

Saddam's Capture and the New Political Order

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Setting the Scene

The capture of Saddam Hussein, Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's apparent abandonment of weapons of mass destruction, and the recent physical assault on Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher in Jerusalem's Al Aqsa Mosque all suggest the dawn of a new era in the Middle East, U.S. regional security strategy, and the global war against terrorism. It may seem far-fetched to assert a linkage between these seemingly incongruous events. After all, how can Saddam's capture be related to the assault on the Egyptian Foreign Minister? And what does Libya's plea for re-entry into the international community have to do with the war against terrorism or U.S. security policy? These events are linked symbolically and each, in its own way, serves to highlight different aspects of an uncertain future as the Middle East enters a new era.

All three events illustrate aspects of a transition process, one that promises to be lengthy and take a variety of unanticipated twists and turns. Existing political institutions will evolve, be swept away and/or be transformed in ways that cannot be foreseen; the region's internal political dynamics are positively fermenting with the possibility of change; rules governing the relationships between the rulers and the ruled will be rewritten. In short, the region stands on the verge of a new political era. The new politics hopefully will lead a macroeconomic revolution not unlike that which is underway in Eastern Europe, where non-competitive state-centric socialist-style economies gradually give way to more competitive systems capable of integration into the rules-based global economic order taking shape under the auspices of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The Middle East may finally be entering the post-Cold War world.

Daunting Challenges Face the Region

The transition process takes place amidst a cluttered landscape, with serious structural problems that must be successfully addressed in order to move the region into the new era:

- *Poor economic growth.* Arab economic growth lags the rest of the developing world. Inefficient national economies are not effectively integrated into the global economy. The region is dotted by the Arab version of state-centered socialist economies that are top-heavy, bloated and incapable of competing in the global economy in accordance with rules and procedures as established by the WTO. These economies are not keeping pace in job creation with their burgeoning and increasingly youthful populations. Absent fundamental change, the region as a whole looks to the prospect of steadily declining per capita gross domestic product in the decades ahead.^[1]
- *Population growth rates among the world's highest.* Population growth will severely strain an already deteriorated physical infrastructure over the next several decades while the trend towards urbanization will continue at an ever-increasing rate. The next twenty years will result in huge urban megalopolises—Cairo's population is projected to grow by nearly 50 percent over the next decade, reaching 15 million by 2020; Karachi's population will double, reaching 20 million over the same period. Riyadh is projected to grow to over 10 million by 2020.^[2] The region's population is projected to grow by 32 percent over the next 15 years.

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- *Crumbling infrastructure.* States throughout the region suffer from inadequate infrastructures incapable of delivering basic services to their growing populations: sewage and water systems, electrical grids, roads, and housing are in decay throughout the region. Fresh water scarcity promises to become a problem of strategic proportions in the decades ahead.[\[3\]](#)
- *Urbanization and political movements.* These increasingly urbanized societies create conditions that previously have proven susceptible to Islamic fundamentalist movements. These movements already are positioning themselves to provide many of the services—health care, social services and education, for example—that are not provided by corrupt and inefficient governments. Indeed if one looks at the evolution of the growth of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, one sees the confluence of many circumstances that will be recreated across the region as populations grow and become increasingly urbanized over the next quarter century.
- *The march towards democracy.* The political processes of the region need to be changed fundamentally to create a participative political space capable of accommodating a wide variety of different forms of political involvement.[\[4\]](#)
- *Disaffected populations.* Public sentiment, as measured by a variety of polls, indicates pervasive feelings of humiliation, rage and hopelessness that have in part fueled the dramatic rise in anti-U.S. sentiment throughout the region over the last four years.[\[5\]](#)

The sum total of these factors indicates that the primary threat to security and stability lies within the region, not from external powers seeking to dominate the region's politics and economics. For most of the twentieth century, the Americans and the British pursued security strategies to protect the region from external threats. This was accomplished through an interlocking series of political relationships, military deployments, and cooperative security arrangements. The United States now must alter its regional strategic framework to account for new conditions, which in turn suggests the need for different supporting policies and new resources to implement these policies. Each of the three events noted at the outset of this essay highlights salient features of the new environment and provides a window in a potential "new" future.

The Capture of Saddam

The emergence of Saddam from his "spider hole" in an obviously confused and discombobulated state provides an apt metaphor for the failed Arab secular nationalist movements that remain a prominent part of the region's political landscape. For decades the secular nationalist regimes focused inward, failing to engage the West and espousing their own rhetoric of justice and unity. In recent years their power has come under fire, and they suddenly find themselves blinking numbly in the light of a reality they had chosen not to acknowledge.

With Saddam's Baathist Iraq now gone, the United States and the peoples of the region confront two other secular nationalist "carcasses" in Syria and Egypt. The Syrian government is headed by Bashar al-Assad, son of Hafez Assad, who ruled Syria for thirty years and arranged for his son to succeed him. Egypt still lives with the legacy of Gamal Abdel Nasser. Nasser effectively kept the Egyptian military in power by passing control to Anwar Sadat, who, after his assassination in 1981, in turn was followed by his groomed successor Hosni Mubarak. Like Assad, Mubarak seems to be making a thinly veiled attempt to position his son as successor.

Neither the Syrian nor Egyptian regimes ever devolved into the Stalinist model of death, terror and fear that characterized Saddam's Iraq. At the same time, both represent other constituent parts of secular nationalism, which need to be addressed if the region is to close the chapter on its failed post-Colonial legacy. In closing this chapter, however, it must be recognized that the verbiage on the new pages remains to be written. The region appears balanced between two authors: nascent pluralistic democracies on the one hand and Islamic fundamentalism on the other. The international community must hope this process of transition will be peaceful and orderly, all the while attempting to channel the transition process towards democratic institutions—and simultaneously living with the uncertainty as to what degree the process of political and economic transition can be controlled once it is begun.



Pictured from left to right are leaders who all ascended to power either directly or indirectly as a result of the turmoil of the post Colonial era in the Middle East that flowed from the secular Arab nationalist movement. Assad, Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein came to power in the late 1960s and early 1970s, eventually turning their countries into defacto dictatorships with a strong "cult of personality." Mubarak assumed power after the assassination of Sadat in 1981, but essentially was cut from the same cloth as Sadat and Nasser. Like Assad in Syria, who passed the baton to his son Bashar, Mubarak may be grooming his son Gamal to succeed him in Egypt. A new political order is slowly emerging in the region that will see fundamental, perhaps revolutionary, change in all these countries. The pace and direction of this transition will profoundly affect regional security and stability in the decades ahead.

Assault on Maher

Prospects for political transition were dramatically illustrated in the incident in the Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem's Old City on 22 December 2003, when Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher was physically assaulted and forced from the premises by its inhabitants—reportedly a group of youths affiliated with Hizbu Tahrir, a radical fringe group trying to overthrow the Egyptian government. On one level, it is easy to dismiss this as an isolated incident. Jerusalem and the area surrounding the Al Aqsa mosque, in particular, are now effectively a combat zone in the ongoing intifada in which radicalized Palestinian elements are in a de facto state of war with Israel. But on another level, the ejection of Maher symbolizes the end of the old political order in which the remnants of the secular Arab movement have become increasingly estranged from the emerging and ever-more-youthful polity.

In the emerging political landscape, the international community may witness the so called "clash within civilizations" described by various commentators that will determine the makeup of politics and governance in the years ahead. [\[6\]](#) Describing the players in this landscape in terms of "right" and "left" seems somehow inadequate; the coming transition might be more accurately described as the battle for the soul of the Arab world. The existing secular structures in Syria and Egypt will resist the forces of the new politics as long as possible, and the emerging order (as defined by the inhabitants of the Al Aqsa mosque, Hamas, and Hezbollah) will play some as yet undefined role in the unfolding drama. Islamist movements and their associated political parties inevitably will be integrated into the political discourse in the years ahead, and if these movements represent the "right" of the political spectrum, it is unclear who will oppose them in a "moderate" political center. One of the disastrous legacies of the secular Arab nationalist movement is the absence of a viable "center" in the confused political diaspora. The only question remaining is whether the integration of Islamist parties into the new order will take place peacefully or through violence.



The 22 December 2003 assault on Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher in the Al Aqsa mosque drew condemnation from mainstream political groups in the Arab world. Even Hamas condemned the heckling and jostling of Maher as he arrived in the mosque for prayer. A group, who shoved him and hit him with their shoes—a sign of profound disrespect throughout the Arab world, reportedly heckled Maher as a "traitor." The next generation of leadership throughout the region must deal with youthful and radicalized elements that reject the politics of the "old" order.

Egypt, rather than Iraq, emerges as the most likely battleground in this potential clash within civilizations. In Iraq, the U.S. occupation will, at least initially, set parameters on the scope and pace of internal political reform. Egypt on the other hand already boasts a mature political organization opposing the regime (the Muslim Brotherhood) and has an existing parliamentary system that might accommodate genuine multi-party politics. Unlike other countries in the region, there also appears to be a potential political 'center' in Egypt, composed of a middle class of professionals, shop keepers and merchants, which may be able to bridge the gap between the secular establishment and the Islamists. While the immediate political drama surrounds the grooming of Mubarak's son Gamal as a potential successor, the broader challenge will center on whether the Egyptian system can evolve into a genuinely multi-party parliamentary system that can accommodate the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots in some shape or form.^[7]

Gaddafi's Overture

Muammar Gaddafi's abandonment of his programs to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD) represents an important victory for the Bush Administration's counterproliferation strategy. Gaddafi's opening of his nuclear facilities to inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency places Libya on a path that may allow this original pariah state to be removed from the rhetorical list of rogue states that, according to U.S. strategy documents, constitute a major threat to security in the region and the wider international system. This is a healthy development that could see Libya reintegrated into the global community of nations after two decades in relative isolation.

A WMD-free Libya and an apparently WMD-free Iraq promise to reshape the geopolitics of the region in a healthy way, potentially leading to the creation of a new security environment based on confidence and trust. A security environment without destabilizing WMD could lower political tensions and create the space necessary for states to address grievances and concerns in a more collegial atmosphere. Such conditions could provide an important basis for the effective political and economic integration of these two potential economic powerhouses into a regional trading bloc slowly taking shape under the auspices of the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Crown Prince Abdullah in Saudi Arabia already has called for a region-wide trading bloc, with a customs union and unified tariff structure to promote regional economic integration.

Perhaps Gaddafi realized that security and prosperity would not flow from WMD development programs but from regional economic and political integration. But before congratulating itself too heartily, the international community needs to realize that the same forces redefining the political order throughout the region are buffeting Libya. Indeed, Gaddafi has been waging a low-level and largely unpublicized battle against militant groups for much of the last decade, and his abandonment of WMD perhaps represents a plea for assistance against forces seeking to fundamentally change Libya's internal politics.^[8] As is the case in Egypt and Iraq, delicate internal political dynamics within Libya are simultaneously a cause for concern and hope in the establishment of a new regional political order.

Implications for Security Strategy and the Global War Against Terrorists

While the capture of Saddam is a welcome development, it remains unclear how it will affect the situation inside Iraq. The unstable security environment undoubtedly has attracted foreign fighters, but it is not yet clear whether Iraq will emerge as a strategic fulcrum in the global fight against Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. U.S. officials hope that the insurgents in Iraq eventually will exhaust their supplies and that improved intelligence on the ground will lead to the eradication of their organizational cells. The broader challenge in Iraq lies less with the war against terrorists but in preventing the outbreak of debilitating ethnic and religious strife that could see the country come apart at the seams.

There are other tactical issues on the immediate horizon. If Libya satisfies the international community that it has indeed forsaken its WMD programs, the United States and/or the international community could become involved in rendering assistance against the militants. And the House of Saud could use assistance in the short-term in its ongoing battle against Islamic militants affiliated with Al Qaeda. At the

strategic level, however, the region will remain an important theater of operations in the fight against hostile terrorist groups. We can expect that the region will remain a wellspring of recruits for Al Qaeda and other groups espousing revolutionary rhetoric cloaked in religious metaphors.

The United States has established the ongoing conflict against terrorism as a centerpiece of its global security strategy. Various reports indicate that the Bush Administration is reviewing the location and configuration of forward-deployed forces around the world to address the threat. There are rumors of the potential establishment of new military facilities in the "arc of instability" reaching from Central and South America across North Africa, the Middle East and East Asia. And, as the Bush Administration moves to implement the capabilities-based force planning approach, we can expect the configuration and numbers of these forces to change.

In the Middle East, the United States draws upon an established infrastructure to project military forces forward into a variety of different theaters, from the Persian Gulf to the Horn of Africa and Central Asia. But this infrastructure was developed to accommodate the flow of large numbers of U.S. forces in times of crisis to "defend the region." In purely military terms, it is no longer clear that for the foreseeable future the United States will need to deploy sizable forces to protect the region against external threats. Instead, the military requirement calls for smaller numbers of forces with a mix of capabilities that can be deployed quickly into crisis spots. The central challenge for the future will be to square the security requirements of combating terrorists in these theaters with the new strategic environment in the Middle East in which the primary threats to stability come from internal forces—not from external powers seeking to dominate the region and its resources. The emerging internal political environment suggests the need for a lower-profile U.S. military presence, emphasizing non-military tools to help these countries manage the process of political and economic transition. Efforts to transform the military, with an emphasis on capabilities instead of numbers of personnel, may allow the United States to bridge these seemingly incongruous requirements.

Several policy options are available to help bridge the divide.

- Reach agreement through consultation with regional coalition partners on an overall framework governing the U.S. military footprint that will be needed to combat terrorism in the various theaters reachable from Gulf facilities.
- Optimize and rationalize the U.S. military footprint in accordance with the DoD-wide effort at transformation and global strike.
- Determine where the U.S. military presence can be drawn down, while retaining significant capabilities in the theater—prioritizing those capabilities in accordance with the defense planning requirements in the Quadrennial Defense Review.
- Integrate wherever possible coalition capabilities into the operational mix of forces needed to mount operations against terrorist groups.
- Ensure the integration of military and non-military policy tools as the region moves into this transitional period.

Conclusion

Three seemingly unrelated events—the capture of Saddam, Libya's overtures to the world, and the assault on Egypt's foreign minister—all illustrate different aspects of future challenges facing the region. These challenges suggest that the United States and the international community must adopt nuanced and multifaceted policies to assist the region as it transitions towards a new political and economic order. The process of transition will not happen quickly and will require patience, perseverance, and the commitment of substantial resources to help manage what will be a wrenching series of changes throughout the region. The United States must develop a security strategy to address the new environment while simultaneously projecting the forces necessary to protect its interests and combat terrorist groups in theaters around the world. Squaring this circle will be the central challenge for strategists in the years ahead.

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References

1. See for example Robert Looney's [Can Saudi Arabia Reform its Economy in Time to Head Off Disaster?](#), from this issue of *Strategic Insights*.
2. An interesting discussion of these trends within the Middle East and on a global scale is contained in National Intelligence Council, [Global Trends 2015: A Dialogue About the Future with Nongovernment Experts](#) (December 2000), 19-25. Also see Chapter 3 of United Nations Development Programme, [The Arab Human Development Report 2002](#).
3. See more detail in *The Arab Human Development Report*, 43-50.
4. See Anne Marie Baylouny's "[Emotions, Poverty, or Politics: Misconceptions about Islamic Movements](#)," from this issue of *Strategic Insights*.
5. The Pew Global Attitudes Project published one of the most recent and comprehensive of these polls. See [Views of a Changing World June 2003](#). The report concluded, among other things, "the bottom has fallen out of support for America in most of the Muslim world." (3) The report documents overwhelmingly negative reactions to U.S. policies in the region and varying degrees of support for Osama bin Laden. Seventy-one percent of Palestinians polled expressed support for bin Laden actions in world affairs.
6. For expansion on this point, see Mamoun Fandy, "[Avoiding the Next Generation of Al Qaeda?](#)," Statement to the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks in the United States, 9 July 2003.
7. An interesting recent report on the status of the Muslim Brotherhood within Egypt is provided in Glen Frankel's article "Egypt Muzzles Calls for Democracy: Reformers Say Billions in U.S. Aid Prop Up Authoritarian Rule," *Washington Post*, January 6 2004, p. A1.
8. There is only sporadic public reporting on these clashes. The best recent description of Libya's internal political turmoil is provided in Ray Takeyh's "[The Rogue Who Came in From the Cold](#)," *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2002).