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Can the United States Promote Democracy in the Middle East?

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The Arab world’s democracy deficit has finally captured Washington’s attention. The September 11 attacks put an end to Washington’s long-cherished illusion that the shortage of democracy in the Middle East was not pressing as long as stability was maintained. Now, President George W. Bush has described the promotion of “freedom” in the Islamic world—assumed to refer especially to the Arab world—as a key element of national security strategy.

Despite this high-level interest, the Bush administration has yet to formulate a realistic democracy-promotion strategy for the Middle East. Ambitious plans to replace current regimes with democratic successors have been proposed for some leaders the United States opposes; elsewhere, a more low-key approach seems to be emerging.

A rapid transformation of internal political conditions in the Arab world is well beyond the United States government’s capacity or inclination. At the same time, an overly cautious approach that perpetuates the status quo is unlikely to be effective. What is needed is a sustained policy of high-level engagement with Arab governments, along with support for openings that would bolster reformist groups, and a willingness to accept that genuine political change will be bumpy. Even this modest policy would represent a dramatic and difficult shift for the United States, especially as regional tensions increase.

THE POLICIES OF THE PAST

Democracy has never been a goal of United States Middle East policy. Successive administrations have focused on promoting peace between

Israel and its Arab neighbors, maintaining access to oil supplies, and containing radical movements. As long as Arab governments helped achieve these goals, the United States was more concerned about their stability than about their lack of democracy. In fact, stability in this strategically vital region was considered so important that the United States declined to push for democratic change even in “unfriendly” states such as Syria.

But during the 1990s, the United States began to notice political changes occurring in many Middle Eastern countries. The late 1980s had seen many Arab leaders start to allow multiparty legislative elections and greater leeway for nongovernmental organizations. These reforms were not intended to signal a transition to democracy, but to prolong the life of regimes. They aimed to bolster unpopular ruling parties (or leaders), improve the environment for much-needed economic reforms, and dilute the appeal of Islamist groups, which emerged as a major political force in the 1990s, challenging both Arab governments and United States policy. In a decade when the United States actively promoted democracy in other parts of the world, Washington did not want to appear completely indifferent to political reform and human rights in Arab countries. Thus the United States supported Arab governments’ cautious reformist moves. It offered verbal and diplomatic support to countries such as Yemen, Jordan, and Morocco that allowed their citizens increased political space.

The United States also funded democracy-assistance programs in nine Middle Eastern countries and the Palestinian Authority (PA). Between 1991 and 2001, the United States spent some \$250 million in the region on projects that included strengthening parliaments, improving human rights monitoring, and training judges. These efforts

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yielded meager results. Some projects were well designed; others were poorly conceived. Their limited impact was due mainly to the inhospitable local contexts in which they were implemented. But these on-the-ground programs were also unconnected to any higher-level United States efforts to encourage democratic change. When Arab governments took actions that undermined the stated goals of American programs (such as Egypt's enactment of a restrictive NGO law when the United States was spending millions to foster an active civil society in the country), the United States often remained silent, especially in strategically critical places such as Egypt or the PA. And, while the United States did raise some human rights issues with Arab governments, it did not pursue a meaningful dialogue to encourage them to take steps beyond their initial reforms.

Indeed, Washington did not want to antagonize regimes whose cooperation it needed to keep the peace process going and the oil flowing. The United States hesitated to press for bolder reforms out of concern for stability and fear of Islamist opposition gains. Occasionally, some officials would recommend a more proactive policy, but were rebuffed by those who argued—compellingly—that the undemocratic status quo was the best the United States could hope for under the circumstances.

RETHINKING THE APPROACH

The September 11 attacks jolted the American foreign policy establishment out of its complacency by providing a terrible example of what the status quo could produce. Washington offered various explanations for the attacks, for the widespread appeal of political Islam, and for anti-American sentiments in the Middle East. Analysts pointed to the Arab world's lack of economic opportunities, to inadequate educational systems that fostered misinterpretations of Islam, and to the unpopularity of American policies in the region. The Middle East's democracy deficit, however, was most often cited as a central explanatory factor. Authoritarian rule created an environment in which Al Qaeda and other militant groups could draw support. Lack of political freedom thwarted peace, prosperity, and modernity. Along with its unpopular regional policies (which the Bush administration did not wish to revise), America's close ties to undemocratic Arab regimes was a source of resentment.

Thus, while democracy promotion previously had been viewed as a pursuit far too idealistic to fit in with the hard, pragmatic core American interests in the Middle East, soon it was portrayed as essential to long-term national security. Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs Paula Dobriansky declared in a speech before the Heritage Foundation that the "advancement of human rights and democracy . . . [is] the bedrock of our war on terrorism. The violation of human rights by repressive regimes provides fertile ground for popular discontent . . . cynically exploited by terrorist organizations. . . . [A] stable government that responds to the legitimate desires of its people and respects their rights, shares power . . . is a powerful antidote to extremism."

Yet although there is now a greater consensus within the Bush administration about the importance of Middle East democracy than before September 11, no coherent rationale has been set forth explaining why the United States should

advance democracy in the region. The United States has always had multiple motives for engaging in democracy promotion around the world, but the leading reasons in the

Middle East seem especially disparate. Some believe that September 11 demonstrated the need for the United States boldly to remake the Middle East into a zone of pro-American democracies, by coercion or force if necessary. Others view democracy promotion as a way to win Arab "hearts and minds" in the war against terrorism, and call for public diplomacy programs and democracy aid to this end. Another perspective sees undemocratic governance as the key problem, and recommends engagement with existing governments to promote reform.

FORMULATING NEW INITIATIVES

Democracy-promotion plans are still being formulated. What has emerged so far suggests an awkward combination of three strands: aggressive calls for democracy in certain "unfriendly" regimes, and elsewhere, heavy doses of reaching out to civil society and modest diplomatic engagement.

The boldest initiatives to promote "freedom" target Iraq and the PA, reflecting the influence of those within the administration who favor a coercive approach. The United States has devised grand policies of Iraqi and Palestinian "regime change" coupled with promises of American support for democratic successor governments. The United States repeatedly cites the "liberation" of the Iraqi

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people from Saddam Hussein's tyranny as a central rationale for a military campaign to disarm Iraq and topple the regime. The administration has also made a rhetorical commitment to establish a "democratic" post-Saddam government, perhaps through an American military occupation similar to that of postwar Japan. In the case of the PA, President Bush has declared that a reformed and democratic government with "new leaders" is a prerequisite for United States support of final status negotiations with Israel and for an independent Palestinian state.

Promoting democracy is not the primary motivation for either policy. Administration officials were pushing for regime change in Iraq long before September 11, and the stance toward Arafat mainly stems from America's conclusion that he is unable to make peace with Israel. Yet in the wake of September 11, in both places the idea of "democracy" can more easily be presented as an appealing by-product of regime change. In addition, new leadership in Baghdad and Ramallah is cast as a catalyst for the broader regional changes that September 11 showed were necessary. As Bush himself stated before the United Nations General Assembly in September, "The people of Iraq can shake off their captivity. They can one day join a . . . democratic Palestine, inspiring reforms throughout the Muslim world." As for democracy promotion elsewhere in the region, the picture is a much less forceful one.

The administration's new multimillion-dollar public diplomacy campaign for the Middle East includes several initiatives to win Arab hearts and minds and to expose Arabs to key elements of United States democracy. Through media outreach, the United States will showcase "American" values of religious tolerance, open debate, and women's rights. Study tours will bring Arabs to the United States to expose them to American democratic institutions and practices. Fellowships and English-language study programs will help Arabs build personal links with Americans and provide useful "tools" for the modern (democratic) global community.

The State Department will provide up to \$10 million in 2003 for new projects in "civil society and the rule of law" across the Arab world (it is seeking significantly more funding for future years). These funds are to come from the new Middle East Partnership Initiative, which will also provide assistance for economic and educational reform.

The United States has suggested it will favor "reformist" Arab governments. "There is already a lot

under way in terms of reform—places like Bahrain and Qatar, and to a certain extent Jordan. . . . [W]e want to be supportive of those," national security adviser Condoleezza Rice noted last September. The Bush administration has also taken a few less supportive steps to indicate its new seriousness of purpose. In August, the White House announced it would not honor an Egyptian request for \$130 million in supplemental aid to protest an Egyptian security court's July sentencing of prominent Egyptian-American democracy activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim and his colleagues to prison for fraud and defamation. The United States considered the charges and the trial unjust. This was the first time the United States had linked the provision of aid to a human rights case in the Arab world.

AN INADEQUATE RESPONSE

Taken together, these disparate strands do not represent an adequate response to the regional democracy deficit to which September 11 had called such dramatic attention. The expectation that regime change in Iraq or the Palestinian Authority can form the core of a regional democracy-promotion strategy is misguided. Aside from exacerbating regional antagonism, neither is likely to provide a shining, inspirational model of democracy any time soon. Even if the United States succeeds in toppling Saddam Hussein's regime, the development of democracy in a post-Saddam Iraq will be an extremely arduous undertaking given the conditions prevailing inside Iraq, the difficulty of imposing democracy from the outside, and the apprehension of neighboring states about a democratic Iraqi government. Achieving minimal stability and a new leadership amenable to United States interests surely will trump concerns about democracy in the short and medium terms. As for the PA, developments since Bush's June 24 speech calling for a new Palestinian leadership show that political reforms, a reduced role for Arafat, and a democratic structure for a future state—goals that many Palestinians desire—are impossible to accomplish while the conflict with Israel rages and a diplomatic pathway is unavailable. Second, pressing for democracy only in countries where the United States does not like the regime and seems confident it can foster a friendly successor government sends a discouraging message to the rest of the Arab world: "democracy" is about our choices, not yours.

As for the rest of the region, it is unclear if democracy-promotion plans signal a qualitatively new approach, or a continuation of the 1990s

efforts, but with more funding and higher-level support. These public diplomacy activities, however valuable, aim mainly to win over Arab publics by promoting a better image of the United States in the Arab world. This is different than focused diplomatic initiatives to encourage Arab governments to open up and to support reformist forces. Increased funding for democracy aid is welcome, but only if new programs do not simply rehash previous initiatives that were ineffective.

Further, it remains to be seen if officials will press governments on democracy and human rights issues in a sustained and comprehensive fashion. The administration's August decision on aid to Egypt represents an important first step in this direction. But it is not clear if the United States will link aid to the broader issues of civil society groups in Egypt beyond this one case, or if it will raise objections to the Egyptian government's treatment of activists who do not have a similar liberal, secularist-oriented platform. Across the region, the comfort level with undemocratic governments remains high. As one senior official remarked recently, "Supporting an authoritarian leader who is a modernizer and is willing to gradually loosen the reins—that essentially should be our policy."¹ Of course, this was the essentially the policy of the 1990s.

Finally, democracy promotion might again become paralyzed over fears about democracy—the United States may still be unprepared to contemplate the possible consequences of democratization where forces opposed to the United States could be the major beneficiaries. In the 1990s, concerns that democratic openings would pave the way for Islamists to impose their own illiberal rule and to pursue anti-American policies led the United States to avoid pushing for such openings. Many American officials are even more wary after September 11. Some believe that the attacks illustrated the need to eradicate all manifestations of political Islam, from Al Qaeda to the Muslim Brotherhood, not to increase Islamist influence, which is what has happened in Morocco and Bahrain, where reasonably free elections have been held recently and Islamist candidates have scored impressive successes. How the United States will deal with this issue is unclear, but it is likely that the new approach will look much like the old.

¹Richard Haass, director of the Department of State's Policy Planning Staff, quoted in Nicholas Lemann, "Order of Battle: What the War Against Iraq—and Its Aftermath—Might Look Like," *The New Yorker*, November 18, 2002.

OBSTACLES TO DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

Can the United States really do more? Devising a more vigorous yet realistic approach is complicated by both the challenge of democracy promotion in general and by specific features of the United States role in the region.

First, America's ability to influence internal political developments in Arab countries is marginal. Democratic transitions mainly are driven by complex internal factors, with outside forces having a secondary impact at best. In most Arab countries, democracy is not an impossible long-term goal, but current political, economic, and regional conditions are not auspicious. It would be much easier for the United States to intervene in support of popular democratic forces that are already mobilized for change in their own countries, but these forces do not yet exist.

Compounding the problem, domestic groups with a political reform agenda are unlikely to soon become American allies in democracy promotion. Across the region, Islamists remain the main opposition group. But Islamists are not courting United States support—indeed, a major part of their platform is rejection of United States Middle East policies. Nor is the United States likely to provide direct support to Islamists, since it questions their commitment to democratic values. The few existing liberal groups are deeply suspicious of the United States for its past support of autocratic regimes, its policy of regime overthrow in Iraq, and its perceived disregard for Palestinian rights. This is not to say that no individuals or groups would welcome United States support for specific projects, but no significant movements view the United States as their savior or protector.

In addition, many Arab countries have pressing economic needs. With a considerable number of Middle Eastern nations suffering from recessions and rising unemployment, some might ask if the United States should focus so much on "democracy" when many Arabs would like help finding a job or feeding their families.

Finally, United States policymakers remain deeply ambivalent about whether calling for democratic change is truly in America's interest now. Key United States concerns in the Middle East—an uninterrupted, cheap oil supply; political change in Iraq; an Israeli–Palestinian peace settlement; and, more than ever before, help in the war on terrorism—still seem best fulfilled by cooperation with reasonably friendly stable regimes rather than with

countries experiencing the turmoil and uncertainties of democratic transformation.

TOWARD A STRATEGY

There is no “one size fits all” answer for Middle East democracy promotion. The approach must be tailored for each country, taking into consideration local conditions. The following four basic recommendations should inform at least the initial stages of a serious United States effort, building on much of what the administration has already devised for beyond Iraq and the PA, but giving it more teeth. First, democracy promotion is a very long-term effort, requiring a consistent series of steps to demonstrate United States sincerity over many years. Toward this end, the United States must shift from zero-sum thinking—that the only alternatives are the status quo or Islamist takeovers—to trying to foster a middle zone of democratization before the question of national leadership is decided. Calling for sudden transfers of power would not lead to democracy or protect American interests. But neither should America endorse cosmetic reforms with the idea that they will suppress grievances or satisfy yearnings for participation and accountability among Arab publics. Every Arab country has a need for some systemic political change, and the longer that steps toward this goal are deferred, the more thorny the problems will become and the more difficult their ultimate resolution.

Interim steps beyond controlled multiparty elections include lifting emergency laws, improving human rights, allowing greater freedom of speech and association, making budgetary processes more transparent, allowing new political parties to form, and granting greater powers to legislatures. As the experience of the 1990s showed, democracy-aid programs, however well intended, have little impact when the broader environment remains stagnant. Further, although economic issues are pressing—and the United States must help Arab governments address them—these problems often have their roots in political distortions, and are unlikely to be resolved without attention to the underlying political structure.

Second, the United States should concentrate its initial efforts on governments, recognizing that if actual democratization takes root, and if regional tensions abate, the United States will have more allies within Arab societies. Arab regimes hold most of the cards in the game of political reform. To the extent the United States has any influence, it is with regimes more than with societies. But even this

influence should not be overestimated; in particular, the United States has less leverage with countries that supply it with oil and with those on whom it depends for access to military facilities and counterterrorism support. Nevertheless, since most friendly Arab governments do care what America thinks, the United States must take into account Arab governments’ treatment of their citizens when determining the closeness of its ties.

To this end, the United States should issue a high-level policy directive that makes engagement on human rights, political reform, and democracy top priorities. This would empower officials at all levels of the bureaucracy to raise these issues without worrying that they will be left isolated by Washington. In countries where it provides significant economic aid, such as Egypt and Jordan, the United States should explore the feasibility of linking aid to political reforms. But it should introduce these conditions slowly and deliberately, through discussions with each government, rather than impose them abruptly. The United States must also carefully craft the language it uses to talk to and about Arab governments. It should compliment those Arab governments that are taking positive steps, but resist the tendency to overpraise them, as it has in the past. It should speak out, consistently, when governments—even close friends—violate human rights or pursue undemocratic policies. These moves will not change any Arab regime overnight; indeed, they will antagonize some and create a degree of discomfort for the United States. But they would add a new calculation to Arab governments’ decision making: the reaction of the United States.

Third, democracy-assistance programs must be taken more seriously. This means conducting honest evaluations to determine what is working and what is not, and avoiding programs that are more about public relations than real change—and more about Washington’s priorities than the region’s needs. It also means understanding democracy aid as just one aspect of a broader effort, not as a substitute for diplomatic action. This is not a call for American officials to interfere in program activities; that would be extremely counterproductive. In the Arab context especially, United States-funded programs must remain at an operational arm’s length from Washington. But it does mean that the message delivered at the highest levels should reinforce the stated goals of the activities taking place on the ground.

Fourth, the United States should embark on the long journey of democracy promotion only if it is

ready to accept that change is inherent to democratization, and that change may be painful. If Arab governments open genuine political space, many long-suppressed voices will rush to fill the void, some friendly to the United States, many not. But more tinkering at the edges only helps the real problems fester and worsen; specifically, continued repression seems mainly to benefit extremists. Islamists are now a fact of life in Middle East politics; ignoring this is unrealistic. The goal should be to help create conditions that will not only empower other potential reformers, but also encourage the possibility that moderate Islamist groups (those that accept democratic principles and renounce all violence) could commit to long-term democratic competition. This is key: a democratic transition in any Arab country is certain to involve some kind of pact between moderate Islamists and moderates inside the regime.

AN END TO DENIAL

Taking these steps over the next few years would represent a sea change in American policy. It would require the United States to accept democratic

change as a possibility in the Middle East, something it has never seriously contemplated before. It would require tolerating new tensions in American–Arab relations as the United States calls on its Arab friends to take difficult political steps. It would require patient, senior-level attention and ample resources over a period of many years, and in the face of many competing policy demands that involve Iraq, Israeli–Arab relations, the campaign against terror, and unforeseen challenges. It is risky: democracy may continue to be an elusive goal for the region for many years, despite United States efforts. Or, seemingly unshakeable authoritarian regimes could crumble, despite United States efforts. The American public, and Congress, must be prepared for the challenge.

Whether Washington will be able or willing to undertake such a commitment to real democracy promotion is unclear. Yet in the aftermath of September 11, the United States has no alternative other than to begin to shift its role in the Arab world from an enabler of authoritarian rule to a supporter of gradual, but genuine, democratic change. ■

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