

Editor: **Mark A. Heller**

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THE ARABS AND IRAQ

Asher Susser

Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies

As the United States prepares for possible war against Iraq, the Arab world finds itself in an embarrassing state of collective helplessness. Still reeling from more than two centuries of defeat by the West, it seems to be sinking ever deeper into what Fouad Ajami has termed the "Arab predicament."

This predicament manifests itself in constant socioeconomic decline and retarded development. According to a recent UN report, the combined national product of all the Arab states in 1999 was less than that of Spain. In recent decades, only sub-Saharan Africa has a worse record of economic performance. Nor are there any illusions about Arab weakness and inability to set the region's agenda. Arab writers do not hesitate to discuss Arab impotence and to express the fear that the U.S. and Israel will redraw the map of the Middle East. In their own self-image, the Arabs today are as incapable as they were in the midst of World War I, when Britain and France carved up the Middle East in the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916.

For the older generation, the picture was not always so bleak. In the heyday of Gamal Abdel-Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s, Egypt's young and charismatic President shared the leadership

of the awakening third world and the non-aligned movement with such illustrious international figures as Nehru of India and Tito of Yugoslavia. As an equal of other world leaders of his time, Nasser set the regional agenda. He scuttled Western efforts to create an anti-Soviet defense pact in the Middle East, nationalized the Suez Canal, and forced the Suez debacle upon the French and the British. For several years, Nasser was the unrivaled leader of the Arab world, spreading his messianic vision of Arab unity, Arab socialism and alliance with Soviet Union as the panacea for the ills of the Arab world and the recipe for the rejuvenation of Arab power.

All that changed in 1967. After six days of war, Nasserism was in tatters. The great promise proved to be nothing more than an empty vessel. And since then, the Arab world has been on a steady run downhill. On the ruins of Nasserism, Islamic fundamentalists offered an alternative route to power and prosperity, without the secular ideological imports. But the record of the Ayatollahs in Iran, the Islamists in Sudan and the Taliban in Afghanistan is hardly brilliant. The younger generation in Iran that did not know the Shah detests the new regime. And radical Islam, instead of sustaining its promise of

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positive change, has become a movement of fury and revenge. Fury and revenge may at times produce horrific acts of terrorism, but they do nothing to alter the balance of power.

For a brief moment after 1973, many in the Arab world and elsewhere believed that the oil weapon would become the guarantor of Arab wealth and resurgence. That did not work, either. Declining oil prices in the 1980s sent the Arab economies reeling into crisis from which many have yet to recover. Even the Saudis are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain their well greased political system where the loyalty of the middle class is bought with favors bestowed by the state. 9/11 produced an outpouring of American anger directed against the Saudis. But in this day and age, the Saudis would not dream of responding with another oil boycott. Instead, they have hired PR specialists to plead the Saudi case and improve their image. Television commercials may represent another use of oil power, but they are a far cry from the heady days of the 1970s.

In this overall picture of weakness, Iraq could have made a difference. It is an extraordinary Arab state, technologically advanced and benefiting from an optimal match of population and natural resources. But Saddam Hussein elected to channel Iraqi power into destructive confrontations with his neighbors, first Iran and then Kuwait. In so doing, he aroused almost the whole world against him. In the first Gulf war in 1990-91, even the Arab states sided with America. After all, the US intervened to restore the existing regional order, and most Arab states were supportive of that overall objective. Moreover, with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Arabs were hardly in a position to oppose the US.

The present crisis is very different. The US intends to intervene in Iraq, not to save the

existing order, but to overturn it. And even those Arabs who despise and fear Saddam are distinctly uncomfortable at the prospect of the US bowling over Middle Eastern regimes and possibly threatening the territorial integrity of an Arab state.

The new US doctrine of preemptive war has given rise to a pervasive sense of uncertainty and insecurity in the Arab world. On what grounds will the US make its assessments of imminent threat or danger? Whom will the US strike next? America's war, some Arabs argue, is targeting the Arabs.

But if they have serious reservations about American policy, they can't do much to change it. They have very few levers of influence on the US, and President Bush feels he can afford to ignore their opposition. The US is not even compelled to pay any real price to the Arab states in exchange for their reluctant acquiescence in the military action against Iraq; the new U.S. road map amounts to little more than lip service to the Palestinian issue.

In its demonstration of collective inertia, the Arab world faces a bleak future. As a collective political organ, it hardly exists. There are not even camps or axes of Arab states competing with one another, just a motley assortment that has not been able to do much either for the Arab collective or for the Palestinians. There is no one in the Arab world who could assume the mantle of trend-setting leadership, just a vacuum of weakness and uncertainty.

For Israel, Arab weakness is a mixed blessing. It tilts the balance of power in Israel's favor. But it may also plant the seeds of even greater despair and fury that could find an outlet in greater terrorism, political adventurism, or the more determined pursuit of the ultimate equalizer -- weapons of mass destruction.