
Between Representation and Reality

A Moroccan Perspective on the Latest Gulf War

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As the second tower of the World Trade Center came crashing to the ground, I sat in the student lounge at Al-Akhawayn University in Morocco surrounded by Arabs and Americans united in horror at the images unfolding on the screen. When CNN cut to commentary, a friend turned to me with tortured eyes and asked, "Do you think your president will attack Iraq?" Her parents worked for the United Nations in the United Arab Emirates, she explained, and military action in Iraq would put them in danger. At the time, I found it difficult to make a connection between the devastating events of 9/11 and a renewed offensive against Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. However, as another Gulf War finishes in the Middle East, her fears seem to have been well founded. Moreover, her concern highlights an obvious answer to the question of why Iraqis and other Arabs have shown such resistance to the "liberation" of Iraq from the clutches of the widely-anathemized Hussein. My experiences in Morocco indicate that, while Arabs condemn Hussein for his violent and oppressive regime, they also harbor intense suspicions regarding U.S. intentions in the region and unequivocally reject Western actions that they view as neo-imperialist, even if that means supporting the Iraqi dictator.

Like much of the world, Moroccans make a clear distinction between anti-Americanism and hatred of Americans. In the

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six months that I spent in North Africa, I spoke with myriad mothers, students, waiters, street children acting as impromptu guides, taxi drivers, and camel drivers, never once feeling threatened or endangered because of my nationality. I participated in discussions with Moroccans from all walks of life about religion, family, the perception of Arabs in the West, and cultural differences, such as relationships between the sexes, youth, materialism, and music in the United States. One might note that such open dialogue and curiosity about the West seems to contradict the atmosphere of hostility insinuated by massive protests against the last Gulf War—in which King Hassan II of Morocco allied himself with the U.S.-led coalition—staged in urban centers like Rabat and Casablanca. However, on the ground, one realizes that the man or woman chanting anti-U.S. slogans in the streets of Rabat is also the warm and welcoming stranger inviting you to dinner if you ever happen to be in the neighborhood.

Due to the good/evil dichotomy created by government parlance and fostered by the media, Americans have developed the idea of the “good” Arab and the “bad” Arab. Good Arabs support the United States, share our values, and long for U.S. forces to free them from the yoke of tyranny and underdevelopment. Bad Arabs back autocrats like Hussein, reject American culture, and foment violence against Westerners wherever possible. Unfortunately, the divide is not so clear cut. Many of the people I met in Morocco understood, supported, and even participated in the protests against U.S. intervention in Iraq. When we broached the topic of U.S. foreign policy, Moroccans expressed incredible dismay at the short-sighted, jingoistic policies of

the West towards the Middle East, but harbored no specific enmities toward American culture or me as a representative of that culture. Again and again, upon learning of my nationality, Moroccans replied, “We are very unhappy with the actions of your government.” I cannot say I blame them.

The reasons why a large number of Arabs rallied behind Hussein are complex and varied, but often pragmatic and tied to a pervasive sense of inferiority vis-à-vis the West. Unsurprisingly, few Arabs I spoke to readily extolled the virtues of Hussein. Ahmed, a good friend of mine, spent his childhood as a Palestinian refugee in Baghdad during and following the first Gulf War.¹ A victim of malnutrition, violence, and repression, he was the first to enumerate the atrocities committed by Hussein against his own people. Nonetheless, Ahmed blamed the U.S. government as much as the Iraqi dictator for the suffering of the Iraqi people, citing the devastation wrought by the 1991 war and the ensuing twelve years of sanctions. Ahmed felt that the United States had abandoned Iraq after the last Gulf War, lending no support to opposition groups that could have toppled the regime, failing to rebuild infrastructure or industry, and weakening the spirit of the Iraqi people through sanctions.

As a Palestinian—and this sentiment is more pervasive than most in the West would like to admit—Ahmed tied his opposition to U.S. policy to our unconditional support for Israel in its fifty-year long struggle with Palestine. Quick to note hypocrisy, Ahmed insisted that the United States had made no move to sanction Israel for its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza following the 1967 war, but readily committed to military action to remove Hussein from Kuwait in 1991.

During the fall of 2001, Ahmed watched Israeli leaders use the rhetoric of the “war on terror” to pursue repressive, expansionist policies in the occupied territories; he could not help but wonder *whose* definition of terror counted. On one hand, the Bush administration demonized Hussein, while on the other it

a plan does not include citrus fruit, Morocco’s primary export. Such tariffs protect Mediterranean countries that produce competing goods and are in turn secured by the EU’s commitment to its common agricultural policy.

The EU also tends to make economic agreements conditional on the extension

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called Ariel Sharon—who stood by while a Lebanese Christian militia slaughtered hundreds of Palestinian refugees in the early 1980s—a man of peace.

Economic dependency is another facet of U.S. hegemony tied to neo-colonialism and the Arab-Israeli conflict. My Moroccan foreign policy class at Al-Akawayn, consisting of both Moroccans and Americans, provided an interesting insight into intra- and extra-Maghrebi policy. During our discussion of relations with the European Union, Adeeb, a master’s student whose father had served as an ambassador to Germany, spoke passionately about the EU’s refusal to deal with the Maghreb on equal terms. The colonial legacies of France and Spain keep Morocco closely tied to them economically. Given the lack of intra-North African trade, the Maghreb depends heavily on the European Union and the larger international community for development.

Moreover, the EU has persistently used its economic strength, asserted Hassan, to keep Morocco in a position of inferiority. The EU has worked to reduce tariffs between itself and Morocco, culminating in a proposed free trade zone in 2010. However, such

of fishing concessions by Morocco to Spain, while at the same time discouraging the growth of an indigenous fishing industry—despite the fact that Morocco possesses some of the most plentiful fishing waters in the world. More globally, the structural adjustments imposed on Morocco and other Maghrebi countries by the IMF and World Bank in return for loans and development funds have succeeded only in expanding the chasm between rich and poor, leading to rampant instability in the cities and a decline in governmental legitimacy. Thus, as Hassan expounded on several occasions, the economic reforms, policies, and agreements imposed on the Maghreb by powerful players in the global market have kept the region weak and underdeveloped.

Hence, the combined factors of neo-imperialism, the failure of the Arab-Israeli peace process, and economic underdevelopment lead to the impression that the West seeks to promote its interests in the Middle East by keeping Arab states weak and divided. During one slow afternoon in Ifrane, Morocco, I sat with Ahmed sipping piping hot mint tea and discussing the impending military action in Afghanistan. We had just

attended a lecture by George Joff, British editor of the *Journal of North Africa*, who espoused the most severe anti-American sentiment that I had heard since arriving in Morocco. Joff berated the U.S. government for gross mismanagement of the “war on terrorism” and warned against “clash of civilizations” rhetoric. As Ahmed refilled my glass, raising the teapot high over my head to aerate the tea, he expounded on Joff’s analysis of the situation, predicting that the Bush administration would use the war on terror to reshape Arab states to better suit its interests. At the time, Ahmed referred to the seemingly unshakable alliance between Bush and Sharon, but he could have just as easily been referring to military operations in Iraq. Like many Arabs, Ahmed felt that the mission of the United States in Iraq had not been accomplished during the reign of President George H.W. Bush and would therefore be completed during the administration of his son.

This administration has gone to great lengths to convince the U.S. public that Iraq forced this war on itself through its duplicitous pursuit of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and collaboration with al Qaeda. However, documentation shows that President Bush planned the removal of Saddam Hussein for at least as long as my Moroccan friends had worried about it. *TIME* magazine reports that President Bush publicly intended to “take [Saddam] out” as early as March 2002.¹ Horrified by the brutal excesses of Hussein’s regime and convinced that the Iraqi dictator had WMDs that could easily fall into the hands of terrorists, Bush succumbed to pressure from top officials such as Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz, and set the ousting of Hussein as his goal. Since

then, the United States has worked overtime to prove to the rest of the world that Hussein does in fact possess WMDs and connections to terrorist organizations, therefore posing a serious threat to the security of the world community—a task that has yet to be achieved.

The Arab world harbors no doubts about the illegitimacy of the conflict, as the masses show their discontent in immense demonstrations against symbols of U.S. power in their countries. These protests are incredibly reminiscent of protests against the presence of American troops on holy ground during the last Gulf War, the continuation of which was one of the primary reasons for Osama bin Laden’s radicalization and subsequent declaration of war against the government of Saudi Arabia. Even if the United States had used diplomacy effectively to gain legitimacy for this conflict, the “liberation” of Iraq would still have been viewed with mistrust by the Iraqi people and the citizens of the Arab world. Iraqis know what the last liberation of Iraq meant. After suffering under sanctions for twelve years, they fear another U.S. attempt to bring them peace and stability. This Gulf War may be the most popular war in the United States in several decades, but those suffering through the liberation remain skeptical.

Furthermore, Arabs believe that the invasion of Iraq establishes a dangerous precedent for further unilateral regime change in the Middle East. The Bush administration is already talking about the dangers posed by Iranian and Syrian WMD programs. Connections to terrorist groups will be much easier to prove in both cases than they were regarding Iraq. The reported exodus of Iraqi leaders to Syria provides yet another reason for intervention. With international support

no longer a prerequisite for military action, the U.S. presence is poised to balloon in the years to come. From the Arab perspective, such a presence will pose a number of problems. Beyond the obvious difficulty of non-believers occupying Muslim holy lands, a strong U.S. presence will surely enhance the sense that Arabs are incapable of solving their own problems, and require the West to impose freedom, democracy, and prosperity on their behalf. A number of Islamists in Morocco insist that a prosperous Muslim society

their people. In fact, U.S. support of corrupt, oppressive Arab regimes represents another leading cause for unrest and anti-American sentiment in the region.

Morocco is an unusual exception to this rule. The Alawi dynasty holds wide legitimacy because of its historic right, ties to the Prophet, moderate level of economic growth, and legacy of political liberation. Yet, even in a relatively stable, moderate Arab state such as Morocco, the toleration of dissent is low and its security apparatus is strong. It is not unusual

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must be built on Islamic, not foreign, principles. The push for democratization, beginning with the shining example of a newly-founded Iraqi democracy, will threaten the United States’s erstwhile allies in the region who are barely able to contain the anti-American sentiment currently exploding in their countries, and will probably require more—not less—repression of civil society in order to provide stability to their countries in the years to come. Thus, many citizens of the Middle East, particularly those living in countries slated for liberation, fear the repercussions of the United States’s unilateral takeover of Iraq.

Speaking of Arab allies, one reason that the United States cannot understand the reaction of the Arab populace to the war in the Gulf is that Arab governments, which pledge their support to the overthrow of Hussein, do not genuinely represent the interests and aspirations of

to find paramilitary officers patrolling airports, key government buildings, and royal residences. In Ifrane, a royal retreat in the Atlas Mountains where the University of Al-Akhawayn is located, ten-foot-high barbed wire fences surround the king’s compound. American students were strongly warned that any breach of the perimeter fence could be met with sniper fire. Following 9/11, the king increased security throughout the country, arresting Islamists with suspected terrorist connections and increasing military visibility in possible sites of terrorist attack. This repression of dissent brings about a lack of responsiveness to the goals and interests of the general populace and, consequently, a misrepresentation of Arab sentiment by Arab governments to Western allies.

Miscommunication is one of the most serious problems between the Middle East and the West. Arabs see the West as

aggressively thrusting its cultural values, economic institutions, and political structures on the Middle East in an effort to remake the region in its image. Interestingly, many of the Moroccans with whom I attended university accepted the pop culture of the West—they wore European clothes, spoke French and English, listened to American music, and got their news from CNN and the BBC. At the same time, these students vehemently opposed U.S. political and military influence in the region, responding to the war in Afghanistan with cynicism and mistrust, fearful of the extent to which the United States would go to win the war on terrorism, and saddened by the widely-negative representations of Arabs in the U.S. media.

The U.S. media cannot grasp that between the bad Arab and the good Arab is a real Arab who opposes Saddam Hussein and those like him, but fears U.S. intentions and intervention in the region. They worry that the United States will steamroll through the region, crush the strength of independent Arab states, and remake them in the image of the West. With a less-than-reassuring track record of nation-building, they fear that the United States will destroy Iraq and pull out the next day, leaving the Iraqi people in rubble and chaos. More than anything, they fear American intentions they do not understand. They know what life is like under a ruthless dictator; the future, on the other hand, holds no certainties.

NOTES

¹ The names of everyday Moroccans in this article have been changed to protect their identities.

² Michael Elliot and James Carney, "First Stop Iraq," *Time* 161, no. 13 (31 March 2003): 173–183.