Cato Institute Foreign Policy Briefing No. 2: The Rise of the Middle Eastern Bogeyman: Toward Post-Cold-War Interventionism

September 5, 1990

Leon T. Hadar

Leon T. Hadar teaches political science at American University and is writing a book on U.S. policy on the Middle East for the Cato Institute.

Executive Summary

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait has triggered a high-risk American military intervention in the Persian Gulf to defend Saudi Arabia and the other oil-rich Arab states. The invasion could not have come at a better time for members of America's national security community, who are searching for new enemies to justify continuing our military involvement abroad and perpetuating America's high defense costs in a post-cold-war era. Exploiting the Persian Gulf turmoil, supporters of the B-2 Stealth bomber, for example, have already won a narrow victory on the Senate floor; funding for that embattled plane has been kept alive.[1]

The crisis is also playing directly into the hands of the Israeli and Arab lobbies, who, despite their differences over the direction of American policy in the Middle East, would both like to draw Washington into a costly and destructive involvement. The Iraqi invasion "shores up Israel tremendously," suggested Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-N.Y.), one of its congressional supporters,[2] and the assumption that the United States should defend Saudi Arabia from the Iraqis has been accepted as a new bipartisan doctrine without serious debate.

From a Cold War to a Middle Eastern War

The members of the powerful Israeli-Arab lobbying coalition had been arguing even before Saddam Hussein moved against Kuwait that the principal future threat to American national interests would be in the Middle East. They cited the region's rising twin evils--the Arab military strong-man Hussein and his warmongering campaigns and the rising political power of Moslem fundamentalism--as probable sources of conflicts, ranging from chemical and nuclear warfare between Iraq and Israel to a worldwide struggle between the West and Islamic forces.

Those apocalyptic scenarios as well as more immediate threats to the stability of the pro-Western Arab states and to the flow of oil from the area are used to win support for various policies such as continuing the American military build-up or renewing the U.S. leadership role in the Arab-Israeli peace process. To paraphrase Samuel Johnson, the Middle East has become the last refuge for the foreign policy activist.

A report issued in May 1990 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies argues that, with the decline of the Soviet military threat to Europe, the potential for American involvement in the "dangerous form of conventional combat" in mid-intensity conflicts (MICs) in the Middle East and Moslem southwest Asia "will provide a key justification for military budgets during the 1990's and will establish most of the threats against which U.S. forces are sized, trained and equipped."[3]

"Growing domestic United States dependence on foreign oil and resources," predict the authors of the study, will lead

to increasing American involvement in the area. That coupled with political instability in what Zbigniew Brzezinski once called the "arc of crisis" will force the United States into the center of a "high intensity conflict" there in the early 21st century. In the short run, the study recommends, Washington should plan for limited military involvement in regional MICs. One MIC scenario discussed is the United States' sending troops to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to save those countries from an Iraqi invasion.

Reflecting similar expectations of potential U.S. involvement in the Middle East, all the participants in a recent war-gaming exercise concurred that there was at least a 30 percent chance of the United States' being drawn into a war involving Israel in the next decade. The pressures exerted on the Bush administration by a variety of special interest groups to flex its military might in the Persian Gulf suggest that such think tank studies and war games are not merely academic exercises by a group of frustrated cold warriors but part of an effort to condition the American public for military engagements in the Middle East.

Ironically, those and other attempts to refocus American military attention on the Middle East while keeping the flickering Arab-Israeli peace process flame alive take place at a time when the main rationale for U.S. involvement in the area, the need to contain Soviet expansionism, is becoming obsolete. The expectation that Washington will view Middle Eastern affairs as less urgent has created alarm both in Israel, whose relations with Washington have depended on its role as an anti-Soviet strategic asset, and among the Arabs, who have been able to successfully play one super-power against the other.

Pressures from the Israeli and Arab Lobbies

It is not surprising that both the pro-Israeli and the pro-Arab constituencies in Washington are elated over the Iraqi aggression against Kuwait, which they hope will help maintain a high U.S. profile in the Middle East. One researcher affiliated with a pro-Israeli think tank argues that the Middle East "will still become the locus of crises demanding attention from Washington,"[4] and an analyst writing in a pro-Arab publication suggests that despite the changes in the international system "the US cannot turn its back on the region."[5]

The spokesmen for the Israeli and Arab causes differ, however, about whom the United States should back. The first scholar maintains that "the removal of the Soviet factor actually increases the value of the U.S. special relationship with Israel," suggesting that Israel's military strength "is the best insurance for deterring radical regimes and shoring up shaky moderate ones." His pro-Arab counterpart contends that the United States has an interest in helping the Arab oil states "to defend their own sea lanes and freedom of navigation." Indeed, government sources in Jerusalem express the hope that the Iraqi move will "revitalize Washington's perception of Israel as a strategic ally" and divert attention from the Palestinian uprising,[6] while in the Arab camp there is the expectation that Washington will bolster the pro-Western Arabs militarily--as well as politically by making "progress" on the Arab-Israeli front.

Needed: A Reassessment of U.S. Engagement in the Middle East

Washington should avoid being lured into returning to a combination of hyperactive diplomacy and military engagement in the Middle East. American decisionmakers should instead reevaluate whether the United States is actually facing a major threat to its interests that necessitates such moves. They should consider carrying out the threat Secretary of State James A. Baker III made in his June 14 testimony on Capitol Hill--to disengage from the deadlocked Arab-Israeli peace process--and they should also begin to reassess the entire American commitment to the Middle East. Such a reassessment should include encouraging the West European powers, whom the United States replaced as guardian of Western interests in the region after World War II, to resume more active and productive diplomatic and security roles.

U.S. policy, especially since the 1973 Middle East War, has been dominated by the perception that any military escalation in the area could produce one or more of the following events: a confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States, a cut in the oil supply from the Middle East, and a major threat to the existence of Israel. As a result, every crisis or act of violence, such as Iraq's invasion, creates pressures on Washinqton to "do something."

In the post-cold-war era, however, the situation in the Middle East is changing. What is needed is a new policy framework within which to integrate the new elements, not an attempt to reactivate an old game plan. What are the

new elements?

First, there is little danger of Soviet-American confrontation over the Middle East. The threat of Soviet expansionism or troublemaking is now largely absent from the Middle Eastern equation; Moscow has lessened dramatically its support for such clients as Syria. Indeed, Moscow has indicated its willingness to play a constructive role in the area by joining the United States in condemning Iraq's aggression and cutting its military aid to Baghdad.

Second, since the 1973 oil embargo, the United States has become less vulnerable to the Arab oil weapon. Oil prices are subject to fewer government controls, and markets are free to adjust quickly to supply and demand. All oil producers with excess capacity--including Iraq--have been "cheating" on OPEC quotas and will probably continue to do so. As one oil expert predicted, even Saddam Hussein "will not be able to dominate the world oil market which today is large and diversified," especially with many forces, including those for environmental conservation and increased energy efficiency, "tending to hold down consumption."[7]

Third, Israel's actions, ranging from the invasion of Lebanon to the attempted suppression of the intifada, have tarnished its image as an endangered democratic entity-- resulting in loss of support from the American public and raising questions about America's "moral commitment." The United States will probably be willing to assume less risk on Israel's behalf in the future than it has in the past-- even leaving aside Israel's palpable decline as a strategic asset .

Fourth, there are no Israeli de Klerks or Palestinian Mandelas to work with, no Middle Eastern Gorbachevs who have the will and the interest to take advantage of American assistance in the peace process to achieve constructive results. The conflict between Zionism and Arab nationalism predated the cold war and will continue even after the last brick of the Berlin Wall is removed. Washington's ability to influence the outcome of that conflict is extremely limited. Moreover, as the animosity accompanying the recent termination of the dialogue between the United States and the Palestine Liberation Organization demonstrates, the higher the expectations about American mediation, the greater the disappointment when they are not fulfilled.

Fifth, there is a growing recognition that the Arab-Israeli conflict is not the sole problem in the area. For example, neither the Iran-Iraq war nor the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait had anything to do with it. The diverse nature of the problems and disputes in the Middle East creates a nearly endless series of quagmires into which the United States can stumble if it insists on maintaining an activist role.

Instability in the Middle East: A U.S. Problem?

The Middle East will undoubtedly be plagued by major political, social, and economic upheavals in the coming decades, and no amount of American good intentions will be able to alleviate all of them. The chaotic struggles involving decaying traditional monarchies such as Saudi Arabia, religious fundamentalism symbolized by Iran and its supporters throughout the region, and ruthless military dictators such as Saddam Hussein who espouse a more secular version of nationalism will be intensified. Among other factors, diminishing economic opportunities will make it more and more difficult for the existing conservative regimes to meet the rising expectations of their mainly young and radicalized citizenry. The American search for and support of "reformers" or "good guys" either in Israel or in the Arab world has little prospect of success. Washington does not have the power to make the Middle East safe for democracy.

Indeed, American moves to contain "extremist" forces or to back "moderate" elements typically backfire. The Reagan administration's decision to prevent a victory by Teheran during its war with Iraq helped to solidify the power of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad. Similarly, the moves by the Bush administration to help the Israeli Labor party by encouraging the fall of the national unity coalition in Jerusalem have resulted in the emergence of the most nationalistic regime in Israel's history. The decision to bolster the conservative Saudi regime by sending in American troops may well antagonize Arab populations throughout the region.

The "road to Armageddon" scenario of a nuclear or chemical war between Israel and Iraq, which has been used to justify an active U.S. role in the Middle East, is exaggerated. Neither side would further its current agenda by launching an all-out war. Jerusalem's main priority is to absorb the Jewish immigrants from the Soviet Union; Iraq seeks to achieve economic recovery and consolidate its position as the leading power on the Persian Gulf. Moreover, the existence of highly destructive weapons in the arsenals of both sides creates a balance of terror similar to the one

that kept the superpowers from going to war.[8]

There is little doubt, however, that political and economic factors will from time to time explode into limited regional conflicts. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait reflects the shape of things to come. Other sources of potential regional instability include

* possible renewal of the war between Iraq and Iran;

* unrest in and secessionist demands by the Moslem republics of the Soviet Union;

* Israeli attempts to topple the regime in Jordan, which could lead to Iraqi and Syrian military intervention; and

* moves by Turkey, if its efforts to join the new European union are rejected and it loses its value as a strategic asset to NATO and the United States, to play a growing role in the Middle East or to renew its military conflict with Greece.[9]

Such developments would not directly undermine American interests, but they would have a major impact on Europe and the Soviet Union.

Needed: A European Diplomatic and Security Role in the Middle East

Geographic proximity, demographic ties, economic interests, and even cultural affinity all point to the need for the European powers to abandon their "free rider" posture and for Washington to return to them the torch of Middle Eastern leadership it inherited in 1945. The current European posture produces a situation in which France, for example, has been supplying Iraq with sophisticated arms that could be used against the United States if and when it engages Iraq militarily. It is only a question of time before the American people and Congress will ask why the United States should assume grave costs and risks to help secure European and Japanese access to Middle Eastern oil. That resentment is especially likely to grow in light of the reluctance of America's principal European allies (except Britain) to participate in the U.S.-led "multinational" military force being dispatched to Saudi Arabia. (Indeed, even the British force scarcely rises above the level of tokenism.) The multinational force is currently--and likely to remain--an overwhelmingly American enterprise. That disparity is impossible to justify given Western Europe's far greater stake in developments in the Middle East.

The decision by Secretary of State Baker to ask the British to continue the dialogue with the PLO after the cutoff of talks between the United States and that organization[10] and the European Community peace mission to the Middle East in the summer of 1990[11] point to the way Washington can help promote the transition from an era of Pax Americana to one in which Europe and a revitalized Soviet Union shoulder primary political and military responsibility in the area. But Washington can and should do more to encourage such a transition. The United States erred in taking a dominant role in response to Iraqi aggression. Instead, U.S. leaders should have made it clear that any response would have to be orchestrated by the West Europeans, Japanese, Soviets, and the major Middle Eastern powers whose interests were far more directly affected by Baghdad's actions than were those of the United States. That strategy would have put the members of the EC in particular on the spot. Since they insisted that events in the Persian Gulf threatened "vital" Western interests, they would then have been called on to lead an effort to defend those interests, not merely make token contributions.

One feature of the early cold war was an American effort to prevent a Soviet threat to the oil routes from the Middle East and, by extension, a threat to the survival of Western Europe. There is a certain historical justice in Europe's taking over most of the responsibilities America has been shouldering in the Middle East. But as the Persian Gulf episode suggests, U.S. leaders seem determined to continue playing a dominant, high-profile role despite the enormous costs and risks. It would be a tragedy if Washington replaced the cold war with a new and even more dangerous military and diplomatic engagement in the Middle East.

Notes

[1] Andy Pasztor, "B-2 Bomber's Supporters Win on Senate Floor," Wall Street Journal, August 3, 1990, p. A5.

[2] Quoted in Richard Wolf, "In Washington, Partisan Pot- shots, Concern," USA Today, August 3, 1990, p. 4A.

[3] Center for Strategic & International Studies, Conventional Combat Priorities: An Approach for a New Strategic Era: The final Report of the CSIS Conventional Combat 2002 Project (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, May 1990).

[4] Barry Rubin, "Reshaping the Middle East," Foreign Affairs (Summer 1990): 131-46.

[5] Michael Collins Dunn, "Cold War or Not, Middle East Remains Key U.S. Security Concern," Washington Report on Middle East Affairs (July-August 1990): 27.

[6] Jackson Diehl, "Israel Calls for Sanctions against Iraq," Washinqton Post, Auqust 3, 1990, p. A26.

[7] Eliyahu Kanovsky, quoted in Hobart Rowen, "Singing OPEC's Tune," Washinqton Post, August 2, 1990, p. A31.

[8] See "Iraq and Israel: The Elephant and the Hawk," The Economist 21, no. 27 (April 1990): 50.

[9] See "U.S. EC Rebuffs Force Turkey to Look Elsewhere," Middle East Times, July 24-30, 1990, p. 6.

[10] "Go Between," Time, July 9, 1990, p. 15.

[11] Jackson Diehl, "EC Delegation Presses Israel on Peace Effort," Washinqton Post, July 24, 1990, p. A18.