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Taking Arabs Seriously

By Marc Lynch

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Summary: The Bush administration's tone-deaf approach to the Middle East reflects a dangerous misreading of the nature and sources of Arab public opinion. Independent, transnational media outlets have transformed the region, and the administration needs to engage the new Arab public sphere that has emerged.

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RIGHT GOAL, WRONG APPROACH

For the hawks in the Bush administration, one of the keys to understanding the Middle East is Osama bin Laden's observation that people flock to the "strong horse." Bush officials think U.S. problems in the region stem in part from "weak" responses offered by previous administrations to terrorist attacks in the 1980s and 1990s, and they came into office determined to reestablish respect for U.S. power abroad. After nearly two years of aggressive military actions, however, the United States' regional standing has never been lower. As the recent Pew Global Attitudes survey put it, "the bottom has fallen out of Arab and Muslim support for the United States."

The failure to find dramatic evidence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction has spurred widespread debate in the Middle East about the real purpose of the recent war, which most Arab commentators now see as a bid by the United States to consolidate its regional and global hegemony. U.S. threats against Iran and Syria play into this fear, increasing a general determination to resist. And the chaos that followed the fall of Baghdad, the escalating Iraqi anger at what is always described as an American occupation, and the seemingly ambivalent U.S. attitude toward Iraqi democracy have reinforced deep preexisting skepticism about Washington's intentions.

Because of the speed with which intense anti-Americanism has recently emerged across all social groups in the region -- including educated, Westernized Arab liberals -- the problem cannot be attributed to enduring cultural differences, nor to long-standing U.S. policies such as support for Israel or local authoritarian leaders. Arabs themselves clearly and nearly unanimously blame specific Bush administration moves, such as the invasion of Iraq and what they see as a desultory and one-sided approach to Israeli-Palestinian relations. But perhaps even more important than the substance of the administration's policies is the crude, tone-deaf style in which those policies have been pursued. The first step toward improving the United States' image, therefore, must be figuring out how to address Arabs and Muslims effectively.

Ironically, for this administration above all others, taking Arab public opinion seriously cannot be considered either a luxury or a concession to "Arabists" lurking in the bureaucracy. It is instead crucial to the success of the administration's own strategy, which links U.S. security to a democratic and liberal transformation of the region. The Bush team's practice, however, has worked against its stated goals, largely because it has been based on misguided assumptions about the Arab world.

One such assumption is that Arabs respect power and scorn attempts at reason as signs of weakness -- and so the way to impress them is to cow them into submission. Another assumption is that Arab public opinion does not really matter, because authoritarian states can either control or ignore any discontent. Still another is that anger at the United States can and should be disregarded because it is intrinsic to Islamic or Arab culture, represents the envy of the successful by the weak and failed, or is simply cooked up by unpopular leaders to deflect attention from their own shortcomings. And a final, increasingly common notion is that anti-Americanism results from a simple misunderstanding of U.S. policy. Together, these concepts have produced an approach that combines vigorous military interventions with a dismissal of local opposition to them, offset by occasional patronizing attempts to "get the American message out" (through well-intentioned but ineffective initiatives involving public diplomacy, advertising, and the promotion of radio stations

featuring popular music). Not surprisingly, the result has been to alienate the very people whose support the United States needs in order to succeed.

Because the administration is right about the political, social, and economic stagnation afflicting much of the Arab world, the way out of the dilemma should not be to return to the traditional "realist" course of pursuing U.S. security interests through strategic alliances with local authoritarian regimes. Nor would a change in U.S. policy toward Israel and the Palestinians be a panacea, as the lukewarm regional reaction to the Bush team's promotion of its "road map" for Middle East peace demonstrates (although a more evenhanded approach to the road map's implementation would give the project greater credibility). Instead, the administration should continue its focus on fighting a war of ideas but change its strategy.

The United States needs to approach regional public diplomacy in a fundamentally new way, opening a direct dialogue with the Arab and Islamic world through its already existing and increasingly influential transnational media. Such a dialogue could go a long way toward easing deep-seated anger over perceived American arrogance and hypocrisy and could address the corrosive skepticism about Washington's intentions, which colors attitudes toward virtually everything the United States does. It might also help nurture the very kinds of Arab liberalization that the Bush administration claims to seek.

THE NEW ARAB PUBLIC SPHERE

Arab public opinion is a more complex phenomenon than conventional notions of a cynical elite and a passionate, nationalistic "Arab street" suggest. The street, or mass public, is real, and its views (expressed or anticipated) can indeed affect government policies. But what now matters more than the street, and sometimes even more than the rulers, is the consensus of elite and middle-class public opinion throughout the Arab world. Articulate and assertive, combative and argumentative, this nascent public sphere increasingly sets the course for the street and the palace alike. It is here that the battle of ideas about internal reform and relations with the United States is already being fought, and here that it must be won.

The emergence of this new public debate has been obscured by the Arab media's less-than-glorious past track record. During the 1950s, Egypt's revolutionary radio programs galvanized Arab audiences and transformed the political landscape, but the angry monologues they featured did little to promote rational discourse in the region. With the credibility of Egyptian broadcasts destroyed by Israel's devastating military victory in 1967 and with President Gamal Abdel al-Nasser's death soon afterward, the Arab media settled into a dreary parade of presidential receptions and official news. National press and broadcast media in Arab countries were subject to state control, with clear "red lines" governing acceptable speech. Occasional bursts of exciting press activity, such as the openings in Jordan and Yemen during the first half of the 1990s, tended to be local affairs, dominated by local issues, and were soon tamed by uneasy regimes.

During the second half of the 1990s, however, a genuinely new kind of Arab public sphere emerged, as satellite television brought disparate local debates in the various Arab countries and the Arab diaspora together in a remarkably coherent, common, and ongoing public argument accessible to almost everyone. Even as (or perhaps because) Arab regimes struggled to maintain their control over local media, transnational media emerged as an alternative location of vibrant and open political debate.

Whereas the broadcasting of the 1950s had been in the service of powerful states, the new media (both television and press) have self-consciously portrayed themselves as a mouthpiece for an Arab public deeply frustrated with all Arab regimes and beholden to none of them. Based primarily in London, the elite Arab press has been able to escape direct government control while drawing on writers and journalists from all over the world. Regular news roundups broadcast on the new satellite stations, along with the increasing availability of newspapers on the Internet for a small but growing younger following, have allowed this Arab press to reach a large audience. As a result, the staid and politically conservative national television stations have been rapidly losing market share and political significance. Yemeni President Ali Abdallah Salih, for example, once famously admitted that he watched the Qatar-based independent satellite network al Jazeera more regularly than he did official Yemeni TV.

It is easy to be skeptical about claims for the revolutionary impact of al Jazeera and its counterparts, but in this case the excitement is not misplaced. Unlike earlier stations, which focused on belly dancing and soap operas, from its launch in 1996 al Jazeera put politics first. Its talk shows pointedly included representatives from across the spectrum, promoting sharp arguments that made for good television and shocked audiences unaccustomed to such fireworks. Such a transnational media outlet naturally focused on issues of broad Arab concern, transforming Arab political culture in the process.

Many intellectual luminaries and influential political figures of the Arab and Islamic world (along with some foreigners)

now appear regularly on Arabic satellite television programs or contribute essays to Arabic newspaper opinion pages. The new media outlets spark arguments among viewers and readers, shaping the terms of debate and framing the understanding of the news. Television watching and newspaper reading are often communal affairs. During crises, cafes become virtual political salons, with patrons flipping channels, comparing coverage, and arguing vociferously about what they see.

The conventional wisdom that the Arab media simply parrot the official line of the day no longer holds true. Al Jazeera has infuriated virtually every Arab government at one point or another, and its programming allows for criticism and even mockery. Commentators regularly dismiss the existing Arab regimes as useless, self-interested, weak, compromised, corrupt, and worse. One recent al Jazeera talk show took as its topic the question, "Have the existing Arab regimes become worse than colonialism?" The host, one of the guests, and 76 percent of callers said yes -- marking a degree of frustration and inwardly directed anger that presents an opening for progressive change.

Al Jazeera may have pioneered the new format, but its success has sparked an explosion of market-seeking Arabic satellite stations broadcasting political news and argument. The field is intensely competitive, with the Saudi MBC, the Lebanese LBC-al Hayat, Hezbollah's al Manar, Abu Dhabi TV, and others contesting al Jazeera's leading position. Stations are eager to differentiate themselves; whereas some seek market share by engaging in what the scholar Mamoun Fandy has called a "political pornography" of radical views and shocking imagery, others cultivate an image of seriousness or an image attractive to cosmopolitan businessmen. Abu Dhabi TV, for example, did surprisingly well during the Iraq war with a less sensationalistic approach.

A TALE OF TWO WARS

These new Arab media increasingly construct the dominant narrative frames through which people understand events. In some ways, the absence of real democracy in the region makes the new media outlets even more powerful, since they face few real rivals in setting the public agenda. An effective approach to Arab public opinion today should therefore focus less on the street and the palaces than on the participants in and audiences of these new public forums.

The Bush administration seemed to recognize this necessity after September 11, 2001, sending numerous representatives on al Jazeera programs, but early enthusiasm gave way to frustration and fury over the network's sympathetic coverage of al Qaeda and hostile coverage of American policies toward Afghanistan and Iraq. The administration's pressure on al Jazeera to censor tapes of bin Laden made a mockery of its free-speech rhetoric in Arab eyes, and Arab journalists were disinclined to take advice on objectivity from the United States, where broadcasters wear American flags on their lapels.

But ignoring al Jazeera and its counterparts will not make them go away. Rather than shun them out of pique, the United States should try to change the terms of debate in the Arab world by working through them and opening a genuine dialogue. Doing so effectively, however, will require more than simply sending more officials onto talk shows, especially because all too often such appearances only confirm the viewers' worst stereotypes. On one recent al Jazeera program, for example, a running survey tallied votes on the question, "Is the United States acting as an imperialist power in Iraq?" The longer a prominent former U.S. official talked, the more voters said yes, with 96 percent voting yes by the end of the show.

Despite what some may think, such hostility is neither preordained nor unchangeable. After the September 11 attacks, wide segments of the Arab public expressed sympathy with the victims, and the elite media presented nuanced discussions of the attacks' implications. Yusuf al-Qaradawi (a prominent Islamist made even more famous by his regular appearances on al Jazeera) and five other leading moderates issued a fatwah condemning the terrorist attacks as contrary to Islam and calling for the apprehension and punishment of the perpetrators -- a remarkable intervention that received little attention in the West. Nor did the war in Afghanistan provoke universal opposition (although many initially doubted American claims of bin Laden's responsibility for the terrorist attacks). The real turning point for Arab public opinion was Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's bloody reoccupation of the West Bank in the early spring of 2002, with anger reaching a fever pitch during the battle over Jenin.

Few single remarks have angered more Arabs more deeply than President George W. Bush's description, offered at the height of the fighting, of Sharon as a "man of peace." Repeated endlessly in the Arab media, this sound bite came to symbolize the United States' inability to comprehend Arab sensitivities. Directed equally at the United States for failing to intervene and at local Arab rulers for failing to act, the fury created an atmosphere that shocked even seasoned observers of Arab opinion. A widespread boycott of American goods, albeit economically insignificant, became a regular part of political and cultural life in many Arab states. The mediocre Egyptian singer Shaaban Abdel-Rahim scored a breakaway hit with his anti-American song "Attack on Iraq." And by March 2003, many of the same Islamists who had backed the United States against al Qaeda -- including Qaradawi -- now urged jihad to defend Iraq against a U.S. onslaught.

For years, Iraq ranked alongside Palestine as an issue of collective Arab concern. It was al Jazeera's furious nonstop coverage of the 1998 Operation Desert Fox bombing raids that first gained the network a mass following, and support for the Iraqi people suffering under sanctions became a powerful defining principle of a new Arab and Islamist identity. It was no accident, therefore, that bin Laden invoked the sanctions on Iraq in addition to Palestine as a core issue guaranteed to mobilize Arab outrage. And it was a deep-rooted conviction that the United States was primarily responsible for the massive humanitarian suffering of the Iraqi people that left most Arabs skeptical about sudden expressions of concern for their "liberation."

In spite of all this, however, Arab opinion toward the recent war was not predetermined. Arabs have long been deeply divided in their views about Saddam Hussein's regime. Debate has raged on the pages of the elite press and in the al Jazeera studios over the extent of Saddam's responsibility for the suffering of the Iraqi people. Iraqi opposition figures regularly get heard, if only because their unpopular positions guarantee good television. And although almost all Arabs attribute bad faith and cynical motives to the United States, few think any more highly of Saddam. Every time he attempted a Nasser-style appeal to the Arab masses to rise up, in fact, he triggered a backlash that weakened his position.

It is conceivable, therefore, that more honest and less overbearing diplomacy by the Bush administration might have produced greater international support for a campaign against Saddam, even in the Arab world. But Washington chose not to go that route, relying instead on calculations that Arab public opinion would be won over by a quick and clean American victory in Iraq followed by images of Iraqis welcoming U.S. troops as liberators. Radicals would be shocked and awed by U.S. military prowess, the argument ran, while mainstream Arab publics would be impressed by the gratitude of the Iraqi people for their newfound freedom. Anti-American voices would be discredited, opening a window for new thinking and self-criticism.

This was always a somewhat implausible scenario, but the theory cannot truly be said to have been disproved, since it was never tested -- in fact, few Arabs witnessed the conflict the way neoconservatives in Washington expected. The war in the Arab media began with an isolated United States and United Kingdom attacking against the will of the entire world. The troops were seen to run into stiff resistance. And Arab coverage was dominated by civilian casualties, American casualties, bombed-out buildings, and angry Iraqis. The accidental bombing of a Baghdad market on March 28, for example, was showcased repeatedly and set off gusts of fury.

The sudden fall of Baghdad deflated the furor, but few Arabs had ever really believed that Iraq would win. The toppling of Saddam's statue, meanwhile -- an iconic moment that virtually shut down debate over the war in the United States -- received much less attention in the Arab media, which viewed it as a stunt stage-managed by the American military with few authentic Iraqi participants. And then the narrative segued quickly from a "tough fight" story to one of a quagmire of American and British mismanagement, Iraqi hostility, and rising guerrilla resistance.

In the language used to describe the war, American troops were always "invaders" rather than "liberators." The description of the American presence in Iraq as an occupation echoes the hated Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. And just as most Arabs consider Palestinian violence against Israelis to be a legitimate response to occupation, so the attacks on U.S. and British forces in Iraq since the war's end have been portrayed, and received, as both understandable and justified. In short, the Arab media have not given many Arabs reason to view the war or its aftermath as quick, clean, successful, or particularly benign.

DIALOGUE ANOTHER DAY?

Some elements of the U.S. government recognize the problem and have tried to correct it. Their efforts have focused on promoting the administration's policies through occasional media appearances by official and semiofficial speakers and promoting a positive image of the United States through popular culture. The former approach has achieved little, however, because the target audiences sense that they are being "spun," and the latter is unlikely to do much better. A planned U.S.-sponsored Arabic satellite television station will have a difficult time finding a market, for example, since any political content will automatically be discounted as propaganda, and existing satellite stations already fill the demand for music videos, reality shows, and mainstream entertainment such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer. The bottom line is that the new Arab media, both broadcast and print, are more than a match for any popular-culture alternative the United States might muster.

The Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, a panel established this July at the request of Congress, will therefore miss a crucial opportunity if it recommends simply greater resources for or better implementation of traditional approaches to these issues. What it should press for is a fundamentally different approach to the United States' interactions with the region -- one that speaks with Arabs rather than at them and tries to engage rather than manipulate. The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has distinguished between "strategic" and "communicative" action, with the first designed to manipulate others so as to further one's own self-interest and the

second designed to search for truth. This echoes a widely recognized distinction drawn by Arab thinkers between dialogue (*hiwar*) and other forms of intellectual combat. All too often, U.S. public-diplomacy efforts have fallen crudely into the strategic category and missed their mark for that very reason. Information has gone in one direction; the target's views and thoughts have been of interest only insofar as they could be molded.

Arabs and Muslims recognize and dismiss such efforts as propaganda, something they are quite familiar with from their own regimes. They are angered at being treated like children and feel the sting of contempt in being objects of manipulation rather than true interlocutors. As one Egyptian bitterly complained, "Americans think Arabs are animals, they think we don't think or know anything." Only by treating Arabs and Muslims as equals, listening carefully and identifying points of convergence without minimizing points of disagreement, will a positive message get through. It may be uncomfortable -- particularly for this administration -- but Washington needs to put its own interests and viewpoints up for discussion as well, rather than focusing solely on Arab pathologies. And words will have to be matched by deeds if they are to have any chance of persuading a highly suspicious and skeptical audience.

Nevertheless, if a call for true dialogue were ever sounded, it would resonate powerfully in the new Arab public sphere, where people have been discussing the concept obsessively ever since Iranian President Muhammad Khatami's abortive outreach to the West in the late 1990s. Rather than targeting Arab rulers or overbroad categories such as "youth," Washington should concentrate on engaging the intellectuals, politicians, journalists, and other public figures who have become so instrumental in shaping Arab public opinion. An ongoing, meaningful conversation with these new media elites could give them a stake in the success of the American enterprise by making it their own and perhaps even generate some level of common identity and purpose -- something that Arabs and the United States so glaringly lack today.

Successful dialogue requires minimizing power considerations and demonstrating mutual respect. Obviously, no U.S.-Arab dialogue could or should avoid the reality of American power, but invoking that superiority too directly would cripple efforts at rational persuasion. Arab and Islamist commentators focus obsessively on the imbalance of power and hardly need to be reminded of their weakness. Relying on "shock and awe" to win respect will alienate far more than it will persuade. Threats of force, no matter how useful in the short term, will entrench the impression of American hostility and ensure future conflict.

Unless the United States reaches out, it is unlikely that Arab attitudes will change spontaneously, for as it stands, ambitious politicians and public intellectuals have powerful incentives to criticize the United States in ever stronger terms and almost no incentives to defend it. Anti-American rhetoric earns one a reputation for authenticity, courage, and clear thinking, whereas a pro-American line -- though praised by Americans as the height of courage -- is usually perceived in the Arab world as cheap opportunism.

If the Bush administration seriously wants to rally Arabs to push for a more democratic and liberal Middle East and win their support for its occupation of Iraq and the war on terror, it must change those incentives. It needs to recognize that the elite Arab public can speak for itself, deeply resents being ignored or condescended to, and is more than capable of directly observing American words and deeds for inconsistencies. Frequent and appropriately frank appearances in the new Arab media by American representatives could have a salutary effect simply by changing the pool of participants and the style of argument, creating new ways for individuals to stand out and enhance their reputation. They could open up a space for influential Arab intellectuals to triangulate between the extremes, staking out a new, reasonable middle ground.

This does not mean simply assisting moderates and shunning radicals, however. Open American support goes a long way toward discrediting any Arab, so anointing favored candidates would likely doom them to irrelevance. It would be better to engage with the full spectrum of existing political debate, trying to shift the balance and style of argument by gradually inserting the United States into the conversation. Indeed, engaging those who hold hostile political views is more important than giving a platform to those who already agree with American positions. Currently, the vast majority of politically active Arabs -- most especially those Westernized and educated members of the new media elite -- feel powerless and frustrated. Giving them a respectful hearing could bring them into an ongoing discussion about realistic alternatives, other possible readings of motivations and actual policies, and a search for solutions in which they have a stake.

ARGUING THE WORLD

As a recent Council on Foreign Relations Task Force on public diplomacy put it, "there is little doubt that stereotypes of Americans as arrogant, self-indulgent, hypocritical, inattentive, and unwilling or unable to engage in cross-cultural dialogue are pervasive and deep rooted." Such attitudes color the reception of any initiative. At the same time, most Arabs are painfully aware of the urgent problems facing the Arab world. The goal of American policy must thus be to find

ways to engage this kind of public opinion -- eager for reform but suspicious and resentful of American power.

Any overture must begin with an honest recognition of Arab skepticism of American intentions: Washington must eschew grandiose rhetoric and instead acknowledge the full range of interests and motivations behind American policies. (Suspicious observers will assume self-interest anyway and take protestations of altruism as evidence of dishonesty.) And expectations should be kept low; a realistic goal for the near term might be to strive for a relationship in which American policy simply gets the benefit of the doubt.

The United States could begin by addressing the nearly unanimous consensus on American insincerity in calling for democracy. American policymakers have long hesitated about promoting democracy for Arabs out of fear that Islamists might win free elections. Now that political liberalization has been put forward as such a prominent American objective, however, the only way for the United States to retain any credibility in Arab eyes is by demonstrating its willingness to accept unpalatable electoral outcomes -- as it eventually did, albeit with bad grace, in Turkey recently.

Arab liberals complain that they have long been fighting for human rights and public freedoms without any palpable American support and ask why things should be any different now, at a time when the war on terror and public outrage over Iraq have made Arab regimes ever more repressive. They want to believe American promises and credit American good intentions, but Washington must give them a reason to do so. The goal should be to establish the United States, through words and deeds, as an ally of the Arab public in its own demands for liberal reform, rather than making such reform an external imposition. A recent al Hayat essay nicely captured Arab ambivalence about the United States' role: "We need to reform our educational systems even though the Americans tell us to." Washington should recognize such sensitivities, understanding that attempts to coerce change, whether through threats or hectoring monologues, will provoke resistance even among those who share its basic goals.

The most important item on the agenda, however, must be Iraq. U.S. actions there over the next several months will have more impact on American relations with the Arab world than anything else. Although Arabs remain deeply invested in the Palestinian struggle, most recognize the complexity and recalcitrance of that situation and understand that even an honest effort there could fail. But fairly or unfairly, in Iraq the United States is seen as having a free hand, and thus the outcome will be read as a direct reflection of Washington's intentions.

The current haphazard U.S. policies in Iraq, which most Americans see as pragmatic reactions to a deteriorating situation, are seen by most Arabs as evidence of malevolent American priorities. It is critical, therefore, that progress be made, and be seen to be made, quickly. Restoring public order and erecting a functioning Iraqi state is vital. American forces must avoid the temptation of heavy-handed military reprisals or of a retreat behind the high walls of Saddam's old palaces. Washington needs to be transparent in its dealings with the Iraqi oil industry and in its financing of reconstruction projects. It should move rapidly toward Iraqi representation in governance and enunciate a clear commitment to a meaningful democratic transition sooner rather than later. It should allow Iraqi newspapers a long leash in openly criticizing the American occupation, because although that would be uncomfortable and not always constructive, such openness would nevertheless set a powerful example of how a free press operates and greatly increase the credibility of any positive reports that might emerge. And Washington should make explaining what it is doing in all these areas openly, clearly, and continuously in the Arab media one of its highest priorities.

Certainly, no amount of dialogue will change Arab opinions about the United States and its intentions absent tangible changes in policy. But just as certainly, changes in policy cannot and will not speak for themselves. Pressing the Israeli government to dismantle settlements, allowing genuinely representative Iraqi elections, easing the visa process for Arabs to visit the United States -- all of these could help repair the damage incurred over the last couple of years, but only if they are explained through open debate in credible and independent Arab media.

A dialogue with Arabs offers no magic bullets. It requires patience and self-restraint, a sustained commitment to efforts that might not deliver immediate gratification. The Bush administration has to set aside its distaste for diplomacy, its penchant for threats and coercion, and its tendency to divide the world into simplistic categories of good and evil. But given the changes that have taken place in the Arab world in recent years, such a dialogue might well be the best, and perhaps the only, way to make progress in achieving the lofty goals that President Bush has laid out for the Middle East.

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