

The Middle East through the Lens of Critical Geopolitics:

Globalization, Terrorism, and the Iraq War

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Unlike terms for America, Asia, Europe, or Africa, the “Middle East” denotes a region of the globe defined from the point of view of the north Atlantic states and is devoid of geographic or cultural referents. As a result, plenty of confusion and imprecision surrounds the question of the location and boundary of the Middle East.¹ Nevertheless, as with the term “the West,” the American public and news media often associate the Middle East with particular political, economic, and cultural characteristics. Among these associations is that the Middle East represents a territorial exception to globalization. Regardless of how globalization is defined or understood, the Middle East is often referred to as disconnected from its processes and resisting its effects. More specifically, the region is commonly viewed as having been excluded from the post-Cold War trends towards economic liberalization, global market integration, and democratization that more closely integrated the West with other regions of the globe.

To explain this exception, some suggest that access to oil resources created “rentier states” able to forgo globally competitive production and political accountability.² Others emphasize what they consider to be a distinct Arab-Islamic political culture as the causal factor.³ Most notably, historian Bernard Lewis places blame on what he sees as the Islamic world’s historic failure to adapt to the economic and political practices of Western modernity.⁴ In making their claims these views all evoke the notion of Middle East exceptionalism (also referred to as

¹ Roderic H. Davidson, “Where is the Middle East?” *Foreign Affairs* 38, no. 4 (July 1960): 665-75.

² Thomas L. Friedman, “Drowning Freedom In Oil,” *New York Times* August 25, 2002; Thomas L. Friedman, “The First Law of Petropolitics,” *Foreign Policy* May/June 2006; Hazem Beblawi, “The Rentier State in the Arab World,” in *The Rentier State*, edited by Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani, (New York: Croom Helm, 1987); Luciani, Giacomo, “Economic Foundations of Democracy and Authoritarianism: The Arab World in Comparative Perspective.” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (Fall 1988): 457-475. See also Michael L. Ross, “Does Oil Hinder Democracy?” *World Politics* 53, 3 (April 2001): 325-361.

³ Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice since 1967*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

⁴ Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003).

Arab exceptionalism). While one can easily compile tables of data and charts that show the Middle East or more specifically the Arab-Muslim world, as a region, to be “less globalized” and “less democratic” than most other regions of the global, this chapter warns of the dangers of thinking about the region in exceptionalist terms. The notion of Middle East exceptionalism generalizes across a very diverse collection of peoples, states, and economies. For example, it refers to oil resources or the role of religion in politics, though such characteristics differ widely across the region. It nevertheless often refers to an undifferentiated entity, the Middle East or the Arab-Muslim world, where politics and economics seemingly function according to a unitary logic. Most critically, Middle East exceptionalism also suffers the faults of other exceptionalist notions, such as American exceptionalism. As historian Daniel Rogers argues, “When difference is put in exceptionalist terms, in short, the referent is universalized.”⁵ Rogers points out that notions of exceptionalism beg the question, “Different from what?” and imply “Different from the universal tendencies of history, the ‘normal’ fate of nations, the laws of historical mechanics itself.”⁶ In other words, notions of Middle East exceptionalism avoid analyzing the diverse peoples and states across the Middle East in terms of dynamics found elsewhere while perpetrating the notion that the rest of the world can be understood as variations of a common type or that all societies, except those in the Middle East, are evolving towards a common political and economy system.

Rather than contest the data and observations that sustain portrayals of Middle East exceptionalism, this chapter views this discourse through the lens of *critical geopolitics*. As an approach to the study of global politics, critical geopolitics questions models and representations

⁵ Daniel Rogers, “Exceptionalism,” in *Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past*, ed. Anthony Molho and Gordon S. Wood, (Princeton University Press, 1998), 23, as cited in Robert Vitalis, *America’s Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 7.

⁶ Rogers “Exceptionalism,” 23 as cited in Vitalis, *America’s Kingdom*, 7.

that claim to be objective, disinterested portrayals of reality. It argues that **language** used in these geopolitical discourses tend to reflect particular political as well as well cultural attitudes and interests.⁷ This chapter shows how notions such as Middle East exceptionalism do more than represent “objective” data, they sustain what I refer to as a particular “geopolitical imaginary.” In contrast to geopolitical maps--defined by criteria such as borders, topography, population--geopolitical imaginaries refer to the territorial terms of reference, or the mental maps, that policy makers, academics, popular media, and the general public use to translate aspects of geography--such as location, distance, and space--and the impact of mobility and flows into geopolitical terms.

As an approach to the study of international politics critical geopolitics can be understood as similar to constructivist international relations theory.⁸ In contrast to rationalist approaches, such as neorealism and neoliberalism, constructivism denies that state interests and security (including notions of threat) can be objectively determined by an assessment of material resources and relative power capabilities. Constructivists argue that identities and intersubjective understandings help define when, for example, a powerful neighbor with nuclear weapons is viewed as a threat or not. The approach also shows how geopolitical change generally occurs as part of process of shifting identities and relationships between states. By a similar logic, the political importance of geopolitical imaginaries is that they shape discourses and mobilize ideological power, rhetorical force, or political affect to promote certain notions of threat, geopolitical goals, and forms of authority over territory. In doing so they often shape the policies and behaviors of states.

⁷ Klaus Dodds, *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 42-49. See also Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

⁸ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

This chapter shows how notions such as Middle East exceptionalism operate as a geopolitical imaginary similar to the geopolitical maps in that define state interests and threats in global politics. But unlike geopolitical maps--which offer a complex mapping of political, economic, and geographic features--the geopolitical imaginary of Middle East exceptionalism divides the world into two by limiting its vision to a binary register defined by the presence or absence of a range of characteristics associated with globalization. The result is a mapping that flattens topographies while leaving a hole in the space where patterns do not match. That space is viewed in exceptionalist terms, that is, not following historical patterns elsewhere, while the binary lens of this imaginary fails to register, let alone understand, viable alternative patterns. This chapter shows how, especially after the end of the Cold War, Middle East exceptionalism came to operate as an imagined geography similar to those, as Edward Said argued, developed within Western scholarship of the Arab and Muslim Middle East during the era of colonialism.⁹

As geographer Derek Gregory explains:

These are constructions that fold distance into difference through a series of spatializations. They work, Said argued, by multiplying partitions and enclosures that serve to demarcate “the same” from “the other,” at once constructing and calibrating a gap between the two by “designating in one’s mind a familiar space which is ‘ours’ and an unfamiliar space beyond ‘ours’ which is ‘theirs.’ “ “Their” space is often seen as the inverse of “our” space: a sort of negative, in the photographic sense that “they” might “develop” into something like “us,” but also the site of an absence, because “they” are seen as somehow to lack the positive tonalities that supposedly distinguish “us.”¹⁰

As discussed below, some of the most influential commentators about the Middle East within the American media view the region through the geopolitical imaginary of Middle East exceptionalism. In doing so, they tend to portray the politics and economics of the Middle East as defined by factors distinct from those found in other countries and other regions of the world.

⁹ See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

¹⁰ Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 17. See also Said, *Orientalism*, 54.

As a consequence, in the wake of September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States they came to view the rise of security threats emanating from the Middle East as a product of the region's failure to embrace globalization. This view led them to argue that American policy towards the Middle East should set out to "fix" the region, as it lacked sufficient internal forces for change and reform. This discourse naturalized the notion that the United States can and should play a role in advancing that progress by unblocking the self-created obstacles standing in the way of the region "joining the rest of the world." While the factors that led to the American invasion of Iraq are numerous and complex, this chapter argues that these exceptionalist discourses framed both public and official understandings of Bush administration policy towards the Middle East in the wake of 9/11. Depicting Iraq as the archetype of the most dangerous form of exceptionalism facilitated the Bush administration's efforts to use force as part of a broader effort to transform the political and economic landscape of the Middle East. This chapter concludes by noting that while the Bush administration sought to justify its policies by portraying them as a break from what it termed "Middle East exceptionalism," such an approach was blind to the diverse ways that globalization is experienced and imagined in the region while it simultaneously embraced the notion of American exceptionalism, that the US is uniquely endowed with a mission to define the fate of other nations.

Cartographies of geopolitics and globalization

When American naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan first invoked the term "the Middle East" in 1902 he was seeking a geographically-defined label to mark the strategic value of the region

around the Persian Gulf.¹¹ In his essay “The Persian Gulf and International Relations” published in London’s *National Review*, Mahan emphasizes the need for Britain to establish naval bases in the region to secure its trade and communication lines between British-controlled Egypt and India which he viewed as under threat from Russian expansion southward and German development of the Berlin-Baghdad railway. As such, the origin of the term Middle East differs somewhat--though is not inconsistent--from the contemporary usage of the term “the Orient” that defined a linguistic and cultural object. Oriental studies, or Orientalism, was not directly concerned with geopolitics but the culture, languages, and history of the Arab and Muslim Middle East. According to Said, Orientalism, “was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (The Orient, the East, ‘them.’)”¹² In contrast, Mahan’s invention of the term Middle East was a product of the distinctive genre of strategic analysis known as geopolitics. Broadly defined, geopolitics refers to the territorial dimensions of international politics. The study of geopolitics focuses on the implications of nature, geography, and material factors on patterns of international politics defined primarily in terms of territorial competition between great powers.¹³ The development of “classical” geopolitical reasoning in the late 19th century was largely a product of technological changes and colonial territorial expansion that led great powers to view their interests within the framework of a “closed-system” at the global geographical scale. As geographer John Agnew explains geopolitics “framed world politics in terms of an overarching global context in which states vie for power outside their boundaries, gain control (formally and

¹¹ See Roger Adelson, *London and the Invention of the Middle East: Money, Power, and War, 1902-1922* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 22-3.

¹² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 43. On Mahan’s cultural reading of the region, see Barbi, Karl K. “Alfred Thayer Mahan, Theodore Roosevelt, the Middle East, and the Twentieth Century,” *The Journal of Middle Eastern and North African Intellectual and Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2004).

¹³ See Daniel Deudney, “Geopolitics and Change,” in *New Thinking in International Relations Theory*, ed. Michael W. Doyle and G. John Ikenberry (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997).

informally) over less modern regions (and their resources) and overtake other major states in a worldwide pursuit of global primacy.”¹⁴ Both Mahan and fellow geopolitical strategist Halford J. Mackinder--who emphasized the advantages of land power over sea power--measured the strategic value of the Middle East region in terms of its geographic position in the global system over which great powers competed for mastery.¹⁵

For its practitioners, geopolitics operated as a seemingly scientific description of the material environment that defined the conditions for international politics. In the wake of World War II, classical geopolitics as a field was generally viewed as increasingly irrelevant due to technological changes, decolonization, and the rise of a liberal economic order in which states gained relative power through trade, increased economic efficiency, and alliances rather than through territorial control.¹⁶ In the United States, the academic study of international politics was soon dominated by realist international relations theory. American international relations theory helped reframe the language of global politics and foreign policy in terms of an anarchic system of sovereign territorial nation-states, each with different degrees of material power.¹⁷ While the US sought to forge a negotiated, but US-led, liberal international economic order and security community amongst its democratic, capitalist allies, foreign policy doctrines and policies continued to be profoundly shaped by geopolitical features, such as the containment of communism and the fear of “falling dominoes” or the spread of communism across the developing world.¹⁸ In this system, the Middle East remained a region of critical strategic

¹⁴ John Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-visioning World Politics*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), 1.

¹⁵ See Stephen B. Jones, “Global Strategic Views,” *Geographical Review* 45, no. 4 (October 1955):492-508. Mackinder located the Middle East at the edge of the Asian “pivot area” (or later “heartland”) needed for world domination.

¹⁶ See Brian W. Blouet, *Geopolitics and Globalization in the Twentieth Century* (London: Reaktion, 2001).

¹⁷ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2003).

¹⁸ Klaus Dodds “Cold War Geopolitics,” in *A Companion to Political Geography*, ed. John Agnew, Katharyne Mitchell, and Gerard Toal, (London: Blackwell 2003), 204-218.

importance. Not only did it retain important maritime communications and trade routes and was situated between the spheres of influence of great powers but its strategic value expanded considerably due to the presence of massive oil reserves and the global development of petrol-based economies and militaries. Throughout the Cold War, rival superpowers competed for influence in the region leading to complex patterns of shifting alliances.

With the end of the Cold War and the rise of globalization in the 1990s, the saliency of classical geopolitics seemed to decline as international relations became increasingly defined by global markets, electronic communications, free trade, capital flows, and the erosion of borders. Many observers noted the seeming decline of distance and some even pronounced the “end of geography.”¹⁹ A critical feature of American foreign policy under presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton was the goal of “enlargement,” that is the effort to expand the scope of the liberal international order across formerly communist East Europe and the newly democratic, emerging markets of Latin America and Asia. As Agnew argues, “This views powerful states, above all the United States, as sponsoring a new global ‘market access’ regime that is producing a new geopolitics of power in which control over the flows of goods, capital, and innovation increasingly substitutes for fixed or static control over the resources of bounded territories.”²⁰

In this context, the state-dominated economies and authoritarian regimes of the Middle East looked out of step and they posed a challenge to the extension of US-dominated post-Cold War order. Beginning with the 1990-1 Gulf war, the US advanced its interests through the projection of military power, directly mostly at containing Iraq and Iraq while providing security for Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states. As the phenomenon of globalization dominated

¹⁹ Frances Cairncross, *The Death of Distance. How the Communications Revolution Will Change Our Lives* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1997); Richard O’Brien, *Global Financial Integration: The End of Geography* (London: Pinter for Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1992).

²⁰ John Agnew, “The New Global Economy: Time-Space Compression, Geopolitics, and Global Uneven Development,” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 135.

academic and policy debates, the Middle East appeared excluded from the post-Cold War trends towards economic liberalization and global market integration as well as democratization. Rather than adjusting to become “trading states” competing for capital and markets in the global economy, Middle East states were viewed as remaining territorially oriented--guarding borders, territorial resources, and state control over their closed national economies--while Middle Eastern societies and political culture were commonly viewed as resisting global trends and unwilling to “confront the age of globalization.” In this context, many scholars of the contemporary Middle East, often marginalized from the ongoing globalization debates, focused on compiling explanations for why the region was being “left behind” by globalization. When the Middle East was mentioned in the globalization literature, it was usually to note, by contrast, the region’s failure to follow these “global” trends. As such, it has not been uncommon to find references to “the region’s status as eternally out of step with history and immune to the trends affecting other parts of the world.”²¹

Popularizing Middle East Exceptionalism

While the notion of Middle East exceptionalism is well represented in academic portrayals of the region, it finds its most prolific representations in American popular media and commentary. One of the most influential popularizers of the geopolitical imaginary of Middle East exceptionalism is *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman. Friedman gained fame for his prize-winning coverage of the Middle East in the 1980s. In the 1990s he began to frame his reporting, in the form of a widely syndicated twice-weekly foreign affairs column, around the

²¹ Paul Aarts, “The Middle East: a region without regionalism or the end of exceptionalism?” *Third World Quarterly*, 20, 5 (1999): 911.

concept of globalization. In 1999, he published the first edition of his bestseller, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, a text that is often taught in high school and college classrooms. As exhibited in its title, Friedman presents contemporary politics, economics, and culture through a binary framework defined in terms of the integrating and freedom-expanding forces of global capitalism (“the Lexus”) that are uprooting the territorial attachments and borders (“the olive tree”) that have sustained nationalism and authoritarianism.²² Friedman contends these transformations are driven primarily by technological change, such as the spread of the Internet, and are making economic liberalization and market integration nearly unavoidable while creating pressures for democratization. In the new emerging order, Friedman contends, all economies will become integrated into a single, global economic system disciplined by the need to attract the “electronic herd” of unregulated global financial flows. As a result all government will have no choice but to don the “golden straight-jacket” and implement neoliberal economic policies or else they will fall to domestic societies demanding economic and political freedoms and be weakened by economic decline and international isolation. In Friedman’s world, the American policy of promoting enlargement and neoliberal globalization can be viewed as an adaptation to technological changes and market forces that no one controls rather than understood as a geopolitical strategy for expanding American hegemonic power.²³ With a similar lack of nuance, Friedman equates globalization with Americanization and celebrates its spread. He acknowledges that each culture adapts in its own way as witnessed, however, by the variations found across McDonald’s menus as franchises of the restaurant chain multiply across the globe. Friedman considers the spread of McDonald’s restaurants as an indicator of not only economic and cultural homogenization but also as a proxy variable in an imaginative variant of democratic

²² Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, revised ed. (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2000).

²³ See John Agnew, *Hegemony: The New Shape of Global Power* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).

peace theory. His so-called “Golden Arches theory of conflict prevention” declares that no two countries with a McDonald’s has will go to war with one another because the presence of the fast-food chain signals a country’s desire to promote capitalist values and economic integration, both of which create disincentives for making war.²⁴

With his background and enduring interest in the Middle East, Friedman continued to report on political and economic developments in the region. But in his books and columns references to the Middle East and his numerous anecdotes from the region often serve as “exceptions” that highlight his putative “rules” about global change. These writings illustrate Rogers’ observation that “When difference is put in exceptionalist terms...the referent is universalized.”²⁵ In Friedman’s depiction, the Middle East is the last great battleground where the forces of globalization have yet to claim victory and he sees this struggle as the key to understanding all major political changes and processes in the region. Friedman often tells his readers, “If you want to see this war between the protected and the globalizers at its sharpest today, go to the Arab world.”²⁶ Tracking political change in the region, he announces “the internet and globalization are acting like nutcrackers to open societies and empower Arab democrats.”²⁷ In doing so, he collapses the politics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the rise of political Islam, and growing challenges to the American projection of power in the region into the same binary struggle between neoliberal economic policies and statist economic systems. Through this lens, Arab supporters of peace with Israel and democracy advocates are understood as motivated by the same logic as economic globalization. He repeatedly explains the widespread opposition to a broad set of trends (mostly American policy objectives) as a reflection of the

²⁴ Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, 241.

²⁵ Rogers “Exceptionalism,” 23 as cited in Vitalis, *America’s Kingdom*, 7.

²⁶ Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, 324.

²⁷ Thomas L. Friedman, “Censors Beware,” *New York Times*, July 25, 2000.

endemic Middle Eastern resistance to globalization. When he encounters Arabs who challenge or disagree with his ideas about globalization or the peace process, he declares they suffer from “systematic misunderstanding” because they follow a framework of understanding that fails to correct itself when exposed to more information.²⁸ In a similar fashion, however, Friedman with little imagination seems to view all processes and struggles in terms of a binary framework defined by a vision of a universal future with no room for alternative possibilities.

While Friedman sometimes blames access to oil resources for the lack of globalization in the region, suggesting that when the oil runs out there will be no further resistance to economic reform and democratization, he constantly evokes a cultural basis to the region’s exceptionalism. For no other region does he make claims such as, in “the Arab-Muslim world...cultural attitudes...have become a barrier to development” while constantly observing how “there is huge resistance to... modernization from the authoritarian and religiously obscurest forces within the Arab-Muslim world.”²⁹ He often returns to the notion that “traditional societies” as found in the Middle East cannot cope with the freedom that globalization offers. He also complains that people in the Arab world fail to correctly understand globalization, for them “it is a challenge that is devoid of any redemptive or inspirational force.”³⁰ When discussing the cultural backlash against globalization, he notes it is “most apparent in the Middle East” where people are still caught up in fights over territorially-rooted symbols while resisting globalization under the battle cry of “I don’t want to be global. I want to be local.”³¹ These people are “ready to go to war to protect their culture from the global.”³² Along with the French, he asserts Arab culture is

²⁸ Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, 325.

²⁹ Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century*, Updated and Expanded Edition, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 412, 493

³⁰ Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, 325, 326.

³¹ Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, 329.

³² Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, 329.

“intuitively hostile to the whole phenomena” of globalization.³³ Writing an imagined memo from Bill Clinton, he complains “what troubles me most about the mood on the Arab street today is the hostility I detect there to modernization, globalization, democratization and the information revolution.”³⁴ In 2001, as the Oslo peace process collapsed (an event that had little to do with globalization) he viewed its decline and the rise of regional opposition to the post-9/11 policies of the George W. Bush administration as signs of the failure of the forces of globalization to transform the region. Rather than recognizing these trends as the product of local political forces with rival interests, he cites his friend Stephen P. Cohen announcing “we are heading back to...an era characterized by...the Arab world’s isolation from the dominant trends in global economic and politics.”³⁵

After 9/11: The Middle East, globalization, and terrorism

With the help of Thomas Friedman and others, in the wake of September 11, 2001 the geopolitical imaginary of Middle East exceptionalism shaped popular images and policy options largely because it offered a ready lens that seemed to explain the causes of the attacks and suggest what the US should do to prevent future ones. The popularity and pervasiveness of this lens is enhanced for most Americans because it does not require specific knowledge of the Middle East. It claims the Middle East generates “abnormal” threats because its political, social, and economic conditions are “abnormal.” This imaginary operates without any reference to US policies and interests in the region. In American post-9/11 debates, efforts to explain the attacks and consider appropriate American responses often ignored geopolitical issues, such as

³³ Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, 325, 375.

³⁴ Thomas L. Friedman, “Clinton’s Last Memo,” *New York Times*, January 12, 2001.

³⁵ Thomas L. Friedman, “Don’t Look Back,” *New York Times*, July 17, 2001.

American alliances and its military presence in the Arab-Muslim world. Instead, American media commentators, think-tank scholars, and policy makers quickly came to argue that the attacks of September 11 were due primarily to the failure of the states of the Middle East to globalize and expand economic opportunities and political liberties for their peoples. While these are, to a large degree, fair characterizations they do not in themselves explain Middle East politics and the rise of international terrorism networks. These observers portrayed the Middle East as a region of dysfunctional states, economies, and societies with little awareness or appreciation of the geopolitical factors that may account for such conditions. For example, addressing a common post-9/11 refrain, in a widely read series on “The Politics of Rage: Why Do They Hate Us?” *Newsweek* columnist Fareed Zakaria wrote under the heading of “failed ideas” that “In some ways the Arab world seems less ready to confront the age of globalization than even Africa...At least the Africans want to adapt to the new global economy. The Arab world has not yet taken that first step.”³⁶ At the time, as it turns out, Zakaria was taking part in a strategy session with Paul Wolfowitz, the deputy secretary of defense and a critical figure behind the invasion of Iraq. While Zakaria’s name did not appear on the resulting report, according to journalist Bob Woodward the report “supported the invasion of Iraq” and “caused Mr. Bush to focus on the ‘malignancy’ of the Middle East situation.”³⁷

While the belief in of Middle East exceptionalism certainly does not explain all facets of American post-9/11 policy under George W. Bush, it helps account for how American policy makers and much of the American public came to think about the threat 9/11 represented. We can read back to Thomas Friedman’s reporting before 9/11 to trace how the logic of Middle East exceptionalism came to define much of the public debate and policy making in the post-9/11 era.

³⁶ Fareed Zakaria, “Failed Ideas,” *Newsweek*, October 15, 2001.

³⁷ Julie Bosman, “Secret Iraq Meeting Included Journalists,” *New York Times*, October 9, and Correction October 21 2006.

In a 1998 column Friedman explains one “can’t understand [the American standoff with Iraq crisis] without reference to...U.S. hegemony after the cold war and globalization.” By this Friedman meant to suggest that “America’s economic success” was “brewing” “deep resentment against the U.S.” while, more broadly, Americanization-Globalization was a “destabilizing force, challenging every traditional society.” At the same time, he warned that “globalization empowers the haters” and, referring to the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, he expresses fear that the threat the US faced was now the “super-empowered individual--the super-empowered angry man.”³⁸ Thus even before 9/11, Friedman’s theory of globalization had led him to a rethinking of the geopolitics of America’s relationship with the Middle East. He argued that the US faced a threat from the Middle East primarily because the Middle East failed to embrace globalization. In his post-9/11 book on globalization, *The World is Flat*, he would represent the Middle East as the exceptional space remaining unflat.³⁹ He argues that the failure of the region to embrace globalization produces not only some “super-haters” but also many passive supporters of terrorism. These men are often the young living in a “state of half-flatness” who “see that the Arab-Muslim world...has fallen behind the rest of the planet.”⁴⁰ Friedman often explained to his readers “the flattening of the world only sharpens that dissonance by making the backwardness of the Arab-Muslim region, compared to others, impossible to ignore.”⁴¹ This logic ignores popular opposition to the projection of American military power in the region since the 1990-1 Gulf War, the primary stated grievance of Osama Bin Laden, while portraying various aspects of the American presence in the Middle East --including political, economic, cultural, and military--

³⁸ Thomas L. Friedman, “Iraq of Ages,” *New York Times*, February 28, 1998.

³⁹ Friedman, *The World is Flat*.

⁴⁰ Friedman, *The World is Flat*, 485.

⁴¹ Friedman, *The World is Flat*, 485.

as simply facets of the inescapable process of globalization transforming the world and spreading freedom, democracy, and prosperity.

At the same time, another component of American post-9/11 discourse that Friedman articulated years prior was that as globalization collapses distance it gives the forces that oppose both the US and the forces of globalization new capabilities to threaten the American homeland. Prior to 9/11, most Americans considered the primary regional threat to US interests to be “rogue states” like Iran and Iraq, which were subject to strategic containment, political isolation, and economic sanctions. After the 9/11 attacks, however, many scholars and analysts in the United States hastily suggested that globalization was refining geopolitics. International relations scholar Robert O. Keohane, for example, concluded “Globalization means, among other things, that threats of violence to our homeland can occur from anywhere. The barrier conception of geographic space...was finally shown to be thoroughly obsolete on September 11.”⁴² For Keohane a “redefinition of American national interests...could lead Americans to support measures to reduce poverty, inequality, and injustice in poor countries.”⁴³ Harvard professor and human rights scholar Michael Ignatieff openly defined the new mission as a form of “empire lite” explaining “Terror has collapsed distance, and with this collapse has come a sharpened American focus on the necessity of bringing order to the frontier zones.”⁴⁴ In other words, these new threats could only be contained by ending, in Friedman’s words, the “the state of half-flatness” in the Middle East. Within the discourse of Middle East exceptionalism, this goal required eliminating the obstacles that have hampered the forces of globalization from transforming the Middle East and allowing its people to experience globalization and its effects.

⁴² Robert O. Keohane, *Power and Governance in a Partially Globalized World*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 275.

⁴³ Keohane, *Power and Governance*, 282. Keohane even suggested that the US had protected the privileged lifestyle that Americans had led, in part, by cutting deals “with corrupt and repressive regimes to keep cheap oil flowing to the United States.” Keohane, *Power and Governance*, 283.

⁴⁴ Michael Ignatieff, “The Burden,” *New York Times Magazine*, January 5, 2003, 50.

Friedman not only supported American efforts to bring economic and political transformation to the region, he also clearly articulated an influential rationale for the American invasion of Iraq based not on the threat of nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons, but on the need for socio-economic and political reform.

Making the Middle East safe for globalization

A defining moment in the evolution of American support for the Iraq war came in 2002, just as the Bush administration was articulating a new global strategy based on “preventative war,” termed the Bush Doctrine, that would lead eventually to the invasion of Iraq. In the midst of an ongoing debate about the threat that Iraq posed to the US, the United Nations published the first in a series of annual Arab Human Development Reports (AHDRs) drafted by a team of well-known social scientists, development planners, and intellectuals from the Arab world.⁴⁵ The report was met with broad approval by American officials, media commentators, and academics. They read it as a sign that the some Arabs had finally correctly diagnosed the maladies of the Arab world. Chapter-by-chapter the report surveys topics including economic, political, demographic, health, and educational conditions across the Arab world, noting the vast range of differences between the rich and poor countries of the region. Most American commentators, however, focused on aggregate comparisons between collective data for the Arab states compared to that of other regions. While the region does not usually rank the lowest globally in these cross-regional comparisons, it often does on political freedom indicators--such as political and civil rights, independent media and accountability of rulers to the ruled. And most American

⁴⁵ UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations*, (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2002); UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report 2003: Building a Knowledge Society* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2003).

commentators focused on this image to view the whole report through the lens of Middle East exceptionalism and suggested the report explains why the Middle East is a generator of terrorism and threats to the US while no such claims are made in the report. More critically, while the authors of the report called for internal reform in the realms of human rights, effective governance, women's empowerment, and improved educational systems, many commentators in the US, from Thomas Friedman to the Bush administration, used this report to justify American policies in the Middle East--from invading Iraq to financing micro-credit schemes--claiming they are in the interest of the Arab peoples and would have their backing.

Commenting on a later volume of the report, Friedman curiously declares it does something avoided in the West "because a toxic political correctness infected the academic field of Middle East studies--to such a degree that anyone focusing on the absence of freedom in the Arab world ran the risk of being labeled an 'Orientalist' or an 'essentialist.'"⁴⁶ Friedman and others focused on the lack of freedom, with little sense of its historical and geopolitical causes, and read the document as proof of their Middle East exceptionalist narratives which collapsed notions of the Middle East's absence from globalization, modernity, and history into a binary framework. In Friedman's words, the report analyzes the "main reasons the Arab world is falling off the globe."⁴⁷ Suggesting that the 9/11 attacks can be explained by reference to internal regional conditions, rather than geopolitical struggles or the breakdown of the central state in Afghanistan, Friedman tells his readers "if you want to understand the milieu that produced bin Ladenism, and will reproduce it if nothing changes, read this report."⁴⁸ Another assessment published by Daniel Pipes's Middle East Forum declared that, "While many Arab intellectuals

⁴⁶ Thomas L. Friedman, "Arabs Lift Their Voices," *New York Times*, April 7, 2005.

⁴⁷ Thomas L. Friedman, "Arabs at the crossroads," *New York Times*, July 3, 2002.

⁴⁸ Friedman, "Arabs at the crossroads."

rail against globalization, the report accepts it as an inevitable consequence of modernity.”⁴⁹ It then cites the dubious claim offered by Victor Davis Hanson, a scholar of ancient warfare, that the report’s findings “lend credence to almost everything brave scholars like Bernard Lewis and Daniel Pipes have been saying for years.”⁵⁰ Lewis and Pipes are well known for their view that Islam is incompatible with democracy, and as Mark LeVine notes, “commentators on the AHDR have placed blame squarely on ‘Islamic pressure’ or the ‘Islamic factor’ for the sad state of the Arab world and its culture.”⁵¹ He explains, however, “These reactions are doubly incongruous given the near total absence of discussion of religion -- positive or negative -- from the Report itself.”⁵²

By the fall of 2002, Friedman had evolved from opining that the US should care about socio-economic conditions in the Middle East (because they “produce bin Ladenism”) to arguing that the only way to stop the threat of terrorism “is by administering some shock therapy to the whole region.”⁵³ Suggesting that “replacing Saddam Hussein with a progressive Iraqi regime” might be such as shock, he declares that “If America made clear that it was going into Iraq, not just to disarm Iraq but to empower Iraq’s people to implement the Arab Human Development Report, well, [Arab terrorists] still wouldn’t be with us” but, referring to the broad mass of public opinion, he suggests “the Arab street just might.”⁵⁴ When time came to take a definitive stand in support of the invasion of Iraq, Friedman explained that while a nuclear armed Iraq could be

⁴⁹ “How the Arabs Compare: Arab Human Development Report 2002,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2002, <http://www.meforum.org/article/513>.

⁵⁰ Cited in “How the Arabs Compare.”

⁵¹ Mark LeVine, “The UN Arab Human Development Report: A Critique” *Middle East Report Online*, July 26, 2002 <http://merip.org/mero/mero072602.htm>

⁵² LeVine, “The UN Arab Human Development Report.”

⁵³ Thomas L. Friedman, “Under the Arab Street,” *New York Times*, October 23, 2002.

⁵⁴ Friedman, “Under the Arab Street.”

deterred, the real threat to American interests was the “undeterrables--the boys who did 9/11, who hate us more than they love life.”⁵⁵ Friedman goes on to reason:

So then the question is: What is the cement mixer that is churning out these undeterrables -- these angry, humiliated and often unemployed Muslim youth? That cement mixer is a collection of faltering Arab states, which, as the U.N.’s Arab Human Development Report noted, have fallen so far behind the world their combined G.D.P. does not equal that of Spain. And the reason they have fallen behind can be traced to their lack of three things: freedom, modern education and women’s empowerment. If we don’t help transform these Arab states -- which are also experiencing population explosions -- to create better governance, to build more open and productive economies, to empower their women and to develop responsible media that won’t blame all their ills on others, we will never begin to see the political, educational and religious reformations they need to shrink their output of undeterrables.⁵⁶

While Friedman’s support for the AHDR goals may be laudable, by justifying this support as an anti-terrorism strategy he ignores the means the AHDR authors suggested for promoting *internally-driven* reform, to be supported by intraregional cooperation, increased education spending, a restructuring the nature of the global economic order, and peacefully ending military occupations over Arab territories. Instead, Friedman portrays the peoples of the region as terrorists and captives in need of liberation, noting “in today’s globalized world, if you don’t visit a bad neighborhood, it will visit you.”⁵⁷ Even after the invasion, when the war was losing support in the United States, Friedman explained:

The stated reason for the war was that Saddam Hussein had developed weapons of mass destruction that posed a long-term threat to America. I never bought this argument...[It] was hyped by George Bush and Tony Blair to try to turn a war of choice into a war of necessity.... The right reason for this war...was to oust Saddam’s regime and partner with the Iraqi people to try to implement the Arab Human Development report’s prescriptions in the heart of the Arab world....The

⁵⁵ Thomas L. Friedman, “Thinking About Iraq (I),” *New York Times*, January 22, 2003.

⁵⁶ Friedman, “Thinking About Iraq (I).”

⁵⁷ Friedman, “Thinking About Iraq (I).”

real reason for this war--which was never stated--was to burst what I would call the “terrorism bubble,” which had built up during the 1990s.⁵⁸

Friedman’s “terrorism bubble” lumps together disparate events such as the 1993 World Trade Center attack and the suicide bombers unleashed by the Palestinian militant group Hamas. He explains them all in terms of the Arab youth whose “governments and society have left them unprepared for modernity.”⁵⁹ A similar logic drove the thinking of Johns Hopkins professor Fouad Ajami. In early 2003, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, one of the most influential Middle East experts in American media and inside White House policy circles, explained:

For a while, the failures of [the Arab world] were confined to its own terrain, but migration and transnational terror altered all that. The fire that began in the Arab world spread to other shores, with the United States itself the principal target of an aggrieved people who no longer believed that justice could be secured in one’s own land, from one’s own rulers. It was September 11 and its shattering surprise, in turn, that tipped the balance on Iraq away from containment and toward regime change and “rollback.”⁶⁰

While concerned about Iraq’s “deadly weapons,” Ajami argued “the driving motivation of a new American endeavor in Iraq and in neighboring Arab lands should be modernizing the Arab World.”⁶¹

The geopolitical imaginary of *The Pentagon’s New Map*

In early 2003, while diplomats at the United Nations debated weapons inspections regimes and American and British officials presented frightening images of the threat Iraq posed, a broader

⁵⁸ Thomas Friedman, “Four Reasons To Invade Iraq,” *Slate.com*, January 12, 2004, <http://www.slate.com/id/2093620/entry/2093763/>

⁵⁹ Friedman, “Four Reasons To Invade Iraq.”

⁶⁰ Fouad Ajami, “Iraq and the Arabs’ Future,” *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 1 (January/February 2003), 3.

⁶¹ Ajami, “Iraq and the Arabs’ Future,” 2.

discourse defined by Middle East exceptionalism was igniting support for a war with Iraq. Along with the writing of Friedman, Ignatieff, Ajami and others in the March 2003 issue of *Esquire* security analyst and former Pentagon strategist Thomas P.M. Barnett published a brief essay and a map that graphically depicted a version of this emerging geopolitical imaginary.⁶² While the specific influence of his iteration of Middle East exceptionalism might be hard to assess, his popular writings clearly represented the ongoing rethinking and redrawing of geopolitical strategies that folded the ideals of neoliberal capitalism into geopolitics and military affairs.⁶³ Barnett argued that American post-9/11 grand strategy should be defined by the notion that “disconnectedness defines danger.” His vision of US grand strategy calls for an explicit connection between the muscular use of military power and the promotion of globalization in the Middle East. According to Barnett, his ideas germinated while working at the US Naval War College in the year before 9/11, when he was tapped to join a Pentagon strategic planning team. In the years since he has disseminated his ideas first through his briefings of government officials and his public writings.

The power of his map is in its simplicity. Barnett graphically defines what he calls his “horizontal” way of thinking by mapping out the locations of major American military operations since the end of the Cold War. These zones fall almost entirely within the region of what he calls the “non-integrating gap.” This vast region, he contends, is disconnected from the global flows of people, capital, and security that sustain mutually assured dependence across “the core.” The resulting territorial division of the globe is what Barnett described as “The Pentagon’s New Map” defining American security challenges in the 21st century.⁶⁴ Rather than read this

⁶² Thomas P.M. Barnett, “The Pentagon’s New Map,” *Esquire*, March 2003.

⁶³ See Sue Roberts, Anna Secord, and Matthew Sparke, “Neoliberal Geopolitics,” *Antipode* 35, 5 (2003).

⁶⁴ See Thomas P.M. Barnett, *The Pentagon’s New Map* (New York: Berkley Books, 2004), http://www.thomaspmbarnett.com/Map_index.htm

ordering of the planet as a legacy of colonialism, structural inequality, or underdevelopment,

Barnett writes:

September 11 told me that globalization's uneven spread around the planet delineated more than just a frontier separating the connected from the disconnected--it marks the front lines in a struggle of historic proportions. The combatants in this conflict harbor very different dreams about the future.⁶⁵

Barnett notes that "the true enemy" is "neither a religion (Islam) nor a place (the Middle East),

but a condition--disconnectedness." He continues:

To be disconnected in this world is to be kept isolated, deprived, repressed, and uneducated. For the masses, being disconnected means a lack of choice and scarce access to ideas, capital, travel, entertainment, and loved ones overseas. For the elite, maintaining disconnectedness means control and the ability to hoard wealth, especially that generated by the exportation of valued raw materials.⁶⁶

While he notes the enemy is a condition, not a place, his map of the "gap" region results in a territorially contiguous space where he claims globalization has not reached. "These are the world's bad neighborhoods... the enter-at-your-own risk regions."⁶⁷

Barnett views globalization as a process in which the local dissolves into the emerging global mosaic, but like Friedman, he worries that the Middle East is resisting such integration. Due to its vast oil resources as well as its religious and cultural proclivities, Barnett argues that the Middle East continues to be the region "most disconnected from the global economy by many measures and its getting worse with time....Simply put, the Middle East exports oil and terrorism and virtually nothing else of significance to the global economy."⁶⁸ In his view, Middle Eastern societies tend to "harbor very different dreams about the future." He notes that "Saddam Hussein's outlaw

⁶⁵ Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map*, 48.

⁶⁶ Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map*, 49.

⁶⁷ Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map*, 150.

⁶⁸ Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map*, 217, 218.

regime was dangerously disconnected from the globalizing world...He was the Demon of Disconnectedness.”⁶⁹

Such views of the Middle East have provided the basis for claims by American and other Western policy makers, development experts, and business elites that to make the West safe, the Middle East must be transformed in order to make it more integrated into the global economic order. Barnett argued for a military strategy beginning with Iraq, suggesting that “America’s use of military power in this war has to be guided towards strategic ends: the destruction of those who would wage war against global connectivity and the freedoms it unleashes.”⁷⁰ By breaking Saddam’s hold on power, Barnett enthusiastically claims, the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 “could be the first step towards a larger goal: true globalization.”⁷¹ He views the war through the lens of what he calls the “big bang theory:” An American strategy to radically shrink the spaces across the globe that remain disconnected from globalization by reconnecting Iraq and demonstrating to the people of the Middle East that the mission of the United States is to offer what he called “connectivity.” Barnett’s vision seeks to redefine American grand strategy in a manner similar to Henry Luce’s vision of “the American Century” which similarly argued that the United States should become the guarantor of global trade and mobility.⁷²

“A forward strategy of freedom”

We can show, based on their own statements, that scholars like Bernard Lewis and Fouad Ajami, who supported both the Iraq war and notions of Middle East exceptionalism, influenced the Bush

⁶⁹ Barnett, *The Pentagon’s New Map*, 286.

⁷⁰ Barnett, *The Pentagon’s New Map*, 48.

⁷¹ Thomas P.M. Barnett and Henry H. Gaffney Jr., “Global Transaction Strategy,” *Military Officer*, May 2003.

⁷² Henry Luce, “The American Century,” in *The Ideas of Henry Luce*, ed. John K. Jessup (New York: Atheneum, 1969 [1941]).

administration's thinking about the Middle East.⁷³ Barnett claims that "senior military officials began citing [his] brief as a Rosetta stone for the Bush Administrations' new national security strategy."⁷⁴ Nevertheless, the above survey of the post-9/11 discourse about globalization, the Middle East, and security cannot offer a complete explanation for the American invasion of Iraq. We can, however, suggest its important contributions. For one, these perspectives helped build support for the war amongst some "liberal hawks," such as Friedman, who found the case for war based on the supposed threat of Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction" not fully convincing.⁷⁵ At the same time, Middle East exceptionalism bolstered claims that Iraq was undeterrable while depicting for the American public a view of the Middle East as a region of dysfunctional states, economies, and societies requiring no awareness or appreciation of the geopolitical factors that may account for such conditions. Moreover, this discourse helped frame the Bush administration's break from policies based on realist balance of power calculations and its embrace of an ambitious vision for using military force to launch a radical transformation of the political, economic, and social conditions in the region. While we cannot fully account for all the factors that determined Bush administration policies, we can show that Middle East exceptionalism provided a logic the administration used to publicly justify its policies.

This logic found its clearest expression in a November 2003 speech by President Bush given as American troops occupying Iraq, who had failed to discover stockpiled "weapons of mass destruction," were facing domestic resistance from Iraqi nationalists and struggling to bring order to a country that now lacked a functioning state and was plagued by deadly bombings perpetrated by foreign terrorists. Extending a theme previously developed, President Bush boldly

⁷³ See Peter Waldman, "A Historian's Take on Islam Steers U.S. in Terrorism Fight" *Wall Street Journal*, February 3, 2004.

⁷⁴ Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map*, 6.

⁷⁵ "Liberal Hawks Reconsider the Iraq War," <http://www.slate.com/id/2093620/entry/2093641/>.

announced that “the United States has adopted a new policy, a forward strategy of freedom” for transforming the political and economic landscape of the Middle East. While the US had long sought to promote reform and modernization in the Middle East, mostly to help ensure the stability of allied regimes, President Bush was now defining the lack of reform as a security threat to the United States:

As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export [as experienced on September 11, 2001].⁷⁶

While the articulation of a “forward strategy of freedom” was developed and promoted most forcefully in the weeks and months after the fall of the Baathist regime in Iraq, the policy was a core element of the “Bush doctrine” developed in the wake of 9/11. In his January 2002 “axis of evil” State of the Union address Bush called for “sweeping political change in the Arab world.”⁷⁷ He pledged “America will take the side” of those “around the world, including the Islamic world” “who advocate” American values of freedom.⁷⁸ And as geographer Simon Dalby explains, “As is especially clear in *The National Security Strategy of the United States 2002*, the document that effectively encapsulates ‘the Bush Doctrine,’ most of these regions whence danger emanates are marked by the absence of economic liberty understood in American terms. The absence of integration into the global markets by rogue states and the Axis of Evil is noted as something in need of correction.”⁷⁹ While the case for promoting economic and political reform was often presented without direct reference to the Iraq war, the discourse resonated in ways that likely increased support for the war as it projects the geopolitical imaginary of Middle

⁷⁶ George W. Bush, “President Bush Discusses Freedom in Iraq and Middle East,” Remarks by the President at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, United States Chamber of Commerce, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, November 6, 2003. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html>.

⁷⁷ Philip H. Gordon, “Bush’s Middle East Vision,” *Survival* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2003):160.

⁷⁸ As cited in Gordon, “Bush’s Middle East Vision,”160.

⁷⁹ Simon Dalby, “Regions, Strategies and Empire in the Global War on Terror,” *Geopolitics*, 12:4 (2007): 589

East exceptionalism and defined domestic conditions in the Arab world as basis of the most pressing security threat facing America. In December 2002, as the Bush was beginning to promote his vision for “regime change” in Iraq, Secretary of State Colin Powell announced the “Middle East Partnership Initiative” (MEPI) to promote political, economic, and educational development in the Middle East. In his speech Powell noted that:

The spread of democracy and free markets, fueled by the wonders of the technological revolution, has created a dynamo that can generate prosperity and human well-being on an unprecedented scale. But this revolution has left much of the Middle East behind.⁸⁰

The MEPI was one of the first major American policy initiatives to explicitly seek to redress the “job gap,” “freedom gap,” and “knowledge gap” between the Arab world and global trends.⁸¹

Powell emphasizes that these “gaps” are the ones defined by the UN sponsored Arab Human Development Reports.⁸² Powell did not make the case for war based on the AHDR, but as we noted above, influential pundits like Thomas Friedman were doing so at the time.

To build public support for the war in Iraq, Bush administration officials often blended the logics for the promoting reform into their case for regime change in Iraq. They would evoke the notion of Middle East exceptionalism, which suggested the need to eliminate the conditions that fostered support for international terrorism, while exaggerating the “gathering threat” posed on Iraq by evoking images of deterritorialized dangers, such as international terrorism. In doing so, the threat of international terrorism would be associated with the threat of Iraq, though the two were not connected. In his speech announcing the “forward strategy of freedom,” after

⁸⁰ Colin L. Powell, “The U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative,” Building Hope for the Years Ahead, Speech at The Heritage Foundation,” December 12, 2002.

<http://www.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2002/15920.htm>.

⁸¹ Jeremy M. Sharp, “The Middle East Partnership Initiative: An Overview,” (CRS Report for Congress #RS21457, July 23, 2003); Powell, “The U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative.”

⁸² UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report 2002*, UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report 2003*.

invoking the notion that the Middle East, due to lack of freedom, was generating “violence ready for export” as experienced on 9/11, Bush notes, “And with the spread of weapons that can bring catastrophic harm to our country and to our friends, it would be reckless to accept the status quo.”⁸³ Bush also indirectly depicts the war as one that will convert Iraq into a developed, liberal democratic state. He declares, “This strategy requires the same persistence and energy and idealism we have shown before. And it will yield the same results. As in Europe, as in Asia, as in every region of the world, the advance of freedom leads to peace.”⁸⁴ Bush then implies that by bringing political and economic freedom to the Middle East through the projection of US power in the region--as it did previously in Europe and Asia (with the defeat of totalitarian regimes during World War II and then with its triumph in the Cold War)--the US would be able to establish peace and diminish threats to US interests. Regime change in Iraq lay at the center of this strategy that was to transform the political and economic landscape of the Middle East. As US trade representative Robert Zoellick wrote in the summer of 2003:

The reconstruction and reopening of Iraq presents an opportunity for change -- a chance for the people of the Arab world to ask why their region, once a nucleus of trade, has been largely excluded from the gains of this modern era of globalization.⁸⁵

In the wake of the American invasion of Iraq the Bush administration outlined several programs to promote the integration of the Middle East into the global economy. For example, in a speech the week after the President declared the “end of major combat operations” in Iraq, President Bush argued that “the Arab world...is largely missing out on the economic progress of our time”

⁸³ Bush, “President Bush Discusses Freedom in Iraq and Middle East.”

⁸⁴ Bush, “President Bush Discusses Freedom in Iraq and Middle East.”

⁸⁵ Robert B. Zoellick, “A Return to the Cradle of Free Trade,” *Washington Post*, June 23 2003.

and proposed “the establishment of a U.S.-Middle East free trade area within a decade, to bring the Middle East into an expanding circle of opportunity.”⁸⁶

Redefining the Middle East

A few months later, the Bush administration even tried to invent a new geographical moniker, the “Greater Middle East” to refer to the countries of the Arab world, plus Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, and Israel. This exercise in naming follows that of Mahan as it defines its object in reference to western security interests rather than any regional conceptions, identities, or geographical features. A draft memo outlining the American proposal for a “Greater Middle East Partnership Initiative” (GMEPI) to be discussed at the upcoming G-8 summit explains that:

The Greater Middle East region poses a unique challenge and opportunity for the international community... So long as the region’s pool of politically and economically disenfranchised individuals grows, we will witness an increase in extremism, terrorism, international crimes and illegal migration.⁸⁷

The memo supports its vision with a review of data drawn from the Arab Human Development Reports starkly illustrating the various “gaps” between conditions in the Arab states and the rest of the world. The GMEPI announces the region is at a crossroads and must choose between continuing on the same path “adding every year to its population of underemployed, undereducated, and politically disenfranchised youth” or, instead, taking the “alternative...route to reform.”⁸⁸ To stem the tide of the threatening flows emanating from the Middle East, the

⁸⁶ George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President in commencement address at the University of South Carolina,” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, May 9, 2003.
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/05/20030509-11.html>

⁸⁷ Dar al Hayat, “U.S. working paper for G-8 sherpas: G-8 Greater Middle East Partnership,” *al Hayat*, February 13, 2003. Available from <http://english.daralhayat.com/Spec/02-2004/Article-20040213-ac40bdaf-c0a8-01ed-004e-5e7ac897d678/story.html>.

⁸⁸ Dar al Hayat, “U.S. working paper for G-8 sherpas”

GMEPI called for counter flows of expert advice and joint programs to help promote institutional reform across the region. It offers a long list of reform projects, guidelines, and institutions that cover education, finance, governance, media, and elections. The goals are less striking than impression that the memo's authors seem to want to micromanage the process of change within these societies bypassing the authority and sovereignty of regional governments. While the document does not link reform with the America rationale for the invasion of Iraq it does state that "the liberation of Afghanistan and Iraq from oppressive regimes" is one the factors that has presented western countries with "a historic opportunity" to "forge a long-term partnership with the Greater Middle East's reform leaders and launch a coordinated response to promote political, economic, and social reform in the region."⁸⁹ Moreover, the GMEPI specifically mentions as its model the experience of East Europe whose inclusion into the global economy was initiated by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. The "fall" of the Baathist regime in Iraq is seemingly viewed as providing an analogous impetus expected to ignite a similar regional transition to free market democracy.

Against Exceptionalism: Unmapping the Middle East

By incorporating reference to the Arab Human Development Reports, the GMEPI sought to suggest that its script for reform was a universal one and that it should be supported by Arabs who want to diminish the "gaps" separating Arab countries from the rest of the world. Defined by the binary logic of Middle East exceptionalism, this discourse erases the geopolitical context and tries to depoliticize the notion of reform. The GMEPI memo and similar American plans for reform in the Middle East, however, fail to recognize the diverse ways states and societies in the

⁸⁹ Dar al Hayat, "U.S. working paper for G-8 sherpas"

region understand and seek to engage in their own processes to define reform and what globalization is and what forms and impact they fear it is having in the Middle East. Joseph Samahah, then the Beirut-based editor for *Al-Safir* newspaper, wrote about the original 2002 MEPI that its purpose was to “to link the ambitions of some people in the Arab world to the objectives of the United States, not the objectives of the United States to the ambitions of people in the Arab world.”⁹⁰ When the draft memo was leaked to the London-based, pan-Arab daily *al Hayat*, it caused a firestorm of criticism from not only leftist, nationalist, and Islamist critics of US policy, but also from the political leaders of America’s allies in the Middle East and Europe as well as the drafters of the AHDR themselves. Marwan Muasher, the foreign minister of Jordan--one of America’s closest allies in the region--publicly criticized the GMEPI arguing that “reform is important and needed in the Arab world...but for it to work we need ownership of the process, not a one-for-all blue-print from Washington.”⁹¹ Nader Fergany, a principle author of the AHDR, was also critical of what he called the American administration’s “arrogant attitude in respect to the rest of the world, which causes it to behave as if it can decide the fate of states and peoples.”⁹²

As a consequence of the massive outpouring of criticism, by the time of the G-8 summit at Sea Island, Georgia the GMEPI was completely rewritten. The expression “Greater Middle East” was replaced by “Broader Middle East and North Africa,” the scope of its projects was scaled down, and it linked itself more closely with reform efforts promoted by the European Union, the Arab League, and the initiatives of Arab intellectuals who had mobilized against the

⁹⁰ As cited in David Isenberg, “Pennywise commitment to Arab democracy,” Asian Times Online, Jan 9 2003. Available from http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/EA09Ak01.html. See also Sharp, “The Middle East Partnership Initiative: An Overview,” 6.

⁹¹ As cited in Steven R. Weisman, “U.S. Muffles Sweeping Call to Democracy in Mideast,” *New York Times*, March 12, 2004.

⁹² As cited in International Crisis Group, “The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative: Imperiled at Birth,” *Middle East Briefing* June 7, 2004, 6.

modality, if not the objectives, of the initial GMEPI plan. The Sea Island version also included references to issues ignored in the GMEPI memo such as political Islam, the unstable situation in American-occupied Iraq, and the need for a resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The Bush administration's project for transforming the Middle East eventually petered out due to the failure to convert Iraq into a model for the region, the success of Islamists opposed to American policy in elections in Palestine and Lebanon, and the unwillingness of the US to impose reforms on its moderate allies Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. In 2006, with Iraq engulfed in what seemed to be the verge of a sectarian civil war, a new wave of exceptionalist notions entered into American discourse about Iraq. Most Americans converted from expecting the new Iraq to become the model for a new Middle East, to blaming the Iraqis and the nature of Iraqi society for the failure of the American project and the ongoing violence.⁹³ Many argued that Americans were only then coming to understand the "true" nature of Iraqi society and history--an artificial nation, where ethnic and religious identities left no room for liberal democratic norms and a love of freedom.

The failure of this project should not be understood as rooted in the belief that democracy and reform is possible in the Middle East, but like modernization theory, due to the conceit of viewing its task in terms of fostering an inevitable outcome while assuming that the United States had the capability to do so.⁹⁴ In an insightful critique of the influence of modernization theory on US policy towards the Middle East since the 1950s, historian Richard Bulliet notes that one reason for the failure of modernization theory as a guide for US policy in the Middle East

⁹³ Thomas E. Ricks and Robin Wright, "As Iraq Deteriorates, Iraqis Get More Blame," *Washington Post*, November 29, 2006.

⁹⁴ See Steven Heydemann, "In the Shadow of Democracy," *Middle East Journal* 60, no. 1 (Winter 2006), 123.

was that American “policy circles seem incapable of imagining a Muslim model of modernity.”⁹⁵

The rise of Middle East exceptionalism in American policy debates can trace its origins to the failures of modernization theory to understand and embrace the agency, imagination, and interests of diverse communities across the Middle East who did not have the same dreams as American policy makers thought they should. Likewise Bush the administration also unwilling to ever consider “whether there might be merit in some of those other ways of looking at reality.”⁹⁶

The notion of Middle East exceptionalism fails to recognize such alternatives, as they would challenge its binary structure that views the differences between the Middle East and the rest of the world in exceptional terms rather approach the range of diversity found across the Middle East in terms variations across the same multiples registers experienced elsewhere.

Oddly, the Bush administration often sought to argue that its project for regional transformation represented a rejection of the notion of Middle East exceptionalism. By this they did not mean they rejected what I have analyzed as Middle East exceptionalism, but rather they rejected simpleminded “skepticism about the capacity or even the desire of the Middle Eastern peoples for self-government.”⁹⁷ Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice often tried to defend the Bush doctrine by arguing that the Bush administration had rejected past American policies that followed “so-called Middle East exceptionalism,” meaning pursuing “stability at the expense of democracy.”⁹⁸ Journalist David Brooks, a strong supporter of the Bush doctrine, defines the notion of “Arab exceptionalism” as follows: “This is the belief that while most of the world is chugging toward a globally integrated future, the Arab world remains caught in its own medieval

⁹⁵ Richard W. Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 116.

⁹⁶ Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization*, 118.

⁹⁷ President Bush’s speech at the Royal Banqueting House in London, November 19, 2003, cited in Daniel Neep, “Dilemmas of Democratization in the Middle East,” *Middle East Policy* 11, no. 3 (Fall 2004) p.78

⁹⁸ Press Briefing: Situation in the Middle East: Secretary Condoleezza Rice in Strelna, Russia, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, July 16, 2006. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/69024.htm>.

whirlpool of horror. The Arab countries cannot become quickly democratic; their people aren't ready for pluralistic modernity; they just have to be walled off so they don't hurt us again."⁹⁹ Brooks claims President George W. Bush stands against this view, since he believes that "the Arabs aren't very different from anybody else, and *can be brought* into the family of democratic nations."¹⁰⁰ While Brooks seems to reject a cultural determinist view of Middle East exceptionalism he nevertheless suggests that it is America's role to "bring" the Arabs into modernity, implying that they are incapable of bringing themselves due to their societies' own internal characteristics. Such a view still relies on the binary logic of Middle East exceptionalism and it can only really be understood through the lens of "American exceptionalism." In other words, the Bush administration viewed itself capable of negating the region's exceptional status due to the exceptional capacities and universal values of the United States. As a senior adviser to President Bush explained to journalist Ron Suskind:

We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality--judiciously, as you will--we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors...and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ David Brooks, "It's Not Isolationism, but It's Not Attractive," *New York Times*, March 5, 2006.

¹⁰⁰ Brooks, "It's Not Isolationism," emphasis added.

¹⁰¹ Ron Suskind, "Without a Doubt: Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush," *New York Times Magazine*, October, 19 2004.

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