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Why Arab Intellectuals Opposed the War in Iraq

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March 20th marked the fifth anniversary of the American military presence in Iraq. In analyzing US failings there, Western analysts devoted much attention to tactical and strategic mistakes committed by the American forces, as well as to moral failures, such as the torture and abuse at Abu-Ghraib. However, one point often neglected in the discussion is the sharp opposition to American democratization plans articulated by a broad cross-section of intellectuals in Arab countries long before the first fire was shot – opposition shared not only by distinctly anti-Western forces, but also by staunch and long-standing supporters of liberal reforms in Arab societies. Consequently, in lacking substantial support among intellectuals, Bush's doctrine for democratization in the Middle East was devoid of a crucial element which invariably has enhanced parallel reform movements in other parts of the world.

To understand the roots of these objections, one must return to the early experiments of Arab societies with liberal democracies after World War I. Then, Western Powers played the dual role of guarding and promoting democracy on the one hand, and imposing their interests on the other. That reality created a Gordian knot of suspicions and hopes: while many elements of the democratic system were ingrained in the Arab political discourse, the West's declared intention to enhance and defend these democratic values had come to be largely interpreted in Arab intellectual circles as a thinly disguised pretense for pursuing an imperialist agenda.

The demise of Soviet communism in the early 1990s led to a conceptual shift in Arab societies. Not only was the West restored to its post-World War I status as an unrivaled military and economic force in the Middle East, but so too did the concept of liberal democracy revert to being perceived in the region the way it was at the beginning of the century: a form of government with universal pretensions.

While few Arab intellectuals accepted the “End of History” argument that the collapse of the Soviet Union provided proof that liberal democracy had irrevocably triumphed, and thus that its time for adoption in the Middle East had come, most cautioned against the renewal of Western imperialism in the region. Liberal democracy, they said, was not a universal concept, and history had not come to an end; the West, when preaching democracy, was actually aiming to promote a global hegemony.

The Gulf war in 1991 exasperated these concerns. In Western eyes, it was merely a war to liberate one tiny Arab state from the occupation of a much larger Arab state. In the eyes of many Arab intellectuals, however, the war served as a warning of the dangers the post-Soviet future posed to their nations and to Arab-Islamic culture. What was taking place, in their view, was not merely a confrontation between countries, but rather the beginning of a clash of two civilizations, a struggle whose true cause was the desire of the West to crush independent Arab power and eradicate the very possibility of the existence of an opposing force.

Many Arab intellectuals inferred the objective of the 1991 Gulf War from its outcome. Since the war had ended in a severe blow to the Arab state with the strongest army and an enlargement of the Western military presence in the Arab state richest in oil, then that must have been its purpose from the start. Some went so far as to describe the war as a Western conspiracy whose true goal was the realization of the vision outlined by then-President George H.W. Bush, of a “New World Order” defined as global American hegemony. A few even warned that the day was near when America would use the forces it deployed in the Gulf to take control over Arab lands and minds.

Little more than ten years later, George W. Bush's plans to democratize Iraq were thus regarded by many Arab intellectuals as a final step in a conspiracy initiated by his father. According to their thinking, the 2003 overthrow of Saddam Husayn's regime was not a war of liberation from tyranny, but rather a war to realize a Western aim to crush the one last power that could stand firm against it – the Muslim world.

Several exiled Iraqi intellectuals and politicians played an important supportive role in influencing America's decision to go to war in order to bring democracy to Iraq (most noticeably Kanan Makiya, whose *Charter 91* initiative envisioned a liberal democratic Iraq). However, their opinions had little echo in the Arab world itself, where most intellectuals were profoundly opposed to the war. Ironically, the opposition found its most forceful presentation in the pages of *al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi*, the journal of the Beirut-based Center for Arab Unity Studies, which, at the beginning of the 1990s, was the single most active source of calls for democratization in the Arab world. The Center's head, the Iraqi exile Khair al-Din Hasib, happened to be Saddam Hussein's sworn enemy. He argued, as did many of his colleagues, that the American invasion of Iraq could not come as a surprise to anyone who had followed US strategy since the end of the Cold War. With the collapse of the Soviet bloc, he explained, America sought to become the sole global power, and controlling the world's supply of oil was the only way to attain this goal. The realization of the American post-Cold War plan had been postponed because of President George H.W. Bush's defeat by Bill Clinton, but was renewed after the 9/11 attacks in the guise of promoting democracy. Hasib argued that there were three true strategic aims behind the facade of liberating Iraq: controlling the world's oil resources, as America realized that in order to avoid competition from the European Union, China and India, having a preponderance of military power would not alone suffice; reshaping the Middle Eastern political map; and ending the danger posed by Iraq to Israel. Moreover, he said, if America were truly interested in Arab democracy, it would not have cooperated with Saddam Hussein in the past and opposed him only after he became too much of a threat to Israel.

Not only the war in Iraq was viewed with scorn and suspicion. So was *America's Partnership for Progress and Common Future with the Region of the Broader Middle East and North Africa*, declared in December 2002, which aimed to promote democratic institutions and education in the Arab world and has now been all but forgotten. In *al-Sharq al-Awsat's* opinion columns, for example, the plan was fiercely attacked. Columnist Bilal al-Hassan argued that the plan's true goal was to serve America's aim of attaining world hegemony. The Saudi writer Turki al-Hamad, otherwise a defender of certain aspects of Western culture, compared America's policies to a minefield in which Arabs should fear to tread, contending that their purpose was making the Arabs dance to the West's tune, and that their success would turn Arabs into "artificial creatures, lacking color, smell and taste".

For American intellectuals, George W. Bush's self-proclaimed idealism was interpreted as a fundamental departure from his father's and his party's realist foreign policy heritage. Arab intellectuals, by contrast, analyzed it as another practical manifestation of a dominant Western mindset insistent upon subjecting the Arabs to Western interests and values. That so many of the elder Bush's senior officials were appointed to high ranking portfolios in his son's administration only reinforced such conspiracy theories. Hence, even if one ignores all of its other flaws, Bush's democratization doctrine has little chances of success in the Middle East, owing to this overwhelming and deeply-rooted hostile intellectual climate.

This commentary draws on material from the author's recent book, The Wars of Democracy: The West and the Arabs from the Fall of Communism to the War in Iraq (Tel Aviv: The Moshe Dayan Center, 2008, in Hebrew).