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## Free at Last?

The Arab World in the Twenty-first Century

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As the twentieth century drew to an end, it became clear that a major change was taking place in the countries of the Arab world. For almost 200 years, those lands had been ruled and dominated by European powers and before that by non-Arab Muslim regimes -- chiefly the Ottoman Empire. After the departure of the last imperial rulers, the Arab world became a political battleground between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. That, too, ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Arab governments and Arab dynasties (royal or presidential) began taking over. Arab governments and, to a limited but growing extent, the Arab peoples were at last able to confront their own problems and compelled to accept responsibility for dealing with them.

Europe, long the primary source of interference and domination, no longer plays any significant role in the affairs of the Arab world. Given the enormous oil wealth enjoyed by some Arab rulers and the large and growing Arab and Muslim population in Europe, the key question today is, what role will Arabs play in European affairs? With the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia ceased to be a major factor in the Arab world. But because of its proximity, its resources, and its large Muslim population, Russia cannot afford to disregard the Middle East. Nor can the Middle East afford to disregard Russia.

The United States, unlike Europe, has continued to play a central role in the Arab world. During the Cold War, the United States' interest in the region lay chiefly in countering the growing Soviet influence, such as in Egypt and Syria. Since the end of the Cold War, U.S. troops have appeared occasionally in the region, either as part of joint peace missions (as in Lebanon in 1982-83) or to rescue or protect Arab governments from their neighboring enemies (as in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in 1990-91). But many in the Arab world -- and in the broader Islamic world -- have seen these activities as blatant U.S. imperialism. According to this perception, the United States is simply the successor to the now-defunct French, British, and Soviet empires and their various Christian predecessors, carrying out yet another infidel effort to dominate the Islamic world.

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