

**View from the East:
Arab Perceptions of United States
Presence and Policy**

Brent J. Talbot and Michael B. Meyer

INSS Occasional Paper 48

February 2003

USAF Institute for National Security Studies
USAF Academy, Colorado

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Air Force, the Department of Defense, or the US Government. The paper is approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.

Comments pertaining to this paper are invited; please forward to:
Director, USAF Institute for National Security Studies
HQ USAFA/DFES
2354 Fairchild Drive, Suite 5L27
USAF Academy, CO 80840
phone: 719-333-2717
fax: 719-333-2716
email: inss@usafa.edu

Visit the Institute for National Security Studies home page at
<http://www.usafa.edu/inss>

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword	vii
Executive Summaries	ix
THE ARAB PERCEPTION AND CONSENSUS PROBLEMS: IMPLICATIONS FOR US POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST, <i>Brent J. Talbot</i>	
Introduction	1
The Perception Problem	3
The Consensus Issue	11
Islamic Radicals	13
Islamic Revivalists (Reformists)	14
Islamic Government in Theory	15
Colonialism in the Middle East and the Introduction to Democracy	23
Policy Recommendations and Conclusion	30
Conclusion	33
Notes	34
ARAB PERCEPTIONS TOWARD US FOREIGN POLICY: WHY PERCEPTIONS MATTER AND WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE AMERICA’S IMAGE IN THE ARAB WORLD, <i>Michael B. Meyer</i>	
Introduction	41
Iraq—“The Innocent Suffer”	46
The Arab-Israeli Crisis—The Seminal Issue	51
Adding Fuel to the Fire—The Second Intifada	62
Conclusions—Implications for US National Security and Policy Recommendations to Improve America’s Image in Arab Eyes	68
Notes	79

FOREWORD

We are pleased to publish this forty-eighth volume in the *Occasional Paper* series of the United States Air Force Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). This timely and insightful set of papers written by two USAF area specialists provides complementary—and together comprehensive—coverage of the critical topic of Arab perceptions of United States policy. Further, the papers expand that coverage to address in detail some of the implications of those perceptions for US military presence and policy in the region. Brent Talbot focuses his analysis on the key segment of the region's population that stands between the totally dispossessed and deprived radical base and some entrenched, corrupt regimes. This Arab majority, he argues, can reshape the region's states into culturally compatible and accountable (if not purely democratic by western standards) revisionist Arab and Islamic political and economic states that are much more compatible with United States values and presence. This is a significant message in terms of the longer-term strategic postscript to the current US-Iraq conflict. Mike Meyer focuses his analysis at the more operational level of US military personnel on the ground in the region, but comes to complementary conclusions as to United States public diplomacy and presence. He argues that American military personnel and programs must purposefully shape the relationships—and through them perceptions and attitudes—with the emerging military and political leaders in this region of transition. This approach also provides a key element to the state-building exercise that will likely soon present itself. Together the two papers suggest a wisdom of experience—academic and practical—that is essential to the high-stakes endgame that lies before us.

About the Institute

INSS is primarily sponsored by the National Security Policy Division, Nuclear and Counterproliferation Directorate, Headquarters US Air Force (HQ USAF/XONP) and the Dean of the Faculty, USAF Academy. Our other sponsors include the Secretary of Defense's Office of Net Assessment (OSD/NA); the Defense Threat Reduction Agency; the Air Staff's Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Directorate (XOI) and the Air Force's 39th Information Operations Squadrons; the Army Environmental Policy Institute; and the Air Force Long-Range Plans Directorate (XPXP).

The mission of the Institute is “to promote national security research for the Department of Defense within the military academic community, to foster the development of strategic perspective within the United States Armed Forces, and to support national security discourse through outreach and education.” Its research focuses on the areas of greatest interest to our organizational sponsors: arms control and strategic security; counterproliferation, force protection, and homeland security; air and space issues and planning; information operations and information warfare; and regional and emerging national security issues.

INSS coordinates and focuses outside thinking in various disciplines and across the military services to develop new ideas for defense policy making. To that end, the Institute develops topics, selects researchers from within the military academic community, and administers sponsored research. It also hosts conferences and workshops and facilitates the dissemination of information to a wide range of private and government organizations. INSS provides valuable, cost-effective research to meet the needs of our sponsors. We appreciate your continued interest in INSS and our research products.

JAMES M. SMITH
Director

**THE ARAB PERCEPTION AND CONSENSUS PROBLEMS:
IMPLICATIONS FOR US POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST,**

Brent J. Talbot

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper is a preliminary effort to assess Middle Eastern perceptions of the US and the resulting effect on US foreign policy in the region. My effort follows a three part outline: a) Arab perceptions of the US; b) how a lack of consensus within the civil polity, especially the relationship between governments and Islamic forces, impedes progress in the various states of the Arab world and contributes to misperception; and c) US policy recommendations and conclusions.

Arab perceptions have turned virulently anti-western in recent years. The Arab-Israeli dispute has been a particular “sore spot” since Arabs believe the US could pressure Israel into accepting peace with the Palestinians. Arab media and education efforts also contribute to misperceptions by misinforming the Arab public. Moreover, US policy is viewed as anti-Muslim, a crusade against the “axis of evil,” and unfair due to practices that favor Israel over the Arabs.

The lack of consensus—disagreement over what is the real problem and who is the real enemy—complicates any hope of Arab unity. Not only are populations alienated from governments, but they see Islam as their only solution, and Islamic solutions fit into two major categories: radical extremism along the lines of Osama bin-Laden and company, and a more democratic revivalist or reformist variety, that unfortunately, has suffered from government efforts to equate it with radicals. Revivalists also suffer from a lack of recognition by the populace. Still, revivalist elements are present in the few reform-minded governments of the region and it is hoped that their examples might be illuminated for others to follow.

A return to Islam is sought by peoples of the region. Islam is the only legitimate means of opposing corrupt, autocratic regimes. The US should support peaceful transitions toward Islamic reforms as the overall policy strategy in the region.

Overall Goal: Achieve Peaceful Transitions toward Islamic-style democracy.

--Increase the pressure on corrupt Arab regimes to share power with Islamic revivalists (consistent with US values); reward governments showing democratic tendencies such as Jordan,

Bahrain, Kuwait, Morocco, and Qatar. This will also improve America's image by eradicating the "hypocrite factor" that results from US aid to corrupt regimes.

--Encourage economic reform to alleviate the plight of demography (goes hand in hand with democratic reforms).

--Increasing the pressure on the Palestinians and Israelis to move the peace process forward is a most essential element due to its role as the biggest problem area vis-à-vis Arab perceptions of the US. More importantly, solving this problem eliminates a major scapegoat Arab governments have used to put off reforms.

--Increase efforts to sell image of America as a value-laden society (not corrupt as portrayed in Hollywood stereotypes) in order to improve understanding between Arabs/US, which in turn, will improve Arab image of democratic government and improve the likelihood of their evolution towards democracy in the region.

**ARAB PERCEPTIONS TOWARD US FOREIGN POLICY:
WHY PERCEPTIONS MATTER AND WHAT CAN BE
DONE TO IMPROVE AMERICA'S IMAGE IN THE ARAB
WORLD, *Michael B. Meyer***

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Arab perceptions of US foreign policy toward the Arab world, particularly since the onset of the second, or Al-Aqsa, *intifada*, are extremely poor. United States foreign policy is viewed by Arab populaces and certain members of Arab governments as biased against the Arabs and in favor of Israel. Some Arabs are aggravated that the US maintains a military footprint in the Arabian (or Persian) Gulf, and others criticize the US for what they claim is giving only lip service to promoting democracy in the Middle East. Two dominant issues that incite Arab opinion against US foreign policy are America's handling of Iraq over the past decade and America's orientation toward the Arab-Israeli conflict. This paper seeks to introduce and explain in detail Arab reactions to US foreign policy toward the Arab world.

For this research, the author relied heavily on discussions he had during his tour as Air Attaché in Damascus, Syria, on conversations he participated in as Political Advisor at US Central Air Forces (USCENTAF), on interviews with subject matter experts

in Washington, DC, and on press reporting from the Arab world and from some US sources.

The author believes image matters. Negative perceptions harbored by Arabs toward US foreign policy endanger US national security interests by threatening moderate Arab governments allied with the US and by encouraging extremism against America. While Arab popular perceptions toward US foreign policy are unlikely to change in the near future, the US must pursue proactive initiatives to favorably affect Arab opinion over the long term and, thus, protect US interests. To better promote its image in the volatile Middle East, America must adopt an enhanced approach to better project the political, economic, diplomatic, and informational instruments of power.

