
Perceptions in the Arab World and Debates in Washington: Analyzing U.S. Mideast Policy After September 11

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U.S. policy towards the Middle East took a dramatic turn after the attacks of September 11, 2002. Two aspects of this relationship are especially worth our attention. The first is the reaction of the Arab world to President Bush's agenda. Many Arabs have been increasingly critical of the U.S. during the months that have passed since 9/11, and it is important to know why. The second is the debate that is taking place in America itself over the prospects of aggressively confronting Iraq. This paper will present analytical frameworks for understanding each of these two issues.

ARAB PERCEPTIONS OF U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

Generalizations about Arab perceptions of American foreign policy are, of course, limited because of the wide variety of views across the Middle East and North Africa. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify opinions held by many people much of the time. In fact, a closer look reveals that these majority views

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have modified and shifted during the period between September 11, 2001, and the end of 2002 in part as response to developments in U.S. foreign policy. In that short 15-month period, Arab majority opinion about the United States has gone through roughly eight different phases. Although they overlap, each phase had a special focus.

In the first phase starting in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attack on the United States, the Arab reaction was predominantly sympathetic with America. Arab leaders and private individuals expressed sincere condolences as soon as they learned of the tragedy. At the same time, because the United States government identified the terrorist perpetrators as Arab and Muslim, Arab reaction included a large measure of embarrassment and dismay. In fact, some Arabs, watching the buildings collapse in New York, thought to themselves, "I hope the

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people who did that weren't Arab." When this turned out to be the case, they were chagrined. For some, this embarrassment was manifested in denial and a demand for "proof" that the perpetrators were actually Arabs as the U.S. claimed.¹ Rumors circulated in the Arab world that the attack was actually carried out secretly by Israelis in order to blacken the reputation of Arabs in

the United States. These stories were supposedly substantiated by the (false) Arab media report that Israeli nationals working in the World Trade Center had quietly left the buildings before the planes hit. Thus, while Americans believed their government was correct when it identified Arabs as the 9/11 terrorists, many Arabs asked for proof, in part because they hoped it was untrue.

In phase two, within days of 9/11, the focus of attention turned to Afghanistan. Here, too, Arab opinion was generally sympathetic to the U.S., as President Bush declared that he would bring al-Qaeda to justice and warned the Taliban regime to give up Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders or face military attack. The subsequent U.S. military action was generally accepted throughout the Arab world as a legitimate response to the 9/11 attacks, since it was assumed that America had a right to retaliate against the perpetrators. Thus, in this second phase, sympathy and support, or at least acquiescence to U.S. actions in Afghanistan, characterized the Arab view.

In phase three, however, the Arab-Israeli conflict began to complicate the Arab view. The Palestinian Intifada that had begun one year earlier continued unabated, as Palestinian suicide bombers repeatedly attacked targets inside Israel, while Israeli forces attacked Palestinians. Arabs were reminded every day of the Intifada because they saw detailed reports of violence in Israel and Palestine on al-Jazeera and the other Arab satellite television channels and in Arab newspapers.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon ignored President Bush's call for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the West Bank. Moreover, mediation efforts undertaken by Secretary of State Colin Powell and U.S. envoy in the Middle East Anthony Zinni brought neither reduction in the violence nor Israeli withdrawals, leading Arabs to think the powerful United States was not really serious about being helpful.

Meanwhile, as Washington refined the terms of its War on Terrorism, a debate developed over the definition of who was a terrorist. Arabs noticed that the official American list of terrorists contained only Arab organizations, and that it included Hizbollah, an organization that in Lebanon is a legal political party with members in parliament. To make matters worse, President Bush had called Sharon a "man of peace," alienating Arabs even more. In their view, Sharon was a man of violence who in the 1980s had been condemned by an Israeli investigation for his role in the Sabra and Shatilla massacre. Ultimately, Arabs felt that Israel's actions resulting in the death and suffering of Palestinian civilians amounted to "state terrorism," and that by praising Sharon, Bush ignored legitimate Palestinian grievances. They believed Sharon had hijacked Bush's War on Terrorism when he called Palestinians "terrorists."

In phase four, American and Arab perceptions increasingly diverged on the question of whether Arab governments were doing enough to fight terrorism. On the one hand, President Bush stressed that any government supporting or condoning terrorism was as bad as the terrorists themselves. American media editorials began to attack Arab governments, especially Saudi Arabia and Egypt, where al-Qaeda leaders and agents had been born and raised, for harboring or funding terrorists, or allowing their educational systems to create an atmosphere that spawned hostility to the West. On the other hand, by this time Arab governments had already begun to increase their cooperation with Washington, sharing intelligence, opening bank accounts to scrutiny, and detaining suspects as never before. Yet, they did so quietly. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and others defensively argued that since they had been targets of terrorists long before 9/11, they were natural partners in Bush's global war. Officials in Riyadh pointed out that bin Laden was also an enemy of the Saudi regime and probably selected Saudi nationals for the 9/11 attack in order to drive a wedge between the Saudis and the Americans.

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In phase five, President Bush increasingly referred to terrorists and their supporters as "evil," declaring that Iraq, Iran, and North Korea formed an "axis of evil." Just as the Arab states were in the process of developing a rapprochement with both Iran and Iraq, Bush's "axis of evil" declaration signaled that the United States was

now moving in the opposite direction. Arabs noticed in particular that two of the three "axis" countries were Muslim. Many Arab governments had by that time reestablished diplomatic relations with Iraq and improved commercial and other relations with Iran. Even the United Arab Emirates, which since 1992 had maintained a very tough stance on Iran, was beginning to soften. And concerns for the suffering of the Iraqi people caused by the U.S.-led sanctions were widespread.

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America had been in a continuous confrontation with Iran since 1979 and with Iraq since 1990, and consequently many Arabs found it puzzling and disturbing that America was intensifying the confrontation in this way. They saw no proximate justification for such an escalation.

In phase six, President Bush increasingly focused negative attention on Iraq, declaring the Iraqi threat urgent and calling for regime change in Baghdad. Senior U.S. officials

linked Iraq to the War on Terrorism, and sought to tie Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda to Saddam Hussein. The general reaction of Arabs throughout the region, even in countries close to Iraq, was that Saddam was not in fact an imminent threat to them or to anyone else, and that the time had come to change the sanctions regime which was only hurting the Iraqi people. They failed to see any link between Iraq and al-Qaeda, and pointed out that the strongly secular regime in Baghdad was anathema to Osama bin Laden and his radical Muslim fundamentalists. They added that the Palestinian situation was a far more urgent priority than Iraq.

In phase seven, the Bush administration began to talk about the doctrine of preemption. The White House argued that the policy of containment that had been the favored approach to the Soviet Union for decades was no longer sufficient to deal with threats. Accordingly, a more aggressive and proactive policy was necessary to deal with Saddam Hussein. In June 2002, in a speech at West Point, President Bush said, "We will take the battle to the enemy." It also seemed to many people from his robust and aggressive verbal attacks on Saddam that the President was prepared to take unilateral action without even trying to elicit international support.

The Arab world, especially the Persian Gulf countries, clearly opposed this doctrine. Virtually no one in the Middle East supports Saddam, and the majority of people would be glad if he were to disappear, but at the same time they did not want the United States to take direct action to remove him. Moreover, Arab governments friendly to the United States feared that such an action would implicate them in an outsider plot against an Arab leader with whom they were trying to reestablish better relations.

Until the fall of 2002, Arab governments repeatedly and clearly expressed their strong misgivings about an attack on Iraq, especially America's unilateralist approach, and said they would not participate in it. Then, in phase eight, seeing that President Bush's policy was gaining support at home and abroad, they began to mute their public criticism. Simply speaking, Arab governments did not want to appear to be obstructing the inevitable. The U.S. president had already secured a large majority in Congress in support of his demands on Iraq, and he seemed determined to disarm Iraq and remove Saddam by force. He also challenged the UN to support him and, after some negotiation, achieved a favorable UN Security Council vote on Resolution 1441—the U.S. negotiation efforts were so successful that even Syria, the 2002 Arab delegate, voted in support.

The UN vote helped to assuage Arab concerns about American unilateralism. Having secured the backing of Congress, it seemed clear that the President was going ahead with his aggressive confrontation, and most Arab governments were reluctant to alienate the U.S. They therefore softened their strong public opposition somewhat, although they retained considerable misgivings about possible U.S. unilateral action and the possible negative consequences of a military attack on Iraq.

By December 2002, only 15 months after 9/11, Arab attitudes towards U.S. policy had passed through these eight phases marked by shifts in the priority and primacy of American concerns. Cumulatively, they added up to a high level of tension in the Arab-U.S. relationship, and some anxiety on the part of most Arabs.

While Arabs retained a generally favorable view of the United States, they had become increasingly critical of American policy. The daily suffering of Palestinians under Israeli occupation was the highest Arab priority, while it seemed to be President Bush's lowest. Conversely, the Iraqi threat was Bush's highest, and most urgent, priority, but it was not considered either a priority or urgent by most Arabs. Moreover, to most Arabs, it looked as if President Bush was

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deliberately hostile to Arabs and Muslims (Palestinians, Iraqis, Iranians, and Afghans) while condoning Israeli actions. This impression was reinforced in November 2002 when an American Christian leader, Jerry Falwell, made derogatory remarks about Islam, which were immediately reported by the Arab media, and President Bush remained silent, not distancing himself from these remarks until after the American midterm election.

Thus, overall, on Iraq, Palestine, Israel, and even Iran, the Arab public has become increasingly critical of U.S. policy. Arab governments now seem resigned to an inevitable U.S. military strike against Iraq, realizing that they are unable to

stop it. At this point, they can only hope that it does not lead to substantial Iraqi casualties, chaos in Iraq, or serious popular protests in the Arab world against America and against the Arab governments that are friendly to Washington.

THE U.S. POLICY DEBATE OVER IRAQ

Increasingly during the summer and fall of 2002, a debate developed in the United States over several aspects of policy toward Iraq and Saddam Hussein. Generally speaking, there have been two very different policy approaches, each based on distinct schools of thought, about international relations and about Iraq in particular. For the reasons of convenience, the two different policy approaches will be referred to here by the old-fashioned terms “hawks” and “doves.” Prominent members of the Bush administration have been identified in the press as belonging to one or the other camp, even though these officials for the most part have refrained from carrying out their internal debate in public.

On the side of the hawks are Vice President Dick Cheney, Under-Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, and his Deputy Douglas Feith, while on the side of the doves is Secretary of State Colin Powell, his Deputy Richard Armitage, and his Director of Policy Planning Richard Haass. Among the prominent policy commentators outside the government, the hawkish view is defended by former NSC and CIA analyst Ken Pollock, who has written a new book on the U.S. policy towards Iraq, former UN arms inspector Richard Butler, *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer, *The New York Times* columnist William Safire, and others. The dovish view is expressed by former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, former Secretary of State James Baker, former Centcom Commanders Anthony Zinni and Joseph Hoar, and former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter, in addition to CSIS military analyst Anthony Cordesman. The following discussion is, however, not a precise rendering of the views of any one of these individuals, but rather a composite of views on both sides of the debate, intended to show how each side sees the various issues.

The Hawks

The “hawks” in the Iraq debate tend to make the following argument. First, they say that dealing with Iraq must be America’s highest and most urgent priority, because Saddam Hussein poses an immediate and credible threat to the national security of the United States itself and to our friends. They justify this by saying that Saddam Hussein has developed chemical and biological weapons and is working to develop nuclear weapons; that he has already used chemical weapons against Iran and against his own people; that he has launched wars against his neighbors (Iran and Kuwait); that he has violated UN resolutions and

fired at U.S. planes flying over his country; that he has supported terrorism; and that he may have links to al-Qaeda. They add that he is a cruel dictator who has violated the human rights of his people. The hawks conclude that as soon as Saddam acquires a nuclear weapon, he will use it to threaten and blackmail others, and that he probably will provide terrorist groups with weapons of mass destruction to use against the United States and its allies. Therefore, he must be stopped now before he can do all of those things. Pollock also argues that Saddam is "unintentionally suicidal," so he is likely to create a situation which is inherently dangerous for the United States and its friends.

Secondly, the hawks argue that it is a waste of valuable time to try to resume weapons inspections in Iraq because the UN experience in Iraq during the 1990s demonstrated that Saddam will only lie to and deceive the inspectors. Saddam will find ways to hide his weapons of mass destruc-

tion, they say, so it is useless to attempt to work with him. Rather, trying inspections again will only give Iraq more time to develop lethal capabilities. Moreover, foreign policy hardliners argue that Saddam is never going to change his behavior, and therefore the only way to deal with the threat that Iraq poses is to bring about "regime change," i.e., forcibly remove Saddam from power.

Third, they say that the United States should, as a matter of principle, make its own determination of what is in America's national interest and neither let others make that determination for it nor subordinate its interests to others. As the only superpower, the United States should rather use its position to take a strong lead in international affairs. With the U.S. in the lead, others will follow, the hawkish argument goes.

The hawks conclude, therefore, that the course of action the United States must take is to intervene directly in Iraq, remove Saddam from power, destroy all of his weapons of mass destruction, and do all of that unilaterally, if necessary.

The Doves

The "doves," or moderates, have different opinions on all of these issues. They do not believe that dealing with Iraq is an urgent priority. They acknowledge that Saddam has chemical and biological weapons, but point out that he has never used them when there was any danger of retaliation. They argue that deterrence has always worked on Saddam, giving an example of the 1991 Desert Storm operation when he fired scuds into Israel and Saudi Arabia but did not arm them with chemical or biological warheads as he could have—he knew that the United

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States would retaliate. Again, in 1994, when Saddam mobilized forces on the Kuwaiti border, the U.S. and others responded, and he retreated. In fact, the only times he has started wars, in 1980 against Iran and in 1990 against Kuwait, was when he was convinced that these countries were weak and that no one would come to their defense. After all, Saddam is careful and calculating rather than reckless. Moreover, to launch a preemptive war against Saddam because he has started wars or has violated human rights would set a bad precedent because there are many other leaders who have done both.

The doves further point out that Saddam is not suicidal, intentionally or unintentionally, but rather gives priority to his own political survival, which he has been successful at for 30 years. In fact, they argue, Saddam would not actually use any weapons of mass destruction unless he was clearly in danger of imminent defeat, and they cite the recent statement of the Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet in support of that judgment.²

Moreover, they argue that deterrence and containment worked for decades against the Soviet Union, which was far more powerful than Iraq, and that Iraq has not yet even acquired a nuclear capability. Even if Iraq is able to make one nuclear weapon, it will have to be tested, and the United States will know about

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it before a second one can be made. In other words, there is no particular urgency in dealing with Iraq. More importantly, they argue, Saddam would never turn over any weapons of mass destruction to terrorist groups because he is a “control freak” and would never take that risk—knowing that the United States would discover his involvement and punish him severely for it. As for threatening and blackmailing others, in order for Saddam to do that successfully,

his victims would have to be weaker than he is and without any means to defend themselves. In this case, however, the overwhelming power of the United States and its willingness to protect Iraq’s neighbors, Israel, and others, make it impossible for Iraq to threaten or blackmail the neighborhood, even if he had nuclear weapons.³

The doves also argue that there are much more urgent priorities than dealing with Saddam, namely prosecuting the War on Terrorism, completing work in Afghanistan, and helping to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They argue that putting Iraq first is a serious distraction that undermines progress on these other vital questions, all of which directly and urgently affect U.S. national interests.

As for acting unilaterally, they argue that dealing with Iraq effectively will require international support and involvement if it is to succeed politically as well as

militarily. Desert Storm was a success because it was endorsed by several strong UN Security Council resolutions; unless the United States secures equally strong resolutions now, it will be criticized for acting alone. More importantly, Desert Storm was endorsed by many key Arab governments, and they also participated directly in the military effort, thus demonstrating in tangible ways that they approved fully of the American-led attack on Iraqi forces. The result was that Saddam failed to rally Arab support against the United States, and Desert Storm is remembered in the Arab world as a genuine Arab-American effort and therefore is considered legitimate. The current Arab opposition or reluctance to join in an American-led attack on Iraq, in contrast, allows Saddam to rally Arab political support against it and creates a serious risk that such an attack will spawn more terrorist attacks on American interests.

Most importantly, unlike conventional wars which the U.S. could, if necessary, fight single-handedly, the War on Terrorism requires cooperation from many countries. Its success depends heavily on sharing of intelligence with other governments, persuading them to detain and interrogate nationals and visitors who are suspects, sharing sensitive banking information, and engaging in sophisticated international police work. Fighting terrorism cannot be done alone and will only be undermined by unilateralism. By the same token, the difficult task of rebuilding Afghanistan will take a concerted cooperative effort that requires allies and long-term cooperation with other nations.

On the question of arms inspections, the doves argue to follow the UN Security Council lead even if the inspections do not by themselves provide the whole solution: to brush them aside would reinforce the criticism that the U.S. is not really interested in disarming Iraq but only in removing Saddam and occupying Iraq for other reasons. Moreover, the UN inspection effort during the 1990s did lead to the destruction of more Iraqi weapons than Desert Storm did, so a renewed inspection regime might be helpful.

ASSESSMENT OF THE DIFFERENCES

Behind this “hawks vs. doves” policy dispute lies a series of substantially different assessments on what is likely to happen if the United States leads a military intervention against Iraq. The assessments differ on the probable extent of casualties, what will happen to Iraq politically, what impact there will be on the region and on terrorism, and what the cost will be to the United States.

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The hawks are optimistic on all counts. They are convinced that the military intervention will be quick, successful, and result in low casualties on all sides; they cite the Desert Storm experience in which Iraqi forces surrendered easily, and fewer than 150 Americans lost their lives. They expect to control and stabilize Iraq quickly in hope that the demise of Saddam will lead to democracy in Iraq, which will in turn be a model for the region, so that democratic movements will be promoted in other Arab countries. They expect that Iran will be so impressed with the strong American intervention against Saddam that the Iranian regime will, as a result, be more accommodating to Washington. Similarly, terrorists everywhere will put on notice that the United States is willing and ready to take firm action thus chastening their actions out of fear of any U.S. response. On the cost of the Iraq intervention, the hawks have said very little, but they have not indicated any particular concern that it will be difficult to pay.

The doves, on the other hand, have a much more pessimistic set of assumptions about what is likely to happen if the U.S. leads an attack on Iraq. They say that such a mission will not be as easy as Desert Storm, which only liberated Kuwait and did not aim at regime change. The United States will prevail, but the Republican Guard, the Ba'th Party, and others with a vested interest in Saddam's survival will resist, and casualties on both sides are likely to be considerable.

The real concern of the doves is not the military outcome per se but the political cost of an American-led invasion which has little overt Arab support.

Stabilizing Iraq will not be easy because many individuals and groups will contend for power, including the exiles, the indigent military leaders, the various Kurdish groups which will want at least as much independence as they have enjoyed now for more than a decade, and the Shi'a. Some members of Congress expect, for example, that Ahmad Chalabi would be an excellent successor to Saddam, but others in Washington strongly disagree because

Chalabi represents only one faction in Iraq, and he does not even have support of all exile groups. Moreover, Saddam has built a sophisticated government structure that will not easily be reformed, and because of that and of Iraq's history, the emergence of a democracy is highly unlikely. Democracy cannot be imposed from outside and it cannot develop over night.⁴

Nor will an invasion of Iraq lead to promotion of democracy in the region; Iraq has never been a model for the region and there is no reason to expect that it will become one any time soon. An attack on Iraq is not likely to intimidate Iran, where the hardliners may in fact benefit from the resentment of American intervention. By the same token, that resentment is likely to lead to more rather than less terrorism against American interests. The longer the United States

remains as an occupying power in Iraq, the more negativity will be built in its relations with the Arab world, as Arabs will see parallels with Israel's occupation of Palestine. And if Israel participates in the invasion, the Arab perception of American-Israeli anti-Arab hostility will be deepened. As for the cost of an invasion and subsequent occupation, unofficial estimates predict that it will exceed \$80 billion, the cost of Desert Storm operation. Moreover, while 80 percent of Desert Storm-related expenses were paid by others, this time the United States will end up paying for most of it because of the lack of coalition support.

The real concern of the doves, therefore, is not about the military outcome *per se* but about the political cost of an American-led invasion of Iraq which has little overt

Arab or Muslim support. Al-Jazeera and the other Arab satellite television channels would undoubtedly cover the invasion and occupation around the clock, and the inevitable suffering of the Iraqi people would be witnessed by millions of Arabs. The resentment generated by those scenes would help Osama bin Laden and other terrorist leaders find more recruits to act against the United States in order to express their deep frustrations against American foreign policy.

In summary, the doves believe that a military attack on Iraq is unnecessary and the costs of it by far outweigh the benefits. They prefer a different approach by Washington, which can be summarized as follows:

- Maintain a policy of containment and deterrence against Iraq, encourage inspections, and even support covert efforts at regime change, but eschew any overt military action;
- Give priority attention to the War on Terrorism;
- Help to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by forcefully putting forward a comprehensive peace plan;⁵
- Help to rebuild Afghanistan as a showplace for the benefits of U.S. intervention; increase U.S. assistance and encourage others to do so;
- Rebuild partnerships with Arab and other governments in order to facilitate the accomplishment of all four objectives above.⁶

It appears that President George W. Bush has leaned more in the direction of the hawks on policies and assumptions, and he may have gone too far in their direction to turn back, even if he wanted to do so. In the fall 2002, he did make some gestures in the direction of the dove camp by agreeing to try inspections one more time and by seeking a UN Security Council resolution to legitimize the effort. But

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he continues to insist on making Iraq his first and most urgent priority, and his preference seems to be to take firm and decisive action even if it is essentially unilateral. If the U.S. does attack Iraq, unless many unpredictable factors go well, the results, unfortunately, will not be what the American public has been led to expect from the optimistic estimates of the President's hardline advisors. ■

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, the report of an Arab-American student colloquium on reactions to 9/11 published in 2002 by AMIDEAST and the University of Maryland.
- 2 Tenet expressed this opinion in his October 2002 letter to Congress that was made public. For analysis, see David Korn, "CIA Intelligence Refutes Bush's War Rhetoric," *The Nation*, October 10, 2002; Julian Borges, "CIA in Blow to Bush Attack Plans," *The Guardian*, October 10, 2002, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/usa/story/0,12271,808970,00.html>> (accessed December 7, 2002).
- 3 Some of these points have been made effectively by John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "Can Saddam Be Contained? History Says Yes," November 12, 2002, <<http://www.comw.org/qdr/fulltext/mearsheimer-walt.pdf>> (accessed December 7, 2002).
- 4 Some of these points have been made in Anthony H. Cordeman, "Planning for a Self-Inflicted Wound: US Policy to Reshape a Post-Saddam Iraq," CSIS, December 3, 2002, <http://www.csis.org/features/iraq_wound.pdf> (accessed December 7, 2002).
- 5 Hussein Agha and Robert Malley make a case for such a plan in "The Last Negotiation: How to End the Middle East Peace Process," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, Issue 3 (May/June 2002).
- 6 After the operation Desert Storm, Richard Haass, the current State Department planning director, published *The Reluctant Sheriff: The United States After the Cold War* (Council on Foreign Relations, 1997). In the book, he stressed the importance of forming coalitions of like-minded countries to deal with crises.