

U.S. spooked by Mideast bogeymen

Most people do not lose sleep over the eight-year-old Gulf War between Iran and Iraq. But for senior western policymakers, this festering conflict is a source of deep worry, confusion and a good amount of fear.

This week I took part in a special closed meeting of some of the West's leading experts on the Mideast. The 24 other participants included former directors of intelligence agencies, past National Security Council staff, diplomats, academics and think-tank experts. No overall consensus on the Gulf was achieved, but some important points emerged:

- There is no end in sight to the Gulf War, though some experts think Iran has concluded it cannot win and will now let the fighting peter out. I'm not so sure.

- The recent UN Resolution 598 that sought a ceasefire "was meant to be rejected by Iran" — which it was. Washington pushed through 598 as a way of encouraging its Arab allies and delivering a diplomatic blow to Iran. The U.S. also promoted 598 as a way of diverting attention from the humiliating Iran arms fiasco.

- When Imam Khomeini dies, the region will enter into a period of grave danger. Most experts expect Iran to be riven by bitter, explosive power struggles between competing groups. None, however, think there is the remotest chance that the royalists, led by "Baby Shah," could regain power. The danger will become acute when rival factions begin turning for help to Washington or Moscow. At the same time, the U.S. and USSR will be greatly tempted to support factions that they see as potentially amenable.

Equally bad, Washington and Moscow will suspect the other of secretly aiding Iranian factions even if this is not true. Pressure to take action will quickly mount.

Eric ARGOLIS in New York



If a pro-Soviet or pro-American faction appears to be winning, Washington or Moscow will come under severe pressure to intervene in Iran. Neither great power can afford to see Iran dominated by the other. The Soviets still claim their 1921 treaty, that allows intervention in Iran in the event of instability, to be in force. And the U.S. is still committed to the Carter Doctrine that says the U.S. may regard any threat to the Mideast oilfields by the USSR as a cause of war.

To avoid such a confrontation, some Mideast experts are urging that Moscow and Washington expand their current modest liaison over the Gulf War to a full-scale, comprehensive agreement over the fate of Iran and the Gulf — before Khomeini dies. If this smells of good old 19th-century sphere-of-influence imperialism, it is.

Experts use the term "vital interests:" laymen, like me, can't see much difference between divvying up Iran in 1988 and the Anglo-French partition of the Mideast after World War I. No wonder Iran claims the "Great Satans" are in collusion.

- By making a deal over Iran and the Gulf with Moscow, the West may legitimize Soviet influence in a region where it has before been only limited. Europeans, who are used to living with the Russians, seem to feel

more comfortable doing this than the Americans. In fact, Washington's view is that the USSR has no legitimate interests in the Mideast, even though the Gulf, for example, is closer to the USSR than Honduras is to Texas.

- Islamic fundamentalism could, like China's Cultural Revolution, burn out and no longer pose a menace to either western influence in the Mideast or to the Soviet Union's own Islamic colonial empire in Central Asia.

- Are the Soviets really serious about pulling out of Afghanistan? Yes, say experts on the matter. The deal has already been made. Pakistan will be forced to police the mujahedin, the U.S. will cut off aid, and the Red Army will pull out of Afghanistan. I'm not so sure and so argued. The Americans are convinced, but my Iranian, Chinese and Pakistani sources remain skeptical.

But no one in Washington wants to listen to naysayers. What remains unstated: It seems a U.S.-Soviet deal will be made over the heads of the Afghan resistance. They, apparently, are good enough to die but are not allowed to influence serious negotiations. Bismarck would have understood.

My overall impression was that the U.S. foreign policy establishment remains frozen in its thinking toward the Mideast. There is total paralysis on the Arab-Israeli impasse induced by U.S. domestic politics. There is strong, knee-jerk opposition to Islamic fundamentalism and deep-seated fear of revolutionary Iran.

Truly, as a French scholar said, the U.S. has become a "status quo" power. The establishment mood is edging toward the idea it's better to begin sharing the policing of the Mideast with the Russians than to find ways to live with Iranian and Arab nationalism. This is wrong. The Mideast needs new ideas, not Russians.