the weekly Standard

Arab Democracy, American Ambivalence

Will Bush's rhetoric about transforming the Middle East be matched by American deeds?

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02/23/2004, Volume 009, Issue 23

OVER THE PAST YEAR, the goal of democratizing the Arab Middle East has been elevated from wooly-headed ideal to national security imperative and a key part of the war on terrorism. The Bush administration judged that political dysfunction and failing, corrupt autocracies were making Muslims, and particularly Arabs, especially vulnerable to the appeal of radical Islamist ideologies. America's longtime rationale for supporting Arab autocrats was their promise of stability. But as the president recognized in his landmark speech at the National Endowment for Democracy in November, the price was high and the stability was deceptive. Hence the new "generational commitment" to promote democracy in the Arab world.

In pursuit of this commitment (and other worthy goals), the administration has already taken one enormously large and costly action: It has launched regime change in Iraq, an endeavor on which the U.S. government has lavished considerable blood and treasure, and in which it cannot afford to fail (though fail it might).

It has also done smaller things--and promised in the loftiest rhetoric to do a great many more such things in the decades ahead--to spur democratic development across the entire Middle East. In what the president calls a "forward strategy of freedom," the administration has vowed to reorient U.S. diplomacy and U.S. aid so as to lend moral and material support to pro-democracy forces throughout the Arab world. Its instruments to this end include the Middle East Partnership Initiative, just over one year old; a Middle East Free Trade Area; and a proposed doubling of the budget of the National Endowment for Democracy, a bipartisan grant-giving organization funded by the U.S. government to support the growth of democracy. In addition, at a series of summits this year with the G-8, NATO, and the European Union, Washington reportedly plans to enlist other advanced democracies to endorse reform principles for the Greater Middle East.

Where does this ambitious venture stand at the end of its first year? It is too early, of course, to offer any verdict as to outcomes. But this is clear: For the endeavor to succeed, many within the U.S. government must overcome their own misgivings about it. Only then will Washington convince the Arab world's lonely liberals of the seriousness of its commitment to the goal of "a democratic peace--a peace founded upon the dignity and rights of every man and woman." What's more, given the complexity and scope of the endeavor, its announced centrality to our national security, and its inevitable consequences for our standing in the world, it is none too soon to clarify underlying assumptions, question priorities, and point out pitfalls.

WHY, AFTER ALL, should Arab democrats believe us? Both "anti-imperialist" Arab intellectuals and American analysts note the credibility gap we confront in preaching democracy to the Middle East. Acknowledging our past support for autocrats, as President Bush did in November, is a start. But actually overcoming the credibility gap and building an effective democratization program requires a firmness of purpose the Bush administration has thus far not displayed. Whether it can and will do this remains to be seen.

To be sure, the administration has taken an irrevocable step with the invasion of Iraq. Having committed many billions of dollars to the democratization program there, America must make its success our first priority. One obvious reason is that if democracy takes hold in Iraq, it really might provide a powerful demonstration effect to the neighborhood.

Less obvious is the fact that America's current problems in Iraq--especially the insistence in Washington on a timetable and procedure for transferring sovereignty driven more by our own needs than Iraqis'--are right now providing a powerful *negative* demonstration effect to the neighborhood. The more repressive governments in the region are tightening their domestic controls, confident that we are distracted. Skeptical Arab commentators point out that American liberation has seemingly brought Iraqis nothing but chaos and death. Because President Bush linked the American democracy project in Iraq to reform in other Arab countries, the fate of democracy activists elsewhere in the Arab world now hangs on the success of the new Iraq. If the United States leaves Iraq's political reconstruction half-finished, Washington will have hung Arab democrats out to dry.

Some Arabs doubt President Bush's staying power on behalf of Iraqi democracy, but even more, they doubt that was ever his goal. This deeper skepticism is, sadly, justified by America's historical ambivalence about Arab democracy, an ambivalence that undermines even the new initiatives that are part of the forward strategy. America's error of "excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East," as the president put it, was compounded in 1992, when the U.S. government acquiesced in a military coup in Algeria designed to forestall a victory by the radical Islamic Salvation Front in the country's first free parliamentary elections. The "Algeria problem"--famously defined by veteran diplomat Edward Djerejian as "one man, one vote, one time"--still haunts American policymakers: the fear that free elections in the Arab world will bring to

power Islamist governments that can claim democratic legitimacy but are anti-American and ultimately anti-democratic.

Add to this Washington's worry that assertive democracy-promotion in the Arab world will exacerbate tensions with Arab states whose cooperation on other issues is highly valued in the State Department and the Pentagon. The United States has little to lose by calling for a democratic transformation in states like Libya and Syria, but the Middle East is full of regimes America has worked closely with for years, and whose cooperation it desires on a variety of security and economic matters, not least the war on terrorism. In the past, the U.S. government has typically subordinated its concerns about governance and human rights to cooperation on defense, the Arab-Israeli peace process, and other core issues.

BECAUSE OF THESE LONGSTANDING CONCERNS, American democratization efforts in the Arab world have traditionally been modest, undertaken in consultation with the region's governments, and aimed at delivering technical assistance rather than altering the distribution of political power. Despite the new imperative driving the president's strategy, the policies devised to implement it so far--setting aside the unique case of Iraq--have not escaped these constraints.

In effect, the Bush administration has embraced the Arab regimes' own survival strategy of *controlled liberalization*. Most of the 22 Arab states themselves recognize their systemic failures, and seek to reform in ways that improve government and economic performance without changing the distribution of political power. While a few forward-leaning regimes have placed some power in the hands of their peoples through constitutional and electoral reforms, many others are trying to create just enough sense of forward motion and participation without power to alleviate the building public pressure for change at the top.

The premise underlying America's embrace of this gradual approach is that we can avoid the risk of Islamist victories and minimize bilateral tensions if we help existing governments reform, even if they resist opening up political competition and sharing power. In theory, our new assistance under the Middle East Partnership Initiative and the National Endowment for Democracy is also supposed to identify liberal forces within civil society, give them funding and training, and help them grow to the point where they can bring about velvet revolutions. This gradualist strategy assumes that, over time, liberalization will take on such momentum that the regimes will no longer be able to avoid devolution of power.

But that is an uncertain assumption: If existing regimes do lose control and chaos ensues, there is no guarantee that long-repressed liberals will win out. Indeed, the top-down "liberalization" underway in many Arab states has not relaxed state controls sufficiently to enable any third political force to organize, beyond the state and the Islamist opposition. The Islamists have the mosque as their forum for organizing, but freedom to organize outside the mosque--to talk politics and form parties--is still heavily restricted.

So the regimes maintain control, and the Islamists remain the only alternative--as well as the excuse the regimes give Washington for deeming truly free politics too dangerous.

The larger the Algeria scenario looms in American policymakers' minds as the nightmare to be avoided at all costs, the more our policy is paralyzed; recalcitrant Arab leaders are quick to see this. But that's not the worst of it. The longer the U.S. government rewards regimes that "liberalize" without allowing new political forces to develop, the more the Islamists benefit from such limited political openings as exist. The more entrenched the Islamists become as the political alternative to the status quo, the more the language of Islamism becomes the language of protest politics, and other voices are marginalized. As an Arab official told me recently, "The only institution expressing freedom [to criticize the government] in the Arab world today is the mosque. That's why they're popular." The net effect of gradual "liberalization," then, may be not to drain the swamp of extremism, but to expand it.

FOR LIBERALIZATION TO HAVE REAL MEANING, the regimes themselves must change. No matter how many small-bore grants the U.S. government gives to improve parliamentary effectiveness, judicial independence, or the rule of law, the legislature and judiciary in most Arab countries will remain subordinated to their executives--until those executives give up emergency laws and restrain security forces. And no matter how much training the National Endowment for Democracy sponsors for women candidates or liberal politicians, they will not be able to compete in the political marketplace until their governments allow freedom of expression and association.

America can constrain the power of Arab autocrats and help create space for the emergence of liberal alternatives only by putting political pressure on the regimes and, at the same time, developing partnerships with indigenous reformers both in and out of government. To succeed, America must dovetail its assistance with the needs of Arab activists on the ground. This requires American officials to get outside their embassies and cultivate Arab allies. It also requires U.S. assistance programs to abandon familiar but ineffective approaches such as relying on international "trainers" and placing our funds at the service of governments with a different agenda.

This hasn't happened yet. In its first fiscal year, the Middle East Partnership Initiative spent just under $28 million. Only about $2 million of it went directly to local Arab nongovernmental organizations to help them expand their work, all of it in less controversial areas such as family law, literacy, and anticorruption campaigns. This meager involvement of the nongovernmental sector is largely the result of the Americans' working within, and not pushing, the bounds set by Arab governments: Nongovernmental organizations are tightly controlled in most Arab countries, and in many they are barred from receiving foreign funding. As a result, roughly one-quarter of the money for political, educational, and economic reform is spent through Arab governments or on training for government officials.

What did the reform programs do? In the political area, they trained the newly elected members of Morocco's feeble parliament ($600,000); assisted the elections commission

in Yemen's de facto one-party state ($325,000); convened a group of Arab judges, whose courts are plagued by corruption and government interference, to discuss "judicial procedure, independence, ethics, appointments, and training" ($1,425,000); and so on. Economic reform projects include funding the translation of government documents, under the rubric of helping Arab states join the World Trade Organization and negotiate free-trade agreements with the United States. Education programs include "English in a Box" for Jordanian and Moroccan teachers ($400,000), Internet connections for Yemeni high schools ($1.5 million), and a "child-centered education program" for North Africa and the Gulf ($1.1 million). None of these programs is intrinsically bad. But as catalysts for tangible political change, they don't stand a chance.

YET EVEN AS American aid programs fail to challenge autocratic regimes from below by supporting local activists, the administration--despite the president's fine words--is failing to challenge the regimes from above. Yet surely the United States must press Arab regimes to reform their politics, not just their political process. The United States should press a consistent message in the region: that controlled "liberalization" that creates quasi-democratic institutions with no power is not democratization. Elections are important, of course, but as Algeria taught us, they are not the primary need. Even more basic are the protections that enable a variety of citizens and groups to speak and organize and operate effectively in politics: freedom of the press, freedom of association, the right to peaceably assemble, and the legalization of political parties and advocacy groups. Some or all of these are absent in most Arab states.

Forcing governments to withdraw their control over the public square and give power to participatory institutions is necessary if non-Islamist political forces are to organize, formulate agendas, and press their case against the state in competition with the Islamists. In Kuwait--where the emir loosened controls under American prodding after the Iraqi occupation of the country in 1991--a decade of freedom of expression, the abolition of state security courts, and the election of parliaments with meaningful oversight over executive policy-making have enabled the emergence of a liberal political movement, with representatives in parliament, as a real alternative to the Islamists and the monarchy. While the Islamists are still the principal opposition, the liberals are viable competitors in the political arena. Even more significant, liberals in Kuwait occasionally ally themselves with Islamists to argue for political freedoms, just as they ally themselves with liberal factions within the royal family to try to contain Islamist initiatives. This embryonic coalition politics is the first evidence that a healthy political pluralism can develop in an Arab society and may be able to prevent liberalization from leading to "one man, one vote, one time." With these ingredients of democracy in place, it seems inevitable that those advocating the vote for women will soon succeed.

But in other states where political expression and the ability to organize are still severely restricted, non-Islamist social groups have a large gap to overcome before they can mount an effective challenge in the marketplace of ideas, much less in the political arena. In Saudi Arabia, for example, there is a group of intellectuals who are essentially liberal reformers. But since political parties and political meetings are outlawed and the press is controlled, they have no means of organizing themselves, no way of demonstrating their

base of support within society, and no way to lobby the government beyond open letters to the crown prince.

THE U.S. GOVERNMENT must also do a better job of coordinating its assistance programs for civil society with its diplomatic agenda. To give one example, funds from the Middle East Partnership Initiative are currently flowing to Internews, an international nonprofit organization, to train journalists across the region--but this program is not accompanied by any noticeable pressure on regimes to relax their controls on the media. Saudi journalists are participating in the Internews program, but abstract discussions of journalistic independence are less relevant to their daily reality than the fact that several Saudi journalists lost their jobs or their columns last year after they questioned the influence of extremist clerics in politics and the exclusion of women from public life. When the United States fails to speak up for those who challenge the system, others have little incentive to try, and activists who would like to take President Bush's words seriously and look to America for support feel betrayed.

In order to build credibility with Arab democrats, American foreign policy must communicate to Arab governments that states that are actually changing the distribution of political power will enjoy better relations with the United States than those that talk about reform but fail to implement it. America has powerful carrots to offer. If we cared to work at devising targeted incentives for real reform we would discover a panoply of underused tools at our disposal. The president's proposal for a Middle East Free Trade Area, in particular, was conceived mainly as a means of integrating Arab economies into world markets and creating wealth, on the general assumption that economic liberalization over time encourages democracy. But opening trade negotiations could be made conditional on political progress. While the United States does not typically insert human rights clauses into trade agreements, it could certainly use trade talks with Arab nations to promote liberal change (notably in such areas as transparency and rule of law). What the United States must *not* do is direct even more money to Arab governments as a reward for limited reform. This, unfortunately, appears to be part of the "Helsinki" plan currently being discussed with the Europeans.

Finally, the United States must trust that shared interests with its Arab interlocutors will mediate the tensions that an effective democratization effort is bound to create. Many in the diplomatic establishment argue that a more aggressive approach to democratization will necessarily cost Arab cooperation with America's other regional goals. A broader perspective is essential.

America's relations with key states are grounded in a web of longstanding mutual interests and benefits. Such relationships can withstand tensions. Riyadh and Washington share interests in the strategic defense of the Gulf and stability in the price of oil, and they still would, even if the United States were to push Saudi Arabia harder on political reform. And in 2002, when Washington threatened to withhold additional aid to Egypt over the imprisonment of democracy activist (and dual U.S. citizen) Saad Eddin Ibrahim, it sent a strong message to the Egyptian government, and did no significant damage to bilateral relations. Although Ibrahim was released by a court ruling, local activists fear he received

special treatment because of his dual nationality. The United States should make clear that its handling of his case is to be seen not as an outlier but as a precedent for U.S. policy toward our Arab friends.

If the administration means it when it calls Arab democracy necessary to American security, then we must build a policy to match and back it with political will. We cannot shrink from the tradeoffs required to achieve success, but must accept them and develop ways to manage both the costs for bilateral relations and the risks of undesired outcomes. It must be a policy that combines the assistance to indigenous liberals that the Middle East Partnership Initiative is supposed to provide but is not now structured to succeed at, with consistent, high-profile diplomatic and economic pressure and incentives to induce states to allow political freedom and to shift power away from the central executive.

America cannot promote democracy in the Arab world unless its strategy is credible. That requires staying the course in Iraq. Equally, it requires a carefully calibrated and robustly supported set of policies institutionalizing the forward strategy of freedom for the long haul. Otherwise, President Bush's powerful rhetoric on the universality of liberal values will prove to be a dead letter, and the cost to the United States, and to the peoples of the Arab world, will be immense.

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