



THE JAMES A. BAKER III
INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY
OF
RICE UNIVERSITY

SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND RELIGIOUS FACTORS THAT
INFLUENCE OIL SUPPLY AND FOREIGN RELATIONS WITH
THE MIDDLE EAST

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DANIEL BRUMBERG
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
DEPARTMENT OF GOVERNMENT
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

AMY MYERS JAFFE
WALLACE WILSON FELLOW FOR
ENERGY STUDIES
JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR
PUBLIC POLICY

GEORGE MARCUS
PROFESSOR OF ANTHROPOLOGY
CHAIRMAN DEPARTMENT OF
ANTHROPOLOGY
RICE UNIVERSITY

SUSAN OSSMAN
VISITING ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
THE CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY
ARAB STUDIES
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

MICHAEL C HUDSON
SAIF GHOBASH PROFESSOR OF ARAB
STUDIES
THE CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY
ARAB STUDIES
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

JOE BARNES
RESEARCH FELLOW
JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR
PUBLIC POLICY

USSAMA MAKDISI
AAEF ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF
ARAB STUDIES
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
RICE UNIVERSITY

MAMOUN FANDY
RESEARCH PROFESSOR OF POLITICS
CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY
ARAB STUDIES
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

JAREER ELASS
OIL CONSULTANT
JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR
PUBLIC POLICY

GERALD BUTT
GULF EDITOR
MIDDLE EAST ECONOMIC SURVEY

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Key Findings

- Political and economic reform in the Middle East faces formidable challenges. There is a huge gap between the agenda of the “political Islamists” and the existing “liberalized autocracies” – one that is not easily bridged. Political parties and civil society struggle to play their role, but each of these significant building blocks for democracy remain significantly hindered in many countries throughout the region.
- Many countries in the Middle East have gravitated into liberalized autocracy for concrete reasons having to do with both historical experience and current societal, cultural, and political realities. The delicate compromise that now represents the *status quo* ante among the middle class, reformists, Islamicists and ruling regimes in many countries in the Middle East, if upended, could usher in prolonged, bloody civil chaos long before it produces, if it ever does, liberalized democracies. The French and American revolutions, for example, demonstrate the potential volatility of change.
- Successful, sustainable change of forms of government, rulers and elites requires a well-established buy-in from the bottom, as the general population has to be willing to accept a shift in the *status quo*. Historically, the need for a supportive underlying society has wrought many negative lessons, ranging from the French experience in Algeria to the U.S. interference in Iran in the 1960s-1970s.
- Analysis of present and future relations between the United States and the Middle East also needs to take into account the more complex and subtle elements of an evolving regional culture – a culture that is undergoing a period of broad change, the end-result of which is unclear.
- The changes in the cultural landscape of the Middle East have been greatly influenced by the advent of broad access to international media, widened public political discourse, shifting political institutions, and dramatically increased mobility,

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especially for women. With these stimuli have come changing attitudes about many social issues such as the status of women, the role of Islam in society, and the appropriate relationship with the West. Reaction to these influences and events has by no means been uniform across the region or its social strata, despite popular culture and mass media attempts to chronicle it as so. How each country in the region addresses these tests to the *status quo* will differ greatly from place to place and will influence uniquely - based on history, local politics and demographics - how each individual country responds to and interacts with the West.

Introduction

Since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, American policy makers, commentators, and media have been trying to make sense of how widespread anti-America sentiment has developed in the Middle East. Countless articles, talk shows, books and pamphlets have been dedicated to answering the question of what America did wrong in its policies towards the region, why rising numbers of Muslim youth are willing to give their lives to attack Americans and their allies, and how a cultural clash of civilizations has developed.

Analysis has been given to whether this deep-seated distaste for the U.S. derives from a general disdain for the “unbelievers” of the Christian world and its values, or more simply a virulent jealousy or dislike for America’s democratic institutions, its economic reform philosophies, and/or its wealth. Others have postulated that it is United States foreign policy that is to blame, in particular, its unflinching support for Israel and long-standing defense of undemocratic regimes in the region.ⁱ The anger towards America has also been put on the shoulders of failing Arab regimes and Islamicist groups, who are accused of trying to camouflage their own deficits by transferring domestic disgust to an outside enemy. Another worthy explanation argues that anti-Americanism is said to find its roots in the region’s schools, in children’s textbooks, which are increasingly being written by Islamic fundamentalist authors.ⁱⁱ

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All these explanations have a grain of truth. The United States has, in many instances, failed to abide by its own norms in dealing with the Middle East. And, there is no question that the region has failed to produce growing economies. Finally, repression and human rights issues abound in the region, frequently at the hands of regimes supported by the U.S.

But analysis of present and future relations between the United States and the Middle East needs also to take into account the more complex and subtle elements of an evolving regional culture – a culture that is undergoing a period of broad change, the end result of which is unclear. This cultural transition, and the emotions raised by it, is perhaps as significant a factor in the simmering dissatisfaction with the U.S. as any American initiatives alone. Moreover, this period of transition is being experienced by no means in a uniform fashion across the region but rather varies widely country by country given differing influences of history, geography, political culture, and demographics.

By culture, that is not to say “Islam” or “Arab”-ness per se, but culture as it is defined as an ever-changing phenomenon – long-term strategies for implementing values or value orientations. Culture in this sense might be compared to a game, the rules of which cannot be reduced to a single rationality, reason, or strategy for playing. Rather, culture presumes complex, layered reality where many “games” or strategies are taking place simultaneously. These strategies might either be supported by or given resistance to institutional pressures.

By this definition of culture, the Middle East is clearly engaged in a period of cultural and ideological transition. Only by understanding the fissures created by this transition can American interaction breed constructive dialogue and understanding – or at least friendly disagreement. Observations that are too universally applied or even grossly oversimplified can drive U.S. policies that fail to respond to the exigencies of the times. Errors could be made from policies designed from premises that meet convenient stereotypes but not the more difficult, complex realities.

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Not every country in the Middle East has a civil society waiting in the wings to burst out for democracy. Nor is every autocratic leader a brutal dictator who sponsors international terrorism. Radical fundamentalism has not grabbed the entire popular culture of the region as a whole, and several countries, notably Egypt, have a vibrant, broad-based feminist movement. Education systems also vary country-to-country, locality-to-locality. Among the elites in many countries, Saudi Arabia especially, are American-educated technocrats, not students of traditional “madrasas.” Street mobs burn American flags, but they also protest, as at a recent national soccer match in Iran, for greater civil liberties and Western style rule of law. Thus, it is necessary for Americans to understand such nuances and avoid monolithic views that serve to promote cultural divide and endanger both U.S. and Middle East co-existence.

It is not necessary for U.S. strategic interests to dovetail completely with a nation or region for relations to be positive and friendly. U.S. friendship with Europe and more recently, with Russia, is not based on a total confluence of interests or even values. Moreover, populations have been known to appreciate the so-called “soft power” of the U.S. while simultaneously resisting a particular foreign policy or economic initiative. But constructive dialogue presumes some knowledge of where each side is coming from – a commodity that seems sorely lacking on both sides of the U.S.-Middle East cultural divide.

The United States and other Western societies need to recognize that, even within the overall context of seemingly broad regional cultural affinities in the Middle East, “all politics is local.” While some commonality may exist within the Arab world on a political level, each country in the region is confronting profound challenges to existing cultural and political systems. Chances are how each country addresses these tests to the *status quo* will differ greatly from its neighbor and will influence how it responds to and interacts with the West.

Tempting as it may be for the West to lump all Arabs together when it comes calling for support on an international issue and expecting a uniform response from its regional

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allies, the varying domestic pressures within the Middle East nations mean that a consensus among them on key diplomatic initiatives cannot be a given. Indeed, one can argue that a “Pan-Arab sentiment” truly does not exist today, and indeed probably never has. Even the Arab support of the Palestinians can be viewed as a more recent phenomenon - a result of the second *Intifadah*. Even there, it is clear that there is a wide range of views within the Middle East on how to handle the Palestinian plight, particularly as few wish to become embroiled in the nitty-gritty of trying to find a resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The approach to Iraq can be seen in the same vein, as its Arab neighbors weighed the impact of an American attack on the Gulf country and the replacement of the regime – and all of the resulting implications -- with the mindset of “How will this affect me?”

Defining the Terms of Transition

The changes that have been seen in the cultural landscape of the Middle East just in the past decade are nothing short of astounding. This period has been marked by the advent of broad access to international media, widened public political discourse, shifting political institutions, and dramatically increased mobility, especially for women. With these stimuli have come changing attitudes about many social issues such as the status of women, the role of Islam in society, and the appropriate relationship with the West. But the reaction to these influences and events has by no means been uniform across the region or its social strata, despite popular culture and mass media attempts to chronicle it as so.

In fact, a disconnect is emerging between the public image of a unified culture - whether it be Islamic culture or Arab culture - and the reality of a highly dispersed reaction, varying by region, social class and generation, to historical, religious, and cultural influences. In this clash of views, a battle for the hearts and minds to “select” or “endorse” a dominant paradigm has emerged, leaving questions for how the region intends to transition into the modern, global society of the 21st century. This struggle for identity is not new to the region - or easily resolved - but comes against a backdrop of a

decades old experience trying to mix nationalism, with secular science, religion, and modernization.

Modern Middle East History:

The Colonial Experience and Early Nationalism

Anti-Americanism in the Middle East is, in historical terms, a relatively recent phenomenon. At the time of World War I, the image of the United States in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire was generally positive. Unlike other great Western powers, such as Britain, France, and Russia, the United States had no colonies in the region, or territorial aspirations. Rather, the region's most visible interactions with Americans was in the realm of higher education where American missionaries created respected institutions such as Syrian Protestant College (later renamed American University of Beirut), Robert College in Istanbul, the American College in Persia and American University in Cairo.

While the first American missionary experiences in the Middle East lacked the significant success in terms of converts (a Maronite Christian was the first Arab convert to Protestantism, but he was imprisoned by the Maronite Church and subsequently disappeared in the late 1820s), they did serve to introduce into the Ottoman world a greater knowledge of American manners, customs, clothes, education, publishing, and medicine.ⁱⁱⁱ Maronite-turned Protestant writer and encyclopedist, Butrus Al-Bustani, and other 19th century Arab liberals seized upon a romanticized, yet unsullied, image of America to advocate a "modern" Arab nation and to educate compatriots. The teachings of the "American" schools also offered an interesting "secular" paradigm for Middle East minority communities, as noted during the dedication of the cornerstone of College Hall at Syrian Protestant College in 1871, "This college is for all conditions and classes of men without regard to colour, nationality, race or religion..."^{iv}

Thus, as the concept of Arab nationalism developed in the 19th century, it focused on a secular, inclusive concept of identity that did not demand adherence to Islam per se and

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therefore was not at odds with the Western world. Indeed, early Arab liberal thinkers were not looking for a “clash of civilizations” in their nationalism but rather a means to respond to the modern world that was increasingly imposing itself in their world. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson’s proclamations on self-determination reinforced the notion among nationalist elites in the Arab world that the United States bore a different foreign policy than its imperialist European brethren. America was also visible bringing aid to the region, when famine struck Beirut and its environs during World War I.

President Wilson also agreed, in 1919, to establish a mission to determine attitudes of the present inhabitants of Palestine to the idea of the “Jewish national home.” The King-Crane commission, as it became popularly known, was met with opposition by the French and British but completed its work anyway, recommending an independent unified Arab state in Palestine, Syria and Lebanon, that if necessary should be placed under U.S. mandatory control (based on its findings that the U.S. maintained goodwill in the region through its educational institutions, its record in World War I and Arab trust that American had no territorial or colonial ambitions).^v The King-Crane commission urged a “serious modification of the extreme Zionist program for Palestine” and noted that if “...the wishes of Palestine’s population are to be decisive as to what is to be done with Palestine, then it is to be remembered that the non-Jewish population of Palestine - nearly nine-tenths of the whole - are emphatically against the entire Zionist program.”^{vi} The report notwithstanding and other reports that found contrary conclusions about popular sentiment, official U.S. policy never backed such findings, and President Wilson stood by his European allies who had other plans for the region.

Although the idea of a world remade on the basis of self-determination had been encouraged by the rhetoric of President Wilson, in reality the European powers were reluctant to relinquish an established position in the Middle East. Still, the experience of European dominance varied from place to place in the region, coloring perceptions even today about “foreign intervention.”

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In 1916, Husayn, the *Sharif* of Mecca, revolted against the Ottoman Sultan and fought alongside allied forces in the occupation of Palestine and Syria. This alliance, borne out of the McMahon-Husayn correspondence of 1915-1916, encouraged the hopes of Arab “independence” after the war.^{vii} But the post-war alliance proved more one-sided than expected. During the same post-war period, Italy extended its control of Libya, and Britain declared Egypt under its protection. In Morocco, armed resistance to French and Spanish rule was defeated in 1926.

Only the Arab Gulf was spared burdensome interference in its internal affairs. Yemen became an independent state under the *Imam* of the Zaydis and Abdul Aziz of central Arabia conquered the tribes of Arabia, defeating Sharif Husayn, and declared a new kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

In 1919, Britain refused to allow the Egyptian government to present its case for independence at the peace conference, touching off a widespread national uprising. While this attempt for independence was initially suppressed, it was followed by the formation of the Wafd party and an eventual declaration of independence from the British which acknowledged the Khedive as king but reserved control of strategic and economic interests in the country until a negotiated settlement could take place. The process of fully ousting the British from Egypt, while lasting several decades, was at least clearly established in principle from the outset.

By contrast, the experience of other areas was not as fortunate in terms of the path to independence. The Treaty of Versailles provided for other Arab areas to be recognized as independent under a mandate from an overseeing state. Under the terms of these mandates, granted by the League of Nations in 1922, and against the backdrop of the Sykes-Picot agreement that secretly carved up the region between Britain and France, Britain would be responsible for Iraq and Palestine and France for Syria and Lebanon. An attempt by the followers of Sharif Husayn’s son, Faisal, to create an independent state of Syria was rebuffed. Another Husayn heir, Abdullah, established the state of TransJordan under loose mandate from the British but his success was colored by the

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problem of Palestine whose fate was complicated by Britain's commitment to the establishment of the Jewish national homeland. Thus, the struggle for self-rule in this area remained embittered for generations, in fact, never healing. A partition plan was rejected by the Arab population of Palestine, but the state of Israel was created *de facto* following the 1948 war.

In Iraq, a tribal revolt against the British occupation ended in Britain's decision to set up institutions of self-government and Faisal, having failed in Syria, was established as king of Iraq from 1921-1933. European settlers in Morocco and Algeria were also firmly entrenched in the post-war period, controlling as much as 20-30% of the land and population there.

These "European" creations failed to hold over time, and both France and Britain found that controlling local populations *by force* to protect strategic assets or landed class investments in cotton and other industries was costly in not only economic terms but also in human lives. Local revolts and a rise in terrorism-style attacks on foreign installations convinced the two Western powers to withdraw from the Levant and North Africa, but only after thousands lost their lives. In many of these societies, the strains of armed struggle and the taint of imperialism drove out more than the foreigners, leading to a rejection of British- and French-created institutions. In several countries, notably Egypt, Algeria, Syria, and Iraq, monarchies were swept aside and parliaments remained in name only, while a new crop of socialist style leaders came to the fore.

The U.S. role in the Middle East certainly began on a high note, with generally positive receptions in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire to the educational and cultural advances made by American missionaries in the 19th and early 20th centuries and the Americans were perceived as not having the same hegemonic and imperialist goals as Britain, Russia, and France in the region. The U.S. became a more active commercial and political presence in the Middle East with the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia in 1938. Having had no colonialist role in the Gulf region, the U.S. was not considered a hegemonic threat to the kingdom or its neighbors. The American-Saudi relationship

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inaugurated a U.S. involvement with the Arab world far more secular in form, strategic in conception and nationalist in interest than its earlier 19th century spiritual and educational influences.

However, as the U.S. and U.S.S.R. engaged in a philosophical and political struggle with the onset of the Cold War in the 1950s, the Middle East became a battlefield as Washington sought to curb Soviet diplomatic inroads in the region, seeing it as a competitor and destabilizing force. During this period, the U.S., in the name of fighting communism, actively sought to discourage nationalist agendas in favor of the *status quo* and remained determined to choose sides against whatever the Soviets backed even if it meant knowingly reinforcing autocratic monarchical regimes to the detriment of potentially progressive, albeit Socialist, alternatives. This led to the simple perception both in the U.S. and in the Middle East that Arab nationalists were *de facto* an American enemy and marked the beginning of emerging negative perceptions about U.S. interference in the region. The U.S., rather than joining forces of democracy and “representation,” was pressed into the position of opposing popular national leaders such as Iran’s Mohammed Mossadeq and Egypt’s Gamal Abdul Nasser. U.S. leadership instead backed repressive autocratic leaders in the name of “stability” and anti-communism, laying the groundwork for emerging bitterness and disappointment in U.S. priorities for the Middle East.

The strongest example of American hostility towards Arab nationalists in the 1950s was U.S. antipathy to Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser. Ignoring that Nasser’s Pan-Arab rhetoric was born out of the region’s distaste for perceived French and British colonial exploitation in the area, the U.S. saw Nasser simply as dangerously ambitious and rejected his attempt at nonalignment in its overriding concern over Russian intrusion in the Arab world.

Although Nasser was widely popular within the Arab world, where he was seen as an authentic voice for Arab aspirations, the U.S. instead saw his 1955 decision to seek arms from the Eastern Bloc as inimical to American interests. By 1956, worsening relations

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between the U.S. and Egypt led Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to announce that the U.S. would withdraw its \$200 million loan commitment towards the Aswan “High Dam” project. Nasser responded by nationalizing the Suez Canal a few days later. These actions, combined with his later support of the Yemen revolution, were viewed by the U.S. as destabilizing to pro-Western autocratic regimes in the region, including Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

Yet, despite its hostile stance towards Nasser, the U.S. did intervene when the U.K., France, and Israel invaded Egypt following the nationalization of the Suez Canal – an action that still gains the U.S. sway with Egyptian nationals.

In an even more oft-cited example of U.S. intervention against regional nationalist leadership, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was accused of organizing the overthrow of the democratically elected, nationalist Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadeqin 1953, following the 1951 decision by the country’s parliament to nationalize the British-dominated Anglo-Iranian Oil Co. Despite growing evidence of popular dissatisfaction with the subsequent dictatorship of Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, the U.S. government unabashedly supported the Shah’s rule.

When the Shah fell in 1979, an intense power struggle ensued but Islamists led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini triumphed and ushered in the Islamic Revolution and with it, a sustained challenge to U.S. involvement in the region. Khomeini mobilized and channeled revolutionary aspirations into a zealous theocracy that sought to revive an ostensibly pure Islamic state and society. The U.S. was portrayed as a totally antithetical civilization.

The 1980 seizure of American diplomats in Tehran dramatically illustrated the gulf that separated the revolutionary Iranian sense of an imperialist U.S. and the American image of itself as a benevolent nation and reliable regional ally. Khomeini and his new breed of Islamists rejected outright the concept that many of the 19th century reformers had of reconciling Islam and the West. The new Iranian leadership painted the U.S. as the

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“Great Satan,” a metaphor that has endured through the ensuing decades among certain segments of the Middle East.

Islamist, anti-American attitudes were exacerbated by rising U.S. arms sales and an increasing military presence in the region in the 1980s and 1990s. The sense of America as imperialist crept more actively into the Middle East lexicon as the U.S. was increasingly viewed as a staunch supporter of Israel and guarantor of the authoritarian *status quo* in the Gulf states. Adding fuel to the fire certainly was the permanent presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia following the second Gulf War and Washington’s hard-line stance on maintaining UN sanctions on Iraq. Some Islamists portrayed the U.S. as a “crusader” against the region, with not only the religious connotations of spiritual violations but with the political implications of occupation and oppression.

Reinventing Regimes

This Islamic rhetoric about U.S. occupation and military support for autocratic regimes has been a significant focus of anti-American discourse in the Persian Gulf, one that is difficult for U.S. policy-makers to easily push aside. In a holdover of Cold War policy, in recent years, the U.S. has found itself in the uncomfortable position of backing autocratic regimes against the winds of political reform and popular sentiment. In particular, the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, at the behest of a non-elected monarchy, has been the subject of much debate in the Arab world. U.S.-friendly regimes in Egypt, Jordan, and Algeria are more liberalized but are under criticism for cracking down on opposition movements since September 11 in support of the U.S.-led war on terror.

The recent history of the U.S. position on democracy in the Middle East is nowhere better highlighted than in the experience of Algeria. In January 1992, the ruling government of Algeria, constituted by the kind of military socialist nationalist regime once scorned by the U.S. as pro-Soviet, cancelled a second round of national elections following the

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obvious win by the Islamic Salvation Party. Despite the fact that the Algerian military regime overruled the democratic process, the U.S. tacitly backed the move over its fears of Islamist control over the North African nation despite the fact that the incident threw the country into a bloody civil war. This event, coupled with U.S. military assistance to regimes in Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, has led to a bitterness that U.S. lip-service towards democracy doesn't apply to the Middle East where oil security is believed to be taking a higher priority to human rights. Such attitudes are lent credence by the fact that the U.S. has backed the Organization of American States (OAS) efforts to sustain democracy in Latin America even when popular movements lead to election of a leadership with a strong anti-U.S. message.

Ironically, American neo-conservative ideology, which advocated military intervention in Iraq, attempts to address this criticism by arguing that the change in the repressive regime in Baghdad will stimulate a sweeping sea change in the region that would promote democracy and economic liberalization. Under the neo-conservative view, the U.S. military can impose a federalist, electoral system in Iraq, which in turn will stimulate populations in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere to demand the same voice in government.

The problem with this argument is that it presupposes that the social and institutional framework for such a transition already exists and that democracy, in effect, just needs a push in the region. The notion that regime change in either Iran or Iraq would undermine the legitimacy, logic, and endurance of liberalized autocracies in favor of substantive democratization is misleading. Iran's populace may be fed up with the *mullahs*, but given the institutional craftiness and adaptability of the state, as well as the relative institutional weakness of the opposition, makes the transition to full democratization or regime collapse less than certain. As for Iraq, years of neo-totalitarianism may make it easier to embark on a political reform whose end goal is democracy. But even if an American-led toppling of Saddam sets the stage for such a transition, Arab regimes are unlikely to emulate a democratic Iraq. Local realities and attitudes will prevail, thus supporting a regional *status quo* that favors partial or "liberalized" autocracy.

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The fact of the matter is that “liberalized autocracy” has become the dominant form of regime in the Arab world, and could easily remain so for years to come. This is because the political process in many countries lacks the basic accoutrements of democracy, that is, active civil society, organized political parties, and a critical mass of political activists and accompanying supporters, committed to pushing democracy into action through demonstrations, violence or other means. Arab regime opponents don’t have the mass population or political parties to mobilize as Eastern European regime opposition had in the 1990s to threaten and negotiate with the governments for liberalization.

Few political parties exist in the Arab countries with liberalized autocracies or have the real ability to flex their muscles in dissenting against the regime’s policies, so although pluralism and some free debate may exist, it is not necessarily a precursor to expanded democracy. Although global models are on the horizon, creating an awareness of alternative political patterns, generally speaking the education system lacks the muster to provide the backdrop to elected formats. Rather than trying to educate the population to understand the basic principles needed to participate in a democracy, regimes are ceding elements of the educational system to Islamists who favor rote learning and dogmatism. Before progress towards democracy is possible, barriers to discussion inside the education system must be removed, and the state, which serves as a key driver of culture, must take responsibility from above for providing such direction.

But, to date, many countries follow a pattern of a “*mukhabarat*” state, where insecure regimes remain suspicious of societal autonomy, pluralism, and alternative agendas. In this social and political space, special interest groups, labor unions, and political associations/parties face constant government surveillance and interference. Coalition politics are generally not permitted, in some countries prohibited by law. Rule of law is generally too feeble to protect civil and political space, especially freedom “after” speech, which is not fully defended in weak judiciaries. Historically, significant opposition, even if it professed loyalty to the system, was forced to be clandestine, leaving powerful

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families, clans, and other social networks to play a more salient political role than organized civil society and political groupings.

In the face of a dearth of democracy movements, partial autocracies have become a sort of “second best” option that both existing regimes and opposition elites (including Islamist oppositions) have grudgingly accepted. State supported patterns of socialization, promoted by a patronage system financed with state revenues from oil and other state controlled-export commodities, have made it easier to sustain this *status quo*. Thus, opposition moderates and regime reformers (or soft-liners) do not have the kind of leverage they need to mobilize the masses in a prolonged struggle for democracy.

Opinion surveys show that the broader Arab population is not opposed to democracy, but neither is it devoted to it. Economic security, corruption, and matters of day-to-day existence usually take top priority in the minds of citizens of the Arab public, according to recent polling. To the extent that the state has failed to meet its “ruling bargain” by providing state-paid jobs and basic economic subsidies on food, health, and education, citizens have withdrawn the political “quiescence” that have come to characterize the patron-client relationship of regimes such as those in Saudi Arabia or Egypt with their populations. Economic mismanagement and corruption have bred dissatisfaction, but it has not yet reached a critical mass in terms of promoting revolutionary change.^{viii}

Furthermore, polling does not support the view that religiosity is a determining factor in the call for or opposition to democracy. Those who support democracy are as likely to be religious as secular. Moreover, support for an Islamic state is generally weak despite the presence of strong religiosity.^{ix}

Such findings may help the U.S. to understand why, on a mass level, there has been little active public support for democracy per se. When young people take to the so-called “Arab street,” they generally demonstrate about three issues: 1) decline of subsidies and economic conditions, 2) Palestine, 3) U.S. foreign policy. Since Arab rulers, especially in Egypt and Jordan, have backed the peace process and/or engaged in it, they are

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sensitive to such protests. Yet neither do such protests provide an impetus for much more than a state managed liberalization. Regimes effectively allow opposition elites to let off steam, preventing them from harnessing such popular discontent to promote real change.

To take just one example, Iran's Mohammad Khatami needs students to occasionally take to the streets; without their pressure, he cannot convince Supreme Leader Khamanei and his hard-line allies in the clerical establishment that they will be better off accepting some reforms rather than watching a bunch of college students topple the entire system. But so far, the process has stopped short of revolutionary change, with hardliners stepping in by military means to maintain the *status quo*. Around the region, regime and opposition elites alike fear that full democratization, rather than bring peaceful reform and transition, might simply provoke the kind of irresolvable, bloody conflict between Islamists and liberal reformers that ripped Algeria apart in the 1990s.

In short, there is plenty of discontent in the Arab world. However, because it has been socialized around issues other than democracy, and because this discontent is not manifest in sustained and organized mass movements, both reformers and opposition moderates are not in a position to invoke the threat and leverage of the "masses" to push for much more than minor reforms.

While the partial autocracy may be viewed as a compromise solution for the leading players, it can also become a trap. In fact, conservative, regional regimes have been able to argue effectively to their middle classes that a push to full democracy is actually too "risky" given that the most vital opposition elites in the Arab world espouse Islamist cultural agendas that are viewed suspiciously as implicitly or explicitly revolutionary. Mainstream Islamists have fared relatively well in every recent parliamentary election, allowing a measure of real competition, including Morocco (2002), Egypt (1987), Jordan (1989), Kuwait (1992 and 1996), Algeria (1991 and 1997), and Yemen (1994). Perhaps the absence of other credible alternatives has left young Arab populations with the choice to vote for Islamic candidates as a form of protest to the ruling order while secular

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democrats are forced by a similarly limited choice between “two evils” to side with the ruling regime.

Thus, ironically, because these Islamic opposition groups have shown success at mobilizing popular support at the ballot box, they have unwittingly reinforced the leverage of regime hardliners, who can argue against liberalization on the grounds that it will produce revolutionary change that will be unappealing to those with any sort of vested interests in the *status quo*. Against this backdrop, liberalized autocracy has emerged as a type of system, not some way station along an inevitable path of democratization.^x

As long as the mainstream Islamists have been accommodated by being allowed into the body politic and ceded territories such as education to oversee, the ruling regime does not actively have to promote the democratic process, and there is less impetus for making substantive change. The extent of the trap varies from regime to regime, and those states with smaller populations often have more space for the growth of liberalization.

Success of the partially liberalized regime depends in part on an implicit pact between regime soft-liners and opposition moderates whose terms dictate that neither side finds itself “decapitated” because of reform. Each side also needs to be able to invoke the threat of their own hardliners or radicals to make the case to the other party that unless they reached a compromise they would be overrode by the militants in their respective camps. Arab governments may find ways to co-exist with mainstream Islamism, but they are unwilling to cede real political power.

Taking advantage of the pragmatic aspects of Islamist ideologies, the regimes will dangle before Islamists the opportunity to participate in parliament and even some cabinet positions, but partial inclusion persists only so long as it prevents Islamists from gaining ultimate control over key cabinet portfolios that give them the ability to advance their cultural/ideological projects.

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Some regimes have turned to a policy of *Islamization*, by which they attempt to co-opt and echo some Islamist policies, but without enabling these policies to impact the key domestic and foreign policy decisions made by the ruling elite. For some Islamists, the avenue of partial liberalization allows mainstream Islamism to sink deeper roots in the society. This has occurred in Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, and particularly in Kuwait. In Morocco, interestingly enough, the leading Islamist party, the Justice and Development Party, intentionally restricted the number of its candidates from running in the September 2002 general elections in the belief that its long-term goals would be better met by coming in third rather than first or second place.

The Middle Class Voice

The secular middle class in the Middle East has found itself between a rock and a hard place in the ongoing, political balancing act between ruling regimes and Islamist opposition groups. While perhaps frustrated that governments are holding back on liberal reforms, as noted, the middle class fears the inroads that Islamists may make if given more of a voice through democratization. While middle class voters may be sympathetic to Islamist anti-corruption rhetoric, they take a cautious stand on Islamist designs to influence social mores and to control a larger piece of the economic pie. In reality, reformists and Islamicists exist in totally different cultural spheres that cannot be resolved through democratic structures.

In many countries, the Arab middle class has been waiting in the wings for eventual democratization, but the mood has turned to despair as it observes that the doors toward democracy are closing rather than opening. In the Gulf countries particularly, members of this group see themselves as the agenda leaders, and therefore have become upset at the freedom that their governments have given the Islamists to operate and impact their agendas. The traditional role of the middle class in identifying and defining the major issues in society, and positing strategies to deal with them is in danger of being usurped by Islamist groups with broad popular support. However, the anger of the middle class in the Middle East towards Israel and its more recent policies towards Palestinians has in

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some cases led to the acceptance that Islamist groups, even militant ones, have a right to exist, granting these groups a legitimacy they didn't have before.

In the post September 11 era, the perceived American antipathy towards Arabs has, for the first time, alienated even those in the middle class with strong political, economic, cultural, and family links with the U.S. Many young Arabs have found their visa applications to the U.S. turned down despite their parents' American ties. Perceptions that the U.S. is pursuing an anti-Islam campaign, combined with anger at U.S. policy towards Iraq, stimulated calls by some for another Arab oil embargo on the U.S. But this rhetoric is rare and is generally put to rest by actions and policies driven by a more realistic, technocratic class whose livelihood depends on the *status quo*.

The health of the Persian Gulf economies depend on a steady oil price of somewhere between \$25 to \$30 a barrel. There is also a realization among the middle classes that in an increasingly globally interdependent economy where an oil embargo is put in place, disruptions to oil supply will be just as harmful to Gulf states as to the target of any oil embargo. In addition, the oil industry in the Gulf is largely run, on a day-to-day basis, by professionals whose orientation is to simply do their jobs, unimpeded by politics. Saudi Oil Minister Ali Naimi and other senior oil officials from Gulf States have repeatedly gone on record saying that as far as they were concerned, oil policies should be kept separate from politics.

Beyond the political power of an oil weapon, optimism from the 1970s that revenue from Arab oil will provide for a better future for the region has all but disappeared. Instead, middle class elites have widely begun to pointedly question where billions of petrodollars have been squandered in the past and just as importantly, how the revenue is being spent today. Investment in the region has slowed in recent years, and the number of young, well-educated Arabs searching for jobs is rising steadily. Despite past fears about speaking out, middle class technocrats are becoming increasingly assertive in articulating their dissatisfaction with official corruption in high places and the squandering of state revenues by ruling elites.

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Ruling families may be no less autocratic than in the past. But increasingly in the Gulf, public opinion is beginning to have influence, and governments can no longer count on the middle class to remain silent and compliant. More and more, key individuals or groups in the oil sector are defending national interests, which were in danger of being undermined by vested interests of one kind or another. Middle class professionals and parliamentary elites are stepping forward to block the freedom of movement of the ruling class in manners that are concrete and direct.

In Kuwait, for example, Islamic and liberal blocks joined forces in the emirate's parliament to stall the Kuwaiti government's proposal to bring international oil firms into the country's oil sector. The parliamentarians not only questioned the concept of the project – allowing foreign oil firms to control Kuwaiti oil reserves – but also the manner in which the government would be awarding the contracts, with suspicions surfacing that the pockets of key members of the ruling clan and a host of agents, middlemen, and merchant families would benefit unfairly from non-transparent contract awards. The Kuwaiti oil project still awaits parliamentary approval, after over a decade of debate on the matter.

Elsewhere in the Gulf, the middle class voice in the oil sector is also being heard loudly and clearly. In Qatar, in the 1990s, the oil establishment stood up to certain members of the ruling family who wanted to secure lucrative contracts for companies for whom they held agencies. The technocratic elite was also successful at eradicating corrupt practices in state oil concern Qatar General Petroleum Co.

In Saudi Arabia, oil professionals are similarly blocking efforts by the ruling family to initiate a major natural gas initiative that would allow international oil firms into the country's gas sector to develop new reserves. The plan, backed strongly by the country's foreign minister and other key members of the royal family, has been surprisingly blocked for years by state oil firm Saudi Aramco and Saudi Oil Minister Ali Naimi despite the fact that the scheme would enable the country's power and water industries to

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be fueled by gas, thus freeing up more oil for export and creating badly needed jobs for Saudi nationals.

Naimi and his supporters of technocrats and professionals both within the oil firm and the government have so far successfully argued that the involvement of foreign oil firms was unjustified, given Saudi Aramco's track record in discovering and developing the country's oil and gas fields. Despite some royal efforts to bring the oil sector under its wing in part through the gas initiative, Naimi and his supporters have not caved in on their objections, as had been expected, even as the international oil firms have vigorously protested the delay in the process and the shift in the focus of the project.

Algeria's state oil giant Sonatrach is also blocking government efforts at privatization of its state monopoly status, and privatization there has become a long arduous process, with opposition coming from labor unions and other groups that feel their roles will be threatened by major reforms.

This trend of middle classes and Islamist elements blocking privatization in the oil sector may give way, depending on the future policies of other competing oil producers, but so far, local politics have not indicated a change is at hand. U.S. analysts continue to predict that liberalization will come to the entire region, if only regime change in Iraq would set off a chain reaction. A Heritage Foundation study, produced by Ariel Cohen and Gerald O'Driscoll, argues that the U.S. "should provide leadership and guidance for the future Iraqi government to undertake fundamental structural economic reform. This process should include a massive, orderly, and transparent privatization of state-owned enterprises, especially the restructuring and privatization of the oil sector."^{xi} According to the *New Republic Magazine*, neo-conservatives in the U.S. government see the privatization of Iraqi oil as "setting in motion a chain of events that could transform the Middle East."^{xii}

While Iraq's technocratic elite has in the past favored the idea of allowing foreign investors into its oil sector and such competition would almost certainly raise the stakes

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for the rest of OPEC to lag behind, full-fledged privatization of state-run industries might wind up being an even harder sell in a country like Iraq with a decades long experience in Baathist, modern socialist nationalism than in the mercantile Gulf states. While the composition of a new pluralistic Iraqi parliament remains unclear, it is by no means a given that privatization would be instantaneously the “will of the Iraqi people” as has been speculated.

The Myth of Monolithic Middle East Culture

Ironically, the American neo-conservative view of a Middle East ready to bust out into sustained liberalization is contrasted with American popular opinion of a backward region stultified by radical Islam. This latter perception is actually perpetuated by certain Islamic groups who also prefer to represent the Arab world as a monolithic culture soon to be fully under their grasp. The reality is much more complex than either of these views and, in fact, reflects the basic incompatibility of each scenario with the other.

Arab society cannot be summed up so easily and in reality, the Arab world is experiencing a period of great sociological and cultural flux. Indeed, despite the rhetoric of Islamic movements, traditional roles are in some cases being swept aside to be replaced by different ones. In particular, the role of women in Arab society is undergoing a profound change, with women entering the work force in greater numbers and even migrating to find employment, and helping pay bills back home. This mobility of women from all social classes is altering family dynamics and proving a true test to the traditional patrimonial hierarchy across the region from North Africa to the Gulf.

Much attention is given in Western media to how laws in many Middle East countries require women to ask their husband’s or father’s permission to obtain a passport or even to leave the home, but the reality is that the number of Arab women traveling abroad is increasingly exponentially. Today the role of the migrant is no longer held solely by a single man gone off to a factory in Europe, as was the pattern of the 1950s. Instead, young women are seeking work abroad as maids, factory workers or prostitutes.

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And, in many Arab societies, women's response to the pressures imposed by Islamic groups is not to hide under the veil but to organize counter-movements that press for legal reform regarding women's rights such as in Egypt or to organize mass demonstrations as thousands of women did in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, following the death of young girls in a fire in a school house because rescuers were thwarted by religious police concerned with their head coverings.

The centrality of women's work to many lower class families' economic lives is not only a matter of budgeting – it has important consequences on the life of the family and on gender roles in the family. Indeed, the movements of women not only out of their houses, but also around the world, transforms the way one might understand the very map of the Middle East and the relationship between its states and societies and people. New patterns of women's migration are not only taking place across state lines, but also within state borders, even for women in the most “fixed” traditional space, who have some access to the moving images of television, meetings with tourists, and even perhaps, to the Internet.

That the ideal of a wife is changing in the Middle East is best demonstrated in the coronation of Princess Lalla Salma Benanni of Morocco. Not only was the new princess evaluated in terms of the local, provincial neighborhood perspective as a “good girl” who came straight home after high school, she was also scrutinized for the requirements of the abstract world of rational modernism – her CV is published on the web next to the king's, showing that she is a computer engineer who graduated first in her class. And, equally as important, she was judged in the world of fashionable fame or rags to riches stories as a beautiful but orphaned young woman, who rumor has it, is having difficulties with the king's sisters. Each of these worlds must be satisfied to qualify this woman to become the princess of a kingdom where the “Commander of the Faithful” had never before spoken in terms of even having a wife.

The Internet and Culture in the Middle East

It is clear that the region is in a period of tremendous flux, with Arabs across the region struggling to determine their individual, national, and geopolitical identities in the globalized and now post-September 11 world. As with previous modern generations, today's Arab youth are continuing to grapple with how to reconcile traditional cultural mores with Western values. Both political and cultural landscapes throughout the Middle East are changing in a great way, with traditional geographical and strategic boundaries fast eroding. A substantial part of this change can be attributed to the impact of changing networks, with newspaper and face-to-face communications in the mosques and *souqs* of the region no longer being the sole means that people gather their knowledge and form ties.

The result is a stronger knowledge-based society, which in turn is coming at the expense of the states and their autocratic regimes. For example, information and communication technologies, in particular use of the Internet, are allowing for an increasing number of electronic forums that are contributing to the growth of political awareness and, in some cases, new trans-national networks. The Internet allows local groups to channel their message globally, creating international support and legitimizing their positions at home. Minority communities are able to tap the Internet and other global communications to raise consciousness and find additional followers. Arab women are also utilizing the Internet to increase solidarity and garner support.

The information revolution is driving a reconstruction of Arab society, certainly through the greater access that the populations have to cable news and cultural programming that cannot be entirely controlled by the state. And, just as importantly, new forms of Arab media, like *Al-Jazeera* television out of Qatar, have brought the second *Intifadah* into everyone's homes in the region, providing a mass mobilization of anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiment. Targeted and widely transmitted news on events in Palestine is recreating a sense of an Arab community without the demagoguery of a single leader. The issue hangs, in fact, as a condemnation of sorts to the existing leadership in the Arab

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world, who are increasingly criticized by local populations for “doing nothing” and seem to offer no practical solutions to the crisis.

Although Internet usage across the region is still marginal compared to the rest of the world, Internet Technology (IT) has had a profound impact and some groups, including Islamist organizations, have used it fully to their advantage. IT expansion in the region is slowly loosening the state’s influence on culture and forcing power holders to interact with other power centers. Al-Jazeera television now boasts 35 million viewers and Internet use in 18 Arab countries has risen from 952,000 users in 1998 to over 4.2 million currently.

Islamist groups appear to have been far ahead of other organizations in exploiting the IT potential, reaching out to well-defined audiences and spreading their agendas in a way that traditional means have not been able to do. These groups address their messages to a well-defined audience that transcends regions and can draw a devoted following, creating trustworthy associations through citations of the Koran. On the more radical end of this type of proselytizing is the Al-Qaeda network, which uses Web resources to reach members across the globe. U.S. officials say they have found new websites and Internet communications that may be part of an effort to rebuild the Al-Qaeda network, with highly mobile Al-Qaeda operatives checking messages in public Internet cafes around the world, making them hard to track.

The Arab press, developing into a political fourth estate, has certainly gained new powers through the Internet and satellite television, with most of regional regimes now unable to restrict their populations’ access to the standard sanitized, pro-government information delivered via state-controlled media. And, trans-national Internet communities are similarly gaining in influence, especially those with an Islamist orientation. Whether it is Sheik Qaradawi’s call-in program on Al-Jazeera or the substantial communities constructed around the Islam On Line Internet portal, these cyberspace communities may constitute an enormous recruitment pool for future exploitation by up and coming political networks and leadership.

Taking On The Arabs: Some Thoughts for U.S. Policy

Past U.S. administrations have favored a Middle East policy that promotes a slow but steady adoption of an incremental reform of liberalized autocracy in the region. Emphasis was placed on the long-term, on building civil societies throughout the region, with emphasis on women's rights, and in particular, market reforms. This policy was pursued in an incremental, rather than, dramatic manner.

The aftermath of September 11 put this policy to the test, however, and raised the profile of neo-conservative philosophy in U.S. policy circles. The neo-conservative philosophy - while still in great measure unrealized as a total policy shift inside the United States government - is, nonetheless, consistent with the decision to implement regime change by military means in Iraq, stirring sentiment in some corners of the Middle East that the current Administration is waging an all out war against Islam.

While the Palestine issue dominates political discourse in the Middle East by a wide margin, a new Arabism is emerging around increasing awareness of a hostile U.S. intrusiveness to the region. This broadening Arab perspective could be on a collision course with an emerging U.S. political response to the September 11 terrorist attacks. At a minimum, U.S. policy makers should be aware both of the extreme complexity of "Arab Anti-Americanism" and of the true political dynamics within the Middle East. In both cases, oversimplification could lead the U.S. into grave error. The democratization of the Middle East may prove far more difficult than optimistic, though well-meaning observers, envisage; indeed, more representative governments might lead, in certain countries, to regimes more, not less, hostile to the United States.

Arab regimes, worried that a backlash against them following September 11 could result in a full-scale drive to topple them, need look no further than discourse of the American neo-conservative movement to justify their fears. The U.S. Administration's war on terrorism and its military action to change the Iraqi regime squares tightly with neo-

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conservative views, even though official U.S. policy in reality stops short of the boldest neo-conservative rhetoric that envisions this process as the beginning of a reshaping of the entire region.

Although the “neo-cons” may perceive the toppling of certain regimes in the Arab world as the most efficient means to reach a more stable, democratic Middle East, they may be missing the underlying realities of the varying history, culture and socio-political organization of the many countries that span that vast region. Successful, sustainable change of forms of government, rulers and elites requires a well-established buy-in from the bottom, as the general population has to be willing to accept a shift in the *status quo*. Historically, the need for a supportive underlying society has wrought many negative lessons, ranging from the French experience in Algeria to the U.S. interference in Iran in the 1960s-1970s. Moreover, it is not clear that improvement in democratic practices in the region will necessarily bring about in every case a coincidence of local Middle East and U.S. national interests.

U.S. foreign policy cannot in itself force sustained reform in the Middle East. Many countries in the region have gravitated into liberalized autocracy for concrete reasons having to do with both historical experience and current societal, cultural, and political realities. The delicate compromise that now represents the *status quo* ante among the middle class, reformists, Islamicists and ruling regimes in many countries in the Middle East, if upended, could usher in prolonged, bloody civil chaos long before it produces, if it ever does, liberalized democracies. The French and American revolutions, for example, demonstrate the volatility of change.

Islamic elements point to American neo-conservative thinking as evidence that the imperialist U.S. intrusion in the region is to be expected. They criticize local regimes for collaboration with the U.S. in the war on terror and U.S. policy on Iraq, leaving those regimes with an excuse to avoid acceding to demands for political reform. Regimes, never committed to reform in the first place, tell a fretful U.S. that they must respond to the Islamicism of their own populations and therefore cannot risk political reform at this

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time, leaving the U.S. in its customary, but philosophically undesirable, position of opposing democratic change and in the process, weakening ties to the segment of the population most inclined to favor Western values.

Worse yet, the U.S. has, as it has been accused, lumped the entire Middle East together under a unified foreign policy umbrella when the reality of differences from country to country in the region are great. U.S. policy makers must accept that social conditions and cultural cues vary from country to country in the Middle East. Reminders of the colonial past are a source of extreme bitterness in Palestine while they serve as a model for nostalgia, glamour, and stylish revivalism and restoration in Morocco.

As it stands now, U.S. strategic interests generally have made America appear downright uneven in its consideration of rule of law and human rights issues in the region. And the current administration has fluctuated between sending the message that it is a caring, concerned participant in the region's future to asserting that America will respond unilaterally to its own strategic necessities.

With an American message so garbled, it is no wonder that a positive response from Arab populations has not been forthcoming. For years, America has talked the talk about democracy and market economies. But the question remains when will it be ready to walk the walk – amidst the full knowledge that the messy ups and downs of democracy may jeopardize other United States national security interests in the region.

End Notes

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