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President Bush on the State of the Middle East

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President George Bush's final State of the Union speech focused heavily on the Middle East, as had all of his previous State of the Union speeches, with the exception of his first, which took place before the wrenching terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Almost one-quarter of the latest speech was devoted to Iraq, the single most important foreign policy legacy of his Administration. The President also promoted his Administration's freedom agenda as a promising strategy for winning the war against terrorism, "the defining ideological struggle of the 21st century."

Focus on Iraq. President Bush made clear what is at stake in Iraq—not only the stability of the volatile, oil-rich Persian Gulf region, but also the future of the struggle against Islamic extremism and efforts to contain Iran. He reminded Americans about the progress made in Iraq during the last year under his new surge strategy and the need to finish the job to protect American interests.

A year ago, Iraq was threatened by rising sectarian tensions provoked by a massive campaign of terrorism unleashed by al-Qaeda in Iraq and Shiite militias supported by Iran. Today, U.S. forces have turned the tide with the crucial support of Iraqis—in the form of more than 80,000 Concerned Local Citizens who have volunteered to assume local security duties and more than 100,000 new members of Iraqi security forces.

Bush received one of his longest standing ovations when he said: "Some may deny that the surge is working, but among the terrorists there is no

doubt. Al-Qaeda is on the run in Iraq, and this enemy will be defeated." The challenge over the next few years will be to keep pressure on the insurgents and resist the temptation to prematurely withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq, which could squander the hard-won gains of the surge.

Bush stressed that a drawdown of the surge forces had already begun. He restated that future decisions on withdrawing troops would be calibrated according to security conditions in Iraq—not political conditions in Washington. His vision of "Return on Success" would enable American troops to come home with honor and a victory, rather than forcing them to accept a politically-imposed defeat.

(For more information on U.S. policy in Iraq, including links to all of The Heritage Foundation's publications and events on that critical issue, see *Progress in Iraq*.¹)

Afghanistan, the Peace Process, and Iran. The war in Afghanistan received only a paragraph in the speech, overshadowed as usual by the war in Iraq. President Bush noted that his Administration had ordered the deployment of 3,200 more Marines to that troubled country. He thanked Congress for "supporting America's vital mission in Afghanistan,"

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in implicit contrast to its wavering support of Iraq. Bush glossed over the inadequate support of NATO allies, which have failed to provide adequate forces and have imposed political restrictions that have severely hampered the effectiveness and flexibility of coalition military operations.

What is sorely needed in Afghanistan is better cooperation and coordination, not only between the U.S. and its Western allies but also between the United States, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The Taliban, al-Qaeda, and other radical Islamic groups enjoy more popular support in Pakistan than in Afghanistan. They have carved out major sanctuaries along the Pakistani side of the border and continue to mount cross-border attacks inside Afghanistan. The U.S. needs more cooperation from the Pakistan government, which has been increasingly threatened by radical Islamic forces toward whom it had previously turned a blind eye. Building up the Afghan army and reforming the corrupt and ineffective police forces must also be top priorities.

Middle East peace efforts also received little mention in the speech. Bush restated his intention to help Israel and the Palestinians “achieve a peace agreement that defines a Palestinian state by the end of this year.” But this will be extremely difficult to achieve, given the continued terrorist attacks perpetrated by Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups. Israel is understandably reluctant to make concessions that jeopardize its security in exchange for Palestinian pledges to fight terrorism that too often go unfulfilled.

The downplaying of Israeli–Palestinian peace efforts is perhaps a sign that the President has not fully bought into Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s potentially risky determination to push the peace negotiations ahead despite political disunity on both sides and the growing threat posed by extremist Palestinian groups and Hezbollah, both backed by Iran.

Iran received considerably more attention in the speech; as well it should, given its longstanding support for terrorism, its hostile meddling in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the acceleration of its uranium enrichment efforts—which soon will give Tehran the capability to produce fissile material, the chief obstacle to attaining a nuclear weapon. The President made a clear distinction between the Iranian people and their oppressive government:

Our message to the people of Iran is clear: We have no quarrel with you, we respect your traditions and your history, and we look forward to the day when you have your freedom. Our message to the leaders of Iran is also clear: Verifiably suspend your nuclear enrichment, so negotiations can begin. And to rejoin the community of nations, come clean about your nuclear intentions and past actions, stop your oppression at home, and cease your support for terror abroad.

These demands surely will fall on deaf ears in Tehran. Iran’s radical regime would have to abandon its extremist Islamic ideology to meet these conditions. Recognizing that this is unlikely, President Bush also issued a stern warning: “But above all, know this: America will confront those who threaten our troops, we will stand by our allies, and we will defend our vital interests in the Persian Gulf.”

(For more information on U.S. policy regarding Iran, see the Iran Briefing Room.²)

Conclusion. While it is unclear if Iran will take heed the President’s warning, Iran and other Middle East issues will surely be a staple of State of the Union speeches for years to come. It is also clear that attaining the Middle East policy goals outlined by President Bush will ultimately depend on the efforts of the next President.

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1. “Progress In Iraq: Facts and Analysis,” The Heritage Foundation, at www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/Iraq/Iraq.cfm.
2. “Iran Briefing Room,” The Heritage Foundation, at www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/iranbriefingroom.cfm.