

Repairing US-Arab Relations

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Journalists, businessmen and academics have a duty to reduce the dangerous gap between America's stated intentions in the Middle East and the Arab world's growing animosity.

Relations between the United States and the Arab world are passing through one of the most erratic and dangerous periods in modern history. This relationship now requires the full, deliberate attention of civil society activists in both regions, given its potential to spin out of control and transform recent anger and violence into a longer-term military and cultural war that can only result in losers on both sides.

The striking thing about this relationship is its inconsistency, with simultaneous signs of deep personal friendship and extreme public hostility. It is a condition that is unlikely to remain stable for very long, because of the many different ways in which American policies impact on the lives of ordinary Arabs. Within just nine months or so, the US has moved from being the looming giant over the horizon to being the 800-pound gorilla sitting in our laps, with a quarter of a million troops in the region and a stated policy of wishing to reshape the politics of the region to become more American and Israel-friendly.

The most dangerous and irresponsible thing to do would be to let this relationship drift and develop according to the whimsical forces of the political market place, now defined by a combination of mutual ignorance, fear, racism and militarism. This week, as I watched American and Arab television, I have cringed before the realization that our mass media largely portrays our two cultures as antagonists at war, and in many cases as cultural and religious threats to one another. Left alone on its current course, this relationship will move toward a troubling dichotomy by which Arabs and Americans relate to one another primarily through two dynamics: bullets and bags of money either the threats and use of military attacks, resistance and terror, or the attractions of material plenty.

It is impossible to approach any American institution in the Arab world, including schools, banks and fast food restaurants, without having to walk past a soldier. When you have to pass through a gauntlet of warriors to get to KFC, you know something is not right. American embassies around the Middle East more and more resemble the Roman legionary fortresses that dotted the Middle Eastern landscape in the second to fourth centuries AD not just in their physical layout of walled compounds surrounded by a security perimeter manned by Roman legionary troops and hired indigenous auxiliaries, but also in their political symbolism as politically and culturally alien outposts that are virtually cut off from normal contacts with the local people.

Arabs and Americans alike must share the blame for this sad situation.

Their shared legacy of political incompetence is being aggravated now at a much faster pace by the American presence in Iraq. Most Arabs view this presence as defined by a combination of illegitimate rationale, unproven justification, terrible human consequences, embarrassing political confusion, inept management and deep cultural insensitivity. The symbol of all that is wrong in America's approach to Iraq and the wider Arab world is US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who stated recently that Iraqis would "figure out a way to manage their affairs ... in a manner that is ... consistent with the principles that we set out."

Now I know what it must have been like to live in the days of the Emperor Diocletian, who reconfigured the eastern frontiers of the Roman Empire in order to make Rome more secure from threats from the east. But Iraq is not America's only face in our region. A string of recent American policy pronouncements and actions indicates the range of issues that concern Washington, at least rhetorically.

In the past year, the American president has invaded Iraq, removed its Ba'athist government and promised the Iraqi people freedom and democracy; he has pushed the establishment of the post of Palestinian prime minister and pledged himself to work diligently for a Palestinian state within three years; and, just last weekend, he offered Arabs states a free-trade zone with the US.

The generous view is that the US has finally woken up and wants to promote Arab democracy and Palestinian statehood in order to reverse the dire consequences of the two main policies that define it in the Middle East: the pro-Israeli tilt that allows Israel to continue to colonize Palestine and torment the Arab world, and the triumph of non-democratic Arab states that Washington has long championed, funded, and armed.

The more cynical view is that the US and its president remain oblivious to considerations of morality, equity or legality in the Arab region; are insincere about promoting Arab democracy, freedom or prosperity; seek only to do the minimum required to prevent more terror attacks against the US; and liberally make grandiose promises that they neither mean nor intend to keep.

American aims and preferences in the Arab world remain unclear.

Washington's words reflect the generous interpretation of its aims, but its actions tend to support the cynics who see Washington as preferring mild police states to real Arab democracy. This messy relationship can no longer be left alone to run its course according to the prevailing forces of the day. Those prevailing forces are now heavily influenced by angry, violent, almost hysterical minds both in the US and the Arab region framed chronologically (for Americans) by Sept. 11, 2001, and (for Arabs) by the attack of March 2003 against Iraq.

The instances where Arabs and Americans interact naturally and comfortably are dwindling in inverse proportion to the duration of the American military occupation/administration of Iraq and the arrogant Roman-like rhetoric of the likes of Rumsfeld. Arab and American officials continue to manage their countries' relationships with a combination of award-winning incompetence and insensitivity. The rest of us are not obliged to perpetuate such nonsense.

This is a moment where nonofficials in civil society especially academia, the mass media, culture and the arts, and business should step forward and rescue the relationship, so that it could reflect the best, not the worst, values that define both societies.

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