Promoting Democracy in the Muslim World:

Assessing the Latest Exposition of U.S. Policy

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Dec 11, 2002

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Brief Analysis

In a thoughtful and measured address on December 4, State Department Policy Planning Director Richard Haass enunciated a new Bush administration policy on building "greater democracy" in the "Muslim world." Though it skirted several of the toughest policy issues (e.g., whether and how to promote democracy in inhospitable terrain like Saudi Arabia), this important speech nonetheless broke substantial new ground. Especially welcome was the healthy mix of realism and idealism, with arguments for pursuing democratization in Muslim countries leavened with the recognition that "we must above all obey the Hippocratic oath and first do no harm."

Outline

Haass offered the following arguments:

The United States advocates democracy abroad both for ideological and practical reasons.

Globally, democratization has registered notable success in recent decades, including "promising developments" in the Muslim world.

Despite this progress, there is a "freedom deficit" in many parts of the Muslim and, especially, Arab worlds.

Although this problem is mostly of Muslims' own making, Washington can be faulted for "halting and incomplete" democratization policies toward Muslim-majority countries.

This "exceptionalism" -- the idea that the United States could make an exception for Muslim states and not pursue democratization there vigorously -- is not in U.S. interests and will be replaced with a commitment to become " more actively engaged in supporting democratic trends in the Muslim world than ever before."

The United States will temper support for democratization with caution. Although Washington recognizes that "stability based on authority alone is illusory and ultimately impossible to sustain" -- a remark sure to be read with raised eyebrows in monarchical Riyadh and pharaonic Cairo -- those U.S. allies will be heartened to hear that Washington will not pursue democratization with "unrestrained zeal" because the "stakes for others are greater than for ourselves."

U.S. democratization efforts in Muslim countries will be guided by eight lessons learned from international experience: 1) there are many models of democracy; 2) elections do not a democracy make; 3) democracy takes time; 4) democracy relies on an informed and educated populace; 5) independent and responsible media are essential; 6) women are vital to democracy; 7) political and economic reform are mutually reinforcing; 8) while it can be encouraged from outside, democracy is best built from within.

Democratization is a "long-term" process that does not obviate the need to address urgent items like the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kashmir. (Here, Haass inadvertently provoked an important question: Although it is generally accepted that a "democratic" Egypt and Jordan would not have made peace with Israel as was accomplished under authoritarian rulers, can one make the same argument for Palestine under Yasir Arafat? According to President George W. Bush's June 24, 2002, Rose Garden speech, the answer is no.)

Key Innovations

Even as Haass offered the intellectual argument for democratization as a policy priority, the most important element of his speech was a sweeping apology for the mistakes of "successive U.S. administrations, Republican and Democratic alike," for "failing to help foster gradual paths to democratization in many of our important relationships." Though not quite on par with then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's awkward mea culpa for U.S. efforts to engineer a coup in Iran a half century ago, Haass's apology for a decades-long pattern of omission was a refreshing, even startling example of the rising influence of values-based policymaking over realpolitik. Although numerous other worthy goals will continue to be pursued (e.g., Middle East peace, disarmament in Iraq), Haass implied that democratization will no longer be the poor cousin, the first to be abandoned when it comes into conflict with other objectives. Precisely how prioritization among competing goals will be determined remains unclear.

The second innovation in Haass's speech was his deft embrace of the combined analysis of Freedom House and the Arab Human Development Report, which together paint a grim picture of politics in the Muslim and, especially, Arab worlds. Particularly significant was his placement of the Bush administration firmly on the side of those who argue that political freedom, not just economic liberalism, is essential to fix the Arab world's "serious problems." That is a powerful, if implicit, rebuke to the often-touted East Asian cum Tunisian model of open economics but repressive politics.

Third, Haass offered a useful service in tempering enthusiasm for democratization with lessons from past experience that collectively underscore the need to strengthen the building blocks of democracy (e.g., education, free media, women's rights) and highlight the importance of step-by-step progress along the bumpy democratic path. Here, in addition to citing the Hippocratic oath, Haass might usefully have cited Churchill: "The more haste ever the worst speed."

Unanswered Questions

Despite the important new elements addressed in Haass's speech, several key issues remain murky or even untouched:

Promoting democracy in unwelcome territory. Haass offered no prescription for how to pursue democratization in countries with governments that are not enthusiastic about the idea. Although he spoke of "carrots" -- such as the new resources Secretary of State Colin Powell is expected to unveil tomorrow in the context of the Middle East "partnership" program on political, economic, and educational reform -- Haass said nothing about the appropriateness of "sticks," such as the White House-imposed withholding of supplemental aid to Egypt pending a resolution of the Saad Eddin Ibrahim case.

Relations with Islamist parties. On this issue, Haass punted: "Let there be no misunderstanding: the United States is not opposed to Muslim parties, just as we are not opposed to Christian, Jewish, or Hindu parties in democracies with

broad foundations." The inclusion of the last phrase -- "in democracies with broad foundations" -- by definition rules out almost all Muslim-majority countries and begs the question of U.S. policy toward Islamist parties. For example, if Hizballah were to get out of the terrorism business and commit itself to the peaceful (though complete) Islamization of Lebanon, would it then merit U.S. recognition? Similarly, if Hamas were to suspend all terrorist activities and commit itself to the eradication of Israel solely through peaceful means, would it merit U.S. dialogue? Although hypothetical, these are important (and unanswered) questions.

The problem of antidemocratic democratization. "When given the opportunity," said Haass," Muslims are embracing democratic norms and choosing democracy." Regrettably, this is not always true. Rejection of women's suffrage in Kuwait and refusal to stiffen laws on "honor killing" in Jordan are just two examples of (more or less) democratically elected parliaments rejecting democratic norms. What should the United States do when faced with this conundrum (which, one should note, is not limited to Muslim-majority countries)? On this, Haass was silent.

Terminological Problems

In one arena, Haass's speech continued an unwelcome but now predictable tradition of policymakers offering idiosyncratic definitions and mixing terms that often have very different meanings. For example, he used "Islamist" (a term denoting a supporter of the virulently anti-Western, anti-American ideology of Islamism) and "Muslim" (a believer in the religion of Islam) interchangeably. Particularly problematic is the term "Muslim world," which might have some relevance in an academic setting but none in the policy world. In a world of nation-states, for a senior policymaker to use this term is itself an unintended sop to Islamists, who would like to resurrect the era of conflict between Christendom and the Caliphate.

Conclusion

On balance, Haass's speech was a welcome and constructive contribution to an issue that will only grow in importance. As with President Bush's June 24 speech calling for "new Palestinian leadership," however, the real test of any policy address comes in its implementation.

In March 1991, President George H. W. Bush outlined an ambitious postwar strategy that would have included measures addressing arms control and economic inequities throughout the Middle East; in the end, both his administration and that of his successor invested only in Arab-Israeli peacemaking and building new security alliances in the Gulf. In retrospect, important capital was squandered amid misplaced priorities. A similar moment of decision is likely to come in the wake of another war with Iraq. If the current administration is, as Haass argued, committed to helping "countries become more stable . . . and more adaptable to the stresses of a globalizing world," then a postwar policy should include not only promoting democracy for Palestinians and Iraqis, but also such items as facing down Egypt over its government-imposed barriers to civil society, speaking out against Tunisia's stifling restrictions on free speech and dissent, and opening the closed educational and media environment in Saudi Arabia. Opting once again for the 1991 agenda -- focusing solely on the peace process and new security relations in the Gulf -- will once again relegate the important issue of regional political change to policy oblivion.

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