

The Middle East and the Political State of the World in 2007

Hooshang Amirahmadi
President - The American-Iranian Council

In 2007, global stability will continue to be affected by developments in the Middle East, which will remain a hotbed of the most troubling global conflicts and the energy reservoir of the world. The struggle in Iraq will no doubt intensify and spread beyond the nation's borders. The US-Iran spiral conflict will also deepen due to Iran's pursuit of a nuclear program and its association with Islamic radicals. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict will also continue unabated and only negligible prospects exist for a renewed peace talk. These conflicts will make the world a more unstable place in 2007.

The Middle East will also influence world politics as a result of rising religious fundamentalism and ethnic nationalism as well as the growing tension between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. These trends, along with Iran's nuclear program, could lead to a renewed standoff between Iran and the Arab world, and particularly Saudi Arabia. Given the growing Iranian-Israeli animosity, a renewed Iranian-Arab tension is certain to shift the fault line of conflict in the Middle East from one between the Arab world and Israel to a more dangerous US-Iran confrontation. Only a move towards moderation on the part of Iran's leadership can prevent this looming disaster.

The rise of China from an East Asian regional power to a global power, the emergence of new economic powers, and the concern over global energy security are also ultimately linked back to the conflicts in the Middle East, as is the renewed political assertiveness of Russia. Of additional concern to the West, and to the United States in particular, are Iran's growing strategic intimacy with China and Russia, and its theocratic government incorporating Islamic radicalism as a model for the state. Under these conditions, it will be very hard, if not impossible, for Iran and the United States to find a diplomatic solution to their mounting conflict.

The world in 2007 will also feel the destabilizing effects of the emerging tension between the state and non-state actors as well as the growing call for people's sovereignty as opposed to the sovereign rights of the states. Meanwhile, troubling issues, not just failing states, will define the disorderly character of the global politics. These issues include mounting arms proliferation, terrorism, human rights abuses, dictatorship, poverty and social inequality, AIDS and other emerging diseases, environmental degradation, and drug trafficking. Incidentally, most of these emerging and vexing issues also relate to the greater Middle East.

The United States, the world's only superpower, is feeling the brunt of these developments as its Middle East policy continues to sink in a regional quagmire. The failure of its policy and the central importance of the Middle East to American global supremacy are now widely recognized in Washington, by political elites of all ideological orientations, from the far right to the far left. What is not agreed upon is how much and in what direction the policy needs to change. As the debate among the proponents and opponents of the recommendations by the recent Iraq Study Group reveal, neither side favors a radical transformation of the current policy.

Yet, no amount of changes to the current policy, irrespective of their direction, will resolve the situation in the Middle East to the extent that the United States will be able to extricate itself from its current predicament there. Only two radical alternatives are available to the United States: to make a complete U-turn toward a policy based upon decisive use of its substantial "soft power," or to push forward in the direction of a more aggressive use of its immense "hard power." It is no surprise that the current debate in America on the stabilization of Iraq focuses on either intensifying the use of American political and diplomatic leverage or shifting gear toward an increased use of military force.

The adoption of the soft-power approach would allow the United States to reduce significantly its military presence in the region, just as Great Britain did in 1971, by accepting multilateral diplomacy and expanding it to include the key regional non-state forces, playing the role of an honest broker in resolving all regional disputes, and helping establish collective regional security systems. The United States must also be prepared to lift its sanctions against the countries in the region, whenever it is desirable, and expand its regional economic, technological and diplomatic relations while maintaining its principled support for the role of law, democracy and human rights.

The adoption of the hard-power approach, on the other hand, would force the United States to emphasize further the use of its military might. A new American militarism would likely require the restoration of conscription and compulsory military service, or it may recruit foreigners using a visa scheme as incentive. Americans would also be forced to make a difficult decision between maintaining their global hegemony and preserving their democratic system. Thus far, the United States, as the first democratic superpower in world history, has been able to maintain a delicate balance between the two. If militarism were to be adopted as the primary means of sustaining American global leadership, American democracy would no doubt suffer.

It will not be easy for Washington to choose between these two alternatives in the current political environment, which is polarized both at home and in the Middle East. The Iraq conflict has de-legitimized the neoconservatives, reducing their ability to implement the hard-power approach in the near future. Nevertheless, their strength cannot be underestimated, given the support that they have in the region from Israel, Turkey, and some of the more conservative Arab states. The growth of anti-Americanism, Islamic radicalism, crisis over Iran's nuclear programs, and other political tensions in the region will also strengthen the militarists' position. Unwilling to accept defeat in Iraq and make any compromise with Tehran, President Bush will insist upon staying the current military course.

Even so, the pro-diplomacy forces have been mobilized and are gathering popular support while the Bush Administration and its neoconservative supporters are in retreat. The American presidential elections of 2008 will begin in 2007 and the ensuing debate is sure to revolve around America's policies in the Middle East. The struggle over the aforementioned approaches can be expected to intensify. Meanwhile, it is more likely that Washington will continue to muddle through its problems in the Middle East using a combination of its hard and soft powers in the same confusing way that it has used them since September 11 tragedy. A military confrontation with Iran is also likely. The results will inevitably be more chaos and disorder in the region and the world.
