

PolicyWatch #1431 : Special Forum Report

The Future of the Middle East

Featuring Thomas Fingar
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On November 18, 2008, chairman of the National Intelligence Council Thomas Fingar addressed a Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute to discuss the U.S. government report "Global Trends: 2025." Dr. Fingar served previously as assistant secretary at the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, principal deputy assistant secretary, deputy assistant secretary for analysis, director of the Office of Analysis for East Asia and the Pacific, and chief of the China division. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

[Download](#) the complete transcript of this event (PDF).

[Download](#) the completed report, Global Trends 2025 (PDF).

The "Global Trends: 2025" report is not a prediction, but a stimulus for strategic thinking: a collection of possibilities and their contributing and mitigating factors that aims to provide ideas and encourage new thinking and analysis. In producing the report, our team asked hundreds of experts worldwide a series of questions relating to their vision of the future. Although the report was deliberately timed with the change in administration, its intended audience is not just U.S. officials, but the world at large. If current trends continue, today's unipolar world will almost certainly become multipolar, and therefore less stable. The world of 2025 might be characterized as "incompletely transformed"; it will be different from today's world, but exactly how remains in doubt. Since the nature of the world in 2025 depends largely on the planning and decisionmaking of today's leadership, the trends and projections set forth in the report are not irreversible.

The Middle East, from the Maghreb to Central Asia, will be at the center of an arc of instability. The multiplicity of challenges may be the region's defining characteristic, since almost every problem that could face a political leader will be found in the Middle East, and most likely at a high degree of severity and intensity. The ability to cope with problems will be complicated by their interaction, by the need to address many simultaneously, and because action taken on one will most likely affect the resolution of the remainder.

Demographically, 97 percent of the projected 1.4 billion additional people in 2025 will come from sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Central America. This youth bulge -- complicated by the natural propensity of youth to question authority and with views shaped by the global communications revolution -- will create increasing challenges, especially in the Middle East. The region's new population, however, will at least create the possibility of a workforce that can help move the Middle East away from its heavy dependence on fossil fuel commodities.

Nonetheless, the large populations of China, India, and Brazil will require tremendous amounts of energy, promising to keep the demand for and price of oil and gas high for a long time. As such, money will continue to pour into the Middle East, providing regimes the cushion and capacity to buy off demands for fundamental change. Of course, the level of demand could be marginally reduced if the world is more serious than it was in the 1970s about finding energy alternatives, and if those alternatives can be fully realized and put in place by 2025.

Regardless of the price of hydrocarbons, the transfer of wealth from West to East will continue, with the oil- and gas-rich countries -- not just in the Middle East, but in Russia, Nigeria, and Venezuela -- accruing large amounts of money. While historically much of this wealth flowed into the United States and Western Europe, there may be a pull in the future to invest these funds in the Gulf or the broader Middle East to ward off instability. However, if the region does not look favorable for investment from an economic perspective, the relative standing of the Middle East vis-a-vis the world will be affected.

Climate-change projections indicate that water shortages and the high cost of food could be significant issues by 2025. Portions of the Middle East are clearly among the areas most vulnerable to water shortages, and competition for water, agricultural land, and other scarce resources could add severe strains to the international system. If water is a problem today, it will be a bigger problem by 2025.

Another important factor is nuclear development. One way or another, today's issues surrounding the Iranian nuclear program will be resolved by 2025, whether by a control regime, collaboration, and cooperation, or through a nuclear arms race that potentially involves outside powers. The issues surrounding the use of civilian nuclear technology -- facilities safeguards, desalination capabilities, and energy alternatives -- will also play an important role in the region's trajectory.

Terrorism is likely to persist in the region, in part as an instrument of the weak against the strong. If regional governments resist change and do not accommodate their youthful populations' expectations, the Middle East will be ripe for terrorist recruitment and activity. In contrast, projections assume a continued decline in the resonance of al-Qaeda-type ideologies through 2025, although groups such as Hizballah, Hamas, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, among others, may remain.

Finally, one must consider the rising influence of alternative models of governance on the international landscape. In recent decades, the appeal of the Washington consensus model has fallen. The rising powers, specifically China and to some extent Russia, promote an alternative model marked by fewer democratic values and a larger state role. This model may have some appeal in the Middle East, although it is questionable whether it would work well in a region with very different traditions, populations, expectations, and relationships to authority.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Audrey Flake.

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