



How to Be a Middle East Technocrat

A look at the rising class of results-minded bureaucrats who are finding a new way across the Islamic World.

BY DAVID KENNER | JULY/AUGUST 2010



The Arab world's fire-breathing guerrillas and military despots get all the attention. But the men who run the region's day-to-day affairs are a different breed. Across the Middle East over the last decade, a new class of technocrats -- all in their 40s and 50s, with advanced degrees in law and economics, many from Western

universities, and backed by powerful patrons -- has risen to power in governments from Syria to Egypt to Palestine, resolutely focused on tackling the mundane problems affecting their societies. And they are achieving surprising success by adhering to three relatively simple rules.

1. PARTY HACKS NEED NOT APPLY. The Middle East's new get-it-done bureaucrats assiduously distance themselves from their ruling parties and official

ideologies. Take Syrian Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah al-Dardari, who never even joined the Baath Party: In the 1980s, while then-President Hafez al-Assad was cracking skulls to beat back an Islamist challenge, Dardari was studying economics at the University of Southern California. In a country where old-school socialism is still officially enshrined in the Constitution, **Dardari has said**, "Only market economy systems have ... the ability to adjust and cope with change."

Although they may be charged with important policymaking roles, this bunch shies away from most explicit politicking. In Beirut, Interior Minister Ziad Baroud avoids identification with either of Lebanon's major factions. "I'm on excellent terms with all political groups," he told **Foreign Policy**. In Palestine, Prime Minister Salam Fayyad is not a representative of Fatah, the dominant political player in the West Bank, but a founder of the tiny Third Way party.

2. DETAILS MATTER. This is a group that spends its days searching for practical solutions to the problems of everyday life -- not railing against Israel. Egyptian Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif, for example, cut his teeth as minister of telecommunications -- a role he prepared for at Montreal's McGill University, where his 1983 Ph.D. thesis explored the difficulties that the Arabic language posed for software development. Nazif went on to become the driving force in the deregulation of Egypt's information-technology sector. As prime minister, he has taken e-government to a new level by starting a pilot project that uses "smart cards" to collect information on consumer purchases, allowing the government to target food subsidies to Egypt's poorest citizens and reduce government waste and corruption.

In Lebanon, Baroud struck a blow against sectarian divisions in 2009 by allowing citizens to remove their religious affiliation from their national identity cards. He also won praise for holding Lebanon's 2009 parliamentary elections without major incident and enforcing seat-belt laws and speed limits -- important steps for a country racked by chronic lawlessness.

Dardari, too, has played an important role in helping the Syrian government shed its international pariah status. A hedge-fund partner told the *Wall Street Journal* that, when a group of U.S. investors visited Damascus in late 2009, they found the pitches by most Syrian officials "**pretty pathetic**" -- but were impressed by Dardari. The deputy prime minister has also been his country's primary proponent of signing an EU association agreement.

3. KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE. There's one major perk to their jobs: These technocrats are adored by Western officials and journalists.

Nobody has benefited from this more than Fayyad. The Palestinian prime minister bonded with U.S. President George W. Bush over their shared University of Texas connections*; Bush greeted Fayyad with the Texas Longhorn "Hook 'em Horns" hand gesture upon his first visit to the Oval Office. Fayyad clocked in at No. 10 this year on *Time magazine's* list of the world's most influential leaders, with a flattering write-up penned by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair (Fayyad made **FP's** list of **Top 100 Global Thinkers**, too).

International observers sometimes go overboard in their praise -- as when Israeli President Shimon Peres referred to Fayyad as the "Palestinian Ben-Gurion." Although competent and well-meaning, the technocrats -- serving at the whims of strongmen with a vested interest in the status quo -- are not exactly the founders of nations. They are able to nudge their societies in the right direction, but when it comes to big-picture questions, the guerrillas and the despots still rule the day.

*The phrase "over their shared University of Texas connections" corrects language in the print edition of this article that stated Bush was a University of Texas graduate. Bush, who was raised in Texas and served as its governor, has a daughter who graduated from the University of Texas at Austin. Fayyad did receive a degree from that university.

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