

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

America's Divergence

by Jon B. Alterman

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In an important way, Americans are diverging from the rest of the world. After a decade of terrorism and war, Americans are now feeling more physically secure and inwardly focused. Rising energy production in the United States is making many Americans feel they need the world less, and Americans seem eager to downsize foreign entanglements after three-quarters of a century of complex global commitments.

Elsewhere, people and governments are feeling more vulnerable. They see China and Russia growing more assertive in their neighborhoods, and they see other regional hegemony rising. They seek global attention to the excesses of their own governments, and they seek global standards that will facilitate their own economic progress. More than anything, they seek certainty and stability, and they look to a powerful country to help provide it.

In this way, the United States is not only on a different page than many countries in the world; to many, it seems like it is reading from a different book. This difference has consequences now, and it will have even more profound ones over the coming decades as the U.S. oil boom recedes.

Looking back, it is hard to recall just how vulnerable Americans felt after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Long accustomed to the security provided by expansive oceans and friendly neighbors, Americans found that neither could protect them from al Qaeda. One must understand the dislocation Americans felt in order to explain the two long and hard-fought wars that followed, the thousands of soldiers sacrificed, and the more than trillion dollars committed.

Over time, the terrorist threat receded. Tightened airport procedures, increased surveillance, and new visa regulations helped prevent a similar attack from occurring again. Operations abroad surely played a role as well. Americans became persuaded that terrorism is neither an adequate nor the appropriate focus for U.S. security strategy, and that the homeland can be safeguarded largely by carefully policing U.S. borders.

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Meat Market

When Arab economies expand, Brazil is one of the great beneficiaries. Brazil's total trade with the Arab world has more than doubled over the past ten years, reaching over \$20 billion in 2013. Whereas many countries have large trade deficits with oil producers in the Middle East, Brazil is deep in surplus: it isn't hungry for oil imports, but Middle East consumers are hungry for its meat.

Nearly half of Arab countries' meat imports in 2012 came from Brazil, and the Arab world as a whole bought 17 million tons of Brazilian food products in 2013, including over \$4 billion worth of meat. The trade is growing quickly. Brazil tripled its meat exports to the Gulf Cooperation Council countries between 2004 and 2012, and now earns more from trading meat to the GCC than to the entire European Union. Saudi Arabia is Brazil's largest Arab trading partner, followed closely by the United Arab Emirates and Algeria.

A robust halal certification industry in Brazil—first established by Arab migrants to South America a half-century ago—is part of what makes this trade possible. Although a recent census suggests Brazil has just over 35,000 Muslims, the Arab Brazilian Chamber of Commerce reports that over 100 beef producers in Brazil now claim to produce halal meat.

Despite the relatively small number of Muslims, the government clearly sees the halal export market as a strategic growth opportunity. Brazilian ministries collaborate with independent halal certification companies to streamline exports. The trade is so strong, several Brazilian companies even label their packages in Arabic. ■

Statesmen's Forum with H.E. Mehdi Jomaa

Tunisian Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa spoke at a CSIS Statesmen's Forum entitled "Tunisia's Path Forward" on April 2, 2014. Jomaa has led Tunisia's government since January 2014, when he took power as part of a political compromise that led to Tunisia's adoption of a new constitution. Jomaa spoke about his government's emphasis on ensuring a smooth path to new parliamentary and presidential elections while strengthening Tunisia's future economic growth and stability. He highlighted the positive role the United States could play in helping Tunisia. Jomaa invited the U.S. government and the private sector to invest in "a start-up called Tunisia" and support the country's path forward. You can watch video or read a transcript of the event [HERE](#). ■

At the same time, many realize that the United States faces real challenges in other areas. Infrastructure built in the postwar era or before is crumbling. Entitlement spending consumes an increasing share of the budget. Unemployment is high, schools struggle to provide students with basic skills, and employers struggle to find qualified employees.

And, suddenly, solutions seem available at home. The sudden rise of unconventional oil and gas is a boon on several levels. It provides gas to U.S. industry at a fraction of the price elsewhere, making domestic manufacturing much more competitive. It provides energy sector jobs to a depressed U.S. labor market. Domestic energy means that an increasing percentage of the dollars spent on oil and gas never leave U.S. shores, and it makes securing U.S. energy a matter of domestic policy.

Rising U.S. energy supplies appeal to the strain of self-sufficiency in the U.S. psyche, built from a frontier mentality and more than a century taming the North American wilderness while European powers sought overseas colonies. Elation at energy self-sufficiency combined with the desire to rebuild domestically leads many to argue that the United States should pivot not to Asia, but inward, and diminish its robust foreign presence.

But the rest of the world is not in the same mental space. Much of the world looks to the United States—if not to lead, then at least to be a predictable force. Neighbors of Russia, China, and Iran all rely to varying degrees on U.S. security assurances, and they look with alarm at what they see as the increasing regional ambitions of all three. Many of those same neighbors look at the U.S. response to Syrian chemical weapons use—after a clear U.S. threat—and they are discomfited. In Asia, the Middle East, and beyond, they wonder what an inward-looking United States considers vital, and which U.S. assurances, if any, must be reexamined.

The problem goes beyond mere security concerns. One Saudi businessman complained to me recently that there was no discernible U.S. global strategy, and that its absence makes it impossible for Saudi Arabia to construct any strategy at all. The quandary is common among many U.S. allies, and it raises fundamental questions about U.S. commitments abroad. Is there anything for which U.S. allies can rely on the United States, and under what circumstances might it change? Equally confounding, how can America's friends make themselves vital to the United States if the United States has no clear understanding and ordering of its own interests?

One might argue that this is just tough luck. The United States is drifting into a new normal of self-sufficiency, or perhaps reverting to the mean of its independent, nineteenth century past. We will control the continent, in this way of thinking, and admit whom we desire to share in our bounty.

But current trends will not hold. In 15 years' time, U.S. oil production will likely decline, and rising global demand will require massive new flows. If the United States spends the next decade drifting inward, it will likely spend the decade after reaching outward again, although from a weaker position. Former partners will have found new friends. A new global system less favorable to U.S. interests will have emerged. The United States will find itself trying to rebuild institutions of global influence, but doing so with atrophied tools and under profound budget pressure, as baby boomers leave the workforce and sharply drive up entitlement spending.

While the United States clearly needs to readjust from decades of war, the country also needs to give more thought to the world it wants to live in—not just in five years, but in twenty. Rising domestic energy production will be a boon for now, but it will not last forever. A thriving United States will need to turn to the world again, but the more it turns away now, the less recognizable the world it turns to in 2025 will be. The more it turns away, the harder and the more costly that world will likely prove to lead. ■ 04/24/2014

Links of Interest

Jon Alterman spoke at a RAND Corporation conference entitled [“The Days After a Deal”](#) on the potential consequences of an Iranian nuclear deal.

The Los Angeles Times quoted Jon Alterman in [“President Obama seeks to bolster ties with Saudi Arabia.”](#)

Reuters quoted Jon Alterman in [“U.S. presses on in Middle East talks rescue attempt.”](#)

Bloomberg quoted Jon Alterman in [“Obama Pledges \\$500 Million in Loan Guarantees to Tunisia.”](#)

The Middle East Program has a new webpage featuring [recent program publications translated into Arabic](#).

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The CSIS Middle East Program

Jon B. Alterman
*Director and Brzezinski Chair
in Global Security and Geostrategy*

Haim Malka
*Deputy Director and
Senior Fellow*

Carolyn Barnett
Research Fellow

Rebecka Shirazi
*Program Coordinator and
Research Associate*

Jason Mullins
Research Assistant