



Middle East NOTES AND COMMENT

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OPRAH IN ALEPPO

Twenty-two million Americans tune in to *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to see her unique mix of charisma, celebrity gossip, and self-help. Surprising to most of them would be the way in which her popularity has spanned the Atlantic: Syrian viewers, both men and women, cite Oprah as one of their favorite American shows.

Oprah's popularity can be attributed to many things, among them celebrity appeal and the absence of competing foreign talk shows. Syrians say they most appreciate Oprah's frank discussions. "Everyone here really loves Oprah! She is honest and talks openly about things," one Syrian woman explained. Her daughter agreed, "Oprah always has [celebrities] on her show and they always talk about personal stuff, which we all love."

While U.S. government-sponsored attempts to reach out to Arab publics are roundly denounced in the region, an icon of American pop culture goes down easily. At the same time, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* bridges cultural gaps by providing a platform for personal and political discussion. Indeed, the Syrian public seemed to watch her interview with President Bill Clinton as enthusiastically as they watched her discussion of eating disorders and body image. Rather than focus on defending U.S. policy, as government-sponsored cultural programs tend to do, Oprah chats her way into the homes of Syrians and Americans alike, forging common ground between the two cultures. ■

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CHINA RISING

By Jon B. Alterman

It is hard to imagine a future in the Middle East in which China does not play a more significant role. Still, it is hard to predict what that role will be, and the Chinese seem as confused as we are. That mutual confusion suggests remarkable opportunities to help shape the nature of China's rising role in the region, but doing so will require patient engagement.

China's move into the Middle East is driven by its need for oil. China first became a net oil importer in 1993. It came as a shock to a country whose leadership is so concerned with self-sufficiency. Oil demand has continued to grow strongly alongside a rapidly expanding economy.

In absolute terms, Chinese oil demand is growing more slowly than that of the United States. After all, we start from a baseline more than three times that of China. Yet, the United States remains confident that it can gain access to oil—through our own reserves, via multinational oil companies, and more generally on the global market—while the Chinese seem to go to bed at night worrying that they cannot. Their fears extend from supply disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz or the Straits of Malacca, to regime instability, to international efforts to pressure China through some sort of international sanctions. They are trying vigorously to lock in supplies, but they complain that most of the deals have already been made with multinational companies or that they are being outbid by Japanese investors sharing many of the same fears. China is not arrogant or self-assured; it is worried.

The preeminent strategic question for Chinese thinkers is their country's relationship with the United States. Much as U.S.-Soviet relations overshadowed U.S. strategic thinking throughout the Cold War, the United States remains both the vehicle and the obstacle to Chinese security and to the country playing its desired role in the world.

What they find is that the United States is becoming increasingly focused on the Middle East at the same time China is. The Bush administration's dual emphasis on

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SAUDI-U.S. RELATIONS

On May 24, the Middle East Program will cohost a conference entitled, "Hostile Intentions? The Future of U.S.-Saudi Relations," with the noted Saudi newspaper Asharq al-Awsat. The conference will bring together a range of prominent American and Saudi thinkers on foreign policy and strategy, including Gregory Gause, Danielle Pletka and Abdel Muhsin al-Akkas. Philip Zelikow, now counselor to the secretary of state and the former staff director of the 9/11 Commission, will deliver the keynote address. Speakers will examine both the foundations of the U.S.-Saudi relationship and chart likely future trends. Transcripts of the proceedings will be available on the Middle East Program Web site (www.csis.org/mideast) the first week in June. ■

containing hostile governments (most famously through its proclamation of the “Axis of Evil”) and its push toward Middle East democratization suggests to China the possibility of a rapidly shifting Middle East environment. Governments may collapse or could fall under international sanction. Either way, China’s energy flow could be compromised. Of equal concern to the Chinese government, however, is the possibility that it will find itself on the opposite side of U.S. policy. If that were to happen, China at best would be perceived as an obstacle to U.S. foreign policy goals and at worst an adversary in the region. The implications would extend beyond the Middle East to threaten the entire range of Chinese strategic considerations. Chinese officials protest that that is not their goal at all. They say they merely seek “normal bilateral relations” with countries around the world, rather than to pick friends and adversaries. They also say that a battle with the United States is exactly what they do not want.

Yet, at least some Middle Eastern states must look at China as an antidote to U.S. power. As the United States demonstrates its ability to act virtually unilaterally on the military level, and draws Europe closer to its democratization agenda through the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative, China’s potential role as a spoiler to supposed U.S. hegemony must seem attractive indeed. China’s seat on the UN Security Council makes it a potential check to collective international action, and its growing commercial and military strength makes it an attractive bilateral partner. While Chinese strategic thinkers may seek to avoid coming into conflict with the United States, some Middle East states may seek exactly that, in order to pursue their own interests.

If one thinks about the triangle—China, the United States, and the Middle East—it seems unlikely that any two sides can line up against the third without significant conflict. In this web of conflicting interests, however, lies an opportunity.

Strategic dialogues that bring together the United States, China, and the countries of the Middle East can help build understanding and bridge differences, while simultaneously delineating clear red lines. Right now, the agendas we share in common are limited. They can and should be expanded, not because they will eliminate our differences, but because they will enable all sides to manage them. There is no way that the rise of a new cold war in the Middle East will serve anyone’s interests—certainly not China’s, and not the United States’ either.

Jon B. Alterman traveled to China in May to lay the groundwork for a forthcoming CSIS project on China in the Middle East, to be run in conjunction with the Freeman Chair in China Studies at CSIS. ■ 5/23/05

Links of Interest

The Chinese Foreign Ministry West Asia and North Africa Department:
<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg/xybfs/default.htm>

Syria is not the only country watching Oprah:
http://www.oprah.com/about/press/about_press_globelist.jhtml

“Disarmament and Rule of Law in Palestine” by program fellow Haim Malka:
<http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0425/p09s01-coop.htm>

A profile of our partner in the U.S.-Saudi relations conference, Asharq al-Awsat:
<http://www.asharqalawsat.com/pcstatic/01aaainfo/profile-english.html>

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