



CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT
for International Peace

20

October 2002

Policy Brief

S U M M A R Y

The increasingly popular idea in Washington that the United States, by toppling Saddam Hussein, can rapidly democratize Iraq and unleash a democratic tsunami in the Middle East is a dangerous fantasy. The U.S. record of building democracy after invading other countries is mixed at best and the Bush administration's commitment to a massive reconstruction effort in Iraq is doubtful. The repercussions of an intervention in Iraq will be as likely to complicate the spread of democracy in the Middle East as promote it. The United States has an important role to play in fostering democracy in the region, but the task will be slow and difficult given the unpromising terrain and lack of U.S. leverage over key governments. ■

Democratic Mirage in the Middle East

*Marina Ottaway, Thomas Carothers,
Amy Hawthorne, Daniel Brumberg*

Democracy and Rule of Law Project, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

From within the Bush administration and on the editorial pages of America's major newspapers, a growing chorus of voices is expounding an extraordinarily expansive, optimistic view of a new democratizing mission for America in the Middle East. The rhetoric has reached extraordinary heights. We are told that toppling Saddam Hussein would allow the United States to rapidly democratize Iraq and by so doing unleash a democratic tsunami across the Islamic World. Some believe that a pro-democracy campaign in the Middle East could produce a democratic boom comparable in magnitude and significance to the one produced by the end of the Cold War.

It is good that the question of democracy in the Middle East is finally receiving serious attention. Although the United States has, over the years, offered tepid encouragement for political reform in the Arab world and funded some democracy aid programs there, past efforts were timid, erratic, and not reinforced at senior diplomatic levels. For far too long, Washington coasted on the complacent and erroneous assumption that the stability of the autocratic regimes of the Middle East could at

least protect U.S. national security. Now the pendulum has swung. U.S. officials no longer see these regimes as bulwarks against Islamic extremists, but consider them responsible for the discontent that fuels terrorism and, in the case of Saudi Arabia, for the financing of extremist groups. But obstacles to democracy in the Middle East are many and go well beyond the autocratic nature of the present regimes to span a host of economic, sociopolitical, and historical factors. These realities do not mean the Middle East will never democratize or that the United States has no role to play. But they do mean that the path will be long, hard, and slow and that American expectations and plans should be calibrated accordingly.

Democratizing Iraq

It is hard not to feel the attraction of the tsunami idea—the tantalizing notion that with one hard blow in Iraq the United States can unleash a tidal wave of democracy in a region long known for resistance to such change. But can it? The United States can certainly oust Saddam Hussein and install a regime that is less repressive domestically



Marina Ottaway is a senior associate in the Democracy and Rule of Law Project at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. She is the author or editor of more than ten books on comparative politics including the forthcoming *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semiauthoritarianism* (Carnegie Endowment, January 2003).



Thomas Carothers, who directs the Democracy and Rule of Law Project at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, is a leading specialist on democracy promotion and is the author of several books and many articles on the subject including *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve* (Carnegie Endowment, 1999).

and less hostile to U.S. interests. But democracy will not soon be forthcoming.

Experience in other countries where the United States has forcibly removed dictators or helped launch major post-conflict democratic reconstruction indicates a strong need for caution. In Haiti, for example, the 1994 U.S. invasion and the subsequent large-scale reconstruction effort have not led to democracy but instead political chaos, renewed repression, and dismal U.S.–Haiti relations. In post-Dayton Bosnia, the truly massive international reconstruction effort has produced peace and some socioeconomic gains, but only a tenuous political equilibrium that even six years later would collapse if international forces pulled out. Panama post–U.S. invasion might be construed as a more positive case, with post-Noriega politics having achieved some degree of pluralism. But Panama already had some genuine experience with pluralism before Noriega rose to power and even so Panamanian politics today, though not dictatorial, are still mired in corruption, public disillusionment, and fecklessness. It should be noted that all these countries are small, making even forceful intervention manageable. Iraq, with its 23 million inhabitants, would require an intervention on a totally different scale.

The example of Afghanistan is especially sobering. Despite widespread optimism of the initial post-Taliban period and the Bush administration's ringing promises to lead the democratic reconstruction, the political situation in Afghanistan today is troubled and uncertain. The administration's failure to back up its promises with a genuine commitment to Afghanistan's reconstruction will badly undercut similar promises made about Iraq.

Like Afghanistan, Iraq is a country torn by profound ideological, religious and ethnic conflicts. Before democratization can even begin, the United States would have to assemble a power-sharing agreement among ethnic Kurds, Shiites, and Sunni Muslims. Because no obvious leader is waiting in the wings and the exiled Iraqi opposition is chronically divided, Washington would have

to provide the political and, most importantly, military and security infrastructure necessary for holding a new government together. In short, the United States would have to become engaged in nation building on a scale that would dwarf any other such effort since the reconstruction of Germany and Japan after World War II. And it would have to stay engaged not just years, but decades, given the depth of change required to make Iraq into a democracy. Thus far the Bush administration has given no indication that it is ready to commit to such a long-term, costly endeavor. All this does not mean that Iraq can never become democratic. But the idea of a quick and easy democratic transformation is a fantasy.

Tsunami?

Equally doubtful is the idea that a regime change in Iraq would trigger a democratic tsunami in the Middle East. The notion that the fabled "Arab street" would respond to the establishment of a U.S.-installed, nominally democratic Iraqi regime by rising up in a surge of pro-democratic protests, toppling autocracy after autocracy, and installing pro-western, pluralist regimes is far-fetched. No one can predict with any certainty what the precise regional consequences of a U.S. action would be, but they would likely have as many or more negative than positive effects on the near-term potential for democracy.

For example, an invasion would very likely intensify the anti-Americanism already surging around the region, strengthening the hands of hard-line political forces. Autocratic Arab regimes that refused to support the American war effort could benefit from a wave of Arab nationalism and find their position strengthened, at least for a period. Domestic advocates of reform would come under suspicion as unpatriotic. Conversely, by supporting the invasion, several autocratic regimes, including Saudi Arabia and Egypt, might win a reprieve from any new U.S. pressure to democratize.

The formation of a new, more moderate regime in Iraq would unlikely have the inspi-

rational effect some predict. Many Arabs, rather than looking to Iraq as a model, would focus on the fact that Iraq was “liberated” through western intervention, not by a popular Iraqi movement. One powerful current in today’s regional discourse emphasizes liberation from excessive western interference in Arab affairs more than liberation from undemocratic leaders.

As to possible ramifications for the future of Palestine, Ariel Sharon’s government in Israel would likely view an American invasion of Iraq as an invitation to skirt the statehood issue. Unless the Bush administration shows the political will to push now for a two-state solution—a very unlikely scenario given the close links between Israeli hard-liners and administration hawks—victory in Iraq would more likely postpone than advance the creation of a democratic Palestine.

Domino democratization does sometimes occur, as in Latin America and Eastern Europe in the 1980s and 1990s. But while external influences may increase the chance of an initial change in government, what happens next depends on internal conditions. This was certainly the case in the former Soviet Union, where what at first seemed like a wave of democracy petered out in the face of deep-seated domestic obstacles. Today most former Soviet republics are autocracies.

Conditions Matter: Middle East Realities

Even if the United States ousted Saddam Hussein and vigorously pursued political reform in the region, democratic results would be highly unlikely. Such a policy would certainly shake up the region, but the final outcome in each country would owe much more to domestic factors than to the vigor of U.S. and European reformist zeal. One of the lessons of more than a decade of democracy promotion around the world is that outsiders are usually marginal players. They become the central determinant of political change only if they are willing to intervene massively, impose a de facto protectorate, and stay for an indefinite, long

term. No matter what happens in Iraq, such forceful intervention is unthinkable in most Middle East countries.

The Middle East today lacks the domestic conditions that set the stage for democratic change elsewhere. It does not have the previous experience with democracy that facilitated transitions in Central Europe. Even Egypt, which in the early part of the twentieth century had a national bourgeoisie committed to the values of liberal democracy, opted for autocracy fifty years ago. Quite a few countries in the region—Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco among them—are liberalized autocracies whose leaders have skillfully used a measure of state-monitored political openness to promote reforms that appear pluralistic but function to preserve autocracy. Through controlled elections, divide-and-rule tactics, state interference in civil society organizations, and the obstruction of meaningful political party systems, these regimes have created deeply entrenched ruling systems that are surprisingly effective at resisting democratic change.

Nor has the Middle East experienced the prolonged periods of economic growth and the resulting dramatic changes in educational standards, living standards, and life styles that led Asian countries like Taiwan and South Korea to democratic change. The picture is instead one of socioeconomic deterioration. Even in the richest oil-producing countries, oil export revenues are no longer sufficient to subsidize rapidly growing populations at previous levels. The population of Saudi Arabia, for example, was less than six million in 1974 at the time of the first oil boom, but it is now sixteen million and growing at one of the highest rates in the world. Through state control of the economy, furthermore, regimes have purchased the support, or at least the quiescence, of key sectors of the citizenry.

Moreover, countries of the Middle East do not benefit from a positive “neighborhood effect,” the regional, locally grown pressure to conform that helped democratize Latin America. On the contrary, neighborhood



Amy Hawthorne, an associate in the Democracy and Rule of Law Project at the Carnegie Endowment, is a specialist in Arab politics. She managed democracy promotion projects in the Middle East for the International Foundation for Election Systems and is the author of a forthcoming monograph on U.S. democracy promotion in the Middle East.



Dan Brumberg is a visiting scholar in the Democracy and Rule of Law Project at the Carnegie Endowment and associate professor of government at Georgetown University. He has written widely on political and social change in the Middle East including *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran* (University of Chicago, 2001)

norms in the Middle East encourage repressive, authoritarian regimes.

Beyond these daunting obstacles, at least three issues complicate the achievement of democracy in the Middle East:

Islamism. The issue is not whether Islam and democracy are incompatible in an absolute sense. Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam is far too complex a religion, with too many schools of thought, for the question even to make sense. Rather, the issue is the existence in all Middle Eastern countries, and indeed in all countries with a substantial Moslem population, of both legal and clandestine political movements that use illiberal interpretations of Islam to mobilize their followers. Since these “Islamist” movements enjoy considerable

only provide governments with a justification for maintaining excessive controls over the entire political sphere, thereby stunting the development of other popular forces. Many governments, such as those in Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Turkey, and Yemen, have tried to skirt this dilemma by giving Islamists a chance to participate in politics while at the same time preventing them from actually assuming political power, but this solution also augurs poorly for democracy.

Conflict with Israel. Resentment against the state of Israel, particularly against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, creates a measure of solidarity between Arab leaders and their citizens that is exploited regularly by autocrats to deflect attention from their own

The U.S. should promote democracy in the Middle East recognizing that quick change is a mirage. The goals must be modest, and the commitment long term.

grassroots support and local authenticity, they are most likely to benefit from democratic openings. Truly free and fair elections in any country of the Middle East would likely assure Islamist parties a substantial share of the vote, or possibly even a majority, as would have happened in Algeria in 1992 had the elections not been cancelled. Democratization ironically raises the possibility of bringing to power political parties that might well abrogate democracy itself. This is a different version of the old Cold War–era fears: communist parties in Western Europe and elsewhere would come to power through elections only to impose radical change. However, continuing to exclude or marginalize Islamist political participation would doom democracy by silencing a voice that resonates with an important segment of the public. Doing so would

shortcomings. Until there is a two-state solution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict that gives security and dignity to both parties, resentment will infuse all aspects of Arab politics and obscure the question of democracy.

Perceptions of the United States. There is a widespread perception in the Middle East that the Bush administration is embracing the cause of democracy promotion not out of real commitment, but because doing so provides a convenient justification for American intervention in Iraq and the acceptance of the Israeli reoccupation of the West Bank. Unconditional support of Israel, combined with the Sharon government’s publicly stated objective of deferring Palestinian statehood, feeds a widespread feeling that the U.S. government cannot be trusted. America’s long

support of Arab autocracies adds to this perception, thus undermining its credibility as an advocate of change in the Middle East.

Beyond the Mirage

The United States should promote democracy in the Middle East recognizing that quick change is a mirage. The goals must be initially modest, and the commitment to change long term.

The core elements of a democracy-oriented policy are not hard to identify: sustained, high-level pressure on Arab states to respect political and civil rights and to create or widen genuine political space; clear, consistent pressure on Arab states to carry out pro-democratic institutional, legal, and constitutional changes; and increased democracy aid that bolsters democracy activists, engages seriously with the challenge of political party development, nurtures efforts to develop the rule of law, supports serious proponents of pro-democratic institutional reforms, and supports a growing range of civil society actors, including moderate Islamists.

In the past several months, the State Department has started to frame such an effort and commit new funds to it. This new policy framework will require considerable additional high-level attention and wider support within the administration if it is not to be a futile quick fix. A serious program of long-term support for Middle East democracy would need to follow these guidelines:

- **Do not reflexively attempt to marginalize Islamist groups.** Differentiate instead between the truly extremist organizations that must be isolated because they are committed to violence and those amenable to working legally to achieve their goals. Develop strategies to encourage political processes in which moderate Islamists, along with other emerging forces, can compete fairly and over time gain incentives to moderate their illiberal ideologies. To do this, the United States needs to acquire a much better understanding of the relevant organizations in each country. It will not be

A New Enthusiasm . . .

"The violence and grief that troubled the Holy Land have been among the great tragedies of our time. The Middle East has often been left behind in the political and economic advancement of the world. That is the history of the region. But it need not and must not be its fate. The Middle East could write a new story of trade and development and democracy. And we stand ready to help."

—President Bush, dispatching Secretary of State Colin Powell to the Middle East, April 4, 2002

"When it comes to the common rights and needs of men and women, there is no clash of civilizations. The requirements of freedom apply fully to Africa and Latin America and the entire Islamic world. The peoples of the Islamic nations want and deserve the same freedoms and opportunities as people in every nation. And their governments should listen to their hopes. A truly strong nation will permit legal avenues of dissent for all groups that pursue their aspirations without violence. An advancing nation will pursue economic reform, to unleash the great entrepreneurial energy of its people. A thriving nation will respect the rights of women, because no society can prosper while denying opportunity to half its citizens. Mothers and fathers and children across the Islamic world, and all the world, share the same fears and aspirations. In poverty, they struggle. In tyranny, they suffer. And as we saw in Afghanistan, in liberation they celebrate."

—President Bush, commencement speech at West Point, June 1, 2002

"If all these steps are taken, it will signal a new openness and accountability in Iraq. And it could open the prospect of the United Nations helping to build a government that represents all Iraqis—a government based on respect for human rights, economic liberty, and internationally supervised elections. The United States has no quarrel with the Iraqi people; they've suffered too long in silent captivity. Liberty for the Iraqi people is a great moral cause and a great strategic goal. The people of Iraq deserve it; the security of all nations requires it. Free societies do not intimidate through cruelty and conquest, and open societies do not threaten the world with mass murder. The United States supports political and economic liberty in a unified Iraq. . . . The people of Iraq can shake off their captivity. They can one day join a democratic Afghanistan and a democratic Palestine, inspiring reforms throughout the Muslim world. These nations can show by their example that honest government, and respect for women, and the great Islamic tradition of learning can triumph in the Middle East and beyond."

—President Bush, addressing the United Nations, September 12, 2002

And a Rising Chorus . . .

“In a matter of only a few years, Palestine will be one of two new Arab democratic states. The other neonatal Arab democracy will be Iraq. These unthinkable developments will revolutionize the power dynamic in the Middle East, powerfully adding to the effects of the liberation of Afghanistan to force Arab and Islamic regimes to increasingly allow democratic reforms. A majority of Arabs will come to see America as the essential ally in progress toward liberty in their own lands.”

—*Michael Kelly. Washington Post. June 26, 2002.*

“What if the United States were as serious about saving the Arabs from corrupt autocrats and radical Islam as it once was about saving the world from communism? What if the tools of the cold war—selective propaganda, open support for dissidents, covert support for opposition political movements and sanctions—were put to use to promote Arab democracy and moderation?”

—*Susan Sachs. New York Times. June 30, 2002.*

“Recently President Bush demanded democratic reform from the Palestinians. Washington should support similar demands for the entire region. For too long, America embraced corrupt and autocratic Arab leaders, asking only that they accommodate Western oil needs and not make excessive trouble for Israel. As a result, too many young Arabs now identify the United States more readily with the repressive dictators it supports in the Middle East than with the tolerant democracy it practices at home. Islamic terrorist groups are adept at manipulating their anger and despair.”

—*Editorial desk of the New York Times. July 4, 2002.*

“The administration cannot rely on local leaders who show no commitment to democratic change to be the instruments of that change. Nor can it rely on a now-discredited peace process to overcome the political hatreds and cultural backlash that roil the region. Only a level and clarity of American commitment to democratic change that forces choices upon reluctant partners will calm an ever more deadly conflict.”

—*Jim Hoagland. Washington Post. August 1, 2002*

continued next page

easy and it entails some risk. But the only means of containing dangerous extremist groups without perpetuating wholesale repression is to open the door of legal political activity to the more moderate organizations.

■ **Do not overemphasize support for westernized nongovernmental organizations and individuals with impeccable liberal credentials but little influence in their societies.** Democracy promoters need to engage as much as possible in a dialogue with a wide cross section of influential elites: mainstream academics, journalists, moderate Islamists, and members of the professional associations who play a political role in some Arab countries, rather than only the narrow world of westernized democracy and human rights advocates.

■ **Don't confuse a “sell America” campaign with democracy promotion.** The U.S. government has launched a major public relations campaign to burnish America's image in the Arab world. Whatever the value of this much-discussed effort, it has little to do with the politically nuanced task of pressuring governments on human rights and institutional reforms, and of supporting key civil groups and the like. Movement toward democracy and movement toward a more positive view of American culture and society are not synonymous.

■ **Do not support lackluster institutional reform programs—such as with stagnant parliaments and judiciaries—in lieu of real political reform.** Push the liberalized autocracies of the region, such as in Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Jordan, and Lebanon, beyond the superficial political reforms they use to sustain themselves. This will require pressuring such states to undertake true political restructuring, allow the development of political parties, and open up more space for political contestation.

■ **Account for major differences in political starting points and potential for political change. Shape policies accordingly.** Be clear about the goal in each country: regime

change, slow liberalization, and democratization are not the same thing. Policies to achieve one goal are not necessarily appropriate for the others. In particular, a sudden regime change would probably make democratization a more remote prospect for many countries because it would too quickly tip the balance in favor of the groups that are best organized and enjoy grassroots support, Islamist organizations in most cases.

■ **Review carefully everything we have done so far in the region in the name of democracy promotion.** The United States has spent more than \$250 million on democracy programs in the Middle East in the past decade with little impact. Understanding the weaknesses of these prior efforts is particularly important in Egypt and the Palestinian territories, recipients of the largest amounts of such aid. Democracy assistance must not translate into more patronage for Arab governments or, conversely, support for organizations that are truly marginal in their own societies.

The idea of instant democratic transformation in the Middle East is a mirage. The fact that the Bush administration has suddenly changed its mind about the importance of democracy in the Middle East has not changed the domestic political equation in any country of the region. Furthermore, the United States has limited leverage in most Arab countries. In other regions, the United States, together with Europe and international organizations, often used the lever of economic assistance to force political reform on reluctant governments. But oil-rich countries do not receive aid. Poor countries in the region do, but the United States can hardly afford to use this aid as a weapon for political reform without jeopardizing other interests. The United States already wants a lot from Arab states. It wants help in the war on terrorism. It wants their oil. It wants cooperation in finding a solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. It wants access to military installations to wage war on Iraq. It cannot afford to antagonize the very regimes whose cooperation it seeks. The

“Change toward democratic regimes in Tehran and Baghdad would unleash a tsunami across the Islamic world, just as change in China will transform Asia.”

—Joshua Muravchik. *New York Times*. August 19, 2002.

“We should instead be talking about using all our political, moral, and military genius to support a vast democratic revolution to liberate all the peoples of the Middle East from tyranny. That is our real mission, the essence of the war in which we are engaged, and the proper subject of our national debate. . . . And just as a successful democratic revolution in Iran would inspire the Iraqis to join us to remove Saddam, it is impossible to imagine that the Iranian people would tolerate tyranny in their own country once freedom had come to Iraq. Syria would follow in short order.”

—Michael Ledeen. *Wall Street Journal*. September 4, 2002.

“So I am for invading Iraq only if we think that doing so can bring about regime change and democratization. Because what the Arab world desperately needs is a model that works—a progressive Arab regime that by its sheer existence would create pressure and inspiration for gradual democratization and modernization around the region.”

—Thomas Friedman. *New York Times*. September 18, 2002.

United States will be forced to work with existing regimes toward gradual reform—and this is a good thing. If a tidal wave of political change actually came to pass, the United States would not be even remotely prepared to cope with the resulting instability and need for large-scale building of new political systems. ■

The Carnegie Endowment normally does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views presented here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Endowment, its officers, staff, or trustees.

© 2002 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace



CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT
for International Peace

www.ceip.org

**Visit the new Carnegie
Endowment web site:
“A must for the web surfer
interested in global affairs.”**

—Dow Jones Business Directory

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a private, non-profit organization dedicated to advancing cooperation between nations and promoting active international engagement by the United States. Founded in 1910, its work is nonpartisan and dedicated to achieving practical results. Its research is primarily grouped in three areas: the Global Policy Program, the China Program, and the Russian and Eurasian Program.

Related Resources *from Carnegie Endowment*

Visit www.ceip.org/pubs for these and other publications

DEMOCRACY CHALLENGED: THE RISE OF SEMIAUTHORITARIANISM, Marina Ottaway. Carnegie Endowment, forthcoming January 2003.

FUNDING VIRTUE: CIVIL SOCIETY AID AND DEMOCRACY PROMOTION, Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers, editors. Carnegie Endowment, 2000.

AIDING DEMOCRACY ABROAD: THE LEARNING CURVE, Thomas Carothers. Carnegie Endowment, 1999.

THE TRAP OF LIBERALIZED AUTOCRACY, Daniel Brumberg. *Journal of Democracy*, October 2002.

DEMOCRACY DEFICIT: U.S. DEMOCRACY PROMOTION EFFORTS IN THE ARAB WORLD, Amy Hawthorne. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, forthcoming 2002.

NATION BUILDING, Marina Ottaway. *Foreign Policy*, September/October 2002.

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT
for International Peace
1779 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036



www.ceip.org