

The 'Freedom Agenda' in the Middle East: Balancing Democracy and Stability

Sep 24, 2005



In-Depth Reports

On September 24, 2005, Robert Blackwill and Samuel Berger addressed The Washington Institute's Weinberg Founders Conference. Ambassador Blackwill is president of the international consulting firm Barbour, Griffith, and Rogers. Previously, he served in the Bush administration as deputy national security advisor for strategic planning, presidential envoy to Iraq, and U.S. ambassador to India. Mr. Berger, former national security advisor in the Clinton administration, currently serves as chairman of Stonebridge International, LLC. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Robert Blackwill

Although the Middle East is more unstable and dangerous than it has been in many years, it is also in the midst of its most promising period in decades. How the region moves forward through the next several years will depend to a certain extent on American diplomacy.

In light of the Middle East's troublesome history -- with milestones such as the 1973 war, Iran's Islamic Revolution, and al-Qaeda's growing global assault -- the Bush administration came to a strategic view that it was time for fundamental change in the U.S. approach to the region. Accordingly, the administration decided to actively support democratic trends in the Greater Middle East. Critiques of this policy have centered on several different arguments, many of which do not hold up under scrutiny:

- Arabs do not want democracy and are incapable of exercising it. This argument contradicts the actual Arab response to elections. For example, although the most recent parliamentary election in Iraq was held at a time when voters could legitimately fear being killed at the ballot box, they nevertheless turned out at a greater rate than voters in recent American elections.
- The Bush administration is ignoring local history and culture. If the administration were in fact overlooking local history and culture, that would be a mistake. It is not doing so, however. Rather, the administration is choosing to emphasize the fact that all Iraqis, regardless of their local history and culture, want choice.
- The administration's policy undermines stability in the Middle East. This argument ignores the region's longstanding instability. The administration is trying a new policy aimed at changing that bloody history into a better one.
- The administration's policy will allow hostile regimes to come to power democratically. Although Washington may not get along well with every democratic government in the world, the fact remains that those countries posing the greatest problems for the United States have without exception been nondemocratic.

How does one measure the success or failure of President Bush's policy toward the Greater Middle East? One way of doing so is to ask whether various trend lines in the region are moving in a positive or negative direction. Broadly speaking, is the situation in the Middle East better or worse than when George W. Bush took office? In general, the

trend lines since the September 11 attacks have been positive. Afghanistan, no longer the epicenter of terrorism, has held two successful elections, and Iraq is in the midst of a constitutional process. Pessimists argued that Iraq could not move toward more democratic institutions, but they have been proven wrong time and time again since the Transitional Administrative Law was implemented. Local elections and other positive changes have also emerged in Saudi Arabia, with the kingdom offering increased cooperation in the war against Islamist terrorism. Egyptians and Palestinians have recently held elections as well.

Although these developments are based more on local initiative than American design, the United States is having a major impact. The challenge that has been unleashed by history, by the president's policies, and by local factors will last well beyond the current administration.

Samuel Berger

The dream of freedom is at the core of American values and is shared by men and women worldwide. When individuals have the ability to control their own lives, communities become stronger, countries become more prosperous, and regions become more peaceful. The absence of freedom has taken a grievous toll on the Middle East. The lack of political breathing space has bred anger and resentment, which groups like al-Qaeda feed on.

Fortunately, polls suggest that strong majorities of citizens in Muslim-majority nations value democratic rights and believe that democracy can work in their countries. As Turkey, Indonesia, Senegal, Albania, and other nations have shown, pluralism and reform are the enemies not of Islam, but rather of radicals who feed on public frustration. As long as freedom fails to flourish in the Middle East, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready to be exported.

Although the Bush administration's basic premise is sound, its execution is troubling. In some cases, its policies have fallen short. It is not enough to have moral clarity if moral authority is lacking. The example of U.S. democracy has always been the most important arrow in Washington's quiver when it comes to promoting liberty and human rights. Currently, however, the United States is very unpopular, even toxic, in the Middle East.

This anti-American sentiment is rooted in many factors, some beyond our capacity or willingness to change. Nevertheless, the manner in which Washington pursues the freedom agenda needs to be adjusted. The Bush administration has applied its rhetoric of freedom far too broadly. This trend began with the Iraq war, which was justified as a preemptive strike against a potentially catastrophic threat: Saddam Hussein's capacity to provide weapons of mass destruction to groups like al-Qaeda. The administration's rationale was revised into a fight for freedom only after the coalition failed to find such weapons. Suggesting that the war was originally launched to bring freedom to the region can only breed cynicism about American rhetoric and intentions.

If freedom becomes merely a slogan for U.S. foreign policy writ large, both the word itself and the ideals it represents will be confused and diminished. In his January 2005 inaugural address, President Bush set out the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in the world. But the reality of foreign policymaking does not always align with ideals. Leaders are constantly obliged to make tough choices, as seen in Pakistan and Russia. Far from generating an international chorus of support, U.S. rhetoric that contradicts U.S. actions will only breed distrust among the people of the world.

Another flaw in the administration's freedom agenda is the bad example set by certain U.S. actions. It is more difficult for a U.S. ambassador in Egypt or Saudi Arabia to deliver a *démarche* on torture when the world sees pictures of abuse at Abu Ghraib prison, or when our own government approves interrogation methods that America has traditionally denounced as torture. Because the United States is the standard setter, it has a special obligation to practice what it preaches. The administration's democracy promotion strategy has also suffered from a lack of patience. The tone of the president's inaugural address suggested that regime change was the simplest road to freedom. The better approach would be to emphasize that democracy must be built from the bottom up. Afghanistan

could have been a model of freedom in the region, but instead we diverted our attention and resources to Iraq. Moreover, the administration has not adequately answered the question, "Democracy for whom?" In theory, democracy promotion should extend to everyone who plays by the rules, even if the results are unpleasant. For example, if free elections were held tomorrow in Saudi Arabia, who would win? The royal family has 25,000 members, and the unemployment rate among young Saudi men is 40 percent. That volatile mix could produce electoral results unfavorable to the United States. While Washington need not support the inclusion of Hamas and other groups that foment violence, democracy promotion should probably extend to most peaceful Islamist parties, even if the United States disagrees with their political views.

How, then, can the United States gain the moral authority that would allow it to advance the ideals of freedom and democracy more effectively? The best place to start is by shrinking the disparity between rhetoric and reality. This means less talk about toppling tyrants and more focus on reforms that allow homegrown movements to make progress toward freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, women's rights, and other key elements of democracy. The United States can achieve its goals in the region only if it assists those who are trying to build modern societies that are true to their traditions. The U.S. freedom policy must be embedded within an overall global posture that earns international respect. Rather than isolating itself, the United States must marginalize the extremists and enemies of democracy. Otherwise, when the winds of freedom finally blow through the Middle East, they may carry to power not new friends, but more radical regimes.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Joshua Prober. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)