

Iraq, Palestine, Then What?

Can America Promote a Liberal, Democratic Middle East?

Oct 4, 2002



In-Depth Reports

***M**r. Khoury's remarks represent his own views and not those of the U.S. government.

Robert Satloff, The Washington Institute: The basic premise of this panel is that the United States is currently promoting coercive democratization in Iraq and in the West Bank and Gaza. U.S. policy is coercive in the sense that it intends to bring democracy to Iraq whether Iraqis like it or not, and that it conditions assistance to promote Palestinian statehood on the creation of a democratic authority and a new leadership.

Looking beyond these two places, are there opportunities for the United States to promote democratization, liberalism, and, perhaps eventually, democracy itself in a noncoercive way? Before we consider how and where the United States might do this, we must first determine whether it is even possible. Some argue that it is best to push for democratization in the most egregiously undemocratic regimes in the Middle East. Others argue that it is best to focus on regimes that have already taken important steps toward democracy. Still others believe that we should work for reform in both sorts of countries. Should we work to create model states as an example for others or should we be happy with incremental progress in various places?

Ali Salem: Arms are used to wage war, not to liberate other nations. This is a fact. Generals know this well. Generals go to war to defend their people and their nations. When people are extremely frightened and miserable, they do not welcome their liberators. Americans do not understand what dictatorships do to the collective minds of their people. Americans read about dictatorships. They see films about them, but they do not know what dictatorships are. Tyranny is like love. You can read about love, see films about love, but you cannot feel love until you are beloved.

I say this because I hear so much talk of liberation. Liberation can occur only from within. People do not merely fail to welcome their liberators, they hate them. In general, we hate those who see us in a bad condition, and hate even more passionately those who save us from our plight.

It is important to understand what dictatorships do to people. A joke may illustrate: Saddam Husayn was riding in a procession past throngs of people greeting him with cries of, "Hail to the savior of the nation, the leader, the great man, the hero!" One man among the crowd held his child aloft while shouting his praise of Saddam. Then the child said, "Daddy, isn't this the man you told me yesterday is a killer and a thief and a corrupt dictator?" The man fell silent for just a second, and then resumed his shouting, crying out, "Folks, whose child is this?" When people are afraid and miserable, they may be willing to sacrifice even their children.

One hears the term "the war against Iraq" over and over again. Yet, it is not a war and it is not against Iraq. It is an operation against a regime, against a single man named Saddam. The United States may be the most powerful state on earth, but to succeed at such a task, it must also be the most creative. For example, in the event of an operation against Saddam, the United States must ensure that Israel stands aside completely, whatever happens. Israel could spoil the whole thing.

Such an operation would in effect be the last battle of the Second World War -- a leftover portion of a meal first

served at the beginning of the twentieth century. This leftover battle could be the best of times or the worst of times. It could be the dawn of freedom in our rich region or it could be the end of our hopes and dreams for freedom and peace for decades to come. Yet, it is not a tale of two cities, Washington and Baghdad. It is not even a clash of civilizations. Rather, it is the preeminent, ongoing battle of our region, the battle between yesterday and today. Saddam and other revolutionary leaders do not live in the present. Even in Egypt the extremists live in the past. The revolutionary elements, whether political or religious, are everywhere one and the same. They have the same mental machinery.

Calling U.S. policy a coercive approach is good -- a coercive approach to helping someone. The United States has been playing this role in the Middle East for more than twenty years, beginning with the Camp David agreement between Egypt and Israel. Both countries still take aid from the United States; in fact, if Egypt had not been given such help, extremists could have taken over the country twenty years ago. In other words, American taxpayers did not waste their money then. Similarly, after unseating Saddam and his regime, we will see the problems of the Middle East in a new light.

Martin Kramer: Can there be a liberal, democratic Middle East? This is very much a loaded question. It reminds me a bit of the famous exchange between a journalist and Mahatma Gandhi. The journalist asked Gandhi, "What do you think of Western civilization?" To which he replied, "I think it would be a good idea." Gandhi's point was that the modern West had failed to live up to the promise of the rich legacy of its civilization.

If I were asked today what I think of modern Arab civilization, I would probably answer the same: it would be a good idea. Here, too, there is a great legacy that the contemporary Arab world has been unable to renew. And nowhere has that been more apparent than in the failure of the Arab world to create the climate of free inquiry without which modern civilization is impossible. In our times, it is difficult to create such a climate without democracy.

If the twentieth century has left us with a lesson, it is that the civilizations that will flourish in the twenty-first will rest on democracy. Every form of dictatorship, from communism to fascism, was discredited in the twentieth century. We are approaching the point in human history where democracy will be deemed a prerequisite of modern civilization itself, and its absence the most obvious symptom of modern barbarism. If that becomes so, then there is little doubt which side of the divide the Arab world will occupy. Freedom House ranks it as the least free part of the globe. And certainly there is a high correlation between the prevalence of despotism and a whole range of barbaric outrages, from the gassing of Kurds to September 11. We know from experience that despotism generates terror. And has there ever been a form of despotism in modern times that did not encourage and even nurture anti-Semitism?

Since September 11, many commentators have looked at the Arab world, made similar observations, and then drawn a conclusion. The conclusion is this: the United States should use its vast power to promote democracy in the Middle East. Not only should it plan to replace hostile despotisms, like Iraq's, with democratic regimes. It should compel our allies, such as the Egyptians and the Saudis, to open up their politics. The theory is that if these were more open systems, this would drain away the intolerance and hatred that pervade these societies, including the hatred of America and the desire to eradicate Israel. The argument for such a policy draws on two reservoirs: one, the can-do missionary optimism that has always colored the American approach to the Middle East; and two, the success of the United States in turning other parts of the world toward democracy.

Let me say that I am sympathetic to the intentions behind the promotion of democracy in the Middle East. I am also profoundly skeptical about what its consequences might be. Sympathetic because I, too, believe that a truly democratic Arab world would more easily align itself with the champion of democracy, the United States. A truly democratic Arab world might even find it easier to accept Israel, another democracy, in its midst. But skeptical because I believe the underpinnings of such a transformation are completely lacking in the Arab world. Any attempt

to promote democracy, far from making things better, might make them worse.

For you see, ladies and gentlemen, I do not believe that the only alternative to the existing authoritarian order is democracy. Certainly it is the desirable alternative. But if we set ourselves the mission of democratizing the Arab world -- especially if we decide to begin with our putative friends -- there is more than a risk of unintended consequences. There would almost certainly be unintended consequences. This is what happened in the Balkans, in the aftermath of the collapse of communism. This is what has happened in parts of Central Asia in the aftermath of communism. We owe it to ourselves, if not to the Arab world, to be frank with them and with ourselves: the Arab world doesn't yet have the basic building blocks of democracy.

The most basic building blocks are not elections, or political parties, or a free press. You can have elections in countries that are not free -- the Arab world has them all the time. These countries have voting; they just don't have counting. Or let's just say they have selective counting, which produces those famous 99 percent votes in favor of the ruler. As for political parties, the Arab world also has them -- mostly in the form of ruling parties. There are lots of those. And thanks to the proliferation of technologies, the press has never been freer in the Arab world -- freer to disseminate hatred, lies, and incitement. These are not the building blocks of democracy. The basic building blocks are attitudes -- above all, a tolerance of political differences, indeed even a celebration of political differences, debated openly and decided freely.

Arab society lacks that tolerance. It is very sharing of many things -- but not of political power. That power is like the honor of one's women: it cannot be compromised without being lost. And in the Arab world, historically, the loss of power has meant the loss of everything: honor, possessions, home, life itself. I do not claim here that the Arab world is imprisoned by Islam, as some might argue. I do claim that it is burdened by its history -- history transmuted into memory and preserved as a mind-set. And I would summarize the mind-set in a simple axiom: rule or die.

Hence, the dearth of what is called civil society. Civil society is that panoply of associations that are greater than individual, family, clan, and tribe. These associations organize people around shared ideas and interests; democratic societies are replete with thousands upon thousands of such associations, from the PTA to the PAC. In the Arab world, civil society is very thin on the ground. And the reason is this: civil society is regarded everywhere as a form of political opposition. The state therefore seeks to destroy or co-opt it. And the people? They also suspect the institutions of civil society, which cannot protect them from the state and whose sponsors are often distrusted. The only exception is the mosque, and, through the mosque, the Islamic movements, to which I'll return momentarily.

Now, an American policy devoted to promoting democracy could strip the existing order of some of its legitimacy. In places where that legitimacy is particularly thin, such a policy could even precipitate regime change. I give America that much credit. But the question is, what comes next?

And here we come back to the law of unintended consequences: if something can go wrong, it will. As the United States and Israel have just pursued a utopian peace process to its unintended consequence, it seems to me very appropriate to ask this: does anyone think that our tools of social engineering are any more precise when it comes to the democracy process? Are we so certain of the outcome that we can confidently take a jackhammer not only to the political structures of our enemies, but of our allies as well?

To the promoters of democracy, I say, promise one thing: that the existing order will not be replaced by civil war as in Bosnia or Algeria or Lebanon. For as bad as the Arab world is, it could get worse, and in fact it has been worse at various times and places. Almost everywhere, beneath the coercive order enforced by the regimes, there are precisely the same ethnic tensions that produced war in Bosnia, the same interfaith hatreds that gave us war in Lebanon, or the same struggle for Islam that ended in civil war in Algeria. Can the doctors of democracy promise, first of all, to do no harm?

Some of them offer democracy as an antidote to the Islamic movements I alluded to a moment ago. These movements are the opportunistic infections that have followed the failed social experiments of the Arab world. They are the poor man's civil society, and a poor substitute for it, since they are tolerance-deficient in the extreme. How can they be defeated? Some analysts suggest the answer to political Islam is democracy. Get the Islamists into the system, open the game to their participation, and they will lose their appeal.

I can assure you that from the vantage point of Israel, things look precisely the opposite. Israel has five immediate neighbors: Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Authority. Syria, Jordan, and Egypt are ruled without even a pretense of democracy. Syria is ruled by a hereditary dictator, Jordan is ruled by an absolute monarch, and Egypt is ruled by a president-for-life. And witness: Islamist movements are no great threat to order in any of these three autocratic states.

But look at Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority. Lebanon actually has a measure of political pluralism. It has political parties, a relatively open press, and elections. Yet this has not diminished the influence of Islamists. To the contrary, they flourish there in their most extreme form: the Shi'i Hizballah. This movement remains armed, it has taken over the most sensitive part of the country, and it operates as a state within a state, periodically nudging the entire region to the brink of war.

And what of the Palestinian Authority? Even under Arafat's wretched and corrupt rule, it still was less oppressive than any other Arab state. It tolerated a wider range of political expression than Syria, Jordan, or Egypt -- and of course it tolerated Islamists. And the result? Here again, the Islamists of Hamas and Islamic Jihad have gained an influence far in excess of their numbers, and they have grown murderous terrorist appendages, whose suicidal violence has infected the entire Palestinian body politic.

In short, political pluralism has not been an antidote to political Islam. Quite the opposite: the more pluralistic the system, the more likely it is to become the host of some cancerous Islamist movement combining incitement and terrorism. One can hardly blame Israelis if they express a strong preference for living alongside a dictator, a monarch, or a president-for-life. To live alongside a freer Arab society has so far meant to live alongside suicide bombers, flying rockets, and bottomless incitement.

I conclude. If there is one thing worse than an authoritarian state, it is a failed state. A prodemocracy policy could create them. It could do so precisely in places ruled by your allies. It has happened before: the Carter administration's promotion of human rights contributed to Khomeini's revolution in Iran. You cannot impose political openings on all of your adversaries -- the Asads and the Qadhafis and the Saddams. Are you prepared to try to impose them only on your allies? If you do, and it backfires (like the peace process did), this wellintentioned policy could leave us with a Middle East divided between radical nationalist dictators whom you have failed to displace and populist Islamist revolutions you will have failed to deflect. The Lansdowne conference will have to run an entire week to cover all the threats.

Arab democracy? A good idea -- provided the Arabs come up with it themselves. America's role should be that of a shining model, the city on a hill. Make this democracy the best it can be, keep this society the freest on earth. And be patient. The rest will surely follow.

Nabeel Khoury: True, there is very little democracy in the Arab world, but Martin has offered a particularly withering analysis of the subject. I will try to be more optimistic. Before I begin, let me offer a disclaimer. Although I work for the U.S. government, I am not here to represent its views. So any remarks I make regarding Arab countries are not necessarily government policy, but rather my opinion. Although I can tell you something about the government's public diplomacy programs, I will treat this as more of an in-house, off-the-record session in which we put our heads together and compare notes.

That said, my answer to the question of whether the United States can foster democracy in the Arab world is yes. Washington can and should do so, not coercively, but cooperatively.

I hope that a military intervention in Iraq can be avoided. Even if such an intervention occurs and is successful in building democracy in Iraq, I would not advocate that we repeat the use of force elsewhere in the region. I advocate instead a softer, gentler approach to democracy, one that takes a little longer, but is a surer and safer way to go.

First of all, democracy is possible in the Arab world, and it is in the best interests of the region and the United States. One cardinal sin of many Arab regimes over the past thirty to forty years has been the suppression of freedom of expression and organization, which has prevented the secular, liberal opposition from playing a constructive political role. This left the ground vacant for more extremist points of view, particularly those of Islamist movements over the past twenty years. Islamists do not need political organizations to thrive. Liberals, however, do. They need political parties and institutions. The Islamists have other ways of organizing, such as mosques and madrasas.

Arab regimes have suppressed the liberals in part by using Islamists to offset them. In this sense, the worst offender is the Saudi regime. In Saudi Arabia, Western- educated liberal thinkers, the country's intellectuals, cannot speak their minds or organize; they must look over their shoulders constantly. Meanwhile, some of the most fundamentalist elements in Saudi society have been given control of the street, the mosque, and the university.

The Saudi regime has probably done this in order to divert the attention of Islamist groups from the royal family and, simultaneously, to forestall problems from the liberal side. Yet, this is a very shortsighted strategy because fundamentalists now control the minds of Saudi youths. The youths who study under Islamists hear vile things about the United States, liberal democracies, and anyone who associates with them. One Islamist teacher, Safar al-Hawalli, used to distribute his audiotaped sermons widely to young Saudis; one of his star pupils was Osama bin Laden. When these youths grow up, they find that their own governments have been "corrupted" by the United States, have invited U.S. troops onto their soil; such observations make them very angry.

So although democracy is possible in Arab countries, its champions are beleaguered. I offer Saudi Arabia as a worst-case scenario, but other Arab regimes, to lesser extents, have done similar things. Egypt, for example, has not gone as far as Saudi Arabia in suppressing its liberal elements, but the regime nevertheless has things backward in its treatment of liberals and Islamists. To illustrate, consider the cases of Nasr Abu Zaid and Saad Eddin Ibrahim. The Egyptian government allowed the Islamist-influenced judiciary to annul Abu Zaid's marriage simply because he wrote a scholarly treatise that offended them. While giving such liberties to the Islamists, this same government put liberal thinker and civil society leader Ibrahim in jail. Obviously, this is not the way to achieve a democratic society.

The Arab world needs democracy because extremists currently have an ideological hold on the region, with free play on the airwaves and in educational institutions. We need to encourage free expression so that liberals can contest the extremists, so that more secular-minded Muslims can stand up and say, "I am a Muslim and I disagree with you. I do not accept your interpretation of the Qur'an. I do not accept your interpretation of the word jihad." At the moment, many Muslims are too intimidated to say such things.

Regional governments and Washington alike need to encourage these secular elements. If we help in establishing civil society institutions, the result will be a political balance of power. Currently, Islamists constitute the only real opposition in many parts of the Arab world because others have not been given a chance. If they were given a chance, liberals would be able to contest Islamists at the ballot box, in the streets, and on the airwaves. This cannot happen overnight. Any country that moves in this direction must move carefully. If a country has been stifling civil society for forty years and then opens up overnight, the result is Algeria.

Morocco is doing an excellent job. I just returned from four years of service there, and although the country is moving slowly, it is moving in the right direction. Civil society does exist in the Arab world: it thrives in Morocco. Ten

years ago it hardly existed, but now there are hundreds of civil society organizations covering important issues throughout Morocco. Moroccan civil society promotes human rights, women's rights, and democracy. It deals with issues such as AIDS, women's health, literacy, and more.

I am particularly proud of what the U.S. government has achieved in Morocco in the area of public diplomacy. Using the Department of State's democracy fund, the U.S. embassy in Morocco formed an interagency democracy working group. A significant portion of this funding was spent directly on Moroccan civil society associations in order to help them develop programs and professionalize their efforts.

As with other countries in the region, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) remain a controversial issue in Morocco and are not officially sanctioned by law. Nevertheless, the Moroccan government is aware of the U.S. embassy's activities, understands their significance, and has allowed them to proceed.

Moroccan women are particularly involved in civil society efforts. In the most distant rural areas, one can find literate women playing leading roles in associations and in village government. They work jobs, take care of their families, and then, after a long day, they contribute their time and effort to two or three voluntary associations. They accomplish a great deal, and their work is appreciated. For example, abused women now have a place to go. They find an association where female lawyers, psychiatrists, and psychologists contribute their time and effort to help those who have been abused. People are going to these sorts of organizations for services, and the government has responded in part by regularly appointing NGO personnel to special commissions so that they can give advice on policy issues.

Again, I do not advocate interfering by imposing a particular model or using military intervention. I advocate putting our money where our mouth is. That means working with civil society organizations and talking to friendly Arab regimes, giving them the friendly advice that it is in their long-term interests and ours to let these groups function.

At the same time, the United States should be an honest friend, one that speaks the truth and is willing to say that what its friend is doing is wrong. This is not to say that progress on such matters should constitute a litmus test for U.S. relations with friendly regimes. It would be best to squeeze a little bit without losing such friendships. ❖

RECOMMENDED



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)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,

Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

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

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

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

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iraq (/policy-analysis/iraq)

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)