

## Little Impact:

# The 9-11 Report and U.S. Middle East Strategy

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

**T**he 9/11 Commission Report is a remarkable and important document. The product of a serious and professional staff that enjoyed unprecedented access to highly classified information, the report is rich in information and has already shaped much of the discourse over the upcoming US election.

To be sure, the report will have far-reaching implications--both in terms of specific policy issues and how the US government is structured to deal with these issues--long after the next president is elected and takes office. By the logic of its own analysis, the conclusions of the 9/11 Commission Report should have especially significant and practical implications for US policy toward the Middle East. That was certainly its intent. But in all likelihood, that will not be the case in either the near or even medium term. This is despite a plethora of sharp analysis of the region and several recommendations specific to it.

From the outset, the report's analysis identifies the enemy not as "terrorism" or "Islam" but "Islamist terrorism," a perversion of Islam marketed by Osama bin Laden and others like him. The report recognizes the need not only to dismantle terror networks, but to defeat the ideology that supports them and, by extension, the economic and social ills that permeate the region and sustain this radical ideology. It calls for increased engagement and cooperation with Middle Eastern states; identifies political, economic and educational reform as critical to promoting tolerance and creating opportunities for legitimate political dissent; and cautions against the trend of "blindly" supporting "friendly" regimes that repress their own people and shun reform in an effort to retain exclusive control over the reins of power.

Similarly, the report's recommendations include such action items as calling for broadening the nature of the US-Saudi relationship beyond oil and security and for fostering public education in the region that teaches "tolerance, the dignity and value of each individual, and respect for different beliefs." It highlights the lessons learned from what it understatedly terms America's "unsuccessful diplomacy" prior to 9/11, especially regarding its efforts to solicit the cooperation and assistance of the Taliban regime and the two countries that recognized and assisted it, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates.

Why, then, despite its decidedly Middle East focus, will the report's impact on US policy toward the region be muted?

Because, unlike its detailed prescription for change within the US intelligence bureaucracy, the report's recommendations regarding policy toward the Middle East are broad and undefined. At the core of the problem is a conundrum the report itself highlights but never resolves: many of the near term (or tactical) goals prioritized in the report are hard to reconcile with its long term (or strategic) objectives.

How to promote "reform, freedom, democracy, and opportunity," for example, while at the same time strengthening the central authority of regimes deemed weak and susceptible of emerging as future safe havens for terrorists? The report wisely calls for economic reform and political openness, assessing that "backward economic policies and repressive political regimes slip into societies that are without hope, where ambition and passion have no constructive outlet." While strategically sound, the report also identifies the removal of terrorist sanctuaries as a paramount tactical objective but never prescribes a means of removing sanctuaries without empowering the very "repressive political regimes" it seeks to reform.

The practical implementation of the report's recommendations regarding the Middle East is equally vague. The report's call for change in the US-Saudi relationship, and praise for recent Saudi counter terrorism measures, is muffled by the commission staff's own conclusions in a recently released monograph that Saudis may still not have turned the corner. The staff's terror financing experts concluded that, "We cannot underplay, however, the reluctance of the Saudi government to make the necessary changes between 9/11 and the late spring of 2003. It remains to be seen whether it has truly internalized its responsibility for the problem." Pressing the Saudis to keep up the tactical pressure on terrorist elements will likely trump all other items on the US-Saudi agenda for some time to come.

The case of Saudi Arabia is paradigmatic of the general challenges facing decision-makers interested in implementing the commission's public education and diplomacy recommendations. Defeating the radical ideology that has increased--not decreased--terrorist recruitment since 9/11 is absolutely critical. But how to accomplish this goal while reigning in the continued state sponsorship of terrorism by regimes like Iran and Syria remains unclear.

The report's greatest contribution toward shaping US policy on the Middle East may have more to do with the report itself than its recommendations for US policymakers. Domestically, the report has catapulted critical policy debates to the front burner, though the bigger conceptual and regional policy issues have largely been overshadowed by the debate over intelligence reform.

The report is slated to be translated into several languages, including Arabic, and distributed widely throughout the Middle East, much the way American diplomats used to hand out translations of the Declaration of Independence and Mark Twain in local dialects. Perhaps once people in the region are able to read the report for themselves, and see that speaking truth to power and providing avenues for legitimate political dissent and criticism is possible, they will be further motivated to seek such freedoms and opportunities themselves. Until then, and as long as the call for reform is seen as an American agenda, the "promotion of such messages will be limited in its effectiveness simply because we are its carriers."

Matthew Levitt is a senior fellow in terrorism studies at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the author of *Exposing Hamas: Funding Terror Under the Cover of Charity* (Yale University Press, forthcoming 2005).

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