

The Return of the State

Shibley Telhami

EVEN IN the best of times, Americans, in the spirit of Thomas Jefferson's aphorism that "the government that governs best governs least", have always been uncomfortable with the idea of "the state." After 9/11, these suspicions about the role of "the state" in world politics rapidly spread in our political discourse. Ironically, even though the attack was launched by a well-organized, non-state transnational actor, its cause and the threat that it was likely to pose in the future were seen to be largely a function of problematic states.

In the first State of the Union address after 9/11, President Bush identified the principal threat to the peace and security of the United States as emanating from the world's rogue states, especially the "Axis of Evil" (Iran, North Korea and Iraq). That none of the 9/11 attackers came from these states mattered little in this configuration. The second target, beyond the rogues, comprised the non-democratic states of the Middle East; the absence of democracy was identified as the root cause for the emergence of Al-Qaeda.

In addressing the threat, the presi-

Shibley Telhami is Anwar Sadat Professor for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland and a non-resident senior fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution.

dent and his team made the case that the pursuit of profound political change in the region must be sought, even if such change destabilized the existing states of the region. In this view, some even saw the desire to maintain "stability" as a relic of Cold War thinking that had merely prevented moves toward constructive change.

For different reasons, public opinion in much of the Arab and Muslim world reflected intense frustration with the existing political order in the region. Opinion polls indicated a seemingly low level of identification with a person's state; a 2004 survey indicated that a plurality of Arabs identified themselves primarily as "Muslim" or "Arab", rather than as citizens of a specific state. Not a single sitting Arab or Muslim ruler received more than single-digit admiration in the Arab world outside their own countries.

But over the past year, and again for very different reasons in each case, there has been a profound change in attitudes toward the state both in the region and in Washington. There is new appreciation for the role of the state in the Middle East, given its ability to provide security for its residents, and in Washington, given its contribution to regional stability. This is driving a correction in American policy priorities and reflects a significant and measurable shift in public opinion in the region. We are witnessing the return of the state.

From NGOs back to Governments

FOR MUCH of the Cold War, the aim of American foreign policy was to promote the stability of allied states, as long as their foreign policies remained helpful to the United States. U.S. aid was primarily a reward to governments for pursuing pro-American foreign policies and was unrelated to whether any attempt was made to promote political and economic reform.

But as Americans discovered that Arab and Muslim publics were highly resentful of American foreign policy, some of the blame shifted to the governments in the region. Why, many wondered, was there such a profound anti-American feeling even in Arab countries such as Egypt and Jordan, where the United States had spent billions of dollars in foreign aid over the years? Why does everyone in Egypt know that the Japanese had built the Opera House in Cairo, but few seemed aware of the more meaningful and substantial projects that the United States was supporting, such as improving sewer systems all over Egypt?

The perception that the absence of democracy in the Arab world was part of the problem for America led to the conclusion that authoritarian governments, even friendly ones, were the source of the problem. Moreover, direct aid to governments was seen as facilitating the ability of regimes to solidify authoritarian rule—compounding the region’s democracy deficit and further radicalizing the population.

The new post-9/11 American aid strategy aimed at two things: to begin to take direct credit for major American projects that benefited the local populations in the Middle East; and to divert aid, to the extent possible, away from governments in favor of non-governmental organizations.

In the short term, the strategy was in-

tionally designed to weaken the state. That goal could be seen as beneficial if the result was to prod authoritarian regimes toward reform and to assist in the emergence of civil society.

But the United States ran into several problems. The seemingly neutral activity of shifting aid from the state to NGOs had the consequence of eroding the power of friendly governments that were dependent on the distribution of aid to maintain the allegiance of their citizens, most visibly in the case of the Palestinian Authority. At the same time, such a process did not enable the United States to engineer more favorable governments—as was evident in the electoral successes of the Islamists in Egypt, the Palestinian areas, Iraq and Lebanon. So if the goal was to promote democratic reform in governments, the policy was a failure.

Second, the United States was still deploying aid to Middle Eastern governments with the goal of rallying their support for American foreign policy objectives (on such hugely important issues as the Arab-Israel conflict, oil export policies, the war on terrorism and Iraq). So even as the United States sought internal change, it was still relying on friendly governments to support U.S. policy initiatives.

Finally, the shift to NGOs did little to improve sentiments towards America in the region. The October 2005 survey of Arab public opinion revealed that most respondents concluded that the United States was not serious in its advocacy of democracy—and that the Middle East was even less democratic than it was before the Iraq War. Moreover, when experiments in electoral democracy did move forward—sometimes under U.S. pressure—the results were not what the United States had hoped for.

What has become apparent is that the United States, even as powerful as it is, can engineer neither public opinion

in foreign countries nor the outcome of elections. The notion that mere support for some middle “civil society” space between authoritarian, paternalistic governments and mass Islamist movements was likely to yield the emergence of a third and better way was problematic from the outset. U.S. aid policies had the unintended consequence of shifting the balance between the two dominant forces in Arab politics today: ruling elites—who could be co-opted or persuaded to align with U.S. policies—and Islamist parties. It is nearly impossible to engineer a third way—a mass movement that could have both impeccable democratic credentials yet could support U.S. policies.

So on the eve of the Palestinian parliamentary elections in January, as the evidence mounted that elections might displace Fatah in favor of Hamas, the Bush Administration abandoned its focus on NGOs and returned to the traditional, pre-9/11 pattern. It initiated a last minute effort to fund public-works projects in the Palestinian areas, without mentioning the American role and allowing the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority to take full credit. The project was a desperate attempt to shore up the party of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. In the end, the effort was too little too late, but it represented a striking reversal of the aid strategy of the post-9/11 era.

The shift in the U.S. aid strategy toward the Palestinians on the eve of the elections was a signal of concern. And withholding aid to a Hamas government until it changes its positions on Israel and terrorism (even if it pursues a reform agenda at home) is a signal of a partial return to the aid policy of old: using American largesse largely as a tool for rewarding or punishing states on the basis of their foreign policies, far more than on the basis of the degree of internal democracy.

Better a Bad State than No State?

WHILE THE United States belatedly tried to forestall the victory of Hamas, three years of experience in Iraq have largely undermined the sentiment that the state is “the problem” in the Middle East.

Consider the stunning magnitude of the failure to bring stability to a unified Iraq. Iraq has been the top priority of the world’s only superpower for the past three years, and a central one for many regional and international powers. The United States, intent on keeping Iraq together, has spent more resources in that country than any state has ever spent on another in the history of the world.

It is popular these days to explain Iraq’s continued troubles and increasing sectarianism by focusing on the particularities of Iraq’s society or poor U.S. planning. One can hardly deny that these are important factors. But they mask a more troubling reality: Even with the best American planning and Iraqi intentions, preventing civil conflict in Iraq would still have been an uphill battle. The problems in Iraq are more closely related to the almost inevitable consequences of dismantling institutions of sovereignty.

In the Middle East, nearly all of the projects of change in the 20th century, even the bloody military coups, maintained the institutions of government, especially the army, and thus preserved the state. In the one major civil war to beset the region, in Lebanon from 1975 to 1990, state institutions collapsed. Sixteen years after the Taif Accords, the Lebanese state remains so weak and fragile that it is unable to defend itself or to disarm militias on its territory.

Once the institutions of sovereignty are destroyed in any state, especially one with a heterogeneous society, the odds are against any effort to build a stable alternative in the same generation. In the

absence of effective central authority, all it takes is a small, determined minority to prevent unity.

Unloved but Desired

IN THE beginning, the American War on Terror and the Iraq War had a significant impact not only on public opinion towards the United States in Arab and Muslim countries, but also on notions of identity and the view of the state. Governments, already unpopular on account of their authoritarianism and corruption, were even more resented by cooperating with the American-led war in Iraq against the will of the vast majority of their populations. Moreover, Arabs and Muslims in general pervasively saw the wars on terrorism and Iraq as broadly aimed at Muslims. These perceptions help explain the rising strength of Islamic identity immediately following the Iraq War, as measured in public opinion polls.

Although most Arabs continued to attribute American behavior in Iraq to traditional American interests, primarily oil and Israel, the aim of “weakening the Muslim world” was later seen to be almost the equal of those interests (with few people believing that American policy is actually driven by the pursuit of democracy, peace, or human rights).

All of this led to an increase in the number of those who gave their primary allegiance not to their national government, but to an Islamic or Arab identity. In the 2004 polls that I conducted with Zogby International in six Arab countries (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates), we asked people which aspect of their identity (Arab, Muslim or national) was most important to them, assuming that all matter. A plurality identified “Muslim” as the most important in four of the six countries.

A repeat of the same question in October 2005, however, showed a marked

increase from the year before in the number of people who identified their state identity as most important. Perhaps more significant there was a substantive rise in the number of people, now constituting a strong majority, who agreed with the proposition that the task of their national government is to secure the welfare of its own citizens, rather than what would be good for Muslims and Arabs more broadly. Even among those who said that “Muslim” is their strongest identity, only a minority said that the government should be serving the interests of Muslims in general (as opposed to Muslims within national boundaries).

This last point is important. Although many may want the clergy or Islamic parties to win in their elections, their view of the world is still statist. In fact, most of the Islamist parties have had a primarily statist agenda, distinct from that of the global jihadists; this includes the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas in the Palestinian areas. Hamas has certainly been a violent organization and has yet to accept Israel. But it has continued to distance itself from global Islamist groups, including Al-Qaeda, and its leaders were criticized by global Islamists as being un-Islamic for visiting Moscow this past February while the Russian state remains at war with Islamists in Chechnya.

Although one cannot say with certainty, it does seem that renewed interest in and allegiance to the national state has to do with developments in Iraq. Most Arabs believe that Iraqis are worse off than they were before the war, according to the polls. This may be in part because most Arabs look at Iraq from a Sunni prism (as most Arabs are Sunnis), but they also broadly see in Iraq a frightening state of anarchy, violence and disintegration of society that they don’t wish for their own communities.

At the same time, the message of Al-Qaeda and other global Islamist groups is not resonating with them. They may

want to see Abu Musab al-Zarqawi force the United States out of Iraq, but they certainly don't want him to rule over their children. This is also borne out by the polling data: only 6 percent said they sympathize with Al-Qaeda's aim of establishing a Taliban-like state. A plurality, however, does support Al-Qaeda's confrontation with the United States.

In short, despite continued frustrations with governments in the region and the rising tide of Islamic parties, the situation in Iraq over the past year has intensified the fear of anarchy and thus rallied favorable opinion towards the state.

Authoritarianism or Anarchy?

EVENTS IN Iraq have caused both Washington and the Arab public to realize that while governments badly need reform in the region, anarchy can be even worse than authoritarianism. Authoritarian rulers must constantly be pressured to reform—but not at the cost of dismantling the state or giving rise to another form of authoritarianism.

All of Iraq's neighbors, for their own reasons, have sought to avoid a divided Iraq. Likewise, all of the major factions in Iraq have an interest in preventing civil war: The Shi'a prefer to have the majority voice in a unified Iraq; the Sunnis fear being left with a rump, resource-poor region; and the Kurds don't want to risk a Turkish intervention that would deprive them of their hard-won, *de facto* independence.

The tragedy of civil war lies not only in what it means for Iraq's people but also in what the consequences would be for international security—the danger of drawing other states in, the potential of spillover to neighboring countries, the erosion of the balance of power in the

region in favor of Iran and the creation of a hospitable environment to international terrorism.

Rogue states can be dangerous, but collapsed states are even more threatening to international security. When it comes to local and regional security, states—with all their flaws and weaknesses and the need to improve them—remain the most effective actors. The Iraq War demonstrates that we cannot afford to take state governments for granted.

Confronting troubled and troubling states is sometimes necessary, but dismantling them is a far riskier undertaking. Many states need to be improved or enhanced, others challenged and sometimes fought, but the dismantling of states constitutes one of the greatest dangers to our international system.

As we consider options toward other states not to U.S. liking, such as Iran, the removal of some governments may seem desirable from many vantage points, but not any cost. The next user of weapons of mass destruction is more likely to be a terror group, such as Al-Qaeda, than any state. In its history, the United States has deterred the most ruthless and powerful states, including the Soviet Union. Groups such as Al-Qaeda are constrained only by the limits of their capability. Where there is absence of central authority, they expand. Al-Qaeda didn't exist in Iraq before the war but now thrives there despite the presence of the most powerful military in the world.

From this perspective, a central measure of success of the intervention in Iraq would be thus: Three years later, have the prospects of regional and global security increased or decreased? The answer would return the focus to the continued centrality of sovereign institutions in maximizing international security, even as the nature of threats is changing. □