

Fighting on All Fronts

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A recent State Department security warning urged all Americans abroad to make sure their cars have a full tank of gas. The message itself was odd: Is there really a Foggy Bottom office responsible for the level of petrol in every expatriate's gas tank? But the emphasis on prevention was wise. The Bush Administration's foreign aid request shows that not all our overseas allies merit the same interest as our overseas automobiles.

Imagine a populous Arab country that lies astride a strategic waterway through which much of the world's shipping - including U.S. Navy aircraft carriers -- regularly passes.

This country has a progressive leadership that recently supervised an election universally recognized as free and fair. It also just won an encouraging evaluation from the International Monetary Fund for its economic management.

This country, an unabashed ally in the war on terror, even sends its intelligence officers to help ours in Guantanamo Bay. It does this despite having to face a growing and assertive Islamist movement, whose most radical elements frequently pop up as al-Qaeda operatives and whose moderate wing just tripled its parliamentary representation.

In short, this country is the quintessential "Arab moderate" state, with all the contradictions the term implies -- Beverly Hills-style homes wired with high-speed internet connections around the block from corrugated roof slums that lack running water; women clad in chic Parisian fashions arm-in-arm with cousins covered in black, puritanical, drape-like robes; mass rallies that echo with the chilling sounds of "Death to the Jews" not far from the only Jewish museum in the Arab world.

One would expect that this country, one of America's oldest friends, would be the target of an all-out effort to put the Islamist genie back in its bottle, and that it would encourage democratization and reward quiet anti-terror cooperation. The fact that it also meets the economic test of "aid effectiveness" -- assistance funds don't normally go down the drain or line ministers' pockets -- is an added bonus.

This country is Morocco. But the reality of U.S. policy is very different. By the universal yardstick -- money -- Morocco does not even register.

The international affairs budget recently proposed by the Bush administration shows that Morocco is scheduled to receive no aid for child survival and health; economic support funds; anti-narcotics efforts; or the now zero-budgeted U.S.-North Africa economic partnership. Money for U.S. Agency for International Development projects

will be cut again, reduced to a mere \$5.4 million. Morocco fares slightly better in two military -- related line items, including a doubling of foreign military financing to \$10 million. As proposed, total U.S. assistance to Morocco will be approximately \$17 million. Morocco may receive some funding from Secretary of State Colin Powell's embryonic Middle East Partnership Initiative, but because it is "too rich," it will not meet the cutoff for President Bush's much larger Millennium Challenge Account.

To put these numbers in regional perspective, aid to Morocco will amount to 56 cents per person. In Egypt, it will be around \$25 per person. In Jordan, it will be about \$90 per person. Even SCUD-importing Yemen will receive three times more per capita than Morocco. Of these, only Jordan can claim the trifecta of being a strong ally, with a progressive leadership and a track record of aid effectiveness.

Of course, Morocco is not a model country. Its politics are still much too opaque and secretive. Its king rudely dismissed Secretary of State Powell. And its phony war with Spain over a speck of Mediterranean rock showed how silly its foreign policy can sometimes be.

But in the fight against Islamism, we have to work with what we've got. True, Morocco will soon have a free-trade agreement with the United States, but it will be years before that deal makes Moroccan goods more globally competitive. Yes, Morocco is Europe's backyard, but Europe's aid is really only a device to keep Morocco's Muslims from swamping its shores.

Money remains the currency of commitment, and if the United States is committed to helping Arabs build productive alternatives to Saddam's tyranny and Bin Laden's jihad, then we are not paying up in Morocco. This would mean more for programs that deny the Islamists easy victories, i.e., programs that ease the cost of economic reform and that bring lonely Arab liberals -- scholars, entrepreneurs, government officials -- to America to gain confidence and contacts to work for peaceful change back home.

As we top off the tank for the ride to Iraq, Washington should still find the resources to put a few gallons of gas into countries like Morocco. Otherwise, we may find ourselves not the world's police but the global AAA. ❖

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