

Moderation or Tyranny

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Articles & Testimony

The Arab world is approaching a historic crossroad. One path leads toward domestic liberalization, regional moderation, and peace with Israel. The other path contains the prospect of continued tyranny, external adventurism, and, eventually, war.

These competing visions of the Arab future have become embodied in the policies of Egypt and Iraq. After a decade of detachment from the main currents of Arab politics - Egypt because of its peace with Israel and Iraq because of its war with Iran - these two states have reassumed their natural roles as the leading powers of the Arab world.

And while both deny it, their starkly contrasting worldviews ensure that their historical competition for Arab hearts and minds is also being reasserted. Egypt represents the pole of Arab moderation. At peace with Israel and allied with the United States, Egypt has for years argued that the welfare of the Arabs can only be realized in an atmosphere of regional peace and stability. This is to be achieved first and foremost by way of genuine reconciliation and accommodation with the Jewish state, a conviction epitomized by Egypt's critical efforts to pressure, persuade, and cajole the Palestinians to enter negotiations with Israel.

In response to the revolutionary changes under way in Europe, Egypt has warned the Arabs to jump on the bandwagon of detente and democratization or risk being left behind. Without a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace, Egypt fears that Arab resources will continue to be squandered on an increasingly dangerous arms race that will only exacerbate the region's twin nemeses of economic backwardness and political extremism.

In contrast, Iraq represents the specter of resurgent Arab radicalism. Overseeing a regime whose tyranny parallels that of Stalin's Russia, Iraq's President Saddam Hussein extols a worldview that is fundamentally anti-Western.

Rather than being chastened by the destructiveness of his eight-year war with Iran, Hussein's aggressive ambitions to dominate the Middle East seem only to have been fueled. Employing chemical weapons with impunity against both Iran and his own citizens during the war, Hussein has used the period since the cease-fire not for demobilization and domestic reconstruction, but to accelerate Iraq's military buildup.

Baghdad now possesses by several orders of magnitude the largest Middle Eastern army, one equipped with ballistic missiles and a massive chemical and biological warfare capability. Most frightening are reports that it will probably acquire nuclear weapons within five years.

Hussein's megalomania has been much in evidence recently. His ruthless liquidation of internal opponents, the execution of a British journalist on trumped-up espionage charges, the string of attempts to circumvent

international restrictions and acquire nuclear-weapons technology, and the constant bullying of Arab neighbors all demonstrate his blatant disregard for civilized norms of behavior.

But Hussein's most venomous threat to date was directed at Israel when he asserted that, if attacked, he would incinerate half that country with chemical weapons. Posing himself as the authentic voice of Pan-Arabism, Hussein insists that Arab interests vis-a-vis Israel can best be achieved through superior military strength and political diktat.

The spoils in this Egyptian-Iraqi contest of visions are, as they have been historically, the allegiance of the Arab states that occupy the lands between the Nile and the Euphrates - most importantly, Jordan and Syria. Which side of the ideological divide they come down on will go a long way toward determining the political and military future of the region.

The score card is so far ambiguous. While Syria has recently reestablished relations with Egypt and signaled a new willingness to deal with Israel, Jordan is now permitting an unprecedented degree of cooperation between its army and Iraq's. This has included Iraqi reconnaissance flights along the Jordanian-Israeli border and the announced formation of a joint ground-forces brigade and a joint air force squadron.

The United States has a vital interest in seeing the Arabs choose the path of Egypt over that of Iraq. American policymakers must therefore begin to think in terms of a more comprehensive approach to the Middle East that moves beyond a narrow focus on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and seeks to integrate four strategic goals: deterring Iraq's hegemonic ambitions; maintaining strong political and security relations with Egypt and Israel; keeping Syria and Jordan out of Baghdad's military orbit; and continuing to facilitate an Israeli-Palestinian settlement. Pursuing these ambitious goals simultaneously will not be easy, but it is both possible and necessary.

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