

Transforming Arab-American Discourse

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By refusing to grant legitimacy to the US-appointed Governing Council in Iraq, the Arab League has taken a stand that reflects international popular opinions about the character and content of American foreign policy. For reasons that are well known, most Arabs were resolutely opposed to the Bush administration's decision to resolve the problem of Saddam Hussein by invading Iraq, and they remain doubtful about America's underlying motivations, especially with regard to control of the region's natural resources and commitment to work for a just resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In their rejection of the new reality in Iraq, then, Arab leaders have made a decision that is truly representative of Arab sentiments.

Unfortunately, symbolic rejection of the new Iraqi reality does nothing to change this reality for the better. In fact, it may only make the overall regional situation worse, by deepening the rift of incomprehension and antagonism that divides Arabs and Americans, and making a "lose-lose" outcome in Iraq more likely. A decisive failure of US policy in Iraq would be a disaster not just for the United States, but also for Arab governments. Nightmarish scenarios of civil war in Iraq are frightful to contemplate, and they serve the interests of no one.

What Arab leaders need is a policy that is not only expressive in nature, but also strategically viable. The present Arab policy is not working. It does nothing to change the present course of U.S. policy, fails to articulate a set of achievable goals, and strengthens the hand of Bush administration hardliners. Even if this policy makes emotional sense and raises important questions about the legitimacy of US actions, it provides no means of transforming Arab convictions into positive outcomes. In other words, it serves the interests of Ariel Sharon much more effectively than the interests of Arabs and Americans.

From the standpoint of international legality, Arabs have a right to criticize the U.S. Fixated on the personality of Saddam Hussein and the fantasy of a hero's welcome, the Bush administration has chosen a dangerous path that evokes memories of Sykes-Picot. Contemporary American imperialism differs from British and French imperialism, however, insofar as American policy derives impetus not only from hubris and grand designs, but also from genuine fear of a region that the American people do not understand.

The United States is far and away the most influential external actor in the Middle East. However unfair it may be, the American game is the only game in town. There is no European game. To maximize their ability to shape a positive future for the region, Arab leaders should focus their efforts on changing the rules of the present game rather than on breaking them. To accomplish this, they will need a new approach to their relations with United States – an outcome-oriented approach that seeks to build mutual understanding,

trust, and shared positive power (as opposed to the negative power of coercion) for realizing common goals and objectives.

As they seek to improve the quality of Arab-American relations, Arab leaders should consider four essential principles of conflict transformation and common security. First, shift the focus of negotiations from official positions to more fundamental interests. When political discourse becomes captive to static positions, oppositional posturing and symbolism replace creative thinking about formulas for addressing shared as well as divergent interests. The simple truth is that authentic Arab and American interests converge on matters of peace and prosperity in the Middle East, particularly but not exclusively with respect to the peoples of Iraq and Palestine. Continued conflict may serve narrow and parochial interests on both sides, yet the likelihood that opportunistic and extreme agendas will prevail is greatly increased when Arab and American leaders begin to conflate their stated, public postures on matters of concern with basic national interests.

America's position with respect to the UN's role in Iraq, for example, is based in part on genuine concerns about possible deleterious consequences of ceding control to an organization whose modus operandi can be cumbersome and bureaucratic. It does not necessarily follow, however, that American interests and those of other Security Council members cannot be bridged in a manner that would improve upon the status quo. Likewise, the Arab League's position on the Iraqi Governing Council reflects genuine fears about the unfettered operation of US hegemony, even though deeper engagement on the part of Arab League members with groups representing different segments of Iraqi society might do more to advance the interests of all concerned parties. In both of these cases, focusing on potentially compatible interests helps to ensure principled flexibility on public policy matters, creating opportunities for new beginnings.

Second, complement discussion of issues with exploration of the collective attitudes that set the context for policymaking. Situations of conflict derive much of their volatility and staying power from adversarial attitudes and polarized perceptions that eventually become accepted as common sense. Cooperative examination of these attitudes can provide insight into the governing dynamics of a conflict situation, and help leaders to generate options for confidence building. It can also provide a vehicle for mutual education about deeply ingrained perceptions and significant cultural differences.

The importance of focusing on attitudes is highly apparent in the Iraqi and Israeli-Palestinian contexts. Americans could benefit a great deal by learning about how experiences of colonialism have determined Arab perceptions of the American presence in Iraq and Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Arabs, in turn, need to gain a more nuanced understanding of American attitudes toward Arab and Muslim grievances, so as to more effectively present their case.

Third, seek to move from the rhetoric of demands toward discussion of basic needs. Whereas the rhetoric of demands adds to defensiveness and hostility, discussion of needs provides shared insight into some of the most powerful factors behind contemporary

conflicts, including drives for identity, dignity, cultural integrity, security, development, and self-determination. Issuing demands to an adversary motivated by one or more of these needs only adds to the urgency and intractability of conflict behavior, and ensures that disputants will pursue security in adversarial ways that actually produce insecurity. The dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict provide a clear illustration of this; Israelis have sought to achieve security at the expense of Palestinian identity, and vice versa. The same dynamic could come to dominate Arab-American relations, unless there is a mutual recognition of needs and a shift toward deliberations about coordinated steps for providing appropriate satisfiers.

Finally, balance consideration of the rights and prerogatives of states with attentiveness to the impact of conflict on individuals. In the long run, any solution to conflict that does not provide scope for the full expression of the human spirit is bound to become unstable. Authentic stability is dynamic rather than static, and can only be achieved by fostering respect for the security and rights of individual human beings. The Arab Human Development Report provides essential guidance in this regard, and Arab states should consider new internal and regional initiatives based on its goals and objectives – not simply because this would please America, but because cleaning house and accepting responsibility for human development will help strengthen Arab states and enable them to carry more weight internationally.

By working in accordance with these principles, Arab leaders can catalyze a much-needed Arab-American dialogue about Iraq, Palestine, and other vitally important challenges. With respect to Iraq, Arabs might be able to devise a new formula that advances their most important interests by welcoming the new Governing Council (following the lead of the United Nations Security Council), on the condition that the United States take genuine measures to empower and expand it. At present the Governing Council advises Paul Bremer, yet the converse relationship is what Iraq needs: Paul Bremer should be advising the Iraqi Governing Council. In addition, the current composition of the Governing Council does not provide adequate space for Iraqis who chose to remain in their country throughout the period of Saddam Hussein's rule.

By taking the initiative, Arabs can help to insure due consideration of the interests, attitudes, needs, and aspirations of *all parties* who have a stake in the future of the Middle East within a framework that gives priority to dialogue and incremental confidence-building measures rather than to threats and coercion. Such a forward-looking, “common security” approach to discourse about regional problems and relations with the United States would help the US to recognize the Arab League's important role in regional politics, provided of course that Arab leaders are ready to define a proactive role that they want to play.

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