Grand Strategies, Muddled Realities

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 challenges. 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.

The author is a Senior Research Fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University.