DILEMMAS OF DEMOCRATIZATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THE "FORWARD STRATEGY OF FREEDOM"

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Although rumors that Washington's flagship Greater Middle East Initiative would be aborted before it had even come forth into the world proved unfounded, there is still the distinct possibility that the policy will be stillborn when it is unveiled at the G8 Summit in June – in no small part due to successive fiascos in Iraq, including the fallout from the Abu Ghraib prison scandal. Despite this obvious setback, however, the initiative's ideological midwives are unlikely to admit defeat back in Washington. This particular modality may have failed, but the notion of the democratization of the Middle East has been receiving more attention than ever before from politicians, policy makers and the media. The reason for this has been well documented: the Bush administration has adopted the mantra of democratization as an answer to the many problems it faces in the region and has deployed the arguments in favor of Middle East democracy with increasing regularity in its articulated statements of foreign policy. President Bush himself outlined his administration's position on democracy in the region during an address given at the twentieth anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy on November 6, and he subsequently devoted a major portion of his only speech during his visit to the UK to the same subject. Not simply a knee-jerk reaction to the problems in Iraq, as some in Europe might argue, these two speeches served to crystallize much of the deep thinking done by the administration over the last two-and-a-half years and need to be taken seriously as they shed light on a key element of U.S. thinking.

Perhaps more important, the constant use of this rhetoric is filtering through to the level of actual policy. In an effort to overcome the challenges posed by the events of September 11, 2001, to mitigate the failure of the global war on terrorism, to eradicate transnational terrorist net-

works, and to manage the fallout from the war in Iraq, U.S. policy makers have increasingly found it expedient to cite the lack of democracy in the Middle East as both the reason for policy failures in the past and the justification for policies being implemented in the present. Of course, the motif of democracy is not a new one in American foreign-policy discourse. It has been there in a variety of guises for decades, more often than not serving as an ideological cover for the traditional *Realpolitik* of international politics. Yet everything suggests that we are not simply witnessing a reassertion of the old commitment to democracy that will be ditched as soon as convenient. Democratization has emerged as a central component of U.S. thinking in the reassessment of its security perceptions in the post-9/11 environment and looks to be a central factor for some time to come.

Just as the idea of democratization is not new to the thinkers behind U.S. foreign policy, so too is it not new to the body of academic writing that informs and feeds into that thinking. Indeed, the roots of the Bush administration's understanding of how democracy can function in the Middle East can be traced in the wider Western academic discourse on democratization in the region over the last couple of decades. These academic writings should not be considered as pure or objective, an unadulterated distillation of higher thinking that can be dipped into in order to provide a scientific basis for government policy. The focus of academic writing has shifted over the decades in response to, or in parallel with, political developments, though it does not necessarily follow them mimetically. Even in academia, it must be wryly admitted, there exists a degree of relative autonomy.

This paper seeks to examine in some detail what is novel in the newfound U.S. commitment to democratization and to analyze some of the modalities whereby the forward strategy of freedom will be translated into a realistic strategy of policy.

NEW DIRECTIONS IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

Democracy has always had its place in American foreign policy. The *cri de coeur* of freedom has long provided Washington with justification to battle political enemies across the globe who typically invoked that same right to freedom and self-determination in favor of their own cause. The traditional commitment to freedom was usually instrumental in nature, adopted as a way to provide an ideological basis for America's sometimes grubby Realpolitik. Honored more often in the breach than the observance, this lip service to freedom and democracy understandably rankled those who had hoped the United States would live up to its own lofty ideals.

Consequently, there is much skepticism in the Middle East and in Europe that things are any different this time round. Indeed, Bush's explicit analogy of his vision for a democratic Middle East and Reagan's vision for a world without communism for many undermines rather than strengthens his position. Bush was referring to a speech Reagan made in 1982, when he said the "day of Soviet tyranny was passing, that freedom had a momentum which would not be halted."[1] Bush noted that, at the time, observers dismissed Reagan's words as "simplistic and naive, and even dangerous." One newspaper editorial was quoted as saying, "It seems hard to be a sophisticated European and also an admirer of Ronald

Reagan." But, whereas Bush obviously drew comfort from the fact his predecessor was with time proven correct in his assessment of the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union, most European audiences would infer a more negative reference to Washington's promotion of liberty as a correlate of its prosecution of the Cold War against its number-one strategic competitor. The discursive trope of democracy was here used in an instrumental fashion, a tactic in a wider strategy to achieve a specific set of political objectives, rather than for its own sake or for the sake of a certain set of principles.

Ironically, U.S. policy in the Middle East, especially the Gulf, has often served to reinforce this European perception. In this region above all others, Washington was willing to sacrifice its promotion of democracy in exchange for the security promised by regimes that would maintain the production of petroleum, provide a buffer against the expansion of Soviet influence and, after 1979, prevent the emergence of more states hostile to U.S. interests, like revolutionary Iran. Unsurprisingly, it was in the Middle East, perhaps more than everywhere else, that this inconsistency stoked the fires of public frustration and fed the overwhelming anti-American sentiment that has been sweeping over the region since the mid-1990s.

Bush did not simply distance himself from this short-sighted approach, but effected a fundamental rupture with past policy in speaking of "decades of failed policy in the Middle East," when the United States and other countries were

> willing to make a bargain, to tolerate oppression for the sake of stability. Long-standing ties often led us to overlook the faults of local elites. Yet this bargain did not bring stability or make us safe. It merely bought time, while problems festered and ideologies of violence took hold.[2]

In the earlier speech, he noted:

> Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe – because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty. As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export. And with the spread of weapons that can bring catastrophic harm to our country and to our friends, it would be reckless to accept the status quo.[3]

The reasons for this radical break from America's old and rather spurious democratic commitments to its newfound fervor for democratization can, naturally enough, be found in the reassessment of U.S. international security policy following the events of 9/11. The idea that democracy and security were somehow linked was also by no means revolutionary. But until 9/11 they had been embodied in the assumption that democracies did not wage war against one another, a notion around which a sizable body of international relations literature had accumulated. With the abrupt realization that the main threat to America's security was no longer rogue states but sub-state actors engaged in terrorist activity, the linkage between security and democracy was radically reformulated. Policy planners came to believe it was no coincidence that the perpetrators of 9/11 and numerous subse-

quent incidents originated in countries which brooked little, if any, participation in the political affairs of the nation. Policy planners also came to believe that America's role in supporting illiberal regimes in the region was indirectly to blame. Had these individuals had the political space to blow off steam at home, they would not have felt the need to blow up buildings in the West. Democracy, so the argument went, would provide an escape valve for some of the mounting and explosive political pressures building up in the Middle East before they reached a critical mass. It might also serve to lessen anti-American sentiment by removing the grounds for criticism of U.S. foreign policy on the grounds of hypocrisy.

Arguments like these naturally appealed most to the more liberal policy makers and are valuable for bringing the skeptical Europeans, not to mention the Arabs, back on side. But, perhaps more important, the end of the Mephistophelean pact with repressive regimes in the region also served the rather less liberal policy objectives supported by some key strands of U.S. thinking after 9/11, which bear a distinct resemblance to the instrumentalist use of "democracy" by the Reagan administration.

In addition to symbolizing the displacement of the pre-9/11 security paradigm, America's new-wave championing of democratization is fed by more immediate concerns. Although the idea of a democratic Iraq was most notably pushed by neoconservative thinkers prior to the war as the keystone of a new regional-security architecture, it is likely to linger in U.S. policy on Iraq even after the neoconservative influence dies away. Democracy in Iraq is a phrase wonderfully rich in policy meanings. It allows the United States to bestow retroactive legitimacy on the Iraq War, provides political cover for the United States to remain in the country, and offers a ready-made reason for the United States to withdraw when its job is done. It is difficult to argue that Iraqis were truly better off under Saddam Hussein, that the United States should completely withdraw before establishing a viable pluralist democratic structure, or that the Unitd States should remain in the country after a stable political structure has been set up. Admittedly, the Bush administration does seem to be pushing the point slightly too strongly. Even a sympathetic observer would raise an eyebrow at Bush's suggestion that violence in Iraq continues because "terrorists . . . view the rise of democracy in Iraq as a powerful threat to their ambitions"[4] rather than a combination of anti-U.S. sentiment, nationalism, criminality, economic or ethnic entrepreneurialism, or sheer desperation. Nevertheless, Washington's present commitment to democracy – the so-called forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East – can be found in the immediate concerns of its adventure in Iraq and the long-term implications of its security perceptions, which were radically redrawn by the events of September 11, 2001.

THE ROOTS OF U.S. POLICY ON MIDDLE EAST DEMOCRACY

Trends in academic writing on democracy and democratization in the Middle East tend to develop in tandem with U.S. policy towards the region, at times influencing administration thinking and at times being influenced by the main thrust of government policy. During the Cold War, when "freedom" was the watchword of

the United States in every region apart from the Middle East, where it was happy to exchange liberty for stability, academic production focused on the reasons for what was typically known as "Middle Eastern exceptionalism." Many scholars in the early 1980s maintained that the Middle East and North Africa were somehow intrinsically resistant to democratic imperatives, most often citing the incompatible natures of Islam and democracy. In various guises, culture was seen as the problem: whether it was an innate Arab predilection to authoritarianism and social conformity, the historical triumph of a body of finite truths passed down from generation to generation over the principles of critical and rational thinking, or the orthodox Sunni emphasis on obeying those in power, the assumed exceptionalism of the Middle East had the rather convenient benefit of not challenging America's policy in the region. After all, if the region were impervious to democracy, then the only choice the United States had was to accommodate Middle East regimes, however oppressive.

This line softened as the 1980s progressed, with scholars developing an interest in the increasingly apparent emergence of indigenous groups that seemed to act in a manner which would qualify them as belonging to what was known in the West as "civil society." For Western academics, these groups provided an essential buffer between the state and the individual and were identified as a fundamental component of democratic society, an embryonic force in favor of democracy and the basis for an entrepreneurial class independent of the state elite such as those found in the West. Following the collapse of communism, the focus on civil society developed further, and its importance became something of an orthodoxy. The assumption was made that civil society was a prerequisite to democratization rather than a by-product, or at least the product of a particular combination of historical circumstances. Furthermore, suspicions emerged as time went by that the increasing significance of civil society in the eyes of the West was at least in part disguised ideological prescription, a mechanism to spread the democratic liberalism of free-market economics to the Middle East after its perceived rampant success in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

Certain factors peculiar to the Middle East facilitated the process by which civil society (and the whole question of internal political dynamics rather than an ossified political culture) rose to a position of significance in academic analysis of the region. The Middle East witnessed an unusual period of relative calm at the international level following the 1991 Gulf War. Iraq's expansionist tendencies were contained until the late 1990s; prospects for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict looked for a time to be positive and, even when they began to darken, the conflict did not spill over into a wider regional confrontation; the Syria-enforced peace in Lebanon held; and in the late 1990s, there was even a significant degree of détente between Iran and some of the Gulf states. This marked decrease in conflict at the state level was guaranteed by what came to be known (rather inadequately) as the *Pax Americana*.

With American influence retarding any drive towards conflict at the international level in the 1990s, policy makers and academics were by default obliged to look elsewhere for objects of analysis. The divide between governments and public opinion in the Middle East was more than

sufficient to fill the vacancy. It seemed that for many analysts public opinion in the Arab world had simply been created *ex nihilo* at some point in the previous twelve years. As the 1990s progressed, the Arab street increasingly agitated against the overwhelming influence of the United States in the region, its mishandling of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and the way their governments were so squarely allied with the global superpower, whose agenda was unacceptable in most of the Arab world. It is true to say that levels of political consciousness in the Arab world (especially in the Gulf) increased as a result of the information revolution. The importance of the "*al-Jazeera* factor" has been well documented – the phenomenon whereby an explosion of satellite TV channels beaming pictures of Palestinian misery into homes on a daily basis served as political education for a previously rather unaware population. But the Arab street did not spring up from nowhere in the rest of the region; it had been active since the colonial era. On occasions in the past when Arab public opinion had supported pro-independence movements (either on the soil of the nation, against the colonial oppressor and its agents, or in exile), it had been dismissed as irrelevant or as having been stirred up and provoked by radical elements. In an abrupt volte face, public opinion was harnessed in favor of U.S. foreign-policy objectives – first in its apparent willingness to constitute the familiar entities of civil society, then as a louder and more authentic indigenous constituency for the policy of democratization the United States was pushing in the region. Once again, policy makers and academics found themselves in a curiously symbiotic relationship, feeding off and into one another's thinking.

TRANSLATING THEORY INTO REALITY

If we accept the proposition that the United States is indeed serious about encouraging democracy in the Middle East, rather than cynically invoking reform in an attempt to exert leverage over states in the region, what prescription does the forward strategy of freedom offer for going about this daunting task? The first change the West can make, Bush tells us, is to reassess its own preconceived notions about the region, to rid ourselves of our "skepticism about the capacity or even the desire of Middle Eastern peoples for self-government."[5] This is a reasonable starting point and a welcome rejection of the notion of Middle Eastern exceptionalism. U.S. policy thinkers now seem to accept the universalism implicit in the principles of democracy.

> Peoples of the Middle East share a high civilization, a religion of personal responsibility, and a need for freedom as deep as our own. It is not realism to suppose that one-fifth of humanity is unsuited to liberty; it is pessimism and condescension, and we should have none of it.[6]

In these few lines Bush not only effects a break with the undercurrents of thought that believed democracy and the Middle East to be incompatible, but also rejects the notion that the West and the Middle East are doomed to be forever opposed. The "clash of civilizations" thesis is here ditched without ceremony. We can also infer that the absence of Middle Eastern exceptionalism removes the West's excuses for criticizing repressive regimes in the region. As a consequence, the United States has already begun to exert pressure

in public and in private on regimes whose political systems remain tightly closed. It will continue to do so in the future. As we have seen at various points over the past couple of years, such pressure is not confined to the usual suspects like Iran. It has also targeted countries whose pro-Western leanings traditionally guaranteed them diplomatic immunity from the prosecution of the agenda for political reform.

Secondly, the Bush administration accords civil society a major role as evidence of and motor for reform.

> Successful societies allow room for healthy civic institutions – for political parties and labor unions and independent newspapers and broadcast media. . . . Successful societies privatize their economies and secure the rights of property. They prohibit and punish official corruption, and invest in the health and education of their people.[7]

Here the European Union and United States can continue to have a concrete impact by channeling financial aid to support civil-society initiatives from think tanks and research centers to human-rights lobbyists, private NGOs and independent charities.

Finally, the forward strategy of freedom seems to suggest that U.S. policy will reflect America's predilection for conceiving political and economic freedoms as proceeding hand in hand. Positive economic incentives could be offered to countries that are successful in implementing political reforms and sanctions imposed to punish those countries that refuse to open up the avenues of political participation. Carrots as well as sticks would therefore be deployed.

REALITY STRIKES BACK

The three modalities of encouraging domestic reform outlined above hit some formidable hurdles when translated into reality. The first step is to challenge the assumption that outsiders can play a direct role in encouraging reform. Will U.S. pressure help or hinder the process of democratization? The involvement of an external power – especially the United States, which has lost any moral standing in the eyes of most Arabs following its uncritical support for Israeli repression of the Palestinians, its invasion of Iraq and the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib – will complicate an already exceedingly difficult and often volatile situation. The difficulties involved in kick-starting the post-war process of political reconstruction in Iraq have demonstrated this point amply. The fact that Washington is the dominant force behind discussions over the future shape of the country's political and constitutional framework means that groups whose support base is primarily contingent on their opposition to superpower machinations may find the cost of participation too high to bear. Some groups, such as Muqtada Al-Sadr and his supporters, realize they can generate greater political capital by remaining outside the U.S.-sponsored Governing Council and the Interim Government than they can from being on the inside. The perception that Washington is dictating the agenda and delimiting the sovereignty of the Interim Government has, for many Arabs, effectively discredited the process of implementing a liberal, pluralist political system in Iraq.

In short, there may indeed be situations in which Washington can play no useful direct role in encouraging reform, in which case the best alternative goal might be to

do no harm. There are in fact many instances in which American pressure can prove at best ineffectual and at worst counterproductive. The Iranian regime has always seen Washington's heavy-handed support for democracy as an attempt to undermine the regime as a whole. Even before the United States finally lost patience with Iranian reformists in July 2002, American support for the modernizers often seemed to have the effect of reversing the gains they had made, as hardliners found in that support ammunition to attack their opponents.

Furthermore, reliance on civil society to push for reform from within raises a host of practical and theoretical issues that need to be addressed. There is a real concern that the United States will seek out bodies that conform to its own idea of what constitutes civil society, rather than organizations that are effectual and rooted in the local milieu. The mosque, for example, is often an important hub for activities often considered the preserve of civil society in the West, but it seems unlikely that the United States would be interested in channeling funds to centers of religion, even if they could find a mosque willing to accept American cash. There is a danger that what will actually be created is an artificial layer of organizations that would not and could not exist without Western benefactors, run by a corps of so-called civil-society professionals. The significance of civil society in Western political development was to create a political space for individuals and aggregated individuals to pursue special interests. The creation of political space is the important thing, not necessarily the presence of minority advocacy groups.

The idea of offering economic incentives for political reform is distinctly reminiscent of the EU preference for "constructive engagement," which seeks to draw wayward regimes into the fold by first enticing them into the structures of European capitalism. As the (often American) critics of constructive engagement rightly point out, the policy did not do much to improve the position of reformists in Iran. (As its defenders point out, at least it did not do anything to shore up the power of the hardliners.) Washington's Greater Middle East Initiative – in its latest, most watered down incarnation, at least – seems distinctly familiar to many Europeans. The European Union has for nearly a decade been involved in its own effort to link economic progress with gradual yet meaningful political reform in its Euro-Mediterranean process. The impact of the Barcelona process, as it is more commonly known, on the economies of North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean has been subjected to criticism on a number of counts, such as that it puts an undue emphasis on macroeconomics, fosters uneven development and polarizes the local political economy. More significantly, it has also been criticized for its complete failure to deliver progress in the fields of political reform or human rights. Europeans remain skeptical that any U.S.-led initiative would be able to avoid the same pitfalls as the Barcelona process.

THE REASSERTION OF THE STATE AFTER SEPTEMBER 11

One seemingly illogical and inherently contradictory aspect of the newfound U.S. favor for democracy in the Middle East post-9/11 is its agitation in favor of the authority and power of the state, even as it calls for the greater empowerment of

society in formal and informal channels of political participation. This illogic is created by an ideological inability to understand the "gray areas" within which both states and societies tend to co-exist, in which the state is neither totally authoritarian nor the society completely free. In sum, Washington seems to have lost any ability to analyze the region except in terms of a monolithic state versus a monolithic society.

The Bush administration sees no pressing need to disaggregate states, to recognize the fact that even non-democratic governments are more aptly described as systems rather than regimes and house divergent opinions, competing interpretations and internal power struggles, rather than comprising one monolithic bloc. (It might be thought that this kind of internal dynamic should come as little surprise to an administration famously characterized by its own internecine battles between rival departments and ideological factions inside departments.)

In the short term, the Bush administration's refusal to perceive Middle Eastern states as having any greater depth or complexity than that of the official government line could reap some benefits for the United States. Its zero-tolerance attitude to interference in Iraqi affairs in the wake of the war has undoubtedly dissuaded even the most hard-line Iranian factions from seeking to exert undue levels of covert influence, eliminating one complication in an area where there are already more than sufficient rival agendas. Paradoxically, America's rigidity in other areas may actually make it easier for regimes that find their ability to respond to U.S. requests constrained by concerns over domestic opinion: governments can use American intransigence as a cover under which they can excuse meeting those requests. Less room for ambiguity at the international level may make difficult decisions a little less difficult to bear for besieged regimes. In the short term, at the very least, states friendly to the United States will find additional support for their efforts to consolidate their positions vis-à-vis those threats perceived to be rooted in the domestic population. The name of the war on terrorism can be invoked to cover clamp-downs that may have a more political motivation than safeguarding the welfare and security of the nation. Domestically as well as internationally, the authority of state actors will be reinforced.

The difficulty lies in the way this reassertion of the state fits in with America's commitment to democratization. Political scientists frequently note that democracy cannot be installed from the top down; the push for a political system in which genuine participation is possible must begin at the grass-roots level. The primacy of the state to which increased and sustained U.S. involvement in the Middle East will lead may actually make it more difficult for publics to exert pressure for reform from within. With the power of the state reinforced in at least the short term, the implementation of measures of political reform will be more dependent on the good will of elites rather than public pressure.

This is not necessarily cause for concern. The smaller states of the Gulf, for example, have made considerable progress in adopting more participatory forms of governance, but this progress comes as a result of changes in the international political and strategic environments rather than as a response to domestic demands for democracy. Largely insulated from

internal pressure by virtue of their rentier economies,[8] the smaller Gulf states have begun the process of reform with one eye on the increased stability of the region (including the gradual rapprochement between the GCC and Iran) and the other eye on the benefits that the United States grants its allies – particularly allies with stable political systems (in U.S. strategic thinking, small democratic states are inherently stable and therefore better bets for long-term planning).

REFORM VS. DEMOCRATIZATION

The policy of "democratization" espoused by the United States is something of a misnomer. It would be more accurate to speak of "political reform." Washington envisages not so much a free-wheeling, pluralist, vociferous democracy as a carefully controlled process of expanding political participation. Bush has noted that Western democracy did not come overnight and has emphasized the need for a gradualist approach to participation, which will no doubt reassure vested interests in the region. Top-down political reform is, understandably, a prospect with which Middle Eastern regimes are much more comfortable than the idea of instantaneous democratization. Reform allows them to control the speed of change, to ensure the "right" people are winners in the new political economy and, above all, to allow business to continue as usual behind the scenes. This might be viewed as an indictment of Bush's lofty speeches of "forward strategies of freedom in the Middle East," but this would be a harsh assessment. In reality, a gradualist, evolutionary approach is not necessarily any different from the way European or American political systems have evolved over the centuries.

Supporting political reform also provides a mechanism to exorcise the familiar problem of "the Islamist dilemma," the specter usually summoned to argue against the expansion of democracy or elections in the Arab world. Should free and fair elections be held in the Middle East tomorrow, it would be likely that radical religious forces would win a sweeping victory in many countries. This is in part a result of the failure of secular Arab nationalist regimes to deliver on their promises and in part a reassertion of perceived Middle Eastern cultural authenticity after an onslaught of Western – usually American – influence. There is the creeping fear that even those Islamist parties that accept pluralist participation in elections might abandon the ballot box for theocratic rule after winning, in a manner analogous to that by which Nazis rose to power in Germany. U.S. policy makers have as yet found no real answer to this potential hazard. Even Noah Feldman, whose thinking on Islam and democracy seems to be consonant with current trends in U.S. foreign policy, fails to address the problem fully in his *After Jihad: America and the Struggle for Islamic Democracy* and retreats under the cover of asserting that the road to real democracy might be difficult, but it will be worth it in the end. Political reform avoids the pitfalls of the Islamist dilemma by limiting the right to participate in politics to those who the governing elite feels are safe enough to take part.

The democracy card is immensely useful for the United States to play. It has a number of different values, meanings and significances that can be used to fit a variety of policy objectives. It provides an ideological cover for its Iraq project, a

response to the challenge embodied in 9/11, an instrument with which to exert leverage on uncooperative regimes, and an excuse to reward countries that make efforts in the right direction. But the importance of democracy is also essential in responding to bigger questions than mere foreign-policy dilemmas. A commitment to democracy can be supported by a wide cross-section of the American political elite: it plays a key role in rallying support for Bush's vision of the role America should play in the world. Democracy offers an ideal opportunity to reach a national consensus over U.S. foreign policy. It is a policy supported by old-school realists who have no time for the liberal critique of U.S. superpower status and approve of Bush's assumption that America has the right and responsibility to own and use power. It is also supported by those more critical of American hegemony who just might be persuaded that the one time America should flex its muscles is in pursuit of good old liberal values like democracy. When all these factors are considered together, it seems likely that the commitment to "democratization" – aka political reform – will be part of Bush's foreign policy (and even a potential Kerry presidency) for some time to come.

In the near term, implementing the forward strategy of freedom in its pristine form will be all but impossible in the current political climate. The United States would be well advised to prioritize the more immediate challenges of coping with the anger that the mere mention of America elicits across the Middle East. Re-engagement in the Middle East peace process as soon as possible after the November presidential elections is essential. Although the Arab "street" is not likely to rise up and overthrow those governments in the region that are allies of the United States, it is impossible for those in government to ignore the ties that bind them to the societies they rule. In the present climate, no Arab government is now in a position to support any initiative from Washington, even if it has unspoken support at home. As the fate of the Greater Middle East Initiative illustrates, the political climate means that ambitious regional policies are almost automatically doomed to failure at the moment. Such grand plans are redolent of neoconservative notions of redrawing the security architecture of the Middle East. Any major project pushed by Washington right now will smack of the imperialist America that the Arab world sees in the occupation of Iraq.

This doesn't mean the United States can do nothing. What it does mean is that the scale, scope and ambition of its plans need to be reined in and rethought. Remembering that small is beautiful, Washington needs to adopt not a headline-grabbing campaign to "democratize the Middle East" but a policy of promoting political reform – or "good governance" in European parlance – by the back door. This is not simply about channeling thousands of dollars to civil-society groups purporting to represent society but in reality representing themselves. Good governance can be fruitfully encouraged at the government-to-government level too. The issue of security governance in the Middle East has traditionally been avoided by the West (with the notable exceptions of the Palestinian Authority and Iraq), but it could well provide the "missing link" between the seemingly conflicting imperatives of security and democracy. Transforming security systems so that they operate in a

manner more consistent with democratic norms and principles of good governance is a vast area. It encompasses issues as diverse as civilian control of the military (and political control of those civil authorities), the provision of an adequate constitutional and legal framework for the armed forces, parliamentary oversight, the involvement of the public (including media, civil society, et cetera), budget transparency, enshrining the rule of law, and safeguarding human rights. As a recent paper on the issue points out,[9] the various principles behind security governance could be couched in terms readily understandable to the different security communities in the Middle East. For the defense community, reform means an end to budgetary waste, an increase in efficiency and a reduction of escalating arms races through greater transparency. For the human-rights community, an accountable security sector is a prerequisite for the rule of law. For the development community, bad governance in the security sector is a drain on energy and resources better spent elsewhere.

The key factors in the field of security governance – and, for that matter, in any other area of encouraging political reform in the Middle East – are to couch it in language that makes sense to people in the region, to work in a framework of partnership rather than a framework of thinly veiled threats and blatant pressure, and to work with the longer term in mind. Unfortunately, adopting such an approach is likely to win President Bush few headlines and hence few votes back at home. As invariably seems to be the case, U.S. policy in the Middle East is about domestic politics rather than what is best for the region.

[1] President Bush's speech at the Royal Banqueting House in London, hosted by RUSI and IISS, November 19, 2003.
[2] Ibid.
[3] President Bush's speech at the Twentieth Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Washington DC, November 6, 2003.
[4] President Bush, November 19, 2003, op. cit.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid
[7] President Bush, November 6, 2003, op. cit.
[8] Bahrain is an exception to this generalization; its political reforms seem to be as motivated by the desire to avoid intra-communal conflict between Sunnis and Shia as they are by external pressure.
[9] Fred Tanner, *Security Governance: The Difficult Task of Security Democratisation in the Mediterranean*, EuroMeSCo Briefs 4, May 2003.