

## MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

## Defining Engagement

by Jon B. Alterman

For much of last month, dramatic images out of Tehran displaced a brewing debate over “engaging Iran.” Similar debates over engaging Hamas and Hezbollah fell by the wayside, too, and the debate over engaging Syria seemed to have been decided in the affirmative, with the announcement that the United States would return an ambassador to Damascus for the first time in more than four years.

Just as the isolation of adversaries lay at the heart of the Bush administration’s strategy in the Middle East, properly calibrating engagement lies at the heart of the Obama administration’s strategy. For advocates, engagement with real or potential adversaries is an elixir that softens hostility and builds common interests. For opponents, it is a sign of surrender to dark forces of violence and hatred. Yet, for all of the passion that the issue of engagement excites, no one seems to want to define it. Each side would rather talk about the effects of engagement than the nature of engagement itself.

Part of the problem is a matter of definition. Refusing to have any official contact with a group or country does not constitute engagement. But what then? Engagement must mean more than merely holding diplomatic discussions, but how much more? How should issues be sequenced? Should symbolic statements be demanded at the beginning as a sign of positive intentions, or held to the end as part of a final declaration? Even staunch advocates of engagement differ on these key issues.

History is replete with examples of both engagement and disengagement working well. Europeans often cite the role the Helsinki Process played in diminishing threats from the Soviet Union; similarly, South Africa’s international isolation in the 1980s helped guide a transition to majority rule in the country. Disengagement followed by engagement can be effective too, as two decades of isolation of Libya, followed by a cautious engagement in this decade, have helped moderate Libyan behavior.

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## Azhar on the Airwaves

The communications revolution has long challenged the authority of religious institutions like Egypt’s millennium-old al-Azhar Mosque. For centuries, al-Azhar was a dominant voice on mainstream Sunni law and practice, and its influence reached from North Africa into Asia. Now, the Cairene institution struggles to be heard over the cacophony of Web sites, television programs, CDs, and DVDs that are freely available to Muslims around the globe.

According to some, al-Azhar needs better branding. In recent months, plans have been made to launch Azhari TV, a 24-hour religious satellite television station emphasizing teachings that pass muster with al-Azhar-trained scholars. The station, which is scheduled to begin airing in August, states on its Web site that it seeks to emulate al-Azhar’s blend of “scientific originality” and “moderation.” While it doesn’t explicitly state the competition, most existing religious channels in the Arab world have ties to Saudi Arabia.

Al-Azhar’s administration seems cool to the idea. Al-Azhar’s Islamic Research Academy issued an urgent statement last month saying the institution cooperates with all channels, not just ones using its name, and that it has neither influence, control, nor a financial interest in the new venture.

Importantly, though, they haven’t stood in the way, and there is more to come. The channel’s creators plan to launch an affiliated newspaper, radio station, a suite of blogs, and a cell phone service. Success will require establishing what the brand really means in all these new contexts, giving al-Azhar’s scholars something to chew on for the next thousand years. ■ RL

## CSIS hosts Admiral Mullen

The CSIS Gulf Roundtable hosted a Statesmen’s Forum on July 7, 2009, with Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In a speech entitled “Security and Stability in the Broader Middle East: A Cooperative Approach,” Admiral Mullen discussed cooperative deterrence of Iran, as well as ongoing U.S. activities in the region. While he did not rule out military action against Tehran, Mullen expressed hope for a productive diplomatic dialogue despite challenges presented by Iran’s recent elections and rapid nuclear development. On the Afghanistan-Pakistan front, Mullen expressed confidence in U.S. commanders newly stationed in the region, while acknowledging that the American campaign “is going to be tougher before it gets easier.” Click [HERE](#) to view the event. ■

The scorecards, however, are not always so clear. Regarding one of the most ambitious goals of engagement—nurturing moderate voices and common interests that help transform target groups and countries—people still disagree on successes. Arguments persist whether engagement has truly transformed groups such as the Irish Republican Army and the Palestine Liberation Organization, and whether Pakistan’s leadership is truly a partner battling terrorism. Even after decades, the fruits of engagement are often debated.

What is clear, however, is that engagement and disengagement both hold the seeds of their own failure. By engaging, countries may be throwing a lifeline to hostile groups or governments that are struggling for survival, allowing them to continue their hostilities. On the other hand, disengagement can engender further hostility as the costs of defiance wither in the absence of bilateral ties that targets seek to sustain.

In the Middle East, engagement is often taken to a fine art. Dialogues easily can be drawn out over years, and cross-border investment and coinvestment are common. Arabs start from the premise that they can only rarely change the chessboard, so they play the game before them with the most skill they can muster. Arab states often have a strong preference for engagement, especially with each other. Even when tensions are high, bilateral visits continue.

While Iran causes deep concern among most regional states, foreign ministers and heads of state continue to shuttle back and forth. The Arab states try to bring Iran closer rather than isolate it, persuaded that some level of Iranian threat is a likely constant in the region, regardless of who rules Tehran. They have inherited that threat from their ancestors and will bequeath it to their descendents. Yet, they argue, an Iran that has Arab interests to protect is less likely to make trouble than a country that feels desperate and cornered, and they continue to try to bring the Iranians in.

Underlying Arab tensions with Iran—and intra-Arab tensions as well—is an acceptance that some level of difficulty is inevitable, yet enemies are unlikely to merely fade away. It is as if they have learned the lessons of Fidel Castro’s Cuba, which has endured more than four decades of U.S. isolation without surrender.

The notable exception to Arab engagement is Israel, which most Arab states continue to shun. Although leaders are far more fearful of Iranian intentions toward them than Israeli intentions, popular sentiment and an underlying sense of Israeli injustice continue to block more regular Arab contact.

Something else is at work too. There is a deep sense that engagement with Israel would be from a position of weakness rather than strength. Militarily, technologically and bureaucratically, Israel is stronger than its neighbors. While its GDP cannot match that of major oil exporters, its non-oil economy is the envy of the region. Arabs, who are experts at engagement, are happy to have things in play with a weaker power (and they consider Iran weaker than the GCC as a collectivity), but they fear a give and take with a stronger power.

There is a lesson here for U.S. policy, which often devotes tremendous energy to the question of whom to engage and far less energy to the question of how to engage. In a world with enduring problems, engagement frees up the United States to use a wide variety of tools against weaker powers. If anything, those tools have remained underdeveloped. With a principled focus on U.S. objectives and a realistic set of both near- and long-term goals, a more pro-engagement U.S. foreign policy can have a dramatically positive effect on U.S. interests around the world. ■ 7/13/09

## Links of Interest

Jon Alterman was quoted by the *New York Times* in “Iranian Leaders Gaining the Edge Over Protesters.”

Jon Alterman was quoted by the Associated Press in “Analysis: Sept. may bring push for Iran sanctions.”

Jon Alterman was quoted by *Politico* in “G-8 climate deal elusive for President Obama.”

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