



## A DIFFERENT INSURGENCY

Kuwait may be the first Arab country subjected to an Internet-led political insurgency. For three years, Kuwaitis had been debating a proposal to reduce the number of parliamentary electoral districts from 25 to five. Increasing the number of constituents for each parliamentarian, supporters said, would make vote-buying and other types of retail political corruption harder. The proposed change threatened some politicians and emboldened others. Tensions flared. A showdown was in the air.

In early May of last year, the anonymous bloggers of *Sahat Al-Safat* instructed readers to send pro-reform emails and text-messages to MPs, cabinet members and journalists. Adopting the color orange for their movement, they created a website, [kuwait5.org](http://kuwait5.org), that provided templates and relevant contact information.

As the cabinet and parliament remained deadlocked on the bill, the bloggers announced a demonstration in support of redistricting. Through emails, blogs and telephone text messages, they encouraged approximately 200 orange-clad Kuwaitis to protest outside a May 5 cabinet meeting. More messages brought some 500 young protesters out the next week, and 1,000 the next. After reformist parliamentarians walked out to protest a government-led effort to sideline the legislation, some 4,000 orange-clad protesters, including parliamentarians, protested outside the parliament on May 16. The next day, the Emir dissolved parliament and called for new elections. Reformists increased their share in the parliament and passed the five-district proposal as their first order of business. ■ -NB

## BEING CONSEQUENTIAL

By Jon B. Alterman

Americans assume that whatever their government does will be consequential in the world. It has not always been so, but the breadth and depth of U.S. global activity after World War II, combined with the U.S. victory in the Cold War, has ingrained this idea.

Europeans are different. More often, Europeans *hope* that what their governments do will be consequential. Their humility is partly a result of decades of being mere powers in the face of a superpower rivalry, and partly an understanding of their frequently limited ability to direct U.S. actions. The often-wayward trajectory of former colonial possessions must feed their doubts as well. Decades-long experiments of direct political tutelage left far more dictatorships than democracies in their wake.

The current state of disorder in the Middle East—not only in Iran, Iraq, and the Palestinian Authority, but also in Lebanon, Egypt and beyond—is an opportunity to rethink these assessments. Any fair reading would confirm that the United States certainly has the power to be consequential, but also highlight the fact that it often lacks the power to direct those consequences. Europeans, meanwhile, have been so conscious of their relative weakness—and often so reluctant to use force—they have too often proven bystanders to efforts to promote peace and security. U.S.-European cooperation is rarely essential, but it often can be helpful. That will especially be the case as countries such as China get involved in the Middle East which may have a quite different orientation to the problems of the region.

Between 1950 and 1990, anti-Communism largely shaped U.S. and European policy in the Middle East, and there was little question that the United States led the global effort to contain the Soviet Union. With a few hiccups, such as President Eisenhower's ire at the Anglo-French adventure at Suez, the United States' role gradually ascended until the British pulled out of the Persian Gulf in 1971.

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## NEW ADDITION

The Middle East Program is delighted to welcome Fares Braizat as a visiting fellow. Fares holds an American Political Science Organization/Fulbright Congressional Fellowship and will be with CSIS through November 2006 studying the internal and external factors affecting reform in Jordan. He works with the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan in Amman, conducting research on public opinion in the Arab world and is director of the center's polling unit. Fares received his Ph.D. in politics and government and his M.A. in political sociology from the University of Kent at Canterbury, and his B.A. in history from the University of Mu'tah in Jordan. His recent publications include *Terrorism: The Aftermath of the Killing of Al-Zarqawi* and *Post-Amman Attacks: Jordanian Public Opinion and Terrorism*. You can reach Fares at (202) 741-3933 or [fbraizat@csis.org](mailto:fbraizat@csis.org). ■

That move left the United States as the principal security guarantor to those regional states not aligned with the Soviet Union.

The Middle East continued to affect Europe, from the oil embargo in 1973 to the Iranian revolution in 1979 and beyond. Still, European states, individually at first and increasingly collectively with the rise of the European Union, had lost their ability to shape the region. They were price takers, not price makers, as it were.

The fall of the Soviet Union meant that the United States and Europe were the principal outside powers in the Middle East for more than a decade. Europe embarked on a Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in the mid-1990s, a series of dialogues and agreements meant to promote economic and political reform. The United States embarked on one of its most sustained efforts to promote an Arab-Israeli settlement. Each effort had its successes, and for a time it looked like each might change the dynamics of the region for the better. A decade later, however, it is clear that neither came close to its aspirations.

Even so, for the last fifteen years in the Middle East, the United States and the nations of Europe enjoyed an advantage: each embraced the strategic direction of the other. There were frequent divisions over tactics—over Iraq, Iran, the Arab-Israeli conflicts, and others. Still, through an ongoing process of consultation, and through a deeper experience of common educations and values, Americans and Europeans largely shared a common set of goals.

The U.S.-European duopoly is unlikely to last. Countries such as China and India are reliant on Middle Eastern sources of energy, and they are even more concerned with regional stability than the United States and Europe were during the Cold War. These countries did not share in the transatlantic triumph of defeating Communism and introducing free markets and free political systems to central and eastern Europe. In addition, the Chinese government in particular has a strong stomach for closed political systems. Not only are there few signs that their ambitions extend beyond energy and stability, but there is some evidence from Sudan to Iran that they often see stability in much more narrow terms than Americans and Europeans. The challenge is not so much that these countries will oppose the United States, as the Soviet Union and its proxies did. Instead, they are more likely to hamstring it, or at least seek to do so.

For the United States, one early lesson to draw is that transatlantic cooperation will be an increasingly important avenue for leverage in the Middle East, not because of an absolute unity of interest but because of a comparative one. Whatever differences divide the United States and Europe, in most cases those differences are significantly narrower than those with non-Western powers. This need not be the case in the future, but there is considerable evidence that it is now. An equally important lesson is this: one of the key determinants of the success of future U.S. efforts in the Middle East will be its skill at multilateral diplomacy. Powers such as China will enter the game far more skeptical of U.S. goals than Europe has traditionally been. Increasingly, the United States and Europe will be consequential only if they act together. ■09/20/06

## Links of Interest

CSIS held a press conference for the release of *Iran 20 Questions* with Congressmen Andrews and Saxton:

[http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/060919\\_20questions.pdf](http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/060919_20questions.pdf)

The Middle East Program and the International Security Program hosted Geneive Abdo for a discussion of her new book, *Mecca and Main Street: Muslim Life in America after 9/11*:

[http://www.csis.org/media/csis/events/060913\\_mecca\\_mainstreet.m3u](http://www.csis.org/media/csis/events/060913_mecca_mainstreet.m3u)

Jon Alterman published an op-ed in the *Financial Times* on the changing roles of elites in Middle East conflicts:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2f0b6fb4-320b-11db-ab06-0000779e2340.html>

Jon Alterman participated in a Middle East Policy Council symposium about Middle Eastern Views of the United States:

[http://www.csis.org/images/stories/mideast/060720\\_mideast\\_symp.pdf](http://www.csis.org/images/stories/mideast/060720_mideast_symp.pdf)

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