

# THE DEATH OF DEMOCRACY PROMOTION?

---

Ilan Berman

---

What a difference a few years can make. In September 2002, less than a year after taking office, the Bush administration laid out a breathtakingly ambitious vision of American foreign policy. “The United States possesses unprecedented—and unequaled—strength and influence in the world,” the newly-released *National Security Strategy of the United States* proudly proclaimed. “Sustained by faith in the principles of liberty, and the value of a free society, this position comes with unparalleled responsibilities, obligations, and opportunity. The great strength of this nation must be used to promote a balance of power that favors freedom.”<sup>1</sup>

But less than five years later, that vision appears to be in full strategic retreat. In Iraq, mounting sectarian violence threatens to erupt into open civil war, undermining post-war reconstruction efforts and putting at risk the political progress made since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. In Afghanistan, the elected government of a vital American ally is under growing assault from a resurgent Taliban. And in the Palestinian Territories, popular elections have brought to power a radical Islamist movement committed to the destruction of its neighbor, Israel. Democracy, in other words, does not appear to be on the march, despite the best efforts of the White House.

Where and how did things go wrong? Some answers can be found in the common misconceptions about the mechanisms by which to foster—and, more importantly, to sustain—democracy abroad that now permeate official Washington.



ILAN BERMAN is Vice President for Policy at the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, D.C., and Editor of *The Journal of International Security Affairs*.

## Mission creep

The first problem that has plagued U.S. policymakers in recent years is confusion about whether the spread of democracy should serve as a tactic in a larger anti-terror strategy, or as the end goal of U.S. policy itself.

---

While “tactical democracy,” if used selectively and carefully, can be a potent weapon against extremism, a policy that promotes democracy above all other values is at best counterproductive. At worst, it is downright dangerous.

The differences are enormous. As a *tactic*, democracy promotion can be an effective counterterrorism tool. After all, as Pavel Ivanov eloquently pointed out in these pages not long ago,<sup>2</sup> the character of individual regimes matters a great deal. Governments that are unaccountable to their own people are far more susceptible to corruption and radicalism, and are more likely to engage in criminal behavior. It is not by accident that the world’s leading state sponsors of terrorism—Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Pakistan—are today all governed by deeply authoritarian, highly unrepresentative regimes. Democracies, by contrast, make better counterterrorism partners. Because an enfranchised populace becomes a stakeholder in a stable civil society, it is by its nature more sensitive to the threats posed by political radicals. And, since democracy demands a greater degree of transparency and accountability from its government, citizens are far less likely to allow their leaders to provide aid and comfort to fringe groups.

The adoption of democracy as *strategy*, however, is far more problematic. It makes the promotion of democratic processes abroad the single most important priority for U.S. foreign policy—a choice that, by necessity, wreaks havoc upon existing alliance structures and distorts the economics of American engagement abroad. For, while “tactical democracy,” if used selectively and carefully, can be a potent weapon against extremism, a policy that promotes democracy above all other values is at best counterproductive. At worst, it is downright dangerous.

Early on, Administration officials showed encouraging signs of understanding this distinction. In the days after September 11th, the Bush administration launched its campaign in Afghanistan not because the regime there was undemocratic, a state of affairs that had persisted since the Taliban’s seizure of power in 1996, but because of the latter’s role in harboring and facilitating the activities of the al-Qaeda terrorist network. Upon the Taliban’s ouster, President Bush threw his weight behind interim leader Hamid Karzai, in large part because he was committed to preventing his country from becoming a safe haven for terrorism—a goal Karzai sought to accomplish through the creation of a pluralistic governing system. In other words, the orienting principle of U.S. policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan was, and remains, counterterrorism, although the promotion of democratic principles represents an important part of that policy.

Very quickly thereafter, however, the Bush administration began to show signs of mission creep. The elevation of democracy to the status of grand strategy first became visible in the context of Iraq in February 2003, when the President himself

told the American Enterprise Institute in Washington that “[s]uccess in Iraq could also begin a new stage for Middle Eastern peace, and set in motion progress towards a truly democratic Palestinian state.”<sup>3</sup> Since then, Administration officials have time and again emphasized the centrality of democracy in Iraq to their vision of a prosperous region.<sup>4</sup>

This conflation of goals belies a deep confusion about the dynamics of the Middle East. Although success in Iraq is important, it does not automatically ensure political transformation in the region as a whole. After all, Iraq is only one element of the exceedingly complex geopolitical picture of the Middle East; its resolution has little or no impact on a myriad of other issues, from succession in Egypt to the long-term stability of the House of Saud, which can and should also be on the plates of policymakers in Washington.

It also connotes enormous opportunity costs, economic and otherwise. Because, if in the eyes of the Administration, Iraq is indeed seen as the key to regional peace, then a failure to promote pluralism there is simply not an option. Indeed, as the President himself has clearly articulated, America’s long-term commitment goes well beyond simply establishing security in Iraq, to incorporate the expansion of civil society and prosperity for the Iraqi people.<sup>5</sup> Such an approach will require major infusions of capital, greater numbers of troops and sustained political attention well into the foreseeable future—all carried out at the expense of other potential fronts in the War on Terror.

None of which is to say that the Iraq effort now under way is not worthwhile. Yet the importance of Iraq today rests in its ability to influence, either positively or negatively,

America’s larger strategic aims in the region. And, if the current scope of U.S. engagement there is any indication, plans for regional stability progressively have been subordinated to more “principled” considerations. Should it turn out that as a result the United States is no longer willing or able to prosecute the War on Terror in other regions or against other adversaries, the costs of toppling Saddam will turn out to have been high indeed.

---

The importance of Iraq today rests in its ability to influence, either positively or negatively, America’s larger strategic aims in the region. Should it turn out that as a result of its engagement there the United States is no longer willing or able to prosecute the War on Terror in other regions or against other adversaries, the costs of toppling Saddam will turn out to have been high indeed.

### **Running the marathon**

The second problem facing American officials has been the conceptual failure to understand that democracy is a process, not a destination. All too often, U.S. policymakers have lauded signs of movement toward pluralism in foreign lands, only to fail in providing the political and economic support needed to sustain such trends over time.

Ukraine serves as a perfect example of this attention deficit disorder. In November 2004, the elevation of former foreign minister Viktor Yanukovich to the country’s presidency (in controversial elections blatantly

manipulated by Moscow) brought hundreds of thousands to the streets in an outpouring of protest that became known as the “Orange Revolution.” The protesters succeeded beyond their wildest dreams; over the course of two months, the original results of the vote were annulled and a new election was held. In it, popular, Western-leaning Viktor Yushchenko handily defeated Yanukovich in what was widely seen as a referendum for a new national direction—one free of Russian influence.

In the West, the outcome was hailed as a major success for democratic forces. During the heady days of the “Orange Revolution,” a number of American nongovernmental organizations (including the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute) had played a major—albeit quiet—role in organizing and sustaining the civic campaign against Yanukovich,<sup>6</sup> with tacit approval from the U.S. government. Yet, in the wake of Yushchenko’s electoral victory, Ukraine’s reformers suddenly found, much to their chagrin, that they had been forgotten. Official Washington, by all appearances, cared more about scoring a political victory against Moscow than securing the democratic peace that followed.

---

Today, the United States has unrivaled capability to support liberal democratic forces around the world. Such support, however, cannot be short-term. Neither should it be pegged to the attainment of any one particular political objective or goal.

This inattention proved fatal. Left to their own devices, Ukraine’s various political blocs dissolved into bitter factional infighting. That disorder, in turn, allowed revanchist forces within the Ukrainian body politic, buoyed by a refocused Russia, to grow increasingly powerful. The culmination came in March 2006, when parliamentary elections abruptly swept Yushchenko’s administration from office in favor of a coalition government headed by none other than his bitter political rival, Viktor Yanukovich. In less than a year-and-a-half, the “Orange Revolution” had suffered a near-total reversal of fortune.

The experience of Ukraine serves as a cautionary tale. Today, the United States has unrivaled capability to support liberal democratic forces around the world. Such support, however, cannot be short-term. Neither should it be pegged to the attainment of any one particular political objective or goal. Rather, it must be sustained in nature, and calibrated to empower not only the initial successes of reformers, but the preservation of these victories over time as well.

### **Real choices**

The third challenge confronting American policymakers is the arduous task of political capacity-building. In order for democracy to thrive in the historically inhospitable soil of the Middle East, the people on the Arab and Muslim streets must perceive that they have real choices about exactly who governs them and what shape that government will take.

In principle, the United States has understood the need to inject new voices in the Middle Eastern political debate. In its public discourse, the Bush administration repeatedly has emphasized the importance

of reformers and political progressives to the creation of a new, more pluralistic order in the region.<sup>7</sup> As a practical matter, however, the past five years have seen precious little investment of this sort on the part of the United States.

Recent events in the Palestinian Authority are emblematic of this failure. The United States and its allies were taken by surprise when the radical Hamas movement abruptly swept to power in the Palestinian Authority in early 2006, but they should not have been. When Palestinians went to the polls in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in January 2006, they had been presented with just two choices, President Mahmoud Abbas' sclerotic Fatah party or its Islamist opposition, Hamas. The decision was not a difficult one to make.

After all, Fatah had enjoyed a virtual monopoly on power in the West Bank and Gaza Strip ever since Yasser Arafat's return to the Palestinian Territories in 1994. The following twelve years saw the institutionalization and expansion of the crony politics, corruption and authoritarianism that characterized PLO practices—all carried out at the expense of ordinary Palestinians. Hamas, meanwhile, stepped into the vacuum left by Arafat's rogue regime, expanding its role in Palestinian education, medicine and social services. In the process, it had positioned itself as a viable political alternative to the PLO. Thus, when it came time for Palestinians to choose, they invariably avoided the corrupt, secular government that had robbed them in favor of an Islamist one that they hoped would not.

None of this registered on Washington's radar. In the run-up to the Palestinian vote, American officials were quick to express their support for the beleaguered government of

Mahmoud Abbas, and just as quick to warn of dire international consequences, from political ostracism to a cutoff of fiscal aid, should Hamas be elected. They did not, however, devote their energies to forcing Fatah to implement the kind of grassroots anti-corruption measures that might have shored up its flagging domestic popularity. Neither did the United States expend the time or effort necessary to foster serious political competition that could have served to supplant—or at least dilute—the appeal of Hamas. By failing to do so, Washington inadvertently helped to midwife the birth of a radical Islamist government in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

### **Selective engagement**

Fourth, when Washington does choose to promote democratic principles abroad, it must be discriminating about where and how it does so. For, in order to be prudent and sustainable, democracy assistance needs to be judiciously weighed against other pressing foreign policy priorities involving the nation or nations in question.

Until now, however, the reverse has often been true, and nowhere more so than with regard to Russia. From early cooperation in the War on Terror, relations between Moscow and Washington have deteriorated into mutual recriminations and discord over Russia's domestic practices. As Vice President Dick Cheney remarked at the May 2006 Vilnius Conference, in Russia today "opponents of reform are seeking to reverse the gains of the last decade. In many areas of civil society—from religion and the news media, to advocacy groups and political parties—the government has unfairly and improperly restricted the rights of her people." Russia,



Cheney concluded, “has a choice to make. And there is no question that a return to democratic reform in Russia will generate further success for its people and greater respect among fellow nations.”<sup>8</sup>

Cheney’s concerns are certainly well-placed. Nor are they unique; over the past two years, a growing chorus of statesmen and politicians has raised concerns about the increasingly authoritarian, unrepresentative and repressive nature of Vladimir Putin’s Russia.

But for the foreseeable future, the United States has neither the capacity nor the inclination to aggressively promote democratic processes within the Russian Federation. It does, however, desperately need Moscow’s aid and backing to resolve a number of pressing international issues, chief among them the twin nuclear crises of North Korea and Iran. And such cooperation is far less likely to be forthcoming from a government that has been internationally vilified by the United States for its questionable internal conduct.

When it comes to democracy promotion, in other words, Washington must pick and choose its battles. If it does not, it runs the risk of alienating potential partners on any number of foreign policy fronts—making its strategic objectives all the more difficult to attain.

---

The emerging threat of a Shi’a political “awakening” is likely to be met by a wave of deepening repression in a region with precious little liberty to spare.

### **The Iranian challenge**

The most immediate threat to American democracy promotion efforts in the Middle East, however, emanates from the Islamic Republic

of Iran. Already, the Iranian regime’s determined pursuit of a nuclear capability, and the apparent inability of the West to halt this atomic drive, has begun to have a ripple effect throughout the region.

A rising tide, the saying goes, lifts all boats, and Iran’s successes have served to empower the Shi’a factions of the region, who now more than ever look to Tehran for strategic support and religious guidance. The summer 2006 war initiated by Hezbollah was an early manifestation of this trend. Since then, there have been others, among them the November 2006 seizure of parliamentary power by Bahrain’s Shi’a minority, growing signs of restlessness among Saudi Arabia’s Shi’ites, and, most visibly, the rise of a pro-Iranian, Shi’a-dominated government in Iraq.

Iranian officials are acutely aware of this trend, and greatly encouraged by it. As Mohammad Mirahmadi, commander of Iran’s feared domestic militia, the *Basij*, recently told his followers, “[t]he spiritual influence of Iran... is becoming stronger and religiosity is gaining ground at an unprecedented rate not only in Iran but also in many countries of the region.”<sup>9</sup>

The other governments of the region, however, are far less enthusiastic about these developments. In Kuwait, fears of Iranian influence have led the government of Prime Minister Nasir al-Muhammad al-Ahmad al-Sabah to step up surveillance of this tiny Gulf state’s nearly one-million strong Shi’a minority.<sup>10</sup> Bahrain, for its part, has chosen a more direct route, banning entry into the country by all Iranians as part of its efforts to ensure “public order.”<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, in Riyadh, the House of Saud reportedly has authorized a massive military modernization plan worth up to \$60 billion<sup>12</sup>—one that can be expected

to focus heavily on domestic security measures designed to quell any potential sectarian unrest.

These steps are likely only the beginning. The governments of the Middle East are overwhelmingly authoritarian in character, and respond to challenges to their rule in predictably autocratic ways. As such, the emerging threat of a Shi'a political "awakening" is likely to be met by a wave of deepening repression in a region with precious little liberty to spare.

In the days after September 11th, the Bush administration proudly announced its commitment to broadening the frontiers of freedom around the world.<sup>13</sup> It would be a sad irony indeed if it ends up leaving the Middle East more repressive and less free than when it took office, all because it has failed to formulate a coherent strategy for confronting Iran.

## **Taking stock**

The last days of 2006 shone a ray of light into this otherwise gloomy picture. On December 30th, defying their many critics, officials of Iraq's fledgling government hung the dictator that had terrorized their country for a quarter-century. The execution, watched intently throughout the region, has been widely condemned for its controversial particulars, with some merit. Yet, whatever its flaws, Saddam's death also succeeded in sending a powerful message to the Arab masses: quite suddenly, the cruel, authoritarian leaders of the region are no longer "off limits."

Changing the political order of the Middle East requires that this powerful message of accountability be amplified and extended in the years ahead. It must also be coupled with the sort of initiatives—from capacity-building to selective, sustained grassroots engagement—required

to ensure the steady expansion of political freedoms in the region, and beyond. Making that happen, however, will be the task for the next administration, provided it is up to the challenge.



1. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, White House, Office of the Press Secretary, September 2002, 7.
2. Pavel Ivanov, "The (Not So) Untouchables," *The Journal of International Security Affairs* no. 8, (Spring 2006) 35-39.
3. President George W. Bush, Address to the American Enterprise Institute, Washington, D.C., February 26, 2003, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/02/20030226-11.html>.
4. See, for example, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Remarks at Princeton University's Celebration of the 75th Anniversary of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton, New Jersey, September 30, 2005, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/54176.htm>.
5. George W. Bush, Address to the Nation, January 10, 2007, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/01/20070110-7.html>.
6. Matt Kelley, "U.S. Money Helped Opposition in Ukraine," Associated Press, December 10, 2004.
7. See, for example, President George W. Bush, Remarks on Winston Churchill and the War on Terror, Washington, D.C., February 4, 2004, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/02/20040204-4.html>.
8. Vice President Dick Cheney, Remarks at the 2006 Vilnius Conference, Vilnius, Lithuania, May 4, 2006, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/05/20060504-1.html>.
9. As quoted by the Mehr News Agency (Tehran), October 28, 2006.
10. "Kuwait Finds Iranian Sleeper Cells," Middle East Newline, October 19, 2006, [http://www.menewline.com/stories/2006/october/10\\_19\\_1.html](http://www.menewline.com/stories/2006/october/10_19_1.html).
11. "Iran: Bahrain Bans Iranians," Adnkronos International (Rome), January 23, 2007, [http://www.adnki.com/index\\_2Level\\_English.php?cat=Politics&loid=8.0.379251229&par=0](http://www.adnki.com/index_2Level_English.php?cat=Politics&loid=8.0.379251229&par=0).
12. "Saudi Launches \$60B Modernization Plan," Middle East Newline, November 27, 2006, [http://www.menewline.com/stories/2006/november/11\\_27\\_3.html](http://www.menewline.com/stories/2006/november/11_27_3.html).
13. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 3.