

# What Next for the U.S. in the Middle East?

**W**hile conflict rages in the Middle East, many Americans are concerned about the role of the United States in that region. At a July 27 Book Forum, speakers included Leon Hadar, author of *Sandstorm: Policy Failure in the Middle East* and a Cato research fellow in foreign policy studies; Geoffrey Kemp, director of Regional Strategic Programs at the Nixon Center; and James Pinkerton, columnist for *Newsday*.

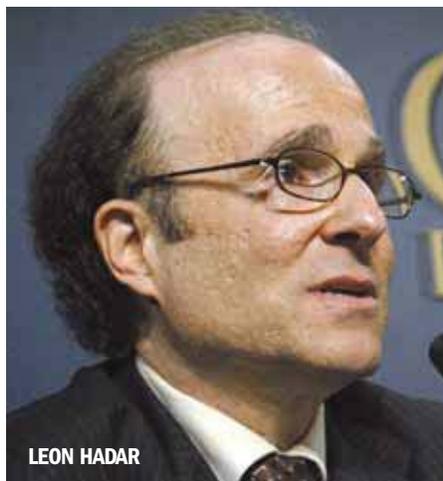
**LEON HADAR:** Let me give you a short definition of what I call the Middle East paradigm, the beliefs and assumptions that have guided those making and analyzing U.S. policy in the Middle East for most of the 20th century. In many respects, the Cold War started on the periphery of the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean—Turkey, Greece, and Iran—after the United States replaced Great Britain as the major Western power in the region. And the Cold War actually ended on the periphery of the Middle East in Afghanistan. The Middle East was a major geoeconomic and geostrategic arena during the Cold War.

There are three components to the old Middle East paradigm. One is geostrategy. The United States led a strategy to contain the Soviet Union in the Middle East. It replaced Great Britain and also France as the major power protecting Western interests in the region. The Soviet Union was clearly an aggressive global power, with an ideological disposition that was regarded as a threat, very much like Nazi Germany during World War II. Hence, there was willingness on the part of the United States during the Cold War to pay the cost of maintaining a strong presence and commitment in the Middle East.

The other component was geoeconomic. After the end of World War II, the United States basically assumed the responsibility of protecting the free access of the Western economy, including Western Europe, Japan, and South Korea, to the

energy resources in the Persian Gulf, through very costly partnerships with Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the other Arab oil-producing states. The Americans were willing to provide those nations a free ride.

The third component is idealism. Israel was established in the aftermath of the European Holocaust. And the American political elites and public decided that they were willing to provide Israel, as a demo-



cratic Jewish state in the Middle East, with a certain margin of security vis-à-vis the Arab states. And this eventually intertwined with the Middle East paradigm. When you talked about the cost of Middle East policy, there was the need to juggle the commitment to Israel with support for the Arab states, especially the Arab oil-producing states.

So when the United States was trying to make peace between Israelis and Arabs, it was less concerned to stop killing than to

bring a certain balance into the Middle East paradigm. You can do that only by achieving peace in the region.

My argument is that the Middle East paradigm became part of the genetic make-up, if you will, of policymakers, journalists, and lawmakers in Washington. It explains the Pavlovian response in Washington whenever someone says “Middle East crisis.” It immediately ignites that notion that if you have a Middle East crisis, the Soviet Union is going to get involved. We’ll have an oil embargo. Israel’s security will be threatened. Those were the images of 1973. And since then, every time there is a Middle East crisis, those are the images that come to mind as far as policymakers are concerned.

The main contention in my book is that the changing realities of the Cold War and the Middle East, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the changing relationship between the United States and Europe, and the transformation of the Arab Israeli conflict from a major international dispute into a more regional and local conflict have made the Middle East paradigm obsolete in some respects. And I suggest that we re-examine those three components of the Middle East paradigm.

Look at the geostrategic issue. Since the demise of the Soviet Union, clearly the main rationale of the Middle East paradigm, no major geopolitical outside power threatens Western interests in the Middle East. If anything, one can make the argument that U.S. intervention in the Middle East since the

end of the Cold War actually helped ignite anti-Americanism, terrorism, 9/11, and eventually the Gulf War. And you have to ask yourself, why can't the balance of power in the region be maintained through a regional security arrangement, as well as more commitment on the part of the Europeans?

If you take into consideration geographical proximity, economic ties, and demographics, the Middle East is for the Europeans what Mexico and Latin America is for the United States. It's their strategic backyard. Why shouldn't the Europeans begin paying some of the costs in terms of protecting their interests in the Middle East, which are immediate and urgent and are very different than those of the United States? If Iran, for example, develops a nuclear weapon, it would be able to attack Paris. It won't be able to attack Los Angeles.

We should bring an end to free riding. And maybe if we create incentives for them to do that, they will spend less money on their wasteful welfare programs and more money on defense.

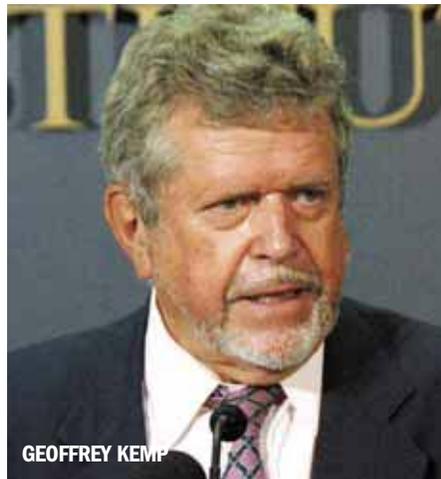
Now what about Israel? Well, Israel today is the most powerful military force in the region. It has nuclear weapons. It has one of the most advanced high-tech economies in the world. It has peace with Egypt, Jordan, and other Arab states. It has the military capability to deal with any perceived threat that you can imagine, including a nuclear Iran.

And as we talk today, Israel is dealing with the threat in Lebanon. It clearly doesn't need U.S. support for that. The United States can act as a facilitator on some level, when both sides decide that they want to make peace. But the United States cannot deliver a peace agreement, as many people think, between Israelis and Palestinians. If anything, as we saw in the last Camp David agreement, U.S. involvement tends to create high expectation and an eventual backlash against the United States.

What I'm proposing is a new Middle East paradigm, a process of gradual constructive disengagement from the Middle East that will create incentives for the creation of a new regional balance of power.

What I have in mind is a consortium of great powers along the lines of the Congress of Vienna system. I call it the Northern Alliance—a loose alliance between the United States, the European Union, and Russia, which will have two major challenges—one, to deal with the Islamic arc of instability, ranging from the Balkans to China; the other, to try to coopt China, and eventually India, into this great power system.

Historian Carl Brown compared the Middle East to a kaleidoscope. Outsiders like the United States get involved and try to tilt the kaleidoscope. The many tiny pieces of colored glass all move to form a new configuration. So any diplomatic initiative or military intervention sets a new realignment of the players. That is why foreign intervention becomes so costly. Unintended



consequences in the Middle East are not the exception but are the rule.

The Iraq war is an excellent example. The United States devastated Iraq, which was the counterbalance to Iran. It encouraged the rise of a pro-Iranian Shiite regime, through election, in Baghdad. It encouraged the election in Lebanon, which strengthened the power of Hezbollah.

As a result of all of this, Iran has emerged as the major power in the Persian Gulf. And with its allies Hezbollah and, to some extent, Hamas, it decided to challenge the proxy of the United States, Israel. So now we have this new crisis. We have this new war. The kaleidoscope has tilted. And the United States is trying again to get involved and resolve the conflict until the next conflict.

**GEOFFREY KEMP:** When I was working for Ronald Reagan, I had a baptism by fire during the Lebanon crisis of 1982–83. So a lot of this material we're discussing today rings awfully true to me. We were in a quagmire then, and I think we are still in a quagmire. In fact, my major quibble with Leon's book is the title. I actually prefer the title of his first book, *Quagmire*, because that means you are really bogged down and you don't know where to go. Whereas "sandstorms" blow over pretty quickly

If you think back to the events since 9/11, we, the United States, launched two major wars to overturn regimes, Afghanistan and Iraq. And I think it's important to draw a contrast between these two and how we handled them diplomatically. In the case of Afghanistan, the Bush administration made absolutely sure that before we went in, we had some of the key neighbors, particularly Russia, India, and Iran, as well as Uzbekistan, on board. They agreed with our narrative, that the Taliban had to go, and they were extremely cooperative. And the Afghanistan war, as we know, went very well at that point in time.

My judgment is that we were so pleased with the speed with which we toppled the Taliban that when it came to 2003 and the challenge of Saddam Hussein, we forgot the lessons we had learned in Afghanistan and essentially went to Iraq without taking into account, let alone consulting with, the key neighbors.

And the message we were sending to our Arab friends, particularly Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf States, is we are not pleased with the way you are managing your affairs, we're going to set up a democracy in Iraq, and you better watch out because, sooner or later, you're going to have to change as well. So we had no buy-in from the neighborhood. And today, we are in a quagmire in Iraq. And we're only going to get out of it if we can come up with a policy that is somehow acceptable to some of the key players in the neighborhood, particularly our friends.

The real challenge is that we have been weakened because of Iraq. The Gulf remains very, very unstable and threatened.

The dependency of the world on Gulf oil is going to grow, particularly if you look at the statistics of what China and India are expecting to import in the coming years. So who is going to, essentially, maintain some semblance of stability if not the United States?

Now, it's certainly true that other countries should be doing more. But the question is, could they do more? And I don't believe they can do very much more in the short run.

The Europeans simply don't have the military capabilities. What capabilities they do have, they're using in support of what's going on in Afghanistan. If you take out the British component of Europe's NATO's forces, there really is no substitute in the short run for American maritime and air power. And the Europeans are not going to change their welfare system and start spending enormous amounts of money on defense, at least not in the time frame that is of much interest to those of us who worry about the next 5 to 10 years.

That said, I quite agree that the United States' moment of hegemony in the Middle East is very transitory. Elizabeth Monroe wrote a famous book about Britain's moment in the Middle East. That moment lasted from about 1919 to 1971. I don't know what the time frame for the American moment will be, but certainly it will pass. But just like in the case of Britain, it doesn't mean to say we will get out of the Middle East completely. We won't. We will reduce our role gradually, I hope.

**JAMES PINKERTON:** Ambrose Bierce, the famous American wit and wag from the last century, said that war is the devil's way of teaching Americans geography.

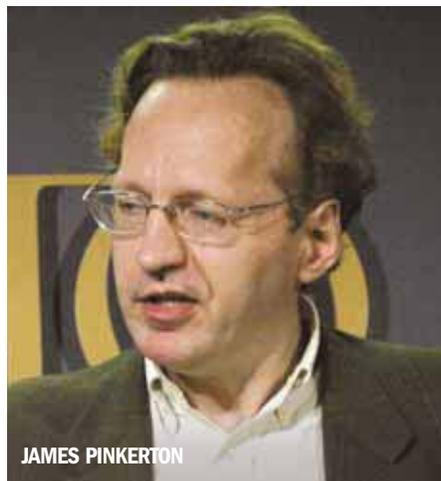
And I think the same applies to politics, history, human nature, and realism. We've been down this road before in these very countries. The West invaded, liberated, whatever you want to call it, Iraq in World War I. We did it again in World War II.

Even people who follow this stuff fairly closely like me have to be reminded of things that are important to the people over there. The Iraqis remember that 300,000

people were killed in a failed rebellion against Saddam Hussein. Most Americans never noticed. And it's still hard for us to process because it didn't happen to us. But we're walking in their moccasins now.

I think that Leon overstates the willingness of Europe to get involved in this. In a world of small families, where the people have one or two kids, they just don't want to part with them in wars the way they used to when it was five or six kids per family. It's a harsh way of saying it, but it's I think true.

I think you're seeing it distinctly in Iraq with the United States, in terms of our willingness to go full bore. I think the Israelis are having the same issue. And I think the Europeans feel as strongly, too, with the notion of a robust peacekeeping force, being able to shoot their way in if necessary.



So I think this is just not what any Western leader is really contemplating.

Again, I certainly agree that the Middle East paradigm that Leon discusses is obsolete and needs to be replaced. But I'm a little puzzled over exactly what we're going to be replacing it with.

It's unclear to me which geopolitical structure is going to emerge. Leon mentioned the Congress of Vienna. That worked out okay. That was approximately 100 years of peace and stability. But of course, things move faster now. And I can't help but think that a couple of processes that undid the Congress of Vienna may be undoing Leon's Congress of Vienna Part 2. Those two forces were visible in the 19th century, but they're a lot more visible

in the 21st century.

One is nationalism and nationalist/religious passions. I've always thought that religion had a strong nationalistic component to it. It's very easy, if you live in the Arab world, to be a Muslim. It's very easy, if you live in the West, to be a Christian. They kind of go together. So I blend the two together in terms of the political effect.

If one were to update this further and think further about where things are headed in the Middle East, one would have to, I think, look back to the 19th century. I'll bring up 1807, when Johann Gottlieb Fichte started issuing an appeal to the German nation about how Germany needed to repel the French. Well, the trick in that statement was there was no German nation in 1807. There was in Fichte's mind, and Herder's and Hamann's and all those other people's, but there was no nation. And yet, one emerged pretty quickly, as we all know, and changed European history in the 19th and 20th century.

So I suspect something like that is going on in the Arab world with the issue of pan-Arabism and whether or not it can be revived in a Shia Sunni split. I suspect that something like that is rumbling in the Arab and the Muslim world.

The other factor that is also accelerating much more quickly these days is technology. You can make a pretty good case that much of the geopolitics of the 19th century were functions of the railroad, the telegraph, the machine gun, artillery. Think today in terms of telecommunications, ballistic missiles, and of course WMDs. So I'm a little worried that a Congress of Vienna may be overwhelmed by the rush of events. Kim Jong Il may not get invited, and may find a way to break it up on his own.

I get the feeling, with the rush of nationalism and technology, that something like an avalanche is coming. So, Leon, I'm not sure you want my help on this, but I think "avalanche" may well be the most apt title for your next book.