

**“Bridging the Gap:
Building a New Partnership with the Arab World”**
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Jon B. Alterman, Ph.D.
Director, Middle East Program
Center for Strategic and International Studies
Washington, DC

It does not take much imagination to realize that the Middle East is in a historic moment. What happens in the next two years, and even what happens in the next two months, will have a profound effect on the future course of the Middle East.

There have been other tipping points in the past – the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, which radically redefined the borders of that conflict, as well as the balance of power between Israeli and Arab forces. It also helped pave the way for radical groups espousing violence and using the slogans and symbols of Islam to dominate the political oppositions in Arab countries. Before that, the string of secular military revolutions, starting with the one in Egypt in 1952, deposed monarchies and breathed life into the idea of Arab socialism.

Some events that were thought to be tipping points have proven less profound than expected. Chief among them is the Iranian revolution, which inspired no imitators and which perhaps has done more to delegitimize the idea of religious governance in the Middle East than to legitimize it.

What puts us on the brink of change now? Several different factors are coming together, all of which individually challenge the status quo, and which combined represent a powerful impetus for change. Tonight, I want to talk about those forces of change, and then I want to talk about what we should do about it.

I want to begin by challenging the idea that the Middle East is a region of great political instability. In fact, it's a region of unparalleled political stability. Many leaders have been in office for decades, from President Mubarak in Egypt, to King Fahd in Saudi Arabia, to President Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen and Muammar Ghadhafi in Libya. Not only that, but many of their ministers have held their positions for decades as well. Sons follow their fathers into national leadership not only in monarchies like Qatar and Jordan, but also in supposed republics like Syria, and, it is rumored, in the future in Egypt and Libya. Political systems remain remarkably closed, and economic systems remain remarkably tied to politics.

I'd like to suggest that one of the challenges facing Middle Eastern political systems is not that they are too unstable, but that they are too stable. Politics end up being about control rather than representation. Consequently regimes only respond when they are teetering on the brink of control, and then they dole out favors based on political necessity. In this way, they careen from crisis to crisis, rarely leading nor anticipating change from below.

For most of the last several decades, this system has worked adequately, at least from the perspectives of the regimes. It is worth remembering that there has never been a popular revolution in the Arab world, and while people may not be enthusiastic about their governments, they have not been moved to throw them off, either. That was the past. But looking forward, several factors are combining that suggest that regimes will not be nearly as successful meeting their challenges in the future as they have been in the past.

- 1) **Actuarial factors.** Most simply and directly, the leaders of the Middle East are older as a group than leaders in the rest of the world. In key countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and in the Palestinian Authority as well, the leaders have ruled for decades and are well over 70 years. One can see two potential issues here: one is that an increasingly infirm leader will find it hard to maintain control as he always has, and the second is that there will be a destabilizing power struggle after his death.
- 2) **Demographic factors.** As we all know by now, Arab countries have remarkably young populations. Forty-nine percent of the population of Yemen is under the age of 15, and 40 percent of the population of Saudi Arabia is under 15. But I have small children, and I don't find them all that challenging. The much greater challenge all these countries face is among youth 15-30. As a group, these people often out of school, and they are twice as likely to be unemployed as the general population. Their problem is a stark one: in many countries twice as many young people are entering the workforce every year as new jobs are created throughout these countries. On top of this, median age of marriage for males is approaching 30 in many of these countries, as they find it harder and harder to amass the savings required for marriage.

Without school, jobs or dependent families, these individuals are what one might call "socially unattached," which is to say that they have less to lose by extreme behavior. As a percentage of the population, they are a stable group – while the percentage of children under 15 will decline over the next half century, the percentage between 15-30 is projected to remain steady at between 25 and 30 percent of the overall population.

- 3) **Technology.** There was a good deal of loose talk in the late 1990s about how the Internet would change everything in the developing world, democratizing information and empowering citizens. It didn't quite work out that way, and internet penetration remains lower in the Middle East than perhaps any other region of the world. But while no one was looking, a much less flashy revolution has had a far more profound effect. Rather than embracing "high-tech," Arab publics have embraced what I would call "mid-tech," basically 1970s technologies like satellite TV, photocopiers, fax machines, and videocassette recorders. These technologies share several things in common: they are relatively cheap to the end user, they have a remarkably easy interface, and they facilitate spreading compelling messages to broad populations.

Consider this: for most of the last half century, Middle Eastern governments have relied on information ministries as part of their governing strategy. These ministries not only decided the "government line" which would be reflected in newspapers, on radio, and on television, but they were also often responsible for censorship. For decades, it basically worked. Now, their audience is evaporating. Unspeakably dull television does not have an audience – that audience migrates to other channels with more interesting fare. Sometimes that is al-Jazeera, but sometimes it is the Lebanese channel LBC, or Hezbollah's station, al-Manar, or the Saudi-backed variety channel MBC. The point is that the information environment is becoming increasingly crowded with alternative messages, and while governments never had a complete monopoly on that space, their dominance of it is under attack. Those who gain attention are those with a message or a style that resonates with their audience. The new environment creates opportunities for entrepreneurial individuals and groups, and spells trouble for hide-bound bureaucracies. Governments have lost an important tool in controlling their populations, and they will be hard-pressed to regain it.

- 4) **Geopolitics.** The Cold War underlay much of the U.S. approach to the Arab world in the last half century. In big ways and small, our involvement in the Middle East was intended to check Soviet expansion and secure Western energy supplies. Even our commitment to Israel was initially seen under this rubric. The beginning of U.S.-Israeli cooperation in the 1950s was nurtured on Israeli intelligence assistance against targets behind the Iron Curtain.

We are no longer in the Cold War, nor are we basking in the glow of the post-Cold War world. We are, instead, in what one of my former bosses in government liked to call "the post-post-Cold War world."

Washington is having lively debate over fundamental issues unlike any debate in the last half-century. We are debating the nature of threats, what our strategy should be, how we should work with other people, what we should expect from them, and what we need from them.

Most significantly, in the aftermath of September 11, there is a lively debate on how one deals with threats that do not come from states, but from non-state organizations that may have ties to states or groups within states. It is my sense that many governments, and especially Middle Eastern ones, do not fully appreciate the depth of change in American strategic thinking.

For many years, the U.S. government had a basic deal with many Arab governments: they mostly met American needs on an international level, and we mostly ignored what they did on a domestic level. This bargain is increasingly being called into question in Washington. In the private words of one senior official, "Our neglect is no longer benign." This is, in part, because of a sense among many that it is authoritarianism in Arab countries, combined with economic stagnation, that fueled the radicalism that led to September 11. It is also because of an assessment that governments will be increasingly hard-pressed to uphold their part of the bargain, as restive publics check governmental acquiescence to American needs, or support violent groups that target American interests.

While the U.S. government primarily has relations with other governments, there is a growing sense in Washington that it needs to broaden its approach, and for Arab governments this means a recasting of their relationship with the United States.

These four elements – the aging of the region's leaders, the growing youth of their populations, the rise of new technologies and new methods of mobilization, and a view in Washington toward remaking the political deals that have governed U.S.-Arab relations for the last half century – all suggest that the rules are changing for Arab states, and they will need a new agility to navigate the challenges of the coming years.

On top of all of this comes the recent – and forthcoming – events in Iraq. It seems to me, and to many of my Arab friends, that events in Iraq will have a deep and profound effect on the region, for a number of reasons. One is recognition of the fact that the Iraqi regime was strong enough to brutally repress its people for three decades, but so weak as to crumble instantly in the face of American military force. This suggests that even a strong regime by Arab standards is spectacularly weak by global standards. Second, the Arab states

were utterly unable to affect the American march to war, despite the almost universal opposition to war among their publics, and those governments' supposed alliances with the U.S. government. The Arab League was particularly ineffective, and its on-again, off-again missions to Baghdad and New York were a special embarrassment. Combine these with the governments general repressiveness – which ranges from moderate to severe – and their failure to deliver economic prosperity to their people and you have an event that challenges the legitimacy of a whole range of Arab states.

I have to confess that I've never been very optimistic about the future of post-conflict Iraq. There are a large number of competing interests within the country, and what may be an even broader array of competing interests outside the country. Few, if any, of them see the best path forward to be a pro-U.S. liberal democracy in which they continually compete for power. Further, I'm concerned that advertising our desire to use Iraq as a platform for broad political change in the Middle East convinces all the surrounding governments of one thing: it is in their vital interest that we fail. And let me point out one more thing: in order to succeed, we need to “win,” while for them to succeed, they only need to “not lose.” It is much easier to create a messy situation in Iraq than an orderly one. For many of Iraq's neighbors, messy is a far preferable outcome, and they have the tools to make it come to pass.

The need for change in the Arab world – the need for what was called a “nahda,” or renaissance, in an earlier period – is widely accepted, even among governments. Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia has been increasingly vocal about the need for political and economic change, and the UN Development Programme's Arab Human Development Report, issued almost a year ago, made the argument for change in stark terms. Written by a team of more than 50 Arab intellectuals, it identified three deficits in the Arab world: a knowledge deficit, a women's empowerment deficit, and a freedom deficit. Follow up reports will follow for each of the next three years, with the first, on the knowledge deficit, coming out in about two months' time. The Arab Human Development Report is a remarkable document, and it has received increasing attention in the Arab world since publication. This is not Americans telling Arabs how they should live their lives, or a Western cabal imposing their values on a weak Arab world; this is Arabs deciding among themselves where their future lies. And it is to this issue that I want to dedicate the balance of my remarks.

Many in the United States see a battle going on in the Middle East between liberal secular forces and reactionary religious forces. They argue that we should act to strengthen the liberal secularists, and help create societies based on American principles. I hope you'll allow me to be a bit provocative. I think

that's a mistake. As my former boss, Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan said of Al Gore in 1999, "Nothing is the matter with Gore, but he can't be elected."

If we look seriously at the Western educated liberal secularists in the Middle East, it's hard to avoid coming to the following conclusions about them as a group: they are increasingly aging, they are increasingly isolated, and they are diminishing in number. Taken by themselves, they are a losing bet. Even worse, our embrace of them makes them even more isolated in their own societies. Consider this: those pleading most for a change in U.S. policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict are not the hard-liners, who take U.S. hostility to their cause as a given, but the would-be reformers, who complain that our position vis-à-vis the Palestinians delegitimizes us and all that we touch in the Middle East.

It's my view that one of the key themes in Middle Eastern social, political and religious discussions over the next several decades will be "authenticity" – a debate over what it means to be an Arab, or a Muslim, and how one sorts through competing definitions and boundaries for what is truly Arab and what is a foreign imposition. To the extent that reform is identified as a foreign imposition forced on a weak Arab world, it will have an increasingly difficult time winning acceptance. Modern Arab history is full of such impositions, and their success has always been fleeting.

Our task should not be so much to promote the reformers we know and like, but rather to encourage them to broaden their coalitions in their own societies. They need to win support on their own terms, not on our terms. A warm reception in Washington is far less important than a warm reception in Cairo, Amman and Riyadh.

For our own part, we need to focus more on institutions than outcomes. One of the mistakes that Western organizations, and especially NGO's, made in the 1990s was trying to support a range of grass-roots civil society organizations in the Arab world. But in the rush for quick results, these grass roots organizations did not take – all of the sunlight and all of the nutrients were coming from the West, so it is any wonder that they did not establish strong roots in their own societies?

When we think about Arab reform, primary in our mind has to be the fact that it must be done *by* Arabs, not *to* Arabs. I worry that some in our government miss this point. They and their proxies outside of government announce bold ambitions to provoke change in the region, unshackling the oppressed and giving rise to a new era of freedom and prosperity. Most notable to me is that these individuals seem to know remarkably few people in the region and have only ill-defined plans for how change might be achieved. They seem convinced

that the mere delivery of their message will prove inspirational and provoke social change. They appear to have no clear audience in the Arab world in mind other than some ill-defined notion of “the masses,” and they can identify precious few in the Middle East who wish to work with them.

Rather than be inspired by their rhetoric, many Arabs with whom I talk and work react with deep skepticism. They quickly point out that if there were anything resembling democracy in the Arab world, the governments would be more anti-American rather than less. Therefore, they argue, American calls for democracy must be a trick to weaken Arab states, steal their oil and serve Israeli interests. I need not point out that this cannot be the response we seek.

Others in the government announce a more subtle commitment to Arab reform, but they too arouse skepticism. Secretary of State Powell launched the “Middle East Partnership Initiative” in December, which seeks to promote rule of law, economic transparency and economic progress in the Middle East. The first problem with the program is that it is under-resourced – only \$29 million region-wide in the first year, with additional requests in the out-years. But the core of the problem with the program is that it is turning out not to be much of a partnership at all. Arab governments complained that the program was launched without their input, and non-governmental organizations in the Middle East feel even more estranged from the initiative. Instead of building from the outside in to Washington, this initiative is being built from Washington out. In so doing, the initiative sows the seeds of its own failure.

There is no shortage of professional friends of the U.S. in the Middle East. They are English-speaking, often U.S. educated, and they make lovely company. They have a knack for telling us what we want to hear, and doing what we want them to do. But their impact in their own countries is limited, and unless we can reach out beyond this group to create new partnerships – not only on our own terms, but also on the terms of our putative partners – the exercise is doomed to languish.

The task before us is not to dump billions more dollars into the Middle East in the hopes that doing so will encourage moderation and reform, nor is it to super-empower our friends in the hopes that they can keep the wolves of radicalism at bay. It is, rather, to play a subtler role, seeking out new partnerships and supporting reform in modest ways.

From a governmental level, one of the most important things we can do is talk frankly with governments about the need for change and the methods to manage it successfully. Middle Eastern governments assert that they have been doing what they do for many years, and it has worked. We need to make the case

successfully that what has worked in the past will not work so well into the future, and that moderate change will be less disruptive to them than a sudden shift. We need to demonstrate to them how change holds out the best hope to preserve their interests rather than destroy them, and is the less risky strategy to pursue.

We also need to create more incentives for economic systems that undermine crony capitalism rather than preserve it. The Arab world cannot prosper as long as economic success is inextricably tied to political connections, and it cannot be free as long as economic inefficiencies are preserved as a way of preserving political payoffs. The only way around this, it seems to me, is to enlarge the economic pie conditionally, preserving economic benefits to current elites while creating new opportunities for additional economic actors.

Arabs are increasingly coming to the conclusion that their educational systems need revision. The forthcoming Arab human development report will further make the case that many have made already: that educational systems that focus on rote memorization, rather than reasoning skills, do a poor job preparing people either to be economic actors or citizens. But we need to be sensitive to the fact that education in every society is a hot-button political issue. We are much better off when Arab governments decide on the need for curriculum revision rather than seeking to impose it through strong-arming them in our bilateral relationship. Qatar and the UAE have gone down this path, and other countries are beginning to go there, too. We are helped, too, by the flood of information that new technologies bring. With so many contradictory narratives reaching young people, they will have to choose between them, creating receptive audiences for reasoning skills. We have to anticipate that educational reform in the Arab world will take a great deal of time. Even after governmental decisions are made to embrace change, teachers schooled in the old method will be reluctant to change their ways. Patience will pay off here, and being too aggressive could undermine the whole enterprise.

Finally, I hope you'll allow me to indulge in my nerdy side. If we're trying to affect the way people think and how they act, we have to be smarter researching the way they think and act, and what would change those thoughts and behaviors. Consumer research has become a well-developed science in the West, but the government does very little to research audiences overseas. Former Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Charlotte Beers – who had been highly successful in advertising before she joined government – used to be fond of saying, “What is important isn't what you say, but whether what you say has the desired effect on the desired audience.” All too often, we forget this wisdom.

I have seen a great deal of State Department-produced polling, and I was never sure what to do with it. It would often ask such questions like “Do you approve or disapprove of Osama bin Ladin?” I never knew what to do with the resultant numbers. The answers I’d be interested in would be to questions like, “Whose opinion most guides your judgments on the proper tenets of religion: friends, your local preacher, religious scholars whose writings you have read, government religious authorities or international religious authorities?” The answer to that question actually helps you decide targets for engagement.

Another thing I never quite understood was the lack of interest in hard data on what makes people good partners with Americans. There is a general sense that exchange is good, and we should do more exchanges. But how long should exchanges take place, at what age, and under what circumstances to produce the best results? Should we bring over a lot of high school students and place them with families for a year, or bring over graduate students or young professionals for three months? It’s not a trivial question, but it’s awfully hard to get people to think in fresh ways about it. Instead, people who staff programs for graduate students argue for more graduate students, those who work with high school students argue for more high school students, and so on.

What I have described thus far is just a set of tasks for the U.S. government. On the non-governmental level, the agenda is just as rich, if not more so. U.S. corporations can have a dramatic effect on the region, through their investment practices, training, charitable activities and others. In fact, we’re now starting up a project at CSIS on how multinational corporations can better target their charitable activities in the Middle East to promote moderation and reform in the region. Corporations have a far broader range of contacts than embassies, and they often have more resources at their disposal.

Educational institutions have crucial roles, too, not only training a new generation of scholars, but also partnering with existing institutions in the Middle East. The Middle East has a long history of being at the nexus of the exchange of ideas, and many texts that formed the basis of the European Renaissance had been preserved through Arab scholarship. We have a vital interest in the Middle East joining international intellectual currents, not to be swallowed up by them but to draw from them and contribute to them.

Finally, the Arab-American community has a role to play as well. Arab Americans, can play the role of a vital bridge between the Middle East and the United States. They understand both realms, and they are less threatening messengers to each party. In order to be effective, Arab Americans will have to embrace this role actively, becoming even more active in American domestic politics as well as deepening their ties to the countries of the Arab world.

I refuse to be pessimistic or defeatist about the future of the Middle East. There are problems, it is true, but there are opportunities as well. The changes I described at the beginning – new leaderships, young populations, new modes of communication, and new geopolitical environments – create opportunities for new balances to be struck and new alliances formed. We in the U.S. need to help, but we need to be mindful of our limits. The potential rewards are great, if we can strike true partnerships with the people of the region and help them achieve their own aspirations of a better future. The better future for them will be a better future for us as well.