



MIDEAST MONITOR: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

Grand Strategies, Muddled Realities

THE POST-WORLD WAR II HISTORY OF THE MIDDLE East is littered with master plans, doctrines and grand strategies of global and regional actors, which never came to fruition. These range from Arab unity schemes to Western plans for an integrated Middle Eastern defense system to combat Soviet penetration, from proposals for comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace to the American plans to bring democracy to the Middle East in order to combat the scourge of terrorism. Governments have repeatedly sought to resolve the region's myriad problems by addressing them in a comprehensive fashion and in ways that advanced their specific policy agendas, usually to no avail.

The latest such idea being mooted in Western policy and academic circles is the promotion of a "grand bargain" between the U.S. and Iran. Its logic is as follows: the nearly continuous U.S.-Iranian confrontation during the last 30 years has failed to prevent the extension of Iranian influence in the region, adversely impacted U.S. interests, brought Iran to the verge of becoming a nuclear power and not impeded Iran's proven capacity for mischief-making in Iraq, the Gulf, Lebanon and the Palestinian-Israeli sphere. This new thinking suggests that a robust dialogue with Iran on the totality of regional issues holds greater promise than previous policies for achieving a more cooperative Iran, in return for U.S. recognition of Iran as a top-ranked regional power with legitimate interests.

To be sure, this approach has not yet been definitively adopted as policy and is only still being formulated. But it has already caused ripples of unease, not just in Israel, but among America's allies in the Arab world. Arab Gulf principalities worry whether the U.S. will agree to the Gulf becoming a more exclusively "Persian" one, which could force them into a situation of intolerable dependency. The Sunni Arab bloc – Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority's Mahmud Abbas, and the anti-Syrian, anti-Hizballah "March 14" coalition in Lebanon – while being utterly opposed to a U.S. or Israeli strike at Iran's nuclear facilities, wonders whether a U.S.-Iranian warming will come at its expense.

In their nightmare scenario, Iraq falls into Iran's orbit, Syria and Hamas are courted by the West without having changed their policies, the balance of power in Lebanon tilts decisively into the Syrian-Hizballah camp, Iran and its allies either benefit from the lack of diplomatic progress in the Arab-Israeli sphere or are credited for compelling the U.S. to apply real pressure on Israel, and Iran strides confidently ahead as a budding nuclear power.

If the past is any guide, Arab worries, while legitimate, should be tempered. Fashioning over-arching, all-encompassing strategies to resolve the host of regional problems may be a good intellectual exercise and can even have practical value in leading to a greater degree of understanding between adversaries. However, their implementation is hardly likely to proceed smoothly. Given the complexity of regional issues in Iraq,

Lebanon, the Arab-Israeli and intra-Palestinian arenas, as well as the degree of mutual suspicions between Tehran and Washington, any Iranian-U.S. dialogue is likely to be fraught with difficulties, no matter the results of Iran's upcoming presidential election.

What to do? As Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa acknowledges openly, Arab governments are clearly playing with a weak hand, beset by an inability to mobilize their collective resources in pursuit of a common strategic and political vision, and hence have been left to fend for themselves in the face of domestic, regional and global chal-

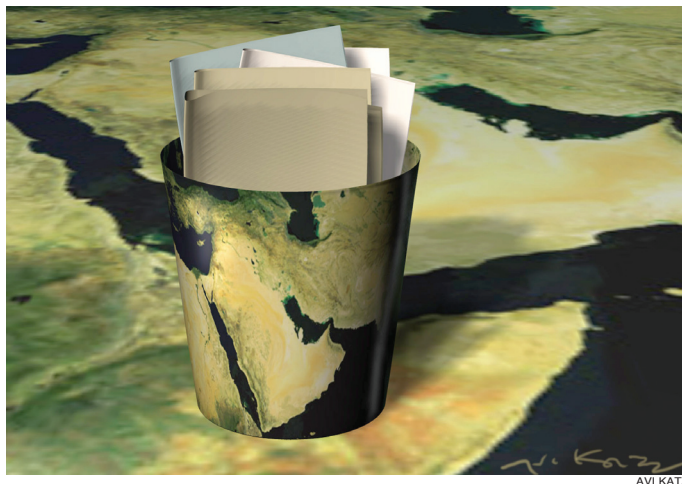
lenges. The indictment by the International Criminal Court of Justice of a sitting Arab head of state, Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir, is perhaps a sideshow to the bigger regional issues at stake, but is nonetheless an additional embarrassment to the entire Arab League.

Egypt, the acknowledged leader of this quarrelsome Arab collective since 1945, is a mirror to this sorry situation, having stagnated internally and seen its regional influence decline for much of the last 20 years. In recent months, however, Egypt has taken a more assertive posture in attempting to combat the spread of Iranian influence, a move which also serves to remind Washington that it should not be ignored. In that regard, U.S. President Barack Obama's choice of Cairo as the venue for his upcoming and much-anticipated speech to the Muslim world is a feather in Egypt's cap.

Cairo has also made it clear to Jerusalem that their common interests in checking Tehran's hegemonic ambitions cannot be pursued at the expense of a genuine and energetic pursuit of Arab-Israeli peace along the lines of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, particularly after the havoc wreaked on Gaza by Israel's military assault against Hamas.

For Cairo, qualitative progress in the Palestinian-Israeli sphere, engineered with Egyptian help, is a sine qua non for reversing the drift in the Arab world towards Iran. In this regard, Egyptian thinking appears to dovetail neatly with the burgeoning policies in Washington towards the Arab-Israeli arena. ●

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