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COMMENTARY

Bush of Arabia

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It was fated, or "written," as the Arabs would say, that George W. Bush, reared in Midland, Texas, so far away from the complications of the foreign world, would be the leader to take America so deep into Arab and Islamic affairs.

This is not a victory lap that President Bush is embarking upon this week, a journey set to take him to Egypt, Israel, the Palestinian territories, the Saudi Kingdom, Kuwait, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. Mr. Bush by now knows the heartbreak and guile of that region. After seven years and two big wars in that "Greater Middle East," after a campaign against the terror and the malignancies of the Arab world, there will be no American swagger or stridency.

But Mr. Bush is traveling into the landscape and setting of his own legacy. He is arguably the most consequential leader in the long history of America's encounter with those lands.

Baghdad isn't on Mr. Bush's itinerary, but it hangs over, and propels, his passage. A year ago, this kind of journey would have been unthinkable. The American project in Iraq was reeling, and there was talk of America casting the Iraqis adrift. It was then that Mr. Bush doubled down -- and, by all appearances, his brave wager has been vindicated.

His war has given birth to a new Iraq. The shape of this new Iraq is easy to discern, and it can be said with reasonable confidence that the new order of things in Baghdad is irreversible. There is Shiite primacy, Kurdish autonomy in the north, and a cushion for the Sunni Arabs -- in fact a role for that community slightly bigger than its demographic weight. It wasn't "regional diplomacy" that gave life to this new Iraq. The neighboring Arabs had fought it all the way.

But there is a deep streak of Arab pragmatism, a grudging respect for historical verdicts, and for the right of conquest. How else did the ruling class in Arabia, in the Gulf and in Jordan beget their kingdoms?

In their animus toward the new order in Iraq, the purveyors of Arab truth -- rulers and pundits alike -- said that they opposed this new Iraq because it had been delivered by American power, and is now in the American orbit. But from Egypt to Kuwait and Bahrain, a Pax Americana anchors the order of the region. In Iraq, the Pax Americana, hitherto based in Sunni Arab lands, has acquired a new footing in a Shiite-led country, and this is the true source of Arab agitation.

To hear the broadcasts of Al Jazeera, the Iraqis have sinned against the order of the universe for the American military presence in their midst. But a vast American air base, Al Udeid, is a stone's throw away from Al Jazeera's base in Qatar.

There is a standoff of sorts between the American project in Iraq on the one side, and the order of Arab power on the other. The Arabs could not thwart or overturn this new Iraq, but the autocrats -- battered, unnerved by the fall of Saddam Hussein, worried about the whole spectacle of free elections in Iraq -- survived Iraq's moment of enthusiasm.

They hunkered down, they waited out the early euphoria of the Iraq war, they played up the anarchy and violence of Iraq and fed that violence as well. In every way they could they manipulated the nervousness of their own people in the face of this new, alien wave of liberty. Better 60 years of tyranny than one day of anarchy, goes a (Sunni) Arab maxim.

Hosni Mubarak takes America's coin while second-guessing Washington at every turn. He is the cop on the beat, suspicious of liberty. He faced a fragile, democratic opposition in the Kifaya (Enough!) movement a few years back. But the autocracy held on. Pharaoh made it clear that the distant, foreign power was compelled to play on his terms. There was never a serious proposal to cut off American aid to the Mubarak regime.

In the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf, a new oil windfall has rewritten the terms of engagement between Pax Americana and the ruling regimes. It is a supreme, and cruel, irony that Mr. Bush travels into countries now awash with money: From 9/11 onwards, America has come to assume the burden of a great military struggle -- and the financial costs of it all -- while the oil lands were to experience a staggering transfusion of wealth.

Saudi Arabia has taken in nearly \$900 billion in oil revenues the last six years; the sparsely populated emirate of Abu Dhabi is said to dispose of a sovereign wealth fund approximating a trillion dollars. The oil states have drawn down the public debt that had been a matter of no small consequence to the disaffection of their populations. There had been a time, in the lean 1990s, when debt had reached 120% of Saudi GDP; today it is 5%. There is swagger in that desert world, a sly sense of deliverance from the furies.

The battle against jihadism has been joined by the official religious establishment, stripping the radicals of their religious cover. Consider the following fatwa issued by Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Abdallah al-Sheikh, the Mufti of the Kingdom -- the highest religious jurist in Saudi Arabia -- last October. There is evasion in the fatwa, but a reckoning as well:

"It has been noted that over the last several years some of our sons have left Saudi lands with the aim of pursuing jihad abroad in the path of God. But these young men do not have enough knowledge to distinguish between truth and falsehood, and this was one reason why they fell into the trap of suspicious elements and organizations abroad that toyed with them in the name of jihad."

Traditional Wahhabism has always stipulated obedience to the ruler, and this Wahhabi jurist was to re-assert it in the face of freelance preachers: "The men of religion are in agreement that there can be no jihad, except under the banner of wali al-amr [the monarch] and under his command. The journey abroad without his permission is a violation, and a disobedience, of the faith."

Iraq is not directly mentioned in this fatwa, but it stalks it: This is the new destination of the jihadists, and the jurist wanted to cap the volcano.

The reform of Arabia is not a courtesy owed an American leader on a quick passage, and one worried about the turmoil in the oil markets at that. It is an imperative of the realm, something owed Arabia's young people clamoring for a more "normal" world. The brave bloggers, and the women and young professionals of the realm, have taken up the cause of reform. What American power owes them is the message given them over the last few years -- that they don't dwell alone.

True to the promise, and to the integrity, of his campaign against terror, Mr. Bush will not lay a wreath at the burial place of Yasser Arafat in Ramallah. This is as it should be. Little more than five years ago, Mr. Bush held out to the Palestinians the promise of statehood, and of American support for that goal, but he made that support contingent on a Palestinian break with the cult of violence. He would not grant Arafat any of the indulgence that Bill Clinton had given him for eight long years. It was the morally and strategically correct call.

The cult of the gun had wrecked the political life of the Palestinians. They desperately needed an accommodation with Israel, but voted, in early 2006, for Hamas.

The promise of Palestinian statehood still stood, but the force, and the ambition, of Mr. Bush's project in Iraq, and the concern over Iran's bid for power, had shifted the balance of things in the Arab world toward the Persian Gulf, and away from the Palestinians. The Palestinians had been reduced to their proper scale in the Arab constellation. It was then, and when the American position in Iraq had been repaired, that Mr. Bush picked up the question of Palestine again, perhaps as a courtesy to his secretary of state.

The Annapolis Conference should be seen in that light: There was some authority to spare. It is to Mr. Bush's singular credit that he was the first American president to recognize that Palestine was not the central concern of the Arabs, or the principal source of the political maladies.

The realists have always doubted this Bush campaign for freedom in Arab and Muslim lands. It was like ploughing the sea, they insisted. Natan Sharansky may be right that in battling for that freedom, Mr. Bush was a man alone, even within the councils of his own administration.

He had taken up the cause of Lebanon. The Cedar Revolution that erupted in 2005 was a child of his campaign for freedom. A Syrian dominion built methodically over three decades was abandoned in a hurry, so worried were the Syrians that American power might target their regime as well. In the intervening three years, Lebanon and its fractious ways were to test America's patience, with the Syrians doing their best to return Lebanon to its old captivity.

But for all the debilitating ways of Lebanon's sectarianism, Mr. Bush was right to back democracy. For decades, politically conscious Arabs had lamented America's tolerance for the ways of Arab autocracy, its resigned acceptance that such are the ways of "the East." There would come their way, in the Bush decade, an American leader willing to bet on their freedom.

"Those thankless deserts" was the way Winston Churchill, who knew a thing or two about this region, described those difficult lands. This is a region that aches for the foreigner's protection while feigning horror at the presence of strangers.

As is their habit, the holders of Arab power will speak behind closed doors to their American guest about the menace of the Persian power next door. But the Arabs have the demography, and the wealth, to balance the power of the Persians. If their world is now a battleground between Pax Americana and Iran, that is a stark statement on their weakness, and on the defects of the social contract between the Sunnis and the Shiites of the Arab world. America can provide the order that underpins the security of the Arabs, but there are questions of political and cultural reform which are tasks for the Arabs themselves.

Suffice it for them that George W. Bush was at the helm of the dominant imperial power when the world of Islam and of the Arabs was in the wind, played upon by ruinous temptations, and when the regimes in the saddle were ducking for cover, and the broad middle classes in the Arab world were in the grip of historical denial of what their radical children had wrought. His was the gift of moral and political clarity.

In America and elsewhere, those given reprieve by that clarity, and single-mindedness, have been taking this protection while complaining all the same of his zeal and solitude. In his stoic acceptance of the burdens after 9/11, we were offered a reminder of how nations shelter behind leaders willing to take on great challenges.

We scoffed, in polite, jaded company when George W. Bush spoke of the "axis of evil" several years back. The people he now journeys amidst didn't: It is precisely through those categories of good and evil that they describe their world, and their condition. Mr. Bush could not redeem the modern culture of the Arabs, and of Islam, but he held the line when it truly mattered. He gave them a chance to reclaim their world from zealots and enemies of order who would have otherwise run away with it.

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