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TREATING ALLIES AS ALLIES IN THE ARAB WORLD

Dr. W. Andrew Terrill

At this crucial junction in time, there are serious, evolving, and seemingly nonstop challenges involving the potential spread of violent upheaval and terrorism in the Middle East and particularly the Gulf region. To address these difficulties, the United States will need to work with friendly Arab nations that can help us meet those challenges with united strength. Unfortunately, the importance of our alliances with regional Arab powers is not always fully appreciated by our own strategic thinkers. Questions correspondingly emerge as to whether we are doing enough to understand allied concerns and find ways in which we can work together to address the terrorism threat.

One central question of allied relations involves the extent to which the United States should exert pressure on friendly Arab monarchies and other states to democratize and move forward on reform. This is a tough issue, and the way we approach it may depend on the circumstances of the state being considered. The single worst way to address this question is to demand democratization in a particular country and then punish that state for having free elections that produce victory for Islamist candidates. The height of hypocrisy is to demand elections and then react with hostility because the electorate freely chooses candidates that criticize the United States. Conversely, one small way to encourage democratization is to at least take notice of the important reforms that are taking place in the region, such as the continued expansion of the role of Kuwait's National Assembly (parliament) in political life and the extension of the Kuwaiti franchise and right to hold office to women. These important gains are often overlooked in the Western media and will only be covered adequately if U.S. policymakers repeatedly, publicly, and forcefully recognize democratic advancement when it occurs.

Jordan is an example of a country that has been moving toward reform in ways that sometimes attract the attention of political commentators on the region and also illustrate the trade-offs we have to consider in interallied relations. The Jordanian reform movement was clearly sweeping forward in the early 1990s, but serious setbacks occurred in the mid-1990s. This timing was not accidental but in response to the government initiating highly unpopular policies that it sought to implement with minimal input from the parliament. These policies were the establishment of a peace treaty with Israel in October 1994 and the sharp downgrading of relations with the Saddam Hussein regime that began in August 1995, with Jordan granting political asylum to Saddam's sons-in-law after they fled Iraq. Jordan implemented both of these policies in partial response to U.S. pressure and over the objections of many Jordanian citizens. Expecting Jordan to make peace with Israel, support the isolation of Saddam, and charge forward with democratization simultaneously was not realistic. Yet, severe

criticism was directed at the Jordanians by a wide variety of commentators for slowing down democratization. A similar spike in criticism about stalled reform occurred in 2003 when theories of a near-term flowering of Arab democracy often obscured the difficulty that the Jordanian government faced in supporting upcoming U.S. operations in Iraq. According to a published account by former U.S. Presidential Envoy to Iraq L. Paul Bremer, this support included allowing limited numbers of U.S. forces to enter Iraq from Jordanian territory at the beginning of the 2003 war.

Another problem for our alliances is the danger of political and media opportunism within the United States. This was most clearly seen in the 2006 Dubai Ports World fiasco in which the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and its constituent emirate of Dubai were treated to an avalanche of public disrespect because of the UAE's interest in purchasing a British corporation that managed operations in a number of U.S. ports. This process began with the shrill statements of political "talk" radio commentators. The U.S. administration conscientiously and correctly tried to resist the tide of public hostility to the deal but was ultimately unable to gain the required congressional support for the agreement to be finalized. This problem occurred despite convincing evidence that all security issues associated with the ports deal had been exhaustively addressed and that a number of other foreign countries, including China, had been involved in similar transactions with the United States over the years. The president of Israel's largest Shipping Company, Zim, also strongly and publicly supported the projected U.S.-UAE agreement. The eventual rejection of the Dubai Ports World agreement occurred despite the UAE's important and ongoing support of U.S. strategic objectives including providing for U.S. use of Dhafra Air Base and especially the port of Jabel Ali, which is the best in the region. Earlier, when presented with a "you are either with us or against us" choice following September 11, 2001 (9/11), the UAE made it emphatically clear that they were with us. The Dubai Ports World cancellation suggests that we are willing to treat them poorly despite this commitment.

It should also be noted that our Arab allies offer us other forms of tangible assistance in the struggles against terrorism. According to numerous sources, including the *New York Times*, Jordanian intelligence was instrumental in helping us track down and kill terrorist leader Abu Musab al Zarqawi in Iraq. Other such intelligence and counterterrorism cooperation will be essential to prevent victories by new Zarqawis throughout the Middle East. Currently, the King Abdullah Special Operations Training Center near Amman trains large numbers of soldiers from friendly Arab countries in the vital skills of special operations and counterterrorism. A similar center may eventually be set up in the UAE. Moreover, virtually all of the Arab monarchies have strong military relations with the United States and often purchase significant quantities of U.S. weapons and military equipment. Qatar has made the largest military air field in the region available to the United States, and Bahrain hosts the headquarters of NAVCENT, the naval component of the U.S. Central Command. Also important to the future of the region, Jordan and Egypt have diplomatic relations with Israel, and Qatar hosts an Israeli trading mission. Egyptian support may also be necessary to help

the region deal with the near civil war conditions in the Palestinian territories. All of these efforts and policies are valuable to the United States.

Thus, as we labor to help address the challenges of the Middle East, it is useful to remind ourselves that allies with different forms of government can have many common interests and work together to achieve shared objectives. Moreover, we also need to remember that smaller states can often become resentful toward larger allies that treat their views only as an afterthought. Dependency, as a rule, breeds resentment. The only antidote is to listen seriously to the concerns of our regional partners and make a real effort to understand their special problems. While we might not always agree, ongoing dialogue and united action is important. Finally, and of special importance, a “stop Dubai Ports World” mindset with a default position that all Arabs and Muslims are more or less against us is not only wrong; it is the quickest and surest path to defeat in the struggle against terrorism by tying a strong right arm behind our back.

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