



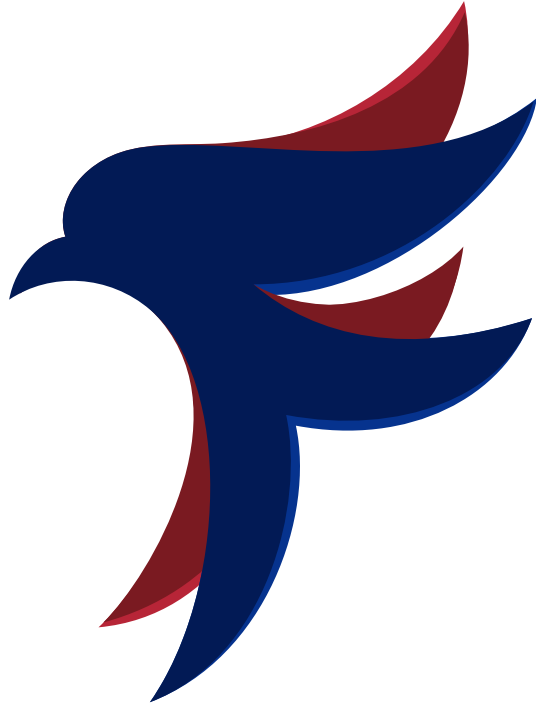
FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

# OUR FOREIGN POLICY:

## A NEW AMERICAN PLAN FOR COMPETITIVE ENGAGEMENT IN ARAB LANDS

Joseph Braude





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Author: Joseph Braude

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Cover image: U.S. forces advise and assist Iraqi partners in fight for Mosul (CENTCOM)



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*A nation must think before it acts*

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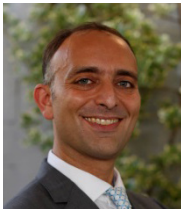
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# OUR FOREIGN POLICY: A NEW AMERICAN PLAN FOR COMPETITIVE ENGAGEMENT IN ARAB LANDS

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Joseph Braude, founder and president of the Center for Peace Communications, studied Near Eastern Languages at Yale and Arabic and Islamic history at Princeton. He is fluent in Arabic, Hebrew, and Persian. Over the past 20 years, he has lived and worked in North Africa, the Levant, the Gulf states, and Iran. His most recent book is *Reclamation: A Cultural Policy for Arab-Israeli Partnership* (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2019).

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The following monograph, calling for a revival of American expeditionary diplomacy in Arab lands, was completed shortly before the present global pandemic. It expresses the core argument of a forthcoming book, and departs from some prevalent assumptions about American Mideast policy.

Now is a time of many departures — and a single preoccupation. As Americans join others around the world in severely limiting their own movement, this monograph's vision of spirited travel and intimate engagement with distant peoples may strike some readers as antediluvian. Alas, as the study also shows, Americans missed a number of opportunities to engage Arab peoples in improving the region over the decades when doing so was much easier than it is today.

May the time be soon when human determination and grit have defeated COVID-19, and Americans, no longer self-isolated, share a heightened yearning to connect with the world around them. May that bright day also mark the beginning of a new solidarity and partnership across the barriers of sect, ethnicity, and national identity in the Middle East and North Africa — an outcome toward which Arab liberals, championed in this monograph, have long been working.

# 1. IT IS TIME TO ENGAGE ARAB LIBERALS

American discussions of policy toward Arab countries largely revolve around two big questions: one asks whether and how much to intervene militarily in the region; the other, whether to coddle Arab autocrats for the sake of stability or abet their opponents in the name of democracy.<sup>1</sup> Americans have weighed these choices amid the bitter aftermath of the Iraq War and the chaos, civil strife, and resurgent authoritarianism that followed the Arab Spring. They tend to foresee an Arab future similar to the recent past — in which armed groups perpetuate sectarian conflict, dictators and Islamists compete for dominance, Iran gains power by exploiting local divisions, and hopes for liberalizing reform remain dim. This picture has understandably led a war-weary American public to prefer whatever policies lessen the country’s entanglement in Arab affairs.<sup>2</sup> It has also cast the legacy of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq as a warning against new calls to transform the Middle East.<sup>3</sup>

But how accurate is the picture? A more granular view of the region does not challenge the assessment that further turmoil lies ahead. It nonetheless reveals the seeds of a potentially brighter future. Arab programming and projects at a range of international development organizations provide ample evidence of civic actors in nearly every Arab country who are striving against tough odds to rebuild or reform

their institutions and societies. These include educators who are crafting new curricula to teach tolerance to youth; broadcasters who message the virtue of peacemaking to their audiences; labor and rights activists struggling for human dignity, gender equality, and opportunity; and entrepreneurs who seek to grow job-creating businesses. Some reform-minded figures even work within the halls of authoritarian government: liberally-minded officials struggling uphill to stem corruption, instill rule of law principles, and otherwise vest the population in the survival of the state.<sup>4</sup>

Viewed in the aggregate, these exceptional men and women do not offer an immediate answer to the extremism, political violence, and state failure that the United States and other countries have sacrificed blood and treasure to confront. But, in the long run, their success will make or break the larger campaign to defeat the same pathologies. As the region remains a fulcrum of international security and the global economy, the question of how to strengthen local Arab efforts for positive change should become a long-term focus of American policy — especially for those who prioritize a reduction in military commitments overseas.

Study and encounter the region’s indigenous liberal reformists and one finds a recurring theme: they want outside assistance. Some seek

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1 Stephen Walt. “When Zombie Neoconservatives Attack,” *Foreign Policy*, June 17, 2019. Accessed online: <http://bit.ly/1KKdZUI>; Witness also the results of the 2016 Pew survey: “Just 37% say the U.S. ‘should help other countries deal with their problems,’ while a majority (57%) say the nation should ‘deal with its own problems and let other countries deal with their problems the best they can.’” Found in “Public Uncertain, Divided Over America’s Place in the World,” Pew Research Center, May 5, 2016. Accessed online: <https://pewrsr.ch/2wyS5Us>

2 John Halpin, Brian Katulis, Peter Juul, Karl Agne, Jim Gerstein, and Nisha Jain Posted, “America Adrift”, *American Progress*, May 5, 2019. Accessed online: <https://ampr.gs/2IoOjzo>

3 David Frum, “Take it from an Iraq war supporter: War with Iran would be a disaster,” *The Atlantic*, May 15, 2019. Accessed online: <https://bit.ly/32XiION>.

4 “Our Hands Tell a Story”, USAID, accessed March 27, 2020, <https://www.usaid.gov/ourhands> ; <https://www.solidaritycenter.org/union-women-rock-16-days-of-activism-against-gbvh/> <https://www.ned.org/region/middle-east-and-northern-africa/> <https://www.americaabroadmedia.org/region/middle-east> <https://www.icfj.org/our-work/media-innovation>

financial support, while others crave strategic partnership with foreign peers in their respective fields — from media and education to the private sector and organized labor — including and especially from Americans. Many also feel that the U.S. government enjoys special leverage to provide assistance through the power of diplomacy, particularly in U.S.-allied Arab states whose governments rely on Washington for aid.<sup>5</sup> What these actors seek, in other words, is not the “hard power” of military intervention but rather a competitive form of soft power: the concerted deployment of civic, diplomatic, economic, and political tools to strengthen their hand.<sup>6</sup>

Arab liberal reformists who share this desire understand that international engagement is a mixed blessing. Reactionary forces in the region seek to tar all who disagree with them as stooges of an outside power, and therefore seize upon evidence that their opponents have actually found international partners. But such reviling is, in the judgment of many liberals, an acceptable price to pay: they routinely endure the accusations anyway, and would rather have the benefit of the assistance than suffer the onslaught alone. To some degree, moreover, the accusations play into liberals’ hands: branded as players in a powerful global network, they win a measure of protection from local antagonists who fear the outside world — as well as new followers who want to join a winning team.

So the case for supporting Arab liberal reformists merits greater attention than it receives in present-day American policy debates on the Middle East. Consider the gaps in the two central questions noted above: whether and how much to withdraw from the region militarily, and whether to back autocrats or their domestic opponents. The first question essentially reduces the notion of “intervention” to one of hard power alone. The

second implies a binary choice between regimes and their enemies, pitting Arabs of conscience against a monolithic authoritarian establishment. This reductionist portrayal diminishes the possibility of empowering reformists *within* the establishment, or bringing state and society together in a partnership for change.

To be sure, the role of “soft power” is not altogether absent from the mainstream American discussion. Some voices use the term to signal the power of diplomacy to end costly wars.<sup>7</sup> For others, soft power refers to the power of the American example: rather than proactively engage Arab affairs, they argue, Americans should focus on modeling an enlightened society to the world.<sup>8</sup> But these conceptions of soft power offer little practical help to local reformists in Arab lands. The envisioned war-ending diplomacy — itself concerned primarily with influencing military outcomes — does not address the granularities of civil reform in the region. As to the hope that Arabs will spontaneously emulate the American example — or that of other developed democracies — it provides neither assistance nor insight regarding the many stages of social, economic, and political development that would lead to that outcome. Without such help, democratic models can be a dream, but not a guidepost.

A richer discussion of the potentialities of American soft power in the region would therefore begin with new questions. For example, who are the local actors now pressing for liberal reform in Arab societies? In what professional sectors do they operate? What are their visions and strategies to bring change, and what are their prospects for success? What are their strengths and weaknesses, and what specific forms of assistance do they need to gain ground? As no directory exists with comprehensive answers

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<sup>5</sup> According to liberal Egyptian publisher and activist Hisham Kassem, “Eighty percent of political freedom in this country is the result of U.S. pressure.” Shadi Hamid, “What Obama and American Liberals Don’t Understand About the Arab Spring,” *Brookings*, October 1, 2011. Accessed online: <https://brook.gs/3cF4BCb>

<sup>6</sup> Nadia Schadow. “Competitive Engagement: Upgrading America’s Influence.” *Orbis*, August 9, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> William J. Burns, “The Lost Art of American Diplomacy Can the State Department Be Saved?” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2019 Accessed online: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-03-27/lost-art-american-diplomacy>

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Nye, “Soft Power.” *Foreign Policy*, Autumn 1990 issue. Accessed online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1148580?seq=1>

to these questions, a separate line of inquiry would be necessary to help create one: how can Americans identify liberal reformists in the region systematically? Amid ongoing political and social upheaval, how does one keep abreast of the shifting competitive landscape and adjust one's plans to support reform accordingly? A third set of questions relates to the gap in language, culture, and mutual awareness between Arab liberal reformists in a range of fields and their counterparts in the United States. The U.S. government, after all, does not necessarily offer the expertise in liberal education reform, media messaging, business development, or other crucial realms in which assistance is needed. What would it take to develop a mechanism to connect American nongovernment specialists in these fields to their peers in North Africa and the Middle East? How would one structure and implement such partnerships given the range of differences and barriers?

This complex discussion thickens, in turn, because the region is so diverse and fractured as to challenge the wisdom of even thinking about it as a contiguous whole. It is not news, for starters, that the landmass commonly labeled the "Arab Muslim world" remains ethnically and religiously variegated, even as minorities flee its purges and wars at an ever-accelerating pace. Furthermore, each country's unique political and security circumstances differentiate the local field of opportunity for liberals in particular. On the one hand, for example, labor organizing and political party building are banned in Saudi Arabia and three of the five Gulf states, whereas both forms of activity manifest robustly across the Maghreb.<sup>9</sup> On the other, some of the most unfriendly environments for organized labor or overt political action nonetheless offer more subtle opportunities. Witness countries in which

the government itself has adopted the strategic practice of promoting tolerance, such as the UAE: governmental and semi-governmental organizations mandated to do so provide a framework for liberals to pursue some, albeit not all, of their goals with establishment support.<sup>10</sup> As to the most chaotic territories in the region — war-torn Yemen and Libya, for example — they tend to feature massive public demand, born of great suffering, for the kind of national reconciliation and institution-building efforts that liberals are well suited to wage.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, amid the chaos of these territories, even staunch government support for liberals can do little to protect them: feuding armed militias, united only in their opposition to any semblance of liberal order, severely constrain civic action. How American civilians can play a supporting role on such terrain is yet another tough question.

All of which is to say that in conjuring a plan to assist Arab liberals from North Africa to the Gulf, a new rubric may be necessary to break down the territory according to its differing opportunities and challenges.

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9 Rothna Begum. "Gulf States' Slow March Toward Domestic Workers' Rights," *Human Rights Watch*, June 16, 2017. Accessed online: <https://bit.ly/2VRDMVE>; Hanan Jebli, "The growing power of Tunisia's labor union," *Al-Monitor*, May 21, 2018. Accessed online: <https://bit.ly/2TqOUaa>

10 For example, "Ministry of Tolerance and Ministry of Education launch project to promote tolerance between public and private schools." *UAE Ministry of Education*, November 19, 2018. Accessed online: <https://bit.ly/39uTTw7>; "2019 is Year of Tolerance," *Khaleej Times*, December 15, 2018. Accessed online: <https://bit.ly/2PVSiyG>

11 Orla Guerin, "Libya in chaos as endless war rumbles on," *BBC*, October 27, 2019. Accessed online: <https://bbc.in/2TF71rU>; Peter Salisbury, "Building Peace in Yemen From the Ground Up," *Foreign Affairs*, February 28, 2018. Accessed online: <https://fam.ag/2IsgJJ3>

## 2. AMERICA'S HISTORY OF COMPETITIVE ENGAGEMENT OFFERS INSPIRATION

Although the idea of deploying competitive soft power wins little attention in current Mideast policy deliberations, Americans historically were not green to the practice. Shortly after the Second World War, the United States developed a range of tools to compete with Soviet expansionism on foreign soil. In the seminal campaign of post-war reconstruction known as the Marshall Plan, the U.S., together with its NATO allies, provided Western Europe not only military protection and economic support, but also the benefits of on-the-ground political action. A generation of American operatives accrued the language skills and area knowledge necessary to engage the local landscape. While Stalin sought to impose his own rules of governance by overriding the will of the majority, Americans provided financial and logistical support to help European liberal democrats counter their pro-Soviet rivals. These American operatives enjoyed a mandate from Washington to act and react according to rapidly shifting circumstances on the ground.<sup>12</sup>

Cold War-era soft power techniques saw successes as well as failures, and entered periods of remission only to see new revivals. Where they did succeed, they were often crucially enriched by innovative Americans working in a civilian capacity — sometimes in consort with the government and other times on their own.<sup>13</sup> For example, American intellectuals supported the development of student groups, publications, and other platforms to empower liberal intellectual opponents of Soviet communism behind the Iron Curtain. Some of America's leading journalists applied their talent to transmit honest reporting into the countries where Soviet propaganda

otherwise monopolized the info-sphere: Radio Free Europe for the Russian-occupied East, and Radio Liberty for listeners inside the Soviet Union.

The American labor movement, for its part, had been active in fighting totalitarianism overseas since the 1930s. Motivated by the principle of solidarity for all workers, unions had raised their own money to assist victims of Nazi and Soviet oppression, and during the Second World War, put their international networks at the disposal of the U.S. government to help gather intelligence and sabotage Nazi installations. After the war, the government went on to supplement unions financially so they could help protect the machinery of the Marshall Plan from Communist attacks. The American Federation of Labor, for example, partnered with anti-Stalinist European union leaders to prevent the Soviets from blocking docks, railroads, and barges in France, Italy, and Germany that were used to unload cargo vital for reconstruction from American ships.<sup>14</sup> Decades later, one of the final blows to Soviet domination of Eastern Europe would be struck by the first-ever independent trade union in the Soviet bloc — co-founded and steered by Lech Walesa, an ally of the United States.

The story of how these remarkable capacities fell out of use speaks to the obstacles the United States will meet in any attempt to resurrect them, as well as the challenge of re-imagining them to suit present-day realities in Arab countries. At the end of the Cold War, Francis Fukuyama's landmark essay "The End of History?" argued that the absence of an alternative ideology to compete with liberal democracy meant that worldwide progress toward the latter was inevitable, and

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<sup>12</sup> Roy Godson. *Dirty Tricks or Trump Cards: U.S. Covert Action & Counterintelligence*. See chapter 2, "Steps and Missteps: Covert Action Since 1945."

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.





nothing needed to be done to promote or defend it.<sup>15</sup> This view, then widely embraced, became a kind of implicit doctrine with respect to American civil engagement in transitioning societies around the world: since liberal democracy faced no competition and required no advocacy, the United States needed only to facilitate the inevitable march toward it. A hallmark of this shift was the closure of the United States Information Agency in 1999 — long a powerful advocate for liberal universalist principles and American interests around the world.<sup>16</sup>

Other U.S. government-supported initiatives, adopting the same “End of History” mindset, offered mainly to share the tools and techniques used to govern the United States, but largely ceased to build support for the underpinning values and ideals. For example, at overseas branch offices of the National Endowment for Democracy, the International Republican Institute, and the National Democratic Institute, a local candidate for political office could learn

how to write a press release, deliver a speech, or organize an electoral campaign. A president or prime minister could receive free advice on how to run his staff, or free computers and database software to manage the flow of legislation among branches of government. The organizations adopted a position of neutrality on the political orientation of locals who participated, welcoming a spectrum of ideological leanings.<sup>17</sup>

Such projects provided a valuable service for transitioning, post-Soviet bloc countries in Eastern Europe that were already united in the aspiration to become liberal democracies as well as culturally and politically equipped to pursue it. But the premise that “history had ended” did not apply in authoritarian Arab states — home to layers of political, ideological, and sectarian tension — where the same American NGOs also deployed. As indicated earlier, tensions simmered between Arab regimes and Islamist movements, the latter having gained ground thanks to sustained backing from Sunni Gulf states and

15 Francis Fukuyama. “The End of History?” *The National Interest*, Summer 1989.

16 Nicholas Cull, *The Decline and Fall of the United States Information Agency: American Public Diplomacy, 1989-2001* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), pps 121-178

17 For an example of the technocratic nature of democracy promotion organizations, see “What We Do.” *National Democratic Institute*. Accessed on June 21, 2015. <https://www.ndi.org/whatwedo>.



Soviet tanks withdraw from Afghanistan, 1988 (Wikimedia Commons)

Shi'i Islamist Iran. Islamists consolidated their hold on mosques and seminaries, and then, with the rise of regional satellite television, built broadcast networks to indoctrinate an even larger audience. Arab liberals tried to compete, but lacked support or a public space in which to function: regimes blocked the emergence of independent civil institutions through which alternative political voices could make their case. Some liberal activists, fighting against the tide, looked to the United States for assistance, but Washington did little for them.

The potential threat posed by Islamist movements did not escape notice in Washington, to be sure. In 1992, an Islamist party in Algeria won international attention by showing it could win an election by espousing a maximalist, anti-Western ideology. (The election was aborted by the military government, triggering a civil war.) Washington policymakers also observed that Arab jihadist veterans of the U.S.-backed Afghan war against the Soviets were returning to their

home countries, buoyed by Islamist propaganda, to wage low-intensity warfare against U.S.-allied Arab governments.<sup>18</sup>

But Americans who raised alarms about these developments were typically dismissed as alarmists, or aging Cold Warriors in search of a new enemy. In a repudiation of their warnings, the 1993 “Meridian House Doctrine” declared, “The Cold War is not being replaced with a new competition between Islam and the West. Islamic fundamentalism is not the next ‘ism.’” Calling on Americans to partner with the “Muslim world,” the “Doctrine” effectively conflated Islam with a subset of Islamist movements that claimed authority in the name of Islam.<sup>19</sup> The Doctrine’s proponents generally derided concerns about Islamism as hostility toward the religion itself. A school of Islamist champions emerged, moreover, that viewed the same movements as America’s natural partners in democratization — “reformists in an Islamist hue.”<sup>20</sup> These voices also alleged that policymakers who portrayed

<sup>18</sup> Edward Djerejian, “The U.S. and the Middle East in a Changing World; Address at Meridian House International,” U.S. Department of State Dispatch, June 2, 1992.

<sup>19</sup> Abdul Monir Yaacob and Ahmad Faiz Abdul Rahman. *Towards a Positive Islamic Worldview: Malaysian and American Perceptions* (Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Islamic Understanding, 1994). 2.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, John L. Esposito. *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), and the community of scholars who have emerged around Georgetown University’s Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding.

Islamists as adversaries were merely trumping up a new Middle Eastern threat in order to shore up the case for the American-Israeli alliance. The first World Trade Center bombing, perpetrated in 1993 by Sunni Islamists under the leadership of a Brooklyn-based Egyptian cleric, did not substantively affect this discussion.

In retrospect, the Meridian House Doctrine and its proponents lent support to Islamist parties that have since wreaked havoc in the region and beyond. At the same time, in calling for a deeper relationship with Muslim peoples, the “Meridians” also offered a fresh perspective. American political engagement with Arab allies during the Cold War had generally been paper-thin, limited to government-to-government cooperation at senior levels. And indeed, the preponderant American focus on the Arab-Israeli conflict had straitjacketed the larger discussion of Arab societies: pro-Israel voices in Washington, while legitimately worried about Islamism, showed little commitment to addressing the domestic plight of those populations in which Islamism was flourishing. Israel’s American critics, for their part, tended to internalize Arab political elites’ assertion that the conflict with Israel was the root cause of the region’s woes — rather than expose this claim as a tool of demagoguery to obscure the repression, injustice, and nepotism by which they ruled.

The experience of fighting the Cold War could in any case provide only limited guidance for any American attempt to engage this fraught landscape. The struggle over reform in Arab countries involved the interplay of ancient cultures and religions, modern ideologies, and loose, ever-shifting coalitions of state and non-state actors of which most policymakers had insufficient knowledge. Nor could a single binary analogue to the overarching conflict between Soviet communism and liberal democracy serve to define the new mission. Furthermore, because Islamist movements used religious proof texts to advance their political agenda, an attempt to counter them would inevitably entail a contest

over the meaning of those texts and the broader role of Islam in public life. The notion of doing so faced resistance throughout the West — in particular, from the large community of American and European elites who had come to regard cultural engagement on foreign soil as “cultural imperialism.” Proponents of this view included the lion’s share of scholars in Arabic and Islamic studies upon whom Washington would have to rely if it sought to develop a competitive strategy. The related principle of “cultural relativism,” moreover, served to discourage Westerners from passing judgment on any ideology deemed to be “indigenous” — and view Arab liberals, who happen to share liberal universalist principles with many Westerners, as somehow inauthentic.<sup>21</sup>

As to the field of political contest in North Africa and the Middle East, though the United States maintained alliances with some Arab governments on regional and geopolitical security, it did not for the most part enjoy the latitude to act politically on their territory. As indicated earlier, under the Marshall Plan, Western European governments had enabled Americans to engage local political parties, labor movements, intellectuals, and students — assured of the Americans’ focus on an enemy they shared, and out of deference to Washington for the aid and protection it provided. By comparison, Arab states — particularly those hewn out of a struggle against Western imperialism — have always been suspicious of American intentions. Might it have been possible to overcome these suspicions, establish trust, and negotiate an arrangement for civil engagement on the basis of mutual concerns? It would have been extremely difficult — but Americans neither developed the expertise, nor used their formidable leverage, to even try.

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21 Marc Lynch, “Taking Arabs Seriously,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October issue, 2003. Accessed online: <https://fam.ag/3cDWF4k>.

### 3. A GENERATION OF MISSED OPPORTUNITIES HAS PASSED

These limitations came into stark relief over the decade following the September 11, 2001 attacks. Under the George W. Bush administration, mainstream conceptions of the “war on terror” called for a “battle for hearts and minds” to accompany the military struggle against jihadists. But the strategy to win the “battle” did not prioritize the empowerment of Arab liberals. Instead, it revolved around the narrow question of why the United States was so unpopular in the Middle East — commonly posed as, “Why do they hate us?” The answer that won the day was that anti-Americanism stems from a false perception of the American people and their way of life, willfully promoted by hardline clerics, hostile regimes, and satellite networks like Al-Jazeera. To address the problem, the U.S. government invested heavily in public diplomacy campaigns to correct misunderstandings about America.<sup>22</sup> These amounted to a treatment of the symptoms but not the disease, in the sense that no substantial political challenge to the forces that *propagated* anti-Americanism — or the suffering in which it festered — was attempted.

Some Americans favoring a more expansive soft power campaign initially hoped that the U.S.-led military presence in Iraq would evolve into a Middle Eastern analogue to the Marshall Plan, whereby military and economic assistance would go hand in hand with cultural and political engagement in support of local liberals. Iraqis

sharing liberal universalist principles proved more than willing to forge such partnerships. These included members of a moderate political current in Iraq’s labor movement who wanted to serve as a bulwark against Islamist groups. They conveyed a desire to partner with the United States in post-war reconstruction, and asked the Coalition Provisional Authority to recognize and empower them<sup>23</sup> — in part by simply proclaiming that unions should “have an influential voice in safeguarding the working man from exploitation and abuse,” as Douglas MacArthur said after taking control of Japan in 1945.<sup>24</sup> Some Iraqi intellectuals, for their part, had been drawing up plans for education reform, aiming to instill a new understanding of what it means to be Iraqi that would encourage reconciliation among identities and sects.<sup>25</sup> They petitioned American authorities for the opportunity to bring these ideas to the education ministry, which at the time remained largely in the hands of members of Saddam’s Baath party. Moderate clerics sought authority over the mosques. Iraqi judges and lawyers wanted help reforming the legal system. Businesspeople running small- and medium-sized enterprises tried to interest American investors. Iraqis and Iraqi Americans came together to propose creating a museum of national memory to foster reconciliation. Many locals, in a general expression of support for these endeavors, memorably shooed away foreign jihadists. They rejected jihadists’ call to attack American soldiers with the retort, “We don’t want you here. America

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22 “Public Diplomacy Steps Taken Since 9/11 Not Enough; Council Task Force Urges the Bush Administration to Counter America’s Deteriorating Image as Anger at U.S. Deepens Post-Iraq War.” *Council on Foreign Relations News Release*, September 18, 2003. Accessed on February 17, 2015. <http://on.cfr.org/1K28pYi>.

23 Julius Getman and F. Ray Marshall. “Bush Should See Labor Unions As Ally In Democratizing Iraq.” *Lexington Herald Leader*. July 11, 2003.

24 Dorris Clayton James. *The Years of MacArthur: Triumph and Disaster 1945-1964* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), p. 114.

25 Khawla al-Zubaydi. “Islah Manahij al-Dirasa fi ‘l-Iraq [Reform of Educational Methodologies in Iraq].” *Elaph*, June 24, 2005. Accessed March 2, 2014. <http://bit.ly/1Nx9tJN>.

is going to make a new Japan out of us.”<sup>26</sup>

But rather than seize these opportunities, the Bush Administration placed post-war reconstruction in the hands of military officers who lacked training for such endeavors or the linguistic and area knowledge necessary to navigate the civil landscape. The Coalition Provisional Authority snubbed unions and moderate clerics, avoided the complex internal politics of the education ministry, and left the private sector to U.S. government contractors, some of whom exploited their privilege and modeled corrupt practices. Meanwhile, a soft power army backed by Iran penetrated local media, mosques, schools, bureaucracy, and the emerging political system. Gulf donors bankrolled the revival of Sunni Islamist parties that Saddam had suppressed for decades. The U.S. made no particular effort to block these activities, adopting instead the “end of history” posture of neutrality in the country’s internal politics. Citing the objective of a “level playing field,” it facilitated elections without supporting candidates. A skewed political environment ensued: Liberals, lacking a sponsor, never had a fair chance to challenge their firmly backed opponents. Jihadists, for their part, gushed through the country’s thinly guarded borders and recruited local fighters from the former Iraqi army, which might itself have assisted in reconstruction had the Coalition Provisional Authority not dissolved it.

Further opportunities to substantially engage the region’s liberals came after the Arab Spring revolutions, when post-dictatorship power vacuums spawned a brief political free-for-all. Now Americans had the chance to forge civil partnerships without the baggage of doubling as an occupying force. One of the more auspicious environments for such action — initially, at least — was post-Qadhafi Libya. A U.S.-led air campaign

had proved crucial in ousting the late strongman, to the cheers of millions of Libyans. A Gallup poll in spring 2012 found Libyans’ approval of the United States to be among the highest ever recorded in the Middle East and North Africa. Washington, the poll reported, had “an excellent opportunity to build a mutually beneficial, productive relationship with Libya for the first time in decades and could potentially find itself with a new, democratic ally in North Africa.”<sup>27</sup> In July 2012, Libyans voted — and defied the trend of Islamist victories in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere: the winner, a Pittsburgh University-educated political scientist, cruised to victory on an agenda of liberal reform and cooperation with the United States.

The country needed soft power assistance in meeting cultural, educational, economic, and political challenges similar to those that had faced Iraq a decade earlier. Also as in the Iraqi case, Libya needed help establishing the requisite domestic security for soft power projects to develop. Hundreds of private militias were carving enclaves across the country, including portions of all the major cities, and refusing to accept the authority of any central government. The situation had all the hallmarks of a descent into warlordism.<sup>28</sup>

Aspects of these challenges were explored by an American policy researcher who spent extensive time in the country. He envisioned a program to address the proliferation of private armies: Through “demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration,” militias would receive political and financial incentives to properly integrate into the government’s security sector, while jobs in other sectors opened up to lure fighters away from armed life altogether. The Libyan government made urgent pleas to the United States for the financial support, equipment, and expertise that

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26 Ahmed H. Al-Rahim (Assistant Professor, Director of the Program in Medieval Studies at the University of Virginia, and a former advisor to the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad, 2003) in discussion with the author, June 4, 2012.

27 Jay Loschky, “Opinion Briefing: Libyans Eye New Relations with the West,” *Gallup*, August 13, 2012. Accessed on November 9, 2012. <http://bit.ly/1KKdZUI>.

28 “Harakat Intishar al-Milishiyat al-Musallaha fi Libiya.” *Shafaftiya Libiya* [Transparency Libya], December 2012. Accessed March 9, 2013. <http://bit.ly/1EUaEQJ>.



Protests in Libya, 2012. (Magherabia/Wikimedia Commons)

would be necessary to implement such a plan on a sufficiently large scale.<sup>29</sup> The civilian population resoundingly approved — with some agitating for it publicly at considerable risk to themselves.

Four young men in Tripoli, for example, launched an Internet radio program called “Rough Talk” (*Kalam Wa’r*), which called out the militias by name and appealed to their soldiers to desert. It also called on fighters and civilians alike to shed loyalties and ideologies that would fracture the country — and develop a constructive, alternative vision based on egalitarianism, tolerance, and the rule of law.<sup>30</sup> At a time when Libyans were hungry for new media and new voices, “Rough Talk” spread virally online, then won a weekly slot on a government-controlled radio network. They went on to appear on several Libyan television channels. Through their popularity, they achieved the capacity to foment civil protest against the militias — and began to do so.<sup>31</sup>

But the fate of the “Rough Talk team” epitomized the arrested development of civil society in Libya. In the summer of 2012, as private brigades began to attack the state, the government put the boys in jail — the only option it had to appease enraged militia leaders while also protecting

the broadcasters from retribution. Upon their release, they fled to Malta and kept their heads down for awhile, then came home and ceased all broadcasting.

In the heady weeks before the final episode of “Rough Talk,” the venture had demonstrated that liberal actors aspired to bring change through the power of their words. The broadcasters understood the urgency of disbanding the militias, as well as the need to instill an alternative set of cultural values that could transcend the country’s divisions. But the United States neither provided support for a concerted “demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration” campaign, nor assisted voices such as the “Rough Talk” team or their thought partners in politics and civil society.

From Baghdad to Tripoli, these missed opportunities for engagement show that while the U.S. has expended substantial military might in Arab countries, it has been strikingly passive with regard to ideological struggles on the same terrain. Rather than help Arab liberals fight and win, the U.S. effectively ceded the political sphere to other powers. In doing so, it allowed its adversaries to shape political outcomes, thereby setting the stage for future conflict.

29 The researcher was Frederic Wehrey, Senior Associate at the Middle East Program of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He described the proposal to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in testimony on November 21, 2013 — accessed January 2, 2014: <http://1.usa.gov/1i672QM>.

30 Sustained independent content analysis of the online radio series *Kalam Wa’r* [Rough Talk], 2011-13.

31 Khalid Al-Badawi, Muhammad Al-Taip and Mohannad Awn (co-founders of the Libyan radio broadcast *Kalam Wa’r* [Rough Talk] in a series of discussions with the author, January-February 2012.

## 4. A NEW OPPORTUNITY HAS ARRIVED

**A** break with this tragic history, as suggested previously, would see the U.S. government at last prioritize strengthening the hand of Arab liberals. It would do so through a sustained campaign of competitive soft power in which the government is aided by American citizens working in consort with Arab liberals in their respective fields. The difficulty of waging such an effort, however, lies not only in Arab countries but also at home. To restate, many of the practices of competitive soft power that the U.S. government used effectively during the Cold War have fallen into disuse. The impediments to reviving these practices have meanwhile grown: in addition to the fact that America's cultural elites no longer instill the virtues of such work in young people, some intellectuals stigmatize it as a purported form of "cultural imperialism."

To alter this reality will require imagination and enormous effort. Where to begin? As a means to liberate the imagination, let us briefly escape the hyper-partisanship of the United States today and think back to a time when the domestic political barriers to waging a competitive soft power revival were much lower: the rare period of national unity following the September 11, 2001 attacks. Amid a surge of patriotism, the American public had given Washington an overwhelming mandate to challenge extremist ideologies in Arab countries.<sup>32</sup> In addition to a spike in military enlistment by Americans of fighting age, Americans of all ages were looking to their elected leadership for guidance as to what they could do personally to support the "war on terror."<sup>33</sup> U.S.-allied Arab autocrats meanwhile faced massive global pressure to halt the corruption and abuse

that had driven so many Arab Muslims into the arms of extremists, and to stop inciting against the U.S. and its democratic partners.

In sum, three key conditions for any effort to resuscitate American competitive soft power and deploy it in the Middle East and North Africa were in place: the U.S. government enjoyed popular support for unconventional measures, American citizens shared the desire to play a role, and Arab states showed willingness to engage foreign partners in fostering their own domestic reforms. It would have been no stretch, under these circumstances, for the President to designate support for liberal universalist principles and the Arabs who champion them as an American strategic priority. Nor would he face an enthusiasm gap among American citizens in asking them to lend their own capacities to further the cause of liberalism in Arab lands. Nor would Congress disappoint him if asked to implant the new agenda in all the overseas development institutions it funds, including USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy, and the newly formed Middle East Partnership Initiative. As the President in turn strove to deploy these principles and assets on the soil of U.S.-allied Arab states, he would find a cooperative mindset among Arab autocrats, and, as described previously, an Arab liberal social current keen to partner with the United States.

Before exploring how to compensate for the absence of these auspicious political circumstances today, it remains to describe a further, crucial challenge in waging a competitive soft power revival in Arab lands, then as now. It is to build, train, and equip a new cadre of personnel

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32 Witness the polling in the early days following the 9/11 attacks: Frank Newport, "Overwhelming Support for War Continues." *Gallup*, November 29, 2001. Accessed online: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/5083/overwhelming-support-war-continues.aspx>

33 Charles Winokoor, "Military enlistment got boost as result of 9/11 terror attacks", *Taunton Daily Gazette*, September 5, 2011. Accessed online: <https://www.tauntongazette.com/article/20110905/NEWS/309059972>.

responsible for leading soft power campaigns within the region. A term used in government parlance that suits them is “expeditionary diplomats.” These bilingual, bicultural actors would deploy to Arab countries in order to seek out liberals, befriend them, probe their potential, ambitions, and challenges, and innovate ways to help them. Expeditionary diplomats are network builders who identify an opportunity to promote positive change, foster a plan to do so, and bring together its component parts — only to move on to a new opportunity and a new set of local actors.<sup>34</sup> In Arab societies atomized by government-induced paranoia and civil unrest, they can bring disparate local elements together that might not otherwise engage one another. They can meanwhile connect these Arab partners, typically isolated from the outside world as well, to resources and professional networks across the United States and beyond, forging transnational teams and organizing them for action.

To build a cadre of expeditionary diplomats for this purpose, the government must not only train them but also create a career path for them. That is, it must offer them continuity of mission, space and resources in each of the region’s embassies, and opportunities for promotion alongside peers who practice the more common forms of diplomacy. It must also expend substantial political capital with America’s Arab allies to negotiate security and freedom of operation, both for expeditionary diplomats and the local teams they build in Arab countries. At the same time, the practice of expeditionary diplomacy need not and should not be the government’s exclusive domain: foundations and NGOs committed to political, social, and economic development in the region should prepare and equip their own teams of “expeditionary social entrepreneurs”

to similarly scout out and develop opportunities for civil action. This cadre, too, requires its own career structure and incentives to grow and flourish.

The combined efforts of all these players, in turn, stand to be strengthened by a central coordinating body. It would debrief expeditionary diplomats and their civilian equivalents continually and assess the impact of their projects, the synergies among them, and the potential for replication of a given success. Combining this aggregate knowledge with intelligence from other sources, the cadre would also trace the larger competitive landscape — including the activity of hostile movements and powers with soft power capacities of their own. What would emerge is a living map of the field of contest. It would provide a sky view for expeditionary diplomats on the ground, a detailed understanding of how American civil society can be helpful, and a razor-sharp diplomatic agenda for senior officials to pursue with Arab leaders.

Returning to the present political moment, all of these measures seem like a distant dream, as none of the three conditions described above remains in place. Washington manifests little interest in advancing a policy to assist Arab liberals, let alone the capacity to muster bipartisan support for one. To the contrary, a rare point of consensus across the aisle, noted earlier, is the desire to withdraw from the Middle East and North Africa, as both Obama and Trump administration policies have shown.<sup>35</sup> Nor does this attitude distinguish meaningfully between military withdrawal and human disengagement: recent years have seen cutbacks in State Department funding and staffing, as well as reduced support for USAID, NED, MEPI, and other major endowments.<sup>36</sup> Many American citizens, for their part, have turned inward,

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34 Rufus Phillips, “Breathing Life Into Expeditionary Diplomacy: A Missing Dimension of Security Capabilities,” *National Strategy Information Center working paper*, Fall 2014.

35 Debra Cagan, “Trump’s Middle East policy looks a lot like Obama’s — that’s not a good thing,” *The Hill*, December 20, 2018. Accessed online: <https://bit.ly/2VXdkA2>; David E. Sanger, “A Strategy of Retreat in Syria, With Echoes of Obama,” *New York Times*, December 19, 2018. Accessed online: <https://nyti.ms/2vJI9Y4>

36 Josh Rogin, “Obama cuts foreign assistance to several countries in new budget request,” *Foreign Policy*, February 14, 2011. Accessed online: <https://bit.ly/2xbx6ao>; Caitlin Emma, “Trump administration mulls \$4.3B in foreign aid cuts,” *Politico*, August 15, 2019. Accessed online: <https://politi.co/2TvfkHK>





USAID/Flickr

registering much less interest in foreign affairs in general and Arab affairs in particular.<sup>37</sup> U.S.-allied Arab capitals, meanwhile, have seen a post-Arab Spring retrenchment of authoritarianism. While the policies of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE have featured some liberal social reforms, they have also asserted new heights of control over the management of reform — and punished liberals who tried to act independently. When in 2012 Egyptian authorities shut down the offices of the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, and Freedom House, seizing files and arresting dozens, they exhibited yet again their profound distrust of these institutions.<sup>38</sup> Thus it remains as challenging as ever — if not more so — to negotiate a space for Americans to engage Arab civic actors in country.

Yet the failure to address these problems and engage competitively only defeats the goal, shared by so many Americans, of reducing military commitments overseas. As section one of this study argued and section three demonstrated,

time and again the United States sent soldiers into harm's way yet ceded the post-war political sphere to hostile powers. In doing so, it allowed its adversaries to shape political outcomes, setting the stage for future conflict. Add to this clear and simple case for reviving American competitive soft power the fact that doing so costs pennies on the dollar compared to war and incurs a far lower toll in human life. It stands to reason that if opinion leaders make such a case compellingly to Americans on a sufficiently large scale, the widespread yearning to bring troops home will prompt its own demand for this nonviolent means of promoting change.

With this mindset firmly in place, bipartisan consensus becomes possible, and the power of American creativity and grit can overcome the various obstacles described above. For example, the fact that the virtues of competitive soft power have been ignored by some cultural elites and stigmatized by others can inspire a reformist intellectual wave on American campuses to

<sup>37</sup> One particularly striking example is the reversal of longtime U.S. Middle East hand Martin Indyk, who recently argued for full American withdrawal from the region: Martin Indyk, “The Middle East Isn’t Worth It Anymore,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 17, 2020. Accessed online: <https://on.wsj.com/2v0JLfN>

<sup>38</sup> Marwa Awad and Sherine El Madany, “Egypt police raid U.S.-backed pro-democracy groups”, *Reuters*, December 29, 2011. Accessed online: <https://reut.rs/32W0gUW>.

change this climate: new educational curricula to rekindle the expeditionary spirit; new polemics to break the false “cultural imperialist” taboo. The fact that it will take years to nurture a new cadre of expeditionary diplomats and social entrepreneurs can inspire an interim strategy while young recruits develop the requisite skills: build on the unprecedented number of mid-career professionals who already possess some of them. After all, the United States now harbors considerably more bilingual and bicultural Arab Americans in a range of fields than it did a generation ago — and as Arab-Israeli relations have improved in recent years, more Jewish Americans have spent time in Arab countries, studied the language and cultures, and built their own bonds of friendship and trust.

As to the fact that U.S.-allied Arab autocracies remain as resistant as ever to American political action on their territory, they are also more concerned than ever about the staying power of America’s commitment to the region.<sup>39</sup> Through shrewd diplomacy, the United States can leverage foreign aid and other wanted forms of assistance to negotiate a space for Americans to partner with local actors in these countries. The same kind of resistance does not exist, meanwhile, in those portions of the region where the state is weak or failing. America’s Arab allies even welcome efforts by outside powers to promote stable governance and civil peace within these territories. Nor in any part of the region can an autocrat or militia fully block alternative forms of civil engagement that happen online: a generation after the September 11 attacks, the potential of information and communications technologies to serve as cross-border tools for coordination and partnership has vastly expanded, and remains underutilized.

This study began by observing that American discussions of Mideast policy reflect a gloss on the region that is both overly militarized and falsely dichotomized. The case for reviving and deploying America’s competitive capacities in Arab lands is as much a case for breaking out of

this narrow gloss, and exploring Arab societies in fully human, three-dimensional terms. Americans will surely continue to probe the region for the threats it poses and the need to neutralize them. They can and must also explore the region for the opportunities it poses and the means to nurture them.



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<sup>39</sup> See, for example, “White House denies Obama’s Gulf overtures are unraveling”, *Chicago Tribune*, May 11, 2015. Accessed online: <https://bit.ly/2PRkP1x>.



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