The End to Aggressive Promotion of Democracy

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In a series of speeches beginning June 2002, US president George Bush presented the expansion of democracy as a, if not *the*, key goal of American foreign policy.[1] By March 2006, this was set out formally in the opening sentence of the National Security Strategy: "It is the policy of the United States to seek and support democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world."[2] This is not pure altruism. September 11 had ostensibly proved that "sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe – because in the long run stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty."[3] Thus, aggressively promoting "a forward strategy of freedom" in the Middle East "reflects the union of our values and our national interests."[4]

The United States pursued this strategy militarily (Iraq), diplomatically (Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority), and financially and rhetorically (all over). The heyday was in 2005, but since then the "Arab spring" has withered. This article details this process, and explores the reasons for American policy diluting the democracy campaign and reverting to traditional pro-stability realism. Egypt, which the administration had hoped would lead the way, provides a quintessential example.[5]

Egypt

At the beginning of her term as secretary of state in early 2005, Condoleezza Rice cancelled a scheduled visit to Egypt due to the arrest of the leader of the liberal opposition, Ayman Nour. Four months later, following his release, Rice traveled to Egypt and gave a celebrated speech at Cairo's American University. Using blunt language – that bespoke serious interference in internal affairs – she detailed a list of what the Egyptian government "must" do in order to proceed with democratization and reform.[6] In the spring of 2006, the secretary did not postpone a visit after municipal elections were canceled, though during a joint press conference with her Egyptian counterpart she elaborated on Egypt's dismal pace of reform. However, there was already a noticeable change in the tone. Instead of talking about "musts," Rice

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conveyed a volte face: "We can't tell Egypt what its course can be or should be."[7] In turn, when in Cairo a year later the secretary voiced timid concern over the constitutional referendum, she was quickly rebuked by Egypt's foreign minister: "Egypt can't accept interference in its affairs."[8]

Rice's regressive rhetoric reflects the course of democratization in Egypt. In 2005 the future looked brighter. President Husni Mubarak received 78 percent of the vote versus Nour's 8 percent in Egypt's first competitive presidential elections. Restrictions on freedom of expression and the press were relaxed a bit, and parliamentary elections were held in a less prohibitive manner. However, after "independent" candidates affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood captured 20 percent of the seats, the government resumed its traditional ways. Scheduled municipal elections were canceled; the generation-old state of emergency was extended; Nour was again jailed on trumped-up charges; opposition activity was violently disrupted by the police; and the judiciary's fight for independence was blocked at every turn. In a sham March 2007 referendum, judicial oversight of elections was constitutionally replaced by a government-appointed panel, and 26 year-old emergency laws (special powers of arrest and eavesdropping) were enshrined in the constitution. The Egyptian regime dealt American aspirations a blow even on the regional scene. In November 2005, a conference of the democracy-promoting Forum for the Future broke up without a joint statement because Egypt demanded that Arab governments be given significant control over which democracy groups receive aid from a new fund.[9] Undoubtedly, Egypt is rebuffing the American agenda.

The American response has been meek, to say the least. The only sign of displeasure was suspension of negotiations on a free trade agreement after Nour was convicted in a bogus trial. A day after police brutally dispersed a peaceful pro-democracy demonstration and arrested more than 200 activists, President Bush met with Gamal, Husni Mubarak's son and presumed heir apparent. This was justifiably perceived as acquiescence to the crackdown and the succession.[10] While activists were arrested and bloggers were tortured, the American ambassador spoke of "the great level of freedom…in the Mubarak era."[11] Egypt receives annual American aid to the tune of $1.4 billion ($60 billion since 1979, more per capita than Europe did under the Marshall Plan). Congressional proposals to cut aid were rejected by the administration on the grounds of "national interests."[12] In 2005 Bush promised, "All who live in tyranny and hopelessness can know: the United States will not ignore your oppression, or excuse your oppressors. When you stand for your liberty, we will stand with you."[13] Not surprisingly, therefore, opposition activists in Egypt say they "will never trust Americans again."[14]

The United States has largely turned a blind eye to the ebb of democracy in the Middle East.

The Wider Picture

To a significant degree, Egypt exemplifies the unstable trajectory of democracy's progress in the Middle East. Naysayers deriding the democracy agenda are exaggerating, because there *has* been an "Arab spring" to which American policy *had* contributed. Between 2002 and 2006 this spring was electorally manifested in many ways: after half a century of tyranny, Iraqis went to the polls three times; Palestinians held free presidential and parliamentary elections; for the first time in a generation Lebanon held elections free from an oppressive Syrian presence; Al-

geria, Tunisia, and Yemen held competitive presidential elections; half the members in the UAE's parliament are now chosen rather than nominated; municipal elections were held in Saudi Arabia for the first time since the 1960s; and in Kuwait's parliamentary elections, assorted (liberal and Islamist) reformists swept a majority of the seats.

Freedom of the press expanded across the Middle East. Bahrain and Morocco empowered judicial bodies to look into past human rights abuses. There has also been progress in women's rights: in Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain women were enfranchised, and some hold governmental posts. In ultra-conservative Saudi Arabia, women were allowed to vote and run in elections for the board of the Jidda Chamber of Commerce and Industry (two were elected). Women obtained the right to carry identity cards, which is a first step in gaining independent legal status, and are now allowed to appear unveiled on television.

According to the rankings of Freedom House, in 2005 Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority were upgraded from "not free" to "partly free." Jordan and Kuwait were both upgraded on the scale of political rights and civil liberties after 2004.[15] No Arab country (or Muslim country, for that matter) was downgraded.[16]

While democracies might well be more peaceful toward each other, democratizing states per se are less so.

Though it is difficult to prove causality, it is reasonable to assume that most of the above would not have happened without the American forward strategy of freedom. This is patently true regarding democracy in Iraq. American influence was also crucial both to the international effort that liberated Lebanon from the Syrian army, as well as to the Israeli decision to allow the electoral participation of Hamas. In the past five years the United States invested approximately $2 billion in a wide array of programs to promote democracy in the Middle East, almost ten times the sum spent the previous decade.[17] This investment reflects the understanding that democracy building means not only fast-track progress in electoral practices but also slower-track deeper reforms: building institutions of civil society; teaching party and parliamentarian practices; strengthening free media; promoting rule of law, ensuring accountable and effective government and an independent judiciary; encouraging small business enterprises (in order to empower the middle class); expanding access to all levels of education and to employable skills; and empowering women in all aspects of life.[18] The American initiative put democracy promotion on the international and regional agendas, and the administration's rhetoric emboldened Arab reformers and pressured Arab regimes. Even leaders of Oman and Syria felt obliged to embrace the rhetoric if not the practice of reform. It was against this backdrop that in 2004, Yemen's President Saleh counseled his Arab colleagues: "trim your hair now or someone will shave it for you" (i.e., reform, or risk being swept away in a tide of democratization).[19]

The Yemeni president, however, is another example of the half empty glass, or perhaps of the emptying glass. In 2004, in the spirit of reform, he promised to step down in 2006 at the end of his term, after twenty-eight years in office. Last year Saleh changed both his mind and consequently the constitution. So did the president of Algeria. During the past year, Jordan has approved laws that allow journalists to be jailed easily for "slander," similar to laws in Yemen and in the Maghreb. In Bahrain, elections in November 2006 were skewed against the Shiite majority, and opposition activists are still harassed. Reform

proceeds at a snail's pace in Saudi Arabia, even though King Abdullah has lent his own considerable moral weight to the momentum.[20] Intellectuals were arrested for signing a polite petition to consider a transition to a constitutional monarchy. True, much lauded municipal elections were held, but the local councils have not yet been convened. Except for a few brighter spots, the general trend from Morocco to the Persian Gulf has been toward the reinforcement of central control, curtailment of public freedoms, and a fading of hopes for peaceful democratic changes.

As in the case of Egypt, the United States has turned a blind eye to this ebb of democracy. In 2005, Secretary Rice successfully pressured the Saudis to free jailed petitioners, talked publicly in Riyadh about women's rights, and promised a continuous "dialogue on the course of internal reform." None of that is on the bilateral agenda in 2007. Despite the Tunisian failure to follow through on promises of reform, in February 2006 the United States announced the expansion of military ties with Tunisia. Only recently Egypt and Libya were offered assistance in developing nuclear energy.[21] Clearly, the administration has rejected the recommendation that reflected its own previous intentions to "use the promise of additional financial support as an incentive for reform…..and convey the message that the general quality of bilateral relations will be contingent, in part, upon reform."[22]

Underlying the Trend

There are two main reasons for American backtracking on democracy promotion in the Middle East: the dangerous results of the policy, and the negative change in the "balance of power" between the United States and Arab regimes.

American policy was intellectually based on the "democratic peace thesis," the claim that democratic states do not fight each other. Democracy should therefore be promoted not only because it is the moral and right way for societies to govern themselves, but mainly because more democracies means more peace. From here some have derived that just as democratization pacifies states, so participation in democratic politics moderates terrorist or militant organizations (e.g., Sinn Fein). This was the hope behind American support/tolerance of the participation of both Hamas in the Palestinian elections and Hizbollah in the Lebanese government.

However, politicians and policymakers ignored a crucial theoretical caveat: while democracies might well be more peaceful toward each other, *democratizing* states per se are less so. Indeed, it has been argued that such states in transition are four times more likely to be involved in inter (and intra) state wars, mostly self-initiated.[23] The reason is that politics and elections in new democra-

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cies, where liberal values and practices have not yet taken root, are marked by rampant nationalist and populist rivalry, leading to aggressive foreign policy.[24] The wars of the Yugoslav succession are a quintessential example, but nowhere is this phenomenon more likely to occur than in the Middle East.

Ethnic fissures, entrenched elites, decades of dictatorial repression and economic deprivation, religious passionate rivalry, and anti-Israeli/Western fundamentalism all render "instant" democracy extremely dangerous and violence-prone. This is evident in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Authority; and it probably will be evident in other countries where recent elections proved that the only viable alternative to existing autocracy is illiberal Islamism. "Allowing carefully monitored, government-friendly Islamist parties into the political system hasn't solved the problem either. [In neither Algeria nor Morocco] have these parties successfully diffused the power of the underground movements."[25] If a wave of truly democratic elections sweeps the Arab world, the United States should expect militant illiberal parties to gain power, leading not to peace but rather to increased confrontations within the Middle East and between it and the West. Moreover, blocking such elections might actually benefit democracy in the long run, given that essentially non-democratic movements cannot be trusted to respect democratic principles if they come to power.

It should have been clear that given the abundance of vital interests in the Middle East, liberty cannot be purchased at the price of immediate stability.

The second reason for effectively abandoning the democracy agenda is the change in the "balance of power" between the United States and the Arab world. On the one hand, the United States has been weakened both by its debacle in Iraq and by the continuous (increasing?) impression that it is unwilling to pressure Israel on the Palestinian issue. Beyond diluting American influence per se, both problems have damaged America's reputation to the degree that Arab liberals are actually tainted by their identification with the democracy agenda. On the other hand, at least the rich part of the Arab world has been strengthened by the "first law of petropolitics": the price of oil and the pace of freedom always move in opposite directions.[26] Petrodollars allow governments (not only Arab) to buy off dissent and lessen the need for coordination with the United States. Compounding the problem is the Iranian threat. No matter its future diplomatic twists and military turns, the confrontation with Iran will dominate the Middle East during the coming years. The United States needs the Arab world on its side, and is in no position to pressure friendly regimes, let alone push for democratic reforms that might actually strengthen Iran.

Conclusion

Perhaps President Bush was correct when he declared that "in the long run stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty." In that case, the United States has effectively decided to prioritize its short term interests. American woes in Iraq, the rise of Islamism, and the looming conflict with Iran caused the United States to revert to traditional pro-stability realism, though this will not be admitted publicly.

The administration is at fault for not having thought through its forward strategy of freedom. True, the United States should have neither delayed elections in Iraq nor pressured Siniora to keep Hizbollah out of his government. Both steps would have backfired by solidifying the impression of the United States as a puppet master. On the other hand, the United States should not have promised

to cease "excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East," and then revert to "purchasing stability at the price of liberty." This has greatly damaged both the American reputation and the viability of the democracy agenda. It would have been better, given cultural-religious-social circumstances in the Middle East, to prioritize the slow track of building democracy bottom-up rather than rushing with public rhetoric that within thirty months proved empty. It should have been clear that given the abundance of vital interests in the Middle East, liberty cannot be purchased at the price of immediate stability.

The next administration, especially if it is a Democratic one, will probably continue with the realist line. Promotion of democracy abroad will always be a formal and public goal of American foreign policy, because it lies at the heart of the American ethos. Future administrations will probably also continue funding various programs that aim at deep and slow-track construction of liberal civil societies in the Arab world. A strong argument is being made that the best focus would be an economic one: developing trade and growth will over time create a strong middle class that will demand both democracy and peace.[27] Nevertheless, pushing for democracy on the fast track, at the risk of replacing relatively moderate and friendly regimes with militant ones, will not happen. Assuring a stable supply of energy, containing Iran, and fighting terrorism are much too important.

Israel should be relieved. Even if the United States and the West could have withstood years of democratic-Islamist turmoil in the Middle East for the sake of a brighter faraway future (which is doubtful), Israel would have paid the price given its location at the eye of the storm. The threat to Israel is immediate; democracy can wait. As long as liberals are not a viable option, cautious monarchies and autocracies led by sheiks or even by Asad are preferable to Muslim Brotherhood democracies striving for an Islamist "New Middle East."

Notes

1 My thanks to Limor Simhony for assisting with research and data.

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3 President George Bush, "Remarks at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy," November 6, 2003, http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/26019.htm.

4 *The National Security of the United States*, 2002, p. 1, http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf.

5 "Egypt has shown the way toward peace in the Middle East, and now should show the way toward democracy in the Middle East," President George Bush, "20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy."

6 Secretary Condoleezza Rice, "Remarks at the American University in Cairo," June 20, 2005, http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/48328.htm.

7 Anthony Shadid, "Egypt Shuts Door on Dissent as U.S. Officials Back Away," *Washington Post*, March 19, 2007, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/03/18/AR2007031801196.html.

8 *Middle East Newsline*: *Arms, Defense, Strategy* 9:116, March 25, 2007.

9 Robin Wright, "Middle East Democracy Summit Ends in Rancor," *Washington Post*, November 12, 2005, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/11/12/AR2005111200464.html.

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11 Ibid.

12 Quoted in David Gollust, "U.S. Deeply Trou-

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13 President George Bush, "Second Inaugural Address," January 2005, http://www.whitehouse.gov/inaugural/.

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19 "Democracy in the Arab World: Not Yet, Thanks," *The Economist*, July 1, 2006, p. 40.

20 "Saudi Arabian Reform: Drip, Drip, Dripping," *The Economist*, May 6, 2006, p. 48.

21 "Democracy in the Middle East: Regression Analysis," *The Economist*, March 17, 2007, p. 48.

22 Madeleine Albright and Vin Weber, "In Support of Arab Democracy: Why and How," Independent Task Force Report # 54, Council On Foreign Relations, 2005, pp. 41-42.

23 Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder, "Prone to Violence: The Paradox of the Democratic Peace," *National Interest* 82 (Winter 2005/2006): 41.

24 Miriam Elman, ed., *Paths to Peace: Is Democracy the Answer?* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), p. 29.

25 Craig Smith, "North Africa: Under Attack and Relying on Repression," *New York Times*, April 15, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/15/weekinreview/15smith.html?ref=world.

26 Thomas Friedman, "The First Law of Petropolitics," *Foreign Policy* 85, no. 3 (May-June 2006): 28. See also Michael Ross, "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?" *World Politics* 53, no. 3 (April 2001): 325-61.

27 This approach is also a strand of the Democratic Peace thesis, based on the positive correlation found between economic development, free markets, interdependence, and peace. See for example Michael Mousseau, Harvard Hegre, and John R. O'neal, "How the Wealth of Nations Conditions the Liberal Peace?" *European Journal of International Relations* 9, no. 2 (2003): 277-314.