
Middle East Region at Critical Crossroads

By

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The Middle East region stands now at a critical crossroads with profound implications for America's national security. The region is in transition, but to what? With a combined population of some 230 million people, the vast majority of whom is under age thirty, the region is confronting challenges of an order of magnitude beyond what we could have envisioned when I was here in 1975. The socialist, secular state machinery that once held such promise has demonstrably failed to keep up with the needs of the people. As the *Arab Human Development Reports* from 2002 to 2004 have chronicled, huge deficits in the areas of education, economy and politics have resulted, creating vacuums that in some cases, well-organized Islamic organizations have stepped in to fill. [The *Arab Human Development Reports* from 2002-2004 can be found at the following web site: <http://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=Arab%20Human%20Development%20Reports%20from%202002%20-%202004&hl=en&lr=scholart>.]

Governments have been slow to respond to this rapid change, but many are beginning to do so. Egypt, for instance, through a painful process of economic reform, has been growing for the past couple of years at 5 percent and is expected to grow even faster in 2006. Though slow in comparison to Asia's powerhouses, Egypt's growth is allowing it to absorb most of the new entrants into the labor force and is beginning to change mind sets. Egypt has also recently experimented with direct elections and is beginning the difficult process of expanding political space in a one-party dominated system.

Such changes are crucial, but they are also slow. They need time and space to come to fruition, but in that same period there are disruptive alternative visions. While there is a trend to democracy, there is also resistant to it. The same factors pushing reforms upon the governments of the region are also empowering those who would like to wipe the entire slate clean and start over with an exclusionary, intolerant world view. In many ways this is a race, and our decision has been to seek to engage now rather than wait to see what happens later. There is a legitimate question as to whether we will succeed, but we know that if we do nothing we will most certainly fail.

The challenges are numerous but the path is clear. Obviously, Iraq is a huge focus. We must work with moderate Iraqis to stabilize Iraq and to give that nation a chance to strengthen its democratic foundations. Security is primordial to that endeavor and, for the moment, that can only be created by a combination of U.S. troop pressure, Iraqi forces build-up, reconciliation with non-terrorist elements of the insurgency, and elimination of death squads. This must be complemented by continued international support for Iraq. Our focus here is the United Nations and Iraq-led effort for an international compact linking Iraqi economic reform and political steps to enhanced international financial and political support.

We must continue to go on the offensive against radicals and extremists who exploit other conflicts to undermine a non-violent and liberal order. In particular, we must confront the new challenge that the Islamic Republic of Iran represents to the international community and to peace and stability in the region. And, more widely throughout the region, we must continue with our efforts to support moderate governments and civil society in their efforts to meet the needs of their people and to encourage genuine freedom to take root.

Meeting any of these individual challenges would not be sufficient to bring peace and stability to the region. And the Arab-Israeli conflict, which has been so central for so long, must be solved if any hope for lasting peace is to be assured. Precisely because all of these issues are so deeply intertwined, our approach must be comprehensive and must seize opportunities where only dangers seem apparent. In no place now are the risks and opportunities more apparent than in the current situation in Lebanon, for it is related to all of these challenges. Hezbollah, a powerful terrorist organization, emerged as a “state-within-a-state” because of the failure of the central government to meet the needs of its citizens. Iran has aided and abetted Hezbollah’s growth through cold hard cash and weapons, a policy that dates back to the early 1980’s, but recently has been reinvigorated. Iran has also looked to replicate the Hezbollah “model” in Iraq in order to further destabilize that country, and has enlisted the minority Alawite regime in Syria. After Hezbollah initiated the violence on July 12, 2006 the U.S. and France led the effort to create a new dynamic in Lebanon for greater stability and peace in that country, an effort that resulted in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 (UNSCR 1701). Through 1701 the international community supports the sovereignty of the Lebanese state, with a monopoly on force within its borders and controlling those borders, so that Hezbollah cannot be present as an armed group in the south and cannot be rearmed. It is our expectation that the introduction of an international force into Lebanon to work with the government of Lebanon and the Lebanese Armed Forces can achieve these critical objectives and avert yet another round of violence in this pivotal nation.

With the arrival of the international force, we will also look to empower the government of Lebanon by urging the prompt lifting of the Israeli embargo by deploying the force as Israel withdraws, and by beginning reconstruction efforts in earnest. We will also work with the government of Lebanon in concert with the international community to address underlying structural problems in the economy that existed before the war. This can only be a beginning. We must also work for Hezbollah’s disarmament, which is in the end the only way to support harmony among all Lebanese. Above all, Syria’s continued interference in Lebanon must stop.

Iran looms as an emergent, dangerous challenge. Shortly, we will be going back to the United Nations Security Council to demonstrate to the Iranian government that the international community is resolved to see an end to Iran’s effort to weaponize its nuclear program. To give strength to the EU-3 (France, England and Germany) negotiations with Iran, the U.S. recently agreed to join our European partners at the table with the Iranians should Iran agree to suspend enrichment and reprocessing. Iran has made abundantly clear that they will not, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has confirmed continuation of enrichment, so we have no choice but to consider how further to isolate Iran. We continue to hold out hope that Iran will abide by the will of the international community, but hope is not a plan. We will therefore seek to constrain Iran’s ability to benefit from the international community which it now threatens.

Stabilizing Iraq, shoring up Lebanon, and containing Iran are all part of a broader strategy that also seeks an end to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. For too long, extremists have traded off the tragedy of this conflict to attract recruits by radicalizing the poor and uneducated. Increasingly, it is extremist Islamic groups who most vigorously exploit this issue. We remain committed to advancing the President’s two-state vision of peace, and we continue to work with the parties and key regional allies to realize that vision. Progress will also strike a blow to rejectionist groups that have adopted anti-Israeli rhetoric in an attempt to further their own political agenda.

While making progress on the Arab-Israeli conflict remains a core concern, the ability of the international community and key states in the region to improve their economic and political situation remains the only way to create the conditions for real development and lasting stability. To the degree that we and they are successful the ambitions of radicals and extremists will fail. Increasing the scope of political freedom, reducing high rates of unemployment, creating opportunities for personal

economic improvement, and raising the standard of living will help address the root causes of terrorism and reduce the appeal of extremist-Islamic political movements. By creating an autonomous business class, new political leaders could emerge.

It will be equally important that governments in the region take on the task of reform. The international community should do its utmost to support reformers as they go through the inevitable growing pains. Our plan is ambitious. We continue to push for greater market transparency, privatization of banking and financial institutions, and a Middle East Free Trade Agreement (MEFTA) by 2012. To build partnerships for change, the U.S. has initiated two comprehensive plans: the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) initiative and the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). These two programs work directly with civil society, nascent democratic movements, and government officials to identify areas of reform and provide support where possible.

We are under no illusions. We know how hard conflict resolution and reform in the region will be. But I am an optimist and I think we can succeed. As I said before, the Middle East is a region in transition and it has come to a crossroads. U.S. leadership is key. How we respond will define our relationship with the region for the foreseeable future.