

A GRAND BARGAIN THROUGH DIPLOMACY

More than a decade and a half since the end of the Cold War and more than five years since the terror attacks of 9/11 regional dynamics in the Middle East have become more insecure today than a decade ago. If a sense of stability and peace is to be restored in the Middle East the international community must seek to implement an integrated security strategy that provides incentives to all protagonists in the region to diplomatically engage with one another.

A succession of wars since the start of the 1990s (Kuwait, Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon) coupled with sporadic diplomatic initiatives (the Oslo peace process, the Quartet Road Map), has led to a fragmented Middle East with different actors vying for roles of strategic leadership. While Israel continues to maintain its military superiority over its neighbourhood, other actors, particularly Iran and Syria, have succeeded in filling the security vacuum left by the collapse of Iraq.

An integrated Middle East strategy must focus on securing a number of objectives in the short to medium term. The most immediate objective must be to restore a sense of order in Iraq. The clear message sent by the majority of the American electorate in the 2006 mid-term elections in the United States for the Senate and the Congress is that they want a shift in American foreign policy that focuses more on a realist perspective of strategic objectives. When it comes to Iraq less unilateralism and more of a burden sharing approach to the issue is likely to be the policy direction adopted by the White House in the next two years. This is likely to be the main recommendation of the Iraq Study Group (ISG) chaired by former American Secretary of State James Baker which is due to present its report towards the end of this year.

The international community must also re-launch a concerted effort to promote a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The incoming German Presidency of the EU and the G 8 has already indicated that this will be a priority in 2007. It is essential that such efforts seek to engage all political actors in this conflict through a process of dialogue so that a sustainable and credible permanent settlement to the conflict is achieved in the next few years.

A Middle East grand bargain must also ensure that the non-proliferation treaty (NPT) does not collapse. Security guarantees must be offered to Iran by agreeing to integrate it into the larger regional security framework in return for agreeing to abandon its nuclear programme. If Teheran acquires nuclear weapons this will dramatically change the balance of power in the Middle East and thus is certain to spur a nuclear arms race across the region with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey all likely candidates joining in such a race.

The international community must also do more than pay lip service to initiatives that are seeking to promote political, economic, and educational reform in the Arab world. More political will needs to be attached to the noble goals that are enshrined in international initiatives such as the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, the Broader Middle East Initiative and the UN Millennium Development Goals if progress across the southern shores of the Mediterranean is to be achieved in the decade ahead.

Finally, the international community must strive to prevent current low-intensity conflicts in different pockets of the Middle East from escalating into a regional war. Power struggles in states such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza can easily degenerate into civil-war like situations. In such a scenario an escalation of hostilities would put at risk order and the safety of the majority of citizens and conjure up the spectre of failing states.

Only a grand bargain that focuses on specific regional security interests and is implemented through a process of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy will succeed in turning the tide against sources of instability that have come to dominate the contemporary Middle East strategic framework. One hopes that a security re-think that focuses more on regional security realities and engages all regional actors takes place as soon as possible.

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