

FROM CONFLICT TO COOPERATION

WRITING A NEW CHAPTER IN U.S.-ARAB RELATIONS

A Report of the CSIS Advisory Committee
on U.S. Policy in the Arab World

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Preface

CSIS convened this study group in early 2004 not because there were too few people examining U.S. policy in the Arab world, but because perhaps there were too many. A remarkable focus in recent years on discrete issues and immediate crises in the Arab world—from the Arab-Israeli conflict to Iraq to terrorism to reform—often meant that longer-term strategic issues were left unaddressed. Too often, the high level of activity served to mask the lack of an integrated vision for U.S. policy toward the region.

With this in mind, CSIS brought together a panel of former senior U.S. government officials, academics, and businesspeople to think in a more integrated way about what it is that the U.S. government does, and what it needs to do, to serve U.S. interests in the Arab world. Importantly, the committee also engaged in sustained dialogues with partners and potential partners in the Arab world, seeking to understand their perspectives and honing recommendations with their help. Our thinking was that if partnerships are needed—and we believe that they are if we are to reach our common goals of peace, stability, and growth—the process of dialogue with prospective partners needs to start early and be sustained. The committee also benefited from excellent suggestions from U.S. government officials, who welcomed both the approach and the preliminary recommendations.

CSIS is grateful to the members of the advisory committee for their service and to our partners and hosts in the Arab world for their many courtesies and their patience with our questions. CSIS Middle East Program coordinators Anna Mohrman and Kari Frame were indispensable to the project's successful conclusion, and former U.S. diplomat Robert Holley was very helpful shaping this project in its early phases.

The recommendations contained here reflect the broad consensus of our bipartisan commission, and not every member agrees with every single judgment or recommendation. They do, however, agree on the direction of the report and on the urgency of the challenges it seeks to address. We look forward to working with partners in the United States and the Arab world to begin to implement its recommendations.

Executive Summary

U.S.-Arab relations are at their lowest point in generations. We are facing unprecedented opposition in the region. The number of Arabs coming to the United States to study, do business, visit, or seek medical care is plummeting. Fear, anger, and frustration between Arabs and Americans are creating a dangerous trust gap that is growing wider every day.

Our commitment to reverse these trends is not driven by starry-eyed idealism, but rather a clear-eyed assessment that broken Arab-U.S. relations are a serious threat to the long-term security and interests of both sides. Over the last century, the United States has been drawn increasingly to the Arab world because of our critical interests in the region—from energy to commerce, from military facilities to Israeli security, from its centrality in the Islamic world to, most recently, its role in spawning terrorism that has threatened Arabs and non-Arabs alike.

As the Bush administration begins a new term, it faces two immediate challenges in the Middle East that are as daunting as they are urgent: Iraq and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. If turmoil and violence continues unabated in Iraq, it will reinforce the voices of those who warn that the United States works for change in the Arab world and then leaves chaos in its wake. While we must not keep U.S. troops in Iraq indefinitely, we must remain until the country is stable, is able to defend itself, and is creating a national identity bolstered by inclusion, not undermined by sectarian turmoil.

The stakes are even higher with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Indeed, we predict that the recommendations that follow in this report will not succeed unless the United States shows active leadership in forging a comprehensive solution that creates a democratic, secure, state of Palestine alongside the democratic, secure, Jewish state of Israel.

Yet, even achieving these historic feats is not enough to protect our country's security and interests. We face a multitude of long-term challenges in the region, none of which can be relegated to the sidelines until the immediate crises in Iraq and the Middle East are resolved.

With that in mind, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) launched a project one year ago to reexamine U.S. policies and relationships in the Arab world. We brought together a bipartisan advisory committee comprising distinguished U.S. experts, led by former U.S. secretary of defense William Cohen. In this report, we tried to go beyond the Arab-Israeli conflict, beyond short-term fixes or general recommendations, beyond a focus on governments, and beyond the views only of Americans. In fact, what most set this process apart was that CSIS sought strong input from potential Arab partners as well as from American experts.

Too often, U.S. policymakers have talked past their Arab counterparts, failing to adequately listen to them, let alone learn from them.

Understanding Arab Leaders and Their Citizens

Last March, CSIS project leaders traveled for three weeks to Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia to interview nearly 200 Arab opinion leaders, including government officials, journalists, and young leaders. Despite their many differences, they voiced common views about U.S.-Arab relations and common fears and dreams about their own futures.

Frustration and Anger over U.S. Actions in Regional Conflicts

In the last few years, U.S. inactions and actions in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and Iraq have cast a long shadow of suspicion over all American efforts. Arab leaders from every sector warned us that unless the United States actively and visibly reengaged in the Middle East peace process, every goal our country pursued in the region would be suspect. Those we interviewed saw little chance that Iraq could become an inspiration to the region. Instead, getting Iraq right was a necessary, but insufficient, step in rebuilding U.S. credibility in the Arab world.

A Matter of Style or Substance? How Arab Leaders Perceive the United States

An overwhelming number of leaders we talked to believed that the United States is engaged in a war with the Arab world or Islam itself and that our government has not successfully challenged that perception. They also complained that the United States appears to have abandoned its commitment to consistent principles and justice in the Arab world, thereby diminishing its credibility as an “honest broker” in the region. Finally, many of those we surveyed lamented that the United States is “not in listening mode,” as one official phrased it, and instead simply issues orders for the rest of the world to follow.

Moving beyond Security

How do we balance a relationship built on security with a diplomatic partnership focusing on a broad array of political, economic, and social goals? Increasingly, Arab government leaders and citizens are speaking openly and even enthusiastically about reform, but there is little agreement on what reforms are needed and how to pursue them. Despite some discomfort with conditionality, many Arab leaders we spoke to recognized that setting mutually agreed upon goals, objectives, and time lines could be a real incentive to reform in the region.

In examining the results of these interviews with Arab opinion leaders, we realized we also wanted to understand more about the attitudes Arab citizens hold toward the United States and our potential to improve them. We teamed up with

Zogby International, which conducted a poll of more than 3,000 Arabs living in Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, the UAE, and Egypt. Some of its key findings follow.

Souring Arab Attitudes Are a Reaction to U.S. Policies—Not Values and Products

In five of the six countries measured, unfavorable views of the United States have increased among Arabs over the past two years, especially in some of our closest allies in the region: Morocco, Jordan, and Egypt. In shaping their attitudes, respondents in most countries surveyed believed that our policies were twice as important in shaping their attitudes as our values and products. In fact, large percentages of Arabs surveyed still have relatively positive feelings about our science, democracy, people, education, movies, television, and products. Respondents did see a role for U.S. assistance, but they said they would rather have help from Americans in solving the Arab-Israeli conflict or improving their employment, education, and health care than helping foster political reforms.

Arabs with Direct Exposure to the United States Have a More Favorable Impression

Large numbers of Arabs surveyed would like to visit the United States and know Americans, including about 60 percent of Moroccans, Jordanians, and Lebanese. Those who have had such exposure give the United States higher overall ratings, especially of our values, people, and products. For those who have not been to the United States or met Americans, the Arab media is their main source of information about this country, with American culture not far behind. Overall, watching American television has a positive impact on attitudes about U.S. science, freedom, people, entertainment, products, and education.



Guided by both our research in the region and our discussions in Washington, we concluded that securing U.S. interests will require two mutually reinforcing approaches: creating stronger bilateral partnerships with Arab governments; and making sustained investments in the next generation of Arab leaders and citizens. Neither strategy is sufficient without the other.

The Role of Governments: The Arab Growth and Development Partnership Initiative

Improving Arab-American relations requires real partnership between our respective governments, something that has been noticeably absent for too long. Partnership is a two-way street; though this report focuses on the U.S. role, our recommendations will not be effective unless Arab governments also do their part. The list of steps we must take together is long—from fighting terror to embracing reform—but the status quo is no longer a viable option. Current Arab-American bilateral relationships—which are often adversarial, narrow in scope, and focused on short-term crises—are ill-equipped to protect either side's interests.

We believe an Arab Growth and Development Partnership Initiative (Arab GDP Initiative) could help the United States and its prospective Arab partners to set and meet long-term objectives together. Focused solely on the Arab world, the initiative would tailor the right mix of strategies to every country's needs, create a respectful and productive bilateral dialogue, and include real rewards for progress. At the heart of the Arab GDP Initiative is a belief in positive conditionality, whereby rewards are contingent on a country meeting defined, understandable, and reasonable requirements.

Advisory Board on Arab Growth and Development Funding

Political, economic, and social reforms, while often difficult in the short-term, are essential to long-term stability in the Arab world. Yet, right now, there is not a central initiative that is as ambitious as the challenges we face in the region. Instead, current U.S. efforts in Arab countries seem scattered across a range of programs, often putting them in conflict, if not actual competition, with one another.

We propose a Presidential Advisory Board on Arab Growth and Development to help determine and oversee the right package of trade, aid, debt relief, and other resources necessary to facilitate long-term improvements in the region. In forming the Advisory Board, the president should select six members, while the majority and minority leaders of the House of Representatives and Senate should appoint one each. The board should include members with a wide range of expertise in the Arab world, including development, trade, the private sector, and government.

The board should identify Arab GDP funding needs, paying attention to other international affairs priorities, appropriate criteria and means testing for assistance, the successes and failures of existing initiatives in the Middle East, and the models that have proven successful elsewhere. Appointees should make sure that the Arab GDP funding is driven primarily by the long-term goals of individual countries and insulated from the daily requirements of diplomacy.

Bilateral Task Forces

We propose that the U.S. government establish individual task forces to help guide bilateral relationships in the Arab world. To help inform future efforts, in the first year, the U.S. secretary of state would start by creating such task forces in five repre-

sentative Arab countries, including: Egypt and Saudi Arabia; a modernizing North African country; a small and forward-leaning country in the Gulf; and a country with which the United States has a difficult bilateral relationship, such as Libya.

Led by the State Department, the task forces would include U.S. members from all the relevant cabinet agencies, the ambassador, key embassy staff, top officials from the host government, and if possible, leaders of local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). This group would create common goals across a wide number of sectors, with future levels of funding, trade, and debt relief dependent on reaching those benchmarks. No doubt, such conditionality is likely to provoke argument over whether the terms of an agreement have been met. But ignoring performance is even more problematic, since it would quickly turn incentives into entitlements and undermine the purpose and spirit of the Arab GDP Initiative.

Strengthening U.S. Personnel in the Field

Our ability to strengthen Arab-U.S. relationships will depend on the skills of U.S. personnel, especially our ambassadors and embassy staff in the field. We need to make sure our ambassadors in the region possess the diplomatic, cultural, and modern management skills to lead a broad range of U.S. and Arab officials in setting and meeting long-term goals together.

To ensure that the Foreign Service includes more officers who speak Arabic and understand the region, we must immediately bring in more mid-careerists and provide incentives for incoming junior officers to specialize in the Arab world. Finally, we must better train the increasing number of staff in the Middle East from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and other agencies, including the Departments of Defense, Treasury, Homeland Security, and Justice.

Investing in the Next Generation of Arab Leaders

While improving our bilateral relations with Arab governments is critical, relationships between individual Arabs and Americans are perhaps the most powerful tool to protect our long-term interests. With the current generation of leaders quickly exiting the stage in the Arab world, we have done far too little to reach out to their successors. In the aftermath of 9/11, fewer Arab students, tourists, and businesspeople are spending time in the United States. Moreover, for those who are staying home, our other public diplomacy efforts have failed to change many hearts or minds.

These are all ominous signs. We are currently reaping the rewards of investments we made in Arab people and institutions during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s; the costs of today's alienation may not be felt fully for decades. There is no one quick or easy solution. Fully reversing these trends will require using all the facets of public diplomacy—from exchanges to support for civil society—to make a serious long-term investment in reaching the next generation of Arab leaders and citizens.

Increasing Educational Exchanges

After 9/11, the United States made changes to its visa policies that are decreasing the educational exchanges with the Arab world that have built and sustained relationships between our citizens, leaders, and countries for decades. Many Arab students have been scared off by the horror stories they have heard about visa problems. Some are being lured to the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, or other places promising a more hospitable atmosphere. Still others have heard rumors about anti-Muslim or anti-Arab sentiments in the United States. If the number of exchange students from the Arab world continues to drop, it could have serious consequences for our goals and relationships in the region for generations.

It is not enough to just regain the ground we lost. We believe we must dramatically increase the number of young Arabs who study in the United States, including those who are not from elite backgrounds. Meeting this challenge in the current climate will not be easy, but it is urgent. Therefore, we call on President Bush and congressional leaders to appoint a high-level commission to investigate the roadblocks keeping students, especially young Arabs, from studying in the United States. The commission should include members with experience in law enforcement, intelligence, business, academia, and diplomacy. Within six months, the members should make recommendations about how we can protect ourselves from terrorism while increasing the number of Arab exchange students coming to the United States.

The Arab Partnership Foundation

If we are going to create sustained Arab-U.S. partnerships—leader to leader, citizen to citizen—we will need an organization viewed as separate from the U.S. government, with a deep understanding of the Arab people. For the last 150 years, the American people have spearheaded some of the most successful U.S. efforts in the Middle East, including relief organizations that care for the sick and universities that bring a first-class education and our country's values to young Arabs. Moreover, the U.S. government lacks credibility in Arab countries at the moment, sometimes making it difficult even for sympathetic organizations and individuals to work with us. Finally, our government, by its very design, is often unable to go beyond daily diplomatic pressures and adequately invest in the future.

We recommend that the U.S. government help establish the Arab Partnership Foundation (APF), a 509(a)(1) corporation to foster education, entrepreneurship, and reform among the next generation of Arab leaders. Modeled in part after the British Council and the Asia Foundation, it would depart from other quasi-governmental institutions that receive almost all of their operating budgets from the U.S. government. Instead, funding for APF would come not only from the U.S. government, but also from revenue created by the foundation's own programs and donations from multinational corporations, host and regional governments, and charitable foundations. The APF should grow slowly in the first years in order to make sure its programs are effective and received well by a region that is wary, if not hostile, to the United States.

The APF would lead a wide range of innovative activities. To foster cross-cultural understanding, it would bring 5,000 new Arab high-school students to the United States and teach American students about Arab and Muslim culture. To improve learning in the Arab world, the APF would teach 100,000 new Arab students English within five years and make Arabic translations of key English texts accessible to the public. To forge relationships among a cross section of Arabs and Americans, it would create an annual Arab-U.S. Forum for emerging leaders and organize reciprocal visits for journalists, religious leaders, business leaders, and others with common interests. To raise the voices of reformers, it would support NGOs and forward-thinking writers, academics, and other intellectuals. To help entrepreneurs at all levels, it would provide training in the areas needed to attract greater foreign investment and help poor women get the microcredit loans necessary to expand their small businesses and lift their families out of poverty.



Right now, a significant opportunity exists not only to make progress on the Middle East peace that has eluded us for generations, but also to look ahead at other critical challenges in the Arab world that lie beyond the horizon. In this report, we have chosen to spotlight the crisis in Arab-U.S. relations because we believe it is a serious threat to our security and interests. We have presented a variety of concrete recommendations because we believe we cannot afford to choose between addressing immediate and long-term needs in the region, between reaching out to governments or nongovernmental organizations, between focusing on leaders or their citizens.

We know we share a common future; what we do in the coming years and decades will determine if that future is characterized by conflict or cooperation. Protecting our security and our ever-increasing interests in the Arab world will require a new commitment from policymakers and citizens on both sides to build strong partnerships with one another. Will we continue to have major differences? Of course. But a century of polarization will serve neither Arabs nor Americans, while a relationship built on common goals and common ground has the potential to improve the fates of us all.

