# Interest, Influence, Intervention:
## US Foreign Policy in the Middle East
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### Decontextualizing History

Let me begin with the recent words of one of Bush's top advisors on Middle East policy: "Terrorism must be decontextualized."[1] I'm not making this up. Richard Perle actually said this in public: terrorism must be decontextualized.[2] As outrageous as it may seem, this about the closest the Bush administration has come to a coherent policy towards the Middle East. And it's brilliant when viewed from a certain angle: if we decontextualize terrorism, then it follows, a war on terrorism can also be liberated from history and context. Decontextualization is the logic behind Rumsfeld and Cheney's decision to attack Iraq in the first hours following September 11, even though it was patently clear that Saddam Husayn had nothing to do with those crimes.[3] As experts have been noting for months, the war on terrorism is disconnected from the plans for war on Iraq. But this *disconnect* is precisely what's meant by Bush's policy of decontextualization. I begin here, because I want to underscore how important historical knowledge is to those of us who oppose the administration's current war efforts. When government officials declare a policy of decontextualization, the study of historical context suddenly becomes a political act. But has decontextualization—rather than informed historical knowledge—come to be acceptable in public debates? It's not clear that it has yet, but I want to preface my sketch of US Middle East policy by retracing some of the directions that public debate could have taken in the past few months but has not.[4]

After 9-11, many of us argued that US citizens now owed it to themselves to study the history of the Middle East. At the least, they owed it to themselves to study the history of US involvement in the region. We argued that if US citizens wanted to understand "the war on terror," they needed to begin with the realization that it did not *begin* on September 11. In other words, what we were saying was that the horrific events of September 11 had a *historical context*.

Many of us thought that American power, so visibly under attack, but so convinced of its

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1 Richard Perle, as qtd. in Robert Fisk, *The Independent*, January 4, 2003.

2 On the ties that link Bush's Middle East advisors to Israel's extreme right, see Jason A. Vest, "The Men From JINSA and CSP," *The Nation*, September 2, 2002.

3 Within hours of learning that Usama bin Ladin was a suspect in the 9-11 attacks, Rumsfeld discussed the desirability of responding — by targeting Iraq. The anti-Iraq position of administration hawks long predates 9-11 and, in the months following the attack, has yet to be supported by any hard evidence linking Hussein to Islamist terrorism. See Glenn Kessler, "U.S. Decision On Iraq Has Puzzling Past: Opponents of War Wonder When, How Policy Was Set," *The Washington Post*, January 12, 2003.

4 On the limited scope of public debate following 9-11, Robert Fisk has quipped: "Ask all you like about 9-11 — but for heaven's sake don't ask why."

righteousness and strength, would welcome a frank conversation about this context. For those of us familiar with how US policies have impacted the everyday lives of people in the Middle East, it was not difficult to prepare a list of questions to submit to US audiences:

- For instance, what sorts of regimes has the US government has been supporting? And what happens when we support a dictator—such as Saddam Husayn, or the Shah of Iran—who's willing to use arms against his own people?
- What sort of impact has US dependence upon Arabian oil reserves had on the economic and political development in the region? Why is it that the world's highest concentration of repressive, autocratic regimes—most of whom are loyal US clients—located in this region?
- How does the US military alliance with regional powers—such as Turkey and Israel—impact the human and civil rights of Kurds or Palestinians living under repressive military rule?
- Why do US weapons manufacturers depend so heavily on the region's inflated arms market? What happens when we make US arms exports to the Middle East such a central part of US foreign policy, and arms production such a crucial part of the US domestic economy?
- Why has the US been so eager to use UN resolutions to address Iraqi abuses of international law, but so unwilling to apply them against the illegal actions of allies?

We could have been asking other more direct questions:

- How many permanent military bases does the US have in the region?
- How many times has the CIA intervened in the region with bloody results?
- How many local Middle Eastern industries have been dismantled by the IMF?

Any one of these questions would be a good starting point for a more robust discussion of why the US now faces widespread criticism among the peoples of the Middle East, and why the US is now encountering armed resistance to its policies. Yet, when was the last time you heard any of these questions plainly asked, let alone answered, in your local newspaper, on Fox News or even on NPR?

If only to *protect* ourselves through knowledge, we might think that there would be wide public support in this country for more critical debate about our foreign policy in the Middle East. Those who have called for such debate have all too often been denounced by the right as

apologists of terror.[5] But, to call for such a debate is not to *justify* terrorism or even to defend opposition to the US. Rather it is to search for explanations of our historical moment. What we choose to do with this explanation is up to ourselves, but it seems profoundly unwise that we would be asked to ignore explanations merely because they make us embarrassed or uncomfortable. Yet, deliberate ignorance is precisely what is being preached by those in the White House: "Terrorism must be decontextualized."

What does it meant to decontextualize a historical phenomenon like terrorism? Surprisingly, there are lots of ways to decontextualize historical events like the one we're in. One way is to talk about American tragedies as if they were wholly distinct from the sorts of tragedies that have been a regular part of other peoples' experience. This is a version of the argument that America is unique, and can only be understood on its own terms. Another way is to *pathologize* those who oppose the US, to talk about them as if they were a naturally occurring, though *deadly* disease. Or to talk about their ideology as if it were a purely psychological disorder, a deranged state of mind, or a form of irrational hatred. Another way to decontextualize is to re-label any foreign criticism of US-policy as "America-bashing," to say that "everybody hates us not for what we do, but for who we are." This is tantamount to inventing a very deluded, lachrymose version of American history. A popular way to decontextualize the problems of our historical moment is to talk in terms of essential binary oppositions. We are all familiar with the rhetoric of media commentators who neatly separate the world into "The Lexus and the Olive Tree," "the democratic West" versus "Islam," or, more simply, "good" versus "evil." Those who speak about a "clash of civilizations," are really asking us something very simple: they want us to forget context, to forget history.

Read most generously, each of these decontextualizing strategies is an attempt to assert what is admirable about this society. But such assertions, which might otherwise be reasonable, are here quite objectionable because they privilege the suffering of US citizens over the suffering of others. We should always be suspicious when we encounter representations of suffering that serve to close, rather than open, the doors of compassion and sympathy. As suspicious as they

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5 Many of the attacks focused on academics whose research focuses on the Middle East. Neoconservative think-tanks (like the American Council of Trustees and Alumni) and think-tanks with ties to the Israeli right (like Washington Institute for Near East Policy and Middle East Forum) sponsored anti-academic initiatives like ACTA's report, "Defending Civilization: How Our Universities Are Failing America and What Can Be Done About It," and Daniel Pipes and Martin Kramer's *Campus Watch*. These initiatives claim to merely hold the work of academics to public scrutiny, an idea with which few would argue. However, the stated goal of ACLA and *Campus Watch*—accountability—serves to hide its real agenda: the intimidation of scholars and educators whose research does not agree with the views of the American right. See Joel Beinin's critical reply to *Campus Watch* in the *History News Network*: http://hnn.us/articles/1001.html

are, it needs to be pointed out that these decontextualizing strategies also present a very strange, and equally objectionable, version of US history where the US appears more or less as a spectator to other people's history. In other words, these sorts of decontextualizing explanations hide the active role we have in Middle East history. What do I mean? We should not forget that even as thousands of civilians were killed in the September 11 attacks, their murderers deliberately targeted prominent symbols of real US military and economic power, the Pentagon and the WTC. These symbols should remind us of the effective agency that American institutions actually have. Moreover, as US citizens we need to know that we are not mere spectators of modern Middle Eastern history, and that Middle Eastern events are more than foreign affairs. That distant history "over there" is not something we merely watch from a place called "here." On the contrary, the US government is among the primary actors in modern Middle Eastern history and this remains true whether or not the US public knows it.[6] So, to understand the US role in contemporary Middle East history, and to understand it in its context, we need to understand the *interests* and *strategic goals* that have motivated the actions and policies of the US government.

**Interests**

What are the US economic interests in the Middle East? Let me start by listing the three largest—oil, weapons, and free markets—and by considering some of the consequences of policy based on them.

**Oil**

1. As everyone knows, oil has been the primary US economic interest in the region. Not only is oil the leading commodity that the US *imports* from the region, but US multi-nationals play a dominant role in the extraction, refinement and distribution of that product. US policy has addressed this interest by cementing alliances with those local regimes—such as Saudi Arabia—which allow petroleum corporations to drill, refine and export the commodity with relatively little government interference and minimal rent. How does this arrangement impact the people of oil-producing countries?

    - The profits which stem from oil production in places like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait or Iraq tend to be concentrated in the hands of a tiny ruling elite, oftentimes in the hands of a single extended family. Very little of the considerable wealth that oil

6 For a concise and critical overview of twentieth-century US policy and intervention in the Middle East, see Phyllis Bennis, "Long Before: The US in the Middle East," in *Before & After: US Foreign Policy and the September 11th Crisis* (Brooklyn: Olive Branch Press, 2003), pp. 21-81. For a very different, though no less critical, version of this same history, see Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters : Culture, Media and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

creates ever trickles down to the working peoples of the region. The great majority of workers in these countries are actually foreign, most come from the impoverished states of South Asia. One of the conditions of their employment is that they surrender their civil and labor rights while living in the region. This situation has lead to some of the most regular and severe human rights problems in the world.

- There is probably no other place in the world where so much of its wealth is controlled by foreign interests, and where so little of its wealth is distributed to the people who live and work there. Considering the volatility of the situation, it is no accident that these oil-producing regimes are some of the most fragile and repressive in the world. There have always been attempts by workers, peasants, and Bedouins in this region to organize for more democratic governance, and a more equitable distribution of national wealth. Previous attempts—by Arabian liberals and socialists—to bring about such change were violently repressed in the 60s, 70s, and 80s. In these conflicts, the US has regularly sided with ruling elites against reformers.[7]

**Arms**

2. The US public is perhaps less aware of the leading US *export* to the region: arms. US arms manufacturers have sold $78 billion worth of arms to Middle Eastern countries in the last

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7 For this history, see Fred Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans* (London: Saqi Books, 2002). Many commentators have been reporting on negotiations now going on about future control of the rich Iraqi oil fields—and there is good historical reason to think that, following a US-led war, these oil fields will be used to pay the expenses of a US occupation. One might think that these fields would become the property of the US public, in whose name US armed forces will liberate them. However, administration of the fields will most likely be handed over to multinational corporations who stand to profit handily from the transfer. Fareed Mohamedi and Raad Alkadiri have also noted that control over Iraq's oilfields will bring more than mere command over material resources: it will also enable the US to interfere—perhaps even break—the power of oil market players. Control over Iraqi oil production will no doubt radically alter the internal politics of OPEC, and may prove to be an effective lever for reducing oil prices dramatically and permanently. See Mohamedi and Alkadiri's article, "Washington Makes Its Case for War," *Middle East Report* 224 (Fall 2002), pp. 2-5. On the current nexus of oil interests in the regional conflict, see also Fareed Mohamedi and Yahya Sadowski, "The Decline (But Not Fall) of US Hegemony in the Middle East," *Middle East Report* 220 (Fall 2001).

10 years. This figure is based on official, reported arms sales by US corporations.[8] The total number, which would have to include arms gifts, and clandestine arms deals (such as those involving the CIA) not to mention sales by other Western countries is much higher. US policy has been simple: subsidize the US defense industry by promoting sales, gifts and loans to US allies in the region. How does this arrangement impact the lives of regular people in the region?

- Commentators like to remind us that the Middle East is an innately violent region. This is rubbish. The Middle East has its share of conflicts, but what makes it uniquely volatile is that it is the most militarized place on Earth. Moreover, these huge sales of weapons are not going to aid the most democratic elements of those societies.
- There is good reason to doubt the wisdom of selling expensive weapons to poor countries like Egypt, since such sales typically result in increasing the debt burden of these countries while adding nothing to their economic or social development. Moreover, there is equally good reason to doubt the wisdom of military sales and gifts to local powers—such as Turkey and Israel—who regularly use such weapons on civilian populations.
- US arms sales should be a matter of discussion in this country, but the discussion should not be limited to *strategic* concerns. As more US bombs begin to fall while waging a campaign against those also armed with US bombs, there needs to be a serious debate about the *ethical* issues involved in selling high priced arms to poor countries and violent dictators. Our current arms policy may help to subsidize segments of the US defense industry, but for us to appreciate this benefit, we need to weigh it against the many predictable consequences of selling arms: regional instability, massive human rights abuses, and a tendency toward solving political conflicts by military, rather than diplomatic means.

**Markets**

3. Harder to quantify is role that free market ideology has played in US policy toward the region. But ever since the Arab boycott of the 1970s, policy-makers have sought to open up regional markets to US products—and they have enjoyed an unqualified success. The policy was, until the 1980s, stymied by the strength of state instruments—such as subsidies, tariffs, and monopolies—designed to level the playing field in the competition between local, developing industries and multinational corporations from the developed world. But, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the expansion of US development

8 See the website of the Federation of American Scientists for the latest figures: www.fas.org

agencies and the cooperation of local business elites, these obstacles fell down. Many of the last doors to regional economies were removed, making the Middle East one of the most "Americanized" markets in the world, a place where on TV, Dallas means more than Damascus and where Crisco has displaced olive oil in many bowls of hummus.

- Corporate interests have loudly celebrated the opening of regional markets to their products and—throughout the 90s—proclaimed a new era of freedom and exchange in the region. But the real benefits of free market ideology will have to be weighed against the social and political consequences. And here, free market ideology will probably have much to answer for in the coming years: the new policies have increased the exchange of ideas and goods across many previously closed borders, but they have also increased the gap between the rich and the poor, eliminated the remains of welfare networks and reduced the ranks of property-owning citizens.

**Geopolitical Concerns: Influence and Intervention**

The other concerns I want to list for you are geopolitical. Among the political interests most often listed when it comes to US policy toward the Middle East are alliances with regional powers. Among the military interests most often discussed are issues of control, security and two special military alliances: between the US and Turkey, on the one hand, and the US and Israel, on the other. These geopolitical concerns are motivated by many of the economic interests I've just sketched, and obviously have an economic impact. But I just want to qualify my description of them by noting that they are not identical to economic interests, nor do they necessarily even reflect them. These geopolitical concerns have a life of their own, and cannot be reduced to things like profit or risk reduction for the simple reason that geopolitical policies—and actions like military intervention—always transform, and often disrupt existing economic interests. So, even if the US Army seizes Iraq's oil fields and hands them over to petroleum companies, a US occupation of Iraq will help—but also complicate—the ability of these companies to do business as usual. In other words, it's simplistic to think that the goals of a military occupation, especially if it comes in the face of popular Iraqi resentment, will be identical to those of the petroleum industry.

This separation is more or less what I meant by my title—that economic interests are distinct from political influence, and are also distinct from military intervention. They may work together, but they may also diverge—and this divergence may be important to those of us who oppose the war. Before continuing, I want to mention one other interest that I think is most important, but which never makes it onto the list of those interests usually talked about: I am talking about the safety and welfare of citizens, which I take to be primary among those that a government ought to consider while making policy. We need to remember that welfare and safety concerns are not the same as security.

With those qualifications, let me begin my description of the geopolitical concerns of US

foreign policy by using the vocabulary of the mainstream US media. If we were to believe the US media, the political map of the Middle East is divided into roughly three parts: allies, moderates, and rogues. Many of us probably reject the moral subtext of this terminology. But, as Noam Chomsky has argued, these terms serve well to describe how *American power* operates in the region.[9] Each term accurately reflects its *assigned role* within US policy making. Each of these terms precisely describes the willingness, or unwillingness, of local *elites* to play the role assigned to it by American power brokers. In brief, **allies** are those states which comply with, gain considerably from, and even exert influence upon the rules of American power. **Moderates** are those regimes which are willing to comply with American power, but which have trouble convincing their publics to accept the equation of US power: as such, they are sometimes rewarded, and always prodded to abide by Washington. Lastly, **rogue** states are those which openly criticize or resist the regional terms of US power. Rogue states are routinely chastised and punished for not getting on board with the program.

Let's take those countries which the US press calls **allies**. Numerically, they are few, but they are important. Two, Turkey and Israel, have the most powerful militaries in the region, and others, such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, possess a significant portion of the world's oil wealth.[10] Allies are those countries which support the widest amount of US influence in the region. Allies not only allow the US to pursue its regional policies more or less unfettered, but also when they appear to contradict them, are given special dispensation. US allies are those countries which allow the US to station military forces on their soil in more or less an open and permanent fashion, and in return, are given advanced weapons systems along with a great freedom to use those weapons. US allies are those countries which never fail to vote with the US in the General Assembly of the United Nations and who can count on US support in the Security Council. US allies usually have markets which are open to US corporations, and receive as a reward preferential trading status with the US. In each case, the relationship between the US and its regional allies works *quid pro quo*—bases for arms, votes for votes. Finally, allies are unique because for helping to widen US influence in the region, they are given widest access to US politics as well. Allies are the only regimes that possess real lobbying power in Washington.

The category of **moderate** states is more confusing and objectionable—mostly because it

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9 As Chomsky points out, when looked at in terms of consistency—that is, in terms of regular patterns of flaunting international law and norms—the US and its allies are often the ones most deserving of the designation "rogue." See Noam Chomsky, *Rogue States: The Rule of Force in World Affairs* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2000).

10 In recent months, there has been a growing debate whether to remove Saudi Arabia from this list of allies—this is a threat that has struck fear into the hearts of Saudi elites whose power base depends on the patronage of the US.

is a term unique to US foreign policy concerns in the Middle East. To my knowledge, the term "moderate" is only ever used to refer to Muslim and especially Arab countries. The designation is enigmatic. We don't talk about Christian or Buddhist countries in terms of moderation. Which is to say, in the language of US foreign policy, there is a unique burden upon Muslims and Arabs to prove they are not extreme. Although the term "moderate" is used to refer to the majority of Arab states, there are only two contexts where it is employed consistently. First, moderate states are those which show a willingness, if not ability, to comply with the rules of US power. Moderate countries—like Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Kuwait—are countries which are ruled by elites who would like to be outright US allies. But they are countries whose people are hesitant about conceding their national sovereignty to the US. In terms of political stability, moderate regimes are fragile, due to the disconnect between the pro-US leanings of their elites, and the more independent leanings of their people. Second, and perhaps most importantly in US policy, the term "moderate" was first used to describe the position of various Arab states toward Israel. In this regard, the first moderate states were those willing to accept the status quo in Palestine-Israel, either by officially normalizing relations with Israel (like Egypt and Jordan) or by recognizing it in other ways (like Tunis, Morocco or Qatar). By status quo, I mean simply, the situation, since 1967, of a Jewish state ruling over the whole of historic Palestine, with no equivalent state for Palestinians living there, nor any lasting resolution for the millions of Palestinian refugees displaced to create the Jewish State. The issue of Palestine is often a flashpoint for the tension between the so-called moderate elites, who are willing to work pragmatically with the current balance of power in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the general population of their countries, who would rather challenge that power.

In military matters, moderates often allow US military exercises on their soil, but their regimes are usually too fragile to offer the US permanent bases. In economic matters, moderates are willing to dismantle subsidies, welfare and state industry under a pro-US rubric of privatization, even when this causes widespread popular protest against the government and the IMF. In this context, during the transformations of global capital during the last 15 years, it has been moderate states which have borne the hardest blows in the region. Finally, just to be clear: moderation says nothing about the rule of democracy in a given country: moderates may be partially elected military juntas—like Egypt or Tunis—or they may be dictatorships and monarchies, like Jordan, Kuwait, or Morocco. These regimes have little influence to transform the main thrusts of US policy and, in time of crisis or conflict, they are generally ineffective in their efforts to lobby Washington.

During the 1980s, the category of the **rogue** state was used to refer to those regimes—Iraq, Iran, Libya, Syria, and Sudan—who most vocally opposed the terms of US power in the Middle East. Earlier, during the Cold War, such states were called "radicals" for having close ties with the Soviet Union, and for supporting popular struggles in the region. In fact, some of today's moderate states—such as Egypt or Yemen—were yesterday's radicals. In terms of economics, these are states which have not opened their doors to US capital and whose industries

have not been brought under the auspices of the IMF. These are countries which are as underdeveloped as the majority of other Middle Eastern countries, but which, unlike those of moderates, do not have heavy debt burdens. None of the states labeled "rogue" is democratic by American definitions, but then, Iran's experiment, though struggling, may turn out to be a vibrant model for other countries of the region to emulate. Since it is not the economic or political systems of these states which has earned them the unique title of rogue—what has?

- First, again, the issue of Israel-Palestine is crucial. Each of these so-called rogue states remains loudly oppositional to Israel's treatment of Palestinians. However, it is important to point out that most of these regimes do not actually act as friends to the Palestinians, but use the issue in order to distract their populations from problems at home. Nonetheless, they do speak out loudly against Israel in places like the UN. From the point of view of the US, who is, along with Turkey, Israel's only regional ally, this opposition is unacceptable.
- Second, these states, unlike the moderates, have historically given material and practical support to armed movements and to terrorist organizations. In fact, this support has meant that "rogue state" and "terrorist state" are more or less synonymous in the US media. But here, we encounter a problem. In the current context, it is often difficult to categorically distinguish between the region's armed resistance movements and its terrorist organizations. And, in a region where most states have a history of using weapons indiscriminately on civilians—either those within their borders or those outside—it becomes especially hard to define legitimate acts of violence from illegitimate ones. Here's an example of what I mean: when the Turkish army bombs a Kurdish village, this is called a "counter-terrorist operation." When Kurdish nationalists fire back at Turkish tanks, they are called terrorists. However, when Iraq uses chemical weapons against the Kurds, it is called "terrorism," and when Kurds resist the authority of the repressive Iraqi state, they are called "freedom fighters." The Palestinian example is more confusing, although it's consistent: whenever Palestinians take up arms to defend their communities, they are simply called terrorists. Whenever a regional state—Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel—has used weapons on Palestinian communities, it's called "peacemaking."
- The US media has played an especially corrosive role in the deterioration of our language on these issues. It is as if they had long put into practice Richard Perle's theory about decontextualizing terrorism. By labeling the violence of US allies "justified and legitimate," and call the violence of all opponents "terrorism," the US media has made it virtually impossible to come to an informed understanding of the wide range of political situations in which violence plays a regular part. What I mean by this is that although we might like to engage in a morally-charged language to talk about terrorism, it is sadly unuseful for describing the wide range of people's experiences of actual violence in the

Middle East. If we want to oppose the political use of indiscriminate violence against civilian populations, in short, if we want to truly oppose terrorism, we should begin by demanding more consistency from those who speak about the subject.

There are real differences that exist between these three categories of ally, moderate and rogue states. In terms of military power, *allies* are armed for free and are given free reign to deploy their armies. *Moderate states* are armed by the US, but not for free: moderates, unlike allies, must take out large loans to make their arms purchases, and they are not allowed to use their weapons independently. *Rogue* states, in contrast, not only are not armed by the US, but face US obstruction when they seek to purchase weapons from other dealers. Allies, such as Israel, are free to develop nuclear weapons and advanced missile systems, and even supported when their weapon programs flaunt international treaties. Moderates are not allowed to develop such systems. The example of Iraq illustrates what can be expected when rogue states begin to develop weapon systems that might compete with those of US allies: they are subjected to the scrutiny of international non-proliferation agreements; unilateral military strikes, and regime change.

These are only the *overt* US policies toward rogue states and opponents. US policy makers also rely on *covert* organizations like the CIA to help deal with rogues—and regularly fund and arm the opponents of rogue regimes, from Iran to Sudan to Iraq and beyond. This is where the history of geopolitics gets really strange: it is precisely these covert operations by the US and its allies which invented groups as al-Qaeda and Hamas, who now are the regional leaders in military opposition to US power.

In terms of economics, the differences between allies, moderates and rogues is again significant. Unlike the rest of the Middle East, the economies of US allies resemble those of the center rather than periphery, of the global economy. US allies, like moderates, are the recipients of US economic aid, but there is a difference. We could compare the examples of US aid to Israel and Egypt to highlight some of these differences.

- Each year, Israel receives over $5 billion in combined military and economic aid, or the equivalent of $1,250 for each Israeli citizen.[11] There are no strings attached to this aid, much of which has gone to help supply the military with new missiles and helicopters, or to build new Jewish-only settlements on Palestinian land. Additionally, since the 1970s, Israel has received many billions more in loans. Israel's right-wing supporters in this country often boast that Israel has never once defaulted on a loan. And they are correct for the simple reason that Israel has never been asked to pay them back. Each year, the US government routinely forgives its past loans to Israel, and continues to grant and guarantee present Israeli loans that, if history is any indicator, will not be repaid either. Thus, what are called loans are also part of this generous aid package which is larger than the sum of all US aid to the entire African continent. Some Americans are not aware of

11 For current and comprehensive figures on US aid to Israel, see the *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*: www.wrmea.com.

this aid, and some may be surprised to hear that it has just been increased by $14 billion in the current White House budget.

Let's compare it to the number two recipient of US aid, Egypt:

- Egypt received slightly less than $2 billion in aid last year, or the rough equivalent of $30 per Egyptian.[12] This aid is not a gift, but rather comes in the form of loans, most of which are used by the Egyptian military to buy more weapons from the US. Additionally, much of this money is used to support large development projects, many of which are administered by the US Agency for International Development which spends much of the money on US economic advisors and US manufactured machinery. In other words, much of this aid to Egypt comes back quickly to the US in the form of subsidies for the arms and development industries. In contrast to Israel, where the aid plays a substantial role in development, little of this money actually trickles down to Egyptians. But that is not the point of this aid. Since the 1970s, the Egyptian ruling party has received dozens of billions of dollars in loans, which have been repaid in regular installments, with substantial interest. This debt plays a major role in influencing the policies of the Egyptian state: when Egypt refinances its debts, there are always strings attached; the US forgave a portion of the massive Egyptian debt in exchange for its support of the last Gulf War.
- In contrast, the economies of **rogue** states remain out of the main loops of global capital. This is both a bad thing, in that they remain underdeveloped, but it is also nominally a good thing, in that they remain somewhat freer from debt than other countries. Moderates have seen massive foreign investment in their local economies in recent years, and this has caused some sectors of the economy to grow, especially in the service industries. But the policy of privatizing heavy industry and ending state management, combined with the usual IMF austerity programs, has made the economies of most moderate countries disasters. Moreover, there is good reason to believe that the one-two punch of globalization—the loss of state protections for local economy, combined with a saturation of western, and especially American, mass culture—has played a significant role in pushing the political opposition in moderate countries toward nativist ideologies and literalist interpretations of Islam. In other words, it is no accident that political opposition in these countries has taken on an indelibly Islamist stamp.

**US Policy: Inconsistency and Opposition**

So, to recap: **allies** are those states which can be counted on to *increase* US political influence and military intervention in the Middle East; **moderates** are those regimes which have a *willingness* to increase US influence, but whose ability to deliver is *unpredictable*; and **rogue**

12 See "Security Assistance Bonanza After September 11," *Middle East Report* 222 (Spring 2002), p. 11.

states are those which can be counted on to *oppose* US power, regardless of the effectiveness of this opposition. These terms work insofar as they differentiate what the region's states do vis-à-vis the US, but they are unacceptable because they reflect only the most narrow perspective of what a US role could be in the Middle East. And as terms, they fail miserably to describe what these states do for themselves. There is some difference in commitment to democratic process between an moderate like Egypt and a rogue like Syria. But compared to an ally like Saudi Arabia, both countries look like Athens. If we were to take human rights as an indicator, we would again find no substantial difference between these three categories. Iraq's human rights abuses are certainly more dramatic and bloody than a moderate like Egypt but then, Turkey's human rights record—and use of weapons against civilian populations—is nothing to brag about.[13] Likewise, the open or secret possession of weapons of mass destruction does not decide who is an ally and who is a rogue: a comparison between Israel and Iraq would suggest the opposite. Finally, respect for international law is not a contributing factor for who is called a moderate or ally. If anything the opposite is true: Israel and Turkey beat out Iraq in the race to flaunt the most UN resolutions, and yet these allies do not face the threat of regime change.[14]

Moreover, these labels only describe what goes on at the highest levels of the state. As progressives, we also need to ask, what goes on at more popular levels? What has been the popular regional response to US efforts to increase its influence? Let me just say that with the exception of those enfranchised segments of Israeli and Saudi societies, regional sentiment towards US policy is overwhelmingly critical and oppositional. And it is a serious mistake to label this opposition "America bashing" for the simple fact that, despite the widespread dissatisfaction toward the policies of the US government, most people in the region continue to admire the political and social liberties of this country.[15] And regional immigration to the US remains high, despite widespread anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism in this country.

So, how is opposition to US policy voiced by political activists in the region?

- In **rogue** states there is a paradox. The policy of these repressive states toward the US tends to reflect—to varying degrees—popular opinion about US foreign policy. In this sense, people who want to criticize the US are free to do so. However, dissidents in these countries are not free to criticize their own states. It is common for reformers from countries like Iraq, Sudan or Syria to pursue their activism in exile, but likewise, many

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13 Though there are few surprises to be found there, it remains critical to review the reports and press releases on countries as published by organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

14 See *Harper's Index*, December 2002.

15 See John Waterbury, "Hate Your Policies, Love Your Institutions," *Foreign Affairs* January / February 2003, pp. 58-68.

Saudi and Egyptian reformers live in exile. The great exception to this rule is the case of Iran where, for the last few years, reformers have pursued their cause at home, often at great cost to their own lives.

- US **allies** treat critics of US power in different ways. In Turkey, as in Israel, the civil rights of certain ethnicities are considerable. Jewish critics of the Israeli-American alliance, just like Turkish critics of the NATO alliance, enjoy the right to dissent, and the price they pay for their dissidence is mostly social. As the tiny numbers of Israeli conscientious objectors to the US-Israeli policy in the Occupied Territories have grown, their punishment has increased—nevertheless, their views remain marginal to mainstream society. In contrast, Palestinian critics of Israel, and Kurdish critics of Turkey—from dissident intellectuals to armed militants—are routinely imprisoned, and tortured. More shameful still, both Turkey and Israel have a long history of assassinating their Kurdish and Palestinian critics.
- And so it happens that the bulk of opposition to US foreign policy is most articulate in the so-called **moderate** countries. Here, criticism of the US is an essential part of activist programs that are designed to increase freedoms we would identify with liberalism. Activists—both secular and Islamist—correctly observe the ties that link the US to the region's autocratic regimes. The bulk of their activism, however, is not directed at US policy, but rather toward seeking protections for a free and independent media, freedom of intellectual and political expression, including the right to form independent political and professional organizations. Other groups pursue labor rights, and programs to provide education and welfare to society's most needy. Importantly, since the region's moderate regimes have a dark history of imprisoning, torturing, and executing their critics, human rights activism has taken a prominent place in dissident activism in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Historically, the US has pursued a sadly inconsistent policy towards these issues. Rather than encouraging democratic reforms and respect for civil and human rights in a uniform way throughout the region, it has bent its rhetoric to suit the needs of local elites and ruling juntas.

**So who stands to gain from a war against Iraq?**

There is a consensus among the region's analysts that although a war in Iraq will result in many, many Iraqi casualties, most likely, for the US, it will be short and relatively painless. And so, when we ask who stands to gain from a potential invasion of Iraq, we are really asking about who will gain from a prolonged *occupation* of Iraq. Bush administration officials have already intimated that Iraqi oil will be used to pay the costs of the war and the occupation—and we can expect them to profit from this trade. Likewise, the arms industry has already begun to profit from the increased order for war materials. Similarly, we can expect development corporations, like Bechtel and Haliburton to profit handily if Bush's talk of a new Marshall Plan comes true.

Who will win the contracts to rebuild Iraq and to administer a newly reformed Iraqi

economy? To answer this, we ought to recall the recent example of Kuwait: ten years ago, under another Bush, it was US contractors and "consulting" firms who monopolized the profits from the clean-up and rebuilding of that tiny, war-torn country. Iraq's contracts will be many times larger—and its profits substantially higher. These profits are not difficult to trace, nor are they part of a secret conspiracy: in fact, the news of these conspirators are published everyday in the business section of the newspaper. I encourage you to pick the stock of one arms manufacturer, oil company or development firm and research the growth that stock has seen since talk of war began. These war, and post-war industries are some of the only dynamic sectors of the speculative economy.

Who, in the region stands to gain? Many regimes will gain from a potential occupation of Iraq, but the war itself may complicate things considerably. First, a war against Iraq will only increase existing opposition to US policy in the Arab and Muslim worlds, and throughout the globe more generally. A prolonged occupation of Iraq will most likely intensify this opposition and may lead to an increase in attacks on US civilians. However, a war and occupation will not fundamentally change the relationship between the US and its regional allies, all of whom are on board—one, Israel, *enthusiastically*, others, like Turkey and Saudi Arabia, much more *reluctantly*. In contrast, even if the relationship between the US and its allies remains stable during this period, its relationship with the so-called moderates and rogues will change dramatically.

As the US puts pressure on the region's moderates to either support, or not oppose, its invasion of Iraq, the fragility of these authoritarian and repressive regimes will become all too evident. Will the US offer these regimes enough to convince them to stifle popular opposition by force? Will the police and army be able to disperse protesters when they call for an end to the war—and perhaps an end to any government which is complicit with the war? It is hard to know. In countries, such as Jordan, Egypt or Morocco, where political opposition is especially organized, it's difficult to say where such a confrontation will lead. Although the so-called rogue regimes will not have to face so much popular protest directed against them, they will find themselves more isolated than ever, and their tensions with the US further increased. And again, it's difficult to say how this tension will resolve itself. Does the US plan a series of regime changes throughout the region? Or does it plan to engage diplomatically with these states?

Some aspects of this scenario seem, even at this distance, fairly predictable: US installed puppets in Afghanistan and Iraq; the Arabian Gulf under direct US military control; front-line rogue states further isolated; and the majority of the Arab world, the moderate countries, destabilized to varying degrees. So who among the region's players stands to gain most from this scenario?

- First, the **US** would gain considerably from such an outcome. There is the issue of Iraqi oil, and with it the real possibility of leveraging world oil markets away from OPEC control. Moreover, given such a widespread American military presence throughout the region, this control over Gulf oil may prove decisive in times of crisis: countries, such as Russia and China, which depend more heavily on Gulf oil, may someday find US control

over these reserves to be constrictive. Likewise, there is the fact that with an American regime in Iraq, the region's two rogue states—Iran and Syria—will soon be more or less encircled by countries that host US troops. It is perhaps most dramatic to look at Iran, now surrounded by US bases to the east in Afghanistan, to the north and west by US bases in Turkey, Georgia, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and to the south by US bases in the Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. Some in the White House have already openly called for regime change in Tehran once the Baghdad operations are complete—and, considering current troop deployments, it would be entirely reasonable for Iranians to take this war talk seriously. The effect of this situation on Iranian politics is alarming to most observers, since it will surely undermine the reformers as much as it will strengthen the hand of the hardliners.

- Second, **Turkey** too may gain from this scenario—it has already asked for some form of control over the Kurdish region of Iraq, a potential site for resolving its own Kurdish problem. It has also asked to be given the oil-rich city of Kirkuk in the north.
- Third, and most clearly, the **Israeli right** stands to gain considerably from this scenario. For years, Israeli generals have been urging the US to launch a war against Iraq. Some of their right-wing Washington allies—Richard Perle, Elliott Abrams, Paul Wolfowitz—attacked Clinton on this issue for years, and celebrated when Bush was elected. I am not giving away a secret about Israel's desire to see this war take place. Only two months ago, the Brown lecture board invited the former Prime Minister of Israel, General Ehud Barak, who urged Brown students to support a war against Iraq—and he received multiple standing ovations. But what does the Israeli right stand to gain from such a scenario? Quite a bit. Not only will Saddam Hussein be replaced with a US ally, but its major opponents in Lebanon—Syria and Iran—will be effectively sidelined. Other Arab regimes, sure to be destabilized by a war, will be too busy addressing their own internal problems to talk about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The result, if things transpire, will be an increased freedom for the Israeli army when it deals with Palestinians. There are parties within Israel's ruling government that are already publicly calling for an expulsion of the Palestinian population while the world is busy with the war against Iraq.[16] Arab commentators have already warned that such expulsions would be like a second 1948. I cannot say whether this will happen. But, given the reluctance of the US to restrain Sharon in the past, there is good reason to be fearful about such an disastrous outcome.

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16 On the contemporary discourse of transfer within Israeli society, see Robert Blecher, "Living on the Edge: The Threat of Transfer in Israel and Palestine," *Middle East Report* 225 (Winter 2002), pp. 22-29.

**Other interests, other possibilities**

Let me express my doubt that these policies and scenarios reflect the dreams or interests of most people in this country. These scenarios don't begin to address many crucial interests—such as respect for the norms of international law, the promotion of democratic values or basic human rights, let alone the welfare and safety of ordinary US citizens in the most selfish sense. It is clear that in such a war, thousands of people in the Middle East will suffer directly from US violence, no matter how benevolent the intentions of our military. What also needs to become clear is that most Americans will gain little from this suffering. If anything, there is reason to believe that many Americans will suffer long-term consequences of this war and local communities will see health, education and welfare resources diverted to pay for expensive weapons, mercenary armies, and military occupation. There is another local connection to this suffering. Many of the immigrants from the Middle East have come here in order to flee the sorts of problems I've outlined here. Just as Central American refugees fled US-backed dictators and death squads during the Reagan years, Arab and Muslim refugees have sought refuge in the very country which backs oppression at home. But now, under the new anti-terror laws, these immigrants are being targeted again. This is not happening somewhere else—but here, in Providence, in Cranston, in Boston.

I have been telling you tonight a story which I always find disheartening. The policies of this country reflect a very cynical notion of what American interests could be. With this in mind, I would like to conclude on a more encouraging note, some cause to think there are good guys out there, and reason for optimism. One question that has come up in recent months is whether there is any Middle Eastern movement that US-based progressives can support? The answer is there is good news and bad news. First the bad: it is a sad legacy that the US has failed to encourage the emergence of civil society institutions in the parts of the Arab world where it has influence. And without such institutions, one cannot expect to find the democratic, liberal and open groups one would like to find. Moreover, it is the unique, and unfortunate, success of the alliance between the US and its regional allies that they have radicalized and militarized their opponents to the point where it is hard to find groups to stand in unequivocal solidarity with. Who here will stand with Hamas or Hizbullah? And before you actually stand up to defend Hizbullah's successes in providing health care and education to the poor of Southern Lebanon, or to celebrate its vibrant participation in Lebanese electoral politics, let me remind you it's illegal to voice your support for these groups—which are on the State Department's official list of terrorist organizations.

Now for the good news: there are other groups—though they do not receive the sort of press the militarized opposition groups receive. I want to tell you briefly about two of them:

- One group, Ta'ayush, is made up of Jewish and Palestinian Israeli activists who, throughout the current Intifada, have attempted to stand in solidarity with Palestinians

living under the occupation.[17] Though they are regularly attacked by armed settlers and the army, these activists routinely brave checkpoints and live fire to deliver food and medicine to starving and wounded villages. The name Ta'ayush means, in Arabic, "coexistence"—and is a testament to the will of activists in Palestinian and Israeli society to resist the injustices of the occupation through a strong vision of shared humanity.

- The second group I'd like to bring to your attention is based in Cairo: it's the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. It is a true story of bravery and commitment in the face of brutality. In the Summer of 2001, the Egyptian police arrested scores of working-class Egyptian men at a floating gay disco on the Nile, *The Queen Boat*. Those arrested were not only tortured and imprisoned without charges, but were subjected to public ridicule in the press.[18] Local human rights groups, wary to champion the rights of gays in the face of social approbation, distanced themselves from the case, and refused to investigate the stories of torture. One human rights worker at the prestigious Egyptian Organization for Human Rights began to publicize the case, but was fired from his job for doing so. He went on to found this small center which, unique in the Arab world, works to uphold the rights of individuals against state intrusion. Certainly, sexual minorities stand to gain from such work—but so too will women, library users, internet surfers and others. Already in its first year, this small center has begun to affect Egyptian legislation by drawing attention to intrusive new laws that, in previous times, would have been passed without public debate.

These are two organizations—which may, from the mainstream perspective of their societies, appear marginal—but with whom we, as anti-war progressives, stand in solidarity. And there are others—in Lebanon, Turkey, Iran and elsewhere. Which is to say that as we begin to study the context of our current historical moment, there are also reasons to be optimistic about it. Our opposition to the war is not just negative—it is also a affirmative statement in solidarity with other people, other activists in the region whose values, while maybe not identical to our own, are in deep sympathy with our own. Forging alliances with these people, finding our solidarity with these activists will be crucial in the coming months. It will be this solidarity that will help sustain our own opposition to the war and transform its apparent negativity into what it really is: a positive insistence upon a sense of shared human interest that is deeper than the economic and strategic interests driving Bush's war. Recovering this positive affirmation of solidarity is the next step we need to take in our movement.

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17 See: http://www.taayush.org/

18 See Hossam Bahgat, "Explaining Egypt's Targeting of Gays," *Middle East Report Online*, July 23, 2001: http://www.merip.org/mero/mero072301.html