

The Old Middle East's Triumph:

Roots of Current Crises

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Brief Analysis

Why does the Middle East have so many crises and problems? This question is usually answered in one of two ways. The "just around the corner" view, often favored by Western government officials and the media, argues that the region's conflicts and lack of significant progress could be rectified quickly if only the proper policies and detailed solutions were proposed. In contrast, the "victim" view, often favored in academia and in the Arab world, argues that the area's problems result primarily from external aggression and oppression. The irony is that those styling themselves progressive and pro-Arab in the West actually do great damage to the lives of Arabs in the Middle East, in part by embracing reactionary dictatorships.

Both of these erroneous perspectives make it more difficult to understand the region, predict its course, or even devise proper policies toward it. The region's problems are in fact embedded in its existing political and socioeconomic systems. The core difficulty is that strong states with dictatorial regimes have been able to mobilize enough popular and institutional support domestically to block advances toward democracy, human rights, economic development, social change, higher living standards, peace with Israel, and strong relations with the United States. Ironically, even the Islamist, opposition groups in the region accept this arrangement, seeking only to give it a different flavor and apply it more vigorously, whatever its disadvantages for ordinary citizens. Thus, radical Islamist movements actually reinforce the roadblocks to progress.

The Defeat of Reform

For several decades leading up to the 1990s, most Middle Eastern states failed to meet their goals or even find workable strategies to deal with the requirements of peace and development. As a result of these failures, and in the wake of events such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, a great debate emerged during the 1990s regarding the need for change in the region. Initially, responses to previous failures in thinking and action resulted in positive developments such as the Arab-Israeli peace process, closer cooperation with the United States, the rise of a powerful democratic opposition movement in Iran, and a far more open discussion about reform.

By the turn of the millennium, however, Middle Eastern regimes and elites had successfully countered the movement toward change, viewing it as a threat to their own survival. More democracy would mean that they could

lose power or even be imprisoned for past corruption or abuses. Expanded human rights would mean that more people could criticize them openly. Economic reform would eliminate state controls established to enrich the elites, creating a middle class that would seek power. Finally, peace with Israel or truly close relations with the United States would strip the regimes of two of their most effective tools for maintaining control: anti-Israeli and anti-Western rhetoric.

Trump Cards

Despite their blatant self-interest, Middle Eastern regimes have had remarkable success in convincing most of their people to continue supporting failed systems and strategies. These regimes do not fear the Arab street; for example, the Iranian regime did not change its policies even after 60 percent of Iranians essentially voted to remove it from power. The regimes also make use of several trump cards to mobilize popular support and keep different constituencies in line. Military officers are given big budgets and privileges; the intelligentsia are given control over state media and schools, and therefore over ideology in general; businesspeople are given wealth through the state-controlled economy; and ordinary citizens are empowered with the role of defending Arabism and Islam against evil outside threats. Dissenters -- especially reform or peace advocates -- are often portrayed as agents of these external enemies.

This system will eventually break down, but the defeat of reform in the 1990s paradigm war was a major setback. To say that democracy might not take hold in the Middle East for another twenty to fifty years is no insult. After all, similar time periods have been required in parts of Europe and elsewhere. The Middle East is not essentially different from other regions, even if it is on a slower track.

Outside Intervention and the Question of Iraq

Can the West facilitate the development of reform movements in the Middle East? This is a difficult question, since identifying change with Western pressure and interests is one of the most potent tactics that existing regimes use to maintain the status quo. Yet, a basis for both progress and pro-American attitudes may emerge if those in the region perceive U.S. intervention as a means of ending the current impasse and creating a better life. Nevertheless, Washington must keep in mind that progress is difficult and that incumbent regimes will be antagonized by efforts toward change, perhaps generating problems in their relations with the United States. Given the stamina of the current system and the risks of involvement in domestic affairs, U.S. policymakers must understand the need for caution, patience, and limited expectations.

If the United States were to achieve an outstanding success in Iraq -- overthrowing Saddam Husayn and helping to create a better system of governance, however imperfect -- it could bring about a turning point in Middle Eastern history. The region's first great modern revolution took place in Egypt in 1952, ushering in a wave of Arab nationalist movements and regimes. As these governments failed, and as their ideologies were partly discredited, a second major revolution took place in Iran in 1979, bringing Islamist movements to the fore. Now that these movements have failed to take power elsewhere or fulfill their promises, a new era in Iraq could spark a third revolution, persuading people that democratic and moderate approaches are best.

The risks of intervening in Iraq are high; bringing democracy to Baghdad would be far more difficult than many think, and if Washington promises too much, its efforts could be judged as a failure at home and abroad. Yet, if a new regime were established in Iraq, most Arab states, seeing U.S. power, would be less eager to confront Washington and more ready to listen to its requests. Moreover, fear of stronger reform movements and U.S. efforts against them would not lead these governments to inflame the masses with anti-Americanism.

The Value of Stability

The old argument still makes sense: the United States should not take actions that destabilize its moderate allies,

whatever their problems. Radical Islamist parties still constitute the main opposition in states such as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, and undermining these regimes could damage the region and U.S. interests alike. Nevertheless, Washington should not be afraid to make reasonable demands of these states, asking them to support basic U.S. policies while still criticizing specific anti-democratic tendencies when appropriate.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Shoshanah Haberman.

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