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**Shibley Telhami**

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**T**HE AMERICAN PROJECT to spread democracy in the Middle East in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, and the Iraq War was doomed from the outset. That's not because the Middle East is not compatible with democracy, but because the project was based on contradictions and erroneous assumptions.

Spreading democracy as a goal of American foreign policy is not new, especially as a reflection of American values. Even in the Middle East, the administration of George H. W. Bush pushed for democratic reform as a priority following the end of the cold war in 1989 and was instrumental in promoting elections in Jordan and elsewhere. During the first few months of the Clinton administration, Secretary of State Warren Christopher spoke of democracy and reform and even raised the issue with Arab leaders.

What happened in both cases was telling. Not only did Islamists do well in the elections in Jordan and Algeria, but those countries that reformed and thus became sensitive to their public opinion were the most reluctant to cooperate with the United States after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. In the second case, the Clinton administration's need to rally regional support for the emerging Oslo agreements between Israel and the Palestinians, and its fear of Islamists' mobilizing to derail these agreements, once again sidelined the democracy question.

But since September 11, the policy of spreading democracy was sold as a strategic objective, not merely as part of spreading American values. The assumption was that the very terrorism that America faced was in part a function of the absence of democracy in the Middle East. That this notion has little factual support mattered little. More important, any benefits that would accrue from such a policy would only follow the emergence of mature democratic institutions, which even under the best of circumstances, would take decades.

Meanwhile, much of the literature shows that moving from authoritarianism to democracy is an unpredictable and destabilizing path.

Thus, it should have been clear from the outset that neither the public in America nor the public in the Middle East would see benefits that justified the course. Even worse, the very terrorism that elevated the democracy policy in America's priorities was likely to increase, as it thrives where central authority is weak and instability is widespread.

Indeed it is ironic that the three countries that were highlighted as true successes of the democracy policy—Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine—are now the subject of considerable concern and instability. But there is more about the troubling dynamics, even in places where instability did not spread, at least visibly, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, where something else worked against the spread of democracy.

At the same time that the United States asked governments to reform, it also asked them to support policies in Iraq, the war on terrorism, and the Arab-Israeli issue that the vast majority of their publics passionately opposed. Most could not resist America's requests, but in the process, they felt even more insecure as their public grew angry, and, inevitably, they unleashed the security services to prevent revolts—even as they held limited elections. It is not surprising that, in every public opinion poll I have conducted since 2003, most Arabs believed that the Middle East had become even less democratic than it was before the Iraq War.

**I**T IS WORTH considering the way many Arab governments saw America's policy on democracy (and on the extreme end, "regime change"). They believed it was irrational, from the point of view of the American national interest, for the United States to seek their demise, but there was a point at which some were beginning to fear that American policy was indeed irrational, and thus took the threat seriously. But that was only briefly, as most developed a different interpretation of American democracy policy: that the threat of change was largely an instrument of pressure against reluctant allied governments to persuade them to cooperate with the United States on strate-

gic issues such as the Iraq War and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

But they also believed that once George W. Bush told the American public that democracy was an American priority, he had to show some evidence of success, politically. Thus, they made limited moves that allowed the president to claim them as evidence of success. When there were no further reform measures, it became very difficult for Bush to argue that these examples of success were now examples of failure. The ascendance of Islamists in Egypt, Palestine, and Lebanon complicated both the political and the strategic picture for the president even more.

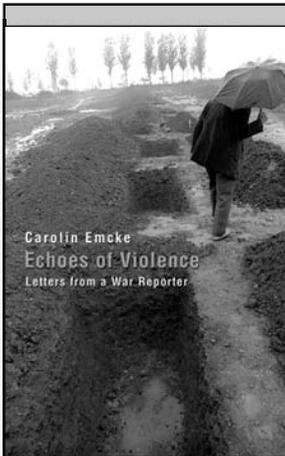
The Arab governments' view that the advocacy of democracy was largely instrumental and also intended to justify the Iraq War once it became clear that there were no weapons of mass destruction was matched by a similar view among the Arab public at large. Public opinion polls I have conducted in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Jordan, the United Arab

Emirates, and Lebanon have shown consistently that fewer than 10 percent of Arabs believe that the spread of democracy was a true American objective, with most believing that oil, Israel, and weakening the Muslim world drive American policy in the region. This was true even before anarchy spread in Iraq, but the latter, coupled with revelations of scandals, such as the Abu Ghraib prison abuses, only reinforced the public perceptions. The seeming rejection of the outcome of Palestinian elections once Hamas won and the feeling that America is doing little to end the occupation in the West Bank and Gaza have added more to Arab skepticism.

It isn't that Arabs have substantially different views of democracy. When asked to name the countries they believe have the most democracy and freedom for their people, all their top choices are Western, democratic countries, including the United States. When they are asked to choose countries outside their own where they would like to live or study, most select Western countries, not China or Pakistan. And even under difficult circumstances, when elections have been allowed to take place freely, the public participated, and the results, as in the case of the Palestinians, have stood. Sure, democracy isn't all about elections, and real reform must be far deeper and more sustained, but that could be said of any region, including Russia.

In the end, most Arabs, like others, want freedom and a system in which their voices count. But even more, they want security for their families, and they reject foreign occupation and anarchy. The very American policy that was said to be aimed at spreading democracy increased the conditions that terrify the public and reduced the attraction of democracy itself. If Iraq is an example of the democratic change they can expect, who, anywhere, would want it? ●

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