The Societal Sources of Change in the Middle East

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Despite the widespread opposition within the Middle East, throughout Europe, and in other parts of the globe against the US-led military invasion of Iraq in spring 2003, there was an underlying sense of anticipation that the removal of Saddam Hussein from power and the subsequent establishment of a more liberal political order in Baghdad would in fact serve as a catalyst to promote political change in the Middle East. While many argued that the war was fought on false premises and for the wrong reasons, there nevertheless existed a common minimum expectation that the forced removal of an authoritarian government at the heart of the chronically unstable Middle East would serve as a jolt for the aging Arab leaderships finally to deal more seriously with the numerous political, economic, and social deficits that today characterize large sections of the region stretching from Morocco to Iran. To be clear, few subscribed to the idealistic notion of the US administration, and particularly the proponents of so-called neo-conservatism, that, as President Bush stated, »the establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution«,[1] or that »a new regime in Iraq would serve as a dramatic and inspiring example for freedom for other nations in the region.«[2] Nevertheless, faint hopes were present that a post-Saddam environment would result in opportunities and more positive consequences for the region and propel the Middle East on a different path from the recurring violence of the past.

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1. Remarks by US President George W. Bush at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, November 6, 2003, available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html.
2. Remarks by US President George W. Bush to the American Enterprise Institute, February 26, 2003, available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/02/20030226-11.html. Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz stated that »Iraq as the first Arab democracy … would cast a very large shadow, starting with Syria and Iran but across the whole Arab world«.

In the year or so that has passed since President Bush officially declared an end to the military hostilities in Iraq on May 1, 2003, that hope has dissipated. In terms of its future political development, the reference to Iraq as a soon-to-emerge full-fledged democratic nation has disappeared from official pronouncements. Instead, the focus has turned to limiting the current level of violence and strengthening the weak institutional capacity of the Iraqi interim government in the hope that somehow stability can slowly be re-established in different parts of the country. In the meantime, for other governments in the region the emphasis has shifted towards maintenance of the status quo rather than experimentation with and implementation of wide-ranging and meaningful reform measures.

Status Quo Instead of Sea Change

The argument to be pursued here is that in light of the situation in the middle of 2004, and in terms of the short- to medium-term developments to be expected, the Iraq war was certainly not a watershed as far as the Middle East is concerned. While the long-term geopolitical repercussions might prove significant in relation to Iraq and its immediate neighborhood, for the moment the US-led invasion that overthrew the Saddam Hussein regime can be characterized merely as the most recent in a series of events that over recent decades have illuminated the serious political, economic, strategic, and structural weaknesses of the Middle East. Coming on the heels of the Iran–Iraq War of 1980–88; the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait of 1990 and Kuwait's subsequent liberation in 1991; the periodic crises of the 1990s, in conjunction with the US dual containment policy of both Iraq and Iran; and finally September 11, 2001, Middle Eastern leaders appear by and large to be resigned to their current cycle of periodic violence, political nepotism, economic statism, and social decay.

In this context, the status quo has been reaffirmed as the real winner in the Middle Eastern political landscape in the immediate post-Iraq era. Initially, leaders in the region must have taken the US seriously when the Bush administration showed its readiness to use military power to bring about change. However, the Iraq campaign soon made it unequivocally clear that the pursuit of a wide-ranging reform process along the lines of US wishes would in fact be highly counterproductive and lead only to a situation of mounting internal instability. With US attention being diverted elsewhere, the decision was thus taken in capitals throughout the

region to continue with the wait-and-see approach that had up to this point served Middle Eastern regimes so well.

At the same time, the invasion opened up a Pandora's box in terms of regional instability. In the Middle East today insecurity has been heightened, the main problems contributing to this insecurity lie unaddressed, and the gap with the rest of the world has grown to unprecedented proportions. Saudi Arabia is confronted by a direct challenge from al-Qa'ida-inspired elements whose pronounced goal is to overthrow the Saud ruling family and install a Taliban-like government in Riyadh. In Iran, the clerical establishment under Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khameini has tightened its grip on power while at the same time pursuing its controversial nuclear program and broadening its interference inside Iraq. Seeing the US getting bogged down in Iraq has made the Iranian ruling clique confident that it can pursue a more confrontational stance vis-à-vis Washington, at a time when the region requires fewer rather than more tensions.[3] Iran could soon replace Iraq as principal regional headline-maker.

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In the meantime, the Arab–Israeli conflict is as far away from a solution as ever. Backed by the almost unconditional support of its American ally, the Israeli government of Ariel Sharon sees absolutely no need to engage with the Palestinians in a substantive dialogue or to rekindle the peace process. Rather, by creating hard facts on the ground in terms of settlement expansion and wall building, Israel awaits Palestinian self-destruction. The Palestinian Authority has helped this process along by being utterly unable to get its own house in order or to put forward the semblance of a coherent institutional machinery that genuinely represents Palestinian interests. Overall, it is a vicious cycle that breeds further hatred instead of promoting tolerance and confidence-building in the region.

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3. This is evident from the decision of the Iranian leadership to resume uranium enrichment activities despite an announcement by Washington that the Iranian nuclear program is an issue of increasing concern.

Such developments, which are at least indirectly related to the Iraq invasion and its outcome, have also manifested themselves at the domestic level and have influenced the internal decision-making processes of existing regimes on three levels. First, in terms of their own standing and survival, the sense of confusion over the course of recent events and the accompanying frustration over the inability to influence that course have made the current regimes determined to avoid any kind of experimentation that could further rock the internal political boat. As far as present elites are concerned, what could occur as the result of a power vacuum was made painfully clear in Iraq. To avoid this, leaders made it clear that any effort at reform would only be piecemeal and gradual so as to allow anticipated changes to gain a firm root within society. Moreover, it was made clear that domestic opponents intent on pushing for too much change in too short a time would be pursued and sidelined. This applied to both individuals and groups carrying out violent acts against the state, for example, as in Saudi Arabia where security forces have been engaged in widespread and increasingly hard-line security sweeps against suspected Islamic militants or even those who advocate largely peaceful change. Again in Saudi Arabia, reform advocates were arrested in March 2004 for allegedly making statements »which do not serve national unity or the cohesion of society.« On August 10, 2004, it was announced that three of them would go on trial, accused of »calling for … a constitutional monarchy and using Western terminology.« In Syria, ten reform proponents were arrested and sentenced to jail terms of between two and 10 years during the period from March to August 2003. There have been similar cases in other Middle Eastern states.[4]

Second, the indirect yet reiterated message directed towards the United States was that the present Middle Eastern leadership was the only force capable of preventing the region from declining into a feared and prolonged power vacuum and associated anarchy. It was made clear to the us that instituting reforms too quickly would endanger internal stability and ultimately plunge states into chaos. In an interview with the

4. For Saudi Arabia see the reports by the *Financial Times*, »Saudis detain reform advocates«, March 17, 2004, the *Christian Science Monitor*, »Saudis round up reformers«, from March 18, 2004, and »Three Saudi reformists go on trial in Riyadh«, Agence France Press (AFP), August 10, 2004. Most of those arrested were subsequently released after signing statements pledging not to engage in any political activity. For Syria, see the Human Rights Watch report for 2003, available at http://www.hrw.org.

Italian La Repubblica in March 2004, Egyptian President Husni Mubarak warned that the imposition of us reform plans on the Arab world would result in »a vortex of violence and anarchy« and that the lessons of violence-ridden Algeria should serve as a clear warning in this regard.[5] And if that was not enough, regional leaders continuously emphasized to us officials and anybody else who would care to listen that the holding of free elections in the current regional political climate would result only in a takeover by Islamist parties, a scenario that, the argument goes, surely nobody would want. In light of the mounting difficulties that the us has encountered in Iraq, this was a message that apparently caught the attention of at least some within Washington's corridors of power, who subsequently decided to take a more low-key approach in terms of advocating radical change. Thus, what was initially an ambitious plan for broad-based democratization under the Middle East Partnership Initiative (mepi) turned into a more general and watered down Partnership for Progress and a Common Future with the Region of the Broader Middle East and North Africa, adopted during the G-8 Sea Island Summit meeting in early June 2004, with the emphasis turning to more collaborative efforts between the us and its European allies rather than a direct unilateral course of action on the part of the us. In essence, what was highlighted once again was the strategic dilemma faced by us policy in terms of promoting reform and opening up the political process versus maintaining stability and supporting existing authoritarian governments.

Third, rulers began to effectively use the rising anti-Americanism within their own societies and within the region as a whole to delay political reforms, arguing that to do so would be to follow an American agenda. us efforts for political and economic reform were effectively characterized as outside interference that would unnecessarily complicate and disrupt the domestic political process and the efforts at establishing a reform movement with strong internal roots. The well-practiced refrain put forward was that reforms should not be imposed from outside and that change must occur at its own pace and in due time.[6]

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5. *La Repubblica,* March 5, 2004.
6. For example, in a joint statement following their meeting in Egypt in February 2004, President Mubarak and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah »affirmed that Arab states are proceeding on the path of development, modernization and reform in keeping with their people's interests and values« and that Arab states »do not accept that a particular pattern of reform be imposed on Arab and Islamic countries from outside.« See *Arab News,* February 25, 2004.

In this context, Middle Eastern governments used the arguments of the US to disarm their own domestic political opponents by arguing that the implementation of the proposed reforms would be nothing more than an imposition of the Western agenda for change. Reformers in the region subsequently found themselves in a dilemma. On the one hand, they felt the need to argue for a sustained reform effort as a means of stemming the tide of increasing Islamist militancy or at least to provide an alternative path to the radicalization of the region. On the other, by supporting reform initiatives they became identified as agents of the West intent on carrying out the agenda of foreigners. This is a dichotomy with which liberal-minded reformers throughout the region continue to struggle. The lead author of the Arab Human Development Report, Nader Fergany, has in this context argued that the US should basically keep out of the internal debate within the Arab world as their interference is skewing the terms of debate and doing more harm than good.[7]

On all three levels mentioned so far, the end result has been a consolidation of the status quo, with the power elites able to exhibit their competence and agility in playing the balancing game, in turn canceling out the advantages of each of their opponents. Looking back over the crises of the past two decades, Middle Eastern leaders must feel reassured over their remarkable ability to weather the numerous regional crises that have engulfed the region. From that perspective, even an event as dramatic as the Iraq war associated with the invasion of an Arab state by over 150,000 foreign soldiers became compartmentalized as something whose repercussions could be dealt with and ultimately overcome.

It must be granted at this stage that the line of argument we are pursuing is a broad generalization that does not necessarily correspond to the policies of every individual Middle Eastern state. In fact, countries such as Jordan, Bahrain, and Qatar have taken significant steps over recent years to institute political reforms that are bound to have far-reaching consequences. King Abdullah in Jordan has been at the forefront, calling for wide-ranging reforms and arguing for the Middle East to break out of its stalemate. This, in turn, has resulted in a widespread modernization program in Jordan since 1999. In Bahrain, a parliament was reconstituted after a break of almost three decades in October 2002, with both men and

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7. According to Fergany, »Intervention from outside deprives Arabs of their fundamental right to self-determination.« Quoted from *Cairo Times,* December 25, 2002. See also the contribution of Nader Fergany in this issue.

women being given the right to stand as candidates and cast their vote in elections. In Qatar, the Emir has promulgated one of the most far-reaching constitutions that, once ratified and in force in 2005, will grant an unprecedented level of personal freedom and protection for a Middle Eastern state. In fact, throughout the Gulf region, the concept of reform and associated measures has gained a respectable level of support, at least to a stage where the leadership acknowledges the need to close the current accountability and legitimacy gap between the rulers and the ruled, if only in terms of guiding a process of change from above.

The degree to which these measures are really meant to bring about real change, however, remains to be seen. In fact, for the moment reform initiatives are largely part of a package to maintain internal control and power, and to substantiate the leadership's status. As such, pronouncements are more a means of paying lip-service to reform demands, the real intent being to shore up an increasingly shrinking legitimacy rather than to enact broad participation rights. The primary motive of power holders remains the maintenance of control over the reform process as such so as, on the one hand, to ensure that the interests of the present elites are taken care of and, on the other, to counteract the possibility that a reform movement might eventually spin out of control and lead to unintended consequences. As a result, the status quo is confirmed while the structural deficiencies accounting for the present Middle Eastern malaise remain unaddressed.

Light at the End of the Tunnel?

If the above description of a stagnant, status quo-oriented Middle East is substantiated, the question has to be posed why Arab leaders are currently contemplating a political reform process at all at a time of widespread regional instability and coming on the heels of a major upheaval like the US invasion of Iraq.

The answer lies in the fact that the reform initiatives currently being contemplated and articulated are not so much a response to the implications of the Iraq conflict as a direct reflection of societal transformations taking place in every Middle Eastern country. The proposed measures are aimed at combating and correcting the deficiencies within Middle Eastern state structures that have combined to produce continued economic decline, increased rates of poverty and social dislocation, a failing educa-

tion system, and in general a growing alienated and disillusioned population. By themselves, such factors would not converge to force ruling elites to respond with the outlines of a reform program. However, in light of such developments as an increasingly globalized and networked local environment, and a rising educated and politically conscious young population, the inevitability of such a reform effort becomes clear. Moreover, and also related to the fact that the domestic environment now confronting the regimes is not the result of the Iraq war but the culmination of a number of factors that have developed over many years and which are slowly but increasingly coming together, the reform measures being considered cannot be viewed as occurring within a vacuum or as a singular response to an isolated phenomenon. Instead, what is happening in the Middle East – what is beginning to engulf the population and the regimes as a whole – is a dynamic transformation process that over the coming years will fundamentally alter the way the region conducts its political, economic, and social affairs.

> The forces of globalization are reaching the Middle East just as they are every other part of the globe and are demanding ever greater openness, accountability, and personal freedom.

In that perspective, the notion of a prevailing status quo manifesting itself throughout the Middle East is short-sighted and not rooted in regional realities. Notwithstanding the minor direct impact of the Iraq war, the Middle East is a region undergoing significant and far-reaching transformation. As ground-breaking reports from the United National Development Program (UNDP) in both 2002 and 2003 made clear, the region as a whole – and the population within it – finds itself confronted by a fast-changing environment that has produced deep cleavages between governments and their citizens and within society itself. The different pulls being exerted are reflected in blatant contradictions. For example, while ruling regimes pursue policies aimed at consolidating the status quo or offering only piece-meal reform, the forces of globalization are reaching the Middle East just as they are every other part of the globe and are demanding ever greater openness, accountability, and personal freedom. In terms of the general population, it is increasingly, albeit slowly, becoming clear that governance arrangements in their present state are simply insufficient to meet rising public expectations. However, this

trend towards a more participatory order is being resisted by ruling elites who fear eventually being swept from power or provoking a heightened period of instability, or both.

To understand the geopolitical and socio-economic path that the Middle East is likely to follow in the coming years, the analytical magnifying glass should thus not be held up to Iraq and its immediate regional environment but rather to underlying social developments. Only by adopting this point of departure will it be possible for the West – and particularly Europe – to prepare itself adequately for the coming shifts and to propose realistic and appropriate policy alternatives to ensure that the stirrings within Middle Eastern societies are routed in a direction in which they begin to promote stability instead of pulling the region into another cycle of lasting violence and insecurity.

Three developments will have a particular impact on Middle Eastern states and societies in the coming years:[8] (i) population increase, particularly young people; (ii) rising educational standards and their impact on the population as a whole; and (iii) increasing political consciousness, supported by the spread of communications technologies and the inability of national government to control the information flow.

As far as population projections are concerned, Table 1 provides a brief glimpse of the projected situation in the Middle East on the basis of current statistics. Here, two items stand out. First, a population explosion is occurring in the region, with the total population expected to double from its current 341.9 million to over 723 million by 2050. For the years 2000–2005, three Arab countries – Yemen, the Palestinian territories, and Oman – are among the top 10 in the world in terms of population growth rates. While currently only Egypt and Iran from the Middle East are among the top 30 most populous countries in the world (numbers 15 and 16 respectively), by 2050 this number will have increased to five, with Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan joining the list. Yemen will move from its current position at 52 to 18 as the population increases from 18.3 million to over 100 million. Similarly, there will be almost 60 million Saudis in

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8. For an extensive discussion of the political, economic, and social dynamics that are fundamentally altering the Middle Eastern landscape, see the Arab Human Development Reports of 2002 and 2003 published by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), available at www.undp.org, as well as the recently published series of World Bank reports on governance, employment, women, and trade and investment in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), available at http://lnweb18. worldbank.org/mna/mena.nsf.

Table 1

Selected Middle East Country Population Statistics

Country	Total population 2000	Projected population 2050	% of population below age 24 2000
Algeria	30 291 000	51 180 000	56.5
Bahrain	640 000	1 008 000	43.7
Egypt	67 884 000	113 840 000	55.7
Iran	70 330 000	121 424 000	59.3
Iraq	22 946 000	53 574 000	61.7
Jordan	4 913 000	11 709 000	61.0
Kuwait	1 914 000	4 001 000	54.5
Lebanon	3 496 000	5 018 000	49.8
Libya	5 290 000	9 969 000	57.6
Morocco	29 878 000	50 361 000	55.3
Oman	2 538 000	8 751 000	63.4
Palestinian Territories	3 191 000	11 821 000	65.1
Qatar	565 000	831 000	39.3
Saudi Arabia	20 346 000	59 683 000	62.2
Sudan	31 095 000	63 530 000	59.8
Syria	16 189 000	36 345 000	63.0
Tunisia	9 459 000	14 076 000	50.8
United Arab Emirates	2 606 000	3 709 000	41.3
Yemen	18 349 000	102 379 000	68.3
Total	341 920 000	723 209 000	56.2

Source: United Nations Population Division.

2050 compared to just over 20 million now. Countries such as Iraq, Jordan, Oman, and the Palestinian territories will move up more than 10 places in terms of total population ranking.

The effects of this tremendous population explosion will be compounded by the large percentage currently (2000) under the age of 24. Overall, young people make up between 50 and 65 percent of the total

population in the Middle East, with Yemen at the upper end of the spectrum with 68.3 percent (median age 15.0 years), followed by Iraq, Jordan, Oman, the Palestinian territories, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, all over 60 percent. To put such figures in perspective, the population of Germany will decline in the period 2000–2050 by approximately 14 percent, the current percentage of those under 24 is 26.8 percent, and the median age is 40.1 years. Spain will see its population drop from 39.9 million to 31.3 million, while its percentage of under 24s is currently 29.8 percent, and its median age is 37.3 years.

This surge in real numbers and the large percentage of young people will in themselves put a great strain on governance systems in the Middle East in terms of the required expansion of social services, particularly in education and health care. This is already an area in which Middle Eastern governments are failing to meet expectations and the sense of discontent will only increase as competition over limited public resources intensifies. However, the true significance of this phenomenon only becomes clear when combined with the likely developments that will occur in terms of education and the related impact of the spread of communications and information technology. The current young generation is generally more literate, has greater access to educational opportunities (including university studies), a greater awareness of regional and international events due to the spread of resources like the Internet, and, as a result of the spread of communications technologies, increased exposure to possibilities and opportunities in other parts of the world, particularly the West. The result is a general rise in the level of political consciousness throughout the region which in turn is bound to translate into a greater determination to take part in political debate.

> As far as the ruling regimes are concerned, the combination of youth, education, and IT is a key problem area, and one which will invariably mean some devolution of power.

A glance at the statistics presented in Table 2 also proves very informative. Throughout the region, literacy rates have continued their steady improvement, even within the span of a few years (1998–2002). As a result, the majority of Middle Eastern states now have literacy rates well above 70 percent. Similarly, net secondary school enrollment rates have improved, reaching 80 percent and above in countries such as Jordan,

Bahrain, and Qatar. In this context, it has to be acknowledged that the overall quality of the education system in the Middle East remains poor and lags behind those of other regions in the world. At the same time, the very fact that exposure to continued education is expanding is directly reflected in a segment of the population that is more aware of developments taking place around them and more willing to engage in political discourse.

Regarding the key problem of women's status in the region, similar positive developments are visible, although gender disparities remain high. In terms of secondary school enrollment, literacy rates, and labor market participation, the trend for Middle Eastern women has been towards increased access and greater opportunities. In Oman, for example, literacy among women increased from 57.1 percent to 65.4 between 1998 and 2002, while for Syria it went from 57.9 percent to 74.2 percent. In almost all the countries in the region, women now have net secondary school enrollment percentages above 60 percent, with Jordan and Bahrain showing figures over 80 percent. Furthermore, while overall female labor participation rates remain low, the percentage of women entering the labor market is increasing steadily, having doubled and even tripled in the Gulf states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. In Kuwait alone there has been an increase of 7.3 percent in the female workforce since 2003. Also in the Gulf states women have slowly gained access to the political system, being able to vote and stand as candidates in municipal or parliamentary elections in Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar. There is no doubt that these trends are contributing to the overall transformation taking place throughout the Middle East.

The real impact in this regard will probably come about due to the expansion of information technologies throughout the Middle East. The increase in the number of Internet users within a four-year period from 757,000 to over 11 million is astounding, especially because this is an area in which the government's monopoly over information is being broken and people are having increasing access to more independent sources of data. The movement towards greater exposure to IT is clearly being driven by the youthful population and therefore it can be expected that such expansion will continue at quite a high rate. With the status of the ruling regimes as arbiters of truth no longer guaranteed, governments are finding themselves under mounting pressure to provide real policy solutions and to take the concerns and aspirations of their populations more

Table 2
Selected Middle East Country Education and Technology Statistics

Country	Total literacy %		Net secondary school enroll- ment rate %		Fixed lines and mobile telephones (per 1 000 people)		Internet users	
	1998	2002	1999	2001 (% of women)	1998	2002	1998	2002
Algeria	64.2	69.0	58.5	62.0 (64.0)	50.7	73.8	6 000	500 000
Bahrain	86.7	88.5	81.6	81.0 (86.0)	413.3	846.4	20 000	165 000
Egypt	54.6[a]	–	79.0	81.0 (79.0)	66.2	177.2	100 000	1 900 000
Iran	73.6	77.1[b]	–	–	125.3	220.1	65 000	3 200 000
Iraq	–	–	33.0	– (26.0[a])	29.8	28.7	–	25 000
Jordan	88.5	90.9	75.9	80.0 (81.0)	124.7	355.4	60 000	307 500
Kuwait	80.6	82.9	49.7	77.0 (79.0)	334.1	722.9	60 000	250 000
Lebanon	85.6[a]	–	70.2	– (73.3[a])	335.7	425.8	100 000	400 000
Libya	77.8	81.7	–	–	94.4	127.2[b]	20 000[b]	125 000
Morocco	46.9	50.7	29.9	– (27.0[a])	54.5	247.1	40 000	700 000
Oman	68.4	74.4	58.5	68.0 (68.0)	135.6	255.4	20 000	180 000
Qatar	80.8[a]	–	78.0	78.0 (80.0)	373.5	727.4	20 000	70 000
Saudi Arabia	74.2	77.9	–	53.0 (51.0)	138.5	361.0	20 000	1 400 000
Sudan	55.2	59.9	–	–	6.0	26.5	2 000	84 000
Syria	72.6	82.9	37.6	39.0 (37.0)	94.7	146.7	10 000	220 000

Country	Total literacy %		Net secondary school enroll-ment rate %		Fixed lines and mobile telephones (per 1 000 people)		Internet users	
	1998	2002	1999	2001 (% of women)	1998	2002	1998	2002
Tunisia	68.5	73.2	67.9	68.0 (69.0)	84.8	168.9	10 000	505 500
UAE	75.0	77.3	67.5	72.0 (74.0)	598.6	1009.7	200 000	1 200 000
Yemen	43.9	49.0	37.0	– (21.1ᵃ)	15.7	48.9	4 000	100 000
Total	–	–	–	–	170.9	331.6	757 000	11 300 000

Source: World Development Indicators Database, April 2004; UNESCO, Global Education Statistics 2004; International Telecommunications Union 2003; Arab Human Development Report 2002 and 2003.

Note: [a] Data for 1999; [b] Data for 2001

seriously. It is in this context that the Iraq war might have lasting consequences as it was a conflict that almost everyone in the Middle East could observe on their television screens through media outlets like al-Jazeera and al-Arabiyya or through the Internet. And while in the long term the spread of IT is probably a positive development in the sense that access to information is more widespread and outlets for political expression are multiplied, in the short term it can also lead to greater instability as the ruling arrangements of the present will be subject to increased scrutiny and people vent their frustrations over their current predicament. As far as the ruling regimes are concerned, the combination of youth, education, and IT is a key problem area, and one which will invariably mean some devolution of power.

The Challenge for External Actors

In this context, Europe and the United States will have an essential role to play. Although the US has, not only in terms of Iraq but also the Palestinian issue, severely undermined its ability to promote a course of

democratic reform, one must not think that the role of outsiders will be negligible, ineffective, or both. In fact, done carefully and based on a constructive set of assumptions, their role should not be underestimated. It is true that the widespread reform debate being initiated in Western capitals and spreading through Western intellectual and policy circles has only limited applicability to the realities of the region. Their impact will therefore be restricted in the direct sense: for example, the accusation of interference can lead to outright rejection. However, globalization and widespread communication also mean that outside debate inevitably seeps into domestic discourse, providing these debates with additional parameters around which to orient themselves. Equally important is the fact that by focusing on the various elements of reform and its associated strategies, outsiders themselves gain a greater appreciation of the intricacies and substance of the issues. As a result, the realization emerges that true political development and reform in the Middle East can in the end succeed only if grounded in local realities and structured from within. If one takes this long-term view, an essential point of departure for democratization and the restructuring of societies, the linkages being established between reform advocates on both sides are bound to bear fruit.

Western governments should therefore focus on pragmatic initiatives rather than ideological principles. For the countries of the European Union, this means following a number of key parameters. First, EU–Middle East and EU–Gulf relations must be constructed on their own merits and cannot be seen primarily as a substitute for US policies. Second, a European approach must strike a proper balance, avoiding both uncritical support and exclusive criticism of US policies.

A good starting point is the realization that with Saddam Hussein removed from power, there is a real opportunity for regional progress and cooperation. This opportunity can, however, be taken advantage of only if the security approach being applied to overcome the insurgency within the country is supplemented with a political course that begins to tackle the root causes of the present instability. Thus, whereas a US and NATO role should be limited to security, peacekeeping, and military crisis-management efforts, the EU needs to step out of its shadow and openly promote a political agenda that has as its basis regional cooperation grounded in and supported by various political, economic, and social reform initiatives. Such initiatives have to be guided by both a European vision of what a future Middle East and Gulf should look like and an open dialogue with the Arab world to jointly define targets and common

projects. At bottom is the unique European vision that builds on the continent's history and experience in overcoming conflicts and divisions.

Conclusion

The Iraq war has both exposed the resistance of the region to immediate change and confirmed trends and indicators that existed prior to the latest crisis, that is, the overall weakness of the state in dealing with its mounting social and internal challenges and the inevitability of reform. What is clear is that change will be driven by the need to provide educational and employment opportunities for the growing youth population rather than by decisions being made on the future development of Iraq. No regime in the region will be able to maintain what is left of its present legitimacy if it does not provide concrete solutions for its population.

In the meantime, Iraq is at best primarily an internal issue for Iraqis, and at worst a diversionary opportunity for leaders to assert the existence of an external threat when the real challenge is domestic. If anything, the war in Iraq is an issue not because of its geopolitical reverberations but primarily because the inept US effort at post-war reconstruction has made the country a magnet for extremist elements and has added fuel to the flames of frustration and impotence that are already consuming the region's youth. This is unfortunate because, when looked at in terms of the real issues defining the future of the Middle East, the picture is not as bleak as it is often made out to be.

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