

**Challenges to Democracy in the Arab and Muslim World**

**Alon Ben-Meir\***

President Bush's notions that democratizing Iraq will have a ripple effect on the rest of the Arab world, bringing prosperity and peace to the region, and that democracy is the panacea for Islamic terrorism are unsubstantiated as well as grossly misleading. Even a cursory review of the Arab political landscape indicates that the rise of democracy will not automatically translate into the establishment of enduring liberal democracies or undermine terrorism in the region. The same conclusion may be generally made for the Muslim political landscape. In fact, given the opportunity to compete freely and fairly in elections, Islamic extremist organizations will most likely emerge triumphant. In the recent elections in Lebanon and Egypt, Hezbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood respectively, won substantial gains, and in Palestine Hamas won the national Parliamentary elections handedly. That they did so is both a vivid example of the today's political realities and an indicator of future trends. And if current sentiments in the Arab states offer a guide, any government formed by elected Islamist political parties will be more antagonistic to the West than the authoritarian regimes still in power. In addition, there are no indications that democracy is a prerequisite to defeating terrorism or any empirical data to support the claim of linkage between existing authoritarian regimes and terrorism.

The data actually say something quite different. An annual study conducted by the State Department, "Pattern of Global Terrorism," shows that between 2000 and 2003, 269 major terrorist incidents occurred in free nations, 119 in countries considered partly free, and 138 in countries with authoritarian regimes. The study also reveals that during the same period there were 203 international terrorist attacks in India, a democratic state, while there were none in China, which most observers agree, does not meet most standards of a free nation. These findings of course do not prove that democracies attract more terrorist incidents than do dictatorial regimes. Rather, they suggest that whereas mature democracies are more stable and generally avoid fighting one another, political freedoms in themselves do not automatically create a shield against violence and terrorism. France's centuries-long tradition of democracy did not prevent fast-spreading urban unrest in 2005 and Northern Ireland has provided another glaring example. Unless democratic elections are preceded by the building of democratic institutions and the effective encouragement of social and economic development, they will produce illiberal democracies akin to authoritarian regimes. If there is any correlation between the democratic drive of the Bush administration and the number of acts of terror during the same period, then by that standard the administration's efforts to fight terrorism by also pushing for democracy have failed miserably. A study on terrorism recently released by the State Department indicates that the number of terrorist attacks reached a new record of more than 11,000 attacks in 2005. Indeed, the administration has never understood that the means to achieve democratic governance are as critical as democracy itself.

Considering the dubious rationale for the war in Iraq and its continuing enormous costs to the American and Iraqi people, the Arab public cannot see any justification for it in the name of democracy. The recent elections and the passage of a new constitution in Iraq have neither diminished the insurgency nor the intense ill feelings and hatred that Iraqis and Arabs in general

harbor against the United States. Not only do they feel cynical about the United States and contemptuous of it, they reject the notion that democracy “American style” should be shoved down their throats with a gun. Still, regardless of their specific national identity, Arabs and Muslims do not reject democratic reforms in principle. On the contrary, tired of despotism, corruption, and abuse by those in power, they seek some political reforms as long *as these reforms correspond to their values and are adopted at a pace consistent with the social make-up and political conditions of their respective communities*. But because the Arab states have much in common--religion, language, and history, and the Muslim world shares with them the strong bond of religion--there are four core measures that can and must be pursued in the region to effect democratic reforms, which will lead to progress and stability rather than to violence and political turmoil. Certainly, the Western world, especially the United States, is doubly challenged if it wants to play an important role in promoting democracy in the Middle-East, not through coercive regime change but through a long-term commitment and investment in the region based on a careful consideration of each country’s unique political, social, and traditional environment.

First, **pursue gradual changes**: Due to their long history of submission to authoritarianism--during which Islam was (and, to a great extent, remains) a dominant factor--and because of tribalism and sectarianism based on religious or cultural orientation, most Arab and Muslim societies prefer gradual rather than radical reforms. Another complicating factor that needs to be taken into account is the traditional loyalty to the family and to the tribe, which naturally erodes the importance of such principles of democratic government as advice and consent and majority rule. In country after country, for example, in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco, most people in the region, when asked, say they want slow and incremental change to reduce resistance to democratic ideals, eventually win over skeptics, and prevent a serious backlash that could stifle future progress. For these reasons, any Western initiative to introduce

democratic reforms must also involve the full support of gradual reforms, however many years they might take to solidify. Moreover, no reform can either be promoted or flourish if opposed by the sitting governments because they are perceived to be threatening their power base and cannot be expected to participate in their own political demise. Gradualism will not only reduce such risks to sitting governments; it will allow these regimes to be part of the reforms process specifically because they can control events better by realizing that reforms provide hope especially to the young, and as such are a prerequisite to maintaining public calm. The West, and once again, particularly the United States, must stop the practice of encouraging the people of the Middle East to rise up against their own governments, as the Bush administration has often advocated. In the context just described, such a policy is not simply counterproductive; it is also dangerous. The Shiites in Iraq still remember how, left to their own devices after they rose up against Saddam Hussein in 1991, they endured horrible persecution. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein, accompanied by pushing democracy down the throat of Iraqis during the second Iraq war, has similarly proven a dismal failure. Iraq, with its long tradition of sectarian conflict and tribalism, was not and is not ready for an American-style democratic form of government. The Iraqis should have been given a much longer transitional period in which to adjust to the regime change and to build in its place a civil society anchored in strong democratic institutions. The hope for a new Iraqi government, even with the participation of the Sunnis and the Kurds, may not endure because the principles of political pluralism have not been fully adopted by all the parties involved and sectarianism remains imbedded. Democracy will not mushroom in the Middle East, according to Mr. Bush's timetable; what the United States should and can do is to offer, as should other democratic nations, help and guidance along with other incentives, essentially allowing each country to develop its own homegrown form of democracy.

Second, **provide economic incentives**: The United States, along with the European Union and Japan, should offer most Arab regimes economic incentives in exchange for their proceeding with democratic reform. These economic incentives, however, should not be offered government-to-government with no strings attached, because the money may end up in private accounts in Swiss banks. Instead, the money should fund sustainable projects through various international agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The idea is to ensure that local communities are involved in the design and implementation of the development projects. Indigenous reconstruction has been remarkably successful in communities around the world, because local people have a strong incentive to maintain projects that address their particular needs in education, health, business, agriculture, and environmental conservation. In most of these instances, local associations formed by members of the community manage projects and implement new ones. New ties of cooperation form when neighboring communities join together to create projects beneficial to their entire area. The United States needs to recognize that *this type of "bottom-up" development is based on democratic procedures*. Two fundamental elements in pluralist democracy are the dispersion of power toward the interior (localities) and the inclusion of all social groups in decision making. Broad participation in the reconstruction of communities is pluralist democracy in action, because it strengthens the capacities of local peoples to manage their own development. If the Bush administration chooses to go this route, it should have no illusions about what it would take to make a real difference in the life of the communities spread across the Arab and the Muslim world. But developing democracy in this fashion cannot be accomplished on the cheap. The West must be prepared to commit tens of billions of dollars toward sustainable development to plant the seeds of democracy. Ultimately, each Arab and Muslim country, depending on its economic power and the pace of its development as it follows this broad policy, must become part of the global economy. Yes, it's a

long-term proposition, but then again, neither the evolution of democracy nor the war on terrorism is a short-term project.

Third, **develop democratic institutions**: To address the need for the development of specific democratic institutions that sustain long-term democracy, the West by invitation must focus more resources in the development of four areas; a free press, liberal organizations, a fair judiciary, and human rights. Although the Arab states are awash with print and electronic media, most of these are official or semiofficial organs of their government. While there has been a recent increase in the number of independent media (electronic and print), the traditional government treatment of unfavorable reporting still inhibits the truly free and unimpeded airing of opinion and open-ended debate. Arab media have been notoriously anti-American and anti-Israeli and have prohibited or repressed free discourse or opposing views that are not endorsed by the government. Without freedom of expression, democracy has no legs to stand on. The West can help to change this by using incentives to persuade Arab regimes of the importance of changing the tone of the media, not as much as to improve the West's dismal image on the Arab streets but primarily to permit a freer but responsible press to flourish as a staple of democracy.

The second focus should be on the development of liberal organizations and political parties so they may emerge, possibly only after years of nurturing, as a new political force. It should by now be abundantly clear that by themselves, free elections neither create nor constitute democracy and, when they precede the building of democratic institutions, and other prerequisites that sustain democracy, they are more likely to produce instability and upheaval, especially in countries previously governed by authoritarian regimes. This explains why the West, with the United States in the lead, should first assist and encourage the development of liberal organizations in each state in the region to the point where they will be in a position to compete successfully with extremist Islamic groups, which are now both better organized and far

more pervasive. In scores of counties in South America, Africa, and Eastern Europe, including Russia, elected leaders gradually amass more and more dictatorial powers, leaving these countries democratic in name only. An increasing number of democratically elected leaders in these parts of the world are cracking down on democratic activities to the chagrin of the West and the sorrow of their own people. President Putin criticized NGOs working on human rights and pushed through a new law requiring that they inform the Russian government of any new project before they undertake it. Uzbekistan's President Karimov Islam is in the process of closing down most Western democracy initiatives. In Belarus, President Alexander Lukashenko has forbidden political challengers to appear against him and stifled the development of an independent civil society. In Africa, the same pattern of crushing democratic initiative is on the rise. In Zimbabwe, the parliament passed legislation prohibiting local NGOs from receiving foreign aid. Meanwhile, Eritrea enacted new laws prohibiting local NGOs from engaging in any work other than relief activities. The same phenomenon may be seen in South America. Recently, the Organization for American States overwhelmingly rejected an American proposal to create a new mechanism to monitor governmental compliance with democratic norms. The leaders of all of these countries were able to do this with impunity because there are no traditional democratic institutions in place or viable political parties to oppose their usurpation of power. Only the emergence of liberal political leaders and institutions with a legitimate chance to compete without fear will permit democracy to grow real roots.

Equally critical is the development of fair and impartial judiciaries. The United States and other democracies can provide substantial help and guidance in building judiciaries that, while consistent with the unique character of each community, remain free, fair, and equitable. The experience of the Western nations in training judges and enhancing the judiciary system in Iraq can be duplicated in other Arab and Muslim countries. Here too, however, the tradition of a

fair and impartial judiciary can only evolve over time, and thus constitutional safeguards must be established to protect the integrity and safety of judges and the entire judicial system. The recent disturbances in Egypt over the judiciary's independence illustrate the importance of these measures. No judiciary can function equitably and impartially if it becomes in any way subservient to government manipulations.

Finally, the rights of the individual should be enshrined constitutionally as a prerequisite for the development of true democracy. That in most Arab societies the rights of the collective generally supersede the rights of the individual adds another impediment to implementing democratic reforms, since these reforms basically focus on protecting individual rights. Institutionalizing the rights of the individual and making them supreme is the first priority, however difficult this may be to accomplish. That said, even dictatorial leaders, because of their fear of international ostracism, are willing, at least formally, to grant full human rights to their citizens. The problem lies in implementing these rights, and here is where regularly applied international pressure often prevents wanton human rights abuses. By careful use of such pressure, the United States and other Western powers can help through incentives many Arab regimes to move in a positive direction, so no Arab or Muslim head of state can trample on individual rights with impunity.

Fourth, **reform educational systems**: Although Arab and Muslim governments are aware that their educational systems need massive change, in most Arab states, not enough effort has been made to adapt to a fast changing world to effect any real change. Tens of thousands of schools (Madrasat), funded mostly by Saudi money and scattered throughout the Arab and Islamic worlds, mainly teach Koranic studies based on a Sunni Wahabism laced with poisonous teachings against the United States and the Jews. Left unchecked, these schools will turn out not scholars but be an enormous pool for the next generation of terrorists. Pakistan, for example, has



thousands of such Saudi-funded schools, because the government does not have the resources to meet its huge educational requirements. The United States and other Western nations can be of critical help by: a) persuading the Saudi government to moderate the teaching requirements and course content in these schools, b) providing direct assistance to Pakistan and other Arab or Muslim countries so education in them becomes less dependent on funding from regimes that dictate course content, c) encouraging other donor nations to offer special assistance for education to needy countries, such as Egypt, and d) beseeching Arab governments to review their history texts and then modify them to reflect more objective historical accounts. What Arab kids are learning today and how that impacts their views of the world are immensely important for the future of democratic reform. Therefore, helping Arab states to modernize existing schools or to build new ones, moderate religious studies, and modify or delete anti-American materials is essential, however daunting this may seem.

Finally, the biggest challenges the West faces in promoting democracy in the Arab and Muslim worlds is that most people in these countries do not believe that these efforts are genuine, undertaken to benefit them rather than to serve Western or U.S. strategic interests. They accuse the Bush administration of using democracy as a ploy to target regimes it does not like such as in Iraq, Syria, or Iran, while leaving governments no less despotic, such as in Saudi Arabia, to their own devices. They further accuse the United States of trying to promote a democracy of convenience, at a time and pace of its choosing irrespective of the aspirations of the people affected by such narrow, interest-guided policies. All the stated enthusiasm in the White House about the spread of democracy in Iraq, Palestine, and Afghanistan is greeted with cynicism by many in the region who see the same developments as a mirage in the political desert of the Middle East. However such manifestations of democratic movements in the region unfold, the

development of true democracy in the Middle East will be slow, painstaking, extremely challenging, and at times violent.

For true democracy to take hold, the West and the Arab and Muslim states must learn from the mistakes the Bush administration has committed in Iraq: artificially accelerating the process or forcing democratic reforms on the people, thereby pushing the region into terrible turmoil. A far better strategy would be to allow for the political maturity, evolving through gradual political and economic development and reform, which produces liberal movements that become the base for sustainable democratic forms of government.

\* Alon Ben-Meir is professor of international relations at the Center for Global Studies at NYU and is the Middle East Project Director at the World Policy Institute, New York.

E-mail: [Alon@alonben-meir.com](mailto:Alon@alonben-meir.com)

Web: [www.alonben-meir.com](http://www.alonben-meir.com)

This essay is based on the author's direct involvement in Middle Eastern affairs both as researcher and mediator.