

# Rebuilding US-Arab ties

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While the Bush administration and much of the US media paint a rosy picture of US success in producing "Freedom on the March," from Afghanistan to Egypt, a more thoughtful assessment of the real problems facing the US-Arab relationship came last week from a distinguished group of former US government officials.

The group, convened by the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), released a report, "From Conflict to Cooperation: Writing a New Chapter in US-Arab Relations." The effort was chaired by former US Secretary of Defense William Cohen, and former US Ambassador to Morocco Edward Gabriel, and included a distinguished bipartisan group of former US government officials, academics, and business professionals, all with substantial involvement in the Middle East. There were three former assistant secretaries of state, a former Republican national security advisor, a former undersecretary of defense, as well as a number of US ambassadors.

Instead of the "spin" used by the administration to describe current US-Middle East relations, the CSIS "Advisory Committee on US Policy in the Arab World" begins their report with a sober assessment of the challenges faced by the US in the region.

that, for the US to be helpful, administration efforts need to be better informed and coordinated. The first set of recommendations is, therefore, directed at this goal. They propose the establishment of a Presidential Advisory Board on Arab Growth and Development "to help determine and oversee the right package of trade, aid, debt relief, and other resources necessary to facilitate long-term improvements in the region." The report further proposes the establishment of country-by-country interagency bilateral "task forces" that would include representatives of relevant US agencies and representatives of the host Arab governments. The purpose of these bilateral groupings would be to "create common goals across a wide number of sectors, with future levels of funding, trade, and debt relief dependent on reaching those benchmarks." While these ideas may seem simple, their importance cannot be underestimated. A proposal to shape policy bilaterally in consultation with partners is revolutionary.

Because personal relationships between the Arab world and the US have become strained in the post-Sept. 11 era, the report recognizes this as a serious problem, and, therefore, recommends efforts to dramatically increase interaction between Americans and Arabs. The study proposes a commission to remove

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more, directed at this goal. They propose the establishment of a Presidential Advisory Board on Arab Growth and Development "to help determine and oversee the right package of trade, aid, debt relief, and other resources necessary to facilitate long-term improvements in the region."

US-Arab relations are at their lowest point in generations. We are facing unprecedented opposition in the region. The number of Arabs coming to the United States to study, do business, visit, or seek medical care is plummeting. Fear, anger, and frustration between Arabs and Americans are creating a dangerous trust gap that is growing wider every day.

Our commitment to reverse these trends is not driven by starry-eyed idealism, but rather a clear-eyed assessment that broken Arab-US relations are a serious threat to the long-term security and interests of both sides."

Critical to reversing this downward trend, the CSIS report states that the US must take measures to stabilize and leave Iraq and show "active leadership in forging a comprehensive solution that creates a democratic, secure, state of Palestine alongside the democratic, secure, Jewish state of Israel."

But as important as resolving these two issues may be to improving US standing in the Middle East, the report notes that much more than this needs to be done.

Based on an evaluation of current US-Middle East initiatives and a yearlong study tour that involved discussions with leaders, opinion makers and citizens in nine Arab countries, the CSIS group recommended a number of constructive programs to reshape US policy toward the region. Some of these are worth noting.

The report recognizes that "political, economic and social reforms are essential to long-term stability in the Arab World," but also recognizes

roadblocks that impede Arab students from coming to the US, and calls for the establishment of an Arab Partnership Foundation (APF), an independent publicly and privately funded corporation to "foster education, entrepreneurship, and reform among the next generation of Arab leaders."

Among its wide-ranging responsibilities, the APF would be charged with bringing 5,000 Arab students to the US and would "forge relationships among a cross section of Arabs and Americans," by organizing "reciprocal visits for journalists, religious leaders, business leaders and others with common interests."

In the end, what makes the entire CSIS effort so important is not the high-level bipartisan composition of its drafters, or the fact that it did not succumb to the administration's spin "that all is well" with the US's Mideast policy. Rather, it is that such a prestigious group developed such a far-reaching set of recommendations based on listening to the needs articulated by Arab interlocutors. To shape US policies and progress that meaningfully address the region's concerns it is important that these policies and programs be demand-driven. By engaging in a yearlong study, a nine-nation listening tour and recognizing the role that US policy has played in souring Arab attitudes, the CSIS Advisory Committee has made an important contribution to helping create a new climate where, as the report concludes, "a relationship built on common goals and common ground has the potential to improve the fate of us all."

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