

Research Brief

Strategic Threats to Middle East Security: Challenges for U.S. Policy

Well before the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States had a vital interest in the security and stability of the Middle East. U.S. priorities in this region include countering terrorism, stopping the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), maintaining stable oil supplies and prices, ensuring the stability of friendly regimes, ensuring Israel's security, and promoting democracy and human rights. In the past, the threat of military aggression posed the greatest danger to Middle East security, at times erupting in open warfare such as between Iran and Iraq and between Arab states and Israel. These threats are likely to continue. Moreover, a study by RAND Project AIR FORCE suggests that political, economic, and social trends could pose new threats to Middle East security in the coming years.

- **Declining economies and the slow pace of democratic reform will increase popular frustration with autocratic regimes.** Civil liberties remain limited; and many states face rising debt, poverty, and shortages of food and water. These conditions will fuel popular unrest and may increase support for Islamist fundamentalist groups.
- **Militaries will be weaker.** As military resources are directed to suppressing internal unrest, states will be less able to defend against hostile neighbors. U.S. allies will be less effective in the war against terrorism.
- **New leaders will be less likely to cooperate with the United States.** Incoming regimes will need to build support among competing political factions. They may be unwilling to continue unpopular policies such as cooperating in the U.S. war on terrorism or supporting Arab concessions to Israel.
- **The Middle East will have stronger economic and military ties with Asia.** As the United States turns to Russian sources of energy, Asia will become the leading consumer of Middle Eastern oil. This shift could strengthen Middle Eastern-Asian defense ties, which may include the transfer of WMD technology from China and North Korea to Middle Eastern states.
- **The spread of communications technology may increase public participation in government.** Satellite television, videocassettes, faxes, and photocopiers will facilitate popular discussion and debate beyond government control. This trend may compel regimes to be more responsive to popular opinion, or it may cause governments to become more authoritarian.
- **Middle East states will continue to develop and acquire WMD.** Many regimes seek chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear weapons and advanced delivery systems. Continued proliferation could threaten the U.S. homeland and could limit the U.S. military's freedom of action in certain parts of the world.

The United States must balance the aim of fostering democratic change with the goal of maintaining political security in the Middle East. Democratic reforms could destabilize existing regimes, thus increasing the threat of military conflict in the region. Such reforms could also elevate nationalist or fundamentalist groups that are opposed to U.S. interests. Consequently, the United States may choose to support certain nondemocratic regimes in order to prevent a larger security crisis. At the very least, the United States should make a greater effort to explain its policies to ordinary citizens in the Middle East in order to limit popular anti-Americanism.

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