

MIDDLE EAST TANGLE

Saudi Arabia may be the next Middle East spot to blow up. That would be even more serious than the current Lebanese disintegration.

Try to follow this tangle: The Iran/Iraq war is a stalemate, but it threatens the Hussein regime in Iraq more than the Khoumeini regime in Iran. Saudi Arabia has been financing the Iraqi war effort. The Hussein regime is a Sunni Moslem regime, although the Shi'ite Moslems are a majority in that country. The Khoumeini regime is a Shi'ite regime. The Saudi regime is Sunni, and is having considerable trouble with the Saudi Shi'ites who notably work in the oil regions of the country.

If the Iraqi regime fails, a Shi'ite regime could well take over, and together with Iran, become a formidable Muslim political force -- one of whose first targets would be Saudi Arabia. The United States would have to step in -- if we haven't by then destroyed our credibility in that part of the world -- in order to protect the critical oil interests of the free world. But if the Saudi regime collapses internally, as did the Shah's in Iran, then we may be helpless.

And there are indications that such an internal Saudi collapse is possible. There have been growing divisions within the apprehensive Saudi royal family in the face of the pressures. Within recent months, members of the Saudi royal family have transferred astronomical amounts of personal money to banks abroad.

Thus, the Middle East tangle thickens. And Lebanon is just a slight caricature of that region's fragmentation. An arrangement had been worked out over the past years whereby the Marronite Christians named the President, the Sunni Moslems named the Prime Minister and the Shi'ite Moslems named the Speaker of the Parliament. But the Shi'ites have grown in population, and now want more explicit political power. So do the Druse. And that is what the current Lebanese tangle is about, spurred on by outside forces.

Americans and Israelis are accustomed to a kind of "national consensus," as strained as it may seem to get on occasion; opposing parties fight bitterly about tactics and strategies, but agree on certain prime values, including procedures for handling their conflicts. There is no such national consensus in most of the Middle East countries. They are just enmeshed in a tangle of power conflicts among religious and political groups which do not hold basic values or procedures in common. Constant warfare is the inevitable result.

Israel is caught in that regional tangle. It is worth noticing that Israel did not cause that tangle. Israel is irrelevant to the Middle East turmoil, although affected by it. On occasion it seems that Israel is saved by that inter-Arab tangle. But, more fundamentally, it prevents Israel from establishing stable peace with its neighbors, no matter what it does.