

Western Strategy for the Middle East

BY AHARON YARIV

The following article, written shortly before the outbreak of war between Iraq and Iran, appears almost prophetic in its assessment of Mideast instability and the West's commitment to maintaining access to the Persian Gulf. In his proposal to safeguard Western interests, Major General Yariv offers a solution that is at this moment receiving serious attention from Mideast strategists.

For several decades the West has tended to view Middle East dynamics mainly through the prism of the Arab-Israeli conflict. While the conflict has definitely played a role, it would be dangerous to minimize the importance of other destabilizing factors that are preponderant—especially as far as Western access to Middle East oil is concerned. As demonstrated recently in Iran, these factors do endanger Western interests and are likely to affect them increasingly in the future. On examining the region's political fluidity since World War II, we see that the traditional rivalry for prominence and predominance between states from the various subsystems in the Middle East (i.e., North Africa, the Nile Valley, the Fertile Crescent, and the Arabian Peninsula) leads to ever-changing coalitions. We have witnessed such rivalry between Iraq and Egypt, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Algeria and Egypt, for example. Struggles between states within these subsystems (Syria-Iraq, Syria-Jordan, Yemen-Saudi Arabia, etc.) and the internal conflicts and upheavals within the states of each of these subsystems, as well as those on the periphery (Turkey, Iran, Ethiopia), have been prompted by ethnic, religious, socio-economic, or power group interests. In most Middle Eastern states the regime has not succeeded in solving these problems and sometimes not even in alleviating them. A regime may continue to control a situation by virtue of sheer power, but the problems have not gone away; widespread dissatisfaction has created submerged forces that erupt now and then, destabilizing the situation. Thus we have witnessed, among others, the Kurdish revolt in Iraq, the numerous attempted coups in Jordan, the bitter and bloody civil war in Lebanon, and the recent unrest in Syria. Soviet efforts since the end of World War II to

gain influence in the region, and Western reactions to them, have also contributed to regional instability.

It seems that the expulsion of the Soviets from Egypt, Sudan, and Somalia dulled Western sensitivity to their growing presence in the Red Sea-Horn of Africa region as a whole and also Western awareness of their impressive advance in power-projection capability. This capability is enhanced by the Soviet Union's proximity to the region and by the large forces it maintains at a relatively high degree of readiness close to its southern border. It took the successive shocks of revolution in Iran, the Kaaba incident in Mecca, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to alert the West, particularly the U.S., to these realities. Superimposed on "inherent factors of instability" in the Middle East is the more recent influence of radicalism—Islamic fundamentalist, social, and Palestinian. Each of these plays a role that varies in weight and impact according to circumstances and the country concerned. But it is whenever and wherever these factors join forces that their destabilizing effect is greatest, offering the best chance for exploitation by the Soviet Union. The strident cries of "Allahu Akbar" that now strongly resound over all the Middle East not only signify readherence to Islamic fundamentalism but very often serve as an expression of the difficult socio-economic, ethnic, and religious problems and the schisms besetting the area and its nation-states. Moreover, they often express the tensions building up among the numerous foreign workers in most of the oil producing states. All of these and their possible, or perhaps probable, exploitation by the Soviet Union pose a direct threat to most of the present regimes in the Gulf region and therefore to the flow of oil. This can result in the interruption of production, in the blocking of the present supply route (the Straits of Hormuz), or both.

With the revolution in Iran, which brought about the de facto demise of the Northern Tier, the events in Afghanistan, and the now increasingly accepted forecast about the Soviet need for imported oil in the mid-'80s, one cannot rule out direct Soviet military pressure on the Gulf. However, the more likely course is the use of proxies to ride the coattails of an upheaval and produce a radical, externally induced pro-Soviet regime.

The scene is further complicated by the fragmentation of the Arab Middle East, the turbulent situation in Iran, and by Turkey's overall weakness. Steering a bold course in its relations with Israel, Sadat's Egypt is quite isolated, though still enjoying the benefit of its links

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with Sudan and some support by Morocco and Oman "from a distance." Maintaining the sensitive and delicate internal balance in Lebanon, which is squirming under Syrian "protection," will demand a considerable effort on the part of the Lebanese Government. But this situation might also be used by Syria as a catalyst, with or without Soviet backing and approval, for military escalation against Israel. One should not forget that Syria possesses a military force of four armored and two mechanized divisions, about three thousand tanks, and close to five hundred combat planes. This force and the nature of its front line, relatively narrow and heavily fortified, permits the Syrians on their own to undertake military operations with limited objectives in order to upset the peace process and create a better bargaining position for themselves. The growing internal difficulties in Syria do not necessarily prevent such an initiative; they might even push the beleaguered regime toward it.

Syria, steering a clear pro-Soviet course, is loosely grouped with the PLO, Algeria, and, of course, even more so now with Libya, all of which oppose the peace process. South Yemen, which is firmly in the Soviet camp and constitutes a solid Soviet base, and North Yemen, which may continue tilting toward Moscow, also belong to this group. On the other hand, distant Morocco plagued by its war in the Sahara against the Polisario, weak Tunisia hardpressed by aggressive Libya, Hussein's Jordan struggling to maintain its special position, Saudi Arabia exerting itself to overcome the fragility of its regime, Kuwait, Bahrein, Qatar, and the UAE—all still feel and fear the searing breath of radicalism, as well as the growing danger of the Soviet presence and expansion. This sentiment was clearly expressed at the recent meeting in Islamabad.

THE "THREAT POTENTIAL"

The fragmentation and instability that characterize the Middle East are also permitting the Palestinians to make full use of their veiled and not-so-veiled "threat potential" to persuade the relevant Arab states (in particular Saudi Arabia) to exert pressure on the U.S. and on Egypt to promote their case and to integrate them effectively into the peace process so as to make them the arbiter of its success or failure. The "threat potential" is exemplified by the presence of about a half-million Palestinians in the Arabian Peninsula, many of them holding important bureaucratic, technocratic, and economic positions.

It is clear that without movement on the Palestinian issue the peace process between Egypt and Israel will falter. But on the other hand one should beware of mistaking progress on this issue for a solution to the problem of safeguarding Western interests in the Middle East in general, and in the Gulf region in particular. Such progress, desirable and important as it may be for all parties concerned, cannot and should not be expected to mend the weakness of the oil-exporting Gulf states and the fragility of the Saudi regime. Similarly, it cannot by itself produce the strong, antiradical, anti-Soviet Arab front pursued by the West. The assumption that progress on the Palestinian issue is the key to the formation of an anti-Soviet regional front is

both naive and dangerous in that it reflects a basic misunderstanding and diverts attention from the necessary and appropriate remedies.

Given the powerful inherent instability factors in the Middle East, one must conclude that, regardless of progress on the Palestinian issue, any effort toward the formation of a local anti-Soviet front or coalition, solid and strong enough by itself to stem Soviet advances and

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guarantee access to oil from the Gulf to its Western consumers, has meager chance of success. A massive, nonselective infusion of sophisticated Western weaponry in countries of the critical area of the Middle East, accompanied by the desired progress on the Palestinian issue and based on the illusory hope of thereby safeguarding Western interests, will not serve as a "stiffener." Such a heavy investment in military hardware in the place of socio-economic projects raises the specter of dangerous internal turbulence. Witness Iran.

THE U.S. CONTRIBUTION

What, then, is to be done? The major prerequisite for safeguarding Western interests in the Middle East is an accurate perception of reality. It is reassuring to note that in his annual report for fiscal year 1981, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown states inter alia: "that stability in the Middle East will be the rule rather than the exception seems highly probable for some years to come." Therefore the problem to be addressed is not how can one achieve stability as quickly as possible, but how can one safeguard Western interests despite continued instability?

Though the area's inherent instability rules out reliance on a local antiradical or anti-Soviet front, it does not rule out the possibility—indeed the urgent necessity—for the West, led by the U.S., to develop an informal and flexible strategic network. In this network the U.S. should form the backbone, and all those Middle East states willing to maintain a bilateral strategic relationship with the U.S. will join in to confront the common danger of radicalism and Soviet encroachment. Turkey is a full member of NATO (and the leaders of the recent coup are strong backers of the Alliance). But others, such as Morocco, Tunisia, Sudan, Egypt, Israel,



Jordan, Kuwait, UAE, and Oman can participate in the proposed network, each contributing according to its capabilities. Most of these countries already have a political and military relationship with the United States. Within the framework of this relationship the West should also provide judicious support for constructive progress in the local partner's society, thus lessening internal tensions and forestalling dangerous deterioration.

In such a strategic network special mention and emphasis must be given to insuring a stable and utterly reliable Israel. By maintaining Israel's military and economic strength, the U.S. not only increases Israel's possible strategic contribution but also reduces the risk of local wars and the concomitant danger of global confrontation. Such a network will permit the West to conduct what I would like to call a "broad front strategy of offense-defense" in protecting its vital interests in the Middle East. The "broad front" should include the whole of the Middle East as well as its broad periphery.

The offensive, initiative element in this strategy should apply mainly to the political warfare dimension, the defensive reactive element to the military dimension. The offensive, that is, the political warfare waged on a broad front, overtly and covertly, does not mean a return to the cold war. But it does mean an effort at applying pressure in suitable areas, selectively and flexibly, in order to dull the sharp edge of both Moslem and social radicalism and to blunt Soviet spearheads. Constructive efforts at mediating local conflicts and helping to lessen their force, if not resolve them, should also be part of the political warfare dimension.

In contemplating the setting up of the proposed network and its strategy, especially the defense element, one must consider the time factor. There is certainly no guarantee that events inimical to Western interests will await the completion of all necessary steps for the effective functioning of the Rapid Deployment Force. The brittleness of the situation in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula, especially the fragility of the Saudi regime, suggests the West may not have at its disposal the "time-span of two to three years" that we have been hearing about lately. Urgent action is therefore needed to set up the strategic network and take immediate political and military steps—providing, as quickly as

possible, a significant, impressive, and effective Western (primarily U.S.) naval, air, and land force. Such a presence will by itself strengthen Western credibility in the area, assist in overcoming reticence local partners feel because of Soviet proximity, and help in forging the network. The U.S. has already taken significant steps in just this direction. These should be continued with greater emphasis on permanence, proximity to the critical areas, and ground force capability for instant reaction. Such a presence, accompanied by clear U.S. commitments to all partners, will convey the message of resolution so vital to the network's effectiveness.

True, there is a limiting factor in the refusal of many Arab states to accept Western military bases. This refusal stems mainly from the desire to avoid being branded "agents of imperialism." But it also expresses apprehension about the Soviet reaction. Logistical support for U.S. forces may prove difficult; nevertheless, the U.S. and other Western states have it within their means to provide considerable and effective forces for the area without unnecessary delay. Their capability will certainly be inferior to that envisaged for the "Rapid Deployment Force." But a relatively small ground and amphibious force, even with limited heavy equipment, permanently deployed in close proximity to the critical area and enjoying good naval and air support, can still do duty as a "rapid reaction force." By its early arrival on the scene—possibly in concert with a force supplied by a local partner—and by taking immediate action, it could resolve a crisis situation that might otherwise escalate into a major military confrontation.

The mode of operation of the "RRF" should be one of surgical accuracy, speed, and decisiveness—like Entebbe—not massive and cumbersome. Moreover, the very potential of such a force may deter trouble-makers or Soviet proxies and avert dangerous crises. Its effective deployment is therefore contingent upon sound intelligence, which in turn calls for a highly organized, efficient mechanism capable of providing it with all the timely, relevant, and reliable factors.

THE NATO ROLE

The heavy dependence of most members of the Western Alliance on Middle East and especially Persian Gulf oil and the well-known "danger to NATO's southern flank" raise the question of the Alliance's role in the proposed scheme. Not only do I think it legitimate to ask the Alliance to share the burden and participate in the strategic network, I believe it is in the full interest of the members to do so. This will enhance the system's capability, credibility, and deterrent effect. The British, for example, though limited in capability are rich in experience; they can make a valuable contribution.

Western participation in the political warfare dimension is important and, given U.S. understanding and cooperation, feasible. Such broadened Western participation might prevent other states from following the French example of organizing separatist fishing expeditions to the troubled waters of the Middle East. **▼▼▼**