

Democratic Impulses versus Imperial Interests: America's New Mid-East Conundrum

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It has long been an axiom among Western scholars and politicians alike that democracies make the United States' most stable and viable partners. Since the beginning of the war on terror and now the war on Iraq, this outlook has special resonance with regard to the Middle East, where stagnant autocracies seem to have succeeded only in producing failed economies, decrepit institutions, and a political culture sanctifying suicide bombings and attacks on one's own people. The emerging consensus contends that if the collection of dictators and mullahs who (mis)govern the region can be removed, the populace will elect responsible governments that will pursue policies harmonious with American interests—including cooperation in the war on terror, acquiescence to regime change in Iraq, and normalization of relations with Israel.¹ Certainly democracy—including the liberal, secular variety—can evolve in the Middle East. However, even progressive regimes are unlikely to accede to the injunctions of the *Pax Americana*. The partisans of the “democratic thesis” must realize that the United States has a stark choice in the Middle East: it can either project its Wilsonian values or protect its strategic interests—it cannot simultaneously do both.

The Bush administration signaled its endorsement of the democratic thesis in its *National Security Strategy*, noting, “We will defend peace by fighting terrorists and tyrants. We will extend the peace by encouraging free and open societies on every continent.”² Richard Haass, then the State Department's Policy Planning Director, further elaborated this theme in December 2002, proclaiming:

¹ When Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs Marc Grossman was asked whether one of the first acts of a postwar Iraqi democracy should be to recognize Israel, he responded “I certainly hope it's among the very first things that they do.” Remarks at a Washington Foreign Press Center Briefing, Mar. 19, 2003.

² White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Sept. 2002.

The growing gap between many Muslim regimes and their citizens potentially compromises the ability of these governments to cooperate on issues of importance to the United States. These domestic pressures will increasingly limit the ability of many regimes in the Muslim world to provide assistance, or even to acquiesce to America's efforts to combat terrorism or address the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.³

The Bush team's call for democratization as a means of safeguarding vital strategic interests has been acclaimed across the political spectrum, uniting an unlikely cast of scholars and pundits. Robert Kagan and Ronald Asmus have written that Americans "have a duty to ourselves and to the world to use our power to spread democratic principles and deter and defeat the opponents of our civilization. This is not a crusade. It's a foreign policy of enlightened self-interest."⁴ The dean of American diplomatic historians, Yale professor John Lewis Gaddis, has been exuberant in his embrace of the Bush Doctrine, stressing, "There is a compelling realistic reason now to complete the idealistic task Woodrow Wilson began more than eight decades ago: the world must be made safe for democracy, because otherwise democracy will not be safe in the world."⁵ In an eerie convergence of views, columnists Charles Krauthammer and Thomas Friedman echo the same theme, with Krauthammer claiming that the "promotion of democracy multiplies the number of nations likely to be friendly to the United States" and Friedman saying that for America to eradicate the bin Laden network in the Middle East, the solution is clear: "It's democracy, stupid!"⁶

The Bush administration's approach is not without its critics. Some fear that premature liberalization in the Arab and Muslim world will redound to the benefit of well-organized fundamentalist movements, who will use the opening to prevent further democratization (the Algerian scenario) and install a fundamentalist regime implacably opposed to American interests. Others argue that the region lacks the experience and institutions needed to make a rapid transition to democracy. Very few, however, challenge the underlying assumption—that the creation of secular, liberal democracies in the Middle East will produce natural U.S. allies in the region.

Given America's perception of itself as a beacon of liberty, Americans have difficulty accepting that their country is an imperial power. President Bush summed up this feeling when he declared, "America has never sought to dominate, has never sought to conquer."⁷ This reaction is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of empires. Certainly, an empire can be

³ Richard Haass, "Toward Greater Democracy in the Muslim World," Council on Foreign Relations, Dec. 12, 2002.

⁴ Kagan and Asmus, "Commit for the Long Run," *Washington Post*, Jan. 29, 2002.

⁵ Gaddis, "A Grand Strategy of Transformation," *Foreign Policy*, Oct./Nov. 2002.

⁶ Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment Revisited," *The National Interest*, Winter 2002/03, p. 15; Thomas Friedman, "Foreign Affairs: Today's News Quiz," *New York Times*, Nov. 20, 2001.

⁷ President's remarks of Oct. 16, 2002, at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/10/20021016-1.html>.

predatory, seeking territorial aggrandizement or the extraction of tributes from subordinates. However, what defines an imperial state is its desire to concentrate power in its own hands, ensuring that other actors conform to its leadership and allow it to set the agenda. In seeking to determine the international orientation and the policies of sovereign Middle Eastern states—to the point of engaging in preemptive war and regime change—the United States cannot but be classified as an imperial power.

However, the enveloping American imperial instinct is both paradoxical and potentially self-defeating. Traditional empires concerned themselves with the external conduct of states and developed surrogate regimes adept at regulating popular passions and nationalistic sentiments. The architects of the *Pax Americana*, exasperated by their clients' inadequacies and jolted by the 9/11 attacks, are vociferously calling for the reformulation of their clients' political structure along democratic values. Yet, an empire can only accommodate democracy among its clients when a clear convergence of interests exists. During the Cold War, fears of the Soviet Union (and China, to a lesser extent) led democratic states of Europe and East Asia to accept Washington's leadership and indeed welcome America's presence. However, a clear lesson of imperial history is that absent compelling and countervailing threats, democratic polities are disinclined to subsume themselves within imperial demarcations.

The peculiarities of the American imperium, a power that aggressively enforces its interests yet is seemingly committed to political liberalization of its clients, defies clear historic precedents. After all, there is a well-demonstrated nexus between nationalism and democracy that makes it difficult for leaders whose position rests upon serving the people's interests to also implement the requirements of the imperial power. As a polity liberalizes and the councils of power come to reflect the collective will, the state naturally becomes more assertive of its sovereign prerogatives. An engaged public will inevitably press the governing class toward defiance of an imperial power seeking superimposition of its dominance. This is particularly true of the Middle East, where the popular will is hostile, if not to the United States, then to the notion of subordination of local priorities to imperial prerogatives. Indeed, this sentiment has been the most consistent dimension of Arab public opinion and the primary ingredient of the region's historic transnational ideologies, ranging from Pan-Arabism to Islamism.

The confidence many in Washington display that democratization will produce regimes in the Middle East inclined to support American interests seems misplaced. The assumption that emerging Arab democracies' rational assessment of their security needs will cause them to align with the United States is not borne out by twentieth-century history. Both British decolonization and the demise of the Soviet "external" empire offer stark lessons for America regarding the perils of an empire that relies on indigenous voters for the longevity of its influence.

The British path toward decolonization was paved not by imperial overstretch alone, but also by the Foreign Office's perception that the empire could be maintained by placating colonial nationalism through representative governments. Whitehall's strategy of promoting "home rule" was predicated on the notion that by magnanimously cultivating self-government within its imperial holdings, Britain could best preserve the advantages of empire. The Government of India Act (1935) or the Watson Commission report on West Africa (1948) assumed that it was possible for London to grant independence to colonial possessions while retaining effective control over defense and foreign policy.

In India, the crown jewel of the British Empire, this experiment led to a complete evisceration of the British imperial structure. Throughout Africa, Britain similarly devolved authority to local representatives and assemblies that followed the Indian model of demanding categorical British expulsion. Beginning in Ghana in 1951 and then in Sudan, Nigeria, and the rest of its dominions, elected ministers and councils were united in their nationalistic hostility to great-power preeminence. Contrary to Whitehall's calculations, local rule did not evolve a class of enlightened, legitimate politicians who were willing to maintain the imperial system.

Similarly, when the Soviet Union contemplated loosening its control over its Eastern European satellites, Mikhail Gorbachev and his advisors believed that shared economic and security interests would continue to bind the satellites to Moscow. A Soviet Foreign Ministry analysis went so far as to claim that "It seems improbable that in the foreseeable future any of the allied countries will raise the question of leaving the Warsaw Pact."⁸ The assumption was that these countries could be Finlandized—producing democratic regimes with full freedom to carry out domestic policies while coordinating their foreign policies to conform to Moscow's interests. Fourteen years later, all the Warsaw Pact countries are either full or candidate members of NATO. Ultimately, nationalism proved impervious to the blandishments of the kinder, gentler Soviet Union.

Like their predecessors, the guardians of the American state are proving to be curious imperialists, demanding to predominate yet be liked; mandating regime change yet confident of the warm embrace of a grateful Arab populace. Steeped in Wilsonian hubris, Washington fails to note that the Middle East can embrace the values of the post-Enlightenment West yet with equal vigor reject the cumbersome and intrusive American presence. Prospective democracies in the Middle East may not be anti-American in the vein of Osama bin Laden, who rejects the totality of Western civilization as profane and hostile, but they are nonetheless likely to aggressively resist the absorption of their region into the American imperium.

⁸ "The Political Processes in the European Socialist Countries and the Proposals for Our Practical Steps Considering the Situation that Has Arisen in Them," Memorandum of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Feb. 24, 1989.

The struggle of the Middle East in the past century was a determined quest to exempt itself from great-power rivalry and superpower dominance. This, after all, is a populace that eagerly participated in bloody anticolonial struggles, lent its sympathies to the 1955 Bandung Conference's call for neutralism from Cold War power blocs, and expressed its solidarity with third-world revolutionary resistance. Contrary to Washington powerbrokers' expectations and sensibilities, it has been the indulgence of the autocrats, not the benevolence of the Arab populace, that has kept America's influence in the Middle East intact. In the end, Middle Eastern democracies are likely to have more in common with Nehru than Adenauer.

What Democracy May Bring in the Middle East

In the Middle East, Washington is finding that the *Pax Americana* cannot easily escape its compact with the unsavory cast of characters it now suddenly finds objectionable and deficient. As with all of its imperial predecessors, the United States brings its own set of demands and priorities to the Middle East. America is not a new power in the Arab world, since it has well-delineated objectives cultivated over decades of involvement in the region. As with all great powers, the foremost imperative of the American colossus is stability—preventing revisionist powers and ideologies from altering the region's balance of power. In order to maintain stability, contain its rivals, and displace its nemeses in the region, America needs garrisons, naval installations, and the cooperation of local intelligence services. It also continues to rely on the region's oil wealth and thus requires that the price of fossil fuel be maintained at a level to encourage continued growth in the global economy. Finally, Washington's mission has always encompassed the security and protection of the State of Israel. It is hard to see how any of these demands can be easily discharged in a more democratic Middle East.

One can dismiss from the outset the trite orientalist assertion that free elections in the Middle East can only lead to the rise of radical Islamic regimes hostile to democratic accountability and viscerally opposed to Western civilization. The notion that the Middle East's political culture is averse to liberal democracy due to the influence of Islam is as flawed as the idea that so-called "Asian values" and Catholic theology were obstacles to pluralism in East Asia and Latin America. In a democratic landscape, radical Islam will be merely another political alternative, competing with ideologies ranging from secular liberalism to constitutional monarchy. Indeed, an expanding marketplace of ideas will serve to demystify radical Islam and expose its pronounced intellectual poverty.

The problem for the American imperium is not the rise of fundamentalism, but the fact that nearly every political tendency in the Middle East is averse to the region's absorption into the *Pax Americana*. For the Islamists, both radical and progressive moderate, America is a civilizational

challenge and a moral affront. For Pan-Arabists, it is a source of regional fragmentation and the benefactor of Israeli Zionism. Even among the secular liberals—the supposed mainstays of any future Arab democracy—the United States is viewed as an aggressive imperial power and the protector of Arab reactionary regimes in the Arab world. The opposition to the U.S. imperial presence cuts across various ideological boundaries to unite seemingly disparate strands of Arab political thought.

To be sure, it is a convenient and self-defeating prerogative of a society left out of the march of globalization to project its frustrations on external enemies and imagined conspiracies. To resent an august, prosperous power is the natural recourse of a populace that has long suffered subjugation, and Arab intellectuals have often indulged themselves in delineating the pernicious tentacles of the West at the expense of conceiving innovative solutions to their region's persistent quandaries. However, this does not mean that the region's grievances are contrived. The Middle East began the twentieth century as the colonial possession of the British Empire (and to a lesser extent, the French) and ended it as a dependency of the United States. Its rhetoric may be prone toward grotesque exaggeration, but the intensive and debilitating interference of imperial powers in this realm is an uncontested historical verity. Arab societies are composed of liberals and conservatives, the secular and the religious, radicals and reactionaries, yet all agree that it is time for the region to escape the imposing shadow of the imperial epoch. As the latest claimant of the mantle of imperialism, the United States will be subject to criticisms that will easily elude public diplomacy palliatives.

How would a more democratic Middle East conduct its relations with the United States? How would the priorities and policies of a democratized region differ from those of the current crop of unrepresentative regimes?

While democratic regimes would seek diplomatic, cultural, and economic ties with the West, in certain important respects their policies would defy America's imperial parameters. An emerging democratic order would impose certain obligations on the Arab states and lead them toward a greater degree of solidarity and coordination than exhibited by the fractious princes and rapacious despots whose personal interests bind them to Washington. Indeed, the foremost priority of democratizing regional states would be the plight of the Palestinians, an issue that has long scarred the region's consciousness. Progressive liberals such as the Wafd party in Egypt have usually put forth the loudest denunciations of America's "double standards" vis-à-vis Israel and the Palestinians. In a similar vein, such states would more easily cooperate with one another in protecting the region's riches and employing all their collective advantages to emerge as important players in the international community free of superpower domination. They would see no rationale for continuing to accommodate America's military installations, peace compacts, and effortless mandating of regime changes wherever Washington perceives an unsavory leader who is not conforming to

its norms. In essence, Arab democracies would seek what they perceived to be equitable and fair relations with the United States, but object to the cumbersome American imperial demands, especially regarding Israel. This is not a clash of civilizations, but a nationalistic defiance of a global power's priorities.

Even in the current, autocratic political societies of the region, it is possible to decipher what the likely international orientation of future Middle East democracies might be by consulting public opinion surveys, the platform of political parties and civic associations, and the musings of the intelligentsia. In March 2002, a comprehensive opinion survey of nine Muslim countries, including U.S. allies Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and Pakistan, unsettled the Washington establishment. The "very favorable" view of the United States seldom reached double digits, with Pakistan recording a dismal 1 percent, followed by 7 percent among the Saudis. The overwhelming number of the participants decried America's policies as "ruthless, aggressive, conceited, and arrogant"—and this was prior to the war against Iraq.⁹ Such public denunciations cannot be easily dismissed as clever manipulations of regimes cultivating anti-Americanism as a means of deflecting attention from their own inadequacies. (Indeed, the regimes' anti-American campaigns are often designed to placate public opinion as opposed to creating such dispositions.) Any government resting on electoral legitimacy will have to acquiesce to popular sentiments for America's presence in the region to recede. An examination of institutions and associations that best reflect the temper of the Arab street would similarly reinforce the public opinion surveys that continually cause consternation in Washington.

Nor should political parties be ignored. Although they are seldom allowed to join the government and thus have little measurable impact on state policy, they do perform the traditional function of mediating between the rulers and the masses. Moreover, these associations' leaders are often elected by the rank-and-file membership, and their platforms are subject to member participation and consensus. As such, despite their relative political impotence, the parties do act as a genuine forum for popular views and their pronouncements do mirror public opinion.

To properly gauge such attitudes, it is useful to focus on four states that have often acted as a vanguard in the Middle East and the Muslim world: Egypt, Algeria, Jordan, and Pakistan. These states have well-developed traditions of strong political parties, vibrant public and professional associations, and an active educated class. Egypt, as the largest nation in the region, is the epicenter of Arab politics. Its encounter with modernization is the longest, its industrial and educational structures the most extensive, and its cultural and intellectual output the most prolific. Among the monarchial

⁹ Andrea Stone, "Many In Islamic World Doubt Arabs Behind 9/11," *USA Today*, Nov. 17, 2002. Full polling data can be found in the *Gallup Poll of the Islamic World* (Princeton, N.J.: Gallup Organization, 2002).

states, Jordan has always been the most prosperous, stable and pro-Western, while possessing a degree of pluralism and party activism. Algeria's war of national liberation and subsequent attempt to craft a successful socialist society set the model not just for the Middle East but much of the third world. For a generation of Arabs, Algeria embodied their hopes and aspirations of postcolonial development. Finally, Pakistan, although a non-Arab state, nonetheless exerts a powerful force on the imagination of Muslims throughout the world. An Islamic nation that successfully defied British colonial machinations, fended off Indian ambitions and penetrated the exclusive "nuclear club" exerts inordinate influence on a region accustomed to defeat at the hands of larger powers.

In all four states, one finds significant opposition to American policies not simply among the masses, but especially among middle-class professionals and those elements most active in civil society. In Jordan, popular opposition to U.S. policy is nothing new. In the 1950s, the leading Jordanian parties were the Socialist Nationalist Party and the Arab Constitutional Party, both of which were secular, leftist, and united in their opposition to inclusion of Jordan in an American-led alliance network. In the past decade, the most prominent party has been the Islamic Action Front (IAF), which, despite its significant differences with its secular predecessors, has upheld their nationalist mantle and vigorously opposes continued American influence. A November 2001 statement issued by 60 public figures representing the opposition parties, the professional associations, and civic institutions captured the tenor of public opinion by condemning the government's support of American policies, including the war in Afghanistan, the Middle East peace process, and the war on terror, which they decried as going "against the public will and aspirations."¹⁰ In February 2003, a committee comprised of more than 100 representatives of political parties, professional associations, and NGOs was formed to reactivate a boycott of U.S. products in protest of Israel's continued occupation of Palestinian land and America's planned war on Iraq.¹¹ Much has changed in Jordan during the past five decades, but not the popular clamor for independence from external dominance. Even those pushing for further democratic and economic reform stress that supposed American support for change is only a "pretext" to realize American (and Israeli) designs for the region.¹²

Egypt offers a similar set of challenges. The dominance of the officer corps, massive amounts of American assistance, and an evidently durable peace treaty with Israel ought not be misinterpreted as proof positive that the Egyptian populace is willing to accede to America's regional leadership. Egypt's

¹⁰ Alia Shukri Hamzah, "Civil Society Representatives Denounce Temporary Laws," *Jordan Times*, Nov. 1, 2001.

¹¹ Alia Shukri Hamzah "Boycott of US goods to be revived, anti-war protest scheduled for March," *Jordan Times*, Feb. 25, 2003.

¹² Fahed Fanek, "Reforming the Arab World From Within," *Jordan Times*, Nov. 11, 2002.

intellectual and professional classes are deeply suspicious of the United States and antagonistic to subordination of the Middle East to U.S. global interests. A Christmas 2002 editorial in the daily *Al-Akbbbar*, addressed as an open letter to President Bush, called his attention to the fact that “hatred against the United States has reached such an extent during your tenure,”¹³ while the daily’s chief editor, Jalal Duwaydar, proclaimed that U.S. actions only confirmed the belief long held in the region that Israel controls the decision-making process in American foreign policy.¹⁴ In a similar vein, Secretary Powell’s “Middle East Initiative,” announced in December 2002 as a way to promote democracy and development, was castigated by the daily organ of the Wafd party—the leading secular democratic party in Egypt—as a sham designed to serve American and Israeli interests at the expense of real democracy in Egypt and the Arab world that “would ruin the U.S. interests in the Middle East.”¹⁵

Even on the issue of U.S. aid, Egypt’s leading secular and Islamist parties strike a similar chord in their call for Cairo to forgo American assistance. While the president of the Wafd Party, Noaman Gomaa, calls on financial experts to “establish a program so that Egypt could dispense with American aid,” the spokesman of the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood, Maamoun al-Hodeiby, notes that “any aid from the United States is not in our benefit.”¹⁶ Egypt’s opinion leaders certainly find the public on their side: a 2002 Pew survey revealed that only 6 percent of Egyptians had a “favorable” view of the United States.¹⁷ In March 2003, the Press Syndicate issued a statement denouncing U.S. policies “designed to maintain a grip on the region’s resources, temper its sovereignty, and . . . eliminate the Palestinian resistance and Arab rights.”¹⁸ It is not coincidental that in the immediate run-up to the war on Iraq, the flagship newspaper of the Egyptian government (*Al-Abram*) and the main voice of the professional, secular opposition (*Al-Wafd*) both published editorials discounting American claims about removing WMD from Iraq or halting Iraqi support for terrorism and instead focused on the threat of American hegemony to Arab interests.¹⁹ The popular call emanating from Cairo can hardly assure the American imperial planners of the strategic utility of their democratic enterprise.

The case of Algeria is also revealing. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the majority of the country’s Francophone elite and secular leaders actively

¹³ “A Message to President Bush on Christmas Day,” *Al-Akbbbar*, Dec. 25, 2002.

¹⁴ See his editorial (“Israel is Mastering the Art of Generating anti-Arab Feelings”) in *Al-Akbbbar*, Dec. 14, 2002.

¹⁵ Editorial penned by Mustafa Al-Nahhas, secretary-general of the Wafd party, in *Al-Wafd*, Dec. 21, 2002.

¹⁶ “Egyptian opposition decries US aid threat,” *AFP* Aug. 17, 2002.

¹⁷ Pew Research Center, Dec. 4, 2002.

¹⁸ “Egyptian Press Syndicate condemns ‘aggressive military drive’ against Iraq,” *MENA*, Mar. 6, 2003.

¹⁹ Mursi Attalah penned the “Opinion” column for *Al-Abram*, Mar. 6, 2003, while Abbas al-Tarabili wrote “Oil, Gas Revenues: US–UK Dream,” for *Al-Wafd*, Mar. 6, 2003.

endorsed the National Liberation Front's (FLN) third-worldist hostility to Western dominance. The Algerian regime's legitimacy partly rested on its role as a vanguard movement claiming defiance of the superpower blocs. In the 1990s, a very different political party, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) scored a stunning electoral victory through a devastating critique of the FLN's failed economic policies. The one area where the leaders of the FIS and FLN found common ground was their nationalistic rejection of Western influence in the region. In a polarized Algerian society, it is rare that one finds agreement between the French-educated liberals and the bearded holy warriors other than on the issue of the Western presence in the region and its intrusive demands. Neither the secularists nor the Islamists in the Algerian opposition voice any criticism of Algerian president Abdel-Aziz Bouteflika when he denounces Israeli "aggression" against the Palestinians or reiterates his opposition to the U.S.-led war against Iraq.²⁰ Neither a rejuvenated, secular FLN nor a more moderate FIS, if they came to power in Algeria, would be supportive of an increased U.S. role in the Middle East.²¹

In Pakistan, the October 2002 elections—though flawed—demonstrated the depth of popular opposition to the policies of General Pervez Musharraf, including his "foreign policy u-turn." Significantly, several secular liberal parties and moderately religious ones—the Pakistan People's Party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid, the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA), and the National Alliance—convened an "all parties' conference" and adopted a communiqué that called upon Musharraf to "respect the interests of the country" in foreign affairs.²² Even though these parties will not form a joint opposition to Musharraf, it is critical to observe how secularists and Islamists can in fact dialogue on issues of policy, a worrisome development for Washington, which has always assumed that the enmity between the two would prevent any common action. Significantly, the MMA has made it clear that it does not "consider Muslims fighting in Palestine, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Chechnya, etc. as terrorists" and that it opposes, in general, U.S. policies in the region.²³ The Alliance for Restoration of Democracy, a coalition of secular parties, voiced criticism of policies that saw Pakistani soldiers deployed on

²⁰ "Algerian president stresses importance of continuing inspections in Iraq," *MENA*, Mar. 1, 2003.

²¹ Even limited moves toward democratization by the present regime have had negative repercussions in trying to open a dialogue between Algeria and Israel, for example. Bouteflika has disavowed any secret meetings with Israelis and committed Algeria not to open relations with Israel in advance of final settlements between Israel and the Syrians and Palestinians. See his interview with *Al-Sbarq al-Aswat*, Sept. 12, 2000.

²² "Six-point Communiqué . . . a positive breakthrough," *Nawa-I-Waqt* (Rawalpindi), Oct. 31, 2002.

²³ On the dialogue between secularists and Islamists, see Mayed Ali and Asim Hussain, "Fazl may be joint ARD-MMA candidate for PM slot," *The News* (Islamabad), Nov. 2, 2002. On the stands of the MMA, see "MMA will prefer re-polls if deadlock continues: Qazi," in the same issue.

the border with Afghanistan to intercept fleeing members of Al Qaeda—a key U.S. request—while leaving Pakistan’s border with India under-defended. These sentiments have spread even among the Western-leaning, professional classes. The Lahore High Court Bar Association issued a statement in November 2002 claiming that “America is not an enemy to any specific Muslim state but it is after the whole Muslim community everywhere in the world.” It further claimed that the United States is using terrorism as a pretext to “destroy the whole Muslim world.”²⁴ In January 2003, the Association took the lead in organizing seminars to protest what it perceived as the Musharraf government’s surrender of “sovereignty” to the United States.²⁵ Benazir Bhutto, a leading representative of Pakistani secular democracy, rejects the MMA’s more radical positions but insists that her party, the Pakistan People’s League, is “pro-American.” Hamid Mir, a Pakistani commentator, has opined, “The future [of] politics of Pakistan seems to evolve around the opponents of the United States, not around its friends”²⁶—a sentiment borne out by the March 2003 debate in the Pakistani parliament after the war commenced in Iraq. Islamists and secularists alike joined forces to call on the government to clearly oppose American “designs” on the region, with Pakistan People’s Party leader Aetizaz Ahsan opining that “a friendly regional country or neighbor was much better than a far off ally.”²⁷

Americans’ limited interest in history may prevent them from appreciating how the region’s inability to fully extricate itself from successive global empires has conditioned its political culture. Arabs’ objections to the United States stem not from a rejection of Western values and institutions, but from a desire to escape the domineering grip of yet another great power. If represented in the councils of governments, most Middle Eastern governments would place a higher priority on national issues than on accommodating great-power considerations. Beyond the issue of U.S. influence, a more representative Middle East is also likely to disappoint Washington in other key areas.

Despite the perennially contested Israeli-Palestinian relationship, one of the enduring trends of the past two decades has been the gradual lessening of tensions between Israel and the Arab states. Two of Israel’s neighbors have even formalized this through peace treaties. Although more democratically inclined Middle Eastern states would be less likely to defy the strategic correlation of forces or to wage fruitless and defeating open wars against Israel, they would be more likely to abort any progress toward further accommodation. The specter of a powerful Israel, imbued with a fierce ideology and “transgressing” on sacred Arab lands, is still the prevailing

²⁴ “LHC Bar terms US threats an eye-opener,” *The Nation* (Islamabad), Nov. 29, 2002.

²⁵ “Lawyers to launch drive against US intervention,” *The Nation*, Jan. 10, 2003.

²⁶ Hamid Mir, “The Political Deadlock and the US,” *Rawalpindi Jang*, Nov. 14, 2002.

²⁷ Naveed Ahmad and Asim Yasin, “Opposition demands clear-cut stance on Iraq,” *The News* (Islamabad), Mar. 19, 2003.

image of the Jewish state in the Middle East's popular culture and political discourse. Polls conducted shortly before 9/11 suggested that throughout the Middle East more than 60 percent of respondents viewed the plight of the Palestinians as the most significant regional challenge.²⁸ One is hard-pressed to find a single meaningful opposition party or movement in the Middle East—even those that are avowedly secular and progressive—prone to accepting peace with Israel. In the two states that have enacted formal treaties with Israel, popular opinion is strongly hostile to such obligations. In Jordan, the IAF backs abrogation of the 1994 peace treaty, while in Egypt, twenty years since the passage of the Camp David Accords, the public remains deeply antagonistic to the Israeli state. Egyptian professional associations still forbid their members from having contact with their Israeli counterparts, and the level of commerce and dialogue between the two societies remains nearly nonexistent.²⁹ The prevailing cold peace between Israel and the Arab states will likely be transformed into a cold war, with its own corollary suspicions, tensions, and arms races. The American and Israeli dream of normalization and integration of Israel in a democratic Middle East does not appear to be rooted in reality—indeed, all indicators suggest that democratic Arab regimes would find it even harder to participate in a peace process closely scripted by Washington.

Nor would the United States discover that newly emerged democracies in the region would forgo the pursuit of WMD. Nations seek such weapons for a variety of strategic and national interests calculations unrelated to whether they are internally governed as liberal democracies or dictatorships. The cases of Israel and India both pose difficulties for the proposition that autocracies are more inclined to pursue such weapons than democracies. In the era of the Bush Doctrine, with its penchant toward unilateralism and regime change through military intervention, it is hard for any beleaguered state to forgo the deterrent value of nuclear weapons. Even more so, the democratic regimes in the Middle East would face a greater nationalistic pressure for modernization of their armed forces and achievement of balance of power with the nuclear-armed Israel. Washington may be able to coax, bribe, and pressure Arab despots into maintaining their compliance with its non-proliferation treaties (as it was able to do with their Central Asian counterparts after the collapse of the USSR), but it can do little with democratic regimes relying on a vote of a public that complains about the inequality of Israeli nuclear monopoly. None of the opposition parties in Pakistan supports any moves toward denuclearization; the same can be said of Iran's "democratic reformers." In the end, the Bush Doctrine may prove to be the greatest catalyst of the spread of WMD in the Arab world and elsewhere.

²⁸ James Zogby, "Measuring Arab Public Opinion," *Washington Watch*, July 30, 2001.

²⁹ Even the prospect of scientific collaboration with Israeli counterparts provokes a negative public response. See the exchange between Nobel Laureate in Chemistry Ahmad Zuwail and *Al-Akhhbar* editor Duwaydar, Nov. 18, 2002. It is also telling that only 0.3% of all Egyptian imports come from Israel.

The dilemma faced by American statesmen is that the imperial structure in the Middle East is seemingly contingent on unresponsive dynasties and lifetime presidents who use petrodollars and great-power patronage to shield themselves from their restive constituents, provoking their own insurgents, rebels, and terrorists. Yet the instruments of American empire—its military bases, its espousal of regime change, its desire to bind the region in a web of peace compacts with Israel—are all resented by a hard-pressed Arab populace. The average Arab may have disdained Saddam, but be deeply disenchanted with the Western power that displaced him. Contradiction and paradox are hallmarks of Arab politics. The Arab street is angry, resentful, and anguished about the transgressions of yet another great power. The task at hand is not to craft glossy public diplomacy campaigns: Madison Avenue cannot ease the imperial burdens imposed by Pennsylvania Avenue. The United States is at a crossroads: it can either accept the risks of democratization or dispense with its Wilsonian pieties and craft a durable empire.

A Third Option: The Liberal Autocracy

The notion that the Middle East must change is compelling and profound. The problems of poverty, underdevelopment, institutional decay, and the demographic explosion are beyond the ken of the current rulers, as the 2002 Arab Human Development Report vividly described.³⁰ Indeed, there is enormous value in the claim that the prevailing regimes' corruption, inefficiency, and mismanagement led to the rise of a disaffected generation easily deluded by the false pledges of radical Islam. The critical question is how the United States should proceed in crafting new governing arrangements, given the risks of democratization and the untenable nature of the *status quo*.

Rather than blindly prop up authoritarian rulers or gamble on democracy, the American empire has to opt for a middle course and aim to produce liberal autocracies capable of managing rather than suppressing pluralism. Such regimes would also need to promote market reforms to ensure a viable distribution of wealth and opportunities for the burgeoning youth of the region. In a liberal autocratic order, democratic institutions and procedures such as parliaments, a liberal press, and the rule of law would exist but be circumscribed by executive power. Such an order permits the forces of opposition a limited voice in national affairs, including a degree of independent political space in the public square, in return for abiding by the rules set down by the regime. In contrast to the totalitarian model, this system of governance recognizes the need for a degree of public participation as a means of injecting a measure of accountability in the system.

³⁰ *The Arab Human Development Report*, UN Development Project (New York: UNDP, July 2002).

Ideally, the United States would hope to engender Arab versions of Vladimir Putin—a pragmatic realist capable of cooperating with the United States while effectively managing popular discontent with American policies. An Arab Putin would be a strong chief executive who firmly controls legislative initiatives and the direction of foreign policy while presiding over a regime that guarantees ample and broad individual liberties yet places controls over organizational freedoms. This would alleviate America's greatest fears in the region: that political and economic reform might undermine America's vital strategic interests in the Middle East or provide shelter for fundamentalist movements.

The liberal autocracy model is not without representation in the Arab-Muslim world. There is no need for the United States to invent or impose it: the region's most stable and pro-American regimes are already moving toward this type of governance. The modernizing monarchy (e.g., Morocco, Jordan, and Kuwait), the liberalizing one-party state (Tunisia), and the past experience of "circumscribed democracy" in Turkey are all variations on this indigenous trend. Washington's task is to consolidate the trend where it exists and promote it where it is lacking. A careful examination of the region's own liberal autocracies will reveal the paradigm of change that the United States can offer to stagnant regimes from Cairo to Riyadh.

The Arab monarchies have proven especially amenable to the development of a liberal autocratic order. In Morocco, King Muhammad has instituted far-reaching economic liberalization measures and crafted a consensus behind his policy of "managed pluralism." Trade unions, political parties, and even Islamists have conceded the importance of promoting economic reform measures while avoiding thorny political issues. Similarly, Kuwait has demonstrated the viability of the parliamentary system, with regular elections and lively legislative debates. Despite its latitude, however, the Kuwaiti parliament's powers are limited by the monarchy and the cabinet it appoints. Parliament provides opinions and counsel, but policy formulation and execution remains firmly in the hands of the ruling family.

In the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, where King Abdullah is genuinely devoted to market economic reforms and provides political space for debate and disagreement, there is yet another compelling guide for change. Yet the Jordanian monarchy stands as the principal barrier against an inflamed public opposing America's regional policies. At a time when 75 percent of Jordanians have an unfavorable view of the United States and 85 percent of them oppose America's war on terror, Abdullah and the royal court's maintenance of certain controls over civil society is the primary obstacle to domestic radicalization. Confronted with the prospect of militants' assuming control in the November parliamentary elections, Abdullah used his authority to postpone elections. In a further contravention of public opinion, Abdullah insists that the peace treaty with Israel offers Jordan "real guarantees and protection of our rights and interests," and dismisses those

calling for rupture of relations with Israel as “holders of empty slogans and private agendas.”³¹ No elected official could have withstood popular pressure the way Abdullah has done.

What happens, however, if there is no existing dynasty with which to work? Tunisia under President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali provides a model of how a regime constructed around a ruling party can institute meaningful reform. Ben Ali is not a democrat; he routinely wins elections with 99 percent of the vote and is the beneficiary of a constitutional amendment abolishing term limits. The ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (DCR) party dominates the country’s political life. However, Ben Ali has legalized six opposition parties and provides some space for discourse and debate. Opposition parties are guaranteed a set number of seats in national and municipal councils; Ben Ali also has set aside a certain percentage of DCR seats for women. All of this permits greater representation, yet allows Ben Ali to control the direction of reform “to keep apace with the progress of society.”³² State regulation of Islam also permits the regime to propagate a moderate, tolerant version, reinforced by the graduates of El Zeitouna (Tunisia’s Islamic university) who staff the country’s mosques. There are definite limits on expression, and nothing is permitted that might threaten the stability of the regime. It is not coincidental that Tunisia is sometimes described as a North African Singapore.

Yet Tunisia remains one of the most stable and pro-American regimes in the region, with a long-term commitment to coexistence with Israel. Moreover, it is often touted by the IMF and the World Bank as a model for economic modernization and transition to a market economy. The 1998 association agreement between Tunisia and the EU commits Tunis to meeting EU standards by 2010. Under the banner of “social solidarity,” Ben Ali has enacted a workable privatization program while retaining a social safety net (the National Solidarity Fund) that minimizes the dislocations caused during an economic transition. As a result, Tunisia’s GNP has been growing at 5 percent annually. The State Department defines nearly two-thirds of the population as “middle class,” with only 3 percent living below the poverty line. While Tunisia cannot be described as a democratic paradise, it does offer a realistic blueprint of an autocratic regime that has successfully enacted reforms while maintaining a pro-American policy. In commenting on Tunisia’s U.S. ties, Ben Ali declared in 2002, “We have expressed our willingness to further boost existing relations and improve our relations so they become a model of partnership.”³³

At the fringes of the Arab world, another Muslim model exists: Turkey. In the past, the military acted as a counterweight to the possible excesses of the popular majority or of political leaders. It had very clear “red lines” it would not allow a civilian government to cross. While many commentators focus on the

³¹ Taken from King Abdudllah’s interview given to *Middle East International*, Dec. 2, 2002.

³² “Results of Tunisia’s Municipal Elections,” *Tunisia Online News Updates*, May 28, 2000, <http://www.tunisiaonline.com/news/280500-3.html>.

³³ Marshall J. Breger, “Tunisia’s Ben Ali,” *Middle East Insight* (July-August 2002).

military's preoccupation with domestic secularism, the true red lines of the Turkish military have been connected with foreign policy; the armed forces will not permit anything that potentially jeopardizes the connection to the West, particularly the United States. The coups d'état of 1960 and 1980 and the intervention that brought down an Islamist government in 1997 were all done to keep Turkey firmly within the Western camp. Clearly drawn and enforced red lines lay down the parameters for access to the public square and political power. This is the reason Turkey today has a comparatively liberal Islamist party (the Justice and Development Party, or AKP) that supports continuing Turkish membership in NATO and aspires for entry into the EU, disavowing calls for *jihad* against Israel and the West. (Yet developments in spring 2003 only prove that genuine democracy and American interests can be hard to reconcile: while overflight rights were granted for coalition aircraft, the Turkish parliament did not authorize the use of Turkish territory to open a "northern front" against Iraq. It is ironic that the United States and Europe pressed the Turkish military to relax its controls over the government—leading to a situation inimical to American interests.)³⁴

Instead of quixotic Wilsonian campaigns to democratize the Middle East, Washington should encourage its recalcitrant allies to adopt this liberal autocracy reform template, which offers the best means of sustaining executive privilege while promoting needed structural reforms. Even stagnant autocracies such as Mubarak's Egypt and the House of Saud are not blind to the remarkable set of demographic and economic challenges they confront, as they seek a way out their domestic quandaries that does not jeopardize their essential powers.³⁵ Washington should present such regulated change as the only viable option to safeguard the ruling elites' interests. It should begin its negotiations with the Gulf-prince class and Egypt's officer-led regime by assuring them it accepts that the existing heads-of-state's legitimacy requires no voter ratification. At the same time, by ceding limited power to elected assemblies and regional councils, these regimes can both inject a measure of accountability into the system and relieve the extraordinary pressures that may generate revolutionary upheavals. By insisting on special powers for the executive—such as the right to dissolve the parliament, suspend elections, and appoint a separate chamber in a bicameral legislature—the ruling authorities can maintain their political prerogatives while instituting long-delayed economic reforms. At a time when these stagnant despotic regimes face both a restive population and a disgruntled superpower benefactor, the model of liberal autocracy offers them an avenue out of their hopeless predicament.

³⁴ See "Arab Democracy and American Security," a transcript of a roundtable held at The Nixon Center, Washington, D.C., Mar. 27, 2003.

³⁵ Already, there are signs that in Egypt, Gamal Mubarak, Hosni Mubarak's son, is being groomed to inherit his father's power and begin gradual political and economic reforms. He is now the assistant secretary general of the ruling National Democratic Party and in charge of charting policy.

Such an order serves both U.S. strategic objectives as well as those of local regimes seeking to grapple with how to modernize their economies and provide opportunities for the hard-pressed middle class and a disillusioned youth.

Conclusion

The United States today stands at a precipice. Having forgone containment in favor of regime change in Iraq, the guardians of the American imperium, ranging from officials in the Pentagon to the editors of the *Weekly Standard*, insist that this must be a war not only to disarm and dethrone a genocidal despot but also to usher in a democratic dawn. Gazing across the Arab realm, the latest occidental imperialists perceive that a pluralistic Iraq, combined with relentless pressure from America, will inevitably reformulate the dysfunctional political topography of the Middle East and finally ensure the stability that all empires crave. Even granting the necessity of having invaded Iraq to remove Saddam, such evangelical zeal in the realm of power politics is both dangerous and self-defeating.

The United States has a choice: it can promote democracy or maintain its sphere of influence. The model of a liberal autocracy offers Washington a means to move the region beyond its pernicious impasse and promote necessary economic and political adjustments (recognizing that the perpetuation of the *Pax Americana* mandates dealing with the region's material inequalities and not the totality of its political discontent). For the American empire in the Middle East to flourish, it must calculatedly disregard its own proclaimed values. And such are the vagaries and compromises of the new imperial age.

