

Full Democracy May Not Be an Answer for Mideast

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A false debate has broken out between those who say a key goal of any attack against Iraq would be the creation of an Iraqi democracy and those who believe the world is ultimately more secure if reliable authoritarians can be found in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East to protect American interests. The answer lies somewhere between.

There is a danger in setting the bar for an Iraqi democracy unrealistically high: The Bush administration potentially could lose support in the postwar period at home and abroad if Iraq did not quickly and simply become a full-fledged democracy.

Historical processes take a long time. It would be better for the debate to center on the very worthy goal of democratization instead of democracy, implying a process rather than an instant result.

Let us be clear. Relying on Middle East authoritarians has not succeeded. The lack of reform undermines peace, and President Bush is right to make such a call for change as sine qua non in the search for peace in the Middle East.

The general approach to peacemaking since the Oslo accords in 1993 has been that Palestinian internal affairs were irrelevant to diplomacy. Because Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat was considered the source of Palestinian legitimacy, his authoritarianism was not only inherent in the deal but even welcomed, in the belief that an unrestricted Arafat would do the most for Israeli security.

This did not work. As has been pointed out by leading Palestinian analysts, the Palestinian violence since September 2000 has been linked to dissatisfaction with Arafat's domestic performance as well as dissatisfaction over Israel and peacemaking. Ultimately, Arafat sought to deflect attention from his domestic nonperformance by blaming Israel for all Palestinian woes.

Moreover, as a top Clinton administration Middle East advisor, Martin Indyk, said last year, the Faustian bargain made to sweep Arab regional democratization issues under the rug in favor of peace failed to secure either.

Likewise, the Arab press in Egypt and Saudi Arabia blames every ill on the U.S. and Israel, which is a way for the countries' leaders to deflect attention from their own nonperformance. As Americans learned on Sept. 11, 2001, U.S. association with authoritarian regimes has only earned it the enmity of the Arab public.

Yet the opposite impulse -- that the U.S. can easily remake the Middle East by imposing democracy -- also should be questioned. Some key members of the Bush administration were enamored by the sweep of democratic governments in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and may feel that history can repeat itself with the same ease in the Middle East. But the Middle East does not yet have Eastern Europe's Helsinki human rights framework or watch groups; neither does it have such grass-roots groups as Poland's Solidarity, which viewed the United States as its ally.

Both extremes are flawed. Democracy promotion should tailor itself to local conditions and not believe one model works for all.

Iraq will be daunting, and therefore the approach must be a process: democratization.

The complex ethnic makeup in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq coupled with wariness of neighboring states that wonder what democracy portends for them means that any transition will not be smooth. However, perfect should not be allowed to be the enemy of good.

A post-Arafat Palestine might not be Jeffersonian, but if it follows a reformist impulse, this would be a major step.

The U.S. must not be shy in bringing its influence to bear in dealing with the Middle Eastern regimes. These regimes will prioritize their own survival, but they will think twice before crossing a determined U.S. on second-tier issues, such as opening up political opportunities.

People in the Middle East will judge the United States by the policy standard that we set for ourselves. For example, Iranian reformers are known to believe that freeing the world of Hussein would be a boost to their own internal struggle for reform. Yet promising a full-blown democracy in Iraq and not delivering, they say, could set things back in Iran.

Because of oil and other factors on one hand and the war against terrorism on the other, the U.S. engagement in the Middle East will continue for years. The contradictory pulls will be eased by American credibility. This requires realistic expectations about the importance of democratization, which can play a key role in minimizing dangers and maximizing prospects for change.

The inability to do everything should not be an excuse to do nothing. ❖

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