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Research Report

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SWP Comments, No. 2/2004

Provided in Cooperation with:

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin

Suggested Citation: Rudolf, Peter (2004) : The "strategy of freedom" in the Middle East: The rhetoric and reality of US policy, SWP Comments, No. 2/2004, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/255896>

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The “Strategy of Freedom” in the Middle East

The Rhetoric and Reality of US Policy

Peter Rudolf

In two policy speeches made in November 2003, President Bush reaffirmed and explained his commitment to promoting democracy in the Middle East as a central goal of US foreign policy. Like no president before him, he has called for overcoming the failed, decades-old policy that has been primarily directed towards ensuring the stability of friendly autocratic states. The Bush administration considers a “forward strategy of freedom” in the Middle East a central element of the war on terrorism. What does this policy really look like? What assumptions is it based on? What are the problems associated with it?

President Bush was explicitly following in the footsteps of Woodrow Wilson when he declared the global spread of democracy as a cornerstone of freedom and security in a speech in London on November 19, 2003. The regional focus of this policy of promoting democracy is to be on the Middle East, where “decades of a failed policy” must be abandoned. The willingness up till now to “tolerate oppression for the sake of stability” is being revoked. In the future, the administration intends to follow a different policy – “a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East.” The policy is not designed to impose democracy, rather it is about supporting reforms wherever they take place.

This self-critical stance towards the absence in US foreign policy of any serious push for liberalization and democratization in the Arab world is remarkable. The em-

phasis now on freedom and democracy is clearly intended to change the prevailing perception in the region that the US is only interested in maintaining the status quo.

The foreign policy message is that the US is prepared to support the opening of autocratic regimes in the Middle East to social forces that are pushing for political voice. Domestically the policy is intended to provide a new legitimizing framework for the crisis-ridden intervention in Iraq. But the message will only ring credible in the US and around the world if the rhetoric is backed up by corresponding policies. How does the US intend, *how can it*, move the process of democratic transformation in the Middle East forward? And how will this administration deal with the dilemmas and problems that have up to now been the reason why promoting democracy has been

of little or no importance to US Mideast policy?

Reasons for the “Democratic Deficit”

The reason why democracy and human rights have played a minor role in US Mideast policy even after being released from the actual or perceived constraints of the global East-West conflict has above all to do with the fear of Islamist forces coming to power. Islamism has been a challenge for US foreign policy ever since the Islamic revolution in Iran. It is an ideology that makes explicit ties between politics and religion, and its understanding of politics and states is one that both contradicts the American liberal tradition and is largely considered incompatible with democracy. The US foreign policymaker’s nightmare of an Islamic state that threatens the regional order, rejects the Arab-Israeli peace process, supports terrorism and seeks to acquire nuclear weapons appeared to become a reality in Iran. The experience with Iran has shaped the perception of Islamist movements. A strengthening of Islamist forces was seen from a security perspective as a threat to America’s key interests in the Middle East, namely the security of Israel and the stability of client states in the Persian Gulf. It was feared that these forces would exploit democratic processes only to dismantle them later on. In particular, the destabilization of Egypt and the Persian Gulf states was regarded as a threat to the Arab-Israeli peace process in which the Clinton administration saw a historic opportunity. In the case of Egypt, where a “war” between the government and militant Islamists took place in the 90s, initial efforts were made to establish a dialogue with moderate Islamists. But on the whole, the Clinton administration declined at every opportunity to publicly criticize human rights abuses and to put pressure on the regime to open up.

The Clinton administration did not, however, ignore the issues of political reforms entirely. Its goals were “pluralism,” “greater

openness,” and “political participation,” which were backed up by concrete programs to support organizations of civil society and to reform existing political institutions. A total of some \$250 million were spent on these programs from fiscal year 1993 to 1999. But the fear of Islamist influences, which were particularly strong among grassroots organizations, led to support for secular liberal parties and non-governmental organizations of minor importance and whose independence from the ruling regimes was sometimes questionable. “Friendly” governments remained free from pressure. Not even when elections were canceled, freedoms curtailed or human rights activists thrown in jail did they have to fear sanctions. Both in practice and rhetorically, the Middle East was excluded from Clinton’s principle guideline for US foreign policy of “enlarging the zone of democratic states.”

The states of the Middle East were also an exception in the past within what is known as the “Third Wave” of democratization (Samuel Huntington), which started in 1974. The empirical evidence shows that Islam and democracy are not incompatible. But according to Freedom House studies, democratically elected governments are much less frequent in countries with an Islamic majority than in those of the non-Islamic world. And in the Arab states of the Middle East there are no electoral democracies. In terms of criteria based on political and civil rights, Freedom House classifies three-fourths of these states as “not free” and one-third as “partially free.” On the whole, in the last three decades the region has made no mentionable progress towards democracy (even if some positive developments are observable in one state or another). Arab states in the region are clearly an exception, and the reason for this is the subject of a lively debate in the literature. The answer probably lies not just with their Islamic tradition, but also with the oil export-based economy of many of these states and the social consequences this produces. The wealth generated by oil is

both a blessing and a curse. It stifles innovation and the incentive to invest, for example in the development of a productive entrepreneurial class and in creating a modern educational system. In addition, autocratic regimes in the region can use the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a source of self-legitimization and to draw attention away from their own failures.

After 9/11: Has Everything Changed?

Soon after 9/11, one could hear in foreign policy debates louder than ever the notion that the US could no longer pursue its traditional policy with regard to democratization. The internal structure of Saudi Arabia and Egypt in particular are considered to have provided fertile soil for the spread of Islamist extremism. The expectation is that in the long run the development of democratic institutions will help dry up the reservoir for the recruitment of terrorists.

President Bush has also adopted this view, as exemplified in his hope that progress towards freedom in the region will also enhance US security. "By advancing freedom in the greater Middle East, we help end a cycle of dictatorship and radicalism that brings millions of people to misery and brings danger to our own people. The stakes in that region could not be higher. If the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation and anger and violence for export."

The question remains whether the US can promote and bring about a change of regime in these and other closely allied states in the Middle East without triggering revolutionary changes or at least risking that anti-American forces come to power? It is precisely because of this dilemma that the goal of democratization in the Arab world still remains a matter of debate in American foreign policy circles. From the standpoint of *realpolitik* there are more risks than opportunities. The argument from this point of view is that there is no reason

to expect that democratically elected governments in the region would actually pursue policies that are in America's interest, especially with regard to Israel and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. It is precisely *because* Egypt and Jordan are governed autocratically that they could pursue moderate policies vis-à-vis Israel. And the case of Iran makes it clear that interest in acquiring nuclear weapons does not disappear in the process of pluralization. As a result, a *realpolitik* perspective ends up calling for a "pragmatic middle way" of promoting "liberal autocrats." The US can either attempt to push through its Wilsonian values in the Middle East or secure its strategic interests, but not both.

Programs and Their Problems

Public statements of the Bush administration make no mention of this conflict of goals. The official policy aims for "gradual democratic change." Three issues are seen as decisive in this transition process, and they represent the lessons that the Bush administration has drawn from the transitions that have taken place over the past 20 years. First, the space in which independent organizations of civil society operate needs to be expanded. Second, "fundamental governmental practices" need to be improved (e.g. fighting corruption, establishing an independent judiciary, etc.). Third, a broad spectrum of the population needs to be involved in free elections and responsibility needs to be transferred to electorally legitimized institutions.

What is explicitly not being considered is to try to export a particular model of democracy, least of all an American one, to the Muslim Arab world. The administration is not ignoring the social and economic conditions necessary for democracy, and it is not equating quickly called elections with the substance of democracy. The view is that democracy has to develop from internal forces within a country, and all the US can do is to provide support.

But how should this happen? By promoting economic and political reform and improving the educational system. That at least was the State Department's answer, expressed in Colin Powell's announcement of the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) on December 12, 2002. The initiative was clearly designed to send a political message.

MEPI is essentially about pulling together various existing, very modestly funded regional initiatives. \$29 million was earmarked for pilot projects for FY 2002, followed by \$100 million in FY 2003. \$145 million has been requested for FY 2004. Fifty programs have been launched with a focus on Morocco, Yemen, Bahrain and other Gulf states. Thus far, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have not been targeted. What do these programs entail?

- ▶ The political pillar involves support for independent organizations, research institutes and the media.
- ▶ The economic pillar includes aid for establishing new businesses (the Middle East Finance Corporation is charged with providing credit to small and medium sized enterprises. Its budget for the current fiscal year is \$20 million) and commercial law development programs.
- ▶ The education pillar consists of support for the education of women and girls and programs to provide teacher training.

The second cornerstone of what the US administration calls its Middle East Initiative is the establishment of a US Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA) by 2013. President Bush announced the plan in May 2003. The idea is that economic reform will in the long run spur political reform in the region. The prospect of dismantling barriers to the US market for exports from the region is to serve as an impetus for reforms. The idea is to roll out the program in stages. The first step would be to reach bilateral agreements with individual states. That would then be followed by a region-wide agreement. Bilateral treaties already exist with two states in the region, Israel

and Jordan, and negotiations with Morocco have been under way since January 2003. According to an announcement made to Congress by the US Trade Representative in August 2003, negotiations with Bahrain are expected to begin in January 2004. Further steps in the process include negotiations on joining the WTO, which many states in the region are not members of (in particular Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Algeria and Yemen). This would be followed by negotiations with the US on a bilateral investment treaty and a framework agreement on trade and investment. As soon as the reforms move forward, negotiations on free trade agreements can get started.

The US policy of promoting democracy thus relies on "indirect" measures (following a distinction made by Thomas Carothers). They are strategies that do not directly affect the existing structures of power, and they are expected to unleash and promote developments that lead to a guided, gradual transformation. What are the problems with this policy? To begin with, this scenario of a transition from an authoritarian or semi-authoritarian political system to a democratic one that is controlled from above is quite rare in practice (cases in the Third World include Chile, Mexico, Taiwan and South Korea). The more common scenario is one of collapse in which a dictatorial regime disintegrates due to a loss of legitimacy and power.

The development of a private sector is to be stimulated by economic reforms that conform to standard liberal principles. It is also assumed this will produce an elite and middle class which are largely independent of the state. The problem with this approach for the Middle East is that the US has thus far had very little success in promoting market-based economic reforms. After all, such reforms undermine the interests of the state sector. Even under optimistic assumptions – reforms are carried out and they have a positive effect – the desired political transformation is likely to take a long time. The EU is similarly trying to promote political change in the

Middle East through free trade agreements. The limits of such an approach are, however, clear: Too much pressure to liberalize the economy could be politically destabilizing, whereas economic reforms within the framework of a patronage system will not necessarily lead to a private economic sector that is politically independent.

The two other forms of indirect promotion of democracy, namely support for “good governance” and the development of civil society, have the same appeal as the political economy form. That is because they do not directly address issues of power in client states of the Arab world, and they do not endanger political relations with friendly autocratic regimes. This is a fruitful approach in states in transition because processes already under way are promoted and supported. But Arab states are not in a process of consolidating democracy. Authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states are capable of allowing limited liberalization without touching the structures of political power.

Critics argue that supporting “civil society,” a popular approach among advocates of exogenous promotion of democracy, does not necessarily help the intended gradual democratic transformation. A highly organized and mobilized civil society in a state with weak and illegitimate political institutions may be detrimental to an evolutionary process. Indeed, in the context of organizations of “civil society” that are becoming more radical and Islamist, it may help prepare the ground for revolutionary developments.

MEPI encompasses a number of programs that, as one critic noted, could be lumped together under the motto: Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom. The extent of the political and economic effect of the individual projects is questionable. What is missing is a strategy for promoting systemic political change in which the projects would be embedded. As a result, some experts fear that the projects will suffer the same fate as those of similar initiatives in the 90s, which ultimately did

nothing to change power relations in authoritarian political systems.

There have been no signs yet that the Bush administration is prepared to shift to a policy of directly promoting democracy. Such a policy would entail pressuring friendly regimes to open up the political process to societal participation. In other words, to call for and encourage developments that lead towards elections.

A number of questions remain to be answered. Does the Bush administration no longer hold the view that has been dominant up to now that a democratic opening in Arab states would lead to Islamist forces taking power? Do they now expect, as many observers believe they do, that a transformation of Arab states will in the long run lead to secularization and Westernization? The only thing that is certain is that the process of opening up the political system is a long one with an uncertain outcome. Is President Bush really prepared to accept these uncertainties given the proposition that further political and economic stagnation is even more risky? The intervention in Iraq shows at least that this president is prepared to take considerable risks to overcome what he perceives as a status quo that is no longer acceptable.

Iraq as a Model and a Catalyst?

President Bush has elevated “a free Iraq in the heart of the Middle East” to the most important mid-term goal in the “global democratic revolution.” And he has declared “a strategy of freedom in the Middle East” as a central part of the war on terrorism. These declarations are intended to counteract the erosion of domestic support for the intervention. Now that the original justification for the costly policy in Iraq has become questionable, the intervention is being increasingly reframed as part of a fundamental transformation of an entire region.

What were previously secondary justifications for the war, namely the “liberation” of Iraq and its democratic transformation,

have since become the primary ones. As the administration considered the consequences of an intervention justified on security terms, the notion came up that a “liberated” Iraq could have a catalytic effect on the democratic transformation of the region. In the long run, it was thought, this would dry up the fertile ground for Islamist terrorism. “A liberated Iraq,” said President Bush in February 2003, “can show the power of freedom to transform that vital region, by bringing hope and progress into the lives of millions.” Doubts about the ability to transform Iraq into a stable democracy given its political culture were dismissed by pointing to the examples of Germany and Japan, which, at the time, many people also thought it would be impossible to democratize. From this point of view, the educational standard of the Iraqi population and the wealth of natural resources are sufficient conditions for a successful democratization. President Bush has thus adopted the “domino theory,” the highly controversial creed of the “neoconservatives” which lacks credibility within the State Department. The hope is that the “liberation” of Iraq will set the transformation of the region in motion.

It appears that a free Iraq is meant to serve as a model for the compatibility of traditional Arab and democratic values. It remains unclear, however, how a transformed Iraq will actually have such a catalytic effect on the region and what the basis is for expecting a chain reaction to occur that results in the spreading of democracy. After all, a democratic Iraq will not change states whose core political constellations consist of autocratic governments on the one hand and power-seeking Islamist forces on the other hand.

The hope of successfully transforming Iraq was already difficult to justify even before the scope of the problems which the US now faces in the country were known. Given what we know about the preconditions for democratic transitions, rational assessment suggests that a plausible solution would appear to entail a long-term

international commitment. While this is not out of the question, it is nevertheless highly unlikely. Iraqis lack experience with even a semi-democratic system; the economic structure resembles that of a rentier state.

The creation of democratic regimes – “regime building” – is US foreign policy’s greatest challenge. But how this can be accomplished in states with limited income and lacking democratic traditions is a matter that has no empirically convincing solutions. There is simply a lack of historical examples. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the US has intervened militarily 18 times in countries (including Afghanistan) with the aim of bringing about a change of regime. But according to the analysis of Minxin Pei and Sara Kasper, regime change by military force resulted in stable democracies only in five cases, and they are either industrialized countries (Germany, Italy, Japan) or in Latin America (Panama and Grenada). The success rate in the Third World was low, even after long-term occupation of a country. No doubt some East Asian states (South Korea, Taiwan) can also be considered successes of US promotion of democracy, but such successes took decades and these are not cases of democratization through military force.

Whereas Iraq represented from the outset an enormous challenge in terms of initiating the process of democratization through exogenous forces, now the process is even more complicated as it takes place under conditions of guerrilla warfare. If the US stays in the country, it must be prepared for an extended, intense guerilla war. If they withdraw before the country is sufficiently stabilized, the intention of transforming Iraq is doomed to fail. President Bush has repeatedly stressed in unambiguous terms that there will be no retreat. According to some observers, doubt about America’s resolve is driving a policy of increasing “Iraqification.” At the military level, this finds expression in the plans to reduce the number of US forces on the

ground. At the political level, we see the presumably unavoidable willingness, given the demands of the Shiites, to transfer sovereignty to a transitional government (legitimized by elections of some form or another). This means giving up the originally planned schedule of first drawing up a constitution, followed by elections, and finally the withdrawal of the US. Politically, this is advantageous for President Bush in that next summer, at the height of the election campaign, he can declare the formal end of the occupation. The troops, however, will have to stay in the country at the "invitation" of the Iraqi government. Uncertainties abound: To what extent will a transitional government feel bound by democratic principles? Will it give rise to a new autocratic regime? Will a civil war break out if the key factions can't agree on the basic principles of a constitution? The Bush administration clearly hopes to maintain its ability to influence the shaping of the political order during the process of "Iraqification."

The disappointment among the "neoconservatives" is unmistakable. They fear that an exit strategy is taking shape regardless of the degree of progress made towards establishing a democracy. They are concerned that the rhetoric of victory in the President's policy is being undermined by the Pentagon's plans to reduce the role of the US under the guise of returning sovereignty to the Iraqis. Some observers are uncertain about the extent to which President Bush's goal of a free Iraq is a foreign policy priority for which he is willing to take some risk on the domestic front. The only thing that is certain is that speeding up the "Iraqification" is – as is the case with the entire intervention – a "gamble, a huge gamble," as a leading architect of the strategy of toppling regimes was anonymously quoted in the *New York Times*.

Conclusion and Consequences

The declared commitment to the goal of promoting democracy in the Middle East

is a break with previous US policy that should not be underestimated. It has also changed the measure of success for US Mideast policy.

Democratization as a goal, however, suffers a credibility problem in the Arab world. The perception of American policy and the credibility of democratization as a goal will be influenced in the long run by how US policy in Iraq develops, whether and how seriously the Bush administration undertakes a new attempt at resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and how consistently the US shapes its policy towards autocratic regimes in the region. Thus far the Bush administration has followed two contradictory foreign policy objectives: On the one hand, it supports autocratic leaders in the Middle East and Asia, in particular Central Asia, who collaborate with the US in the war on terrorism. On the other hand, it has declared it will promote freedom in the Arab world, an interest that is based on the assumption that politically and economically stagnate states, whose citizens have neither political influence nor economic hope, are breeding grounds for extremism.

This assumption is undoubtedly correct, but a coherent strategy of implementing change is lacking. How serious is the Bush administration about promoting democracy? It can prove its seriousness by developing a consistent policy that doesn't spare "friendly" autocratic regimes criticism, pressure, and sanctions, by allocating resources, and, not least, by the willingness to provide institutional support for the stated change of policy. A number of suggestions regarding institutionalization have been put forth in the American debate. At the national level, a Department for Democratic State Building could be established which would be responsible for drawing up and carrying out strategies for creating democratic systems. At the international level, this might entail the establishment of new institutions which would promote and consolidate democracy. At the regional level, a foundation for promoting democ-

racy in the Middle East could be established which would be funded by the US and Europe but run by Arab experts.

Despite all the uncertainties and doubts about the actual willingness of the US to change to a credible policy, one should not be too quick to dismiss the whole idea as mere rhetoric. What would be far more desirable is serious transatlantic dialogue on how to promote political and economic change in the Middle East.

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