

POWELL AND THE ARAB WORLD: A NORTH AFRICAN VIEW

When the general who had overseen Desert Storm was appointed secretary of State in January 2001, observers in the Middle East wondered about the significance of this choice. As a political scientist and an Arab, I felt that the appointment of Colin Powell indicated that the new administration intended to use all available means — including military ones if necessary — to guarantee Israel's security and regional stability. Clearly, the new U.S. government intended to allow Israel to abandon the peace process that previous administrations had helped negotiate, and to oppose any threats to the conservative regimes of the region. Hence, I felt that the Arabs could not count on the new secretary of State to push for a more balanced and equitable policy in the Middle East, much less to defend or promote the interests of the countries of the region. Little has happened thus far to prove me wrong.

The tragic events of Sept. 11, 2001, further exacerbated tensions in U.S.-Arab relations. Washington's subsequent declaration of the war against terrorism was seen by many Arabs and Muslims as nothing more than a continuation of pre-existing American hostility towards them, except that the

hostility was now expressed openly and with a sense of legitimacy.

To counter that reaction, President Bush, Secretary Powell, and other high U.S. officials made gestures and issued declarations designed to reassure governments and public opinion that the target of U.S. policy is terrorism, and not Muslims or Arabs. A notable example of such efforts is Mr. Powell's speech at the Heritage Foundation on Dec. 12, 2002. In that speech, the secretary of State announced a "U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative" aimed at "all the peoples of the Middle East to improve their daily lives and to help them face the future with hope."



My first reaction was to wonder why Mr. Powell decided to deliver it at all, why he did not deliver it in November as initially scheduled, and why he chose the Heritage Foundation as his host. It seems most unlikely that he really believed that the initiative would improve the tarnished U.S. image in the region. Therefore, one is tempted to dismiss the initiative as just another symbolic gesture designed to win the good will of Arabs and Muslims; its author must or should have known that it could have no more effect than visits to mosques by politicians, iftar meals held at the White House during the month of Ramadan, and similar gestures.

An Ineffective Prescription

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BY BECHIR CHOUROU

F O C U S

Even if one refrains from speculating about circumstances and motives, and takes the initiative at face value, the outcome is mixed. On the one hand, the grim picture of the Arab world presented by Secretary Powell is accurate. We are indeed lagging behind most other regions socially, economically and politically. But on the other hand, the prescription he proposes is totally ineffective. He offered an initial amount of \$29 million to finance the initiative in its first year of implementation, which works out to about 11 cents per inhabitant. This is modernization and liberalization on the cheap. How many schools, factories or computers can

Bechir Chourou is a professor of international relations at the University of Tunis in Tunisia.

***The U.S.-Middle East
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but it represents
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be had with such an amount?

So it should be no surprise that critics in the region have been scathing. They compare the amount with sums spent by the U.S. on military aid to Israel, or on the campaign it is preparing against Iraq, or on supporting the autocratic regimes that it wants now to reform and that are, in fact, responsible for the current dismal state of the region.

They further argue that it makes no sense for countries with immense natural resources and vast revenues, and whose leaders have vast personal fortunes invested in the West, to ask for or accept charity.

So in the final analysis, the reaction that is probably most widespread in the region is outright rejection. Critics point out that the initiative came at a time when U.S. foreign policy is faced with spreading



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and growing opposition, not only among its allies but even among Americans. It also came as the situation in Palestine was becoming more and more chaotic, mostly as a result of unconditional American support for Israel and indifference to the Palestinian people. Many aver that it was no coincidence that Mr. Powell gave his speech just a few days before his meeting with the other members of the "Quartet," at which he stalled, on behalf of Israel, on formulating a solution to the Palestinian problem.

The proposal must also be put in the context of the oft-denied but clear intention of going to war against Iraq. The proponents of this viewpoint conclude that the American initiative is little more than a perfunctory, if not necessarily cynical, public-relations exercise. Even Mr. Powell himself does not appear quite convinced by his proposed support to

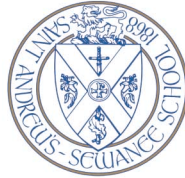
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the Middle East: "We should be quite realistic as we move forward about the obstacles that are ahead, about the time that it will take to see real change take root, and about the limited role that outsiders can play," he warned at the conclusion of his speech. This seems to be a diplomatic way of saying that not much should be expected from the initiative or its promoter.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

Allowing the Palestinian issue to revert to its pre-Oslo status, and keeping the region in a state of tension and turmoil that prevents societies from directing their energies and resources toward a rapidly deteriorating situation, are not the only causes of disappointment in Secretary Powell's performance. Many of us living in North Africa feel that our region gets little attention from the State Department, and then only in the frame-

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work of events taking place in the Near East, or at times of crisis. Of course, we are part of the Arab world, and we are concerned with and affected by events taking place in any of its parts. However, we do have interests and preoccupations that are not directly related to the eastern part of the Arab world. But because of our historic links with Europe, especially France, the United States has traditionally stayed out of this region, especially in the economic, social and cultural areas.

Geographic distance and the limited use of English in North Africa are other major obstacles to greater interaction between the U.S. and the Maghreb, but the real problem is lack of interest. For example, American trade and investment here outside the energy sector are insignificant. The exchange of students and scholars, media coverage, and tourism are all limited.

This is not to say that the U.S. alone is responsible for this situation. North African governments have not done enough to make themselves attractive to foreign investments, and have failed to integrate their individual small markets into a larger single one. Both Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Marc Grossman and Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs William Burns emphasized this point during their respective visits to the area in late 2002. Our businessmen lack the resources and the proper mentality to go after an American market reputed to be difficult and demanding. Our governments are unaware or unconvinced of the importance of lobbying in American politics. For instance, no Maghreb state has, to my knowledge, professional lobbyists representing its interests in Washington.

The Next Two Years

There are signs that this situation may be changing. Secretary Powell has honored our region with his presence once, when he visited Morocco in April 2002, although the bulk of his meeting with King Mohammed VI, as he indicated in a press conference, "was spent on the situation in the Middle East." On the other hand, Under Secretary Grossman declared at the end of his visit

It does not appear that Secretary Powell has pushed for a more balanced and equitable policy in the Middle East.

to the region in November 2002 that the focus of his talks with officials was on economic issues: "This is the news in North Africa," he said in Rabat, and added that the U.S. wants to take up other issues as well, such as political reform and democratization. Mr. Grossman also indicated that Washington is interested in reviving the project initiated during the Clinton administration by then-Under Secretary of State for Economic

Affairs Stuart Eisenstadt, aimed at setting up a U.S.-North African Economic Partnership. Toward that end, he announced that the U.S. would soon start negotiating free-trade agreements with Morocco and other countries in the region.

These are steps in the right direction and, small as they may be, they indicate that the Maghreb is not totally ignored by the State Department. Still, what Mr. Powell said with regard to the U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative applies to us as well: "[W]e should avoid resigning ourselves to low expectations." I would like to see stronger, more durable and more diversified relations between the United States and North Africa. If the glass is seen as half-empty, we can view Mr. Powell as having done little to achieve that objective. I prefer to see the glass as half-full, and to argue that at least the Maghreb continues to figure on Mr. Powell's agenda; it may even be rising in his order of priorities.

What are the prospects for the remainder of the secretary's term in office? Mr. Powell's job is to carry out the decisions of the president. He advises him, and he can try to influence him, but he does not decide policy. By words and by deeds, President Bush is carrying out a foreign policy that public opinion in the Arab world considers unfriendly, if not outright aggressive. But most people here are unaware of, or unconcerned by, these constitutional considerations, and will therefore blame the secretary for the U.S. government's actions.

I do not know what Mr. Powell's personal convictions are with regard to the Arab world, but he cannot be evaluated on that basis. Only observable acts count, and on that basis, Mr. Powell's report card is not as favorable as one would like it to be. Nor is it likely to improve in the immediate future. ■