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SUBJECT: Arab Perceptions of the United States



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ARAB PERCEPTIONS OF THE UNITED STATES [REDACTED]

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KEY JUDGMENTS

The Arab-Israeli conflict is the most important issue shaping Arab perceptions of the United States. The Palestinian uprising in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip has raised the consciousness of virtually all Arabs, including those for whom the Arab-Israeli conflict is not a primary concern. Virtually all Arabs believe the United States is biased in favor of Israel. Many are optimistic that the United States ultimately will use its influence to bring Israel to the negotiating table. This optimism is declining, however, and will continue to deteriorate if the current US-PLO dialogue is unproductive. [REDACTED]

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Security issues also have a significant impact on Arab perceptions of the United States. The smaller Arab Gulf states, which felt threatened by the Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq war, appreciated the dispatch of US naval forces to the Persian Gulf during the war and continue to view the United States as the ultimate guarantor of their security. With the cease-fire, however, their security concerns are receding, and other issues, such as their difficulties in purchasing weapon systems from the United States and the broader political problem of the Arab-Israeli dispute, are becoming more important. [REDACTED]

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In the long run, economics may be the most important factor shaping Arab perceptions of the United States because it is economic challenges that most threaten the security of existing regimes. Economic considerations are already as important as political issues in shaping Egyptian perceptions of the United States. Cairo counts on US economic support, and, to the extent its needs are not met, Washington is viewed as culpable. [REDACTED]

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Arab dissatisfaction with US policies is compounded by the profound ambivalence that characterizes Arab perceptions of the United States. On the one hand, Arabs admire the United States for [REDACTED]

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its power, technical expertise, educational achievements, and identification with human rights. On the other hand, the resentment they feel about decades of Western domination is focused on the United States as the most powerful Western state.

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An Arab tendency to view the world in conspiratorial terms nurtures a belief that Washington can do whatever it chooses because of its power. This can lead Arabs to blame Washington for anything that goes wrong from rising prices to Israeli policy in the occupied territories. These underlying predispositions foster often volatile reactions to specific events that seem out of proportion to the importance of the events themselves, and they can be tapped by those who seek to strengthen their position by appealing to anti-US sentiment.

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Islamic fundamentalism has long-term negative implications for Arab perceptions of the United States. Radical Islam, the principal ideology of protest in the Arab world, contains a strong anti-US component. It reinforces the perception that the West is decadent, and this perception can be exploited by those seeking to change the existing order.

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Many of the elements that will shape Arab perceptions of the United States in coming years appear to work against US interests. The younger generation in most Arab countries is more critical of the United States than the older. Similarly, the reservoir of good will among Arabs toward Washington is being depleted, a process aggravated by a perception that US power, credibility, and relevance are declining. This perception is based on the view that Washington is experiencing a decline in its political, military, and economic involvement in the Middle East. The negative implications of this perception could be a reduced willingness on the part of Arab leaders to cooperate with Washington.

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[REDACTED]

Although the United States has little ability to affect many of these underlying predispositions and trends, it can affect some issues that have a bearing on Arab perceptions of the United States. To the extent it can move the Arab-Israeli negotiating process forward, advance its dialogue with the PLO, and separate itself from Israeli

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policies that particularly anger the Arabs, Washington's image will improve. Similarly, Arab perceptions of the United States will improve when Washington is perceived as playing an effective security role in an area of tension, such as in the Persian Gulf during the Iran-Iraq war. The US image also would improve if it could sell sophisticated weapon systems to its Arab friends.

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SCOPE NOTE

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There are numerous variations in Arab perceptions of the United States, and this paper does not address them all. Any attempt to describe Arab perceptions will contain a multitude of oversimplifications. For the most part, it is the perceptions of elites that are available to us. When questions of broader public attitudes and proclivities are discussed, they are viewed through the filter of US observers who in turn are often informed by members of Arab elite groupings.

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Some countries and regions are slighted in the paper because of varying responses from the participants. Because of good responses to our collection requirements from US Embassies in the smaller Arab Gulf states, for example, these countries may be given more attention than they merit in terms of US policy interests.

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ARAB PERCEPTIONS OF THE UNITED STATES [REDACTED]

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UNDERLYING PREDISPOSITIONS AND TRENDS

Ambivalence: The Historic Legacy

Arab attitudes toward the United States are characterized by a profound ambivalence derived from a history of extensive contact with the West. Arab feelings of superiority are born of an ancient civilization, an indigenous religion, and the knowledge that, centuries ago, the Arab world repulsed the Crusader invasions and even ruled over part of what is now the Western world. A sense of inferiority, on the other hand, has been fed by more recent Arab domination by the West--political domination during the colonial era and subsequent economic domination and cultural encroachment. Though not a colonial power in the region, the United States, as the most powerful contemporary Western power, is tainted by the negative legacy of the past. [REDACTED]

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At the same time, the United States has tremendous appeal for many Arabs, who are attracted by US technology, educational opportunities, political system, wealth, and power. Many individuals are particularly attracted by the US identification with such values as freedom, democracy, and the rights of the individual. In addition, although it has inherited much of the Western colonial legacy, the United States is not viewed with the same cynicism and skepticism as are such colonial powers as the United Kingdom, France, and Italy. Both government and academic sources observed that the Arabs also have an underlying affection for Americans, viewing them as far more open and straightforward than Europeans. [REDACTED]

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Arab ambivalence toward the United States is evident in the coexistence and frequent expression of seemingly contradictory attitudes--resentment and attraction, frustration and hope. An Egyptian writer has described this phenomenon as the Arab elite's schizophrenia toward the United States. Resentful of their inferior political and economic position, Arabs tend to resent those who have the upper hand. At the same time, they have an abiding hope that the United States ultimately will see that its interests lie with the Arabs, will adjust its policies in their favor, and, because of its power, will be able to solve their problems. [REDACTED]

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A People in Transition

Arabs view the outside world through the prism of their own experience, and, in political and economic terms, they are a people in transition. Before World War I, no Arab country except Oman was independent, and only six were independent before the end of World War II. The pace then accelerated, and, by 1971, 19 Arab states had become sovereign political entities. Most of these states are still transforming themselves from economically backward, fragmented societies into modern nation states. Many questions remain about how this should be accomplished and even whether it should be accomplished.

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The uncertainty and lack of resolution inherent to transitions have fostered the volatility that has characterized Arab society in the past several decades, causing reactions to specific events that often seem out of proportion to the importance of the events themselves. Each Arab state has had its own problems adjusting to this transition, or modernization, but all remain vulnerable in one way or another.

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As the Arabs' perceptions of their states' political identity and legitimacy have evolved, their attitudes toward the outside world and particularly the United States have fluctuated. Numerous situations and events have affected these attitudes. In recent times, the Arab-Israeli war in October 1973 and its aftermath have had perhaps the greatest impact. Although the Arabs lost the war, their ability to regain some of the territory lost in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war convinced them that Israel was not invulnerable and that the Arabs eventually would prevail. This new sense of confidence, their new oil wealth, and the sense of power they derived from the postwar oil embargo had a profound psychological impact, restoring to them a sense of pride and enabling them to deal with the outside world with greater dignity. To a considerable extent, this sense of optimism has been maintained.

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A Conspiratorial View of the World

Many Arabs have a conspiratorial view of life that fosters a tendency to blame the United States, as the most powerful Western state, for negative events and trends. "Whereas anything that goes wrong used to be blamed on the British secret service, now it is blamed on the CIA," according to a US academic expert. He cited as an example the current Egyptian view of US complicity in the revival of Islamic fundamentalism, reporting that anti-US Egyptians believe the United States is using Islamic fundamentalism to

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prevent Arab progress, while pro-US Egyptians argue that Washington is foolishly trying to exploit fundamentalism as a weapon against the Soviet Union. A US Government official confirmed this Egyptian orientation, stating that the United States comes under suspicion whenever a US official meets with a fundamentalist. [REDACTED]

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During the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, according to the US Ambassador in Cairo at the time, senior Egyptian officials firmly believed that the United States was behind the major defeat the Arabs suffered. They argued that Israel could not have done so well without US assistance. The Palestinian uprising in the occupied territories is viewed similarly by many Arabs. The United States is held responsible for Israeli actions, and Arabs ask, "How can Washington permit beatings, destruction of homes, and deportations?" Although these are all Egyptian examples of the phenomenon, several academic and US Government experts indicated that this conspiratorial attitude is shared by much of the Arab world. [REDACTED]

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Islamic Fundamentalism

Religion is extremely important in forming underlying Arab attitudes and assumptions with respect to the United States. Lingering suspicions of the West and its anti-Islamic intentions date from the Crusades and remain particularly alive in the states of the Levant. The Iranian revolution demonstrated that radical Islam is capable of arousing public passions and posing a threat to established regimes, whether through revolution, subversion and terrorism, or popular pressure on policy issues. [REDACTED]

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Islamic fundamentalism has reemerged as an ideology of protest in the Arab world. In searching for their identity, many Arabs have rejected Western models and sought solutions to problems through Islam. An indigenous belief system with its own laws and structure for living, Islam offers a common rhetoric and alternative approach to those unhappy with the prevailing order and seeking a return to basic truths. [REDACTED]

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Fundamentalism is inherently hostile to outside influences and disdains Western "corruption and decadence." Because it reinforces underlying anti-Western and anti-US attitudes, it can be exploited by those seeking to change the established order. A US academic stated that, "Fundamentalism is a threat anywhere in the region that social order is endangered." Another argued that, although the impetus for change in a particular state might not be religious in nature, fundamentalists can exploit turmoil arising from economic distress or political anger. [REDACTED]

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Several US Government and academic experts expressed concern about the threat posed by fundamentalism to such key Arab states as Egypt and Jordan. The US Embassy in Cairo emphasized that for most Egyptians religion is a way of life, not a form of political expression. The Embassy added, however, that the Islamic revival has adversely affected attitudes toward the United States and the West in general. The election to the new Jordanian parliament in November 1989 of 31 delegates emphasizing Islamic themes out of a total of 80 seats suggests that fundamentalism has considerable resonance in Jordan.¹ King Hussein has expressed optimism about his ability to work with the new parliament, but he may face problems advancing his reform program if the Islamic delegates pursue a fundamentalist agenda.

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The conventional wisdom holds that fundamentalism will continue to have significant resonance in the Arab world because it is the only viable ideology and that it will have a negative impact on Arab perceptions of the United States. All observers agree that a strengthening of Islamic activism, with its inward-looking orientation, would have negative implications for US interests.

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A somewhat more sanguine view of religious activism is taken by some US academics who argue that fundamentalism as an active political phenomenon should not be confused with the widespread return to religious observance in the Arab world. According to this view, a religious emphasis does not necessarily translate into political activity or involve increased anti-US sentiment. In addition, these observers maintain, there are important differences between Sunni fundamentalism and Iran's Shia fundamentalism.² The Iranian revolution has lost much of its appeal to Muslims outside Iran as a result of Iran's loss to Iraq in the war and because of the Islamic republic's inability to resolve many of Iran's problems.

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Few observers believe that fundamentalism will produce dramatic changes in the region in the foreseeable future. Several US Government officials and academics argue that the religious revival in the Arab world may work to US advantage. One academic noted that fundamentalism may be less anti-American than are pan-Arab ideologies, and another argued that a religious predisposition may favor the United States, which

1 Twenty of these delegates are members of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the others emphasized Islamic themes in their campaigns.

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2 Sunni fundamentalism does not exalt the Iranian model and is not as extreme. Sunni religious practice does not allow clerics to emerge as political leaders as in Iran.

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is viewed as Christian, over the Soviet Union, which is viewed as atheistic. [REDACTED]

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Generational Change

The issue of generational change in the Arab world must be factored into any projection of likely trends in attitudes toward the United States. We believe there is a generation gap in most Arab countries and that the implications of this gap are unfavorable for the United States. Several US academic experts argue that the preindependence generation of Arabs has not transmitted its social and political values to the younger generation, which rejects Western strategies for development and is trying to find its own--often through Islam. This trend could become more critical as economic conditions worsen and as the younger generation assumes responsible positions. It is compounded by the fact that the current bulge in the teenage population in most Arab countries creates the specter of a larger and even more hostile generation waiting in the wings. [REDACTED]

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The US Embassy in Amman argues that the older generation's affinity for the United States is not shared by younger colleagues who have had less exposure to the United States, have witnessed the virtual collapse of the US-Jordanian military relationship, and are more likely to be critical. Similarly, in Tunisia, according to the US Embassy there, the younger generation tends to be less sympathetic to the United States than the older. The US Embassy in Riyadh reports that the generation now in its forties represents the high point of positive attitudes toward the United States and that younger Saudis, now largely educated at home, are not well informed about the United States and tend to be more critical. [REDACTED]

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This negative trend is worsened by a decline in the number of Arab students being educated in the West. For example, only 4,000 Saudis are now enrolled in US universities compared to 12,000 a decade ago. This declining exposure weakens the US position because those who know the United States best have the most positive attitudes toward it. The US Embassy in Tunis reports, for example, that, where Americans have personal contact with Tunisians, negative stereotypes are replaced by friendship. Should the number of Arabs coming to the United States remain constant or decline further, we believe those countries that have had historically close ties to the United States will experience an erosion in pro-US attitudes. By the same token, we believe those states that have had limited exposure to the United States but whose access and knowledge are increasing (the smaller Arab Gulf

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states, for example) could experience an improvement in perceptions of the United States.

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There are observers, however, who do not believe generational change will be harmful to the US position. The US Embassy in Cairo reports, for example, that, although there is a profound generation gap in Egypt, it is not manifested in attitudes toward the United States. Several academic sources who have taught Arab students in US universities argue that those who have visited the United States and understand it best tend to be most critical of it. They maintain that students who come to the United States are often bitter and disillusioned by the time they leave. Thus, the fact that fewer Arabs are being educated in the United States may not adversely affect attitudes toward it.

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The Role of Public Opinion

The impact of public opinion varies from country to country. In general, the more democratic the country or the more vulnerable its government, the more important popular attitudes become. In Egypt public perceptions and opinions matter a great deal, and the government is sensitive to them. In Jordan popular attitudes also matter, though somewhat less. King Hussein's decision to hold an election in Jordan, the first in over 20 years, reflects his belief that public attitudes are important enough to be given a legitimate form of expression. In the conservative Arab Gulf states, public opinion historically has been of secondary importance. The Iranian revolution sensitized the leaders of all states in the region both to the dangers of ignoring strong public attitudes and to their ultimate dependence on public acceptance of their rule. To the extent public attitudes are becoming more critical of the United States and as public opinion becomes a more important political factor, the implications are negative for the United States.

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THE IMPACT OF US POLICIES ON ARAB PERCEPTIONS

Many of these predispositions and trends are deeply entrenched in the Arab psyche and in the Middle Eastern political and economic environment. Most are highly resistant to change, and we believe the United States can do little to change them. Arab perceptions of the United States are also influenced by contemporary issues that are affected by US policy. In general, political issues tend to be of most importance in determining Arab perceptions, but other factors may have more resonance in some regions at certain times.

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Security concerns, for example, have carried particular weight with the smaller Arab Gulf states because of their fear that the Iran-Iraq war would spill over, while Egyptians tend to focus on economic as much as on political issues. [REDACTED]

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The Arab-Israeli Conflict

There is little question that US policy with respect to the Arab-Israeli conflict is the most important issue determining Arab perceptions of the United States. Virtually all Arabs harbor anger toward the United States for what they consider a bias in favor of Israel as well as for years of what they believe to have been missed opportunities and broken promises (of an Israeli pullback to pre-1967 borders, of creation of a Palestinian state, of prevention of Israeli settlements on the West Bank). They are frustrated by what they see as US failure to perceive the obvious--that long-term US interests lie with the Arabs. Arabs often misunderstand and underestimate the nature and extent of the US commitment to Israel because of their own perception that the United States should be more supportive of Arab interests. [REDACTED]

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This negative opinion of the United States is shared by both US allies and adversaries. Officials in the US Embassy in Jordan report, for example, that even those Jordanians who admire the United States criticize its policies with respect to the conflict. The US Embassy in Cairo reports that Egyptians resent that, no matter what assistance Cairo receives from the United States, Israel is given "more and better." Palestinians believe the United States is, at best, indifferent to their aspirations, while Syrians are fiercely critical of the United States for its "one-sided" support of Israel. [REDACTED]

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The outbreak of the Palestinian uprising in the occupied territories in December 1987 reinforced popular Arab support for the Palestinian cause and intensified anger toward Israel. It also strengthened the Arab perception that the United States is biased in favor of Israel because the "powerful" United States does nothing to stop Israel's repression of Palestinians in the occupied territories and obstructs UN resolutions condemning Israel's actions. Such sentiments are sustained daily by television and press commentary highlighting Israeli actions against Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. [REDACTED]

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Most of the Arab world has been affected by the Palestinian uprising. The US Embassy in Tunis reports that it has raised the consciousness of virtually all Tunisians, who are convinced that Israel can pursue its repressive policies only because it has US support. Even the Gulf Arabs, who

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consider the Arab-Israeli conflict a secondary issue, have been deeply affected. Reporting from the United Arab Emirates, for example, indicates that the uprising has "embittered attitudes toward the United States without exception." [redacted]

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The US decision to open a dialogue with the PLO was received favorably by most Arabs (except those who oppose a negotiated solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict or fear their own exclusion from a settlement--radical Palestinians, Syria, Libya). The US Embassy in Cairo reports that the Egyptians believe they were instrumental in the PLO's adoption of a more moderate line, which made possible the US-PLO dialogue. Egyptians expect the United States to press Israel to make concessions. The dialogue has raised expectations throughout the Arab world, even among those who are skeptical of its prospects. Its collapse or stagnation almost certainly would produce increased anger and disillusionment. [redacted]

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The Iran-Iraq War

Embassy reporting strongly suggests that security issues are of most importance in shaping the perceptions of the United States held by the small, conservative Arab Gulf states. The Iranian revolution of 1979 and the subsequent Iran-Iraq war created anxiety in these vulnerable states. Both US Government officials and academic observers agree that the US naval presence in the Persian Gulf during the Iran-Iraq war was appreciated by Gulf Arabs as was the US agreement to escort Kuwaiti shipping in the Gulf. The United States also has been credited with helping to bring about the Iran-Iraq cease-fire. Embassy reporting maintains that many Gulf Arabs continue to view the United States as the ultimate guarantor of their security. With the end of the Iran-Iraq war, security concerns are receding--although the Arab Gulf states continue to be concerned that the US Navy may leave the region before there is real stability in the Gulf. [redacted]

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Probably the strongest favorable impact of US policy in the Gulf during the war was in Kuwait, the most threatened of the smaller Arab Gulf states. According to the US Embassy in Kuwait, that state's views of the United States have become more positive as a result of US policies. US policy also helped to mitigate a growing Arab view of the United States as ineffective and unreliable and to restore confidence in the willingness and capability of the United States to use force to defend its interests--and theirs. [redacted]

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The US Embassy in Baghdad reports that Iraq's perceptions of the United States improved as a result of US support for an arms embargo against Iran, the US naval escort of Gulf

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shipping, and US political support for Iraq's efforts to end the war through UN action. In the aftermath of the war, however, Iraq has reverted to a more critical attitude toward Washington. The Embassy indicates the Iraqi belief that both the United States and the Soviet Union seek improved relations with Iran. Iraqi suspicions of the United States were reinforced by the aborted US-Iranian arms deal of 1986. According to US officials and academic observers, the Iraqis retain their suspicion that the United States is unfriendly and has interventionist intentions whether in support of the Iraqi Kurds, Iran, or Israel. [REDACTED]

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The gains made by the United States as a result of its policy during the war were tangible as well as perceptual. Embassy reporting indicates that several states in the region became more willing to allow the United States access to their military facilities and have continued to cooperate even though the war is over. The willingness of Kuwait and Bahrain to cooperate militarily with the United States during the war meant that Oman was no longer the only member of the Gulf Cooperation Council to do so. Since the cease-fire, Oman has resumed joint military exercises with the United States, and the US Embassy in Manama reports that Bahrain's leaders favor a permanent US naval presence in the Persian Gulf. [REDACTED]

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US Position on Arms Sales and Weapons Proliferation

Virtually all of the observers that we interviewed agree that the US unwillingness or inability to sell sophisticated weapon systems to its moderate Arab friends is having a significant negative impact on Arab perceptions of Washington. The US Embassy in Amman reports that the Jordanians are irritated by the US refusal to sell them sophisticated weapon systems and that their pride has been bruised to the point that King Hussein has announced that Jordan will no longer seek US arms. The US Embassy in Riyadh reports that the Saudis are irritated, frustrated, and hurt by the fact that their need for weapons is questioned in US Congressional debates. Saudi officials argue that they have not taken part in any aggressive military action since the early 1930s and that they have a legitimate need for defensive weapons in an area as unstable as the Persian Gulf. The Saudi response to US policy has been to begin diversification of arms sources. Riyadh's most dramatic purchase to date has been the Chinese CSS-2 intermediate-range missile system. [REDACTED]

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In the smaller Arab Gulf states, the US position with respect to arms sales is becoming more important as security concerns recede. According to US Embassies in these states, the political elite considers the long process involved in purchasing weapons from the United States humiliating and

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strongly believes that arms purchases by moderate Arab states are legitimate to defend against an aggressive Israel that the United States refuses to control. Their response has been to begin purchasing weapons from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. [redacted]

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Most Arabs see US policy with respect to proliferation in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict and consider the policy hypocritical and directed only against Arabs. Even the Egyptians, who share the US antipathy for Qadhafi, are angry that Washington is more worried about chemical weapons in the hands of Libya and other Arab states than about nuclear and chemical weapons in Israeli hands. Many Arabs wonder why Washington has not insisted that Israel sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and there is a growing Arab belief that chemical weapons may be the only Arab deterrent to Israel's nuclear threat. [redacted]

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This negative view of US policy undermines Washington's efforts to gain cooperation to control proliferation. Many Arabs are reluctant to support US efforts to isolate Libya on the chemical warfare issue because of their view that US policy is being applied unfairly. [redacted]

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Declining US Economic Role in Region

The relative US economic role in the Middle East is declining, although the United States continues to give extensive economic and military assistance to Israel and Egypt, remains a major supplier of goods to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and offers attractive investment opportunities for the Arabs. Its relative role is declining because Western Europe and Japan are competing more effectively for Arab markets. We do not believe this decline has had a major impact on Arab perceptions, but Arab awareness of the trend is growing. Continuing decline could have significant long-term implications for Arab attitudes toward the United States. [redacted]

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The US Embassy in Bahrain reports that the decreasing US economic role is affecting Bahraini attitudes toward the United States. Whereas the United States was once seen as an overwhelming economic and commercial power, according to the Embassy, it is now "just another player" competing with Japan and the European Community for business and contracts--and not doing so successfully. US businesses are seen as less sensitive than their competitors to local market conditions, less willing to compete for contracts, and less interested in proving themselves through small contracts to gain strategic advantage later on. [redacted]

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Those countries that depend on US aid or are seeking such aid are affected by the US economic position, particularly its willingness and ability to sustain or increase aid levels. This is particularly the case with Egypt. The US connection, originally sought by President Sadat to alleviate some of Egypt's economic problems as well as to extricate Cairo from the costs of the Arab-Israeli conflict, has led many Egyptians to believe that their country "bought and paid for" US aid at Camp David and that it has a right to it. Cairo counts on Washington for economic support, and, if Egyptians believe their needs are not being met, they are ready to blame the Egyptian Government--and ultimately the United States. [REDACTED]

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The fact that Egypt remains poor despite US help feeds the traditional Egyptian conspiratorial view of the world. Many Egyptians believe that US aid is poorly designed and, at worst, purposefully ill designed. A US academic who recently returned from Egypt said Egyptians believe that "if America wanted Egyptian prosperity, it would design it." A former US Ambassador to Egypt said that Washington unintentionally bolsters this perception because much of its economic aid is invested in projects that are not visible at lower levels and because considerable aid is funnelled off by the wealthy. [REDACTED]

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A large portion of Egyptian and Jordanian debts is owed the United States. Thus, when either country is having serious trouble paying its debt, frustration and blame are directed at Washington. Academic sources and former US Government officials commented that in many Arab countries, even when an economic problem is domestic (an increase in bread prices, for example), the United States is often blamed for not alleviating the situation. [REDACTED]

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The US Embassy in Amman reports that the decline in US aid to Jordan is having a debilitating effect on US-Jordanian relations. According to the US Embassy in Khartoum, the prospect of less US aid has made the Sudanese less open to US advice, although the Embassy adds that this has not changed basic attitudes toward the United States. The subsidiary political affect, however, is that Sudan has more incentive to seek assistance from Libya and less incentive to push economic reform. [REDACTED]

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RESERVOIR OF GOOD WILL: INTACT OR DEPLETED?

Opinion among those interviewed for this paper was divided on the question of the current status of Arab attitudes toward Washington. Most US academic observers and US Government analysts believe that Washington's reservoir of

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good will is being depleted. Several attributed this to a growing Arab perception that the United States is in decline. Widespread press reports of drug use, rampant crime, homelessness, and general economic malaise in the United States are undermining the Arab view of the United States as a power to be feared and respected. [REDACTED]

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US credibility and relevance also are being questioned. A former US Ambassador argued that "we have led people down the garden path over and over again" and lost credibility in the process. The US Embassy in Amman reports that the United States is suffering from a decline in relevance. The fact that US military and economic assistance to Jordan is decreasing makes the United States less central to Jordan's interests--and, therefore, reduces its influence. [REDACTED]

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US setbacks in Lebanon in recent years--the bombings of the US Embassy and Marine Barracks in 1983, the withdrawal of US forces in 1984, the taking of US hostages, and the abortive US effort to mediate a solution to the Lebanese election crisis in 1988--contributed to a decline in US prestige. Several former US officials argued that being seen as incompetent and undependable is worse than being viewed as biased or corrupt because it undermines US credibility and makes the Arabs less willing to cooperate with the United States. They stated that US setbacks in Lebanon reinforced a general Arab perception that the United States does not have a "good strategic sense" and that Americans are "naive amateurs." [REDACTED]

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The combination of declining relevance, respect, and credibility may affect the US ability to advance its interests in the Middle East. According to a former US Government official who was involved in the negotiations leading to the opening of the US-PLO dialogue in late 1988, for example, the US lack of credibility complicated efforts to move the process forward. At one point, he reported, PLO leader Arafat sought Egyptian and Saudi advice before proceeding and was warned by both that Washington could not be trusted to follow through with assurances it had given. [REDACTED]

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Current US Government officials tend to be more optimistic about Arab attitudes toward the United States. They believe the United States has a large reservoir of good will. They argue that, although the Arabs may be angry and frustrated with US policies, they respect US values and appreciate their need to work with Washington. Supporting this argument is reporting from the US Embassy in Damascus to the effect that, despite years of anti-US propaganda, most Syrians have a positive view of the United States, seeing it as an economic, technical, and even political model. The embassy believes this attitude will continue. The US Embassy

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in Cairo also believes that favorable attitudes toward Washington will be maintained. [REDACTED]

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Some officials argued that continued appreciation of the United States is based on the Arab perception that the United States is strong and has leverage with Israel. As one official stated, "We have survived 40 years of frustration, broken promises, betrayal, and one-sided US policy--but the Arabs still look to us for help." Another cited the ability of the United States to bounce back from perceived setbacks, arguing that "each new administration gets another chance."

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TRENDS AND OUTLOOK

We believe many of the underlying elements that determine Arab perceptions of the United States will not change in the foreseeable future. These include the development and strength of Islamic fundamentalism, the nature and ultimate impact of the generation gap, and the ability of the moderate Arab states to deal effectively with their economic problems. Washington will have little ability to affect these predispositions and trends. [REDACTED]

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There are, however, important issues that the United States will be able to affect, if only marginally. These issues will have a significant impact on Arab perceptions of the United States and on the resulting US ability to further its regional interests over the long term. [REDACTED]

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The Arab-Israeli conflict will continue to be the most important single issue affecting Arab perceptions of the United States. If the stalemate on this issue continues, the implications for the United States over the long term almost certainly will be negative, particularly if Washington continues to be seen as Israel's patron. If Israel is seen as the obstacle to progress, the United States will almost certainly suffer a continuing and debilitating decline in its prestige, credibility, and influence. If the Arabs are the cause of stagnation, however, their attitude toward Washington will not be as strong or as negative. [REDACTED]

(b)(3)

We believe that a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict that is acceptable to the moderate Arab world, no matter what the auspices, would have a favorable impact on Arab perceptions of the United States. Although it would not remove all sources of strain and irritation, it would eliminate a chronic source of tension and alleviate the stigma of "unfair" US support for Israel. [REDACTED]

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Any steps taken by the United States to advance its dialogue with the PLO, to put distance between itself and Israel and particularly Israel's alleged human rights abuses, and to move the negotiating process forward will enhance the US image with the Arabs. Those US policies that appear to support Israel at the expense of the Palestinians, such as vetoes of UN resolutions condemning Israeli policy, will further erode perceptions of Washington as a credible intermediary. [REDACTED]

(b)(3)

We expect that the continuing US inability to sell sophisticated weapon systems to the moderate Arab states will lead them to further diversify their sources of military equipment. In time, we believe this diversification will reduce the US military advisory presence, reinforce Washington's declining economic role in the region, and diminish Washington's ability to influence regional policy. [REDACTED]

(b)(3)

We believe the United States will continue to play an important role in the economic and commercial life of the region, but that US exports of all sorts will face increasingly effective competition from the European Community and Japan and that this too will lead to a gradual decline in US relevance and influence. [REDACTED]

(b)(3)

Over the long term, economic considerations will have increasing importance in forming Arab perceptions of the United States. It is economic challenges that most threaten the security of existing regimes (particularly those that are friendly to the United States) and that will ultimately determine the success or failure of radical, and inherently anti-US, forces in the region. [REDACTED]

(b)(3)

If the economic deterioration of moderate Arab states coincides with the continuing decline in the US economic role in the region, Arab attitudes toward Washington will become increasingly negative. Few observers are optimistic about the economic prospects for the poorer Arab states. Although Egypt's economic problems are so profound that its dependence on the United States appears inescapable, the United States will face a major challenge if its funding levels are reduced. The impact on the US image and relationship with Egypt is potentially destructive and could produce a violent backlash. If assistance to Israel were not reduced proportionately or if the Egyptians believed they were being punished unfairly, the impact would be even more severe. [REDACTED]

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*memo sent to all on
national distribution list*

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~ [redacted]

(b)(3)

8 January 1990

MEMORANDUM FOR: Dr. Richard N. Haass
Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director
for Near East and South Asian Affairs
National Security Council

SUBJECT: Arab Perceptions of the United States [redacted]

(b)(3)

Richard,

1. You may be interested in this paper addressing Arab perceptions of the United States.

[redacted]

[redacted]

(b)(1)
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2. The paper deals with underlying Arab attitudes and predispositions as well as with current issues and US policies that affect Arab views of Washington. The paper discusses the role of political, security and economic factors in forming Arab attitudes toward the United States as well as the impact on those attitudes of Islamic fundamentalism, generational change, and the profound ambivalence that characterizes the Arab view of the West.

[redacted]

(b)(3)

3. The author of this paper is [redacted] Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

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B. E. Layton
Director

Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis
Central Intelligence Agency

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[redacted]

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SUBJECT: Arab Perceptions of the United States

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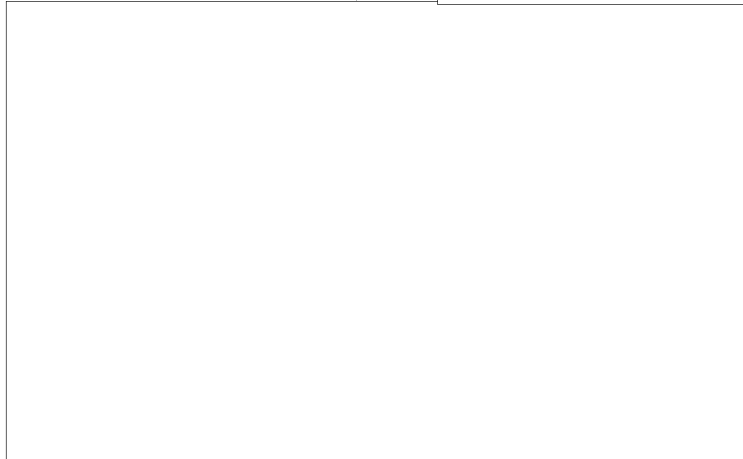
निकट पूर्व/दक्षिण एशिया विश्लेषण कार्यालय
ادارة التحليل لشؤون الشرق الاوسط وجنوب آسيا
המחלקה לענייני המזרח התיכון ודרום אסיה
اداره تجزيه و تحليل خاور ميانه و جنوب آسيا
Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis
Directorate of Intelligence

8 January 1990

NOTE FOR: D/CPAS

SUBJECT: Arab Perceptions of the United States

You may be interested in this paper addressing Arab perceptions of the United States.



B. E. Layton

Attachment

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निकट पूर्व/दक्षिण एशिया विश्लेषण कार्यालय
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اداره تجزيه و تحليل خاور ميانه و جنوب آسيا
Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis
Directorate of Intelligence

8 January 1990

NOTE FOR: DDI

SUBJECT: Arab Perceptions of the United States

FYI, no action required. Here is your copy of [redacted] paper on Arab perceptions. A copy has gone to the DDCI.

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B. E. Layton

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निकट पूर्व/दक्षिण एशिया विश्लेषण कार्यालय
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Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis
Directorate of Intelligence

8 January 1990

NOTE FOR: DDCI

SUBJECT: Arab Perceptions of the United States

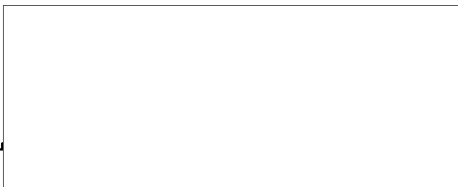
FYI, no action required. You may be interested in this paper addressing Arab perceptions of the United States.



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B. E. Layton

Attachment



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