

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

PERCEPTIVE FROM THE ARAB STREET

by

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ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Lieutenant Colonel Abdulla Al-Ammar

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This project will cover the current situation in the Arab World, and the impact of the United States of America Policy in the Arab World from the Arab Street perspective. As my following discussions with my faculty Adviser we agreed to write about public perspective of US Policy in the Arab street. During the Christmas break, I went back home to Qatar, while I was there I discussed these questions with different people from variety sectors, and I collected information from the Media about different Arab opinions in the current situation in the Region, in addition to that I collected from some of the Arabs officer papers regarding the same questions and their perspectives This paper will cover the following questions:

- What are your opinions of the United States? Policy in regard to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran?
- Should the US simply leave the area all together and if so why?
- What has the US done well for the region and what have they failed to do?
- What is the biggest single problem facing the Arab world and how do you think it should be solved?

I will cover also the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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PERCEPTIVE FROM THE ARAB STREET

Since the attacks of 9/11, the US policy toward the Arab/Islamic world has been perceived to be more aggressive, and some people think this is anti-Islamic in nature. Due to this impression of aggressiveness, the “Arab street” can be considered to be more distrustful towards America and its stated or perceived goals in the Middle East.

This paper will discuss the current situation in the Arab World, and the impact of the United States of America's policy in the Arab World from the Arab Street perspective. As my following discussions with my faculty Adviser we agreed to write about public perspective of US Policy in the Arab street. He gave me specific questions addressing some specific issues in the Arab world, and he requested opinions from the Arab street. During the Christmas break, I went back home to Qatar, and while I was there I discussed these questions with a variety of people from different sectors. I collected some information from the Media about various Arab opinions concerning the current situation in the Region. This paper will address the following questions:

1. What are your opinions regarding the United States?
2. What is your opinion regarding American policy with regard to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran?
3. Should the US simply leave the area all together and if so why?
4. What has the US done well for the region and what have they failed to do?
5. What is the biggest single problem facing the Arab world and how do you think it should be solved?

I will also address what I feel to be the source of the “discomfort” in the “Arab street” and how this “discomfort” is tied to the American policy and not towards the American people or their religion.

OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM - OEF (AFGHANISTAN WAR)

On Oct. 7, 2001 OEF began with massive air strikes. The initial military objectives of Operation Enduring Freedom, as articulated by President George W. Bush in his Sept. 20th Address to a Joint Session of Congress and his Oct. 7th 2001 address to the American people, was to effect the destruction of terrorist training camps and infrastructure within Afghanistan, the capture of al Qaeda leaders, and the cessation of terrorist activities in Afghanistan.¹

On October 9, 2004 an Election in Afghanistan was held, and Hamid Karzai won the Election. One opinion on the OEF as a military operation is that it was a decisive operation which led to end of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. It led to the creation of an interim government. The US engaged many countries to support the economic activities in Afghanistan,

and develop the country, to build infrastructure like roads and schools. They also trained the police and the Army. Some examples of other aid was the provision of financial support by convening meetings to collect money for the Afghanistan Government. In spite of all this aid and assistance, the coalition Forces could not control all of the Afghanistan territory. The security is still considered as a main concern to the Afghani people. In order to solve this problem; the political process should encompass all the Afghani groups without exception. Another problem is the proliferation of the drug trade. An Afghanistan, United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime survey (Afghanistan Opium Survey 2004) shows that there is an increase in opium/poppy cultivation (refer to chart no 1)

The best solution to this problem is to introduce alternate crops or land use which would be capable of providing the opium farmers a decent living.

Afghanistan opium poppy cultivation, 1994-2004 (hectares)

1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
71,000	54,000	57,000	58,000	64,000	91,000	82,000	8,000	74,000	80,000	131,000

Afghanistan: Opium poppy cultivation from 1986 to 2004 (hectares)

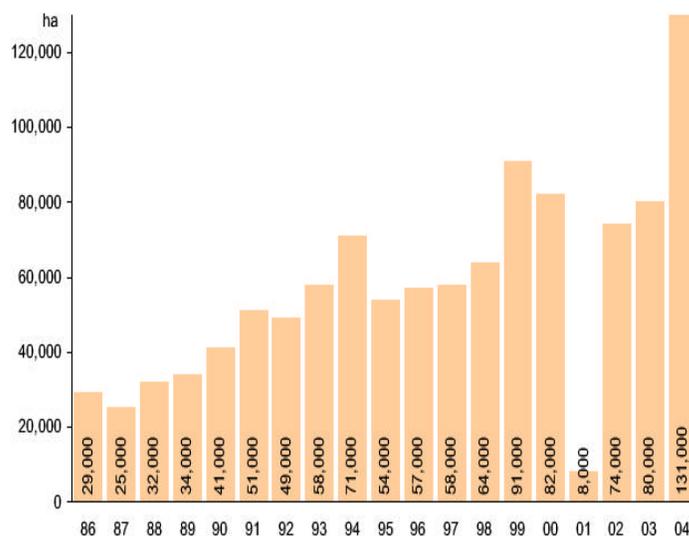


FIGURE 1

OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM

On March 19, 2003 the United States began operation Iraqi Freedom. In my research I got various opinions from different resources. One of the opinions about Iraq is that in spite of the successful preparation and execution of the initial phases of the war, the unstable situation which resulted as a result of the rapid military victory in Iraq caused the delay of the reconstruction processes, the disintegration of the political infrastructure, and the economic collapse of Iraq. The ongoing instability in Iraq can be traced to dishonest, mistaken and weak assumptions that the US received from the Iraqi advisory team during the planning and the preparation phases of the war. These deceptive assumptions became clear as time progressed and the reconstruction began. In addition, the Iraqi interim government could not contain all the Iraqi people, and all the different ethnic groups. It could not achieve either the security or stability in Iraq which are considered vital elements for the political process to settle. The Iraqi people lost their social and economic privileges and lost all aspects of normal life. This displacement of normal life lead the Iraqi people to consider armed resistance to the interim government and their supporters. In addition, the decision to dissolve the army and the police was, as Ayad Alawi said "a mistake" and "We absolutely not only lost time. The vacuum allowed our enemies to regroup and to infiltrate the country."²

From that stand point, in order to secure stability and security in Iraq, the Iraqi people should participate in the political process without ignoring any party or city, and they should meet in the middle of the road to build a stable and democratic country. The Iraqi people should be treated humanly and with respect from every body and from all levels of the government and from all troops.

Other opinion from Mohammad Al Douri, former Iraqi ambassador to the United Nations under Saddam Hussein concerning democracy in Iraq; "What right does the US have to speak about democracy in Iraq, after all the death and destruction it has caused to the Iraqi people. What the US wants is not democracy but control over the Iraqi oil," he argued. "Democracy can not be imported or imposed from outside"³

Anther opinion from newspaper editor Abdel Bari Atwan "Democracy can not come from warplanes and in the form of missiles and rockets," said Abdel Bari Atwan, while criticizing the US-led war which he termed "illegal". "Iraqi people are capable of creating democracy in their country, provided all foreign troops leave the country and allow them to decide their future". In the current situation 50 per cent of the Iraqi people will not be able to participate in the election process,"⁴

IRAN

With the anticipated victory of the Shia population in the recently held Iraqi elections, and the apparent military and ideological defeat of the extremist salafist Taliban movement in Afghanistan, the Government of Iran could not have envisioned a more desirable strategic windfall. These twin situations serve to create strategic buffer zones on either side of Iran. On its eastern flank is the western part of Afghanistan with its mostly Shia dominated population which has been effectively purged of the Shia's natural "enemy" and antagonist, i.e. the Taliban. On its western flank, a newly empowered Shia governed Iraq is being trained, supported and supplied by a powerful US presence. Just as the Muslims view fasting in winter time to be "booty with out struggle", so too the Iranian strategic situation has been greatly improved with virtually no effort at all from Tehran. Additionally, the way is now clear for Iran to concentrate on one of their main strategic projects, namely, the development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). As a nuclear power, Iran will be able to dominate the region, and thus become the regional hegemony. This situation could lead to new security arrangements in the region and must be seen by the Iranian leadership as divine intervention in the reestablishment of the once great Persian Empire.

One other opinion regarding Iran and its assumed WMD programs is why the US is concentrating only on Iran's WMD projects and continues to turn a blind eye towards Israeli WMD programs and capabilities. It is very important to completely clear the region from all WMDs and there should be no exceptions or exemptions for any of the countries in the region to disarm their WMD. American policy in this regard should be consistent, even handed and measurable by one standard only.

THE ARAB AND ISRAELI CONFLICT

This is an old and difficult conflict. Most of the Arab people believe that it is not in the US interest to aid or support Israel in its policies which are contrary to UN resolutions. These issues have caused the failure of US policy in the region and have contributed to the loss of American credibility. To deny the Palestinian people even the right to self defense against what is perceived to be Israeli aggression has led to a worsening of the security situation in regard to both sides. Israel has consistently used excessive force and collective punishment against the Palestinians. All this against a backdrop of no new political solutions or initiatives on the horizon which could serve to reduce the violence. The US, in its role as a super power, has within its sphere of influence, both Israel and the Palestinians, and it could solve the problem if it set its priorities do just that. It is even conceivable that the US could, if it wanted to, impose a just

solution on both sides. The failure of the us to act as an honest broker, by giving one-sided, unconditional support to israel perpetuates the perception of injustice. As long as this perception exists there can be no solution or peace. Should us simply leave the area all together?

OPINION 1

I think US should not leave the area. If it does leave, it will cost the loss of many of their interests in the region. As the Carter Doctrine called the region a "vital Interest" for the US and their political influence in the Gulf. It will also allow other powers to take advantage of the vacuum of power. This situation would not be favorable for the US, and would damage US strategic interests in the area. If in the future the US wanted to regain the initiative in the area it would require a tremendous amount of effort to regain the situation in the uncertain future.

OPINION 2

To maintain a US presence in the Region, the US could stay in countries where they already have negotiated agreements. Where they can cooperate and work together, and work out a relationship which takes the local populations sensitivities into account. Where emphasis is placed on minimizing any type of resistance or conflict. Only thru these means can damage to US interests be minimized and stability maintained ..

WHAT HAS THE US DONE WELL FOR THE REGION AND HAVE THEY FAILED TO DO?

Many in the Arab street believe that the US has done a lot of things in the region which have been of benefit in both economical and industrial areas. They also look at the liberation of Kuwait as a positive contribution.

Of those who think that the US as failed to be of benefit to the area are those who believe that the US looks exclusively to it's interests only, and ignores the interests of others. These same people contend the US relies too heavily on it's military power to solve the problems in the region. Diplomacy and universal concepts of justice and fairness are often seen as the last resort instead of the overriding policy. This leads to hatred by the locals toward the US policies in the region. They also believe that the US is using the war on terrorism to justify their actions and aggression against the Arabs and that the true agenda of the US is the Judeo/Christian religious domination of the Middle East and the destruction of Islam.

WHAT IS THE BIGGEST SINGLE PROBLEM FACING THE ARAB WORLD?

OPINION 1

Some people believe that the absence of Democracy and individual freedom is the biggest problem in the Arab World. They believe that political reforms should take place and that elections of some sort should occur. They believe that the rule of law should be applied and that they should have a beneficent leader. Some Arab governments believe they have begun reforms in this direction.

OPINION 2

Others believe that the biggest problem in the Arab World is the Arab and Israeli conflict and the Israeli occupation of Palestine 1947, and some people think that the Israel should return to border prior to 1967. They see this occupation as a brutal inhuman oppression against unarmed civilians and the world's failure to enforce the implementation of UN resolutions as a global hypocrisy and double standard which undermines the entire concept of the rule of law. If the rule of law does not apply universally and at the state level, how and why would it apply at the individual level?

CONCLUSION

It is clear from my research and from talking with various Arab people that there is an overriding impression that most of the people like the United States as a country. They seem to see the US as having many positive institutions such as Democracy, a free economy and the rule of law. They also believe that US has done many good things in the Arab World, like helping to produce and develop the oil industry, leading the fight for the liberation of Kuwait and the development of technology. It becomes an extremely frustrating situation to many of them that the very Islamic ideals that led the US to espouse and develop the positive institutions as mentioned above are sometimes not implemented at the international level in dealing with the Arab people.

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ENDNOTE

¹ <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/enduring-freedom.htm>

² <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A63423-2003Nov19?language=printer>

³ http://www.thepeninsulaqatar.com/Display_news.asp?section=Local_News&subsection=Qatar+News&month=January2005&file=Local_News200501193321.xml

⁴ http://www.thepeninsulaqatar.com/Display_news.asp?section=Local_News&subsection=Qatar+News&month=January2005&file=Local_News200501193321.xml

