

# **The Future Security Environment in the Middle East**

*Conflict, Stability, and Political Change*

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## SUMMARY

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Since the end of the 1991 Gulf War, threats to political security in the Middle East have increased. Tensions between states have long threatened to destabilize the region. At times these tensions have resulted in open warfare, disrupting political and economic security and creating humanitarian crises. Today, the threat of interstate aggression is manifested in new and more dangerous ways. The collapse of the Arab-Israeli peace process and the subsequent outbreak of violence have inflamed anti-Western sentiment throughout the region. The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) has also raised the potential for conflict between rival countries. The exportation of Middle East terrorism around the world has contributed to the political and economic isolation of the region.

Domestic developments over the past decade could also contribute to the destabilization of the region. A new generation of leaders has begun to take power with untested leadership skills and uncertain bases of support. Education among women has increased, presenting a challenge to traditional social hierarchies. Information technologies such as satellite television have become more available, providing populations with diverse views on political and social issues. Together these developments could bring about major political, social, and economic changes. The long-term effects of such changes may be positive from the perspectives of democratization and the advance of human rights. However, the short-term effects could spell political and economic turmoil, increased threat of conflict, and unpredictable shifts in policy and behavior by individual states.

## **POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST COULD HAVE SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES FOR THE UNITED STATES**

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Middle East has played a more prominent role in U.S. policy than ever before. The United States relies on Middle Eastern partners such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, and others to fight terrorism and to halt the proliferation of WMD by rogue states. The loss of key partners due to hostile regime changes or increasing anti-Americanism could limit the United States' ability to fight terrorism within the region. In addition, the United States has an interest in maintaining stable energy prices and reliable supplies. Given the West's dependence on Middle East oil, political instability in the region could hurt economies around the world.

## **EMERGING TRENDS WILL INCREASE THE POTENTIAL FOR DESTABILIZATION**

What are the prospects for political security in the Middle East in the foreseeable future? RAND Project AIR FORCE studied current political, economic, and social trends in the Middle East to forecast future threats to regional security and their potential impact on the United States. Key findings include the following:

- ***Liberalization will advance slowly and democratization will be even more limited.*** Middle East states are typically controlled by authoritarian, nondemocratic regimes. In recent years, these regimes have come under pressure to reform the political system and to relax government controls over the media and other forms of public expression. Some states have responded to this pressure by allowing *liberalization*—the introduction of civil liberties such as free speech and freedom of assembly—but have limited *democratization*—the development of democratic institutions such as elections and representative legislature. For example, some states allow citizens to participate in civic organizations that remain tied to the state and do not represent grassroots interests. Despite these limitations, however, continued liberalization may fuel the public appetite for political reform and may lead to more long-term democratic change. (See pages 15–55.)

- ***Declining economies will likely increase popular dissatisfaction with governments.*** Recent economic reform efforts have failed to create jobs or to attract foreign investment to the Middle East. Heavy debt, overtaxation, and government corruption have prevented economic growth. The region currently suffers from unemployment, poverty, and heavy demands on both clean water and domestic food supplies. High population growth will exacerbate these problems in the coming years. Countries will need to import more food and will have to invest in expensive water reclamation technologies. Continued economic decline will erode public confidence in leaders and will increase the potential for unrest. Moreover, the surplus of educated youths without jobs will provide fertile ground for radical fundamentalism to grow. At the same time, the reforms that would need to take place to improve economies—such as fewer government regulations and greater accountability—could destabilize regimes by alienating special-interest constituencies. (See pages 57–128.)
- ***Militaries will be more devoted to internal control than to external defense.*** Many Middle East states have “dual mandate” militaries responsible for protecting their regimes from internal challenges as well as defending their countries from external dangers. As economic and social pressures cause domestic threats to increase, militaries will have to commit their best resources to internal police functions such as suppressing demonstrations. Regimes will seek to consolidate control and will be less willing to grant power to frontline commanders. As a result, military forces will become less effective at external defense. This trend will have mixed implications for the United States. The persistence of civil control over the military will mean that U.S. allies in the region will possess the means to suppress terrorist groups within their borders. At the same time, these partners will be less effective in combat operations. (See pages 129–162.)
- ***New leaders may be weaker and less likely to cooperate with the United States.*** Since 1997, new leaders have come to power in Iran, Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, and Syria. Further leadership changes are expected in Saudi Arabia and Egypt in the near future. Incoming leaders will need to concentrate on building popular support for their regimes. They may therefore be less willing to continue unpopular policies such as cooperat-

ing with the U.S. war on terrorism or supporting Arab concessions to Israel in future peace negotiations. Furthermore, inexperienced leaders will be more likely to make mistakes in foreign policy, whether by overestimating their countries' military strength, by believing that they can intimidate their adversaries, or by trusting in international support that proves to be unreliable. These political miscalculations could lead to increased tensions between states. (See pages 163–195.)

- ***Changing patterns in the energy market will strengthen Middle East ties to Asia.*** The Middle East dominates the global energy market with roughly 70 percent of the world's proven oil reserves. The region is expected to maintain its preeminence through new exploration and increases in production capacity. However, the United States and Europe are expected to shift the majority of their consumption from Middle Eastern oil to Russian oil in the coming years. Asia will become the leading consumer of oil from the Middle East. This shift could have important political implications for the West. China, North Korea, and Russia are among the leading suppliers of WMD and missile technologies. As Asian energy demands increase, the defense trade between Asia and the Middle East is likely to grow. As a result, the United States will find it more difficult to pressure Asian governments not to export arms to hostile Middle East regimes. (See pages 197–225.)
- ***Communications technologies may increase the demand for public participation in government.*** Advanced technologies such as the Internet are primarily limited to the wealthier and more educated echelons of Middle Eastern society. However, mid-level technologies such as satellite television, videocassettes, fax machines, and photocopiers have become widespread among the general population. These technologies could have a profound impact on the political landscape. They permit the quick and inexpensive circulation of printed materials that are beyond the control of government media and publishing monopolies. Satellite television gives people access to Western media. These innovations provide the population with diverse views on politics and world events. They also provide forums for greater discussion and debate. One possible outcome of this change is that Middle Eastern governments will be compelled to

take greater steps to eradicate corruption, to bring transparency to the government process, and to increase standards of living. However, it is equally possible that governments will respond by becoming more authoritarian. Regimes may attempt to silence dissenting voices through intimidation or force. They may also attempt to limit popular access to certain technologies. (See pages 227–251.)

- ***Middle East states will continue to develop and acquire WMD.*** WMD capabilities in the region have increased in recent decades, though not at the rate originally feared by Western analysts. Nevertheless, many regimes seek to develop or acquire chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear weapons and advanced delivery systems. It is possible that states such as Iran will develop nuclear weapons capabilities within the next decade. Continued proliferation of WMD in the Middle East would have serious implications both within the region and around the world. The geographical distance between adversaries in the Middle East is very short. States would not need long-range delivery systems to inflict sudden and catastrophic damage upon each other. The expansion of WMD capability in the Middle East would also constrain U.S. freedom of action by increasing the vulnerability of deployed forces. Finally, the proliferation of WMD among Middle East terrorist groups could threaten the U.S. homeland. The September 11 attacks demonstrate the global reach of certain groups and their willingness to stage large-scale offensives against the United States. (See pages 253–298.)

### **THE UNITED STATES MUST BALANCE OPPOSING INTERESTS IN FORMING MIDDLE EAST POLICY**

Given the range of potential crises that could emerge in the Middle East, the United States must carefully consider which policies are likely to produce the best outcome. A critical issue is whether the United States should promote political stability or whether it should encourage democratic reform. Experience in the former Soviet Union and elsewhere suggests that states undergoing the transition to democracy are more likely to become involved in conflicts with their neighbors. Moreover, democratization in the Middle East could open the door to nationalist or fundamentalist groups that are op-

posed to U.S. interests. In the past, when faced with a choice between preserving the stability of a nondemocratic ally and fostering democratic change, the United States has sided with the incumbent regime. However, surveys show that this policy has fueled anti-American sentiment among populations throughout the region. In the future, the United States will need to make a greater effort to explain its policies to ordinary citizens in the Middle East. It will also need to weigh the prospects for democratic change with the potential for instability and the loss of key Middle East allies. (See pages 299–315.)