions there are directed at U.S. troops. Islamist terrorism, in turn, threatens other oil-producing countries such as Saudi Arabia. Available information suggests that terrorist forces are engaged in a determined quest to acquire and employ weapons of mass destruction, as well. Similarly, the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction, in this case nuclear, appears to be on the Iranian policy agenda. This Iranian quest, in turn, could result in a rapid proliferation of
weapons programs among a number of states in the region, adding to its overall vola-
tility and threatening stability. Israel, a nuclear state already, is part of the equation. Threats to stability, as we have previously noted, can easily result in a disruption to oil supplies or, at the very least, skyrocketing oil prices on the international market. Thus, although we can identify five separate issues of U.S. policy focus, the issues are in fact importantly interwoven, adding to the difficulty and complexity of finding adequate policy solutions.

However, the policy difficulties for the United States are magnified by important religious issues. The United States has a long and unbroken history as a secular democratic republic with most of its citizens, like its values, rooted in the Christian tradition. Another simple historical fact is that the Middle East is the kernel of the Islamic world, which, with the exception of modern Turkey, has no secular democratic tradition. Indeed, separation of church and state is a concept foreign to Islam. Islam, Koranic verse and tradition, and Sharia law are facets of everyday life in the Middle East. In addition, centuries of violent conflict between the Islamic world and the West, literally ancient history to most Americans and Europeans, are nowhere near as remote or irrelevant to many Middle Eastern inhabitants. To many Muslims in the Middle East, the West stands stubbornly in opposition to Islam and of its nature represents a real menace and affront to the \textit{Ummah}, the community of the Muslim faithful that recognizes no borders.

This confrontational worldview, in turn, is regarded as paranoid, exclusionary, and intolerant in the perspective of many Americans. This wide divide in basic thinking and perception between the two traditions, one broadly secular and democratic, the other generally religious and authoritarian, is a complicating factor in the ability of the United States to successfully pursue perceived national interests in the Middle East. Nowhere is this divide more apparent than in the areas of Islamist terrorism and Iraq.

The difficulties the United States has encountered in the occupation of Iraq doubtless have many fathers, but have been importantly exacerbated by the status of American troops as “unbelievers,” an uninvited foreign element transplanted on Arab and Muslim territory, thus doubly offensive. One need only note the hundreds, if not thousands, of video clips from Iraq, widely available on the Internet, where an attack against a U.S. military facility or convoy is accompanied by shouts of “Allah Akhbar” or selective verses from the Koran. Similarly, Islamist terrorist propagandists such as Al-Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden routinely justify their attacks against the United States and other Western targets strictly in Islamic religious terms; no other justification is required, and none is offered. Significantly, those Muslims who are less virulent than the Islamists are cast as heretics and apostates deserving death; again, their crime is portrayed much more as a religious than a political transgression. This extreme message as a call to nearly indiscriminate violence may be rejected by most Muslims, but nonetheless finds resonance with a disturbingly large number in the Middle East.

This religiously and culturally motivated animosity to the West in general and the United States in particular serves as a backdrop to any U.S. policy initiative in the
Middle East. Any U.S. policy activity regarding the Middle East, once known, is automatically regarded with suspicion by a considerable percentage of the region’s population. Middle Eastern governments, even those generally friendly to or even profiting from U.S. positions, often publicly pander to the anti-American “Arab street” while offering private assurances to U.S. officials. All of these factors clearly serve to complicate the practice of U.S. diplomacy. The situation is unlikely to change soon.

Despite these inherent difficulties for U.S. policy in the Middle East, the United States cannot simply disengage from the region, and accordingly, it needs to forward its national policy interests as best as practicable. As long as access to oil remains an essential and, indeed, indispensable precondition of U.S. economic health, active engagement in the Middle East will continue. As long as international terrorism is active and motivated by Islamist ideology, U.S. activity, including preemptive anti-terrorist actions, will endure. As long as Middle Eastern powers and nonstate actors appear intent on engaging in the proliferation of nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction programs, pro-active U.S. diplomatic and, perhaps, military efforts in the region will continue. As long as Iraq threatens to explode or implode, threatening an array of negative consequences, U.S. presence in the area will remain in one degree, shape, or form.

RUSSIAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE MIDDLE EAST

Mikhail Troitskiy

The Middle East is a difficult region for Russian diplomacy. It presents the country’s leadership with a set of intricate dilemmas. In the Middle East, Moscow seeks to balance several priorities: coordinate security policies with regional actors, promote the interests of Russian businesses, and guard against the rise of Islamic extremism and proliferation of nuclear weapons. Given this multifaceted and sometimes contradictory set of interests, Russia has usually avoided making clear choices. Moscow prefers not to side with or put the blame on just one party in any conflict. The trademark of Russia’s official perspective on Middle Eastern conflicts has been calling for multilateral solutions with due respect to the interests of all actors involved. However, should the security situation in the region deteriorate, Russian dilemmas may become more acute. As a consequence, Moscow may find itself hard-pressed to define clear-cut positions and faced with the need to take up new responsibilities for conflict management in the region.

The Shaping of Russia’s Middle East Policies: Interests and Influences

Russian policy in the Middle East is informed by a combination of internal factors, regional developments, and pressures from the broader international environment. Domestically, Russia is interested in developing trade relations with the
region, coordinating pricing policies for hydrocarbons exports, and fending off negative implications of the Middle Eastern conflicts for Russian internal and external security.

The ethnic composition of Russia and its internal security challenges bear directly on Moscow’s stance on major Middle Eastern issues. Muslims constitute at least 12 percent of the Russian population. Some of Russia’s Muslim republics, especially Tatarstan and Chechnya, successfully negotiated special deals with the federal center whereby the republican leadership enjoys more leeway than governments of other members of the Federation. Although armed separatism was by and large defeated in Chechnya by the mid-2000s, Islamist slogans continue to serve as a mobilizing tool for the various criminal and radical elements operating across the North Caucasus. In such a situation, the Russian government is cautious to avoid alienating Russian Muslims by excessive rhetorical emphasis on “combating Islamic terrorism.” As a consequence, Russia has traditionally demanded that both Israel’s security concerns and the Arab bid for Palestinian statehood should be equally honored by the international community.

Generally, the Russian leadership considers Israel an important ally in containing Islamic extremists in the Middle East and a promising partner for high-tech co-operation. Russia and Israel have been reported to work jointly on a reconnaissance aircraft for the Indian air force. In April 2006, Russia launched three Israeli reconnaissance satellites. Russian and Israeli security services exchange information on terrorist and other security challenges to both Russia and Israel. Contacts between the two countries are facilitated by the Russian-speaking immigrants who constitute about one-quarter of the Israeli population. However, the fact that Russian-Israeli annual trade turnover barely exceeds $2 billion and Israel’s unequivocal reliance on the United States as its main ally and principal mediator in all Arab-Israeli disputes highlight the limits to Russia’s engagement with Israel.

Russian arms exporters constitute a powerful domestic lobby exerting a strong influence on the country’s Middle Eastern policy priorities. Russian arms sales to the Middle East are focused on the Arab states and Iran. In 2005, President Putin estimated Russian arms sales to the Middle East at “mere” $500 million. He compared this figure to $6.8 billion worth of American arms supplies to the region.10 Despite the relatively modest amount of Russian arms supplies, some contracts aroused political controversy both within and beyond Russia. For example, Moscow’s decision to sell short-range surface-to-air missiles to Syria was sharply criticized by Israel, which claimed that the missiles could have disturbed strategic balance in the region. As a result, Russia introduced additional measures to prevent the use of these missiles by extremist organizations, and the transaction was completed in early 2005. However, the transfer to Syria of more advanced 900-km-range Iskander missiles was stopped by President Putin despite pressure from arms exporters. Persian Gulf states also emerged as prospective buyers of Russian arms, including fighter jets (Saudi Arabia) and surface-to-air complexes (United Arab Emirates).

Another powerful domestic interest group is the Russian atomic energy industry. Since 1996, Russian builders have been working on the completion of the Bushehr...
atomic power station in Iran, the whole project estimated at about $1 billion. For more than a decade, Russian policymakers were dismissing Western criticism of the Bushehr contract. Apart from being pressed by the domestic “atomic lobby,” Russian leaders had reasons to believe that, should Moscow abandon Bushehr, the void will soon be filled by American and European corporations who provided Iran with valuable nuclear technology back in the 1970s.

A strong impact on shaping Russia’s Middle East policies is produced by the largest Russian oil and gas corporations known for close ties with the government. Russian interest in relations with the energy-exporting countries of the Persian Gulf is two-faceted. On one hand, Russia competes with them, as members of OPEC, for the ability to influence prices on international oil markets. Russian oil exporters may lose profits if Saudi Arabia decides to employ the spare upstream production capacity Riyadh claims to maintain. On the other hand, Moscow is exploring opportunities for reaching agreements or, at least, a mutual understanding with Persian Gulf countries on coordination of oil sales strategies. In early 2007, Russia displayed enthusiasm about expanding political and economic ties with Saudi Arabia. Riyadh was fearing a decline in the U.S. commitment to the ruling dynasty and had reasons to question the reliability of Washington as a security ally.11 Given the radical attempts at reshaping the region undertaken by the Bush administration, Riyadh could not help considering scenarios in which Washington would no longer protect the royal dynasty or the territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia. This signaled a notable change in Russia’s perspective on Saudi Arabia, which had been commonly referred to by Russian analysts as a “source of funding for Islamic extremists in the North Caucasus.”

Russia’s Gazprom has an interest in coordinating natural gas pricing policies with the largest Middle Eastern producers, such as Qatar, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates. With the growth of a global market in liquefied natural gas (LNG), a possible emergence of an OPEC-style gas cartel is increasingly discussed among both exporting and importing countries. However, Russia’s official stance on a “gas OPEC” has been cautious. Moscow values its reputation as an independent supplier of both oil and gas whose pricing policies are not skewed by any cartels.

There are at least two significant external factors influencing the Russian approach to the Middle East. In the first place, in this region, Russia stands to benefit from raising its profile as an impartial and respected mediator. Reviving Russian policy in the Middle East has become one of the manifestations of President Putin’s strategy of diversifying Russian foreign policy priorities and hedging against a decline in relations with the West.

Second, Russia’s leverage in the Middle East may be used to softly balance the United States as long as Washington’s policies in Russia’s neighborhood or on missile defense cooperation with Central European countries cause increasing concern in Moscow. However, while extending unconditional support to U.S. initiatives in the Middle East would indeed be illogical from a Russian policymaker’s point of view, Moscow has tried to make sure that Russia’s own security interests are not undermined by balking at American initiatives.
Under the combined influence of domestic and international factors in action since the early 2000s, Russian foreign policy makers have attributed high importance to the Middle East. During his two terms in office, President Putin traveled to the Middle East twice. His April 2005 official visit to Egypt, Israel, and the Palestinian Territories was hailed as the first trip of the Russian leader to the region for almost half a century. The Persian Gulf was covered by Putin in February 2007, when he visited Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as well as Jordan.

**Assessing the Role of the United States**

In the late 2000s, Middle Eastern futures are determined by external influences at least to the same extent as they are defined by internal developments. The Middle East has become a new target in the U.S. strategy of a comprehensive pre-designed restructuring of a region. Success in fostering economic and political reform in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s with subsequent integration of former Soviet allies into NATO gave rise, in the United States, to a new school of strategic thinking. Its adherents argued that the United States had enough determination, vision, and power to transform a whole region by means of diplomacy and military force. In fact, these two sets of tools were regarded by the first Bush administration as essentially parts of one continuum.

However, this American attempt at reforming the Middle East is seemingly running aground. One reaches such a conclusion irrespective of assessments of America’s achievements in Iraq. The thrust of the U.S. approach, premised on the claim that Washington knows what the region needs better than its inhabitants, has been rejected by political elites in most Middle Eastern countries. It has frustrated American allies (such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey), destabilized “problem states” (such as Iraq and Lebanon), antagonized potential partners (such as Syria), and turned outspoken critics into open foes (such as Iran). Even some mainstream Israeli politicians have hinted that U.S. Middle East policies are being crafted with little respect for the interests of Israel as America’s main ally in the region.

An influential group of Russian foreign policy experts asserted in early 2007 that “the strategy of democratizing the broader Middle East—a central foreign policy project of the Bush administration—has turned into fiasco. This can lead, in the nearest future, to Islamists seizing power in the region against the backdrop of a dramatic weakening of U.S. positions.” An official Russian Foreign Policy Review, issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in March 2007, argued that “contemporary Islamic radicalism is essentially a strained and dangerous, but predictable reaction to the unilateral approach pursued by the United States in the post-bipolar unbalanced international system where American power is no longer checked by a global rival.”

American pressure on Iran with a failure to deliver on sanctions did not hamper Iran’s nuclear program. Instead, it increased Tehran’s determination to pursue uranium enrichment and aggravated tensions between Iran and its Arab neighbors. At the same time, mutual understanding increased between Iran and Turkey, while Ankara has been drifting away from the position of a close U.S. ally in the region.
As a result, even hawkish American and European experts suggested striking a deal with Iran as soon as possible. These pundits came to realize that the longer such a deal is postponed, the worse the conditions the international community is likely to obtain.14

Another grand American initiative, the stabilization of Afghanistan through the removal of the Taliban, was welcomed by Russia until the U.S. and coalition forces attempted to include Afghanistan in the project of democratic restructuring of the broader Middle East. Moscow was especially critical of the United States and its allies who conducted elections in Afghanistan, but refrained from curbing opium production and using force to contain extremist elements in Afghanistan's remote areas.

**Regional Points of Stress: A Russian Approach**

**Israel and Palestine**

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has clear prospects of continuing for many years. Developments that took place since 2001 diminished hopes for its resolution and blurred the way towards a final settlement. At the end of 2007, achieving progress along the lines of George W. Bush's road map seems problematic. Israel's unilateral disengagement policies and the outbreaks of intifada violence are now aggravated by the rise of Hezbollah in Lebanon and internal strife within the Palestinian Territories. Indeed, with the growing popularity of Hamas in Palestine and Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been moving away from, rather than nearing, resolution. One of Russia's most long-standing observers of the Middle East expects Israel to face a security challenge from its own Arab citizens, whose share in the country's population had grown from 11.1 percent in 1949 to 19.6 percent in 2006. In such a situation, a wall separating Israel from the Palestinian Territories is unlikely to bring the long-awaited peace. Israeli Arabs are showing signs of increased radicalization and may begin to align with Palestinian Arabs in their fight against Israel.15 This can make prospects for a compromise even more remote.

In the presence of Arab-Israeli tensions, other conflicts in the Middle East will remain difficult to address. Some of them, such as Shia-Sunni animosity in Iraq or the factional strife in Lebanon, may prove to be manageable by means of constant financial and mediation efforts. However, other flashpoints, where at least one side is provoked by continuing Israeli-Palestinian hostilities, have considerable chances of spinning out of control. The controversy surrounding Iran's nuclear program results largely from differing readings of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by Iran and the West. American support for Israel, as well as the massive presence of U.S. troops in the Arab world, continues to provide ideological justification and inspiration to the Islamic radicals fighting against the government of Afghanistan and seeking to use the poorly controlled areas in Afghanistan and Pakistan as a launching pad for terrorist activities across and beyond the Middle East.

Given the sources of Russia's Middle East policies outlined above, Moscow is unwilling to put most of the blame for continued hostilities between Israelis and
Palestinians on one of the sides. Russia aspires to a greater role as an impartial mediator whose innovative approaches to the conflict may help to achieve a breakthrough. Although Russia does not uncritically endorse the U.S. or EU positions on the conflict, Moscow and Washington agree that the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation underlies most other conflicts in the Middle East. It constitutes a whirlpool of mutual hatred, intransigent ideas, money, and radical fighters that stirs up tensions and deepens many other divides in the region.

The Future of Iraq and the Kurdish Issue

Apart from Arab-Israeli hostilities and third parties’ involvement in the Middle East, factional strife among Muslims remains a major impediment to a comprehensive conflict settlement in the Middle East. The dismal security situation in Iraq results not so much from the coalition troops presence on Iraqi soil, than from the inability of Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish communities to forge a compromise on the governing system and division of oil revenues in Iraq. However fierce the fighting of “all against all” may have been since the defeat of Saddam Hussein, skilled policies of the U.S.-led coalition may return southern and central parts of the country to relative stability, if not peace. A deal between the Shia and the Sunni could be hammered out and maintained through a long-term engagement of the United States with each party. Yet the Kurdish issue is likely to remain a backbreaker. Should the United States, as the coalition leader, acquiesce to the Kurdish bid for statehood, a major bout of instability will follow. Turkey may step in to squelch its own Kurdish minority. Iran will also be defending its territorial integrity with all means available and will most likely accuse Washington of trying to undermine Iran by supporting Kurdish separatism. Potentially, a concerted move of the Kurds towards independence in at least three neighboring Middle Eastern states may trigger a crisis on the scale comparable to the Arab-Israeli conflict outbreak of the late 1940s.

Iran’s Nuclear Ambition

While the acute issue of Kurdish statehood has mostly regional security implications, Iran’s nuclear program presents the whole of the international community with a challenge of genuinely global proportions. Quite apart from Israel’s concerns about Iranian intentions, Iran’s nuclear ambition may trigger a WMD arms race in the region, where the sense of rivalry is growing between Iran and its neighboring Sunni monarchies of the Persian Gulf. Such an arms race, in its turn, may exacerbate the Arab-Israeli antagonisms and push Turkey’s security policy further away from its NATO allies. The multilateral regime based on the Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968 will be completely shattered if Iran manages to get away with deploying a nuclear deterrent by the end of the decade.

The U.S. threat assessment of Iran’s nuclear program was on a constant rise under the Bush administration and became surprisingly high by the end of 2006. At that point, influential analysts began questioning the conventional wisdom that the
United States was not intent on attacking Iran given the challenges U.S. troops were facing elsewhere in the Middle East. Despite strong pressure, Tehran raised the stakes by making it clear that uranium enrichment would be continued and expanded.

Iran’s drive towards a large-scale enrichment capacity is motivated by a complicated mix of factors, some of which appear to be inadequately assessed by major players involved in the dispute. These factors include boosting Iran’s regional and global standing and defending from an external attack as well as propping up the ayatollahs’ regime within Iran. In addition to that, psychologically, as some Russian observers have noted, Tehran may be vying for respect as an international player. Since the collapse of U.S.-Iran ties in the wake of the 1979 revolution, Tehran has been largely ignored and then fiercely pressured by Washington on nuclear and other issues. Iran may therefore pursue a nuclear status in order to ensure that the West, and the United States in particular, treats Iran as an equal negotiating party. Just like India was removed from the American list of countries punished for pursuing nuclear weapons, Tehran would like to be dropped out of the “axis of evil” group of pariah states. Even a rhetorical move by Washington in that direction may bring surprising benefits in terms of engaging Iran in constructive negotiations with the international community.

On its part, Russia’s policy vis-à-vis Iran is based on balancing several sets of calculations. Pros for distancing from the U.S. position include revenues from launching the nuclear power station in Bushehr and weapons sales to Iran as well as an opportunity to softly balance the United States and European Union. However, as more information about the real scope of Iran’s nuclear ambition was reaching the Russian leadership, Moscow became more cautious in supporting Tehran in its confrontation with the West. Russian attitudes may have been affected by fresh assessments of the threats arising from a war with Iran or a nuclear-armed Iran capable of hitting targets in Russia. In late 2006–early 2007, Moscow supported a series of UN Security Council resolutions demanding that Iran stop enriching uranium and submit all its nuclear installations to IAEA inspections. In March 2007, the Russian contractor at Bushehr accused Iran of failing to transfer payments due for the next stage of construction work and threatened to suspend further work on the ground. At the time when a military operation against Iran was considered an especially high probability, Moscow chose to avoid both an implicit endorsement of Iran’s intransigence vis-à-vis the international community and any damage that may be caused to Russian personnel in Iran. The latter scenario would make it impossible for Russia to preserve neutrality and distance itself from both conflicting parties should a war between Iran and the United States become a reality.

Afghanistan

Security in the Middle East is further challenged by the continuing instability in Afghanistan. This country serves as a channel whereby South Asian security threats are projected onto the Middle East. Most Russian observers agree that the future of Afghanistan is highly uncertain and the situation may play out against Russia. In
the worst scenario, the United States may decide to drastically reduce its commitment to Afghan security. This could undermine the willingness of other ISAF-contributing nations to remain on the ground. Should that happen, not only Afghanistan, but the neighboring regions, including Central Asia, will be further destabilized and generate a multitude of direct threats to Russia.

At the same time, American efforts to engage Afghanistan in a network of security, trade, and social relationships with post-Soviet Central Asia were negatively received in Russia. Initiatives, such as the Greater Central Asia Partnership, may export insecurity from the Middle East and South Asia straight into Russia’s southern neighborhood while providing no clear benefits to Russia and its partners in Central Asia.

Russian analysts have sided with the growing number of negative assessments of the impact of Pakistani policies on the situation in Afghanistan. Russian experts were among the first to draw attention to the support provided by Pakistani security services to the Taliban and other extremist insurgents operating in Afghanistan. Given the links between Afghanistan and Central Asia, Moscow has shown interest in cooperation with NATO in the region. However, by 2007 Russia’s proposals for multilateral activities with the participation of NATO, Russia, and Central Asian countries have not received positive reaction from the Atlantic Alliance. Moscow, in its turn, has ruled out any deployment of Russian contingents on Afghan soil.

Russia-NATO cooperation in Central Asia and Afghanistan may gather momentum after the Alliance deepens its partnerships with Central Asian countries. This will help NATO overcome fears about Russian domination of any multilateral cooperative arrangement in Central Asia. Both sides have already concluded that no comprehensive solution of security challenges in Afghanistan will be possible without mutual trust between Russia and NATO as well as their concerted action.

Conclusion

Russia’s geographic proximity to and long-standing ties with the Middle East make it the first great power to suffer from new bouts of conflict and also the first to benefit from enhanced regional security. Multilateral comprehensive solutions, favored by Moscow, are unlikely to materialize in the foreseeable future—not only because of the unilateral inclinations on the part of Washington, but also because of the reluctance of most regional actors to achieve a final settlement. At the same time, it is becoming increasingly clear to Russia and other influential external players that the deadly threats emanating from the Middle East equally undermine both Western and Russian security. These two trends combined will be encouraging Russia and the United States, as well as EU countries, to agree on policy priorities and step up coordination of their positions on major regional issues. Only faced with concerted pressure by the leading mediators will the conflicting parties seriously consider ceasing hostilities. However undemocratic such a “Middle Eastern Concert” of nations may appear, it is a more realistic alternative to unilateral designs for a comprehensive democratization of the Middle East.
NOTES

1. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, the U.S. European Command, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.


4. Muslim attitudes to Iraq and on related issues are the subject of frequent and detailed polling by the PEW Research Center, accessible at http://www.pewresearch.org.


9. The views expressed in this chapter are the author’s only.


11. Russian President Vladimir Putin paid an official visit to Saudi Arabia on February 12, 2007. In the course of his visit, he promoted joint Russian-Saudi projects on oil exploration and production, the building of railways and connecting Saudi Arabia to the Russian GLO-NASS global positioning system.


17. For one influential policy proposal, see S. Frederick Starr, “A Partnership for Central Asia,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 4 (July–August 2005): 164–78.