



Occasional Papers

**Passing a Flaming Torch:  
The Middle Eastern Issues  
Confronting the Obama  
Administration**

**Rami G. Khouri**

Center for Contemporary Arab Studies  
Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service  
Georgetown University  
©2009



**Passing a Flaming Torch:  
The Middle Eastern Issues  
Confronting the Obama  
Administration**

**Rami G. Khouri**

Rami George Khouri is a Palestinian-Jordanian and U.S. citizen whose family resides in Beirut, Amman, and Nazareth.

He is the Director of the Issam Fares Institute of Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut (AUB) as well as editor-at-large of the Beirut-based *Daily Star* newspaper. He is an internationally syndicated political columnist and author.

Mr. Khouri has been a visiting scholar at Stanford, Harvard, and Syracuse Universities, and lectures annually at AUB, the University of Chicago, and Northeastern University. In November 2006, he was the co-recipient of the Pax Christi International Peace Award for his efforts to bring peace and reconciliation to the Middle East.

**RAMI G. KHOURI**

Center for Contemporary Arab Studies  
Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service  
241 Intercultural Center  
Georgetown University  
Washington, D.C. 20057-1020  
202.687.5793  
<http://ccas.georgetown.edu>

**©2009 by the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies. All rights reserved.**

## PASSING A FLAMING TORCH

*In December 2008, both President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice gave us the intellectual equivalent of what lame ducks do when they paddle away into oblivion and offer one more flap of the wings and spread of the tail feathers. Both Bush and Rice attempted valiant but ultimately pitiful efforts to attract some praise for what most would see as deserving of ignominy and isolation. In separate media interviews they tried their hand at real-time historical revisionism and plain old-fashioned political fantasy by claiming that they leave the Middle East in better shape than it has been for decades.*

*It is hard to imagine a more false statement of fact, but perhaps this is no surprise for an administration that has based its policies in the Middle East on a foundation of falsehoods constructed largely of misdiagnoses and buttressed by recurring misperceptions. These two otherwise honorable citizens rose far beyond their political and intellectual abilities to wander in alien and confusing corridors where they have understood little, fantasized often, and done much more harm than good.<sup>1</sup>*

\*\*\*

### INTRODUCTION

**W**ith its army and its diplomatic posture, the American administration is now deeply part of the Middle East. Many of the problems of the region have been clearly aggravated, and in some cases sparked, by American policy, though many of them are a joint venture between Arabs and Israelis, between Turks and Iranians, and between Europeans of different nationalities. But because the United States is such a decisive player in the Middle East, it has inordinate power to affect things in the region for good or for bad.

In this paper, I outline ten issues facing both the Middle East and the Obama administration—most of which have been worsened by the Bush presidency. While there is hope for a better future, the mess Bush and Rice leave behind is an enormous one that presents a wide array of difficult challenges.

### POLARIZATION OF ARAB SOCIETY

**F**irst, the region is dealing with a situation in which demography and urbanization have created a polarized society. On the one hand, about 60 to 65 per cent of the population is under the age of 30, and most of these young people live in cities and are educated reasonably well—usually through high school. But many are unemployed or underemployed in autocratic societies, and as

RAMI G. KHOURI

a result they are very frustrated politically. On the other hand is a small number of wealthy people—perhaps 15 per cent of the population—who are plugged into the global economy that is characterized by the immense real estate investment projects we now see all over the Middle East. This group thus lives side by side with large numbers of very poor people who can barely make ends meet and are becoming increasingly marginalized from their own society.

This is an untenable situation. The driving force for the Islamist movement that began in the mid- and late-1970s was domestic inequity, and it remains the driving force for much of the indignity that people feel. This context of demography, urbanization, and polarization is challenging the entire region and any foreign powers dealing with it.

***“On the other hand is a small number of wealthy people—perhaps 15 per cent of the population—who are plugged into the global economy that is characterized by the immense real estate investment projects we now see all over the Middle East. This group thus lives side by side with large numbers of very poor people who can barely make ends meet and are becoming increasingly marginalized from their own society. This is an untenable situation.”***

#### AUTOCRATIC GOVERNMENTS

Second, the region's new regimes—i.e., the children of older leaders—are trying to define themselves with new forms of legitimacy that are not based, as in the 1950s through the 1980s, on a combination of pan-Arab nationalism, socialism, state-building, or even fighting foreign threats. Their legitimizing strategies are more heavily based on modernization and globalization. As such, these children plug into the global process and generate investment through economic incentives and reform. They have created a lot of new jobs, but in most cases there are never enough to catch up with population growth. The state—in most cases, the centralized Arab security state—then becomes weaker in that its control does not extend to all sectors of society, because some have been taken over by warlords, gangs, tribalists, or local Islamist community-based groups. But where the state does have control, it has become more authoritarian.

The perpetuation as well as the remodernization and relegitimization of these regimes is an enormous challenge because better governance, democracy, accountability, and rule of law are what people throughout the Arab world are

## PASSING A FLAMING TORCH

demanding, and there is no sign of a meaningful, credible transition to democratic rule in any Arab country today. There is no sign of a Mandela or even a Gorbachev who can start to make a real shift.

People tolerate autocratic, centralized security-based regimes as long as their lives are getting better. This is what happened in most of the Arab world from the 1940s through the 1980s. A process of state building occurred, and services such as education and health care expanded as well as employment opportunities. Under such conditions, people put up with a lack of democracy. However, they will not put up with it indefinitely if economic stagnation, abuse of power, greater disparities, and greater corruption accompany such regimes. This is the difficult situation we are in now, and in which people will find alternative means of dealing with their life situations, such as legal or illegal migration, criminality, adherence to radical movements, deep religiosity, a return to tribalism, or other means to change the circumstances of their lives.

***“People tolerate autocratic, centralized security-based regimes as long as their lives are getting better. ... However, they will not put up with [them] indefinitely if economic stagnation, abuse of power, greater disparities, and greater corruption accompany such regimes. This is the difficult situation we are in now...”***

### DIVIDED POLITICAL RULE

**T**he third challenge that currently defines the Middle East is the reconfiguration of state power in which both ruling sovereign powers and other authorities are seen by the people as legitimate. Instead of external powers primarily granting legitimacy, people in the Middle East are now demanding to define the legitimacy of their own rulers. As a result, we have situations such as in Palestine, with Hamas and Fatah, and in Lebanon, Iraq, Somalia, and other divided societies.

This situation of multiple authorities in a single country is, in some cases, exacerbated by direct external American and other European support. The Americans give money and arms to one side with the goal of winning the internal battle, thus creating another situation that is not sustainable. Yet this situation does contain the seeds of a resolution, because part of the transition to more accountable, democratic governance in the Arab world will have to include Islamist movements due to their strength and legitimacy.

RAMI G. KHOURI

### DIFFUSION AND PLURALISM OF POWER

Fourth, a new balance has emerged between statehood and the sectarian identities evolving throughout many Arab societies. People talk of states and non-state actors, but the situation is actually much more varied, because we have states, failed states, weak states, and quasi-states such as Northern Iraq and parts of Sudan. We also have parallel states, such as Hezbollah's parallel state to Lebanon, which is seen as perfectly legitimate by many Lebanese. Finally, we have proto-states—city-states in the making, such as Dubai and Doha. These are small cities that started out as entrepot, smuggling, or duty-free zones and expanded into sovereign states. They are very satisfying in many ways—they offer lifelong jobs and welfare care for all nationals, for example—but they have developed neither the substance of urbanism nor the attributes of statehood. Hence we should encourage them to become real urban centers that contribute, on many levels, as urbanism has to cities such as Cairo, Damascus, Beirut, and Sana'a. These centers in the past have generated knowledge, technology, and culture, and they have contributed to the human spirit as well, whereas the Gulf city-states have excelled to date mostly in high quality construction management.

Different actors are also at play in the Middle East, such as religious groups, the private sector, militias, and tribal groups. These actors cause an incredible diffusion of power—power that had been centrally held in Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and other countries from the 1950s through the 1970s. The power of religious iconography and identity, for example, is now widely disseminated among Islamist, ethnic, and tribal groups as well as the government. Hence the Saudi government and the Egyptian government still have religious iconography as part of their tool kit, but not in the same way they did twenty years ago, because others in society now share the power the state once monopolized in this realm. Further, economic impact is vastly scattered via privatization, globalization, and commercialization, and it is even being moved outside of Arab society and into foreign hands. Economy and security were always the two central control mechanisms in the modern Arab world, but even military and security power is not as tightly held in the hands of the central government as it was in the past; this is due to the emergence of militia groups, gangs, and foreign armies.<sup>2</sup>

Thus a whole new universe of actors relating to the power of the central government—a kind of pluralism of power—exists, and the most interesting aspect of it is that all of the actors seem legitimate. They all work in society, and they all try to find a place at the table. Most of these forces are indigenous, but they were not allowed previously to manifest themselves, as the processes of the Cold War, the Arab security state, the impact of oil and state building, and the Arab-Israeli conflict controlled them. Once the lid came off after the end of the Cold War, they started to come into play. This pluralism of power is actually a very sustainable one,

## PASSING A FLAMING TORCH

because it is one of the few natural political realities of the Arab world. In a way, it is an equilibrium that produces a bizarre kind of stability. Having these different groups play in the same arena means that they are playing according to a set of rules and that they are competing for and sharing power according to an organized system.

### REGIONAL DYNAMIC OF VIOLENCE

**T**he fifth point that challenges and confronts the region and the Obama administration is a situation in which violence is now not only prevalent throughout the region and many different conflicts, but that these conflicts are now linked in a single regional dynamic. Years ago occasional outbreaks of violence occurred—a civil war, a rebellion, a foreign invasion, a terrorist attack, a tribal feud. Now what we have is a whole cycle of violence in which western armies routinely fight or occupy Middle Eastern countries. In this way, the Israeli occupation perpetuates itself after 40 years. Among the Middle East governments—Arab, Israeli, Turkish, and Iranian—there isn't a single one that doesn't use violence routinely in its own country or regionally. Militia groups, terrorists, criminals, gangs, freelance hit men, thugs, and copycat teenage gangs constitute normality. If the Americans do it and the Israelis do it and the government does it and the foreign governments do it, among them other Arab governments, then it becomes a routine form of behavior.

***“Years ago occasional outbreaks of violence occurred—a civil war, a rebellion, a foreign invasion, a terrorist attack, a tribal feud. Now what we have is a whole cycle of violence in which western armies routinely fight or occupy Middle Eastern countries.”***

How do you defuse a situation in which violence has become not only a chronic and pervasive reality throughout the entire region, but has also become the routine norm for political expression? This is a major problem, and it was not very realistic for the Bush administration to say it wanted to deal with violence in the Middle East while it had 150,000 troops there and was actively funding and arming different groups, whether they were governments, militia groups, or covert operations. This situation challenges the Middle East to find new ways of political participation, engagement, and competition within its countries, but it also challenges the United States and other Western powers to find new ways of engaging the region other than through the use, or the threat of the use, of force.



RAMI G. KHOURI

## PATTERNS OF DEFIANCE AND RESISTANCE

Sixth, a new context exists throughout the Middle East of self-assertion, defiance, and resistance. Large numbers of people are challenging or actively fighting the Arab security state, Israel and its occupation and its threats, the United States and the British in Iraq and other places, and anyone else who might be considered oppressors or predators in the region. They are doing so in a variety of ways—politically, emotionally, militarily, culturally, and religiously—and as individuals, in small groups, in large political and religious movements, and in some governments (Iran, Syria, and others).

The 2006 war in Lebanon was one of the best examples of this phenomenon. It is quite astounding that a country as powerful as Israel was not able to stop Hezbollah's rockets. This is not just a reflection on the limited capacity of a military power to stop the process of resistance, self-assurance, and defiance; it is also common among oppressed, subjugated people to fight back.

But it is important to understand why it is that suddenly after a half century of problems in the region that people are fighting back. Part of the explanation is that people woke up in 1990 or 2000 or 2005 and realized that they were addressing the same issues their grandparents addressed in 1920 at the end of WWI—citizenship, statehood, security, sovereignty, Arab rights and Palestine, relations with the great powers, basic constitutional rights, economic development, decent treatment by one's own government—and they have had enough. They are searching for new mechanisms through governance, through the economy, through religiosity, and through citizenship to address these problems and try to build a better world.

***“People woke up in 1990 or 2000 or 2005 and realized that they were addressing the same issues their grandparents addressed in 1920 at the end of WWI—citizenship, statehood, security, sovereignty, Arab rights and Palestine, relations with the great powers, basic constitutional rights, economic development, decent treatment by one's own government—and they have had enough.”***

People also link the situations in Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, and Palestine, which creates a sense of solidarity, both among those who side with the Americans/Israelis and the conservative Arab regimes as well as those who fight against them. It is particularly interesting that old divides no longer pertain. Hence one sees all kinds of combinations working together that used to be seen in opposition, such

as Sunnis and Shiites, Islamists and so-called Baathist Arab nationalist regimes, and Arabs and Iranians. All we can do at this point is identify this process of ferment and change, but it clearly needs deeper analysis in the future.

### ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

**A** seventh issue of importance is the continued centrality of the Arab-Israeli conflict. 2008 marked 60 years since the creation of Israel and the dispersal, exile, occupation, dismemberment, and disenfranchisement of the Palestinian community. The longer this situation continues, the more it radicalizes many parts of the Middle East. We have seen circumstances recently, such as in Lebanon, where Jihadi militant groups form as a result of a lack of governance and human rights in Palestinian refugee camps. This is just one example of how a camp situation left for 60 years results in rebellion and violence. Hamas and Hezbollah's emergence since the 1980s is another phenomenon of rebellion against long-term occupation. The Arab-Israeli conflict is therefore something that must be addressed, and quickly.

### ARAB ABSENCE IN MIDDLE EASTERN SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

**T**he eighth challenge is how to achieve a secure regional balance in a post-Iraq situation. The current balance of power that provides the region's security architecture is essentially between Israel, Turkey, Iran, and the United States—nary an Arab in sight. And the Arab countries that do have power—Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and others—are not using it strategically, either because they don't have the will or because they are not permitted by other powers. Leaving this security architecture defined by non-Arab states, three or even four of which have traditionally been seen as predatory or enemies of the Arab world, is not a sustainable situation.

As such, it is no wonder that Hezbollah emerged as the power able to fight Israel for 34 days and force it to go to the UN for a cease-fire. It is also not surprising that the other cease-fire Israel accepted was in Gaza, when it could not stop Hamas's rockets. Israel has now gone back to fighting, but fighting will not stop the process of resistance. Thus the situation in which Arabs are entirely absent as agents in their own security architecture encourages people to fill that vacuum. There needs to be a process of shared security that is defined by the participants—Arabs, Iranians, Israelis, Turks, and Americans in the first instance—which in turn requires resolving the Iran nuclear issue peacefully and to the satisfaction of all.

RAMI G. KHOURI

## TERRORISM

**N**ine, there is a need to assess and fight terrorism more effectively and legitimately. The terrorism threat has been worsening across the globe, and it is getting more difficult to fight because of the diffusion, decentralization, and localization of many terror groups. The causes of terror need to be identified much more rigorously, honestly, and completely, and the "global war on terror" that the United States has launched must be seen as an unsuccessful venture that requires significant reassessment. It must also be kept in mind that the issue of terror is also about the U.S.-led coalition of global forces that confront terror, and also aggravate it. It is therefore about the global projection of American power as much as it is about fighting terror.

*"The terrorism threat has been worsening across the globe, and it is getting more difficult to fight because of the diffusion, decentralization, and localization of many terror groups. The causes of terror need to be identified much more rigorously, honestly, and completely, and the 'global war on terror' that the United States has launched must be seen as an unsuccessful venture that requires significant reassessment."*

Further, the United States defined, launched, and continues to prosecute this war without significantly changing the Cold War mentality of dealing with the rest of the world as either targets to bomb or markets with which to trade or to exploit. This superior, sometimes racist, mentality must be changed.

## U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

**T**he last point is that the United States must look at more win-win strategies. It cannot continue to try to reorder and reconfigure the world, either in its own image or for its own national interest. It must start acknowledging the mutual interests and legitimate needs of all people in the world, whether they are Arabs, Iranians, Israelis, or others. Particularly, a much more rational, sensible way of projecting American money and power must be found. To do that, the United States needs to look at its own interests as well as the interests of others and negotiate relationships that will address issues and resolve them.

## CONCLUSION

The broad situation across the Middle East outlined above demonstrates that the region's challenges relate to 1) sovereignty and legitimacy; 2) security and stability; 3) identity; and 4) basic human needs.

Most people in the Arab world do not feel that their countries are truly sovereign, that they as citizens actually make the decisions about their military power, their foreign policy, or the use of their natural resources. This relates to legitimacy, which cannot come from Washington and London and Tel Aviv; it must come instead from within Arab societies. Further, legitimacy is different from incumbency. A regime can be in power for 30 or 40 years, as some Middle Eastern regimes and Arab individuals have been, but these spans of rule do not constitute legitimacy. Indeed, the individual, the elites, the governments, and the power structures that rule these countries are either thinly legitimate, or they have forfeited their legitimacy over the years by failing their people in terms of security, development, dignity, and basic good governance.

We can safely say that throughout the region, people are anxious for an opportunity to engage in the self-validating, self-legitimizing process known as self-determination. Indeed, there are hundreds of millions of Arabs who want to define their own countries, government systems, political structures, ideologies, foreign policies, tax systems, education systems, religiosity, secularism, and all the other phenomena that comprise sovereignty and legitimacy. However, we still do not have a single Arab country in which we can honestly say that the people are freely exercising full authority to define themselves.

Security and stability—security of the individual as well as security of the collective group—are also unrealized in the Middle East. Groups in the region have been subjected to ethnic cleansing, such as Palestinians, Kurds, and Shiites, and perpetrators have included Israelis, Arab governments, and assorted foreign forces.

Identity is another complex and unresolved issue. Different levels of identity—that of the individual, the group, the state, the nation, or the Islamic *umma*—still need to be defined clearly. Further, these multiple levels of identity coexist, making the situation more complicated. Thus people exhibit multiple identities, and for peace to preside, they must be able to express them as well as live tolerantly with other identities.

The development issue is becoming more significant as well, because while \$140/barrel oil prices have existed and may exist again, the vast majority of Arabs—maybe as much as 80 per cent—are either poor or have stayed at their same level of real purchasing power for the last 15 or 20 years. As noted above, only around 15 per cent are well off and live in the global economy. Basic human needs are thus stresses that are driving more development forces at the grass-roots and community levels.

**RAMI G. KHOURI**

Together these issues create the simple demand of most people in the Arab world: dignity and normalcy. The Arab people do not want to live in abnormal societies with abnormal power structures anymore, and they do not want to live with abnormal identities that were either created or sustained by foreign powers or foreign occupation. They desire an end to the abnormality of the modern Middle East and the modern Arab world.

Like every power, the United States pursues its own interests—and it will surely continue to do so. But it must also pay attention to and respect the dignity and the everyday lives of the people of the Middle East. We have not seen that kind of balance in the foreign policy of the Bush administration or Israel or Europe recently, nor have we seen it in the policies of many ruling Arab regimes. Thus we have an unfortunate situation in which both sides are driven by fear, anger, ignorance, revenge, violence, and a massive dehumanization and demonization of the other side. The continuation of this trend means a catastrophe for the Arabs, the people of the Middle East as a whole, and the United States. At some point those in power, whether in the Arab world, the United States, or, ideally, collectively, should come to grips with these terrible realities and say that we have had enough of this kind of behavior. It is irresponsible, it is dehumanizing, it is destructive, and we see the rising costs. The Obama presidency has this opportunity, and the Arab leaders and people have always had it.

ENDNOTES

1. Khouri, Rami G. "Bush-Rice: A Legacy of Lies and Delusion," December 10, 2008. Cited with permission from Agence Global.
2. For example, in the case of the American-led invasion of Iraq—when a whole state is wiped away and when external forces (Iranian, American, and Saudi, among others) come in and help some of the feuding local parties with money, guns, and diplomatic cover—the central state's cohesive control mechanisms are essentially obliterated, and groups work to fill the vacuum.

## OTHER CCAS PAPERS

**The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam**

Talal Asad (1986)

**Islam, Jerusalem and the West**

Walid Khalidi (1996)

**Islamists and the Challenge of Pluralism**

Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad (1995)

**Religion and Political Development: Comparative Ideas on Ibn Khaldun and Machiavelli**

Barbara Freyer Stowasser (1983)

**Rethinking Islam Today**

Mohammed Arkoun (1987)

**Rethinking the Roots of Modern Science: Arabic Manuscripts in European Libraries**

George Saliba

**Saudi Arabia: One Hundred Years Later**

CCAS Conference Proceedings (1999)

**The US and the Challenge of Democratization in the Arab World**

Guilain P. Denoeux (1996)

**A View on Islamic Economic Thought**

Ibrahim M. Oweiss (2002)

**CCAS Occasional Papers are essays, lectures, research notes, and other items of interest to students, scholars, and friends of Georgetown University's Center for Contemporary Arab Studies. The views expressed are solely those of the author.**

For a complete list of CCAS Papers, see <http://ccas.georgetown.edu/research.cfm>

**RAMI G. KHOURI**

For nearly 35 years, Georgetown University's Center for Contemporary Arab Studies (CCAS) has enjoyed international recognition as a leader in research, teaching, and scholarship about Arab society, culture, and politics. At a time when it is especially urgent to comprehend the historical and sociopolitical specificities and transformations of the Arab world in all of their complexity, CCAS has played a key role in illuminating the dynamic interaction of the Arab world with the West. CCAS is helping to prepare new generations of scholars, diplomats, business leaders, teachers, citizens, and policymakers capable of critical thought, constructive dialogue, and creative engagement with the riches and challenges of the contemporary Arab world.

The Center, located in the nation's capital, is distinguished by its rigorous Arabic language training. It is part of Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, the oldest school of international affairs in the United States. In recognition of the Center's first decade of excellence, the late Senator J. William Fulbright observed in 1985 that "with remarkable foresight, Georgetown University moved to fill the need for understanding the Arab people by creating the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies...offering a significant contribution to our country."

Since 1997, CCAS has formed the core of Georgetown University's National Resource Center on the Middle East, funded by a Title VI grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

Few regions of the world now command as much attention as the Arab world. CCAS has fostered deeper understanding of this vital area with energy and distinction, illuminating the lives and experiences of the Arabs today, while also researching the future role of the Arabs in a changing and challenging world.



**THE CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ARAB STUDIES**, an integral part of the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, was founded in 1975 to enlarge and enrich academic studies and scholarly research on the Arab world. CCAS is the only academic institution in the United States devoted solely to the study of the Arab world. It administers a Master's program in Arab Studies as well as graduate and undergraduate certificate programs.

For more information, please visit our website at <http://ccas.georgetown.edu>.