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ARCS OF INSTABILITY

U.S. Relations in the Greater Middle East

Geoffrey Kemp

What do we mean by “the Middle East”? There is no single, agreed definition of its political or geographic boundaries. Geographers, historians, journalists, and government bureaucrats all use the term, yet they frequently mean different things.

The Department of State speaks of “the Near East,” to include North Africa, the Levant, and the Gulf countries—but not Turkey, since that state is a member of Nato. In contrast, the Department of Defense divides the region another way. U.S. Central Command has responsibility for military operations in a zone that includes Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, the Gulf Cooperation Council states, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Excluded are the Caucasus, Turkey, Israel, Syria, and India; the first four remain under the responsibility of European Command, while India falls under Pacific Command.

The breakup of the Soviet Union and the establishment of the newly independent republics of the Caucasus (Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia) and Central Asia (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan) raised new questions about where exactly the Middle East begins, where it ends, and whether it can be comprehensively, consistently delimited.

How then should we define the Middle East? One option would be to use the phrase “Greater Middle East,” which has gained some currency. So formal a designation, however, implies a degree of precision that is not presently justified. It assumes there is a generally accepted definition of which countries to include and which to exclude (as in the case of continents—say, the line between Asia and Africa). In fact, however, selection is bound to be arbitrary, because rationales for including one country and excluding another are based on judgments

as to what the determinant variables are. If one is primarily interested in strategic geography rather than religion or political alliances, one necessarily selects countries differently from those who would wish to analyze, say, the Muslim world or the Cold War confrontation states.

For our purposes, let us include the Caucasus, Central Asia, and South Asia, as well as Turkey and the traditional Middle East countries in a broad definition of “the Greater Middle East.” That brings us to a new term requiring definition—the “arc of instability.”

In the vast Greater Middle East are several arcs of instability, not just one. The most obvious arc follows the historical “Fertile Crescent,” from the Nile Valley along the Mediterranean coast through Lebanon and Syria into Mesopotamia and the northern Persian Gulf. Two other arcs are notably unstable, one running from Turkey through the Caucasus to Iran, the other from Iran through Afghanistan and Pakistan to India. Within these three arcs lie most of the dangerous conflicts that worry us today—Arab-Israel, Armenia-Azerbaijan, Iraq-Kuwait, Iraq-Iran, Turkey-Iraq, India-Pakistan, Afghanistan. Three countries have nuclear arsenals (Israel, India, and Pakistan); Iraq and Iran aspire to be nuclear states. If proliferation continues, Turkey and Saudi Arabia could join this list.

It is necessary to remember two other geographical concepts that are worthy of note in connection with arcs. First, in an area stretching from southern Russia to the southern Persian Gulf lies a “strategic energy ellipse” that contains over 60 percent of the world’s proven oil reserves and approximately 80 percent of the world’s proven natural gas. This ellipse will be one of the key strategic prizes in the geopolitics of the twenty-first century. Second, since President George W. Bush’s 29 January 2002 State of the Union address, we have had to take into account another geographical phenomenon, an “axis of evil” that stretches from North Korea to Iran and Iraq.

Given this geopolitical framework, let us focus on three developments since 11 September 2001 that concern U.S. security policy. The first is the extraordinary realignment of relationships in the Middle East (as we have defined it); as a result of the terrorist events, new ties with the United States have been formed by many nations. The second is the growing pressure from the Bush administration to end the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. The third concerns the complicated and confused state of American relations with Iran and how that country relates to key items on the American agenda—terrorism, proliferation, and regional stability.

NEW U.S. ALIGNMENTS

Consider the new strategic realities in the Greater Middle East that have emerged from the 11 September attacks. The United States has deployed military

forces or training missions and can use military facilities in the following countries: Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar. It has access to facilities in Egypt, Israel, and India, and it could, if it wished, establish closer military ties with Azerbaijan and Georgia. It has established closer intelligence cooperation with Syria, Yemen, and Sudan. In addition, it has a formidable naval presence in the eastern Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean.

No American military presence in Central Asia could exist without Russian approval; the fact that such approval has been given reflects the major change in U.S.-Russian relations since 11 September. Rhetoric in the United States and the West concerning Russia's crackdown on terrorism in Chechnya and elsewhere has accordingly been much reduced. If this new alliance survives a number of short-term challenges, it could set the stage for a reassessment of American policy toward the Caucasus and Central Asia, where until recently the United States has been willing to challenge Russia's attempts at dominance. There could also be a parallel Russian reassessment of its policies toward the Middle East, particularly Iran and Iraq, policies that have been seen as contrary to American interests and security concerns. The indications are that President Vladimir Putin has considerable support for such a reassessment, although how far he is prepared to be more restrictive on Iran and Iraq remains to be seen. Certainly Russia is now engaged with the United States in far-reaching discussions on matters relating to weapons development and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction into the Middle East. The improvement in U.S.-Russian relations has deferred, at least for the time being, speculation about alternative strategic alliances involving China, and possibly India, designed to check American hegemonic tendencies.

Relations with China

China, as much as Russia, wants good relations with the United States at this time, primarily for economic reasons. The recent downturn in the American economy, together with the economic effects of the 11 September attacks, raised the prospect of a global recession. Deterioration could accelerate dramatically were there further terrorist attacks against the United States or other major economic powers, such as in Europe. This in turn would have a most negative impact on China's growth prospects and upon Russia's hope to parlay better economic relations with the West. For these reasons, no global counterweight to the new U.S.-Russia relationship seems likely for the time being. The relative lack of international response to President Bush's decision to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty suggests that better relations with the United States

outweigh for other governments the strategic consequences of an American missile defense program.

Changing Relationships with India and Pakistan

Prior to 11 September, a better relationship with India had been one of the few significant changes in American foreign policy under the Bush administration. India seemed destined to have new, special ties with Washington, and this prospect was reflected in India's support of American missile-defense proposals and frequent allusions to greater economic ties between the two countries. Pakistan, in contrast, was increasingly isolated—almost a pariah state, analogous to Iraq or North Korea.

The speed with which President Pervez Musharraf adapted to the events of 11 September demonstrated his extraordinary survival skills. Pakistani cooperation has been essential to the American war against terrorism and has taken place without jeopardizing America's new relations with India. True, India has been frustrated and annoyed by certain U.S. policies, particularly Washington's reluctance to regard terrorism against India by Pakistani-sponsored groups as being as serious as the attacks on New York and Washington. Nonetheless, the United States has now become an honest broker between India and Pakistan, trying to prevent a nuclear war over the issues of Kashmir and terrorism.

Musharraf, in turn, has gone farther than other Muslim leaders in speaking out against religious extremism. He is taking firm steps to crack down on the *madrassehs*, extremist Islamic schools, and their financing by foreign countries and individuals. He and many other Pakistanis have concluded that radical Islam is detrimental to the long-term interests of their Islamic state. However, the U.S. military presence in Pakistan may be contributing to growing anti-American sentiment in the country, evidenced by the kidnapping and murder of the *Wall Street Journal's* Daniel Pearl in Karachi. Washington fears that domestic turmoil could lead to the destabilization of General Musharraf's regime and pave the way for an Islamic fundamentalist government. If such a government were to take control of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, it is unlikely that India would sit quietly and watch. A major Indian attack would drag the entire subcontinent into a war—a situation that recently came dangerously close to playing out. Both countries are currently expanding their stockpiles and seeking various advanced military technologies. In that arena, the 11 September attacks reinforced some of the problems that U.S. policy already faced.

Whether or not Musharraf survives and is eventually able to hand over rule to a democratic government remains uncertain. As of this writing, American relations with Islamabad and New Delhi are good. America's previous

preoccupation with such issues as nuclear nonproliferation on the subcontinent has ceased to be the priority, as it had been for most of the 1980s and 1990s.

U.S. Relations with Afghanistan

The United States, through its prompt and successful military actions against the Taliban, brought into being a new, ideally democratic Afghan regime headed by an interim leader (later confirmed), Hamid Karzai. In hopes that new attempts at nation building in Afghanistan will succeed, large sums of money have already been committed to the reconstruction of the country. There is international consensus that without such foreign aid Afghanistan could once more become a source of international terrorism.

The future of Afghanistan will depend not just on the United States but on its relations with Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Russia, China, and India. These countries have different agendas, and it could be that the struggle for Afghanistan will yet be a long and bloody one. Reports allege that Iran is supplying weapons to certain Afghans as part of an effort to destabilize the western provinces. Tehran, for its part, has a strategic interest in preventing an American-backed government with no Shia representation from taking power; the U.S. government, in turn, is concerned that Iranian officials may be training local soldiers and placing agents in Afghanistan to bully local leaders into subservience to Tehran.

If Afghan provinces start acting on their own or against other provinces, the central government will collapse. Nevertheless, the United States is deeply involved in ensuring Afghanistan's stable future, as indeed are the European Union countries and Japan. This bodes well for development in the region, provided that the external powers can resolve confrontations and conflicts between themselves, and provided that the Afghans continue to avoid the easy descent into warlordism and violence. The Bush administration had no interest in Afghanistan when it came into office—but as any student of history knows, events change everything.

U.S.-Saudi Relations

American relations with Saudi Arabia have recently gone through their most tumultuous period in modern memory. The fact that many of the perpetrators of 11 September were Saudi citizens (albeit living in exile) and that money from Saudi Arabia supported the Taliban and (indirectly) al-Qa'ida operations to a significant extent highlighted the ambiguous nature of the U.S. relationship with Riyadh. The kingdom has been both cooperative and obstructive in the war on terrorism; for example, the government froze the financial accounts of Saudi nationals and organizations that the United States identified as sponsors of

terrorism, but it did not grant American officials access to domestic intelligence information.

For the first time, the world is scrutinizing the house of al-Saud and calling its style of governance into question. Following the discovery of oil, Saudi Arabia became a “renter state,” rendering its merchant class redundant as a source of state revenue and hence unrepresented in the government decision-making process. Achieving political quiescence in this situation involved substantial pay-offs, some of which were then channeled to militant and terrorist groups who have since been providing money and ideological guidance to networks all over the Middle East.

In trying to maintain a firm hold on power, the Saudi royal family has been wary of upsetting the religious Right and reluctant to round up active militant groups for fear of unrest and charges of monarchical illegitimacy and religious deviance. Accordingly, its approach has been accommodation rather than confrontation. The presence of the U.S. military on Saudi soil does not help, and

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neither does the poor state of the nation’s economy. Hit by volatility in the price of oil, Saudi citizens no longer enjoy to the extent they once did the fruits of their enormous welfare state. Instead, they face high levels of unemployment

and potential cuts in subsidies, should Saudi Arabia join the World Trade Organization. The current system has fostered social rigidity, terrorism, and civil unrest; conversely, many Americans are asking why their government supports a corrupt, autocratic monarchy that has a bad human rights record and turns a blind eye to terrorism outside its borders.

The answer, of course, is that the United States and the industrialized world remain critically dependent upon Gulf oil, to which there is no short-term alternative. The United States imports 18 percent of its imported oil from Saudi Arabia; for that reason it has been reluctant to confront unpalatable domestic Saudi practices. Russia would like to play a more important role in the oil market, and Iraq may eventually be able to add several millions of barrels per day. However, Saudi Arabia remains the only country with the surplus capacity to make up shortfalls in the event of a serious interruption of supply from other major producers.

Much of the antagonism between Saudi Arabia and the United States has been fought out in the press in both countries. The two governments themselves have retained good relations, and it is likely that the relationship will weather the current storm. But the public nature of the dispute has raised questions in the

collective American political mind as to how long U.S. forces need to be kept in the Gulf. One of the reasons argued for action to rid Iraq of Saddam Hussein is that it would remove the need for a major American military presence on the landmass of Arabia, which in turn was one of the primary justifications Osama Bin Laden used for attacking America.

Statements made by Crown Prince Abdullah indicate that Saudi Arabia wishes to play a major part in restarting the Arab-Israeli peace process and calming Muslim anger in, and concerning, that region. The crown prince has suggested a proposal for peace that might include acceptance of Israeli control over the Western Wall and Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. The importance of this initiative is that Saudi Arabia, as the protector of Medina and Mecca, wields great prestige, influence, and financial leverage in the entire Arab world and may be in a position to effect change. Saudi reluctance to compromise over the issue of Jerusalem during the Camp David talks was one of the reasons the talks failed.

THE "AXIS OF EVIL"

If the United States has effectively formed a new Greater Middle Eastern coalition, several countries remain outside it. The most troubling are those identified by the president as "evil" in his State of the Union address—Iraq, Iran, and North Korea.

Perhaps the president could have made his points about these three countries in a more nuanced manner and yet have been tough on the issues, but in fact Iraq and Iran are the most troublesome regimes now facing the United States in the Middle East. How to handle them will require adroit diplomacy.

Washington's ongoing internal review of Iraqi policy remains contentious. While the White House believes Saddam Hussein must be removed from power before the end of the president's first term in 2005, how and when to topple the regime has not been determined. Likewise, whether an American effort will be part of an international coalition or a unilateral confrontation is unclear.

Three basic plans on Saddam's ouster are believed to be circulating throughout the administration. They are not mutually exclusive. One approach, drawing upon lessons from the recent war in Afghanistan, calls for a short, intense military campaign using overwhelming airpower and limited U.S. ground forces; forces generated by the indigenous and exiled Iraqi opposition would take the lead in replacing the regime as it began to collapse. A second military plan is more conservative and posits a major buildup of American military forces in the region, to include upward of two hundred thousand U.S. ground troops. Preparation for such a level of effort might take a year. The assumption here is that American forces would have to do most of the fighting on the land as well as in

the air to ensure a decisive outcome. Whether the operation would culminate in the occupation of Baghdad and what role would be assigned to Iraqi opposition forces are matters that at this writing have yet to be worked out. This plan would require access to a number of important military facilities in the Arab world that may not be available if the Palestinian crisis is still unresolved.

The third plan, promoted by the Central Intelligence Agency, is to work more intensely to exploit internal dissent in Iraq and promote within the military a coup d'état that would remove Saddam and his entourage from within. Such an outcome would avoid the need to use U.S. forces and could be presented to the world as a primarily Iraqi operation.

The most vocal advocates for the early use of force display great optimism as to the ease with which Saddam can be removed and the strategic benefits that would follow. Victory in Iraq would bring a better, more humane government for the Iraqi people and put pressure on Iraq's neighbors, including Iran, to change their ways—especially with respect to terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and human rights. Iraq would become a stable, unified country. Over time, a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict would become more achievable. An economic boom could follow as billions of dollars of foreign investment flowed into Iraq to rebuild the country.

More pessimistic scenarios suggest that unless a U.S.-led operation had international legitimacy, preferably bestowed by the United Nations Security Council, it would not be supported by many countries currently in the coalition against terrorism, including most of our Arab partners. This might not matter if the war were won easily, but what if the operation went wrong? One concern is that since U.S. policy is to remove the regime, Saddam and his immediate cohorts would have no option but to fight, and they would not be deterred from using whatever weapons of mass destruction were in their possession. They would probably fire chemical and biological weapons at American forces, Israel, the Kurds, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. If a weapon of mass destruction were to strike Israel, especially if it caused substantial casualties, Israel would likely respond massively, possibly triggering a wider regional war, with serious consequences for the stability of key Arab regimes.

Further, it might be more difficult to remove the regime in Iraq than the optimists suggest, even with massive force. Sustained bombing would surely destroy most of the Iraqi infrastructure, but there is no guarantee it would destroy either the leadership or all the weapons of mass destruction; a bombing campaign would likely kill many Iraqi civilians and thereby create a humanitarian crisis; the occupation of Baghdad itself could prove especially costly. If, after a massive campaign, Saddam Hussein were to emerge alive and uncaptured, the undertaking would be considered a failure, with politically disastrous consequences for Bush.

Finally, the economic costs of a major war could be high. In 1991 the United States garnered billions of dollars of financial support for DESERT STORM from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Japan and others. This time the U.S. taxpayer would have to pay the entire bill. A protracted war could cause volatility in the oil market, even a disruption of supply causing short-term price spikes—at a time when the Asian economies are in trouble and the United States is just emerging from recession.

These, then, are two extreme scenarios. Probably any military operation against Iraq would be neither as easy nor as horrendous as the extremes sketched above. Nevertheless, there is utility in thinking about “best” cases and “worst” cases. These cases will be discussed in many forums in the coming weeks and months. It is important to have a public and open discussion on the options—and especially about “the day after.”

IRAN

President Bush included Iran in the “axis of evil” speech for several reasons. One was continued U.S. anger at Iran’s support for Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in their war against Israel, as well as over Iranian complicity in the shipment of smuggled arms for the Palestinian Authority on the merchant ship *Karine*. A second was Iran’s continued attempts to develop nuclear weapons—a finding shared by the intelligence services of the United Kingdom, Germany, and France, as well as the United States and Israel. Another was disillusionment with President Mohammad Khatami, who has so far proven unable to challenge Iran’s hard-liners or open a direct dialogue with Washington.

Despite President Bush’s harsh rhetoric, there remains much uncertainty as to the next military actions in the war against terrorism. For many in Washington, Iraq remains the prime target once Afghanistan has stabilized. Yet, ironically, having included Iran in the “axis of evil” the administration may have stimulated greater cooperation, both direct and indirect, between the hard-liners in Tehran and the regime in Baghdad in a search for common ground against an increasingly threatening American military posture.

While Iranians still harbor bitter resentment toward Saddam Hussein, these days Tehran’s hard-liners fear America more than Iraq—and for good reason. The United States now has military forces in Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, and is reportedly using military facilities in Tajikistan. It retains a formidable military presence on the Arabian Peninsula, in the Gulf itself, in the Arabian Sea, and in Turkey. Iran is surrounded by American military power, save along its western border, with Iraq.

If Washington decides on operations against Iraq, the objective will be the end of the Saddam Hussein regime, which would entail an extended American military presence in the country; whatever regime follows Saddam would be

likely to be at least relatively pro-American. Iran would then be surrounded in all directions by countries hosting American military forces. Further, the end of the Saddam Hussein regime would remove at least one impediment to a negotiated conclusion to the Arab-Israeli conflict. This would be an anathema for Iran's most intransigent mullahs, for whom the demonization of Israel is an ideological cornerstone. An Iraq under a new regime could become a major focus for international investment in energy development and production and thereby overtake Iran as an oil exporter. This, in turn, could further reduce oil prices at a time when Iran desperately needs foreign exchange to meet its still-growing population. Under such circumstances, the pressures on the hard-liners to relinquish power to elected moderates, under Khatami or his successors, would be likely to reach a crescendo.

It would therefore be logical for the hard-liners to help Saddam Hussein avoid being overthrown by American military power. How could they do this? One way would be to stir up trouble in Afghanistan. So long as there is unrest in that troubled country, the United States will be under pressure not to expand the war into Iraq. Another option would be to airlift more arms and support via Iraq and Syria to the anti-Israeli forces in Lebanon and in the occupied territories, in the well founded belief that the more unstable the Arab-Israeli front, the more difficult it would be for the United States to gain support in the Arab world for a war against Saddam. A third possibility, of which Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has warned, would be to assist the escape of al-Qa'ida personnel from Afghanistan, in the hope that they would cause trouble for the Americans in other areas, possibly even in the United States itself.

While none of these options is likely to be supported by President Khatami and his entourage, Khatami has little say in the doings of the ministries of intelligence and security and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Until recently, rogue elements in these institutions were assassinating Khatami's own supporters. The bifurcation of power in Iran and the failure of the elected majority to exercise real control over the militant elements of Iranian foreign policy ensure continued enmity between Washington and Tehran.

While President Bush's speech caused great concern in Europe, China, and Russia, there is no doubt he had made a conscious decision to put Iran on notice that it must change its foreign policy. The smiling face of Mr. Khatami and Iranian help in the early stages of the Afghan conflict do not compensate for the dangerous activities of the hard-liners.

Whether the United States will succeed in this new, assertive policy is a matter of intense debate. In the short run, labeling Iran an "evil" state has undoubtedly strengthened hard-liners and further weakened Khatami. However, most Iranians know that their long-term national interests are not served by playing with

fire. Eventually the majority will realize that they have more to gain from working with the United States than against it.

For the foreseeable future, the events of 11 September will influence the international environment in which the United States pursues its national interests. A new era of megaterrorism is upon the nation, an era that will impose many new codes of conduct upon the key international players. Although American predominance as a military power has never been greater, 11 September demonstrated both how vulnerable the United States itself is to attack and how essential it will be, in coping with future terrorist threats and attacks, to cooperate with old allies and new friends in all corners of the globe.

Without international coalitions, the most basic tasks of counterterrorism cannot be met. Intelligence sharing, access to bases, routine policing, and monitoring of borders and ports—all require unparalleled degrees of international cooperation. For this reason the United States must balance its willingness to act unilaterally in the face of threats to American citizens against the danger that a too assertive, too aggressive posture would be perceived as arrogant and risky by many countries who are presently eager to work with Washington.

For the near term, how the Bush administration manages the crises with Iraq, Iran, and Israel will provide a bellwether of the likely policy direction of the coming years. So far, the war on terrorism has gone remarkably well—indeed, better than expected. So long as the pattern of success continues, the administration will get high marks, especially from its domestic constituency. But if, and when, resistance stiffens and the campaign runs into trouble, clear international legitimacy and a well established alliance of partners will be essential.