
This New Struggle for Power

Assessing American Foreign Policy in the Middle East

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARTIN INDYK
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Dr. Indyk served for eight years as founding Executive Director for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a research institute specializing in Arab-Israel relations. He has been an adjunct professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, The Middle East Institute at Columbia University, the Dayan Center for Middle East Studies at Tel Aviv University, and the Department of Politics at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. Dr. Indyk has published widely on U.S. policy towards the Arab-Israeli peace process, on U.S.-Israeli relations, and on the threats of Middle East stability posed by Iraq and Iran.

On November 22, 2006, Dr. Indyk spoke to The Forum about the Arab-Israeli conflict, the crisis in Lebanon, the war in Iraq, and nuclear proliferation in the Middle East.

FORUM: *Does the continuance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict prevent policy success in the war on terror and in other Middle East policy areas? If so, does that mean that the conflict must first be resolved before other policy objectives can be accomplished?*

MARTIN INDYK: The Israeli-Palestinian conflict generates a critical negative dynamic in the region and has a direct impact on U.S. policy because the United States is an ally to Israel and has an interest in building its relations with the Arab world. It is a hot-button issue for both Arabs and Israelis. To be successful in the Middle East the United States needs to have proactive diplomacy on the Israeli-Palestinian issue and on the broader Arab-Israeli conflict.

One of the reasons why the Bush administration has had real problems in the region is because of its refusal to accept that diplomatic principle. That said, if you could solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, you would not be removing any of the other sources of conflict in the region, most of which do not depend on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Al-Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden exploit the conflict, but their battle is against the United States—they want to establish a caliphate in the entire Middle East, and for that purpose, they want the United States and Israel out. They would not accept any reasonable peace agreement that was worked out between Israel and the Palestinians. Solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on terms other than the removal of Israel, which by definition is not solving it at all, would not be acceptable to those forces in the Arab and the Muslim world that reject Western influence in the Middle East and Israel's existence in the Middle East. That applies to the Iranian regime. It applies to Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda. And it applies to Hamas and other Islamists. So when people say, "Well, solve the Israeli-Palestinian problem—all our problems will go away," they simply don't understand the nature of the objectives of those we are up against in the Middle East.

They will not accept the compromise solution that the rest of the world supports—that is, a two state solution in which an independent Palestinian state lives in peace alongside a Jewish state of Israel; that is a solution that is acceptable to the Arab states and is acceptable to the rest of the international community. It is not acceptable to Iran, to al-Qaeda, or to Hamas. An active diplomacy designed to move towards a solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a necessary, but not sufficient, element in an American strategy of promoting its interest in the Middle East.

FORUM: *Let us talk about Gaza. The Spanish government has proposed a peace initiative calling for an immediate cease fire, a prisoner swap, and the renewal of negotiations [between the Government of Israel and the Palestinian authority], leading to the establishment of an international peacekeeping force tasked with monitoring the implementation of the cease-fire. What are your takes on this initiative and on European involvement in the Arab-Israeli peace process in general?*

INDYK: This initiative is not a serious initiative. It is a classic example of what is wrong with European diplomacy when it comes to trying to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict because it focuses on pronouncements rather than on an effort to get an agreement. It was announced without any discussion with the Government of Israel. And so, the Government of Israel immediately rejected it. Since the Government of Israel has more than 50 percent of the cards in its hands, any initiative that is immediately rejected by them is an initiative that is dead on arrival.

Europeans have a very important role to play, especially under the current circumstances, where—over the last six years—the Bush administration has been reluctant to play an active role. But European initiatives need to take into account the concerns of both sides, unless all they want to do is play to the gallery of the Palestinians and their Arab supporters. Moreover, the Palestinians have seen that kind of European game before, and they are not impressed by it. What they are impressed by is an initiative that can influence Israel. That is why they would be much more willing to engage with and embrace an active American diplomacy—because of their belief that America can influence Israel much more effectively than the Europeans can.

FORUM: *With the new Democratic Congress, do you think that we might see increased pressure to fill this diplomatic void, as neither Europe nor the United States seems to be taking a strong initiative?*

INDYK: I think that the Democrats will call for more active engagement on the Palestinian issue—but it is the prerogative of the executive branch to engage in diplomacy. I believe that
the Secretary of State and her advisors want to take a more active role. But there is resistance on the part of the President, who has never believed in active engagement on the Palestinian issue, and by his White House advisors, who still believe that by promoting democracy, peace will follow. They have it backwards, but they are incapable of seeing that. All promoting democracy has done in the Palestinian arena is to bring us a Hamas government, which, by any standard, represents a setback to the peace process.

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FORUM: *Let us transition to Lebanon. Following the July war between Hizbollah and Israel, Lebanon is engulfed in a political crisis, exacerbated by sectarian*

divisions and a faulty system of political representation in the Parliament. The recent talk on forming a government of national unity has collapsed. What are the regional implications of a destabilized Lebanon, and what should be the priority of the international community in dealing with Lebanon?

INDYK: Lebanon after 1982, and before last year, was essentially a sideshow. Syrian tutelage prevented civil war from breaking out, and Lebanon was essentially seen as a kind of appendage of Syrian foreign policy. That was all fine and good until the Lebanese got sick of it and decided that it was necessary for the Syrians to go. That sentiment was provoked by the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, in which the Syrians are at least complicit. In a surprising development, more than a million Lebanese came out on the streets and demanded that Syria leave. That demand was backed by the United States; suddenly Lebanon moved from being a sideshow to being a central element in the Bush administration's efforts to promote democracy in the Middle East.

Now Lebanon is one of the arenas in which a new contest for power in the region is taking place. This comes as a result of developments over the last six years, in particular as a result of the United States' removal of Iraq from the balance of power equation in the region. The United States itself is no longer able to maintain its dominance of the region, and Iran and its allies, Syria and Hezbollah, are emerging to make a claim for regional hegemony. The places where they're making their claim are in Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian arena.

This new struggle for power—which is essentially a struggle between the United States and its allies, Israel and the moderate Arab states on the one hand, and Iran and its allies, Syria and Hezbollah on the other—is playing itself out in Lebanon. The current battle between the anti-Syrian Lebanese government and Hezbollah, backed by Syria and Iran, which seeks to topple that government, is part of a much bigger power play by the Iranians. They are part of a broader effort that includes establishing their sphere of influence in Iraq as the United States leaves that arena and, of course, acquiring nuclear capabilities.

FORUM: *What kinds of recommendations would you propose to the international community to help Lebanon?*

INDYK: The first is to get behind the Lebanese government and make sure that it enjoys not just American support, but full international support, and that the international community stands up to this effort by Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah to topple the government. Second, is certainly to increase the capabilities of the Lebanese army and the capabilities of

the United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon (UNIFIL) to back up the Lebanese army as it seeks to extend the writ of the Lebanese government to southern Lebanon. The third step is to help the Lebanese government in the reconstruction efforts so that it can be seen to be delivering to the people of Lebanon in a way that Hezbollah is not able to deliver. Hezbollah can hand out money but it cannot rebuild houses and rebuild roads and infrastructure and so on. It is a combination of things that would need to be done.

FORUM: *Regarding the Lebanese population, one has the feeling that a Lebanese citizen would be suspicious of almost every party involved at this point. What are the prospects for success for the government to win over the population?*

INDYK: First of all, the Lebanese population is already divided along sectarian lines. The nature of Lebanon's (confessional) democracy is that people identify with their ethnic or religious community, and the system reinforces that identity. So in circumstances where Lebanon again becomes the plaything of external forces as it did in the 1970s, the potential for Lebanon to come apart—to return to civil war—is quite high.

There are two factors that might head this off. First, the feeling amongst, I would say, almost all Lebanese is that to go back to the civil war that they experienced in the 1970s is a really bad idea. You see that Hassan Nasrallah, the head of Hezbollah, even as he seeks to use the power of street demonstrations to bring down the government, nevertheless is quick to assert publicly that what he seeks is unity, not division. That is a reflection of that first point. The second source of salvation might come from an international focus on the Syrians' efforts to upset the apple cart here. By shining a spotlight on Syrian behavior, it may be possible to deter them from creating havoc again.

FORUM: *Shifting gears now to Iraq. What would be the primary policy points that you would consider in formulating a new strategy for Iraq and could you comment on the particular idea of partitioning Iraq into separate ethnic states?*

INDYK: There is no magic solution for the situation in Iraq. From an American point of view, I think that the best that can be hoped for is to prevent the implosion from becoming an explosion. It is very hard to see, as the country descends into civil war, how American forces can do anything but get caught up in the middle of that. A phased withdrawal will have a dangerous effect in terms of setting off a kind of "every man for himself" attitude within Iraq, because of the signal it will send that the United States

will be getting out, and therefore everybody will make their calculations on that basis and seek protection where they can find it—amongst the militias and war lords and so on.

An immediate pullout would likely leave a vacuum that is going to be filled with all sorts of bad actors. It is very hard to see what the best way out is. But it is clear that we have an interest in containing the explosive potential of this disaster in Iraq. And that is where we are going to need to shore up our friends in the region—particularly the Kuwaitis, Saudis, and Jordanians—who are going to face an influx of refugees. And I think we will run the risk, particularly in Jordan and Kuwait, of major destabilization. We have to try as best as we can to prevent neighboring armies from intervening in Iraq—Iranians in particular—but the Turks as well. That seems to me to be the minimum requirements of a strategy going forward.

As for the idea of speeding up what looks like an inevitable process of partition by actually trying to implement it through a political process and a movement of populations: I think it is beyond our ability to do that. At this point, it seems to me highly unlikely that we will be able to persuade politicians to agree to a fair division of the oil revenues, and even more unlikely that we will be able to persuade people to uproot themselves from their homes, many of which they have lived in through generations, and move to other areas on the grounds of some “made in Washington” plan for Iraq. I just don’t think we have the ability to do that anymore.

FORUM: *Any kind of population transfer would be immensely difficult.*

INDYK: Yes. It is very hard to do. I mean unfortunately the alternative to it is a process of ethnic cleansing, which is probably what you are going to see. But the notion that we can create a process in which there is orderly separation is really trying to manipulate history in a way that we just do not have the ability to do.

FORUM: *The next question is about Iran. Hedging themselves against a rising Iranian hegemony, states across the Middle East may now seek the acquisition of nuclear weapons. Do you see nuclear proliferation unfolding across the Middle East, and what kind of strategic nonproliferation arrangement might the United States and its allies implement to prevent a possible arms race from unfolding?*

INDYK: I think it is particularly ominous that Arab states that have lived with the idea of an Israeli nuclear capability for at least four decades are suddenly now announcing that they, like Iran, are going to embark on nuclear programs. Of course they say it is for peaceful purposes, but they clearly feel

the need to start down that road because of Iran's nuclear program. That just underscores the potential for a nuclear arms race in the region. I think that the United States has a very strong interest in trying to discourage that arms race—first by trying to get sufficient guarantees about Iran's nuclear intentions. That would enable us to go to these other Arab states, and say, "It is not necessary for you to go down that road."

We have to recognize now that the chances of actually persuading Iran to give up its nuclear ambitions and put its nuclear program under international monitoring—the chances of that are pretty slim. They are actually between slim and none. Therefore, I think we need a backup plan as well. We need to be thinking about a broader security infrastructure for the region—an architecture that will enable these states to feel that they do not need to acquire nuclear weapons.

How can we do that? The simple proposition is to extend a nuclear umbrella to our allies in the region, from the Saudis and the Gulf Arabs, to Egypt, Jordan and Israel. In that nuclear guarantee, the United States would essentially be saying to Iran, "An attack by you on any of our allies under this umbrella will be treated as an attack on the United States and will be responded to with the full force of the American nuclear arsenal." Then we would have to turn around to the Arab states and say, "The price of this nuclear guarantee is that you do not seek to acquire nuclear weapons."

FORUM: *Can you measure the possibility of this nuclear umbrella strategy actually unfolding as the security option?*

INDYK: I think that the chances of it unfolding are very high. The problem is the timing of it in Washington. The

administration does not want to talk about it now because they fear that it will signal that they have given up on trying to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. But if we wait until Iran finally acquires nuclear weapons, which appears to be still a few years off, and have not laid the foundation for this security architecture, it is going to be much harder to do it, and therefore it is going to be much harder to convince Iran's Arab neighbors that they do not need to acquire their own nuclear weapons.

In that nuclear guarantee, the United States would essentially be saying to Iran, "An attack by you on any of our allies under this umbrella will be treated as an attack on the United States and will be responded to with the full force of the American nuclear arsenal."

In a way, I do not think it is a question of whether this is very likely. I think it is a question of when is it better to pursue this, in terms of discussion with the Arab states and with Israel about how this would work. This is not an idea that is going to be easily sold to the American public either. It is going to require some groundwork, and I do not see that the groundwork is being laid. That is because of this concern in Washington that somehow it will be interpreted as an indication that we have given up on trying to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons—that we are moving from prevention to deterrence.

FORUM: *Let us discuss processes of radicalization. What strategies can the United States or any other state actor realistically pursue in trying to prevent radicalization? Supporting non-violent Salafists or other conservatives who would discredit violence may be one option. Is the United States government doing good work in this area, and what strategies might it pursue in the future?*

INDYK: Once you start talking about the strategy, I think you have to start from a slightly different point, which is to understand what has happened to the balance of power in the region. The United States used to be the dominant power, and it is not anymore as a result of the debacle in Iraq. Instead Iran—with its allies Syria and Hezbollah—are making a play to replace the United States as the dominant actors in the region. We have to return to pursuing a balance of power policy—not because that is such a great policy, as we end up in bed with some bad actors—but because the circumstances are such that we are not going to be able to protect our interests unless we find a coalition of like-minded countries in the region who share a common perception of the threat from Iran, Syria and Hezbollah.

That community exists out there. It just has not coalesced yet. We need to find a way to get it to coalesce. It consists of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arab states, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, and perhaps Turkey. In order to bring those like-minded countries together, the United States needs to be engaged proactively in trying to build this kind of coalition to counter Iran, Syria and Hezbollah. The basic wherewithal to do that is there because they are feeling threatened.

The qualification for membership in this counter-alliance is not religious. It is whether the actors are moderates or not—whether they seek peaceful solutions, whether they oppose the use of force and violence in defiance of the international community, which are the hallmarks of the thugs that represent this alliance between Iran, Syria and Hezbollah.

FORUM: *Regarding al-Qaeda's narrative of global jihad, is there a strategy to counter that kind of narrative, particularly in the media?*

INDYK: The first thing we have to do is to build an alliance of countries that share a common interest in promoting a different course of action, that is, a course of moderation and reconciliation, particularly between Israel and the Palestinians, which becomes the cement of this virtual alliance that has a common interest in tolerance and modernism, and to not want to be dragged back to those violent days that al-Qaeda and its like are trying to promote here.

In the current circumstances, we cannot avoid the consequences of America's failure in Iraq. We need to find ways to make up for those consequences. Those consequences are uniformly negative in terms of America's power, influence, prestige, and moral authority—all of the elements that go into giving the United States influence in this part of the world—our influence has declined dramatically.

We are going to have to work with our friends to boost it again to the point where we can start to talk credibly to the people out there, and so our friends in the region can talk credibly to their people to puncture this illusion that Nasrallah and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad [The President of Iran]

are feeding the public. That illusion is that their way works—that by pursuing violence, terrorism and extremism, the people of the region can achieve their purposes. That essentially is what Nasrallah and Ahmadinejad are saying: "Our way works, and the ways of your leaders—moderation, peacemaking, tolerance, acceptance of the other, that does not work." This is how Nasrallah and Ahmadinejad's argument goes. We have to show the people of the region that their way does not work, that their promise of justice and dignity out of the barrel of a gun or a nuclear bomb is a false hope that leads only to more misery. So there is really a competition between two different ways of doing business. And the best antidote to al-Qaeda is to show that our way works.

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FORUM: *Thank you very much for speaking with The Forum. ■*

