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**The Middle East Crisis:
Six “Long Wars” and Counting**

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The Middle East is never a peaceful place, but even by regional standards, the US faces major problems in virtually every area. Even if one ignores the problems raised by enduring issues like energy, development, demographics, and normal politics and diplomacy, the US and its allies are now directly or indirectly involved in six "long wars:"

The war in Iraq

The struggle with Iranian proliferation and "adventures"

The War in Afghanistan and the Problem of Pakistan

The Israeli-Palestinian struggle

The Israeli-Lebanese struggle

The broader war on terrorism

It is easy lose sight of one or more of these conflicts under the pressure of dealing with the others. It is equally easy to lose sight of the connections between them and the fact they really are "long wars." Almost regardless of the level of violence involved, all of these conflicts now promise to involve religious, ideological, political, and perceptual struggles that will play out over at least a decade.

The most the US can hope to accomplish is to limit the scale of risk and intervention, contain the worst violence and risks, and put a given struggle on a path to progress that time can eventually turn into real conflict resolution. The US can lose quickly in some cases, but it cannot win quickly in any. Moreover, there are no conflicts where it can act unilaterally. In every case, success depends on international and local partners.

The irony is that there was never a time when the US needed bipartisan realism and allies more than today. The reality, however, is growing and largely opportunistic partisanship, uncertain realism at best, and an ongoing compulsion to transform or pressure allies rather than treat them as partners. This is made worse by the fact that Arab-Israeli conflicts always polarize US politics and strategic thinking, and the Administration and Congress are now looking at two elections rather than one: Congress in November 2006 and the Presidency in 2008. Truth may be the first casualty of war, but it is the national interest that is the first casualty of domestic politics.

There are no good, quick, or simple answers to any of the conflicts the US faces, but the importance of patient, bipartisan realism is easy to illustrate:

The War in Iraq

The US and the Iraqi people face a critical period in which Baghdad and the country can slide into a level of civil war that US forces can do little to prevent and where any effort to do so would simply make them part of the fighting. The Battle of Baghdad is unlikely to explode this summer—although some major incident(s) might trigger this. It is more likely to play out over six months to a year. US and Iraqi forces should be able to score initial victories against the insurgency and reduce sectarian conflict—if the Iraqi police can be controlled and if fighting does not take place with the Shi'ite militias.

Everything does depend, however, on Iraqi political leadership and reaching some new national compromise. It depends on US and Iraqi ability to keep the military non-

sectarian, reform the security forces and police, establish a criminal justice and court system, and establish a government presence at the local level.

Defeat can come in days, weeks, and months. Progress and some form of "victory" almost certainly mean a major US effort beyond 2010. This will involve US combat support indefinitely into the future—it is over when it is over not, at some date certain—although the levels of such support may decline sharply. It probably requires at least another \$20 billion in aid, and this time aid that goes directly to Iraqis with the US tasked to ensure the projects are real by limiting corruption and measuring progress and effectiveness. Grim as it may sound to say so, the US may have to think in terms of 5,000 American lives and more than \$800 billion, five-year plans, and only 50-50 odds of success at best.

It also needs to think far more about how to give the Iraqis the lead in every area of activity as soon as possible, how to work far more closely with other regional states and the Arab League, and how to defuse the short and mid-term backlash the Israeli-Palestinian and Lebanon conflicts will create because of US ties to Israel. There is a direct connection. The US is perceived as Israel's cobelligerent and every anti-US movement in the region, and many of America's friends, will act accordingly.

This does not mean the US should abandon Israel for Iraq, oil, or any other reason. It does mean that the US should maintain the highest possible profile in an ongoing attempt to move towards a meaningful peace and rush in massive humanitarian aid. No one in the region expects perfect US neutrality or that the US will not pursue a "dual standard." Simply standing by, however, reinforces the label that the US is indifferent and self-seeking. This is also the worst possible period to threaten the Arab regimes that support peace with Israel, moderate action, and aid the US in security terms. Instant transformational diplomacy never made much sense; it is now a self-inflicted wound.

The Struggle with Iranian Proliferation and "Adventures"

Iran presents a threat that goes beyond proliferation. It is gaining significant advantages in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. It is too soon to talk about a "Shi'ite crescent" or "Shi'ite axis," and such labels would best be avoided in any case. Regimes and movements are not a faith or society. There is, however, a serious risk that the sectarian tension in Iraqi could be mirrored in much of the Middle East, compounded by the anti-Shi'ite beliefs and practices of Neo-Salafi Sunni extremists like Al Qa'ida.

Iraq's Shi'ites, Syria's Alawites, the Hezbollah and links to Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) give Iran new leverage and influence. There also is no indication that talk about regime change, internal unrest, or military strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities will change this. Iran is another five year campaign at best.

This reinforces the need to continue seeking victory in Iraq and to take steps to reduce the political backlash from US ties to Israel. It also, however, reinforces the need to rebuild and strengthen US military ties to the Southern Gulf states and Turkey. To contain Iran, the US must deter and defend against Iran's missiles and efforts to proliferate, and if the US is forced out of Iraq, the US must have ties to regional allies to ensure that there is no domino effect.

This also reinforces the need for the US to work with Europe and regional powers to push diplomatic options to halt Iranian nuclear efforts to the limit and beyond in ways where it

is clear that American military action or extended deterrence may follow. Talk with Iran and Syria may help; it may not. The US, however, needs to offer the carrot as publicly as possible, with as few slogans and as little vacuous political rhetoric as possible, before it uses the stick.

The US also needs to learn from the Israeli experience in Lebanon and its own experience in Iraq. If it does use the stick, the US is almost certain to provoke a much more direct form of asymmetric war with Iran that will be regional, involve energy and Israel, and lasting. The US will desperately need moderate Shi'ite support—if it can get it. It will need to play the Arab card against the Persian one, and the best results will not be pleasant.

The War in Afghanistan and the Problem of Pakistan

The US may not be losing in Afghanistan, but as General Schoomaker said of Iraq, it is not winning. The Afghan government and Afghan forces are not taking hold; they are losing it. The Pashtun problem is growing steadily, and Pakistan's role (and future stability) is increasingly uncertain. US efforts to convert Afghans away from a drug economy are doing far more harm than good, and traditional religious and cultural values are resurfacing along with the Taliban.

The same interlocking images of Israelis attacking Lebanese and Palestinians, and of the US attacking Iraqis, that are being exploited all over the Arab and Islamic world have hurt the US in Afghanistan. So has undermanning the US military effort and underfunding the local economic and force development aid effort. "Nickel and diming" is not a synonym for "Spartan."

Iraq, Chechnya, Israel's local struggles, Afghanistan, Iran, dictatorships in Central Asia, and Pakistani religious movements and the ISI's adventures all interact. US efforts to over-rely on NATO allies that are ideologically tied to peacekeeping, rather than warfighting—and the further exposure of British troops in a high risk area—offer the Taliban a very attractive target. So do the small elements of underpaid Afghan forces, and the few Afghan government elements, normally present in most areas.

Nothing may be more politically unpalatable in the short term than calling for more American forces and expenditures in Afghanistan over a period of at least half a decade. Nothing may be more dangerous in the mid and long term than failing to provide them. At best, it will be cheaper to pay and win now than try to do so later. At worst, it will be far better to pay now and win than to pay later and lose.

The same, incidentally, is true of aid to Pakistan. Afghanistan is only a threat as a sanctuary for terrorists and extremists. Pakistan is a major power and a nuclear one at that. An Islamist Pakistan is not likely but is certainly possible, and a nuclear Pakistan with missiles to sell could be a major new problem child in the "greater Middle East." The current cost of aiding Pakistan at far higher levels than today would be far cheaper than dealing with this alternative.

The Israeli-Palestinian Struggle

The links between the US security position in the Middle East and Israel have already been touched upon. One central reality does, however, have to be kept in mind. Israel and the Palestinians have been locked in a war of attrition since September 2000, and the

prospects for peace are now much worse than they were under Arafat. Neither the Palestinians nor the Israelis are really peace partners for the other side.

There is no Palestinian unity, and waiting for Hamas, the PIJ, and other Palestinian radicals to change is now even less credible than before the fighting started in Lebanon. If Hezbollah has sent any message to the Palestinians, it is that asymmetric warfare may not win, but it does damage Israel.

Israel is less likely to make meaningful unilateral withdrawals. It will be far less willing to put trust in barriers without a forward Israeli Defense Force (IDF) presence, and it will be far less willing to trust Palestinians in Israel.

The US can make beginnings. It can raise the visibility of the peace process. It can carefully allocate humanitarian aid. It can put constructive pressure on Israel to limit the size of its barriers and settlements. It can offer the Palestinians more incentives. And it can be far more aggressive in talking to Europe and Arab peace partners. At the end, however, it is hard to believe that the end result will do more than help prepare for the possible moment when one or both sides become so exhausted by their current struggle that they will change their position, and this seems unlikely for the next half decade or so.

All talk and no walk for the foreseeable future. The best the US can do is reduce the backlash effect. It also cannot be certain that Israel will not face more serious threats like Iranian proliferation or the transfer of far more advanced arms to the hostile elements near its borders.

The Israeli-Lebanese Struggle

The Israel-Lebanese conflict can still have something approaching a successful local outcome, but this depends on permanently disarming Hezbollah and securing southern Lebanon. However, the legacy of the fighting may well create political attitudes in Lebanon and the region that make this impossible. Even a peacemaking force and Lebanese Army presence may simply defer, not solve, the problem. The fighting can easily trigger a search for longer-range, more accurate, and more lethal weapons—including crude chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear (CBRN) warheads.

The broader regional impact will be negative for the US and Israel even—as now seems unlikely—if it eventually leads to backlash against the Hezbollah as well. Like Iraq and Afghanistan, the lesson is you don't need nuclear weapons to attack the US or Israel. The impression in the region (however fair or unfair) is one of an Israel that escalates without being effective and causes needless human suffering—a message that well serves Al Qa'ida, Hamas, and the PIJ.

It is premature to talk about the fighting as being a defeat for Israel, but it seems more likely that no one will be the winner more than Israel. It also seems likely that the US will pay for some years for this war, although perhaps more for a diplomacy that seemed distant, unfeeling, and unbalanced than for Israel's actions per se.

The Broader War on Terrorism

The US may not be losing the broader war on terrorism, but all of the above factors warn that it is not winning. The issue is not Bin Laden or Al Qa'ida, or the present regimes in Iran and Syria. It is dealing with the diverse mix of current and future extremist movements throughout the region. It is dealing with religious, ideological, and cultural

forces that only local allies can enable the US to defeat, and it is recognizing that the US simply cannot withdraw from any part of the region without creating a broader threat to the entire Middle East and to its own territory.

If the US is to win, it has to address each of the other struggles as well as the war on terrorism. This is particularly true of Iraq and Afghanistan, but US success is also linked to Israel's actions and to the struggle of Arab governments against their own internal threats. The US needs allies like Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, etc. more than it has in decades.

The US is only beginning to understand what "long war(s)" really mean in terms of US military commitments and budget expenditures and in terms of complexity, interaction, and time. The sooner it learns these lessons, the sooner it turns back to realism, and the sooner some effort is made to restore bipartisanship the better. Right now, the phrase the "world's only superpower" risks becoming something of a sick joke.