SURFING IN SAUDI

Women are all over the World Wide Web in Saudi Arabia. Websites specifically targeted to women—sometimes full of roses, hearts, and pink graphics—are an increasingly popular avenue for popular expression in the Kingdom. Many observers believe women constitute the majority in Saudi cyberspace, talking about everything from fashion trends to investment tips to personal relations. In addition, an estimated 54 percent of Saudi bloggers are women. In their hands, taboos fall one after the other.

Everything from Marxist criticisms of religion to descriptions of premarital sexual relations can be found on sites directed toward a Saudi female audience, even if bloggers and webmasters sometimes need to move swiftly to stay one step ahead of the censors. Many of the sites are not daring at all by Western standards. Some, such as Philosophy Café, merely create a public outlet for the kinds of public discussions that are common in many places, but sometimes rare in Saudi Arabia. Religious guidance is also common, and extensive sections of religious websites cater specifically to female audiences.

Although Saudi women have an equal voice once they are in cyberspace, getting there can be a different story. Many conservative households refuse an Internet connection in an effort to protect women and children from the temptations and depredations of the Internet world. As a consequence, women-only Internet cafés have sprung up in many cities. They seek to meet the growing demands of Saudi women to gather, to discuss, and to explore the increasingly rich offerings of the Arabic, female-oriented Internet.

DÉJÀ VU DIPLOMACY

By Haim Malka

As the Middle East marks the fortieth anniversary of the Six Day War, it is a remarkably different place. Nasserism is dead, Islamism is surging, and Israelis and Palestinians are facing deep internal political crises. The U.S. approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict, however, is eerily similar to the way it was forty years ago. Then, as now, Arab-Israeli diplomacy has been pushed down on the list of priorities, remained uncreative, and characterized by an all-or-nothing approach to peacemaking. That approach did not deliver in 1967, and it will not deliver today.

As in the Johnson Administration, the Arab-Israeli conflict has been overshadowed by another, all-encompassing crisis. In 1967, the crisis was a campaign in Vietnam that was going badly. American casualties were mounting, and the country was bitterly divided. The Johnson Administration was overwhelmed with the war, much as the Iraq War now dominates Washington. Then, as now, there was little energy left for high-level diplomacy.

Both presidents also came to the Arab-Israeli conflict convinced that their predecessors were deeply misguided on the issue. President Johnson adopted a “hands-off” policy in the aftermath of the war, after watching President Eisenhower force Israeli, British and French troops to withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula in their 1956 campaign. The result, Johnson judged, was a strengthened but no more pliable Egyptian government that rewarded U.S. actions by drawing ever-closer to the Soviet Union. President Bush saw the Clinton Administration’s efforts to broker Palestinian-Israeli peace falter after years of direct presidential engagement, only to see the Palestinian territories erupt into violence. In his mind, President Clinton’s 1998 trip to Gaza to preside over the revision of the Palestinian National Charter did not result in an historic Palestinian commitment to forgo violence, but instead was an example of Palestinians’ predilection for demanding tangible concessions in exchange for mere words.

In addition, both presidents have sought to bypass the Palestinian leadership. United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, largely drafted by the United States and considered the gold standard for any agreement, does not mention Palestinians at all, seeking only an all-or-nothing approach to peacemaking. That approach did not deliver in 1967, and it will not deliver today.

In inaugural Gulf Roundtable

Professor F. Gregory Gause III, an expert on the foreign policies of the Gulf states and Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Vermont, analyzed the creation of the “Arab Quartet” at the inaugural session of CSIS’s Gulf Roundtable. The Middle East Program has launched the monthly roundtable to examine current opportunities and challenges in the Gulf region, as well as future prospects and its evolving strategic role in the region and globally. Gause, while questioning the initial motivations behind the Arab Quartet, suggested it will provide the necessary diplomatic support for the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan to move forward on the Arab-Israeli political process. For the full summary please click HERE.
pick and choose those with whom it might negotiate; in 1967, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was not on that list; in 2007 the PLO is but the Hamas-led government of Palestine is not.

The net result of these recurring trends is that U.S. diplomacy has remained rigid, uncreative, and unable to cope with increasingly complex developments on the ground. Rather than seizing opportunities, the Bush Administration has sought to wait out the Palestinians until they meet benchmarks based on unrealistic expectations. However desirable those benchmarks might be in the abstract, they ensure that the conflict continues to claim lives on both sides. Meanwhile, the United States is losing credibility in the region, and its ability to influence developments is waning. The longer the conflict persists, the less impact U.S. diplomacy will have on solving the conflict.

Though their policies have been shortsighted, the administrations on the bookends of the last forty years are not alone in pursuing an uncreative and rigid strategy. Even the highly publicized bi-partisan Iraq Study Group, which called for a clear departure when it came to Iran and Syria, failed to offer a creative approach to Arab-Israeli diplomacy. The commission’s authors resorted to the same old formulas: direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians who accept Israel’s right to exist, leading to a final peace settlement. Those formulas have been tried for decades, and they have never been able to create a viable Palestinian state next to a secure Israel. Democratic strategists give no indication that their approach would be any different.

To be sure, direct talks are the only way to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, and a final agreement should be the ultimate goal. But under the current circumstances, with both sides unable to compromise on fundamental issues and their leaderships weak and fractured, there is little chance of success. Rather than the all-or-nothing approach which has guided every president since 1967, the United States would be wise to aim for a more modest coordinated withdrawal which seeks to lead Israelis and Palestinians to a new phase of co-existence and non-violence.

Promoting Palestinian unity rather than confrontation is the first step. The current armed conflict between Hamas and Fatah is not constructive, it is destructive. Without a basic understanding between Fatah and Hamas, no Palestinian leadership will be strong enough to implement even the most basic agreement with Israel. Instead of tacitly supporting the efforts of Saudi Arabia to end Palestinian infighting, the U.S. worked against it, funding Fatah for its armed confrontation with Hamas. Whatever U.S. ambitions might be, the current fight will not be enough to destroy either side, but it will weaken each and make it hard to forge a consensus on Palestinian national ambitions.

Palestinian unity is essential for any progress. An exchange of prisoners which would free Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit, and end rocket attacks against Israel hinge on the ability of Palestinians to overcome their internal differences. With an expanded and durable ceasefire the scene can be set for a coordinated Israeli withdrawal from significant portions of the West Bank, which many Israelis still support.

Regardless of who heads the Israeli and Palestinian governments, such a path is far more likely to succeed than an effort to begin building the framework for a final agreement. None of this represents the comprehensive agreement the United States has sought for the last forty years, but it may ultimately provide the only way of moving forward and providing some hope for greater stability.

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Links of Interest


Jon Alterman was interviewed on CBS about the Bush Administration’s talks with Syria.

Below are three examples of popular Saudi women’s websites: Philosophy Café, Al Frasha, and Saudi Eve.