

# An Arab Liberal Looks at the Post-Saddam Middle East

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Brief Analysis

**T**he fall of Saddam Husayn's regime is a seminal moment in the Middle East. President George W. Bush has called for democratization in the region, and the predicted results vary widely, ranging from Arab radicalization to Islamist militancy to rapid political and economic liberalization. Although liberalism is a minority voice in the Arab and Muslim worlds, a liberal agenda aimed at replacing pan-Arabism, recognizing the preeminence of the nation-state, and revitalizing civil society is critical for political and economic development in the Middle East. Such an agenda must focus on reducing poverty and improving the welfare of individual Arabs in different countries. It must not emphasize a vague ideology or narrow, sectarian interests.

## Obstacles to Liberalism

In the Arab world, liberals are widely viewed as political dissidents, advocating the wrong ideas and values in a region that is illiberal, if not antiliberal. The majority of the Arab world has never fully embraced liberal Western ideologies, regarding them as vestiges of colonial domination. Indeed, the continuous struggle to reconcile these ideologies with Arab values has often exposed the region to decidedly illiberal foreign ideologies, which many regimes incorporated into their governing systems and national agendas. Saddam's regime was the most malevolent example of this phenomenon: a combination of Arab tribal loyalty and Western socialism, nationalism, and totalitarianism. Arab liberals are an oasis in a desert, confronted with the difficult task of reconstructing a region that has little experience with liberal developmental models. Hence, the Arab mainstream has yet to internalize President Bush's vision of democratization.

Given this backdrop, Arab liberals face a daunting challenge, not only because they seek political and economic reforms, but also because they must reform social and cultural values that are hostile to modernity. As a prerequisite to political modernity, Arabs -- populations and regimes alike -- must be disabused from their belief in pan-Arabism as a romantic dream uniting the Middle East. They must focus on reform -- political, economic, and civil -- in their own nation-states. Moreover, the debate on the compatibility of Islam and liberal democracy is irrelevant. It is not religion that is incompatible with modernity, but rather its practitioners who are hostile to change. Democracy and liberalism should not try to present themselves as being compatible with Islam. Instead, Arabs should create tolerant and liberal societies that are open to free religious expression.

## Rebuilding Post-Saddam Iraq

Although the U.S.-led war in Iraq has had some positive results, the response of the Arab mainstream has been catastrophic. Two views dominate the Arab world. The minority view holds that the region's main problems (e.g., corrupt regimes; poverty) are an Arab responsibility, to be solved in cooperation with the West. The majority view, however, is primarily concerned with nationalism as a tool for combating foreign enemies, real or imaginary. Consequently, most Arabs in the region see regime change in Iraq more as an imperial exercise than as a liberation or a passport to modernity and development. The mainstream Arab view contends that the United States cannot help Arab states because it is allied with Israel, and that Europe cannot help because it is a colonial power. This resistance to Western liberalism may also be rooted in the continued prevalence of tribalism in mainstream Arab sociopolitical

circles.

Democratization and liberalization in Iraq are possible as a long-term project, but the example of Central and Eastern European advances over the past fifteen years is inapplicable in this context. Arab liberals should join with the United States, Britain, and their allies in encouraging nation building as well as constitutional, rather than chauvinistic, nationalism.

More practically, the United States has an obligation to remain in Iraq and assist in the rebuilding process. Yet, U.S. forces should be ready to depart as soon as they accomplish their explicitly identified tasks in order to avoid becoming permanent occupiers. The challenges are formidable. First, the United States must help revitalize the Iraqi middle class, in part by inviting middle-class Iraqi expatriates to assist in reconstruction. Second, although "de-Ba'athification" is a critical step in creating distance between the new state and Saddam's Iraq, a distinction must be drawn between Ba'ath Party officials and party members. Whereas the officials were responsible for oppression and violence and should be barred from public service, approximately five million Iraqis became party members exclusively for professional viability. These Iraqis are not responsible for, and in fact may have suffered from, Saddam's tyranny, and they should be included in public service and reconstruction efforts. Third, U.S. forces must prevent Sunni-Shi'i discord, which could draw in Syria and Iran due to Sunni connections with the former and Shi'i ties with the latter.

#### Region-Wide Challenges

The first and foremost task for the United States and Europe is to help resolve the Palestinian issue. Bitterness arising from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict prevents Arabs from viewing U.S. policy favorably. Pressure on Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasir Arafat and efforts to end anti-Semitic incitement in the Arab world must be accompanied by equal pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and efforts to halt the expansion of Jewish settlements. Although the Palestinian leadership should be reprimanded for its actions and decisions, the Israeli leadership must stop speaking of negotiations in a manner that casts Israel as the sole proprietor of the land; such rhetoric comes across as colonialism and racism. A peaceful, evenhanded, negotiated resolution is essential if future U.S. policies are to succeed in the region and if Arab liberals are to pursue reforms.

Second, fissures between the United States, France, and Germany pose serious concerns for Arab liberals. Such divisions weaken the cause of liberalism worldwide, and efforts to mend these relationships are critical for Iraqi reconstruction and Middle Eastern democratization in general. The United States should not behave as, or become, a power that pursues its interests unilaterally, with callous disregard for the concerns of other nations.

Third, free-market capitalism, while good for rich people in the West, is not perfectly compatible with the Middle East. An element of social welfare is essential for the region, and social democracy is a must in order to lower poverty rates and improve individual welfare.

Fourth, U.S. domestic practices following the events of September 11 have reduced that tragedy to an ideology. Security-based fears have eroded certain civil liberties in America -- a bad example for Middle Easterners who are fighting against regimes that restrict civil liberties. Ultimately, the United States is the jewel of liberty, democracy, private enterprise, and multiculturalism, and no true liberal can be anti-American. Yet, liberals cannot be expected to support everything Washington does. Dissent is not anti-Americanism; it is liberalism.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Eran Benedek.

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