The End of Arab Exceptionalism, and of America's Own

THE FINAL YEAR of the George W. Bush administration admittedly presents an awkward context for a book arguing for a muscular American policy of democracy promotion in the Middle East. Attempting to push the Middle East toward more American-style government was, after all, one of the Bush administration's hallmarks, and the results have discredited the project as few could have imagined. Where the administration failed, it failed spectacularly. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq produced a seemingly endless military quagmire that resulted in thousands of dead American soldiers and untold numbers of dead Iraqis; the reconstruction effort produced nothing an American might confuse with democracy. Even where the administration succeeded by its own terms, it failed spectacularly. It pushed for elections in the Palestinian territories and got a Hamas government and a civil war among the Palestinian factions. It pushed for fairer and more open elections in Egypt and got a show of electoral force from the Muslim Brotherhood. It pushed for new elections in Lebanon, free from Syrian meddling, and got an impressive showing by Hizballah and a weak and paralyzed government whose collapse it has had to struggle ever since to prevent. Given these outcomes, many Americans now regard the promotion of democracy as a fool's errand, the province of naïfs and neoconservatives. Even Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who so boldly championed Middle East democracy, has practically stopped talking about it except when asked by a journalist.

So it is with full awareness of the uphill climb I face with most readers that I state what should be an unremarkable thesis: promoting democracy in the Arab world remains an imperative for the United States. This is the case not merely—or even mainly—because democracy might act as an antidote to the spread of Islamist terrorism but because enduring American interests in the region require us to embrace and advance democracy for Arab citizens. America's fundamental interests in the Middle East remain largely unchanged, despite the dramatic threats revealed by the attacks of September 11, 2001, and despite the massive, costly, and long-term intervention in Iraq. What has changed, radically, is the effectiveness of America's traditional means of securing its regional interests. What has worked in the past will not work in the future.

In the coming years the United States will find its historical tools of alliance-building in the Middle East altogether insufficient to protect American interests. As the Iraq war has amply shown, even America's overwhelming military power does not enable it to achieve its regional goals unilaterally. U.S.-Arab cooperation remains a fundamental necessity for regional peace and global economic stability. But the path to promoting and sustaining successful cooperation has irrevocably changed. U.S.-Arab cooperation can no longer be sustained on the crumbling foundation of the past—the reliance on strong, autocratic leaders who can guarantee policy cooperation even in the face of domestic disapproval. A stable new basis for America's necessary regional engagement can be built only on the enlightened self-interest of both sides, and today, unlike in the past, that requires the consent of the region's citizens. Only the development of liberal democracies in the Arab world's major states will, in the long term, secure the advancement of American goals in the region.

The Middle East is, according to Freedom House, the least democratic region on the globe. It resisted even the third wave of democratization that swept through Asia, Latin America, and eastern Europe during the 1980s and 1990s. Arab "exceptionalism" has produced its own scholarly literature of explanation and apology.[1] Scholars have explained the persistence of Arab authoritarianism through reference to historical circumstances, religious philosophy, political culture, great-power politics, and oil economics, among other factors.[2] Over the decades since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire following its defeat in World War I, Arab states have been through many waves of political upheaval, yet the Arab world has not witnessed a single

successful transition to democracy. A number of regimes in the region survive essentially unaltered from their form at the moment of postcolonial independence. But most Arab regimes have undergone dramatic changes, including revolution, civil war, and military rule. More recently, since the end of the cold war, many Arab rulers have experimented with reforms in economics, politics, or both. They have used the banner of "democratization" to refer to the reestablishment of parliamentary bodies (Kuwait), the revision of press and association laws (Jordan and Egypt), and the holding of contested presidential elections (Yemen). Indeed, at several points in the past twenty years, the relatively quick pace and broad scope of reforms in certain countries led observers to hail a democratic transformation in the region. But by and large these changes amounted to little improvement in the distribution of political power in Arab societies or in the minimal degree of public accountability governments in the region enjoy.

In recent years the rhetoric of democratization and the use of certain of democracy's forms have been in vogue even among Arab autocrats. Four of the conservative tribal monarchies of the Arab gulf have given women the right to vote and run for office.[3] Egypt's long-time autocrat, President Hosni Mubarak, allowed himself to be reelected to his fifth term through a competitive ballot rather than, as in previous years, a yes-or-no referendum.[4] At the sixth annual Doha Forum on Democracy, Development, and Free Trade, held in April 2006, the Qatari emir, hereditary monarch of the tiny gulf nation, said that "the success of the democratic process is essential for addressing the manifestations of tyranny and corruption that still devour the people's fortunes, deprive them of their rights, and push some of them to extremism and alienation."[5] Even the calcified Arab League agreed, in March 2004, to "keep pace with the rapid world changes, by consolidating the democratic practice, by enlarging participation in political and public life, [and] by fostering the role of all components of the civil society, including NGOs, in conceiving of the guidelines of the society of tomorrow."[6]

The most dramatic change in rhetoric, however, has come not from the region but from the White House. Many commentators greeted President Bush's commitment, declared in November 2003, to spreading democracy in the Middle East as a radical restructuring of American policy toward the region. But the commitment was not entirely new; the administration's rhetorical emphasis on transforming the politics of the Arab world had been evident since shortly after the 9/11 attacks. At West Point in June 2002,

for example, the president asserted, "The twentieth century ended with a single surviving model of human progress, based on non-negotiable demands of human dignity, the rule of law, limits on the power of the state, respect for women and private property and free speech and equal justice and religious tolerance. . . . Mothers and fathers and children across the Islamic world, and all the world, share the same fears and aspirations."[7]

Seven months later, on the eve of the Iraq war, the president argued the importance of democratization in the Arab world for American security, asserting that "stable and free nations do not breed the ideologies of murder."[8] Bush has sustained his rhetorical emphasis on democratization in the years since then. In his second inaugural address he famously declared, "The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world."[9] And in a speech at the National Defense University in March 2005 he said that "for the sake of our long-term security, all free nations must stand with the forces of democracy and justice that have begun to transform the Middle East."[10]

The reason for this shift in presidential attitudes toward Middle East autocracy is an altered view of international security and its requirements that derives from the end of the cold war and the rise of transnational security threats, including international organized crime, refugee and other migrant flows, and, most notably, international terrorism.[11] If events such as the Rwandan genocide or the Somali state's collapse demonstrated the consequences of internal political dynamics for the security of neighboring states, then the al Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001, drove home to many Western leaders the idea that domestic politics in one country or region might produce consequences affecting the security of states far distant.[12]

The U.S. government thus embraced the necessity of democratizing the Middle East in order to, as the phrase goes, "drain the swamp" from which Islamist terrorism emerges.[13] The president's "forward strategy of freedom" was the first attempt by the Bush administration to enunciate a positive vision for American engagement in the post-Saddam Middle East. It was also, quite consciously, a strategy for winning the war on terrorism by transforming the dysfunctional politics of the region, which in Bush's view made Arab citizens resentful and repressed and so more vulnerable to the appeals of extremist ideology. The Freedom Agenda, as the administration formally dubbed it, was billed as the political face of America's counterterrorism

effort. Deeper and more meaningful than any attempt to "win hearts and minds" for the United States itself, it was an effort to win Arab hearts and minds over to the practice of American values and virtues—whether the new practitioners ultimately embraced the United States and its policies or not. From this perspective the goal of democracy in the Arab and broader Muslim worlds was to marginalize Islamist extremists, delegitimate political violence, and so make the world safe for Americans.

President Bush was probably correct in supposing that spreading liberal values in the Middle East would reduce the prevalence of anti-American terrorism in the long run. It is hard to imagine that, embraced by Arab societies, values such as toleration, limited government, individual rights, and equality before the law would not help to limit the appeal of the ideology—deeply intolerant, totalitarian, even nihilistic—that undergirds the terrorists' actions and provides them with moral, popular, and financial support and with a pool of willing recruits. Although democracy might not defeat terrorism, in the long run it ought to help undermine the popularity of violent, radical Islamism in countries where the ideology currently enjoys followers, sympathizers, and admirers.[14]

The trouble is that although this theory has strong philosophical roots and many friends, it is as yet entirely speculative.[15] Democratic societies produce terrorism and recently have even produced Islamist terrorists such as, to name only a few examples, Zacarias Moussaoui, Richard Reid, and the perpetrators of the July 2005 attacks on the London subway. Democratization, moreover, is a long-term and uncertain process and, as recent scholarship has shown, often produces violence.[16] The assumption that democratization could defeat terrorism seems a thin reed upon which to build such a dramatic new commitment for American foreign policy.

But here is the rub: Although George W. Bush's application of America's traditional democratic idealism to the Middle East may derive largely from the post-9/11 logic of the global war on terror, it also responds, intentionally or not, to a real and growing crisis in Middle East governance. The hesitant reforms of the Arab world's monarchs and imperial presidents and the mounting domestic and international pressure for more reform both respond to Arab societies' sinking circumstances in a changed global environment. In a world in which democratic governance is an increasingly universal norm, in which political, social, and economic openness and flexibility appear to be the keys to successful development, the Arab states are

increasingly out of step.[17] At the same time, demographic forces within the Arab countries are increasingly challenging their governments' abilities to provide the basics: education, housing, health care, and jobs. The governance crisis in the Arab states has deep and long-standing roots. And the forces of change that are buffeting the Middle East from within and without are strong and growing.

They are not, by and large, explicitly democratic forces, meaning that the outcome of the coming change, without some concerted push, may well not be democratic either. Indeed, democratization in the Middle East is by no means inevitable—it is a very uncertain path, fraught with danger. But it is a path that the peoples of the Middle East must take, because the alternatives are so much worse—for them, for us, and for the world.

Because of this reality, America's new policy of democracy promotion in the Arab world is not best viewed as a naïve, ideological juggernaut that deserves to crash and burn with the end of Bush's second term in office. Rather, the policy meshes with the real historical circumstances of both domestic and regional Arab politics. Bush's policy commitment to Arab democracy was significant not because it promised an end to Islamist terrorism—which it could not realistically hope to deliver—but because it was responsive to historical developments already under way in the Middle East. That is why getting American policy right on this issue is so important and why the actual execution of the Freedom Agenda has been so disappointing.

Indeed, despite the high-volume rhetorical commitments of the Bush administration, it remains to be seen whether the United States can help to midwife the birth of a democratic Arab future or whether, if the transformation occurs, the United States will be a mere spectator. The structures put into place to implement President Bush's Freedom Agenda for the Middle East were woefully inadequate to the task at hand, and the minimal investments of funds and, more important, of political capital made by the United States in supporting Arab democrats have so far had little effect other than threatening the credibility of the project.

Already in the Freedom Agenda's first few years the project has been beset by a lack of commitment among the foreign policy bureaucracy, by a mismatch between the assistance strategy and realities on the ground, and, most notably, by a lack of sufficient support at senior policy levels to bolster democracy assistance with frank government-to-government dialogue. A

degree of naïveté in designing and implementing programs also limited the policy's force and chipped away at its effectiveness and the seriousness with which rulers and activists in the region viewed it. Continuing down this path risks undermining the foundation of American public and congressional support for the larger project.

America's weak-kneed policy, though, does not result simply from indecision or an inadequate commitment to democratization on Bush's part. It flows, rather, from genuine dilemmas and costs associated with the promotion of democracy—costs vividly on display in the Hamas victory and the gains by Islamists in Egypt and militants in Lebanon. The United States, while it today enjoys unprecedented and perhaps unmatched ability to influence the direction of change in the Arab Middle East, still faces significant risks and obstacles to doing so effectively. First is the potential for democratic processes in Arab states to produce outcomes that many Americans, including many policymakers, find unpalatable—specifically, the election of Islamists to the leaderships of what are today friendly Arab states. Second is the possibility that a serious-minded pro-democracy policy might impede Arab regimes' cooperation with Washington on other issues of importance. These two factors, along with other challenges of policy implementation, explain the hesitation and half-measures that have characterized even the most aggressive American efforts to advance democracy in this region.

The ambivalence these risks and costs induce is understandable, but it creates a major impediment of its own: a significant credibility deficit on America's part in arguing for democratic change to an Arab audience. Grassroots activists know the difference between drop-in-the-bucket grant-making programs administered by mid-level bureaucrats and a speech in which the president of the United States demands, as Ronald Reagan did of Mikhail Gorbachev in Berlin, that the Soviet leader "tear down this wall." And America's limited credibility with the Arab public, in any event, impairs its ability to play a direct role in encouraging grassroots democratic development. Indeed, some Arab democracy activists argue that, given America's tainted reputation in the region, direct American assistance harms grassroots democrats more than it helps them. Any effective policy of democracy promotion must begin by confronting and resolving the risks of bad outcomes and competing priorities—and addressing thereby the ambivalence they induce in America's own attitude toward the project.

This is not, I admit, a challenge most commentators and policymakers now wish to tackle. The United States is in the midst of a full-fledged backlash against advancing democracy as a policy objective. Democracy promotion, we are told, is naïve, unachievable, and imperialistic. And even when we win, we end up losing. The conventional wisdom argues instead that we have no choice but to bolster the Middle East's extant autocratic regimes as bulwarks against extremism or at most to promote economic and other gradual reforms as spurs to eventual democratization.

This is exactly the wrong answer.

My purpose in this book is to argue that, notwithstanding the failures of the past several years, America has no viable choice but to wield its power and influence firmly on behalf of democratic reform in the Middle East, alongside other reforms in economics and society. For the United States, and indeed for the rest of the international community, the risks that accompany Arab democratization are at least balanced by, if not overwhelmed by, the risks of failing to act on behalf of democratic development in this strategic part of the world. Propping up corrupt autocrats might seem the only way to hold back radical Islamists whom democracy would hasten to power. But, in fact, failing to press assertively for basic political rights serves to entrench the Islamists' position as the sole viable opposition to the autocrats, just as surely as it entrenches the autocrats—for now, at least—in power. Only by pushing to expand political freedoms can the United States cultivate the sort of political movements that can challenge the Islamists for legitimacy as voices of dissent. In pressing for expanded political rights, the United States has more powerful tools than many policymakers and commentators imagine.

All this may seem an obtuse argument given the extent to which, in the public discourse both in the United States and abroad, the Bush administration's policy of advancing Middle Eastern democracy is inextricably linked to the war in Iraq. Yet this conflation misunderstands both the Iraq war and Bush's policy of democracy promotion. Humanitarian intervention to topple a brutal dictatorship was a distant third among the rationales put forward by the Bush administration and its allies for the invasion; the primary arguments had to do with Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, both past and presumed, and its alleged links to terrorist groups. Hope that Saddam's fall would produce a democratic "domino effect" in the region was expressed by the president and other senior officials as a hope, not as a war

aim.[18] The United States would not have gone to war simply to create a democracy in Iraq, absent what was then viewed as a compelling security rationale. On the other hand, having made a decision to invade and topple the existing dictatorship, the United States and its allies could not reasonably have been expected to impose a nondemocratic successor regime in Baghdad. The goal of establishing a democratic government in Iraq is properly viewed as a consequence of the decision to go to war, not as a motive.

Similarly, the project of Iraqi stabilization would have been only marginally less difficult had the American military imposed a strongman of its own. The military would still have had to contend with the competing ambitions of Kurds, Sunnis, and Shiites, and it would still have faced an insurgency by al Qaeda and by those dissatisfied with the distribution of power and wealth in post-Saddam Iraq. The challenge of building a democracy in Iraq after the previous regime's defeat is more properly viewed as a project of postconflict reconstruction and nation-building than one of promoting a transition from authoritarianism to democracy.

The Iraq war is a distorted prism through which to view external efforts to cultivate Middle East democracies for another reason: almost no efforts to promote democracy, either today in the Middle East or throughout modern history, have been carried out at the point of a gun. Although international norms clearly endorse democracy as the form of government most protective of fundamental human rights and freedoms, and although post–cold war international practice suggests the evolution of a "duty to protect" citizens from an abusive government as a rationale for external intervention, a lack of democracy in and of itself has *never* been suggested by any state as sufficient reason for military overthrow. Aggravated human rights abuses and transborder effects harmful to international peace and security (such as mass refugee flows) have been required to raise governments' indifference to their citizens to a level worthy of international scrutiny, let alone action.[19] The notion that democracy promotion necessarily involves forcible imposition or military intervention, simply because the war in Iraq did so, is a red herring. Indeed, partly as a result of the fiasco in Iraq, the United States is far from advocating forcible regime change in any other case, either in the Middle East or outside it. The Bush administration may have pressed its relatively ambitious agenda of democracy promotion in the Middle East simultaneous with its execution of the war in Iraq, but the two efforts—except in Iraq itself—employ different approaches

and tools. Iraq is not a model of democracy promotion likely ever to be replicated.

This is not to say that the war in Iraq has no implications for efforts to promote democracy in the Middle East. Unfortunately, those implications are vast. At least initially there was some evidence in the wake of the invasion that, as in past episodes of Arab military defeat, Western intervention in the Arab heartland had provoked the sort of introspection that might encourage internal pressures for democratic change. As in 1967, after Israel's lightning defeat of the combined Arab armies and conquest of territory previously held by Syria, Jordan, and Egypt, Arab commentators asked how it was that their nations had become so feeble. The ouster of Saddam likewise compelled even nationalist journalists and intellectuals to ask whether internal weaknesses were what had led to the humiliation of yet another external military intervention in the region. For example, a petition signed by 287 Syrian citizens and delivered to Syrian president Bashar al-Assad in May 2003 noted that "the only force capable" of combating America's imperialist plans in Iraq and Palestine was "a free nation."[20]

More recently, however, the chaos in Iraq has overtaken Arab public perceptions, making an easy case for those who argue for the benefits of order over freedom in public life. It has also further discredited American leadership and, in Arab eyes, motives.[21] This has made it more difficult for those both inside the region and around the world to partner with the United States in advancing Arab democracy. Whether the Iraq war will, in the end, hasten or stymie a democratic trend in the Middle East will be a matter for historians to judge. But however much the American intervention in Iraq may color contemporary perceptions, clearly it is inappropriate to restrict a discussion of the American role in building Arab democracy to an examination of the failed military intervention in Iraq.

The more substantial objection to efforts to promote Arab democracy is that those undertaken by the Bush administration have produced very limited payoffs—and some of the farther-reaching outcomes have yielded profound regret in Washington. The elections in Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine produced gains by armed Islamist factions whose values are far from the liberal pluralism that the United States would like to see triumph in Arab politics. Indeed, the very commitment of these groups to democratic pluralism, given their ideologies and their continued armed activities, is questionable.

In some places, domestic agitation and initial American pressure produced substantive gains in political freedom. In Egypt, Yemen, and Morocco, for example, the period immediately following the Iraq war produced tangible results. Egypt held its first-ever competitive presidential ballot, marred though it was by unfair rules, state harassment of opposition candidates, and repression of voters. In Yemen the president committed the government to a new anticorruption drive and allowed a significant degree of competition in his reelection bid. In Morocco a major social reform passed the legislature that vastly improved the legal status of women. The king also accepted the report of a commission investigating state abuses of human rights during the reign of his father. But in each place, progress slowed or even was reversed (notably in Egypt) as American efforts flagged and the executive power reasserted its authority over spheres where greater liberty had temporarily reigned.

Surveying the region in late 2007, one sees the Lebanese government stalemated between allies and adversaries of neighboring Syria, with the militant group Hizballah nearly able to tip the government into irrelevance. The Palestinian Authority, struggling under the weight of Fatah's entrenched corruption and Hamas's violent intransigence, has split into two rival entities in the West Bank and Gaza. In Egypt, major opposition leaders are back in prison and the country holds its breath to see what Mubarak's death might hold in store. It is not a pretty picture, and realists are reasonably tempted to avert their eyes and try to return to the comfort of the old policy framework—one in which dictators did as America wanted, more or less, in exchange for American indulgence of their illiberalisms.

But that comforting framework is no longer available. One way or another, major changes are coming to Middle East governments. The United States can try to prevent those changes, but for reasons I lay out in the following chapters, it is highly unlikely to succeed in the long run and will pay a huge price for the effort to stand behind the region's repressive forces. The alternative is to try to shape the change, to encourage and cultivate those forces and institutions most congenial to Western values and interests. Uniquely at this moment in history, the United States has a crucial role to play in the future of the Middle East. America's overwhelming military and economic dominance of world affairs since the cold war, its brash but irrevocable intervention in Iraq, its indispensable role in Arab-Israeli

relations, and its close military relations with many Arab leaders and governments make its attitude toward domestic Arab political development a significant variable in the way these changes play out. America's enduring interests in the Middle East do not allow it to take a neutral stance toward the question of Arab democracy.

In the next chapter I look at the challenges that have historically beset American efforts to promote democracy abroad and that long prevented the United States from making any serious attempts to do so in the Arab world. I explore the two chief impediments—the conflict between democracy promotion and other strategic interests, and the risks of Islamist takeover—that have handicapped even the Bush administration's landmark efforts.

In chapter three I explain the factors that have, until now, largely sustained Arab autocracy even while democratization has transformed every other part of the globe. I also explain why the status quo that the United States has so long defended in the Middle East is no longer viable, examine the dangers of the current period, and argue that America therefore has little choice but to try to aid a peaceful transition to more democratic politics in the region.

I use chapter four to consider alternatives to a policy of democracy promotion in the Arab world and reveal why none of them will suffice to safeguard American interests or to avoid the pitfalls of instability and extremism, as their proponents claim they will. In chapter five I explore and critique the tools of American policy that have so far been directed toward advancing a democratic transformation of the Middle East. The investments made by the Bush administration match neither its soaring rhetoric nor the necessity and urgency of the enterprise at hand. America's policy of Middle East democracy promotion has so far been beset by ambivalence, a consequence of its inability to resolve the enduring challenges outlined in chapter two. Chapter five lays bare the ambiguity afflicting American policy in the Bush administration and explains the failings of Bush's Freedom Agenda.

In chapter six I describe ways to overcome this debilitating ambivalence and build a sustainable policy of democracy promotion in this challenging environment while protecting key American interests. American leverage in the region is significant, but it cannot be exercised without limit or cost. America's desire to advance democratic politics must be tempered by a grounded assessment of the risks of change in the region and how to hedge

against them. A practicable strategy must acknowledge these challenges and focus attention on areas of maximum leverage and efficacy. In particular, I argue, the United States must seek in all its efforts to advance basic political freedoms for Arab citizens, which are key to resolving the dilemmas of democratization in this region. The United States must therefore be willing to put other elements of U.S. policy at stake in pressing that end with its Arab allies.

In chapter seven I tackle the challenge of integrating Islamist movements successfully into democratic Arab politics. The United States cannot choose the winners and losers in future Arab democracies, and its attitude toward Islamist movements must become far more attuned to regional realities. I develop a framework in this chapter for making American decisions about which groups to condone, to associate with, or to support in the context of broader democratization. The book concludes with a brief discussion of the necessary bureaucratic elements of an effective policy and how support for robust American democracy promotion can be built and sustained among the institutions of American government and society.

Having decided that "America's vital interests and [its] deepest beliefs are now one," as Bush said in his second inaugural address, does not mean that the two will be congruent in every time and place or that democracy promotion requires no difficult choices along the way.[22] A proper understanding of America's role and its limits is necessary to transform a comfortable and only-when-convenient idealism into a sustainable and effective policy. A hard-headed framework for making unavoidable choices about how and when to press for democratic change is necessary to prevent the freedom strategy from being abandoned as impractical when such choices emerge. Think of this book as a realist's argument for democracy promotion in the Middle East and a guidebook for making the choices that a realistic strategy demands.