

THE ARAB STREET IS WATCHING

T LIKE AMERICANS, ARABS ARE DIVIDED OVER THE CHOICE BETWEEN BUSH AND KERRY. THEY KNOW THE WINNER WILL PLAY A MAJOR ROLE IN RESHAPING THE REGION'S FUTURE.

BY SALAMEH NEMATT

The U.S. has never been more involved in the Middle East than it is today. Both on the military and national-security levels, and in the political and economic spheres, Washington is, by far, the leading player and power broker in this perpetually volatile part of the world.

Since 9/11, the U.S. has used force to overthrow two hostile regimes in that region: the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Saddam Hussein in Iraq. And, apart from using its military prowess and political influence to shape the future of these two countries, the U.S. has used its international clout to launch an ambitious project aimed at democratizing 20 Arab states in the region, from Morocco to the Persian Gulf. The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative, adopted at the G-8 summit in Sea Island last June, is viewed in the region as an American attempt at achieving a series of "regime changes" by non-military means in the heart of the Arab world. The prospect has arguably "terrorized" many dictatorships and authoritarian regimes throughout the Middle East, perhaps even more than the U.S. application of brutal military force in Afghanistan and Iraq.

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Some of these regimes are already active in Iraq in an attempt to bog down American forces to keep the U.S. "monster" from moving farther into the region. Syria, which is strategically allied with Iran, has made no secret that it hopes to give America a bloody nose in Iraq to stymie its regional ambitions. Other Arab states, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Jordan, have been more subtle in their resistance to American plans — showing outward diplomatic cooperation, while escalating anti-American propaganda in their state-run media.

Amman and Cairo, in particular, feel they need to walk a fine line in view of generous annual U.S. economic and military aid grants. Others, especially the Persian Gulf Arab states, have shown more reluctance to go along with American plans, hoping Washington would eventually abandon its "forward strategy" in the Middle East.

Whether the Bush administration used the attacks of 9/11 to overthrow the Taliban to build oil and gas pipelines linking Caspian Sea reserves with hot Asian markets through Afghanistan, or whether it did so to try to bring international terrorists to justice, people of the region remain dubious about American intentions. When America moved next to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime, people and governments in the Arab world, though very few had any sympathy for the brutal Iraqi dictator, became more and more convinced that the U.S.,

the world's largest consumer of energy, was mainly after oil. They argued that Washington is more concerned with controlling Iraq's oil holdings, which make up 11 percent of the world's reserves, in order to dictate future global oil policies and pricing, than in liberating an oppressed people or ridding Iraq of weapons of mass destruction.

A Choice Between Coke and Pepsi

America's support for Israel, despite its violation of dozens of U.N. Security Council resolutions related to its continuing occupation of Palestinian territories and oppression of the Palestinian people, has made it even more difficult for fellow Arabs to believe that the U.S. has any good intentions in the Middle East. Conspiracy theories abound regarding Washington's plans, but frustration and resignation remain the dominant themes.

The "Arab street" (the term used to refer to regional public opinion) briefly hoped for a "regime change" in the White House that would bring about a more balanced and credible approach to Middle East problems. This was most true while Howard Dean was (briefly) the front-runner for the Democratic nomination, running on a strong anti-war plank. But once he was forced out of the race and John Kerry cruised to the nomination, those hopes rapidly faded. (Even Ohio Congressman Dennis Kucinich, the most outspoken opponent of the war, abandoned his position at the Democratic Convention to back Kerry.)

Arabs note with disquiet that both Kerry and his running mate, Senator John Edwards of North Carolina, voted in October 2002 for the congressional resolution authorizing Bush to attack Iraq. Both also voted in favour of the Patriot Act. That measure, under the guise of fighting the "war on terror," gives the CIA, FBI and other police agencies unprecedented powers to spy on the American public, particularly Muslims and Arab-Americans, and to override constitutionally protected civil liberties.

Then the Democratic National Convention, which people in the Arab world thought might show the difference between the two main political parties in America, failed to offer an alternative to the Bush administration's

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policies on two of the most critical issues for the Arab world: Iraq and Palestine. In his acceptance speech, Kerry seemed to go out of his way to stress his support for the occupation of Iraq and the crushing of the anti-U.S. insurgency, mainly criticizing Bush for not deploying more troops. He has also repeatedly proclaimed his support for the war on terror and the doctrine of pre-emptive war, which is the centerpiece of the Bush administration's policy of using military force to topple unwanted governments.

Even this late in the election campaign, there does not seem to be any serious debate on the ongoing war and occupation of Iraq. And adding insult to injury, the Democratic Party seems very active in trying to oust independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader from the race. Nader, who is an Arab-American of Lebanese origin, opposes the war in Iraq and has called for a balanced U.S. policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict.

As a result, most Arab observers see the choice between Bush and Kerry — at least on Mideast issues — as amounting to the difference between Pepsi and Coca-Cola.

Much Is at Stake

It is important to bear in mind that the Arab people and their non-democratic governments have different reasons for opposing U.S. policies. The regimes — especially the ruling families themselves — are concerned above all with their own survival, so they are highly critical of the U.S. for pressuring them to democratize. By contrast, the people of the region are hostile toward America for *not* fulfilling its promise to bring democracy to the region, and for continuing to support both authoritarian regimes and Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands.

Still, beleaguered reform elements within Arab societies, who are convinced that the transformation to democracy in their countries cannot be achieved without outside help, cling to the hope that America, regardless of who wins the elections in November, will pursue the proclaimed "forward strategy for reform and democracy" in the Middle East. True, many have been disillusioned by the U.S. performance in Iraq so far, and by Washington's

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unwavering, bipartisan support for the government of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. But they are alert for signs that the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative, backed by the European Union and other industrialized powers, will eventually come to fruition.

Betting the other way, Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida terrorist organization is said to be preparing major attacks on U.S. soil, possibly on the eve of the November elections, in an attempt to repeat the success of its March bombing in Madrid, which appears to have precipitated the ruling party's defeat. They are also reportedly working with local insurgents and supporters of former dictator Saddam Hussein, in the belief that America cannot tolerate too many casualties among its forces, and would thus vote against the administration that put these troops in harm's way. If that is true, then for the first time since World War II, foreign countries and extremist groups have become players in the U.S. presidential elections, with most external forces hoping for a "regime change" that would alter the global

dynamic that started on Sept. 11, 2001.

Like Americans themselves, then, Arabs are divided between those who believe they're better off with a second Bush administration and those who prefer a Democratic president, with those favoring a change in the majority. But they all know that whoever will occupy the White House next will play a major role in reshaping the future of the Middle East, for better or worse. American success in establishing an Arab democracy in the Middle East could help spread reform and democratization in the entire region.

In contrast, a failure of the American reconstruction and stabilization of Iraq would give rise to the dark forces of extremism who are now active in trying to abort the U.S. effort. It would also encourage undemocratic regimes throughout the region to stand firm in resisting pressure to liberalize.

All this makes the American presidential election this year the most important in many years for the people and governments of the Middle East. ■

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