

## **Strategic Partnership in the Middle East: Respecting Our Arab Allies, Realism About Ourselves**

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It is easy to talk about a U.S. strategy based on strategic partnership and coalitions. It is far more difficult, however, to make such efforts work. This is particularly true when the U.S. fails to honestly address its own problems and mistakes, minimizes the costs and risks involved, and exaggerates criticism of its allies. Strategic partnerships need to be forged on the basis of an honest understanding of the differences between the partners, respect, and mutual tolerance of their different needs and limitations.

Some of the recent U.S. criticism of its Arab allies is justified, but much of it is exaggerated, makes sweeping generalizations, and ignores the differences between the values, priorities, and strategic interests of the U.S. and each Arab ally. At the same time, there is a false equity in U.S. criticism of allies like Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE – not to mention another key regional ally, Turkey.

The worst mistakes in U.S. criticisms lie in implying that all allied states and Arabs are alike, and every ally should share our values and strategic goals. Our Arab allies tend to make their worst errors in criticizing the United States in the form of conspiracy theories, a lack of attention to facts and numbers, and unrealistic expectations about the ability of the U.S. to solve their particular set of problems.

Both sides need more objectivity and transparency, more realism about the strengths and limits of any alliance, and more understanding and acceptance of the real world differences in their values and strategic interests.

An American can get very tired of the sillier Arab conspiracy theories; the notion that the U.S. has the ability to wave a magic military wand, and that the U.S. has sinister motives whenever it fails to do so. It is even easier to get tired of charges that the U.S. is somehow the helpless captive of Israel or the persistent idea in the Gulf that the U.S. is abandoning its Arab allies in favor of an alliance with Iran.

At the same time, Americans have their own conspiracy theories when they state that every Arab state which has failed to come to grips with terrorism and extremism supports Jihadist movements and Islamic extremism. Americans also need more realism about the nature of strategic partnerships. Americans should not expect Arab allies to change their regimes to become clones of the U.S., or to give up their values,

priorities, and strategic interests. They should not expect to receive more than given Arab allies can credibly deliver. Like the U.S. – and our allies – every Arab government faces major limits to what it can and cannot accomplish as an ally.

### **The Iraq War (and its Aftermath) versus Arab Interests**

One way of putting these comments into perspective is to begin with the invasion of Iraq in 2003. It is all too clear in retrospect that the U.S. went to war for the wrong reasons. It ignored the balance of power between Iran and Iraq. It assumed that Iraq posed a missile and weapons of mass destruction threat that did not exist.

Key policymakers felt Iraq was a sponsor of terrorism and of al Qaeda when it was not. And perhaps worst of all, the war plan simply assumed that after Saddam Hussein was driven from power, Iraq would suddenly emerge as a wealthy, stable democracy, without outside aid or any serious stability operations. And, policymakers incorrectly believed that U.S. combat units could begin leaving Iraq within 30 days of Saddam's fall.

Most Arab government had serious reservations about removing Saddam, not because they trusted him, but because Iraq was still a strong enough military power to counter and contain Iran. Many of the Arab officials involved, especially the Saudis, also feared a U.S. invasion of Iraq could unleash sectarian, ethnic, and tribal tensions that could quickly spiral out of control. All, however, still supported the invasion to some degree. Even Saudi Arabia quietly allowed air operations over its territory and U.S. Special Forces to operate out of Ar Ar on the Saudi-Iraqi border.

The end result was instability that evolved into a major civil war, the virtual destruction of all of Iraq's military forces, and then sudden U.S. military departure at the end of 2011. This departure was partly the result of Maliki and Iraqi politics, but that several of President Obama's most senior cabinet members have now publically stated that it was avoidable and should never have occurred.

The end result is that Iraq is now trying to edge out of a low level civil war between the Shi'ite dominated central government and Iraq's Sunnis, and resolve deep divisions between its Arab and Kurdish populations. The United States, Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar must also contend with the fact that more than a decade after 2003, they are fighting an air war against the Islamic State.

It is an air war that can never succeed unless the U.S. is far more successful in overcoming the consequences of its invasion of Iraq than it has been up to now. Iraq's military forces are more a farce, than a force. Iraq will not be stable until its Sunnis can be brought back into supporting the government, and Arabs and Kurds can unite. Largely thanks to the US, Iraq's forces have lost their ability to deter Iran, and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has a major advisory presence in post-Saddam Iraq.

The U.S. needs to be honest about the blame it must take for its actions, and about the reaction of its Arab allies. Thanks to the U.S. and Maliki, no Arab state, as yet, has an incentive to actively support the Iraqi government, or can trust Iraq's new government to give its Sunnis a fair share of wealth, political power, and security.

Moreover, in spite of the opposition Arab states have to the Islamic State (ISIL/ISIS) they have a critical disincentive to support Iraq's central government in any military action that favors Shi'ite over Sunnis.

## **Iran and the Consequences of U.S. Mistakes in Iraq**

What unites the U.S. and its Arab allies in spite of these problems and U.S. mistakes is that they all have a common fear of Iran and the Islamic State. U.S. military action which crippled Iraq's military establishment in 1991, and then virtually destroyed it again in 2003, allowed Iran to reemerge from its massive defeats at the end of the Iran-Iraq War and become a major regional military power.

It was also an Iranian threat that was far more direct and immediate to Arab states than the risk of Iranian nuclear weapons that is the focus of US, European, and Israeli concerns. Iran built up a massive missile force and capability for asymmetric warfare in the Gulf. Its IRGC and Al Quds force not only became a major influence on Iraq, but came to play a critical role in supporting the expanding support to Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) in the Gaza Strip, and then in supporting Assad in Syria.. They also came to play at least some role in Bahrain and Yemen.

This virtually forced the Arab states to carry out a major military build-up and turn to the U.S. as the last Western power that could project major amounts of military force to protect them. Saudi Arabia and the UAE had to make major increases in their air and air defense capabilities to deter and defend against Iran. All of the Gulf states have had to buy some form of missile defenses.

All faced a naval-air-missile threat to traffic through the Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, as well as to key cities and infrastructure facilities on or near the Gulf coast. They had to turn to the U.S. to provide the additional military forces they needs and much of their arms imports –a dependence that includes U.S. bases, common exercises, dependence on command and control and intelligence assets, and ongoing orders of U.S. arms that now collectively are worth more than \$50 billion.

This is the context that has led Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to join the U.S. in deterring and containing Iran and attacking the Islamic State or provide military bases the U.S. can use in doing so. This is why Jordan and the GCC governments cooperate with the U.S. in terms of military exercises, provide active or contingency basing, and make purchases of U.S. arms. While the Arab states have key strategic interests in doing so, any American criticism *of* them should be tempered by consideration of the continuing legacy of U.S. mistakes in Iraq.

As for the U.S. side of strategic dependence, the U.S. could not tolerate a military vacuum in a region whose oil exports were critical to world trade, the manufactured imports that support the U.S. economy, and limit the growth of energy prices. While U.S. petroleum imports dropped to some 8% of total U.S. imports in 2013 and are projected to drop further through 2030, the U.S. Department of Energy reference cases still projects that the U.S. will import some 32% of its total liquid fuels by 2040.

More significantly, indirect U.S. energy imports will continue to rise. The CIA World Factbook indicates that total U.S. imports rose to some \$2.3 trillion dollars in 2013, or some 14 % of a total U.S. GDP of \$16.7 trillion. Some 86% of those imports came in the form of manufactured goods, and roughly 60% of those imports came from countries dependent on petroleum imports and at least 30% from Asian nations critical dependent on Gulf oil and gas. No one can deny the advantages the U.S. has gained from increases in U.S. and Canadian oil and gas production, but energy independence is at best a myth that can only affect direct petroleum imports, and will not affect growing U.S. dependence on indirect energy imports in the form of manufactured goods.

### **Arab Stability versus the “Arab Spring”**

The tensions that shape the strategic partnership between the U.S. and its Arab allies have been further compounded by divisions over how to treat the massive political upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa that began in 2011. This time, both sides made serious mistakes, but the U.S. needs to both admit its own mistakes and understand and respect the different perspectives and needs of its Arab allies,

The stability of your neighbors doesn't matter all that much when you are safely across the Atlantic or the Mediterranean, and you can largely ignore political upheavals. It particularly doesn't matter when the U.S. and many Western countries assume that instability means progress and adopting their “universal” values. It doesn't matter when you make the mistake – as many U.S. policymakers did at the start of the “Arab spring” -- of ignoring the historical reality that most revolutions do not end in stability or democracy, ending instead in prolonged civil conflict and periods of political extremism and/or authoritarian repression and excess.

The regimes in the Arab states that did not descend into chaos or civil conflict and had to live with these upheavals saw them create millions of refugees, help fuel violent Islamic extremism that threatened every existing regime, fighting between Sunni and Shi'ite, and conflicts between ethnic groups and tribes. They saw political warfare and cases where millions were displaced from their homes and business or made refugees outside their country.

Syria, Yemen, and Libya were the worst cases, but every upheaval created major new political, economic, and governance problems in the country where it took place, and critical new risks to the nations on its borders and throughout the region. The Arab regimes that are our allies may not have been altruistic in seeking to protect their rule, but Americans do need to understand the priority they gave to limiting political change, preserving existing governments, internal security, and avoiding similar upheavals in their own territory. It is equally important to remember that security, the ability to earn a living, and the ability to raise children are also human rights.

Another priority of regional Arab allies is the ability to live without the fear of extremism and terrorism coming from within, or from the outside. With the exceptions of Qatar, some elements in Kuwait, and a non-Arab Turkey, each of our Arab allies sought to limit the role of Islamic movements like the Moslem Brotherhood, and place even tighter controls on Islamist extremists.

Somewhat ironically, many allied Arab regimes also saw the U.S. as more tolerant of Islamist politics and parties than they were, and this was particularly true in the case of Egypt – which all saw as a critical influence on other Arab states. In fact, the Arab perception that the U.S. encouraged the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was a source of considerable tension between the U.S. and states like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait. These tensions have eased now that the Egyptian military have overthrown and suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood, although some officials in other Arab states privately admit that the level of military repression in Egypt has become a problem in its own right.

## **Syria and the Importance of a Sunni and Arab Identity**

The key exception was Syria, and here Americans and Westerners need to realize that the struggle for the future of Islam -- and for a Sunni and Arab identity -- has become as serious as the problems the West once had to live with because of the Reformation and Counterreformation. While Syria is the most obvious case, this struggle is almost as serious in the case of Iraq, and affects every Arab country where there is a significant Shi'ite or other non-Sunni population.

A strategic partnership cannot ignore the fact that religious and cultural values define all of our Arab partners. These values help explain why the Sunni Arab states soon saw the largely Sunni demonstrations and then uprisings against Assad – and Assad's violent suppression of the Sunni opposition – as a cause they could and should back. They were willing to support rising rebel movements that often had an Islamist character, and money and arms were transferred to rebel forces that were linked to – or part of – the Al Nusra Front and/or the movements that became the Islamic State.

It is also important to note, that Turkey – and not most Arab states other than Qatar – focused far more on Assad's removal from power, tolerated the more extreme Islamist movements, and was the key corridor for the flow of foreign volunteers, money, weapons, and trade to what became the Islamic State.

Once again, the US needs to admit its own mistakes and take responsibility for them. Much of the limited Arab support to the more extreme rebel movements that actually did come from the governments of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait was a response to US failures. It only came after the US refused to provide serious support to so-called moderate rebel groups during the period in 2011 when they dominated the effort to overthrow Assad and had a real chance of driving Assad from power. That support also largely ceased at the official level the moment given rebel elements clearly emerged as Islamist extremists.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE sharply restricted support to Islamist groups when Al Nusra Front and/or the movements that became the Islamic State became a major force in the rebel movements. Jordan, Bahrain, Oman, and the UAE never provided significant state support to such movements. Kuwait did not provide major official support, but its steadily more divided politics and inadequate financial safeguards and regulation meant that some major donations did occur or transited via Kuwait.

Qatar was the only Arab government to take major risks in the transfer of funds and arms, and feel it could coopt such Islamist movements – actions that led Saudi Arabia and UAE, to put severe pressure on Qatar and then withdraw their ambassadors. Qatar has since joined the broader Arab alliance with the US and other outside powers.

The question of which side made the most mistakes in dealing with the “Arab spring” and Syria is scarcely one where the US can put the majority of the blame on Arab states. It also makes no sense for Americans to treat all Arab states as the same, or see all allied Arab governments as somehow responsible for the rise of Al Nusra or the Islamic State – a movement which grew out Sunni disaffection and fighting in Iraq during 2003-2008.

As Secretaries Clinton, Gates, and Panetta have made clear, there were many senior voices that felt the US missed a key window of opportunity and must share the blame for a nightmare where Assad remains the primary threat to the Syrian people and Syria’s neighbors. The Islamic State is emerging as a center of massacres, executions, and repression, and is now creating hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced persons.

It is Assad, however, that substituted violence and repression for reform in 2011. It is Assad who was responsible for the more than 9.3 million Syrians that the UNHCR said were at risk in September 2014, for more than 192,000 civilian dead by the most conservative estimate, for more than 3 million Syrian refugees outside Syria, and for more than 6.5 million displaced Syrians still inside the country.

(See: UNHCR, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486a76.html>;  
<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>; and Source: UN OHCHR/UNAMI , Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict in Iraq: 6 July–10 September 2014,  
[http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/IQ/UNAMI\\_OHCHR\\_POC\\_Report\\_FINAL\\_6July\\_10September2014.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/IQ/UNAMI_OHCHR_POC_Report_FINAL_6July_10September2014.pdf).

## **Cooperation in Counterterrorism vs. Arab Support of Islamic Extremism**

Arab support of violent Islamist extremism is an all too real problem, but Americans also needs to realize that it is far more of an immediate problem for Arab governments than it is for the US or Europe. There are many alienated young men throughout the Arab world, living in countries whose economies do not offer jobs or meaningful careers. There are many who do not distinguish between Islamic charity and education, and Islamist violence and extremism. There are vast private savings, many in Europe and Asia that can be funneled in support of extremist movements. Arabs in Jordan, the Arab Gulf states, and throughout the Arab world have contributed to and still contribute to Islamic extremist causes.

No Arab Ministry of the Interior, or real world Arab counterterrorism expert, would privately disagree with the broad trends reported in the Statistical Annex to this year's state Department Country Reports on Terrorism that found there were 27,664 terrorism-related incidents in the Middle East and north Africa (MENA) between 1970 and 2013, and that the number of major incidents increased from some 300 major incidents a year during 1998 to 2004 to some 1,600 in 2008, 1,500 in 2010 to 1,700 in 2011, 2,500 in 2012, and 4,650 in 2013.

(See the data base annex to the *US State Department Country Reports on Terrorism, 2013*, April 2014, ([http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?start\\_yearonly=&end\\_yearonly=&start\\_year=&start\\_month=&start\\_day=&end\\_year=&end\\_month=&end\\_day=&region=10&asmSelect0=&asmSelect1=&dtp2=all&success=yes&casualties\\_type=b&casualties\\_max=](http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?start_yearonly=&end_yearonly=&start_year=&start_month=&start_day=&end_year=&end_month=&end_day=&region=10&asmSelect0=&asmSelect1=&dtp2=all&success=yes&casualties_type=b&casualties_max=))

These increases could not have taken place without local support, Arab volunteers, and Arab contributions, and a recent study by Seth Jones of the Rand Corporation found that,

- There was a 58-percent increase in the number of Salafi-jihadist groups from 2010 to 2013. Libya represents the most active sanctuary for Salafi-jihadist groups in North Africa, and Syria the most significant safe haven for groups in the Levant.
- The number of Salafi jihadists more than doubled from 2010 to 2013, according to both our low and high estimates. The war in Syria was the single most important attraction for Salafi-jihadist fighters.
- There was a significant increase in attacks by al Qa'ida-affiliated groups between 2007 and 2013, with most of the violence in 2013 perpetrated by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (43 percent), which eventually left al Qa'ida; al Shabaab (25 percent); Jabhat al-Nusrah (21 percent); and al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (10 percent).

(See Seth G. Jones, *A Persistent Threat: The Evolution of al Qa'ida and Other Salafi Jihadists*, Rand,

But, *and it is a critical but*, these increases did not take place with the support of allied Arab governments. They took place in spite of steadily increasing counterterrorism activities by key allies like Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Saudi Arabia treated Al Qaida and violent Islamic extremism as a threat long before the US came to focus on it after 9/11, and created massive new counterterrorism efforts after Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula launched a series of attacks inside Saudi Arabia in 2003. Jordan stepped up its already impressive efforts after a series of attacks by Al Qaida in Mesopotamia that was a spillover coming out of the fighting in Iraq.

Virtually all Arab regimes fully realize that extremist movements see them as illegitimate, if not as apostates. Key officials have been threatened and attacked, and virtually all of the real world casualties of terrorism and extremism in the Arab world have been Arab and the vast majority have been Sunni Muslims. Key governments like Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have all taken major new steps to limit the flow of money and volunteers since the rise of the Islamic State, and Oman has always had relatively tight controls.

It is also Arab and Arab regimes which are the primary target of extremists and terrorism. The US often thinks of itself as the focus for terrorist attacks, and virtually all Western countries focus on the real or potential threat posed by foreign volunteers, but virtually all US official data tracks with another key conclusion of the Rand study: "Approximately 99 percent of the attacks by al Qa'ida and its affiliates in 2013 were against "near enemy" targets in North Africa, the Middle East, and other regions outside of the West, the highest percentage of attacks against the near enemy in our database."

A review of the unclassified data on the counterterrorism efforts in individual Arab countries in the annual editions of the State Department Country Reports on Terrorism since 2003 shows that expert in the US government see a steady increase in the effectiveness of the counterterrorism operations of key most key Arab allies, with the exception of Kuwait and Qatar.

The U.S. Treasury does not comply with the legislative requirement for an annual unclassified report on progress in limiting the financing of terrorist and extremist movements, but experts indicate that such progress has again been significant by most governments aside from Qatar. The key problem lies in private donations and financing, and the continued ability to use banks and financial institutions in some European and Asian countries with limited oversight and controls places serious limits on what Arab states can do.