

# U.S. HAS MISGUIDED MIDDLE EAST POLICY

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The U.S. policy toward the Arab world is misguided, and recent events prove it. In the past few months, U.S. bombs repeatedly struck Arab targets, gaining little militarily while forsaking diplomatic credibility.

The bombing of a pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum, Sudan, was both illegal and counterproductive. A CIA operative is said to have gotten a soil sample outside the plant that might have indicated the presence of a chemical weapon precursor. Any reasonable response would have sought more information. Before cruise missiles destroy a facility and cause innocent civilian casualties, the evidence of a clandestine weapons operation should be unequivocal. A great power shouldn't be trigger-happy with one of the world's poorest nations.

No, the U.S. didn't contact international authorities on chemical weapons nor its allies for confirmation. No efforts were made to use diplomacy. Cruise missiles did the talking, and when the evidence pointed to a catastrophic mistake, the U.S. stonewalled an objective investigation. Of course, if the plant was making chemical weapons, an investigation would support U.S. claims, so the U.S. throws suspicion on itself by preventing an inquiry. Now a United Nations inspection may prove false the U.S. assertions about chemical weapons. If this wasn't so tragic, it would be humiliating.

Imagine if Russia had launched missiles at a pharmaceutical plant in an African capital, claimed that the plant was making weapons despite contradictory evidence, and stopped the international community from uncovering what was really there. The U.S. would lead the chorus of outrage. But it wasn't Russia; it was the United States. The failure of the U.S. to act appropriately conveys an unacceptable message that the U.S. is careless about

the use of force and arrogant about standards of international law.

The December bombing of Iraq has also worsened U.S. standing throughout the Arab world. Few, if any, Arab leaders have much respect for Saddam Hussein, but U.S. policy has made him a sympathetic victim. Arabs dismiss as nonsense U.S. claims that substantial military damage was inflicted and that Hussein's grip on power is slipping. What is important, they contend, is that the Iraqi people are suffering from U.S. aggressive military action. The United Nations Special Commission's verification of weapons of mass destruction has been upended by devious U.S. manipulation, threatening the future of arms control.

An Arab adage says: "Me and my brother against my cousin, and me and my cousin against the stranger." Obviously, the U.S. is the stranger. Arab dislike of the Iraqi regime does not suggest tolerance of 1 million dead Iraqis, including 500,000 children, from the U.S.-sustained embargo that has cut off food and medicine.

And just last month, a U.S. missile misfired and leveled a residential neighborhood, killing innocent civilians. Such deaths are not merely the price that must be paid for security; they signify a casual U.S. attitude about Arab lives. The price of doing the wrong thing at the wrong time for the wrong reason is the shrinking of U.S. leadership and the disruption of peace. Regrettably, U.S. audacity has strengthened the Iraqi government's position.

Arabs have long memories and consider revenge justified. But they are also generous, forgiving and quick to respond to similar gestures. Symbolism means much more to them than Westerners appreciate; Arabs cannot accept indignity or loss of face. In Arabic, the word peace connotes an outcome that is dignified and just and not unconditional surrender. Double standards are unacceptable, which is why the Arabs so deeply resent the U.S.'s duplicity.

A sound U.S. policy would engage Arabs in a forthright dialogue about security in the region and the future of Iraq. The important question is why is U.S. policy so misguided? If given the opportunity, most Arab-American experts would have advised the

administration to engage the Sudanese and Iraqi governments. But the administration has excluded such advice, despite the obvious insight it would have provided.

If the U.S. continues to think that all is well because it can impose its will by force, then a clash of cultures is inevitable, and the consequences for peace and security will be disastrous. There is already too much violence in the Middle East, and violence begets violence. The United States should be a force for stability and for the rule of law, but its resort to force without legal justification sends an altogether different, and wrong, message.