

CURRENT HISTORY

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“There is no inherent reason why the Arab world cannot join the global democratic trend. Yet there are very real . . . reasons why the democratization of Arab societies will prove unusually slow, difficult, and conflictive.”

Democracy: Terrorism’s Uncertain Antidote

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The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, threw into serious question a long-standing tenet of US policy toward the Middle East: the assumption that nondemocratic, pro-Western regimes such as those in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait are bulwarks against Islamic radicalism. The fact that the 9-11 hijackers came from Saudi Arabia and Egypt provoked many American observers to ask whether such regimes are instead breeding grounds for terrorism. In the months immediately following September 11, US policy makers began to talk about the need to pay more attention to the absence of democracy in the Arab world. In the two years since, the US policy establishment has come to believe that promoting democracy in the Middle East should be a component of the war on terrorism—part of a broader effort to go beyond the active pursuit of terrorist groups to address the underlying roots of terrorism.

The most significant operative element of this new policy line has been the invasion of Iraq. In deciding to move against Saddam Hussein, President George W. Bush was motivated by a medley of security concerns, geopolitical intentions, and economic considerations. Whatever the precise weight of these different factors, one of the motivations clearly was the desire to replace the thuggish, highly repressive Iraqi dictatorship with a democratic government, both to improve the lives of Iraqis and to help spread democracy elsewhere in the region—in part as an antidote to terrorism.

The war in Iraq would spread democracy in two ways. First, some Bush aides hoped that regime

change in Iraq might constitute a political shock sufficient to destabilize hostile regimes in Syria and Iran and pave the way in those countries for more open, pluralistic governments. Second, creating an example of a working democratic government in the Arab world might stimulate the pro-Western authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes in the region to move in a democratic direction as well.

Alongside the hard edge of military-led regime change in Iraq, the administration has unfolded a complementary soft side to the new emphasis on democracy promotion. To stimulate and support political reform in friendly Arab states, the administration has formulated an interrelated set of measures: a new aid program—the Middle East Partnership Initiative—to support democratic change; the reorientation of existing aid programs in the Arab world to sharpen their pro-democratic content; a diplomatic stance consisting of greater praise for those Arab governments that do take positive political steps and somewhat more pressure on those that do not; and a new push to promote Arab economic reform and free trade (with the hope that improved economic conditions will, over the long term, stimulate political reform).

OBSTACLES TO SUCCESS

This new attention on the part of the US government to the near-total lack of democracy in the Middle East is a welcome development. For far too long, successive American administrations have ignored the issue, content with supporting Arab “friendly tyrants” and giving only lip service to the cause of political reform. Yet in the rush to embrace a new line, the US government and the broader US

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policy establishment need to recognize the substantial obstacles on the path to democratization.

One obstacle is the facile assumption that a straight line exists between progress on democratization and the elimination of the roots of Islamic terrorism. The sources of Islamic radicalism and the embrace of anti-American terrorism by some radicals are multifaceted and cannot be reduced to the simple proposition that the lack of democracy in the Arab world is the main cause.

Moreover, any rapid opening up of the closed political systems in Saudi Arabia or Kuwait or even Egypt could well, in the short to medium term, allow extremist groups to operate more actively and give strength to the wider Islamist organizations that sometimes feed the extremists. There may be an analogy to the much-debated relationship between the existence of democracy in countries and the proclivity of countries to go to war: although established democracies tend not to fight wars with one another, countries setting out on the turbulent path from dictatorship to democracy are often more war-prone.

Even the successful achievement of democracy offers no

guarantee that a society will not produce terrorists. More than a few established democracies have struggled with persistent terrorist threats, whether it is Spain confronting Basque terrorists, Italy facing the Red Brigades, or Britain grappling with the Irish Republican Army.

Second, although many people in Washington may have decided that the Middle East's democratic moment has arrived, a discernible democratic trend in the region itself is not evident. The past two years have seen mild reforms by some Arab states and increased discussion among Arab intellectuals about the need for political change. The Arab world remains dominated, however, by deeply entrenched authoritarian or semi-authoritarian governments with a proven will and capacity for survival. The recent reforms that some have undertaken—such as Bahrain's legislative elections and the Egyptian ruling party's internal reforms—are limited, adaptive initiatives designed to ensure the regimes' long-term survival. They have not altered fundamental non-democratic features, such as unelected leadership. As Daniel Brumberg persuasively argued in the October 2002 *Journal of Democracy*, these are

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regimes stuck in “the trap of liberalized autocracy.” They try some reforms to relieve growing pressure for participation from below, but then the political forces thereby strengthened scare the regimes from taking reform any further.

The situation is thus unlike, and much more difficult than, the prevailing circumstances in other regions where the United States made a major push for democracy in past decades, such as Latin America in the 1980s or Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Internally generated movements toward democracy already existed in these areas, with significant regional demonstration effects. In taking on the challenge of promoting democracy in those regions, the United States was reinforcing a growing domestic dynamic of change rather than trying to create one almost from scratch. For example, the United States supported Solidarity in Poland and the Civic Forum in Czechoslovakia during their periods of anti-totalitarian struggle,

but it did not create them.

Positive results are not guaranteed even where an internal impetus for democratic change asserts itself, a breakthrough

occurs, and the United States sides with the forces of change. In the early 1990s, the new states of the former Soviet Union took what looked at the time like dramatic steps toward democracy. Today, most of that region is a democratic wasteland dominated by harshly authoritarian regimes in some countries and seriously backsliding leaders in others.

Third, the United States faces a tremendous problem of credibility in asserting itself as a pro-democratic actor in the Middle East. Confronted with the notion that the Bush administration is now committed to democracy in the region, many Arabs react with incredulity, resentment, and outright anger. They have a very hard time taking the idea seriously, given Washington's longtime backing of authoritarian governments in the region, what they believe is insufficient US support for Palestinian rights, and a war in Iraq that most Arabs feel was an illegitimate imposition of American political force on Arab territory. As the US Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim World highlighted in its October 2003 report, “hostility toward America [in the Muslim world] has reached shocking levels.”

The credibility problem renders real partnership with the Arab world extremely difficult, yet such partnerships have been key to successful democracy promotion efforts elsewhere. The lack of credibility is serious but not immutable. Over time American policy makers and aid officials can overcome ingrained suspicions and skepticism, as they did to some degree in Latin America from the mid-1980s through the 1990s. But such a transformation of attitudes can be at best only slowly achieved. It will require long-term consistency between democratic word and deed, as well as the steady commitment of major resources for at least a decade or two. And real progress with the credibility gap probably cannot be achieved without a substantial rebalancing of the US approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which appears unlikely to occur under the Bush administration.

THE DIFFICULT EARLY STEPS

The postwar situation in Iraq highlights just how difficult trying to build democracy in the Arab world is, even with the unusually high degree of influence over Iraqi domestic affairs gained by the American-led invasion and occupation. More than half a year after Saddam's ouster, a new Iraqi political system has only barely begun to take shape. From the early maneuverings and machinations of the Iraqi Governing Council, as well as the varied sociopolitical pressures roiling beneath the surface of the Coalition Provisional Authority's rule, it is evident how long and hard it will be to resolve the sharply different interests and intentions of the various ethnic and religious strata of Iraqi society in a manner compatible with a pluralistic, liberal political order.

It is probable that Iraq eventually will have a political system considerably better for its people than Saddam's regime, though the possibility of an eventual lapse into destructive civil conflict exists. But the diplomatic, political, and economic costs for the United States of helping Iraq get there will end up being much, much higher than initially anticipated. This is evident in the tremendous hostility the war has provoked toward the United States in the Muslim world and in many other places, the troubling fact that recruitment for Al Qaeda and other radical Islamist terrorist organizations has reportedly spiked since the war, and the huge price tag that the war and occupation have already incurred.

The challenge of spreading democracy to the rest of the region is equally problematic. Given Iraq's history of political repression and violence, its divided society, and its centralized economic

resources, an exemplary democratic order will not likely emerge in the next decade or two. The more probable political outcome is a choppy, poorly functioning pluralism or a moderately authoritarian regime. The power of an Iraqi democratic model for its neighbors is thus very uncertain.

Even if Iraq manages to succeed democratically, the demonstration effect will be limited, given a model whose first steps consist of foreign invasion, followed by a short but frightening period of chaos and violence, then a long foreign occupation. Unlike the regional demonstration effects of democratic breakthroughs in Latin America and Eastern Europe, this is not a political model rooted in what a people can do for themselves. It hinges on the much less appealing example of what the application of enormous foreign military force and subsequent political intervention and economic aid can make possible.

THE SOFT SIDE

The soft side of the new democracy policy for the Middle East is also just beginning to take root. The constituent elements all make sense, but none is likely to have any rapid or decisive effect. Stepping up democracy aid through the Middle East Partnership Initiative and bolstering the democracy component of existing aid programs will allow greater support for worthwhile initiatives in the realms of civil society development, women's rights, rule of law strengthening, and political participation. But as the experience with such aid in other regions makes clear, democracy support programs only have a moderate impact at best, mildly reinforcing whatever domestic reform trends exist. They often bounce off regimes determined to resist fundamental change.

Greater economic reform in the Arab world and more open trade relations with the United States represent valuable goals, but not a formula for near-term political change. For 20 years Washington has been pushing the Egyptian government to implement basic market reforms, with only partial success. It is unclear whether or how the Bush administration will overcome Arab states' proven unwillingness to jeopardize the support of core protected constituencies through disruptive reform measures. And the one Arab country that has made real progress on market reforms—Tunisia—has experienced no positive spillover effect in the political realm. Despite an impressive recent record of economic performance, Tunisia remains one of the most repressive Arab states.

US diplomatic pressure for political change is a potentially critical element of a pro-democratic policy. And administration officials are beginning to push a bit more openly and directly on political reform issues with some of the American-friendly regimes in the region, such as Egypt and Jordan. Bush aides point to the president's August 2002 letter to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak expressing US dissatisfaction with Egypt's strong-arm treatment of human rights activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim as evidence of a new, tougher line. So far the letter stands more as an exception than a new rule. The relationships between Washington and Arab capitals are still very much oriented to the status quo.

The stubborn fact remains that the United States depends on many of these regimes for extensive security cooperation on anti-terrorism, at least limited support for US diplomatic efforts in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and, in the case of the Gulf states, access to the largest oil reserves in the world. The Bush administration's newfound desire for democratization in these countries is balanced against a deep caution about not producing cataclysmic change. These societies have strong Islamic movements and a very uncertain capability to move rapidly from paternalistic patterns of political control to genuine pluralism and openness without losing control completely.

FEET ON THE GROUND

The Bush administration is attempting what some policy makers and observers hope might become an historic shift in US Middle East policy toward a pro-democratic stance. The Bush team's willingness to shake up old ways of US diplomacy in the Arab world is commendable. So is its adamant rejection of noxious culturalist arguments about the supposed incompatibility of Arab culture and liberal democ-

cracy. Yet casting out unhelpful habits of the past and rejecting vulgar culturalism are not a license for downplaying hard facts on the ground.

It is true that there is no inherent reason why the Arab world cannot join the global democratic trend. Yet there are very real, deeply rooted historical, sociopolitical, and economic reasons why the democratization of Arab societies will prove unusually slow, difficult, and conflictive. Similarly, there are substantial reasons why US policy cannot swing to a forceful pro-democratic orientation without some major trade-offs with regard to near-term security and economic interests.

The place of a pro-democracy effort in the broader campaign against terrorism will not be simple or straightforward. Many elements of the Bush administration's anti-terror effort in other parts of the world, such as the increased support to friendly nondemocratic regimes in Central and South Asia, already cut against democracy concerns. The attempted democratization of Iraq to date has provided only uncertain and mixed results with respect to reducing terrorism. Similar tensions and complexities inevitably will continue to arise to the extent the United States pushes its new democracy agenda in the rest of the Arab world.

To be effective and sustainable, the US effort to promote democracy in the Middle East will require a sharp sense of nuance and balance, a strong dose of humility, and a willingness to invest heavily and stay the course for decades in the face of much discouragement along the way. And though it has been launched from the shell of the war on terrorism, the effort can succeed only if it eschews some of the signature elements of that campaign to date, such as the dubious philosophy of "you're either with us or against us" and the misguided notion that creating fear in the Arab world breeds respect. ■