

Necessary Risks

How a New U.S. Administration Can—Finally—Give Us
the Middle East Policy We Need

by *Shadi Hamid*

America's mounting failures in the Middle East are tied not only to ineffective policies but also—and perhaps more importantly—to faulty assumptions about the sources of our difficulties in the region. Anti-American violence and terrorism is fueled by long-standing grievances, both real and perceived. A new Middle East strategy must be premised on a long-term effort to seek out root causes of this anger and, where possible, address them.

The Middle East today is consumed by political violence, autocracy, and extremism—a toxic mix that threatens American interests and regional stability. Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Saudi Arabia continue to exert undue influence. Despite the high-minded rhetoric of the 2007 Annapolis conference, Israeli-Palestinian peace seems as distant as ever. Meanwhile, Arab autocrats, many counted as American allies, are reasserting themselves, striking with increased ferocity at their domestic opponents and crushing dissent. The promise of early 2005, when Egypt, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia experienced democratic openings, is a rapidly fading memory. On the terrorism front, an April 2008 General Accountability Office report states that al Qaeda is regrouping in its safe haven on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Then there is Iraq, which, to put it mildly, still has a long way to go.

While there is a well-deserved consensus that the Bush administration has caused untold damage to our relationship with the Arab and Muslim world, it would be a mistake to think that eight years of Republican rule are an anomaly in an otherwise proud history of successful engagement. The reality is more troubling: American policy has been consistently self-defeating under administrations of both parties for more than five decades.

In practice, the United States has almost always been in crisis-management mode regarding the Middle East, seeing the region through a short-term strategic lens. Policymakers have focused on treating symptoms without addressing the deeper, structural causes that have produced so many of the region's ills—whether political violence, sectarianism, or terrorism.

Fortunately, progressives are beginning to move in the right direction. There is little

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“One person with a belief is a social power equal to ninety-nine who have only interests.”

—John Stuart Mill

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doubt that a new Democratic administration would repair our image and credibility in the international arena. There remains, however, a profound disconnect between the extent of our problems in the Middle East and the boldness needed to confront them. It is a dangerous illusion to think that multilateralism, diplomacy, and “restoring moral leadership” will, on their own, be enough to address the systemic problems of the region.

In this century, America’s security is threatened as much by what happens within states as by what transpires between them. As a result, the attitudes of Arab and Muslim publics should weigh heavily as the next administration articulates its security strategy. Mistrust and suspicion of the United States—no matter its origin—fuels long-standing grievances. A new Middle East strategy must be premised on a concerted attempt to acknowledge America’s misguided past efforts and reposition this nation as a fair-minded power in the region.

Notwithstanding their acute awareness of the Bush administration’s failings in the Middle East, progressives have failed to offer a coherent vision for U.S. engagement in the region. To be sure, there are a host of excellent prescriptions on individual policy

concerns—whether on Iran, Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, public diplomacy, or counterterrorism—but each issue tends to be treated in isolation, without reference to the others.

In short, America must reassess the core premises of its Middle East policy. With that in mind, this paper will challenge the assumptions that have long been the basis of U.S. policy formulation; reassess American security objectives in the region; and propose a set of practicable policy changes that embody a new mindset. This paper proposes, among other things:

- demilitarizing the fight against terror by putting more money into smart-power initiatives;
- elevating democracy promotion through aid conditionality;
- engaging nonviolent Islamist groups; and
- promoting Turkish accession into the European Union.

Assumptions

Let us take a step back. What are our basic assumptions about the Middle East and America’s role in it?

Americans and Middle Easterners hold to widely divergent narratives regarding the role of the United States in the region. As long as these narratives remain worlds apart, it will be difficult for the United States to effect real change.

American observers often express great bafflement at the lack of economic and political reform in the region, and at the rise of radicalism and violence. Too many seem to regard the United States as an innocent bystander in the Middle East. In order to move forward, we must rid ourselves of this perception and address the profound ways in which American foreign policy has affected, often negatively, the region's long-term development.

Five decades of bipartisan Mideast policy have tended to center on maintaining close relationships with friendly Arab autocracies at the expense of Arab publics. A Faustian bargain was struck: Arab governments would do our bidding in the region, and in return we would turn a blind eye to the suppression of domestic dissent.

Pliable regimes were needed to support U.S. economic and security goals, including countering Soviet influence, securing access to oil, and ensuring Israel's security. America conveniently forgot that hundreds of millions of Arabs and Muslims were living under increasingly repressive governments that stifled almost every facet of cultural, religious, and political life. To a large extent, U.S. policy was based on the assumption that what happened within the borders of these countries was of only limited relevance to our national security. The conduct of foreign policy was separated from concerns regarding the internal character of states.

For a time, it seemed to work. As Michael Hudson remarked in 1996:

"The situation [in the Middle East] appears to be well under control. The Soviet Union is gone, Israel has not only survived but has become a regional superpower, pan-Arabism is a spent force and Arab oil (most of it, anyway) is in the hands of

friendly, dependent regimes. Defense of the Middle East has succeeded, and America has achieved hegemony."¹

This "control" proved illusory. Dictatorships can stifle dissent for a period, but—as events in Latin America and Eastern Europe in the 1980s demonstrated—such repression cannot last forever. From economic and political stagnation, and the resulting popular discontent, rose religious extremism and political violence. We had failed to realize that the Arab publics—the populations that spawned al Qaeda's Sept. 11 operatives—could not be ignored indefinitely.

While primary and secondary education was expanding at unprecedented rates during the 1960s and 1970s (one of the few positive legacies of Arab nationalism), the Arab state, due to its closed, unresponsive nature, could not absorb the growing demands of ballooning populations. Middle Eastern dictatorships, even those that claimed to be modernizing, were ill-equipped to meet the economic and political requirements of a changing international system.

The United States, preoccupied with containing the Soviet Union, did not appear overly concerned with the deterioration of Arab society. In some cases, the United States even helped foster this deterioration by consistently providing financial, political, and military support to authoritarian regimes such as Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia.

Not only has the United States supported dictatorships, it has also seemed to actively undermine the few nascent democratic groups and movements that have emerged in the region. It is important to remember what happened in 1953 in Iran and in 1991 in Algeria—two tragic and resonant political moments that contribute to the Middle Eastern narrative of a malevolent superpower bent on keeping Arabs and Muslims down.

In Iran, the CIA organized the overthrow of democratically elected prime minister, Mohammed Mossadeq, in part because he nationalized his country's oil industry. The coup valued apparent "stability" over

democracy. It backfired—the ensuing 26 years of the Shah’s brutal rule provoked the 1979 Islamic revolution. Jimmy Carter once labeled the Shah’s Iran “an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world.” It was—until it wasn’t.

In 1991, Algeria was in the midst one of the Arab world’s more promising political experiments. On December 26, in the freest and fairest elections in the country’s history, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won 47 percent of the vote in the first round and was poised to finish with a parliamentary majority. The staunchly secular military intervened and canceled the elections, resulting in a civil war that would claim more than 100,000 lives.

In response, the administration of George H.W. Bush stood silent and tacitly endorsed the military intervention. James Baker, the secretary of state, explained the calculus:

“Generally speaking, when you support democracy, you take what democracy gives you. ... If it gives you a radical Islamic fundamentalist, you’re supposed to live with it. We didn’t live with it in Algeria because we felt that the radical fundamentalists’ views were so adverse to what we believe in and what we support, and to what we understood the national interests of the United States to be.”

As Baker’s words suggest, the dictatorships that receive U.S. support tend to be secular, while the ostensibly pro-democracy movements that America has opposed tend to be Islamist, reinforcing the perception that the United States is anti-Muslim. While it is understandable that Baker would worry about American interests under an Islamist-led government, it is unclear how supporting a military coup was the best way to address those concerns. The United States, instead, could have put its support behind a power-sharing deal, something Algeria’s secular president at the time, Chadli Benjedid, was open to. Washington declined to seize the opportunity, and the resulting Algerian debacle highlighted American hypocrisy at its starkest.

In addition to America’s support for undemocratic governments, the list of Middle Eastern grievances includes perceived American bias toward Israel, the presence of American military forces throughout the region (including in Kuwait, Qatar, Yemen, Bahrain, and even Djibouti), and, of course, the Iraq war. These grievances are significant factors fueling anti-Americanism. Yet they are also current embodiments of a lingering mistrust: Even if all of them were to somehow be resolved tomorrow, chances are that Arabs and Muslims would find other reasons to express uneasiness with the United States.

The American tendency is to discount those grievances as a product of misunderstandings and misattribution of blame. This is valid to a degree: While some grievances are legitimate, others are based on an inaccurate perception of the United States and the way it conducts foreign policy. There is no doubt that America’s complicity in various alleged crimes is often exaggerated by our critics abroad—particularly those who view American actions solely through the prism of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

However, treating Arab and Muslim grievances as products of misunderstanding to be corrected through public-relations campaigns, better “messaging,” or cultural-exchange programs is another illusion. From the perspective of millions of Arabs and Muslims, the United States is complicit in their repression and in the denial of democratic alternatives. Even the most unfair anti-American paranoia cannot be understood as a product of mere irrational hate. It is important for Americans to understand how valid grievances can snowball into a more general suspicion of all U.S. motives and actions—a suspicion that lends itself to disinformation and conspiracy theorizing. In short, most policy disagreements are substantive and many are legitimate. Even the ones that are not must be addressed on the plane of policy. Perceptions matter because they drive narratives, and narratives drive the way Middle Easterners view the United States.

Admittedly, it will be difficult for progressives to offer a foreign-policy vision that expressly

aims to understand the roots of Arab and Muslim grievance. In the current American political climate, it is not popular to admit wrongdoing or be too self-critical. To some, this has the appearance of weakness, which American voters are loath to support. Nonetheless, it should be obvious to most that the Bush administration's preferred strategy of projecting "strength"—a nebulous term that conservatives have deftly employed to de-legitimize progressive efforts on national security—has been an utter failure and has only made us weaker. Strength, as determined by results rather than intent, is based on an ability to acknowledge mistakes and correct them.

Objectives

On some issues there will probably always be daylight between Americans and their Arab and Muslim counterparts. For example, regardless of how it would poll in the Middle East, the United States is not going to part ways with Israel. A concerted effort working for an independent Palestinian state, however, would go a long way toward minimizing the salience of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

As long as Middle Easterners have grievances against us (and they will for the foreseeable future), the only sustainable American response is to promote those democratic mechanisms that will absorb, temper, and channel such sentiments in a constructive fashion. When Arab publics are empowered by informed choice at the ballot box, it provides a meaningful avenue with which to articulate their collective concerns, frustrations, and hopes. Only when governments are responsive to their publics' needs and frustrations will the populace be able to shake off the humiliation that has been a prime mover of anti-Americanism.

A primary objective of U.S. policy should be the peaceful democratization of the Middle East. While the Bush administration said it supported democracy abroad, its actions proved otherwise. President Bush and his advisers never explained what democracy

promotion would have to mean in practice, perhaps because they were not ready to embrace the implications of their own arguments: that friendly, autocratic regimes would be replaced, through free elections, by new—and potentially quite different—governments.

In order to engender democracy in the Middle East, America must support the incorporation of nonviolent Islamist parties into the political process. Moreover, the United States should pressure regimes to allow more political space for liberal and secular groups. Any process of genuine democratization will of course take time, but we should be clear that alternation of power, one of the basic requirements of democratic governance, is a concrete objective.

In short, a re-orientation of U.S. policy should be viewed through the prism of Arab societies rather than Arab regimes. This means shifting support from governments to publics. As tens of millions of people begin asserting themselves and demanding real political reform, the question is whether America will choose to support their efforts. If we do not, then the emerging democracies of the region will take note, making it difficult to prevent the electoral rise of governments that see us as an adversary rather than a friend.

On the other hand, if America plays a leadership role in providing support for democratic transitions, similar to the role the European Union has played with Turkey, this will wed future democratically elected governments to our own. Free elections are likely to bring Islamist parties to power in at least some Arab countries, and it is better to engage these parties before they take office—while we still have leverage—than afterward, when it will be more difficult to influence their agenda on key U.S. concerns.

A constellation of Middle Eastern democracies, inclined to accept America as a positive force in the international arena, no doubt sounds farfetched. This is why such a fundamental transition will require a long-term

strategy and a willingness to take necessary risks.

A New Approach

The challenge is taking a broad strategic reorientation and translating it into discrete, practicable policy changes that reflect the gravity of the challenges ahead. Here are four suggestions for where we can start, embodying a spirit of necessary, constructive risk:

Demilitarize the fight against terror by moving allocated money to smart-power initiatives. It makes little sense to devise military solutions to problems that are not military in nature. There is, of course, a core of terrorists not open to negotiation or compromise. They must be defeated. Terrorist activities and the broader phenomenon of religious extremism, however, draw support and sympathy from large constituencies who may agree with terrorists' motives but disagree with their means. These millions "on the fence" can still be won over. If they are written off because they sympathize with those who wish us harm, then extremists will continue to have the upper hand in the battle of narratives. The key to any counterterrorism effort is to separate our enemies from those who still might become our friends.

The vast budgetary gulf between the Defense Department and the State Department is a good representation of a stale status quo that needs changing if we are to successfully contend with the terrorist threat. For fiscal year 2008, the State Department has a total budget of approximately \$42 billion (including supplementals for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan) while the corresponding figure for the Defense Department is \$623 billion.²

It is worth noting that the State Department budget is itself highly militarized. As Stephen McInerney notes in a recent paper, "Even in the international affairs budget for the [Broader Middle East and North Africa] region—normally thought of as the 'soft power' counterpart to the

DoD budget—69% is designated for various forms of military assistance, as compared with 10% for democracy and governance."³ To put things in further perspective, democracy and governance funding in the Broader Middle East and North Africa comes out to less than 1 percent of the Department of Defense's annual Iraq expenditures.

We must devote far more resources to helping Arab and Muslim publics effect successful democratic transitions over time. Significant budgetary changes are needed to reflect the changing nature of the terrorist threat, and the non-military tools we will need to address it effectively. Any budget re-allocation should be substantial enough not only to make a tangible difference, but also to demonstrate on a symbolic level the strategic re-orientation advocated throughout this paper. These changes will help align us with the aspirations of the broader population in the region.

Most progressive politicians talk about the need to engage in a "war of ideas." In practice, however, re-allocating funds for the nation's security away from the Defense Department is seen as politically dangerous. Again, progressives will need to find ways to make their case to the American people by reframing the notion of "strength."

Elevate democracy promotion through aid conditionality. I recently spoke to a Jordanian acquaintance about the various economic and political problems plaguing his country. I suggested that if Jordanians wanted to, they could organize for change and put pressure on their government to get serious about reform. He agreed in principle, but said, to paraphrase, "America won't let us," citing Jordan's financial dependence on the United States.

He and the countless others who feel powerless for precisely this reason are not too far off the mark. Jordan is the second largest per-capita recipient of American foreign assistance in the world. There are extensive ties between U.S. intelligence agencies and the dreaded *mukhabarat* (internal security),

whose repressive practices constitute one of the main reasons that nearly 75 percent of Jordanians still say they are afraid to publicly criticize the government.⁴ It is difficult to imagine Jordanian citizens succeeding in pushing for far-reaching political reform without the United States giving the green light for such a process. The perception that America stands opposed to democratic openings in the Middle East must be challenged head-on so that Arabs and Muslims will begin to feel that they—rather than foreign powers—hold the keys to change within their own societies.

The United States can start by articulating a regionwide contract whereby foreign aid is made explicitly conditional on a set of benchmarks, including respect of opposition rights, freedom of expression, and progress toward holding free elections, even if only on the municipal level at first.

The specifics will differ from case to case, as some countries are further along the path to democracy (Morocco and Jordan) than others (Saudi Arabia), and therefore require different strategies. In the 2008 foreign appropriations bill, Congress for the first time made \$100 million in aid to Egypt conditional on judicial reform, curbing police abuses, and destroying smuggling tunnels into Gaza. This was a step in the right direction. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, however, waived the aid restriction, citing the need for flexibility in dealing with Egypt.

Engage political Islam. Democratization will likely further empower Islamists, a reality that the United States must come to terms with. In order to re-establish credibility on democracy promotion—and just as importantly, to show that we have no gripe with Islam—we need to engage in a sustained dialogue with all religiously-oriented parties as long as they fulfill the conditions of renouncing violence and committing themselves to the democratic process. (Nearly all mainstream Islamist groups in the region, with the exception of Hamas and Hezbollah, meet these two conditions, including Jordan’s Islamic Action Front,

Morocco’s Justice and Development Party, and Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood).⁵

A new administration must begin by stating as a matter of policy that the United States is not opposed to dealing with non-violent Islamist groups and has no problem with parties of a religious character coming to power through free elections. This would be coupled with the initiation of a U.S.-Islamist “dialogue,” designed to explore areas of tension and misunderstanding. As trust develops, the discussion would move toward the question of how moderate Islamists can help us and how we can help them. In exchange for supporting the political participation of Islamist parties in their respective countries, America would seek to extract certain “concessions” in return, including guarantees that they would respect vital U.S. interests, including standing peace treaties with Israel.

Promote Turkish accession into the EU.

The extent to which Turkish entry into the EU is central to any long-term policy agenda in the Middle East cannot be overstated. It is surprising, then, that the issue rarely receives the attention it deserves. Currently, the United States has little influence or leverage to push this issue with its European allies. This is likely to change in a future administration, although French and German objections to full membership will continue to present a challenge.

Over the last several years, Turkey’s desire to join the EU has been the primary engine behind its wide-ranging legal and political reforms—reforms passed by the Islamist-leaning Justice and Development Party (AKP), which was re-elected in 2007 with an impressive 47 percent of the vote. In order to continue along this path, Turkey must remain enmeshed in Western institutions and partnerships. One of only two countries in the world led by a democratically-elected Islamist party, Turkey stands as one of the few successful models of political reform in the Middle East, as well as a promising example of how Islam and democracy can be mutually reinforcing.

Unfortunately, earlier this year, in the face of a highly dubious judicial effort to disband the AKP on the grounds of “anti-secular activity,” the United States once again failed to clarify its stance, rekindling memories of the 1991 Algerian debacle. In April 2008, Secretary Rice said the matter was something “for Turks to decide,” and expressed “hope that [it] will be decided within Turkey’s secular democratic context and by its secular democratic principles.” In the coming critical months and years, noncommittal statements such as this will not suffice.

Fortunately, Turkey’s Constitutional Court ruled against the dissolution of the party, and disaster was averted. However, tensions between an increasingly illiberal secular elite—who control the military and judiciary—and popular, religiously-oriented parties such as the AKP will continue. The future of Turkish democracy is still at stake, and the United States, in conjunction with its European allies, needs to make clear that if the military or judiciary

overstep their bounds and threaten the integrity of Turkish democracy, the long-standing U.S.-Turkish alliance will suffer significant damage.

These suggestions are just a start. There is obviously much more that can and should be done. Many other analysts have written persuasively on a grand bargain with Iran and a reinvigoration of the Arab-Israeli peace process. These four policy changes—demilitarizing the “war” on terror, elevating democracy promotion, engaging Islamists, and ensuring Turkish EU accession—are emphasized here because they meet two conditions. First of all, they are practicable, in that they can be implemented if policymakers have the political will. Second—and more importantly—they reflect an understanding that rooted grievances can only be addressed through a long-term vision that commits the United States, in word and as well as in deed, to the political development and democratization of the Middle East.

Endnotes

¹ Hudson, Michael, “To Play the Hegemon: 50 Years of US Policy Toward the Middle East,” *Middle East Journal*, Summer 1996.

² For an accessible breakdown of the defense budget, see Fred Kaplan, “It’s Time to Sharpen the Scissors,” *Slate*, February, 5, 2007, <http://www.slate.com/id/2159102>. Based on his calculations, Kaplan puts the effective budget even higher, at \$739 billion. However, I have chosen to use the more accepted \$623 billion, which is a straightforward addition of the main budget and the war supplementals.

³ McNerney, Stephen, “Democracy, Governance, and Human Rights in the Middle East: The President’s Budget Request for Fiscal Year 2009,” Project on Middle East Democracy, June 2008, <http://pomed.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2008/05/fy-09-budgetreport.pdf>.

⁴ “Democracy in Jordan—2006,” University of Jordan, Center for Strategic Studies, July 2006.

⁵ For more on how Islamist parties have moderated in recent years, see Shadi Hamid, “Parting the Veil,” *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, Summer 2007, <http://www.democracyjournal.org/pdf/5/Hamid.pdf>; Robert Leiken and Steven Brooke, “The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2007, <http://www.nixoncenter.org/publications/LeikenBrookeMB.pdf>; and Marc Lynch, “The Brotherhood’s Dilemma,” *The Crown Center for Middle East Studies*, January 2008, <http://www.brandeis.edu/globalbrandeis/documents/MEB25.pdf>.