

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

A Deeper Difference

by Jon B. Alterman

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If you were to believe the papers, falling U.S. standing in the Middle East is all about a supposedly feckless U.S. administration that cannot be bothered to pursue U.S. interests. In response, regional governments have reconciled themselves to a reduced U.S. role and resolved to carry on with little regard for U.S. preferences.

Such a reading misses much of what is driving international relations in the Middle East and U.S. relations with the countries of the region. What is truly at play is a reconfigured threat environment in which internal concerns outweigh external ones, and in which states increasingly question the wisdom of Western-style liberalization. In this environment, the idea has begun to circulate not only that the United States is not the asset it once was but that it is often a liability. The Obama administration's decisions play a role in U.S. regional standing, but larger historical forces are also at play and have not been fully appreciated.

In the three-quarters of a century that the United States has been a major force in the Middle East, states have relied on it to be an external guarantor of security. France and Britain spent much of the 1920s and 1930s as Mandate Powers, establishing governments that locals perceived as little more than colonial outposts. European proconsuls controlled economies, ran police forces, and established legislatures that followed Western rules. When Saudi Arabia welcomed a U.S. alliance in 1945 and established an enduring—and some would say, improbable—partnership between one of the world's most avowedly religious governments and one of the world's most avowedly secular, it was partly because Saudis believed that the United States had no designs on the Kingdom's internal governance.

Post-war U.S. foreign policy emerged in a Cold War framework that stressed “building partner capacity,” which often meant creating a fighting force that could help repel external aggression, especially in cooperation with U.S. forces. Operation Desert Storm was precisely the sort of contingency for which the U.S. relationship was expected to be relevant. After Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, the United States led a coalition of more than 30 partner nations that sent troops to protect Saudi Arabia, and then to push Iraqi troops back over the border.

(continued on page 2)

Gulf Roundtable: Young People and Employment

Mona Mourshed, director of the Global Education Practice at McKinsey & Company, spoke at a Gulf Roundtable entitled “Changing the Meaning of Success: Young People and Employment in the GCC” on December 19, 2013. For many Arab youth, education neither leads to jobs nor prepares them for jobs. Arab policymakers are only beginning to grapple with the problem. Mourshed argued that in order to build more effective ways to prepare youth for the workforce, educators and employers need to step into each other's worlds. You can read a full summary of the event [HERE](#). ■

Fight or Flight

March 19 of 2013 was a deadly day for Iraq, with around 60 people killed and over 150 others injured around the country. Yet the very next day, Baghdad International Airport logged 125 incoming and outgoing flights—the highest total in memory. Even as violence escalates in Iraq, business is booming.

The Iraqi government has made the revival of commercial aviation a major component of its economic strategy, and the government plans to double the size of Baghdad Airport to handle 15 million passengers per year. Iraqi Airways began direct flights to London, Moscow, and Kuala Lumpur in 2013, and the government announced in October that it would begin flights from Baghdad to Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shanghai. Direct flights to Azerbaijan, Tunisia and Morocco are also in the works. Last February, for the first time since the Gulf War, flights took off from Baghdad to Kuwait.

Iraqi Kurdistan has welcomed similar efforts to encourage cross-country investment and tourism, including a direct Erbil-Tbilisi flight launched in March 2013. As many Iraqis were on that flight as visited Georgia in all of 2010. Facilitating travel is intended both to draw investors in infrastructure and other sectors, and to allow Iraqis with disposable income wider business and vacation opportunities.

Five years ago, flights followed a corkscrew path to land at Baghdad Airport in order to avoid shoulder-fired missiles. Investors still need to be comfortable with risk to invest in Iraq, but the amount of physical risk entailed seems clearly to have declined. ■

The U.S. action had nothing to do with governance in either Iraq or Saudi Arabia. While the United States pressed Kuwait to reinstall its parliament, which the emir had disbanded in the years before Saddam's invasion and which subsequent emirs have disbanded since, that parliament has not threatened the ruling family's control of the country. The old deal of the United States providing security still prevailed.

One might argue that the watershed in U.S. relations with the Arab world was the push for democratization and human rights in the second Bush Administration. An ambition to spread freedom dominated President Bush's 2005 inaugural address, which promised, "It is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world." In practice, though, the president's ambitious words swiftly yielded to realpolitik, as the Bush Administration made accommodations to long-standing authoritarian partners.

Instead, the watershed was really in 2011, when the governments of Egypt and Tunisia fell, and it seemed the Arab world was embarking on a wholly new direction. In the United States, many felt a keen desire to "get on the right side of history." They cheered the fall of dictators and even tried to speed their descent. As part of this turn, U.S. leaders began not only to accommodate themselves to the empowerment of Islamist opposition movements that had lurked in the shadows for decades, but even to encourage their participation in government. The Muslim Brotherhood was the most prominent but not the only one, and like-minded groups began to find themselves feted in Washington and other Western capitals, even while they struggled for position at home.

To existing governments in the region, however, the U.S. bet was badly misplaced. Leaders saw the United States casting its lot with forces that not only were the enemies of the status quo, but that would turn out—in their judgment—to be enemies of the United States as well. Making matters worse, the United States had moved on from providing earnest advice on liberalization and democratization to friends. Now, the United States was withholding aid from friends and giving support to former opposition forces.

The rift grew. Sitting governments in the Middle East have felt an increasing existential threat from their internal opposition movements, while the United States has seen an emerging opportunity to solve the problem of societies that seem to produce radicalism and hostility. The Arab government instinct has been toward more closed politics, and the U.S. government response has been toward promoting more open politics. The difference is more than academic.

In country after country, Arab leaders have seen naïveté and wishful thinking dominating U.S. actions. Egypt remains the sorest wound, because of its demographic weight and its centrality to Arab culture. But something else has hurt about Egypt. Former president Hosni Mubarak had been such a loyal U.S. ally, yet he was abandoned swiftly.

Of course Arab states still face a series of external threats, and on many of those they also differ from the Obama administration. The Arab leaders do not trust U.S. strategy toward Iran. They complain about U.S. policy toward Iran's allies in Syria and Iraq. They remain aggrieved that the United States maintains a close relationship with Israel while remaining distant from the Palestinians. As it has been for many years in the past, the list is long.

Yet in years past, the Arab states were willing to swallow their complaints, because they needed the United States to protect them from their most pressing threats. In the eyes of many, the United States is now abetting their most pressing threats. While consultations between allies can alleviate misunderstandings, much of the tension between the United States and its Arab allies reflects fundamental differences in strategy. Neither side is likely to shift its strategy soon, and relations will reflect that fact. ■ 01/14/2014

Links of Interest

The CSIS Middle East Program released a new Gulf Analysis Paper by James Andrew Lewis, director of the CSIS Strategic Technologies Program, entitled "Cybersecurity and Stability in the Gulf." The Gulf has become a flashpoint for cyber conflict. Cyberspace has become an arena for covert struggle, with the United States, Israel and other nations on one side, and Iran and Russia on the other.

AP quoted Jon Alterman in "US faces new pressure over missing CIA contractor."

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