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AMERICAN POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: NEW APPROACH FOR A NEW ADMINISTRATION

by

AMOS PERLMUTTER

The Reagan Administration, now half way into its first year, continues to face the persistent difficulty of devising a Mideast policy that will promote peace and stability in that region while serving the economic and military interests of the United States and its allies. The need to protect the production and trafficking of oil from the Persian Gulf makes it imperative that US policy be wise, precise, and strong, and that US political perceptions about the Middle East be clear-headed and realistic.

To be successful, the Reagan Administration must gird itself to use military as well as political and diplomatic means, and its initiatives must be carried out in a consistent way, grounded always on an over-arching strategy. This was not the case with the Carter Administration, which failed to articulate a clear policy and then failed to administer its often muddled policies wisely or efficiently.

New departures for American foreign policy must thus emerge for the Mideast—particularly for the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula—replacing policies now discredited. Both the Kissinger-Nixon concept of establishing Iran as a surrogate hegemonic power in the gulf to protect US interests and the Carter reliance on Saudi Arabia and Iraq to perform similar functions proved to be

failures. These were applications of a policy of regional substitutes to perform US functions. We have discovered, however, that there is no substitute for US power able to act in its own right.

For any US policy to achieve its aims, it must first be cognizant of the political realities and capabilities of regimes and states in the Middle East. This means discarding or ignoring the wishful thinking and propaganda of those regimes and their apologists.

The first political reality to face up to is that only three political systems in the Middle East can be accurately described as stable, relatively durable, and viable: Israel, Egypt, and—perhaps surprisingly—Iran.¹

By definition, a political system encompasses more than its identity as a regime, its political orientation, or its ideological persuasion. For a political system to be sound—for it to be self-sustaining, inner-directed, and capable of continued development—it must be composed of political institutions which are structurally complex, coherent, adaptable, and based on historical tradition. Egypt and Persia (Iran) once constituted mighty and powerful empires with successful, long-established political cultures and histories of imperial

rule. More important, Egypt has the oldest centralized administration in the area, while Iran's now well-established and modern bureaucracy had its genesis with the enthronement in 1925 of the Pahlavi dynasty. By contrast, none of the other Arab states in the region have legitimacy as functioning political entities; none have political continuity; and none have acquired more than surface stability. Most important, none have cohesive central administrative structures.

No amount of political propaganda or public relations effort will turn Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, or the gulf sheikdoms into credible, institutionalized political entities, at least not in the foreseeable future. They are ethnically heterogeneous, politically fragmented, and socially non-cohesive states; as a result, they are characterized by short-lived, insecure praetorian regimes which, along with their social systems, are prey to revolutionary ferment and upheaval.

The Arab states of the gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia and the oil sheikdoms, present a modern facade, especially in economic terms. Yet their political systems are pre-modern, as are their social, bureaucratic, and military institutions. A common indicator of viability is how these regimes respond under stress, and events over the last three decades in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, the two Yemens, and Saudi Arabia (especially during the abortive Mecca coup of November 1979) are not encouraging. In fact, recent history has served only to underscore the fragility of these regimes.

Even when considering states that strike as having some semblance of longevity—Jordan, Morocco, Iraq, and perhaps Saudi Arabia—the impression rests upon appearance only, not underlying substance. In all of these cases, revolutionary and social forces are nibbling away at the weak foundations of the regimes. It can be said that Jordan's military is a formidable and stabilizing political force, but it is nevertheless not enough in itself to turn Jordan into a viable political entity.

Traditional indigenous military and bureaucratic institutions are the true stuff of

state stability. In much of the Arab world, however, the regimes and bureaucracies are not indigenous, but rather are artificial creations of the British and the French, imposed on territorial remnants of the Ottoman Empire. These artificial creations have been nurtured by the United States and the Soviet Union since 1945, a process continuing in substantial measure today. That this process has ill-suited the Arab states can be seen, for example, in their poor military performances. Arab efforts against Israeli military forces in four wars, Nasser's ill-fated war against the Yemenis, and the Iraqi's indecisive performance against the revolution-shattered Iranian army have revealed inherent war-making weaknesses that Soviet and American military training and technology could not overcome.

It is true that the military structures and bureaucracies of Egypt and Iran are also dual products of the Ottoman Empire and the West, but, as noted earlier, they stretch back to a period of indigenous empire, thus preserving their nations' political integrity and helping them to survive even such disasters as Khomeini's revolution. The key distinction is that the bureaucracies and martial structures of Egypt and Iran have a base in historical tradition.

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American policy must be based on reality—the reality of power in the gulf area and the reality of a particular regime's ability to sustain itself. These realities are threefold. First, Israel is clearly the most stable, historically based, and modern state in the area. Second, Egypt and Iran are a mixture of pre-modern and modern states, but, most important, their bureaucracies and military and political systems have firm historical roots. Third, the praetorian states of the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf have no such historical or political legitimacy; their longevity, their viability, and their stability are all suspect.

Considering these realities, what should American policy be? Assuming abandonment of a policy of surrogate representation, in what direction should the United States go? In essence, there is no substitute for an independent American military presence in the area.

This American military presence should be composed of naval and airborne forces targeted on protecting key strategic areas, areas vital to US interests, particularly in the northeastern part of the Persian Gulf. The United States must be ready to undertake internal as well as external intervention in the lower part of the gulf. Imminent coups, rebellions, and the overthrow of unstable regimes must be anticipated and prevented.

Saudi Arabia is a principal example of where US action or a US presence could be vital and decisive. The Saudi regime, as noted before, is extremely vulnerable to subversion from either inside or outside. Three coups have been attempted in the last decade, two of those attempts coming in the last two years. In addition to the Yemeni-inspired attempt on Mecca in 1979 already mentioned, the air force mounted an unsuccessful coup in 1971 and, most recently, there was reported an abortive military coup in an army garrison around Riyadh, the Saudi capital, in late October 1980.

Despite rapid economic development and increasing affluence owing to their oil wealth, the Arab sheikdoms refuse the strong medicine of radical political reform that might undercut the prospect of revolution.

They could not reactively stop a revolution of the intensity of Iran's. Iran serves well as an example of an area where the United States could have prevented revolution. Although the Iranian revolution spread throughout the masses and gained widespread popular approval, the Shah, with assurance of support from the United States, might have acted early and decisively in a way that could have mitigated, prevented, or crushed the revolt. For those who shrink from such a thought on grounds of libertarian political principle, it is instructive to observe that the regime of the Mullahs and the Grand Islamic Coalition in the Majlis has proved in many ways more brutal, intolerant, and repressive than that of the late Shah.

In Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Peninsula, the presence of US military forces—either in Saudi Arabia proper or in the surrounding area—could forestall any coups or revolutions in the making. Owing to the politics within the Arab world, Saudi Arabia cannot be expected to openly embrace the prospect of American troops deployed on its soil at the present time, but that time will come, and the United States must be prepared for it. The function of a US military presence would not necessarily be to forcibly repress coups, but rather to discourage them by its very existence. The primary US military mission would be to deter revolutionary actions that would threaten Western oil supplies. To that end, a strong US naval force would be necessary to keep open sea routes to and from the gulf. In addition, elements of the US Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, deployed appropriately in the Mideast, could be used to protect oil production centers and supply routes from destruction or revolutionary takeover.

US bases in the Arabian Peninsula would be a powerful deterrent to coups or incipient revolutions. As of this writing, the Saudi dynasty is still split over the issue of US bases on Saudi soil, although last year the Saudis did accept AWACS planes for protection against Iranian reprisals during the Iraqi-Iranian war. But that war—the outcome of which could seriously threaten Saudi Arabia—and the continued threat from the

south in the possibility of a combined Yemeni onslaught could dissolve the Saudi reluctance to accommodate US bases. Barring an actual US presence in Saudi Arabia, US forces could operate from bases in the southeastern Egyptian desert, the Sudan, Kenya, Oman, or the Sinai.

Linkage to the Camp David accords is crucial to US strategy in the Middle East. Camp David should serve as the backbone of a trilateral alliance tied to a US military presence. The three states of the alliance would be Egypt, Israel, and eventually Jordan, not as unlikely a prospect as it may appear. Linked to the two islands of stability in the area—Israel and Egypt—and enjoying the support of the United States, Jordan would have both much to give and much to gain.

Egypt is a plausible site for US military bases protecting the gulf, and Egypt is the first backup for an American umbrella policy in the Middle East. Indeed, Egypt could be the first protector of the Arabian Peninsula, not as another surrogate, but with the support of a US military presence on Egyptian soil.

So long as the Palestine question remains unresolved, Israel should not be directly involved in the American umbrella over the Arabian Peninsula. Israel could, however, serve as a forceful check on Iraq. If Iraq eventually turns on its current allies in the gulf—and I believe it will eventually threaten Saudi Arabia and the gulf sheikdoms—Israel could hinder such moves by pinching off the flow of Iraqi military supplies through the Gulf of Aqaba. In addition, Israel and Jordan could deter untoward actions by Syria, the chief Soviet client in the area.

Essentially, American military strategy must be composed of three elements.

First, at the center, are the Camp David accords, with a *de facto* Egyptian-Israeli military alliance once Palestinian autonomy takes on some legal shape. The makings of such an autonomy appear to be already in place.² This alliance must be complemented by a second element—an Egyptian-American military entente designed to protect the

political integrity of weak regimes in the Arabian Peninsula. The third element is the eventual participation of Jordan. Although Jordan is now ostensibly allied with Iraq, when King Hussein sees the US policy taking shape, including the forward movement of the Camp David negotiations, he will not want to be left out and indeed will see the paramount necessity of taking part. Hussein, in the finest tradition of Arab politics, is a survivor first and an ideologue second. When he sees the dangers of Iraq's adventurism, he can be expected to hearken to the more tangible promise of the American-Egyptian-Israeli partnership. He has, after all, asked for and received Israeli and US aid before in his struggles against Syria and the PLO.

In the northern part of the gulf, US policy must be to preserve the territorial and political integrity of Iran, however galling that such a policy may be to us now in the wake of the hostage trauma, and to discourage Iraq's hegemonic ambitions. Of necessity, this means separating the hostage issue from long-range policies. The hostages are now home. And while Khomeini and the ayatollahs may come and go in Tehran, a weakened and isolated Iran will doubtless fall prey to the Soviet Union, Iraq, disintegration, or all three, results that are intolerable for US interests. To prevent Iran's collapse, the United States must offer limited but effective military support to Iran or promote a UN peacekeeping force along Iran's disputed borders. The United States could pursue both courses by shipping repair parts and military equipment to Iran and at the same time forcefully pushing for a UN debate on the Iraqi-Iranian war, branding Iraq as the aggressor and calling for the installation of a peacekeeping force and the immediate withdrawal of Iraq from the Shatt-al-Arab and Khuzistan areas. So far as the territorial dispute is concerned, the specific goal of UN mediation should be to reestablish the *status quo ante bellum*. The UN has promoted and enforced this kind of initiative before, in the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli wars and in Lebanon. The policy is not by any means perfect, but it appears workable and it is in the best interests of the United States and the

West. That, after all, must be the first consideration of any US strategy.

What is being suggested here is not a reincarnation of the outmoded policy of the United States as world policeman. Rather, the United States should actively underwrite long-standing and legitimate states such as Egypt and Iran, and project military forces to the Middle East to protect US interests—particularly the continued production and shipment of oil from the Arabian Peninsula. This necessitates curbing Soviet incursions, discouraging Iraqi hegemonic ambitions, and

establishing an umbrella alliance of moderate and friendly states—Egypt, Jordan, and Israel—to prevent the oil-producing states from falling into chaos. None of this can be achieved without the backbone of a real and powerful US military presence.

NOTES

1. A fourth state, Turkey, is a special case. It is the last remnant of the Ottoman Empire and possesses a modern, centralized administrative structure.
2. For elaboration, see my essay, "The Palestinian Entity?" *International Security*, 5 (Spring 1981), 103-16.

