No region of the world has been more shaken by U.S. policy over the past decade than the Middle East. The U.S. invasion of Iraq has unleashed Shi’a-Sunni tensions, empowered Iran, and spread refugees and violence to Iraq’s neighbors. The U.S. push for democracy in the region has backfired and mostly harmed the very dissidents that the United States intended to empower. Hamas and Hizballah, militant groups labeled as terrorist organizations by the United States, have gained power and prestige at the expense of U.S. allies. Iran has made huge strides in its effort to master nuclear power, stirring fear among its neighbors. The perceived tilt in U.S. policy toward Israel has become even more pronounced, leaving intense anger at the United States in its wake. Opinion polls consistently show that respect for the United States across the Arab world has reached its lowest ebb in decades.

After all of this, what role would the people and governments of the Middle East want the United States to perform in the next administration? The first reaction might be a simple reflex: leave us alone. Yet, Arab leaders would then fear the United States might actually take that advice. From their perspective, the only thing possibly worse than the United States meddling is the United States disengaging, so the real answer might be, “Fix this mess.”

There are no easy solutions to the furies that have been unleashed across the region, in large part because of U.S. policy. For the foreseeable future, tens of thousands of U.S. troops will be in the center of the Middle East, patrolling Iraqi streets and killing Arabs. For the foreseeable future, the Israeli-Palestinian dispute will not be resolved, despite a belated and desperate effort to forge
a deal in the past year. For the foreseeable future, Iran will shrug off the relatively weak sanctions imposed by the international community and continue to build up its nuclear expertise.

Indeed, the diplomatic challenge ahead is much like a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle. The pieces needed to solve the challenge of Iran might leave close U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia angry and upset. The puzzle that would resolve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute will be incomplete unless Hamas is somehow included. Supporting the nascent Israeli-Syrian peace talks might leave unfinished the puzzle of Lebanon’s future.

The Iraq war, in many ways, is the least interesting part of the puzzle. The region accepts that no U.S. president will lead a precipitous withdrawal from Iraq. The war’s damage to U.S. prestige and power will linger for years, but the combination of a tenuous stalemate and a semifunctioning government means that the Iraq war has begun to fade as an important issue in the rest of the region, much as the war has disappeared from the television screens of Americans as well.

What the region needs and wants from the United States is sophisticated diplomacy, which has been in short supply in recent years. The United States, for instance, has promoted the idea that there are two strains in Middle Eastern politics: “moderate” states and “extremist” states. This construct is naive, in a place where alliances change as quickly as the desert sands and where “moderate” Saudi Arabia actually has one of the worst human rights records in the world. U.S. diplomacy should not be constrained by arbitrary rules or constraints but must be unleashed, if only to test the possibilities of more creative solutions.

Interestingly, the region is already demonstrating that it cannot wait for a change in administrations. Despite deep misgivings by the United States, Turkey has brokered indirect talks between Syria and Israel while Egypt has arranged a truce between Israel and Hamas. Just as Iran has stepped into the power vacuum left by U.S. distraction over Iraq, so too have allies concerned about the dangers left unchecked by U.S. drift and vacillation.

Run the Israeli-Palestinian Marathon, Don’t Sprint

In the view of Arabs, virtually every step the United States has taken concerning the Israeli-Palestinian dispute in the past decade has been wrong and has arguably made problems worse. Arab officials despair that there has been little sustained diplomacy but instead just a mad dash in the waning months of an administration eager to strike a deal, no matter how unlikely. Such talks collapsed with the demise of the Clinton administration and the general reluctance of the current administration to try to pick up the ball. The Annapolis
process launched in 2007, although sputtering, might have a slightly better chance of continuing into the next administration, if it even survives a change in Israeli leadership. Yet, it is still considered a weak, ill-formed enterprise, particularly because, in Arab eyes, the United States has been ineffective in restraining Israel’s constant buildup of settlements.

Before the Annapolis process, the United States had shown little interest in sustained diplomacy on the Palestinian issue. Instead, Washington relied on a succession of special envoys and new plans that were abandoned almost as soon as they were started. The United States was never a fan of the 2003 road map, largely drafted by the Europeans, and thus did little to support it. Rather, the United States pushed the Israelis to come up with something dramatic: the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. The Israeli departure from Gaza, including shuttering all settlements, was billed as a way to jump-start the road map, but instead it largely undermined it. In fact, the 2004 exchange of letters between the United States and Israel, in which the United States explicitly said that, in any peace deal, Israel could keep major settlement blocks and that Palestinians should not expect to return to their abandoned homes in Israel, did more to harm the image of the United States as an honest broker than any other single act in the last decade.

The errors only compounded. The United States pressed the Israelis and Palestinians, despite their misgivings, to allow Hamas to run in Palestinian legislative elections in 2006. Convinced that no militant group could do well at the polls, U.S. officials were stunned when Hamas unexpectedly won. That victory set the stage for a unity government shunned by the United States and for Hamas’s eventual seizure of the Gaza Strip and its 1.5 million inhabitants.

Many Arabs hold that a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must be a central focus of U.S. policy. Yet, this assertion is a cynical diplomatic artifice designed to detract attention from the inept failure of most Arab nations to reform their internal politics. An Israeli-Palestinian deal will not solve many of the problems of the Middle East, although peace between Israel and its neighbors would certainly lower tensions. If the Arab world really cared about the Palestinians, however, the neighbors would not only actually provide the millions of dollars long promised but rarely delivered, but would also take the necessary steps to support the peace negotiations. Thus far, these promises have not come to fruition, even after the United States convinced many reluctant top Arab officials to attend the Annapolis conference.

Ironically, the U.S. was on the right track when it focused on Palestinian refugees.
Ironically, the United States was on the right track when, in the 2004 exchange of letters, it focused the issue on Palestinian refugees. (Nevertheless, the letters were poorly handled diplomatically, with no consultation with Arab officials.) Questions of borders and the status of Jerusalem are enormously difficult but relatively simple compared to the refugee question. For Palestinian and Arab leaders, the refugee issue is one that they have never faced forthrightly. Decades of propaganda have left ordinary Palestinians with the impression that they will someday return to their homes in Haifa, Jaffa, and elsewhere, but no Israeli government will accept anything aside from a token number of refugees in any peace deal. Having signed on for a two-state solution, largely because of concerns that the soaring Arab population would overwhelm the Jewish population, the Israelis believe that the Palestinians will have their own state and should remain there. Yet, no Palestinian leader nor any Arab leader has laid the groundwork for the end of this Palestinian dream.

The challenge for the United States is to convince not only the Palestinian leadership but also the Arab world to accept the difficult fact that Palestinians will never return to Israel. The sooner an Arab leader says this publicly, the sooner there will be a peace deal. The Palestinians should be able to negotiate a handsome package worth tens of billions of dollars for giving up the right of return. Yet, no Palestinian leader will make such a commitment unless there is buy-in from respected Arab leaders first. A key focus of U.S. diplomacy should therefore be to set the conditions that would allow the Arab world to provide the necessary backing for Palestinian negotiators.

Finally, there is the question of Hamas. Its victory in the 2006 legislative election is the direct result of the U.S. fixation with elections as a pathway to democracy. It was a bitter lesson learned, that elections without the necessary preconditions, such as a vibrant civil society, are highly unpredictable, but there is no turning back now. The Hamas victory, while deeply unwelcome to Arab leaders, left them in a bind. Saudi Arabia could never publicly bemoan the triumph of Hamas, which marked the first time since the Prophet Muhammad that there has been a democratically elected Islamic state in the Arab world. Indeed, despite the extreme displeasure of the United States, the Saudis worked hard to promote the formation of the short-lived unity government between Fatah and Hamas.

Hamas’s 2007 seizure of Gaza, concluded partly in response to the threat it perceived from the U.S. buildup of Fatah armed forces, ended that unity...
government. Yet, Hamas continues to be a force to be reckoned with. The Israeli blockade did little but strengthen Hamas’s hold on Gaza, to the point that even Jerusalem realized that it was better to agree to a truce even if it meant that such a deal would signal the growing irrelevancy of President Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinians’ nominal peace interlocutor with the Israeli government. The Israeli agreement with Hamas in many ways may only defer a later clash. The deal, however, especially its use of Egypt as a mediator, points the way for the United States to begin its own indirect discussion with Hamas, if only to explore if any elements within that organization would be open to broader dialogue. The rise of Hamas means that a viable peace has become a three-legged stool—Israel, Fatah, and Hamas. The stool will not stand if one leg is missing.

The most crucial issue today in the Arab world is Iran’s dramatic expansion of its power.

Talk to Tehran

The most crucial issue today in the Arab world is Iran’s dramatic expansion of its power, but many Arabs, especially the Saudis, deeply doubt that the United States has the staying power to confront Iran. As a result, repeated U.S. efforts to build an anti-Iranian coalition among the Gulf Arabs have fallen short. Arab leaders fully expect that one day they will turn on their TV sets and learn of another dizzying shift in U.S. policy, this time tilted toward Iran. The U.S. troop surge in Iraq was in part prompted by an unusually blunt post-Thanksgiving meeting in 2006 between Vice President Dick Cheney and King Abdullah, in which Abdullah pointedly asked whether the United States was serious about confronting Iran. The U.S. answer came a few weeks later, in the form of tens of thousands more troops in Iraq. The surge, accompanied by more aggressive tactics against Iranian operatives, has succeeded for now in slowing Iran's ambitions in Iraq.

Nevertheless, the invasion of Iraq has reshaped the balance of power in the Middle East, leaving Tehran ascendant. Iranian influence is now seen not only in Iraq but also in the Palestinian territories through Hamas, in Syria through the weak Assad regime, and in Lebanon through the growing might of Hezbollah. Even more troubling, Iran is quickly developing its nuclear capability. The United States and its allies have seemed incapable of thwarting that Iranian effort.

Iran’s nuclear breakout might have been prevented with more adroit U.S. diplomacy. Iran appeared to have approached the United States in 2003, shortly after the fall of Baghdad, with hints of interest in a “grand bargain.”

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Iranian nervousness was understandable. The United States in less than a month had toppled Saddam Hussein, who had kept Iran at bay during a grinding eight-year war that left one million Iranians dead. There is fierce dispute about whether the Iranian approach was actually genuine, but in any case, the United States was not interested in pursuing even wisps of Iranian interest at the time. Indeed, the British, French, and Germans became so concerned that the United States might attack Iran that they launched their own negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program, winning a suspension of the program that lasted two years. Without the United States at the table, however, Iran had little incentive to continue, and the talks broke down in 2005.

By the time the United States, along with China and Russia, joined the European-led effort, Iran was on its own trajectory, shrugging off UN Security Council sanctions and offers of economic incentives. Interestingly, the start of U.S. participation in the negotiations resulted in a dramatic weakening of the incentive most appealing to Iran: recognition of its political importance. The 2005 European proposal to Iran had included a commitment not to use or threaten to use force “against the territorial integrity or political independence” of any state, including Iran, and a commitment to “an expanded dialogue and relationship” on regional security issues. That language disappeared from the 2006 offer that included the United States, largely because U.S. officials were concerned about Saudi Arabia’s reaction. Instead, the 2006 proposal merely substituted a vague reference to supporting a conference on regional security that might not even have been an official, government-sponsored event. The shift in language, so obvious to the Iranians, was an important reason for Tehran’s rejection of the deal.

The sweetened offer made in June 2008 significantly enhanced the political section, restoring the language about respecting “territorial integrity” and the encouragement of “direct contact and dialogue” with Iran and even adding a commitment to “support Iran in playing an important and constructive role in international affairs.” In the meantime, however, two crucial years had passed, giving Iran time to install some 3,500 centrifuges at its Natanz facility and to build up a supply of 150 kilograms of low-enriched uranium. Iran says that its work is for electricity, not weapons, but the number of centrifuges is beginning to give Iran the critical mass needed to make significant strides toward a nuclear bomb. By the end of 2008, Iran could have as much as 500 kilograms of low-enriched uranium; about 700 kilograms are necessary to begin enrichment for weapons-grade uranium.

The Arab world could do without the rhetoric and trauma of the last decade.
The United States now will face important questions about when, not if, it should talk to Tehran. The United States dramatically shifted tactics in July 2008 when a senior diplomat traveled to Geneva to take part in preparatory discussions with Iran about the negotiations. (Javier Solana of the European Union, accompanied by the political directors of China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United Kingdom, delivered the 2008 offer to Tehran in June.) Should the United States hold back from further talks until Iran verifiably suspends its enrichment activities? Should the suspension requirement be dropped or modified, even though it is enshrined in four UN Security Council resolutions? The next administration will face these difficult questions.

The conundrum for regional states is that although there is a real desire for diplomacy and not war, no Arab state wants to return to the period when the Persian Gulf was simply an Iranian lake. During the quarter century of U.S.-Iranian tensions, missed signals, and diplomatic estrangement, the Arab world has forged its own links with Tehran and created a much more balanced relationship. Arab leaders therefore view U.S.-Iranian talks with some trepidation, no matter how much they may publicly support them.

Another key question that should worry U.S. policymakers is Israel’s response to a possible failure of the diplomatic efforts. Israel is clearly preparing itself to conduct a military strike on Iran, if only to keep the threat of that option viable. An Israeli attack would be viewed in the Arab world as a proxy for U.S. action. Israel’s destruction in 2007 of a Syrian nuclear reactor did not prompt much outrage because the facility was unknown up to that point, the government in Damascus was so disliked by its Arab brethren, and Israel never publicly claimed it had launched the attack. Yet, Natanz is a different issue because the facility is so well known and the diplomacy over its activities has been so intense. The diplomatic blowback in the Arab world could be intense, and Iran has tentacles in terrorist organizations across the region from which it might launch a bloody retaliation.

A Tarnished Brand

The American brand is badly tarnished in the Arab world. The war of choice in Iraq, combined with the images of Abu Ghraib, is just one factor in the decline of the U.S. image. Hamas’s legislative victory and Hizballah’s resilience in the showdown with Israel also directly affected the way the United States was seen in the region: on the defensive and in decline. The overbearing promotion of democracy angered leaders and tainted reformers, winning few admirers for the crusade.

Yet, the American brand can bounce back. The mere fact that an African-American with a father from Kenya won a major-party presidential nomination
has done more to restore the U.S. image than any of the schemes launched by the public diplomacy arm of the Department of State. The vibrancy of the U.S. political debate, now carried live across the Arab region by cable television stations, is much more of a gleaming advertisement for the glories of democracies than a thousand speeches by a secretary of state.

For the moment, the Arab world could do without the rhetoric and the trauma of the last decade and would welcome a sustained focus on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and confronting the rise of Iran. Neither issue offers the prospect of an easy solution, and Arab leaders will face difficult questions on how and whether they assist the American enterprise.

Notes

