



**THE PUSH FOR DEMOCRATIC CHANGE IN THE MIDDLE EAST:
FOCUSING THE STRATEGY**

by Daniel Kaplow

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Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice concluded her June 2005 tour of the Middle East with a visit to the American University of Cairo. In her talk there, she laid out America's commitment to promoting liberal, democratic government in the region as the key to ensuring long-term stability.

We should all look to a future when every government respects the will of its citizens — because the ideal of democracy is universal. For 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East — and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people.[1]

This policy is the articulation of the Bush administration's goal of targeting the causes of Islamist terrorism. President Bush affirmed this Middle East policy in a June 28, 2005 speech at Fort Bragg:

Our strategy [is] to defend ourselves and spread freedom_ The rise of freedom in this vital region will eliminate the conditions that feed radicalism and ideologies of murder and make our nation safer_ And when the Middle East grows in democracy, prosperity and hope, the terrorists will lose their sponsors, lose their recruits and lose their hopes for turning that region into a base for attacks on America and our allies around the world.[2]

In prioritizing the countries that it should push to democratize, the administration must consider the chances for success and whether democratization in these nations enhances, or at least does not damage, the interests of America and its regional allies. Further, Washington must politically and economically support the countries it chooses to push to democratize in order to make it is less likely that democratization in these states will produce extremist leadership.

Taking these considerations into account, the Bush administration should focus its strongest democratization efforts neither on its strongest Arab allies in the region — Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia— nor on its most hostile enemies — Syria and Iran. First, pushing for democracy in these two groups of states would have a low chance of success, especially in the countries already hostile to the U.S. and already under heavy American pressure. Second, pressing U.S. allies to liberalize could potentially transform these countries from allies to enemies. Instead the U.S. should focus on three places: the Palestinian territories and Lebanon, and remaining in Iraq. These three nations offer the best prospects for successful democratization, and would serve as pivotal role models to the peoples of the region. At the same time, pushing for change in these places would pose the least danger to U.S. regional interests and allies; critically, too, the U.S. would be in a better position to manage the possible negative fallout of democratization in a way that would not endanger its regional interests.

THE HOSTILE STATES: PUSH, BUT DON'T EXPECT TOO MUCH

Lebanese opponents of Syria's occupation, backed by American and international pressure, orchestrated February 2005 mass demonstrations that forced a Syrian retreat. Though Syria's President Assad is unlikely to initiate large-scale, regime-endangering reforms, the main internal opposition groups —Kurds, Islamists, and intellectuals — have been emboldened by the effects of external pressure on the Syrian leadership; indeed, the most recent sign of this increased willingness to dissent has come from the Kurds of northeastern Syria, who have begun speaking out against Assad's government.[3]

Nonetheless, Assad remains strong at home, where he has moved to shore up his regime since retreating from Lebanon. Aware that the withdrawal from Lebanon had left him more vulnerable to internal dissenters, Assad convened a Baath party conference shortly after the withdrawal, in order to give the Syrian people at least a semblance of liberalization. This is especially important in the economic realm, to revive the country's dilapidated economy. However, Assad is unlikely to adopt even these reforms as his inaction over the past several years demonstrates. Further, he has also begun to clamp down on opposition figures. Notably, Sheikh Khaznawi, a leading Syrian-Kurdish dissident, was murdered in May 2005.[4] Nor does Assad's grip seem to be weakening.

The Bush administration withdrew the U.S. ambassador to Syria in the wake of the February 2005 assassination of Lebanese former Prime Minister Hariri; additionally, a U.S. embargo against Syria imposed by Congress in late 2003 still holds; finally, the administration has consistently denounced Syria as a harbor for terrorists and insurgents.

Though it remains unclear how long Syrians will be willing to put up with economic charades and political repression, his regime continues to be quite resilient at home.[5]

In the case of Iran, world market trends can only make the current regime stronger. The windfall profits Iran is expected to earn with the continued high price of oil will allow Tehran to buy off popular discontent. Like Damascus, it remains resilient even in the face of strong UN, EU and American diplomatic and economic pressure: Washington denounces Iran as a pillar of the axis of evil and an exporter of terrorism; an international economic embargo has been in place on Iran for years; and Iran continues to pursue nuclear weapons capability even in the face of threatened UN Security Council action

For this reason, these two states should not be the central focus of an American push for democracy, which needs examples of successful democracy soon.

THE FRIENDLY STATES: PUSH, BUT NOT TOO HARD

In contrast to the antagonistic regimes in Tehran and Damascus, the pro-Western regimes in Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia remain among America's strongest Arab allies. Pressuring for democratization in these countries poses a dilemma.[6] Democracy could bring to power Islamist extremist elements, that are gaining in popularity as they oppose the now-liberalizing regimes in Amman, Cairo, and Riyadh, and because of their ties to the Islamist religious establishment. It is therefore significant that Secretary Rice delivered her speech on the administration's commitment to democratization from Cairo. This location sent a clear signal that the U.S. will continue to push for liberalization in Western-allied countries like Egypt, despite the possible negative consequences.

In order to lessen the chances of extremists' gaining power in pro-Western countries following a democratic transition, a very real possibility given the high levels of popularity and legitimacy of the Islamist extremist opposition in these states, the U.S. must push for democratization less in these countries, even if this opens the U.S. to charges of hypocrisy. This does not mean that the U.S. should not welcome democratic developments in these countries; but the U.S. should take care to promote a gradual liberalization process. The Egyptian and Jordanian peace treaties with Israel of 1979 and 1994 respectively constitute the cornerstone of any stability there is in the region, and a popularly elected government in Cairo or Amman could bow to widespread sentiments against these treaties and renege on its commitments. Elected Islamists would not guarantee democracy, either, if they were to subscribe to a "one man, one vote, one time" philosophy once in power.

THE SWING STATES: THE PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES, LEBANON, AND IRAQ

The best chances to advance democracy are in the Palestinian territories and Lebanon, and Iraq — where the U.S. must continue its efforts. First, the U.S. is in a better position — more than it is in other states in the Middle East — to influence and manage the transition to democracy in these states. Second and critically, the U.S. can afford to risk changing the political dynamic in these areas without damaging critical U.S. regional allies and interests. These interests, most importantly, include cooperation on combating terrorism, facilitating greater regional stability and promoting Arab-Israeli peace efforts.

In the Palestinian territories, the United States is the sole power capable of pressing Israel to accommodate demands for a Palestinian state; it is also an important source of aid to the Palestinians. Moreover, many Palestinians seek American identification with the Palestinian cause and recognition of their leaders. The key to Palestinian statehood lies in Washington. In Lebanon, much of the country —specifically, Christians, who make up 40% of the population — has always identified strongly with the West. Syria's long-standing hegemony over the country has pushed Lebanon's Sunni and Druze majority toward supporting an independent, Western-looking Lebanese identity, bringing them closer to their Christian compatriots. Lebanon is clearly on the road to democracy: it has held free and contested parliamentary elections, and the anti-Syria opposition majority faction has now formed the first government free of direct Syrian intervention.

And America, of course, wields tremendous influence in Iraq.

The emergence of a democratic Palestinian state is not beyond achieving. However, to accomplish this, Washington must significantly increase its efforts toward democracy in the Palestinian territories. It must do much more than coddling Abu Mazen and hoping that he can cajole illegal armed militia groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad into upholding their end of a ceasefire with Israel — the current policy. Abbas should not have been allowed to come away from his May, 26 2005 meeting with President Bush with \$50 million and no exhortation to take immediate action to dismantle terrorist groups[7]. Instead, Washington must be sure he understands that he must fulfill the Palestinians' obligations under the 2003 Roadmap, namely, outlawing and taking action against illegal armed militia groups. American funding is an important source of leverage with the Palestinians. Indeed, the Bush administration has already provided Abu Mazen with millions of dollars in emergency aid.

Israel's withdrawal from Gaza strengthens Abu Mazen's hand with his people, but if the Bush administration desires real democratic change in the Palestinian territories, it needs to increase its pressure on the Palestinian Authority. The three points Abu Mazen needs to hear are, first, that vast security services and illegal militias are anti-democratic and make it impossible to take on the terrorist groups; second, that Washington will fully support and fund action to restructure the security forces and to take on armed militias; and third, that Washington will not press Israel for any concessions until the territories meet these requirements.

Washington need not oppose Hamas' or Islamic Jihad's entering the political arena. However, these groups' participation in Palestinian legislative elections should be conditioned upon their acceptance of Israel's existence, disarming, and renouncing armed struggle. If these groups cannot finance a continued armed struggle, they will be forced to come to some sort of modus vivendi with Israel, which will be further reinforced by Israel's security barrier. The Roadmap still stands as America's political program toward the creation of a Palestinian state. Washington cannot allow the Palestinian Authority to collapse into a militarized Hamastan. For this reason, Washington must push for a demilitarized, elected Palestinian leadership. And

while the U.S. and Russia are reportedly planning a regional conference to advance relations between Israel and North African and Gulf Arab states, this would also be a good opportunity to revive the Roadmap.[8]

Though the security situation in Lebanon is still unstable, the rise of the anti-Syria opposition signals that most Lebanese want to have their country's sovereignty restored, build intercommunal harmony, and end war and occupation. Even though sect-based politics played a large role in the recent Lebanese elections, the demonstrations resulting in the end of the Syrian occupation, in which Christians and Sunnis alike participated, prove that many Lebanese are loyal to one national identity. Before its civil war and subsequent occupation, Lebanon was an exemplar to the Arab world of a free-market and capitalist, liberal, pluralistic and tolerant country. All these signs bode well for the success of an American push to sustain democratization in Lebanon.

Washington should support Beirut in several key areas: efforts to revive the Lebanese economy, including financing Lebanon's huge debt; encouraging the Lebanese government to deal with internal militias; monitoring to ensure that Damascus stays out of Lebanese affairs. In addition, the U.S. can work with Lebanese leaders to devise a way to move forward on deconfessionalization of the political system. Washington can help Beirut determine ways politics can be organized around national and not religious-sectarian constituencies. This would have to be done in a manner that would not endanger the sectarian balance that currently ensures civil peace.[9] Further, it could continue to appeal to the international community and especially to France to support American efforts. Lebanon was formerly a French colony, and France has always maintained a strong interest in a pro-West, democratic Lebanon. Most recently, France worked closely with the U.S. at the UN to press for Syria's retreat and for the disarmament of independent militias. The U.S. should continue to work with the international community and especially France to support the new Lebanese government.

The risk of pushing for change in Lebanon is that the country could revert to civil war and communal strife, but this seems unlikely given the public's war fatigue. This risk can be further reduced by continued U.S. financial support for economic growth and reconstruction efforts. The U.S. must engage in greater consultation with the new government to determine the pace at which these changes should take place and assess its needs. Secretary Rice's very brief visit to Lebanon in July 2005 indicates that the Bush administration is moving in the right direction; more U.S. involvement in Lebanon is still needed.

Iraq, the center of the Arab consciousness, is of course where the U.S. is most heavily invested, and it has great potential as a demonstration project for democracy--and it has great potential to be a success, with its oil wealth and well educated populace. Further, its multi-ethnic makeup ensures that an Islamist government cannot gain majority support and guarantees that the three main religious-political communities — the Shia, the Sunni, and the Kurds — will install checks and balances on each other's exercise of power.

The challenges, however, are avoiding civil war and creating a secure environment for reconstruction. Accordingly, Washington has no choice but to increase its investment in the project, at minimum maintaining current force levels and training them in counterinsurgency warfare. President Bush must do a better job explaining to American voters what the risks of failure are in Iraq; an untimely U.S. withdrawal from Iraq would only leave a vacuum of power that would be filled by Iran or extremist Islamist al Qaeda-supporting terrorists, or both. Further, Iraq's infrastructure needs to be rebuilt, so Iraqis can experience tangible gains in their welfare. The key is: Only real movement on the political front to elect a legitimate government under a ratified constitution can address the root causes of the insurgency, which has both taken advantage of and contributed to the chaotic political situation.

A legitimate, democratic regime in Iraq will go a long way toward stabilizing regional politics, which is fundamentally important to winning the global war on terrorism. When citizens' needs can be resolved in a democratic manner, support for terrorists can only wane; the freedom to speak that democracy brings can also help initiate a conversation within these mostly Islamic states as to the limits on invoking Islam to encourage violence. Giving up in Iraq would provide Islamist terrorists worldwide with further encouragement to continue their violence.

Notes

[1] Secretary Rice's speech can be found at www.state.gov.

[2] President Bush's speech can be found at www.whitehouse.gov.

[3] Hassan M. Fattouh, "Kurds, Emboldened by Lebanon, Rise Up in Tense Syria," *New York Times*, July 2, 2005.

[4] *Ibid*.

[5] Sami Moubayed, "Bashar Assad ensured the Baath was here to stay," *The Daily Star* (Beirut), July 19, 2005.

[6] To read more about the dilemma of pushing Friendly Tyrants to reform, see Adam Garfinkle et al., *The Devil and Uncle Sam: A User's Guide to the Friendly Tyrants Dilemma*, (Transaction Publishers, 1992).

[7] While in his speech following the meeting President Bush "applaud[ed] your [Abbas'] rejection of terrorism", Bush did not call for the dismantling of terrorist groups. Instead he warned that "All who engage in terror are the enemies of a Palestinian state, and must be held to account" after which he promptly awarded the Palestinians funds for post-disengagement reconstruction even while Abbas had yet to take any action toward dismantling terrorist groups. The text of the speech can be found at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/05/20050526.html>

[8] Aluf Benn, "Rice praises Abbas' efforts to clamp down on militias," *Haaretz*. July 23, 2005.

[9] For more specific recommendations, see the results of the Lebanon Study Group, co-chaired by Daniel Pipes and Ziad Abdelnour of the Middle East Forum at www.meforum.org.