

## **KISS GOODBYE TO A LIBERAL MIDDLE EAST**

By Michael Young Daily Star, Opinion (Lebanon) November 16, 2006

Amid the joy surrounding the defeat of the Republicans in last week's midterm congressional elections, I might be forgiven this dissenting observation: With George W. Bush so roundly beaten, don't expect much American interest, in the foreseeable future and probably beyond that, for liberalism in the Middle East. We're returning to the days when the United States put its regional hopes mainly in leaders who were reliable thugs.

That's not to suggest that Bush was particularly consistent in his democratic preaching, or that he formulated his message in the most convincing of ways in Iraq. However, the historic mistake of Arab liberals was to stand elbow to elbow with the despots oppressing them in condemning the American democratic project for the region, instead of exploiting it. Rather than drawing on the Americans' presence in their midst for their own benefit, far too many of liberals fell back on a restricting cliché that the US was practicing a new form of imperialism. Perhaps it was, but early on it became painfully clear that that imperialism was as soft and malleable as a warm slug; that if the Americans could bend before the frail figure of Ayatollah Ali Sistani, they would probably listen to, even assist, those like the Lebanese who had decided to rid themselves of previously unassailable oppressors.

There was considerable hypocrisy in the Arab liberal reaction to Bush's wars. For decades, an unwavering lament of the liberals was that the US had abandoned democrats in favor of autocrats. That was true, particularly during the Cold War, when administrations pushing for greater openness on the part of their Arab allies were reminded by the latter that pushing too hard might induce them to lean toward the Soviet Union. In an era of superpower competition, the "realist" paradigm accepted such blackmail: It was better for the US to deal with states primarily on the basis of interests as opposed to values, even if values were never abandoned in Washington's public rhetoric.

That's where we are heading again today. American realists are making their comeback, most recently through Robert Gates at the Defense Department. However, Gates is part of a larger confederacy of old government hands rebounding thanks to the chaos in Iraq: "We told you so" is their leitmotif, and while many of these individuals can blend in an occasional value with their estimates of interests, their expectations remain decidedly low when it comes to the Middle East.

Prepare for more of what a realist paragon, Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser to President George H.W. Bush, told The New York Observer in summer 2004. "It's not that I don't believe Iraq is capable of democracy. But the notion that within every human being beats this primeval instinct for democracy has not ever been demonstrated to me."

In that phrase lies much contempt and a fundamental justification for tying America's wagon to Arab dictators. That is perhaps why Scowcroft, his colleague James Baker, who now co-chairs the Iraq Study Group, and their boss, the elder President Bush, never expressed noticeable remorse for two of their more callous decisions in the Middle East. One was their irresponsible encouragement of Iraqis to revolt against Saddam Hussein's regime in early 1991, after its army's defeat in the Gulf War. Bush's unwillingness to follow up on that invitation with American assistance led to a savage Baathist counterattack that killed tens of thousands of Shiites. And, prior to that, in October 1990, the Bush administration effectively ceded Lebanon to Syria so that

President Hafez Assad would agree to join the international coalition convening to oust Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

There are two problems with a return to realism past. The first is that 9/11, whichever way you cut it, was a by-product of that approach. Because militant Islam thrives in repressive Arab societies, because America can only appear more hateful to peoples who see it bolstering their absolute rulers, nothing prevents another terrorist attack against the US. That is the fatal flaw in the realists' approach. For them 9/11 was a glitch in the international order, albeit a substantial one, an event that should have merely brought retaliatory police action designed to re-establish an equilibrium. Realists were incapable of gauging the importance of ideas, of understanding that militant Islam is perilously eschatological in its ambitions. In their fixation on power, realists never see beyond the dry instruments increasing or lessening power.

The second problem is that America's traditional Arab allies, those many prominent realists continue to serve in sundry ways, particularly Egypt and Saudi Arabia, are fast being marginalized by the region's non-Arab peripheral states - Iran, Turkey and Israel. Within the next decade, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, but also Jordan and Syria, are liable to face considerable instability unless they can reform and become more democratic. To regard the Arab state system as stable in its mediocrity is to misread the recent past. On even the most basic of political issues, namely leadership succession, secular republics have regressed by resorting to dynastic ploys. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has no obvious successor today, and is trying to maneuver so his son can take over from him. In Syria, Hafez Assad had no alternative when his eldest son, Basel, was killed except to pick son number two. The poverty of such choices will only discredit secular nationalist leaders more than they already are, making revolutions, especially Islamic ones, ever more likely.

But American realists can't see that either, because in their deference to the natural order of states, to sovereignty, they cannot bring themselves to deplore what's happening inside states. That's why it's ironical that Arab liberals should now applaud the onset of a realist American foreign policy toward the Arab world. After all, the liberals always argued that unless the West preoccupied itself with the domestic evils of Arab regimes, they would be vulnerable to the policemen and intelligence agents tormenting them. They can now rest assured: The "neo-imperial" US has increasingly less of an intention to defend their cause, and with realists back in the forefront, ample philosophical justification not to do so.

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## **LOOK WEST FOR THE MIDDLE EAST'S VIOLENCE**

By Rami G. Khouri

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I had the pleasure this week of spending a few days in Doha and Dubai, two booming Gulf emirates that contrast sharply with the tensions and occasional turbulence of my home in Beirut. Without exception, on this trip and during our daily lives throughout the Middle East, the one question that continuously reasserts itself - especially in discussions among Arabs themselves - is: Why is the region so volatile, violent, unstable, prone to extremist rhetoric and actions, and riddled with instability and militarism?

The opportunity to engage in long conversations with learned people and a few more suspect political types in the heady, hyper-growth atmosphere of the emirates of Dubai and Qatar also offers a useful perspective on the strengths and weaknesses of the Arab world. Qatar and Dubai have planned and implemented impressive developmental programs that have started to catch the attention of the world for more than their dramatic architecture or occasional eccentricities. The order, excitement and ongoing expansion of these cities contrast starkly with the ravages and tensions that define much of the rest of the region.

We are all well aware of the problems of grief-stricken lands like Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan, Algeria, Yemen, and Somalia, plagued by war, civil strife and perpetual stagnation. Even countries that are renowned for their stability and strict security, like Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia, suffer a combination of intermittent political violence and terror attacks, alongside pent-up domestic political and social tensions. The latest example was last week's shootout between police and terrorists in Tunisia, which should only heighten our acknowledgement that even the most efficient police states ultimately generate their own forms of instability, insurrection and incoherence. Why is this so? Why is the entire Arab world - even some Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain - susceptible to chronic tension that manifests itself in regular outbursts of terrorism or domestic strife? Simple and occasionally sinister minds in faraway lands would explain this by culture, religion or values, or by claiming that masses of ordinary Arabs have simply allowed their emotions to overcome them and thus have not permitted themselves to engage in the joys of modernity, democracy and liberty.

I think there is a better explanation, which will not please those far away who accuse us of blaming all our ailments on foreigners and history. I suspect that much of the Arab world is a chronic mess because it is the only region in the world that simultaneously suffers the debilitating consequences of two of the most wretched and wrenching forces in modern history: the distress and distortions of societies that Europeans manufactured, ruled over, and then abandoned in the 20th century; and the new stresses and dysfunctional nature of neo-colonial policies the United States is spearheading in the Middle East - and only the Middle East - in the wake of the end of the Cold War and the advent of the post-9/11 "global war on terror." For some reason, we in the Arab world must endure the worst of the 19th and 21st centuries combined. Only the Arab world suffers the mass self-abuse of police states and soft autocracies that are a legacy of the post-colonial period in the 20th century that brought into being the modern Arab political order, alongside the renewed abuse of foreign armies that march into the region today to repeat the state-making, regime-crafting mistakes of their imperial predecessors a century ago. The British get the prize here, having come into Iraq and other lands several times in the past century, and always with similarly negative consequences of chronic instability and national incoherence. Their shameful

legacies are visible today in Palestine, Sudan, Iraq and other tortured lands. The Americans under George W. Bush seem to be learning the same awful game. It is hard enough trying to sort out the lingering distortions and problematic legacies of 19th- and 20th-century European colonialism, as some Arab societies are trying to do. It is impossible to attempt this, though, when these societies simultaneously are subjected again to military attacks, long-term occupations and strategies for regime change and social reconfiguration by the American, British, and Israeli political establishments. It is no wonder that our region is such a mess.

The single most important difference between this round of foreign assaults on the Arab world and the experience last century is that the natives are more aware, less willing to passively accept their fate, and more inclined to resist and fight back. This makes for a long period of turmoil and confrontation ahead, as witnessed in the past few years.

Will the Arab world be able one day soon to look forward to a century, even just a few decades, without foreign invasions, imperial conquests, colonial state-crafting, post-colonial police states, and neo-colonial threats, assaults and regime changes?