

# Disengaging in Defense of Liberty

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Articles & Testimony

**W**hile working at Hebrew University this past year, I took the bus to campus each day. Whenever U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell or Special Envoy Anthony Zinni was dispatched to Israel, colleagues would urge me to stay home until after the suicide bombing. Middle Easterners understand the lesson those in the U.S. and Europe are still learning: When governments engage dictators, civilians suffer.

While European, American, and United Nations officials lament the cycle of violence in the Middle East, seldom do they consider that the phenomenon of suicide bombings developed only after the 1993 Oslo Accords ushered in a period of engagement. Palestinian Chairman Yasser Arafat repeatedly used terrorism as a tactic. In 1996, a rash of suicide bombings hit Israel. When the West employed extraordinary pressure, Arafat reigned in the terrorists, thereby demonstrating his culpability. But it was convenient to deal with him, and the results are clear. Documents seized at Orient House and Arafat's Ramallah compound detail how exchange-rate manipulations on EU aid helped Arafat build a slush fund to pay for another five years of terror.

Not only Israelis suffered, though. Arafat may be a symbol of Palestinian nationalism, but he is hardly a popular leader. West Bank Palestinians led the first Intifada, only to have Europe and the U.S. bring exiles from Tunis to rule the Palestinian Authority with an iron hand. They and the late Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin figured that an autocratic Palestinian Authority could best end violence and usher in Palestinian statehood. They were wrong. Arafat and his oligarchs embezzled European and Arab aid money and built luxury villas while honest people suffered. In just one scandal, Kuwait's al-Watan newspaper on June 7 detailed how Arafat embezzled \$5.1 million in aid money for personal use.

Palestinians are scared to criticize openly, though. Arafat's personal militia repeatedly storm prisons, and execute "collaborators" held within. As in Iran and Iraq, executions are public, and meant to terrorize. Bodies are displayed to send a warning. In April, Arafat's Tanzim militia executed a 22-year-old in Ramallah, after his sister reported seeing him talking to an Israeli; the crime of dialogue. Surprisingly, the same European politicians who harp on human-rights abuses elsewhere, never question the collaborator label. To Arafat, a "collaborator" is anyone who speaks of coexistence or questions into whose bank accounts hundreds of millions of dollars of aid money disappeared. To Palestinians, he is a symbol of greed's triumph over freedom.

Arafat is not the only dictator that Europe and the U.S. have accommodated. In the 1980s, the West sought to engage Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. Iran, Kuwait, and the Kurds are still seeking to recover. The day after London unveiled its "smart sanctions" proposal, an illiterate Iraqi farmer asked me, "Why do they talk about war crimes one day, and reward Saddam the next?" After the confirmation of the Bush election victory, Iraqis were ecstatic. "Maybe he will correct his father's mistakes," one Iraqi explained. "Why do people in the West think we want to live under Saddam any more than they do," another asked.

Nowhere is the failure of engagement clearer than in Iran. For more than a decade, the EU has pursued dialogue and trade with the Islamic Republic. Bilateral trade now exceeds \$12 billion. Unfortunately, Iranian terror has not abated, and reform remains in the realm of rhetoric rather than reality. On July 8, Isfahan's Friday Prayer Leader Ayatollah

Jalaludin Tahiri, one of Iran's most prominent clerics, resigned in disgust from blasting the Islamic Republic for "unemployment, inflation and high prices, the hellish gap between poverty and wealth, the deep and daily-growing distance between the classes, the stagnation and decline of national revenue, a sick economy, bureaucratic corruption, desperately weak administrators, the growing flaws in the country's political structure, embezzlement, bribery and addiction, and the failure to find effective solutions." It is unfortunate, then, that prominent Eurocrats like External Affairs Commission Chris Patten, still insist, "Everybody who supports the reform process in Iran will welcome the steps we have taken." Too bad that on July 29, Iranian reformists issued a statement condemning the EU's "mercantilist policy" toward Iran.

The U.S. has taken a different tack. Responding to the failure of Arafat's dictatorship, Bush declared, "If liberty can blossom in the rocky soil of the West Bank and Gaza, it will inspire men and women around the globe who are equally entitled to the benefits of democratic government." He applied the same policy toward Iran, placing the U.S. squarely with reformists and democrats, declaring on July 12, "As Iran's people move towards a future defined by greater freedom, greater tolerance, they will have no better friend than the United States of America."

Unlike the empty rhetoric of the past, recent actions demonstrate the seriousness of the Bush administration. On August 15, Bush warned Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak that the U.S. would not supply Egypt with new foreign aid in response to the jailing by an Egyptian kangaroo court of a leading democracy activist. It is the White House, and not traditional NGOs, that is leading the drive to cool relations between the United States and the Saudi autocracy, despite continued American dependence on oil. The era of cynical realpolitik is over, and the age of principle has begun.

Unfortunately, there is still a tendency on both sides of the Atlantic to equate moral clarity with, in the words of former French foreign minister Hubert Vedrine, "simplisme." Libya is poised to assume the leadership of the United Nations Human Rights Commission. There are congressmen and senators who, like their European colleagues, advocate engaging the Islamic Republic regardless of what Iranians say. They favor the maintenance of tight relations with Saudi Arabia, and they would cynically sell out Palestinian freedom so as to not admit the tragedy of their previous infatuation with Arafat.

In May, a commission of European and American officials concluded that the Sudanese government is complicit in the slave trade. Yet, the EU responded not by calling for democracy or severing its ties to the Islamist regime, but by funding it. The State Department upgraded its diplomatic presence. By appointing a permanent charge d'affaires rather than an ambassador, Foggy Bottom bypassed the need for Senate confirmation. Why respect democracy at home any more than abroad? Troubling, both Europe and the United States appear ready to sacrifice religious freedom for the sake of an effervescent Sudan peace deal. Real peace is possible, but only when Sudan embraces democracy and religious pluralism.

But the tide is turning. Afghanistan has won new freedom, and Iranians and Iraqis will soon know liberty. Even the Palestinians may leave the dictatorship of the past behind. Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go. In Lebanon, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, the U.S. and Europe must still place democracy first. The West continues to meet Syria's occupation of Lebanon with deafening silence. Mali, one of the poorest countries on earth, is the only Muslim country that Freedom House rates as completely free and democratic. In fiscal year 2001, the U.S. provided Mali just \$33.7 million in development assistance. And yet, USAID provided Lebanon, a country with one-third the population, and host to numerous terrorist groups, \$50 million. In Saudi Arabia and Syria, citizens still lack the most fundamental human rights. Even outside the Middle East, China is coddled, while democratic Taiwan is treated as an leper. The concerns of India—the world's largest democracy—are often ignored.

The age of dictatorship and autocracies must pass. Their representatives should not be toasted in the West regardless of their oil wealth. Diplomats and policymakers must not smugly dismiss the notion that men and women

around the globe are entitled to the benefits of democracy, despite the rejoicing of Afghans, and the growing chorus of Iranians, Iraqis, and Palestinians demanding freedom. European Commission officials, academics from organizations like the Middle East Studies Association and the Royal Institute for International Affairs, and activists from the American Friends Service Committee, Voices in the Wilderness, and any number of self-righteous peace groups have subverted human-rights standards for narrow political agendas for long enough. They have lost the morale high ground, and by dishonest claims and selective reporting they have done irreparable harm to those suffering at the hands of dictators and terrorists.

Increasingly, the Bush administration understands that engaging dictators may be easy in the short-term, but it ensures more trouble ahead. Europe might chide American unilateralism, but the United States should not abandon defense of liberty, even if it means going it alone.

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