

Preface

Veteran observers of the Middle East scene are understandably prone to skepticism about the prospects of any fundamental transformation in regional realities. After all, the sense of dynamism and change that characterizes developments in Asia or Latin America is virtually absent from reviews of the Middle East. Instead, it seems that the same themes of instability, terrorism, political authoritarianism, socio-economic stagnation, enduring intra- and inter-state conflict, and the crucial role of oil that dominate current analyses were those that prevailed in analyses two, three, or four decades ago. Hence the somewhat jaded view that in the Middle East, there is nothing new under the sun.

It is easy to exaggerate the degree of stasis. A closer look at the concerns of policymakers and opinion leaders as well as of interested publics and extra-regional actors does reveal some significant changes. This is certainly true of the longer term. Issues like great power rivalry in the region or the rising tide of radical Arab nationalism that preoccupied those who were involved with or merely trying to understand the region in the 1950s and 1960s have simply faded away. It is even true of shorter term perspectives. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the commitment (or at least lip service) to democratization was a central theme in the early aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks; within a couple of years, it had practically disappeared from the regional agenda. It is also the case that some discrete events – such as the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran or the 2003 American-led ouster of Saddam Hussein in Iraq – have had effects that could fairly be described as convulsive.

These reservations notwithstanding, there remains a certain repetitiveness to the list of topics included in an annual review of strategic developments. Indeed, the contributors to the 2007-2008 edition of the *Middle East Strategic Balance* address the bulk of those recurring issue-areas. At the same time, it could be argued that two of these topics seem particularly familiar: the continued prominence of the Palestinian issue and the simmering crisis over Iran's nuclear activities. In the first, the most noteworthy developments in the period under discussion were the forceful takeover of Gaza by Hamas and the subsequent escalation of violence across the Israel-Gaza demarcation line. These events encapsulated some of the themes that have characterized the Israeli-Palestinian relationship over the course of almost 100 years, including the interactive dynamic between unresolved conflict and fragmented Palestinian leadership; the prominence of Islamic themes in the history of Palestinian nationalism; the centrality of force in the politics of the issue; and Israel's inability to disengage from the conflict, either unilaterally or through agreement, psychologically or physically. Hamas/Gaza developments overshadowed the Annapolis meeting convened by the American administration in late 2007, which many hoped would provide an antidote or at least alternative logic to Hamas/Gaza. In the longer sweep of history, Hamas/Gaza represents continuity in the Palestinian-Israel relationship while Annapolis represents the prospect of change. The relationship itself will clearly remain at the core of Israel's strategic agenda in the coming years. It is less clear whether the essence of that relationship will be continuity or change, but to the extent that one can extrapolate from events of 2007-2008, the former seems more likely.

In the second issue-area – that connected with Iran's nuclear ambitions – it is more difficult to point to distinct events that dramatized persistent trends. Instead, it was the continuing preoccupation of Israel, the region, and the international community with the Iranian challenge that embodied larger themes: the assertiveness of Iran and the increasing suspicion by others of Tehran's hegemonic aspirations;

the growing salience of confessional – i.e., Sunni and Shiite – identities (exacerbated by post-2003 developments in Iraq); Iranian appeals to and support for sub-state/non-state actors; and more generally, the shift of the regional center of gravity to the Gulf (only partly symbolized by the rapid rise in the price of oil), and Iran’s increasing assumption of the role once widely attributed to Israel – nexus of regional affairs to which everything else in the Middle East is linked in one way or another. Barring another domestic revolution similar in magnitude to that of 1979, Iran will continue to be a source of major strategic concern to Israel and to occupy center stage in the strategic agenda of both most other actors in the Middle East and the outside world that remains perforce engaged in the region.

Readers who have consulted *The Middle East Strategic Balance* over the years will know that this edition is the latest in an annual series stretching back to 1983. They will also note a change in format. Since its inception (as *The Middle East Military Balance*), the volume included an analytical survey of events during the period under review as well as a detailed database of military forces in the region. This year, for the first time, *The Balance* confines itself to the analytical survey. The database no longer appears in hard copy once a year but is instead constantly updated and permanently accessible on the Institute’s website: www.inss.org.il.

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