

A New Gulf of Tonkin Incident?

Among the speakers on the second day was Dr. Joseph Moynihan, a United Arab Emirates-based regional vice president of Northrop Grumman, who warned that the countries of the GCC are preparing for a U.S. war against Iran. He cited the now ongoing Persian Gulf maneuvers of the United States and eight other countries under the so-called Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) as an immediate danger. Unlike previous Gulf maneuvers, this latest maneuver is “purposeful,” “targetted,” and no longer about “intercepting” ships carrying smuggled material. When asked by a member of

the audience if the United States had military plans to attack Iran, Moynihan pointed again to the exercises that had been made public the previous week by the State Department, saying that while he could only speculate on the answer, the exercises are “very operational,” and are geared to a “U.S. post-election” timeframe. They are designed to “send a message to Iran,” he said.

Moynihan and other speakers candidly voiced fears that the United States could stage a “Gulf of Tonkin” incident in the immediate days ahead, under the cover of the PSI maneuvers, and then launch unprovoked attacks on Iran.

Chas W. Freeman, Jr.

The Gulf Cooperation Council and The Management of Policy Consequences

Remarks to the 15th Annual U.S.-Arab Policymakers Conference by former Undersecretary of Defense and former Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Chas W. Freeman, Jr., USFS (ret.), on Oct. 31, 2006, in Washington, D.C. Subheads have been added.

It is an honor once again to make the concluding remarks at the annual U.S.-Arab Policymakers Conference. I do so, of course, as an individual and as an American concerned with the implications of events in the Gulf region, not on behalf of any organization or group with which I am affiliated. Speaking only for oneself enables one to call it like it is. I shall.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) began in a time of crisis 25 years ago. Since then the GCC has passed through many stressful strategic environments. It was, after all, formed to cope with the challenges that caused Americans first to declare the Gulf a region of vital interest to the United States—the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war. The GCC was also, of course, created to provide a means of dealing with the sudden rise in U.S. interest and military activity in the Gulf in the wake of these events, the oil boom, and the Camp David accords between Egypt and Israel.

The GCC functioned as a coherent alliance during the U.S.-led war to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation that followed the end of the Iran-Iraq war. Its members separately provided essential staging areas and support bases for the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq a dozen years later. Some have since deepened their reliance on the United States, while others have hedged their previous dependency.

Now the GCC member states may be facing their greatest challenge: the changes brought about by the progressive collapse of American policies in the region, including U.S. efforts to transform Iraq, to block Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons, and to achieve security for Israel by persuading it to respect the right of Palestinians to democratic self-determination in a secure homeland.

The U.S. military have developed the useful concept of “consequence management.” The idea is to set aside for later study the questions of why and how widespread devastation followed the use of weapons of mass destruction or a large-scale natural disaster, and instead to acknowledge the damage while focusing on actions to mitigate it and prevent it from worsening. It is time to apply consequence management to the mounting wreckage of our policies in the Middle East.

Only true believers in the neo-conservative dream can now fail to recognize that it has wrought a deepening nightmare in Iraq. The shattered Iraqi state has been succeeded (outside Kurdish areas) by near-universal resistance to the foreign occupation that supplanted it. The aggravation of secular and ethnic divisions by ill-conceived constitutional bargaining and elections has created a new political culture in Iraq in which theocratic feudalism, militia-building, and terrorist violence are the principal modes of self-expression.

The attempt to cure the resulting anarchy by building a strong army and police force for the Iraqi central government misses the point. The Baghdad government is itself a key participant in all of the pathologies of contemporary Iraq. In practice, it is more a vengeful tyranny of the majority in a temporary marriage of convenience with Kurdish separatists



EIRNS/Stuart Lewis

“What kind of country is it that invades another, trashes it, sets it on fire, and then walks away to let inhabitants and neighbors alike die in the flames?” asked Chas Freeman, referring to U.S. prospects in the Middle East.

than a government of all the people. It is hard to disprove the thesis that it seeks a monopoly on the use of force only to consolidate either a Shi'ite version of Saddam's dictatorship or an Iraqi version of the Iranian theocracy. The sad fact is that, to many Iraqis, these outcomes now seem to offer the most realistic hope for renewed domestic tranquility in their country.

U.S. Occupation of Iraq

All but a small minority of Iraqi Arabs now reject the legitimacy of any continuing U.S. military presence on Iraqi soil. On the one hand, the occupation has become the indispensable prop of the current order in Iraq, such as it is; on the other, the prolongation of the occupation is the main reason Iraqis wage an insurgent war against that order. The occupation thus supplies its own opposition; its continuation feeds the violence that makes its eventual curtailment inevitable.

The unpopularity of the occupation continues to provide a rewarding opening for outside agitators. Al-Qaeda now openly acknowledges a major stake in the U.S. staying in Iraq for as long as possible. Our military presence is not just a potent motivator of anti-Americanism and a source of volunteers for terrorism; it has put us in the position of providing instructors to “Jihad U,” the graduate school we have inadvertently created in Iraq for terrorists with global reach—an advanced curriculum, where failure is punished by death at our hands, but course completion is rewarded by a chance to take part in future terrorist operations in Europe, Asia, and North America. The costs of the occupation must be measured in much more than the hundreds of billions of dollars we continue to spend on it.

No one can predict how U.S. forces will withdraw from Iraq, but no one now doubts that their departure is only a matter of time. While some wish to soldier on, few see any prospect that the United States will leave behind an Iraq at peace with itself, a united Iraq capable of playing a constructive role in regional affairs, or a strong Iraq willing and able to balance Iran as it once did. The United States invaded Iraq against the counsel of our allies and friends, drunk with our own self-importance, convinced by our own delusions, apparently invincible in our ignorance, and utterly unprepared for the quasi-colonial mission we assumed. Contemporary Iraq is a monument to American martial prowess and civil ineptitude.

Withdrawal—But on What Terms?

It now seems likely our withdrawal will be undertaken for domestic American political reasons, again without much attention to Iraqi and regional realities. But withdrawal risks escalating the conflict inside Iraq, infecting other parts of the region with Iraq's sectarian strife, and providing an early graduation ceremony for terrorists bent on applying elsewhere what they have learned in Iraq. Unless diplomacy has first crafted a regional context that limits the damage, a politically dictated withdrawal will crown our incompetence with disgrace and devaluation as a security partner. What kind of country is it that invades another, trashes it, sets it on fire, and then walks away to let inhabitants and neighbors alike die in the flames, or perish of smoke inhalation? Who will wish to associate themselves with such a country, still less entrust their security to cooperation with it?

We did not consult the GCC countries or others in the region about the strategy or tactics of our invasion of Iraq. We would do well to seek their advice, counsel, and support—and they would do well to insist on our consulting them—as we make our next moves, whether these are within Iraq or away from it. Techniques of asymmetric warfare pioneered in Iraq now find their way within weeks to Afghanistan and elsewhere. The targeting of GCC rulers, and oil and gas facilities by terrorists with connections to the mayhem in Iraq underscores our common interest in countering spillover from the jihadi intervention in that country. Similarly, the well-founded concern that areas in the Gulf with mixed Sunna and Shi'a populations might suffer contagion from the religious struggles in Iraq emphasizes the imperative of containing them.

These are closely connected and clearly anticipatable problems that affect many countries in the region. They must not be left to be addressed ad hoc and at the last minute.

Then, there are the problems presented by Iranian ambitions, not just for nuclear weaponry but for preponderant influence in the Gulf. These go well beyond the issues of whether bombing Iran would not provoke it to attempt regime change in the countries from whose bases the attack had been launched, or simply confirm it and others in their judgment that the only effective protection against preemptive attack

by the United States is the possession of a nuclear deterrent.

Assuming, as we must, in light of the results similar U.S. policies toward north Korea have produced, that Iran will eventually acquire a nuclear deterrent, how do the GCC countries plan to deal with Iran as a nuclear power? Will each respond separately or will the response be collective? Will there be piecemeal appeasement or defiant reaffirmations of sovereign independence? If a nuclear umbrella or deterrent to the nuclear threat from Iran is deemed necessary, will this be collectively managed or will each country seek its own protection? In either context, what role, if any, do the Gulf Arabs desire for the United States or other nuclear powers? Is the role they envisage for us, one that Americans can or will undertake?

Then, too, having destroyed Iraq's utility in balancing Iran, we and the GCC have yet to concert a strategy for a new and sustainable balance of power. Such a balance cannot be sustained if, as was the case in Saudi Arabia, the American military presence becomes not an asset to national security but its principal liability, thanks to the provocation it offers to political extremists. How do we propose to manage the contradiction between our desire to assure the stability of the Gulf and the fact that our presence in it is inherently destabilizing? If we are to avoid a strategic debacle, we cannot leave Iraq without agreeing on answers to these questions with our Gulf Arab partners.

Iran is emerging as yet another proof that diplomacy-free foreign policy does not work. Neither do lack of planning or the refusal to talk to interested allies and adversaries. It's not hard to anticipate the questions that will arise from the probable future course of events in Iran itself, and in Iranian relationships with Iraq and other countries in the region. These too must not be left to tactical responses, improvised on the spot in the absence of strategy, sprung with no warning upon those whose cooperation or forbearance is essential to enable them to succeed.

Israel: No Talent for Peace

Finally, let me allude briefly to the issue of Israel, a country that has yet to be accepted as part of the Middle East and whose inability to find peace with the Palestinians and other Arabs is the driving factor in the region's radicalization and anti-Americanism.

The talented European settlers who formed the state of Israel endowed it with substantial intellectual and technological superiority over any other society in the Middle East. The dynamism of Israel's immigrant culture and the generous help of the Jewish Diaspora rapidly gave Israel a standard of living equivalent to that of European countries. For 50 years Israel has enjoyed military superiority in its region. Demonstrably, Israel excels at war; sadly, it has shown no talent for peace.

For almost 40 years, Israel has had land beyond its previously established borders to trade for peace. It has been unable to make this exchange except when a deal was crafted for it by the United States, imposed on it by American pres-



UNRWA

Freeman pointed out that Israel's behavior has deviated from the high ideals of its founders and the high ethical standards of the religion most of its inhabitants profess. While it excels at war, "sadly, it has shown no talent for peace." Here, the Palestinian refugee camp in Jenin, which was obliterated by Israel in 2002. Israeli commanders had studied the methods the Nazis used to crush the Warsaw Ghetto to carry out their assault.

sure, and sustained at American taxpayer expense. For the past half decade Israel has enjoyed *carte blanche* from the United States to experiment with any policy it favored to stabilize its relations with the Palestinians and its other Arab neighbors, including most recently its efforts to bomb Lebanon into peaceful coexistence with it and to smother Palestinian democracy in its cradle.

The suspension of the independent exercise of American judgment about what best serves our interests as well as those of Israelis and Arabs has caused the Arabs to lose confidence in the United States as a peace partner. To their credit, they have therefore stepped forward with their own plan for a comprehensive peace. By sad contrast, the American decision to let Israel call the shots in the Middle East has revealed how frightened Israelis now are of their Arab neighbors and how reluctant this fear has made them to risk respectful coexistence with the other peoples of their region. The results of the experiment are in: Left to its own devices, the Israeli establishment will make decisions that harm Israelis, threaten



White House photo/Eric Draper

President Bush with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. During the Bush-Cheney Administration, Freeman said, Israel has enjoyed carte blanche to bomb Lebanon and “smother Palestinian democracy in its cradle.” Arabs no longer view the United States as a peace partner.

all associated with them, and enrage those who are not.

Tragically, despite all the advantages and opportunities Israel has had over the 59 years of its existence, it has failed to achieve concord and reconciliation with anyone in its region, still less to gain their admiration or affection. Instead, with each decade, Israel's behavior has deviated farther from the humane ideals of its founders and the high ethical standards of the religion that most of its inhabitants profess. Israel and the Palestinians, in particular, are caught up in an endless cycle of reprisal and retaliation that guarantees the perpetuation of conflict in which levels of mutual atrocities continue to escalate. As a result, each generation of Israelis and Palestinians has accumulated new reasons to loathe the behavior of the other, and each generation of Arabs has detested Israel with more passion than its predecessor. This is not how peace is made. Here, too, a break with the past and a change in course are clearly in order.

The framework proposed by Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah at Beirut in 2002 offers Israel an opportunity to accomplish both. It has the support of all Arab governments. It would exchange Arab acceptance of Israel and a secure place for the Jewish state in the region for Israeli recognition of Palestinians as human beings with equal weight in the eyes of God, entitled to the same rights of democratic self-determination and domestic tranquility within secure borders that Israelis wish to enjoy. The proposal proceeds from self-interest. It recognizes how much the Arabs would gain from normal relations with Israel if the necessary conditions for mutual respect and reconciliation could be created.

Vital American Role

Despite the fact that such a peace is so obviously also in Israel's vital and moral interests, history and the Israeli response to date both strongly suggest that without some tough love from Americans, including especially Israel's American coreligionists, Israel will not risk the uncertainties of peace. Instead, it will persist in the belief, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that it can gain safety through the officially sanctioned assassination of potential opponents, the terrorization of Arab civilians, and the cluster bombing of neighbors rather than negotiation with them. These policies have not worked; they will not work. But unless they are changed, the Arab peace plan will exceed its shelf life, and Arabs will revert to their previous views that Israel is an ethnomaniacal society with which it is impossible for others to coexist, and that peace can be achieved only by Israel's eventual annihilation, much as the Crusader kingdoms that once occupied Palestine were eventually destroyed.

Americans need to be clear about the consequences of continuing our current counterproductive approaches to security in the Middle East. We have paid heavily and often in treasure in the past for our unflinching support and unstinting subsidies of Israel's approach to managing its relations with the Arabs. Five years ago we began to pay with the blood of our citizens here at home. We are now paying with the lives of our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines on battlefields in several regions of the realm of Islam, with more said by our government's neo-conservative mentors to be in prospect. Our policies in Afghanistan and Iraq are adding to the threats to our security and well-being, not reducing them. They have added and are adding to our difficulties and those of allies and partners, including Israel. They are not advancing the resolution of these problems or making anyone more secure. They degrade our moral standing and diminish our value as an ally. They delight our enemies and dismay our friends.

In the interest of all, it is therefore time for a change of course. But, as Seneca remarked almost 2,000 years ago, “If a man does not know to what port he is steering, no wind is favorable.” It is past time that we agreed on our destination and devised a strategy for reaching it. As events belatedly force us to come up with a workable approach to consequence management, and lay a course to take us beyond it, Americans will need the advice of our partners in the GCC and others in the region.

If we pay no attention to the opinions and interests of these partners, we should not be surprised to discover that we have forfeited their friendship and cooperation. Without both, we cannot hope to manage and overcome the consequences of the series of policy disasters we have contrived or to devise new and effective policies. And we here, like our friends in the region and elsewhere, will all pay again for this failure, and pay heavily. We must not allow that to come to pass.