

Building Arab Democracy

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Nov 18, 2003

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Articles & Testimony

President Bush's speech about nourishing democracy in the Middle East was received with predictable derision by state-run Arab media. More disturbing is the fact that the speech has failed to attract much attention in this country. It is dismissed by some as mere political rhetoric and seen by others as part of an effort to justify America's military losses in Iraq.

Not enough Americans see the link between the internal dynamics of Arab societies and Arab foreign policy -- and the way authoritarian Arab regimes seek legitimacy by blaming their troubles on "sinister" forces abroad. Indeed, for adherents of the so-called "realist" school of politics, who always thought talk about Arab democracy was delusional, dropping the entire project makes sense. But in the post-Sept. 11 world, these realists are not realistic: Arab democratization is not a fantasy, it is a necessity -- for both Americans and Arabs alike.

Today, as before, America earns enmity from Arab public opinion for its seeming indifference to issues unrelated to Israel and oil, and the language of protest more often than not is Islamic. Because Arab governments feel weaker than ever, many have sought refuge in distancing themselves from the United States. Throughout the Oslo-to-Camp David era of peacemaking, for example, Arab governments were not nearly as publicly supportive of U.S. efforts as Washington wanted (or needed).

Ironically, as Washington and Arab capitals grew farther apart on key policy issues, Islamist fanatics such as al Qaeda gained ground by painting America as the main pillar of support for what they would call bloated, corrupt and oppressive Arab regimes. Arab leaders responded by using their impressive internal security apparatuses to clamp down on (and sometimes export) terrorists, while seeking popular legitimacy by currying favor with the softer side of Islamism. Instead of confronting the ideology of the Islamists, they tried to ride the Islamist wave, just as they rode anti-colonial, pan-Arabist and anti-Israel waves in previous decades. But because these regimes could never truly out-Islam the Islamists, they were fighting a losing battle. The result has been the growing isolation felt by both the

United States and Arab leaders.

A strategy of promoting Arab democratization would demolish the cynical "Islam is the solution" myth propagated by the Islamists and would give ordinary citizens a stake in the development of their own countries.

But promoting democracy in the Arab world is a tricky process. On the one hand, demanding "instant democracy" -- that is, immediate elections -- would be unwise, perhaps even catastrophic. Most Arab regimes would view open, transparent elections as a threat and would call on the vast array of tools at their disposal to manipulate, marginalize, defeat or even neutralize their opponents. (Indeed, hope for democratization in Iraq rests, to a great extent, on the fact that there isn't an Arab regime in place to prevent it.) And if the United States arm-twisted Arab regimes enough to compel free and fair elections, the most likely victors would be Islamists, the only popular force with a ready-made organizational infrastructure, the mosque. Islamists would be delighted to use liberal means (elections) to promote illiberal ends (the creation of theocratic states) -- hardly the preferred outcome.

On the other hand, pursuing "business as usual" in the Arab world -- that is, talking about political reform but doing virtually nothing to advance it -- only hands victory to the Islamists.

In a Faustian bargain, Arab leaders cynically but shortsightedly support such Islamization because they believe it keeps them one step ahead of the real Islamists. Unable to play the game of "performance politics" -- winning legitimacy by providing real services to their people -- they opt instead for "identity politics," in which leaders are never actually held accountable for their actions. This makes it easier to blame foreign enemies -- i.e., the United States and Israel -- for their troubles, both at home and abroad.

Between the realist's option of "do nothing" and the romantic's option of "elections now" lies a third path -- gradual yet persistent liberalization. By helping Arab countries lay the building blocks for democracy, Washington can ensure that real elections, when they come, will eventually rest on a firm foundation of law and institutions.

Liberalization is a messy, difficult, time-consuming process. It means sometimes working with -- and sometimes working against -- Arab leaders to advance a strategy of opening political space; encouraging freer, more responsible media; increasing participation for women in public life; modernizing educational systems; improving justice systems and instituting incremental political reforms.

This requires a master politician's sense of when to cajole, when to praise and when to twist arms. But unlike many initiatives, it does not require a lot of money. Rather, it will need a constant supply of an even more precious commodity: consistent attention at the highest levels of government. This process will never succeed if it is the last item on President Bush's talking points for conversations with Arab rulers. It is also sure to fail if it is the only item. That the journey will be long and difficult is understood, so long as the direction is clear.

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