

# **The Crisis of American Policies in the Middle East**

*Reflections upon the Context of US-Middle East Relations*

By

Abdul Aziz Said

Mohammed Said Farsi Chair of Islamic Peace

Director, International Peace and Conflict Resolution Program,

School of International Service, American University

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## **OUTLINE**

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>I. Introduction</b>  | <b>3</b>  |
| Story of the King-Krane Commission (1919)   |           |
| <b>II. Theme</b>  | <b>5</b>  |
| Business community has an interest in addressing the contextual roots of tensions in US – Middle East relations |           |
| <b>III. The Reality of Failed Development</b>   | <b>6</b>  |
| Social and economic state of the Arab Middle East   |           |
| <b>IV. The Failure of Politics</b>  | <b>10</b> |
| Modernization theory and its failure in the Middle East   |           |
| <b>V. The Question of Context</b>   | <b>13</b> |
| Three stories of US – Islamic interaction   |           |
| <b>VI. Towards a New Approach:</b>  | <b>15</b> |
| <i>Resolving the Dilemma of Context</i>   |           |
| - Making peace with Islam   |           |
| - Developing forms of democracy compatible with Islam   |           |
| - Resolving crises in Iraq and Palestine  |           |
| - (Re)framing the war on terrorism  |           |

## **SPEAKING NOTES**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Focusing creatively on security concerns with a multi-dimensional, out-of-the-box approach in the past not only shored up the American power base but enabled the U.S. to curry favor in the Middle East, something it now desperately needs to replicate.

After World War 1, for example, President Wilson rapidly demobilized the army and in 1919 sent the King-Crane Commission to the region to hear the concerns of Iraqi, Syrian and Lebanese Arabs suspicious that European leaders were trying to usurp their mandates for independence. Backed by Wilson's "fourteen points of self-determination," the commission in 1919 pressured Britain (then colonial occupier of Iraq) to allow a new Iraqi state into the League of Nations.

After centuries of domination by the Ottoman Empire, 1919 became known as the Arab "year of hope," an invigorating transition that sparked visions of returning to the glory days of the Abbassids when Baghdad reigned as the center of the known world. America, as the principal guarantor of an evolving moral security order that combined liberal intellectual tradition with an ethos of self-determination, basked in the accolades.

The U.S. can dig out of its current problems and at the same time reverse its negative standing in the Arab world by proving equally resourceful in fine tuning its overseas policy.

Just as Wilson created a new set of political principles with which to guide a world emerging from war, America must revamp its security operations in Iraq. These traumatized, war shattered lands can transit to genuine stabilization and peace only in a climate of orderly political discourse, economic development, and cultural expression, after all. In a secure environment, political authority will take root and confer legitimacy on the temporary American role in Iraq.

## **THEME:**

1. International business community has an interest in the legitimate development of democracy within the Middle East
2. Business can assist\guide government in creating cooperative policies that seek long-term growth and stability in the Arab world
3. To do so, we must reflect upon the context of our interactions, and specifically address some of the more difficult contextual differences that require synthesis and dialogue:
  - a. Making peace with Islam
  - b. The development of democracy in the Middle East
  - c. The crisis in Iraq and Palestine
  - d. The dilemma of terrorism

## **THE REALITY OF FAILED DEVELOPMENT:**

1. The Middle East has been trapped by political violence and stagnating development throughout much of the modern period
2. Region has experienced almost constant interstate and intrastate conflict thus stifling political and economic development:
  - a. Lagging Political Development (Freedom House Index). In all major categories tracking freedom and political development, the Arab Middle East ranks as one of the most oppressive regions in the world
3. Economic and Social Stagnation:
  - a. GDP of all Arab countries (including North Africa) is less than that of Spain
  - b. Human Development Index: the region scores lower than Latin America, SE Asia, and East Asia – this includes lower averages for life expectancy and adult literacy
  - c. Large split in wealth distribution both between states and in states
  - d. Declining productivity and real wages since 1960
  - e. Double digit unemployment in each country

- f. Overall, the Arab Middle East suffers from a significant degree of stagnating development

These tensions manifest themselves in the current political landscape of the Middle East in terms of the situation in Iraq and Palestine. In fact much of the question of reducing tension can be boiled down to what to do with Iraq and Palestine:

1. Iraq

- a. Iraqi Tensions from violent conflict:

- i. Since 1945 state episodes of international conflict: 5, but involve over 20 states
    - ii. Since 1945 episodes of intrastate conflict: 7
    - iii. International fatalities: over 1 million
    - iv. Intrastate: ? conservative estimate = over 500,000
    - v. Post-Saddam era finds a security gap, multiple ethnic and religious fractions competing
    - vi. Anti-US\Governing Council insurgency

- b. Iraqi tensions from a deteriorating political and economic infrastructure:

- i. Entire state infrastructure destroyed by Saddam's rule and two wars
    - ii. Emerging elite (ethnic and religious) competition
    - iii. State is still without a vision - though the interim constitution has been signed, groups still will emerge to dispute certain aspects

- c. Iraqi social tensions:
  - i. The use and manipulation of Islam by the state
  - ii. Emerging political power to Shiites and competing views by Shiites of process of political and economic development
  - iii. Islam is becoming a rallying point for multiple disenfranchised groups

## 2. Palestine

- a. Palestinian Violent Conflict Tensions:
  - i. Since 1948 episodes of interstate conflict: 6
  - ii. International fatalities: over 150,000
  - iii. Since 1948 episodes of intrastate conflict: 10
  - iv. Intrastate: ? conservative estimate = ? over 170,000. as include civil wars and conflict in Jordan and Lebanon caused by refugee populations displaced from Palestine
  - v. In the midst of the second Intifada
  - vi. Violence is escalating, only point of nonviolent resistance is around the 'barrier'
- b. Palestinians tensions from a deteriorating political and economic infrastructure
  - i. Closures of West Bank and Gaza have a negative economic and political impact upon both Israelis and Palestinians
  - ii. Burden upon Israeli economy to maintain large ground forces and checkpoints, international blowback

c. Palestinian social tensions

- i. Internal divide in Occupied Territories between Islamic groups and nationalist oriented groups
- ii. Increasing use of Islamic rhetoric by Fatah
- iii. Growing apathy in Israel and increasing acceptance of violence

The experience of social, economic and political violence form a series of structures which inhibit the political development of the Arab polity and lock them into a cycle of historical memory predicated upon grievance, fear and retribution. To break this cycle and all its manifestations will require addressing the structures of violence in the Middle East.

## THE FAILURE OF POLITICS

1. To date, all western models of political development (i.e. modernization) have failed in the Middle East because they have only approached the Middle East with Western ideals and archetypes of social and political development
  - a. What is modernization theory
    - i. No monolithic theory; related to how different academic schools position the relationship between civil society, as the non-governmental capacity to shape the socio-cultural environment, and the state's corresponding ability to structure social relations. Different schools of modernization theory include:
      - ii. *Liberal School*: the development of open economic systems and democratic systems of governance, result from changes introduced into the social system that enable citizens to pursue their interests; ideologically related to pragmatism and positivism; example = Deutsch, relate modernization to the social capacity to sustain technological and structural change through non-governmental forces (i.e. media, education system, economic change, etc.). EXAMPLE: The Shah's Iran, US invests in local development disregarding political elite or their institutions

- iii. *Conservative School*: shifts the emphasis from the modes of social interaction as the dominant characteristic of political and economic modernization to factor traditional cultural values; political systems also reflect in the Weberian tradition cultural values; political development becomes a synthesis of modernity and values; programs of modernization shifted their attention to the state and state institutions. EXAMPLE: Egypt, the US invests (Sadat) in strong Egyptian state, seeking to modernize from the top down
  
- iv. *Marxist and Neo-Marxist*: focus on the classic relationship between labor and capital and run the gambit from Trotsky's never ending revolution to more moderate Neo-Marxist schools of political development (dependency theory, bureaucratic-authoritarianism, world systems theory, etc.) that offer the possibility of economic reform inline with the dominant modern system without a need for total revolution. EXAMPLE: Baathist socialism

In the end, all modernization theory ends at the same conclusion: the rest of the world must be integrated into the existing, Western dominated political economic order – the west is the universal order, the model of all state development – all alternative forms of social organization are taken as antiquated or inappropriate to the goals and structural orientation of western political economic systems.

It is a theory of displacement where the traditional is remade by the adoption of foreign modes of production (technology, organization, economic). The state is still not problematized as a political entity, nor are the dominant paradigms of liberal economic orders and democratic systems of governance taken as potentially coercive in respective regions. Both the liberal and conservative schools of modernization seek the convergence of the periphery of the world system with its western-core within the dominant political economic order. Thus, exporting modernity through advocating local modernization programs has the potential to produce local crises of governance to the extent to which it diverges from the existing social order. In this respect there is a structural crisis produced by traditional modernization attempts.

## **THE QUESTION OF CONTEXT**

Business community has an interest in accessing this large market considering its growth potential, but in order to access it in an equitable and sustainable manner will require coordinating cooperative policies for local development outside existing (GMI) and previous attempts to modernize the region.

We must transcend simply reflecting upon the failures to date of the interaction between the West and the Arab Middle East.

We delete the essential when we explain wars and large socio-political events only by so called determinant factors such as power, economic resources or even in ethno-political dimensions. When we do so, we reduce the complex reality of Islam and the Arab world to extract general statements about fundamentalism, extremism, and terrorism.

Muslims also do the same with even more dogmatic perceptions of the West as imperialistic, colonial, and anti-Islamic.

Both sides go out of context. Both sides take us back to ideologically empty debates. Both of these approaches are projects in retrospective, past oriented vision rather than prospective, future oriented vision. We cannot make peace with one another as long as the discourse continues to solely focus on the past.

We need to get away from the blame game. To escape the blame game will require understanding the context or the 'stories' we tell or could tell about one another.

Consider three stories:

1. Incompatibility and Confrontation

- a. Muslims see: an image of the West tainted by envy and admiration, fear and suspicion founded upon the collapse of empire and colonial experience; see West as in moral decay
- b. West sees: Islamic inability to enter modern world, Islam as alien, extremist based ideology; see Islam as irreconcilable with modernity

2. Compatibility and Coexistence

- a. Muslims see: prospect for coexistence of Islamic civilization and Western models of political and economic development
- b. West sees: shared cultural roots joining Islam (Hellenism, Abrahmic traditions) and the West, acknowledging the compatibility of the Islamic social critique and western political development

3. Convergence and Reconciliation

- a. Both see: their convergence in humanistic cultural pluralism; diversity is seen in terms of coexistence of political systems and ideas but not cultures

**TOWARDS A NEW APPROACH:**  
*RESOLVING THE DILEMMA OF CONTEXT*

Current US difficulties in the Middle East impede both policy options and stifle the ability of local and international businesses to develop the market and through such development ensure the convergence and integration of that which is best about both cultures and polities.

The regions conflicts are simultaneously a function of political and economic underdevelopment that generates a social cycle of violence and our inability to create a common context of understanding and appreciation between Arab Islam and the West.

To break the cycle will require new innovative approaches and cooperation between business leaders and government officials. Most of all, it will require a broader commitment to cooperative (vs. competitive) engagement in the Middle East, especially in relation to Iraq and Palestine.

In today's Washington, the legislative and executive branches of government subcontract more and more policy-related tasks to ideological workshops funded by wealthy donors and influential interest groups.

As an increasing number of Arab officials and intellectuals have come to recognize, these think tanks are the smithies in which US Middle East policy is forged.

All too often, prescriptions formulated by lobbyists and “policy entrepreneurs” take precedence over both the informed opinions of academics and the scruples of civil servants not to mention the desires of concerned citizens.

Those who understand how power operates in Washington’s policymaking circles face a difficult dilemma: How can they work with career diplomats to achieve joint solutions to political problems when policymaking power lies in the hands of political appointees and think tank staffers?

How can they talk to American officials about policies that are in the public interest when the institutions that actually make policy are neither public nor accountable to the American people?

This is especially relevant in four areas of concern:

1. Making Peace with Islam

- a. The history and structures of violence in the Arab Middle East creates a perpetuating basis for constructing negative stereotypes of each other; this only serves to radicalize religious and cultural ideologies
- b. There is a definite need to both address the roots of violence (autocratic regimes, lagging economic development) while simultaneously seeking cross-cultural dialogue to diffuse the existing negative context.

## 2. Developing Forms of Democracy Compatible with Islam

- a. There is a fundamental need to open Arab societies, but it must in a manner that is compatible with Arab and Islamic notions of social justice and interaction.
- b. Reconcile Western notions of political and economic development with Islamic notions of justice to produce an inclusive model of democracy that accepts the idea of freedom without alienating the either culture

## 3. Resolving the Crises in Iraq and Palestine

- a. At present the situations in Iraq and Palestine create a perception of Western hegemonic intent and indifference to the world view of the Arab Middle East
- b. Need to consider more balanced, cooperative approaches in dealing with Israel-Palestine, admitting our ability to be an impartial third-party and instead, seeking solutions that empower both parties
- c. Need to transform current mission in Iraq to engage local Iraqi voices in determining their own political future; our security in the future will be a function of the legitimacy of the regimes and policies we support as a nation

4. (Re)framing the War on Terrorism
  - a. Develop counter-terrorism policies that analyze the motives of terrorists and the larger social and systemic context of terrorism as political action
  - b. Reflect upon our own policies that might actually be counter productive and work to breed rather than contain and transform terrorism as international phenomena