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NEWS ANALYSIS

Political analysts see varying effect of crisis on Israel

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — Ahead is the most dangerous period for American involvement in the Middle East since...
Actually there is no "since" in this case. The right word is probably "ever" ...but certainly since World War II, when it was primarily British forces who were active in the region.

There is a consensus here among Middle East

experts that the dangers ahead are exceptionally grave, the options narrowing, and the possibility of a major and historic military clash increasing to a likelihood.

The overall atmosphere here in the American capital is really one of underlying apprehension and uncertainty, despite the toughness and resolution which fill the newspapers and TV talk-shows.

The apprehension and uncertainty are muted.

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however, for a number of reasons. Primarily the Bush Administration continues to work competently, consistently and overtime to portray itself as firm and resolute. And the White House has the ability to set the tone here, especially when it comes to what is seen as a basic challenge to "vital American national interests."

There are other reasons as well, having to do with the nature of American society and the ways in which Washington and the American press interact.

Back in the 1960s, as the U.S. inched forward to its major commitment in Vietnam, the Johnson Administration manipulated the situation to create the incident in the Gulf of Tonkin that resulted in the Congressionally approved Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that resulted in the rush of American military forces to Vietnam. At that time the American public backed the President with a huge 85% endorsement; in later years it became evident the incident was staged by the Pentagon precisely to enlist public support at the time. And we all know what happened in subsequent years.

Today there is considerably more media scrutiny, or at least discussion, of government policies through television than was the case in the 1960s. But the press is largely dependent upon a cast of commentators who are usually former government officials often still on the payroll in one way or another as consultants and advisers, persons whose mindsets are not much different from those actually holding the reins of power.



American soldier prepares to leave for Middle East

Additionally there are the supposedly "independent" analysts who are usually associated with the half dozen or so "think-tanks" that compete for attention in this town. But the reality here is that few if any of these "research centers" are really independent and hardly any of the commentators are. Nearly everyone has been co-opted by one political interest or another. It is no wonder then that by the time the American press chooses whom to put on the air or whom to quote in print, nearly everyone blathers forth with a very homogenized analysis.

It's very interesting, though, to see what truly independent and knowledgeable analysts are saying right now about the situation into which the U.S. is plunging itself along with its most important Middle East allies.

Here's what world-famous linguist and political commentator Noam Chomsky had to say when I asked him what his own alternative policy suggestions would be:

"I'm undecided about what would be the best thing to do for a number of reasons. One is that a policy proposal that is out of line with current hysteria will be like trying to stop a rampaging elephant with a pea shooter — or more likely, if anyone even notices it, waving a red flag in front of a bull. When the 'ultraliberal' *Boston Globe* features George Bush on its front page saying that 'we must resist aggression or it will destroy our freedoms' — just like Panama — and then adds in an editorial that we must draw the line even more firmly than in Vietnam, we can see that the hopes for rational discourse sink to about zero.

"In fact, the hypocrisy is so overwhelming and so sickening that it is difficult even to get to the heart of the matter without wading through mountains of sludge. It's intriguing to see that the media not only manage to miss the fact that Saddam Hussein is only a

pale copy of Bush and his predecessors, but that up until a few weeks ago they were his most ardent supporters and helped him reach his present state, and that his motives for annexing Kuwait (threat to economic interests, etc.) are exactly the ones the White House offers as the lofty principles we must defend.

"But I think (reasonable) discussion of these things is hopeless in the present climate," Chomsky adds. "As for policy options, there are virtually none, in my opinion. U.S. policy over the years has made the U.S. the most hated force in the Middle East. Any U.S. initiative will be seen as another imperialist effort to suppress the Arab nation and undermine its rights and just cause. On the other hand, it really is true that if a gangster like Hussein were to exert significant influence over Saudi Arabian oil, directly or indirectly, the world would be in deep trouble — not just those who have to deal with this brutal thug today.

"Assuming that this somehow passes," Chomsky concludes, "the usual victims will be those that suffer the most. The Palestinians may well be finished. It's hard to see anyone today questioning the 'strategic alliance' with Israel, the defender of our cause on the front lines. Israel may indeed be emboldened to attack Jordan, as it has long planned, establish a 'Palestinian state' run by collaborators, 'transfer' the cis-Jordan population to their 'homeland,' begin to settle northern Jordan to control the Jordan headwaters, and take 'its rightful share' of the Litani waters for good measure. Even under less dire projections, the question of Palestinian rights has sunk to a (a low) level.

"At this point, I don't think much more could be done constructively than to explain the background for what has happened, crucially, why the U.S. is so despised in the region and what this means for the options. Given these facts, others should take the initiative (but) they probably won't. The options are narrow, the stakes immense, the hysteria mounting. I don't see what there is to do."

Another very interesting and somewhat different perspective comes from my friend and colleague Dr. Yigal Arens who is one of the country's leading authorities in the field of artificial intelligence.

Yigal shares few of his famous father's views — Moshe Arens, the Defense Minister of Israel and he has been a great supporter of Palestinian statehood and the need to stop U.S. funding and support for Israel for many years.

"I looked over Chomsky's views," Yigal has just written to me. "He believes that the current crisis will end up strengthening Israel's position in relation to the U.S. I think another interpretation of events is possible — in fact, it is the one I believe.

"I think Israel will lose quite a bit of its importance to the U.S. The U.S. has supported Israel, in great part, so that it can help assure U.S. access to Middle East oil. The current conflict with Iraq has clearly demonstrated that Israel is powerless to intervene when the oil supply is facing a realistic threat. Iraq is too far, and any Israeli involvement in U.S. troops transfer — even as a refueling stop — is enough to alienate every Arab country involved. It appears that Iraq will continue to be a force the U.S. must reckon with. As a result, the U.S. will be forced to build up some other ally which is closer to the Persian Gulf and less antagonistic to the countries in the area.

"If Israel is lucky, this will be Saudi Arabia, with which Israel has no serious conflict. If Israel is less lucky, this will be Jordan or Syria, which would probably demand a resolution to the Palestinian conflict that would not sit that well with Israel. The U.S. has already tried this approach with Egypt, and although Egypt is no military power, I think diplomatically they have proven their worth to the U.S. — particularly in this crisis.

"In any case," Arens continues, "the mere existence of another military ally of the U.S. in the region will be at the expense of Israel. This is something they have always done their best to prevent, in part by opposing arms sales to every Arab country — another strategy that has now backfired. Israel not long ago prevented Kuwait itself from purchasing some U.S. weapons, I believe. And note that one of the first things Bush did was rescind some Congressional limits on the number of aircraft the U.S. could sell Saudi Arabia. The limit was put there by one of Israel's friends in Congress. Israel has now been shown to be capable of intervening only in its immediate neighbors, if there.

"I think the Israelis are worried about this and are doing their best now to try and demonstrate that they do have some value to the U.S. after all," Arens says, bringing his thoughts to a close. "I read in the paper about how they're providing the U.S. with 'intelligence.' It couldn't be that great, as they were unable to warn the U.S. about the Iraqi invasion in the first place. Now on the other hand, Arafat has apparently chosen to ally himself with Iraq. What (more) can I say?"