Promoting Arab Democracy (or Not):

What the Past Should Tell Us about the Future (Part I)

by **J. Scott Carpenter (/experts/j-scott-carpenter)**

Oct 18, 2007

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

J. Scott Carpenter (/experts/j-scott-carpenter)

J. Scott Carpenter is an adjunct fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Brief Analysis

On October 3, 2007, J. Scott Carpenter addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute marking the launch of **Project Fikra (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=24)** , a new Washington Institute program focused on empowering Arab moderates and liberals in their struggles against extremism. Mr. Carpenter is a Keston Family fellow at the Institute and former deputy assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs. The following is a summary of his remarks; **Part II (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2670)** of this PolicyWatch summarizes remarks by other participants in the forum.

Democracy is a powerful tool in the war of ideas. Given its potential for countering radical ideology and expanding freedom in Arab countries, promoting it is a long-term U.S. national security interest. This perspective is not just theoretical, but is based on experience in the field and in government. The United States should therefore remain committed to democracy promotion despite recent challenges. Doing so requires a careful examination of Washington's efforts thus far -- both the positive achievements and the areas that need work.

Getting It Right

In recent years, the United States has correctly identified the most fundamental problem in the Arab world and has been determined to do something about it. The rampant stagnation and demographic time bombs in the region could no longer be ignored -- Washington resolved to add internal governance to the list of agenda items for its autocratic friends. In doing so, it clearly recognized that the best long-term response to terrorist ideology, and therefore the best course of action for U.S. security, lay in supporting political and economic liberalization in the Arab world.

Until recently, the Bush administration successfully separated the Arab-Israeli peace process from the question of internal governance. For the first time, a U.S. administration refused to allow the conflict to be an excuse for ignoring political and economic reform. Without a doubt, resolving the conflict would accelerate reform, but its continuance should not be used to avoid necessary change.

The administration crafted a holistic approach across multiple departments and agencies, particularly within the

State Department, to advance this policy. It also sought to coordinate all foreign assistance to stimulate reform. (The financial sector reform in Egypt is a perfect case in point.) Washington then invested in a number of tools to help advance the policy effectively, stressing economic liberalization as a featured component of democratization. The administration launched the Millennium Challenge Corporation and the Middle East Free Trade Area, expanded bilateral investment treaties, and worked to get Arab governments into the World Trade Organization -- all with the intention of using carrots to stimulate reform. It also launched the Middle East Partnership Initiative and the Human Rights and Democracy Fund, in addition to supporting large budgetary increases for the National Endowment for Democracy.

Washington also recognized -- however slowly -- that it needed partners, and it took steps to bring in the rest of the international community: the Community of Democracies, begun under President Bill Clinton, was continued, and the G8 BMENA was launched in 2004 and later expanded to other non-G8 nations. The latter initiative includes hundreds of nongovernmental organizations that, for the first time, are engaging Arab governments about the future direction of reform. The United States also worked to establish the UN's New Democracy Fund, which has established projects in a number of Arab countries.

In Need of Improvement

In other respects, U.S. rhetoric has outstripped policy implementation. Washington needed something substantial to indicate the change in U.S. policy, but it did not implement this policy effectively and therefore undermined U.S. credibility. Failure to push the president's clearly articulated policy within the Washington bureaucracy was a contributing factor. In particular, the administration failed to use the Defense Department as a messenger. As a result, the United States sent conflicting signals to numerous Arab governments. For example, the same administration portrayed Tunisia as both a model and basket case.

Initially, the United States failed to develop individualized strategies to fit with the political and historical currents of each country. Washington's policy was too generic at first. And when the president called on Egypt and Saudi Arabia to lead the way, policymakers should have had a clear roadmap -- and fuller discussions with Cairo and Riyadh beforehand.

In addition, Washington has not made the effort to match resources with priorities. The United States pledges $1.3 billion to Egypt's defense annually. Yet, the Middle East Peace Initiative received only $50 million for all of 2007. There has also been little effort to leverage resources from the private sector or from the Gulf. For example, one of the most prominent reform efforts in the Persian Gulf -- Dubai's proposed $10 billion investment in regional education -- was initiated not through U.S. programs, but by the emirate's ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum.

The Bush administration has also allowed democracy promotion to be caricatured and confused with regime change. Despite the positive aspects of the U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan -- including the ouster of Saddam Hussein's regime -- quick transitions through military intervention are not effective templates for democratic development. Critics of the overall effort in Iraq used the case as a red herring to oppose democratization across the board. The administration, unfortunately, did not counter these criticisms.

Finally, in terms of recent elections in the region, policymakers did not apply the clear democratic principle that armed political groups be banned from participating, especially in the cases of Hamas and Hizballah. In short, the United States made a mistake. It should have helped make clear -- as Washington has done in other cases, like Northern Ireland -- that groups cannot be part of the political process while remaining armed and threatening violence. In large measure, the comfort with allowing armed actors to participate in elections stemmed from Iraq. The argument that the January 2006 Palestinian elections would not be meaningful without Hamas echoed earlier

debates preceding the elections in Iraq, where the United States naively permitted the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) to participate.

Going Forward

The issue of democratization in Arab countries will persist regardless of who is the next U.S. president. For policymakers, therefore, the question has become one of tactics, not strategy.

If the United States gives up on the democracy agenda, it will be forced to choose between increasingly decrepit autocrats and antidemocratic Islamists. Such a decision would also undermine U.S. credibility among those who have begun to trust the United States. Washington needs partners in the battle of ideas, and if those who are willing to fight do not believe that America stands by what it says, they will give up.

Finally, abandoning democracy promotion would be the equivalent of waving the white flag in the battle of ideas. Holding up a standard of managed autocracy is not motivational -- sooner or later people will demand real change. Hopefully, the United States will be on the right side of history when that change occurs.

J. Scott Carpenter is Keston Family fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its **Project Fikra (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=24)** , which focuses on empowering Arab moderates and liberals in their struggles against extremism. ❖

Policy #1292

RECOMMENDED

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria

Feb 15, 2022

◆

Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)