

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

A Question of Commitment

by Jon B. Alterman

No region of the world better reflects U.S. power than the Middle East. After a half century of struggle against the Soviet Union, and a quarter century of struggle against violent extremism, the United States finds its friends in power in a virtually uninterrupted stretch from the Atlantic to the Gulf. True, anti-Americanism is rife—especially among major aid recipients—but the governmental order that is in place is the consequence of sustained U.S. efforts.

With a global debate brewing as to whether the United States is a waning power, there is no place where that debate has greater impact than in the Middle East. The United States is engaged in efforts to provide energy security in the East, to promote Arab-Israeli peace in the West, and to enhance stability throughout. Less U.S. power should mean worse outcomes at higher costs to the United States and its allies.

And yet, the global debate over U.S. power is more muted in the Middle East than in many other places. The United States remains overwhelmingly more powerful than any other actor or collection of actors in the region, and more powerful than any other external actor. With the exceptions of Iran and Syria, each government in the region actively cultivates positive relations with the United States.

The Middle East concern is not one of U.S. capability. There is no alternative superpower in the wings, nor a regional power that threatens to displace the United States from its privileged position. In a region that sees itself as both vulnerable and weak, the United States remains a vital part of the stable order.

Instead, the concern is one of U.S. intention and commitment. Put another way, the question is not what the United States can do, but instead what it will do. In this regard, the tests are myriad, and many see the results as lacking.

A chief area of complaint is Iraq, where Arabs increasingly complain that a lack of U.S. commitment has allowed Iran's allies to rise on the back of a trillion-

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"Euro-Islam"

Germany's public universities will soon count dozens of imams amongst their graduates. The country's announcement last month that it will fund imam training programs at three state universities is part of a broader European effort to integrate their growing Muslim populations and eradicate the threat of homegrown terrorism through education.

From aggressively monitoring mosques, to deporting extremist imams, to enhancing transportation security, European measures to combat domestic extremism have often been reactive and focused on short-term security concerns. Government-sponsored imam training programs seek to tackle the problem at its roots – by training leaders to teach a tolerant, inclusive "European Islam."

Germany's first publicly-funded imam training program, launched at Osnabrueck University, includes German language courses and field trips to the German parliament. Students in the Master's imam training program at the Dutch Leiden University have to write their theses on Islam "within a European context." France's Catholic University offers courses in secular subjects like French law, history, and politics to imams studying at the Grand Mosque of Paris.

Prominent Muslim organizations have criticized state-sponsored programs. The Union of French Islamic Organizations declined to send students to the Catholic University program, preferring a more "neutral academic framework." The Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs, the largest Islamic organization in Germany, did not send any representatives to the open house for the imam training program at Osnabrueck University. For some, state support is a problem, not a solution.

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Gulf Roundtable: Iran, the Bomb, and Gulf Security

When it comes to its nuclear program, Iran's government seeks to manipulate any U.S. action to its own advantage, and diplomatic engagement is no exception. The instinct of some, such as Andrew Parasiliti, is to engage Iran proactively and soon. Others, such as Kenneth Pollack, are skeptical of how Iran will respond to diplomacy absent direct pressure. Regardless, Parasiliti and Pollack agreed that U.S. policymakers must have a coherent strategy that allows diplomacy, deterrence and containment mutually to reinforce each other in the potentially brief period before Iran acquires a nuclear weapon. Parasiliti and Pollack gave their arguments for devising such a strategy at a Gulf Roundtable held on October 13, 2010. Click [HERE](#) to learn more about the event. ■

dollar U.S. war effort. Gulf Arabs have often been fond of conspiracy theories to explain the persistence of their enemies—one making the rounds in the late 1990s was that the United States kept Saddam in power to provide a pretext for a sustained U.S. military commitment to the Gulf. A more current one puts Iraqi Prime Minister-designate Nouri al-Maliki in the pocket of the United States and Iran, a U.S. goodwill offering to the ayatollahs.

Another area of complaint is Iran. Many governments in the Middle East see the U.S. strategy to offer Iran both engagement and pressure as clumsy. In private, many aver that the pressure is not hard enough. In public, many engage far more than the United States has been willing to do. Israel appears especially agitated by U.S. policy toward Iran, not so much because Israel has a better strategy at its disposal, but instead because the United States remains far more able than Israel to shape Iran's choices.

A third area of complaint is Palestine. Here, many in the region see the United States as being wholly ineffective in the face of an Israeli strategy of deflection and delay. It is on this issue that many in the Middle East see the gap between U.S. capability and performance to be most glaring. It is on this issue that Arab leaders say that they fear that the United States is weakening itself by not acting forcefully in line with its own interests.

For their own part, many Israelis see U.S. policy as dangerous folly, a quixotic mission to trade real security for vague promises. Yet, Israeli strategy contains within itself its own contradictions. There is no long-term Israeli security without a strong United States, and to the extent that Israeli actions create an impression of U.S. weakness, they undermine Israel's long-term security.

For the United States, pursuing power for its own sake is a path toward disaster. Nothing advertises weakness so much as a campaign to demonstrate strength. In addition, the Middle Eastern view is not so much that the United States lacks power as that it does not utilize its power for appropriate ends.

The better strategy, then, is for the United States to act with full awareness of its power, consulting extensively but acting more forcefully in its own interest. In a region full of friendly governments, there is not one with which the United States does not have basic differences. That fact is not one to be glossed over, but one to be managed. It is the natural consequence of the differences in the positions of a great power and its clients and allies.

The missing link for the United States in the Middle East is not that it lacks power. Instead, it is that it is demonstrating insufficient leadership. Leadership in this case means articulating clear goals and having others adopt them as their own. The Bush administration's leadership was tone-deaf to the region, high-handed and ultimately ineffective. The Obama administration's leadership thus far has been too tentative and too desirous of approval. The administration's instincts resonate with much of the Middle East, and its power is not in question. What is in question, instead, is its resolve. A clear demonstration of it would not only improve U.S. fortunes in the Middle East, but also far beyond.

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Links of Interest

Haim Malka was quoted by *Bloomberg* in "[Netanyahu, Clinton Vow to Keep Working to Revive Middle East Peace Talks.](#)"

Haim Malka commented on Al Qaeda's North African operations in "[Chasing Shadows?](#)" in *This is Africa*, a magazine published by the *Financial Times*.

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