

## Toward a US policy that looks beyond Arab oil

Commentary by **Tamer Mallat**

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The energy crisis is upon us. Gas at the pump has increased threefold in two years. Inside the United States, criticism mounts of the huge profits enjoyed by oil companies at a time of deepening recession. Ideally, using alternative energy resources offers a way out of global dependency on petroleum products. Unfortunately, that depends on scientific breakthroughs only partly at hand. Hence the importance of the Middle East, which has the largest known oil reserves on earth.

The struggle for control of oil reserves is rightly acknowledged as a leading factor in the conflicts of the contemporary Middle East. America has retained a key advantage by maintaining alliances with most of the region's major oil producers, in the process buttressing their autocratic regimes. Yet this is a shortsighted emphasis. More useful, and valuable, would be for the US to see the region in a broader scope, through its rich history and culture. It is home to over 400 million people for whom oil is of lesser concern than what they have offered the world over the centuries, which has defined Arab identity and pride in ways oil never could.

Increasingly for the citizens of the Middle East, Western, particularly American, policy is an aggravating factor in their already miserable daily lives. Hostility to the US is not baseless. Supporting repressive Israeli actions, backing one side or the other in domestic conflicts, turning a blind eye to [human rights](#) abuses committed by ruthless governments, whose leaders-for-life run rentier states and care little about diversifying their countries' economies - these are only some of the crimes that America is perceived to be associated with by its Arab critics. The tragedy is always the same and the victims are always the same: Peoples at the mercy of powers they have no ability to influence or control.

How does a US policymaker, who must focus on oil because that is what consumers concerned by rising gas prices are most interested in, shift attention to the basic rights of the peoples of the Middle East?

For starters, the US must make the defense of democracy and human rights a real policy priority. This involves not only advocacy by administrations, but taking systematic, tangible steps to build on what has already been gained in the expansion of rights and liberties. The reason for this is that, realistically, the US cannot brusquely abandon its alliances with despots. What it needs to do is begin a gradual departure from the approach of today, bringing about a general change in mood and behavior that can then be consolidated in the medium and long term.

The US must also actively push its Arab allies, where applicable, to diversify their economies. The curse of oil can often be worse for locals than for American consumers. How can Arab societies be weaned off oil? There is no easy recipe, but instead of paying completely with cash, the US may choose to pay for oil partly through financial arrangements that emphasize [job creation](#) outside the oil sector. Oil producers may not accept anything but cash, but some sort of a "diversification tax" could be levied on American oil companies working in Arab states. Washington should also be more evenhanded in its relationship with Israel. When Israel makes a mistake, the US should not ignore it. This would fortify the notion that America is fair with all sides. If the US claims to be a world leader, then it should prove this by equitably mediating between the parties. Such a policy change would not necessarily make the Middle East less autocratic, but it would allow Arabs to trust the US more.

These three steps - greater emphasis on human rights issues beyond a focus on narrow oil or political interests, encouraging diversification of Arab economies, and a more nuanced relationship with Israel - if taken as the basis for new rapports between the US and Arab regimes, would also encourage ordinary Arabs to put greater pressure on their own leaders, this time with the manifest backing of the US.

In such a context, each small step can eventually lead to a bigger one, until one day there is much more latitude for the peoples of the Middle East to choose systems of government that best serve them. Once again, this can only be a gradual, long-term process; democracy takes time to develop, but it is necessary for the US to start the ball rolling now.

It took more than a century for France to find stability after its 1789-1799 revolution, and it took several generations for England's monarchs to finally cede political power. But societies, like individuals, can be changed, and should be if they are based on injustice. The world in general, and the US in particular, has a greater stake in the [Middle East than oil](#) and self-interest, and it's about time that policy begins to reflect this fact.

***Tamer Mallat** will be graduating this year from Concord Academy in Massachusetts.*