US Foreign Policy and Democracy Promotion in the Middle East: Theoretical Perspectives and Policy Recommendations

*Katerina DALACOURA**

Abstract

Much has been written on US foreign policy in the Middle East. Since the attacks of 11 September 2001, democracy promotion has been an important aspect of this discussion. In this paper, I briefly introduce the complex rationale behind US democracy promotion in the Middle East in the years and decades preceding 9/11 and outline the changes that occurred following the attacks under the George W. Bush administration. I draw on insights from international relations theory to illustrate the role of democracy promotion within the broader context of US foreign policy towards the region and to assess its impact. Finally, I address recent developments under the Barack Obama administration and make recommendations for US policy.

Keywords: Democracy Promotion, United States, Middle East, International Relations Theory, US Foreign Policy.

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ABD Dış Politikası Ortadoğu'da Demokrasi Teşviki: Teorik Perspektifler ve Politika Tavsiyeleri

Öz

ABD'nin Ortadoğu ile ilgili dış politikaları hakkında çok şey yazıldı. 11 Eylül 2001saldırısından bu yana sürdürülen demokrasi teşviki çalışmaları, bu tartışmaların önemli bir bölümünü oluşturmakta. Bu makalede ABD'nin 11 Eylül sonrası başlattığı Ortadoğu'da demokrasi teşviki çalışmalarının ardında yatan karmaşık mantığı ve 11 Eylül sonrası süreçte ve W.George Bush yönetimi döneminde yaşanan değişikleri ana hatlarıyla belirtmeye çalıştım. Uluslararası ilişkiler teorilerinden yola çıkarak ABD'nin bölgeye yönelik dış

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politikaları bağlamında demokrasi teşviki çalışmaların oynadığı rolün önemini betimlemeye ve etkilerini ölçmeye çalıştım. Son olarak da, yakın dönemde Barak Obama yönetiminde yaşanan gelişmeleri ele alarak ABD dış politikası-na yönelik bazı tavsiyelerde bulundum.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Demokrasinin Teşviği, ABD, Ortadoğu, Uluslararası İlişkiler Teorileri, ABD Dış Politikası.

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السياسة الخارجية للولايات المتحدة الامريكية – تشجيع الديمقراطية في الشرق الأوسط :
آراء نظرية وتوصيات سياسية

خـلاصـة

كتب الكثيرون عن السياسة الخارجية للولايات المتحدة الامريكية حول الشرق الأوسط. وتشكل جهود تشجيع الديمقراطية التي بدأت منذ احداث 11 ايلول/ سبتمبر 2001 قسما كبيرا من هذه النقاشات. وقد حاولت في هذه الدراسة ان ابين المنطق المعقد الذي يكمن وراء فعاليات تشجيع الديمقراطية التي بدأت بها الولايات المتحدة الامريكية بعد 11 ايلول/ سبتمبر 2001، وان اوضح الخطوط الرئيسية للتغييرات التي حصلت بعد 11 ايلول خلال فترة عهد الرئيس جورج بوش. وقد حاولت، انطلاقا من نظريات العلاقات الدولية، وضمن اطار السياسات الخارجية للولايات المتحدة المتعلقة بالمنطقة، ان اوضح اهمية الدور الذي تلعبه فعاليات تشجيع الديمقراطية ، وان اسبر غور تأثير هذه الفعاليات على المنطقة. وفي الختام فقد تناولت بالبحث التطورات الحاصلة في الفترة الاخيرة في ادارة الرئيس باراك اوباما، مقدما بعض المقترحات حول السياسة الخارجية للولايات المتحدة الامريكية.

الكلمات الدالة : الديمقراطية، التشجيع، الولايات المتحدة الامريكية، الشرق الأوسط، نظريات العلاقات الدولية، سياسة الولايات المتحدة الامريكية الخارجية.

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Much has been written on US foreign policy in the Middle East. Since the attacks of 11 September 2001, democracy promotion has been an important aspect of this discussion. In this paper, I briefly introduce the complex rationale behind US democracy promotion in the Middle East in the years and decades preceding 9/11 and outline the changes that occurred following the attacks under the George W. Bush administration. I draw on insights from international relations theory to illustrate the role of democracy promotion within the broader context of US foreign policy towards the region and to assess its impact. Finally, I address recent developments under the Barack Obama administration and make recommendations for US policy.

The Cold War Period and the Interregnum of the 1990s

During the Cold War, US foreign policy in the Middle East was driven by the three main objectives of containing the Soviet Union, securing petroleum supplies and ensuring the survival of Israel. Democracy promotion was, to all intents and purposes, eclipsed by these three aims. Democracy and human rights considerations did not feature in the US support of conservative against 'radical' Arab states during the Cold War. Balance of power and ideological preoccupations were at the forefront of US policy makers' minds. US support for Israel was strengthened by an affinity towards a fellow democracy but, in the wider region, the need to secure support in the confrontation against the Soviet Union, and maintain the supply of petroleum resources, overrode any misgivings about authoritarianism in seeking US allies.

The end of the Cold War and the perceived victory of 'democracy' over Soviet communism, led to important changes in this area of policy. The two Bill Clinton administrations (1993 – 2001) increasingly paid attention to democracy and human rights issues abroad. The Leahy Amendment to the Defense Appropriations Act (1998) and the Religious Persecution Act (1998) were examples of new legislation which sought to 'mainstream' human rights and democracy in US foreign policy. Special attention to women's and labour rights and the view that democracy and development were interdependent also coloured the US approach. Middle East policy was inevitably influenced by these changes and democracy tentatively started to become one element in relations with regional actors. [1]

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1   On the Clinton record see Thomas Carothers, *The Clinton Record on Democracy Promotion*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Democracy and the Rule of Law Project, Working Paper 16, September 2000; Katerina Dalacoura, *Engagement or Coercion? Weighing Western Human Rights Policies towards Turkey, Iran and Egypt*, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2003.

US democracy promotion in the Middle East during the 1990s interregnum was driven by a mix of idealist and pragmatic considerations. On the one hand were the Clinton administrations' liberal internationalist principles which emphasized universalist values over cultural particularities and realist considerations of power maximization and the national interest. On the other hand was the pragmatic (though not realist) rationale which derived from 'democratic peace theory'. Democratic peace theory, which maintained that democracies do not go to war with one another, became a source of consensus in the State Department and other centres of power in Washington. As Diamond argues, a 'more democratic world would be a safer, saner, and more prosperous world for the United States… Democratic countries do not go to war with each other or sponsor terrorism against other democracies… [or] build weapons of mass destruction to threaten one another.'[2] More specifically, democratising Arab regimes was seen as the means of securing peace in the conflict-ridden region of the Middle East. Democratizing the Palestinian Authority in particular would be a way of achieving peace with Israel and resolving the region's most long-standing conflict.

None of the above considerations, however, were powerful enough to overwhelm *realpolitik* practices in US policy towards the Middle East in the 1990s. The fear of instability, disruption to the oil supply and other economic interests overwhelmed democracy and human rights concerns. The threat of political ascendancy of anti-Western Islamist movements, such as what had nearly occurred in Algeria in 1991-2 where the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) came close to winning power through elections, ensured continuous support for pro-Western, authoritarian regimes. Democracy promotion during this period remained a limited aspect of US policy.[3]

The Effect of the 9/11 Attacks on US Policy in the Middle East

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 on the United States catapulted democracy promotion onto the centre of US policy in the Middle East. The attacks meant the questioning of the democratic peace theory as the main

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2   Larry Diamond, 'Promoting Democracy', *Foreign Policy*, 87,1992, p. 30.

3   For a useful overview of democracy promotion policies in the 1990s, albeit not just focused on the United States but on Western and multilateral institutions generally, see Sheila Carapico, 'Foreign Aid for Promoting Democracy in the Arab World', *Middle East Journal*, 56 (3) 2002, pp. 379-95. See also my *Engagement or Coercion? Weighing Western Human Rights Policies towards Turkey, Iran and Egypt*, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2003.

justification for democracy promotion in the Middle East partly because they showed that non-state actors, rather than states, now posed the greatest danger to the United States.[4] In its stead, other theories emerged to provide the rationale for policy. Immediately following the attacks, a view which gained wide currency was that the Islamist terrorism now threatening the United States, on its very own soil, was the outcome of a profound democratic deficit in the Middle East, for which the United States was partly responsible. Barring them from the possibility of participating in a democratic process, the argument went, deprived Islamist movements of the opportunity to become socialized in the habits and norms of peaceful political interaction. Repression and authoritarianism brutalized them and led them to desperate acts. It followed that democratisation was the solution to the terrorism problem.[5] The so-called 'participation-moderation' thesis - that the inclusion of Islamists in a democratic process would encourage them to move away from extremism and terrorism towards a more moderate interpretation of Islam – now served as a foundation for policy.[6]

Such views became popular across the political spectrum in Washington, both in policy circles and among major commentators, including liberal internationalists. But they became pivotal in the formation of US foreign policy with the ascendance of the so-called 'neo-conservatives' in the first administration of George W. Bush (2001-5).[7] The alleged causal connections between democracy and Islamist terrorism in the Middle East, similarly to the democratic peace theory, provided a pragmatic rationale for US democracy promotion in the Middle East in the post-9/11 period by linking democracy with the West's security. But to interpret the neo-conservative privileging of democracy in US foreign policy as yet another variant of *realpolitik* – as many

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4   Daniel Neep, 'Dilemmas of Democratization in the Middle East: The "Forward Strategy of Freedom"', *Middle East Policy*, 11 (3) 2004, p. 75.

5   See for example Jennifer L. Windsor, 'Promoting Democratization Can Combat Terrorism', *The Washington Quarterly*, 26 (3), Summer 2003.

6   For a thorough and critical discussion of the 'participation-moderation' thesis see Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. For a more sympathetic view of the thesis see Jennifer Noyon, *Islam, Politics and Pluralism: Theory and Practice in Turkey, Jordan, Tunisia and Algeria*, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2003 and Mohammed M. Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2003.

7   See for example: Timothy J. Lynch, '*Kristol Balls*: Neoconservative Visions of Islam and the Middle East', *International Politics*, 45 (2), March 2008. Neo-conservatism's dominance in the Bush administration rested on its key advocates such as Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz and Donald Rumsfeld.

did in the West, the Middle East and the world over[8] – is to misunderstand what drove their ideology.

The best framework for understanding the role played by neo-conservatism in post-9/11 US foreign policy is E. H. Carr's insight that a constant tension between realism and idealism runs through the making of foreign policy and the practice of International Relations generally.[9] In this instance, neo-conservatives were the idealists. Partial heirs to Ronald Reagan's anti-Soviet Cold War ideologues, Bush's neo-conservatives made the ideal of democracy the driving force of US foreign policy. Promoting democracy across the board was part of the global US mission and would assist in securing its primary position in the world. For neo-conservatives the world – and especially the fractious and problematic Middle East – must be reshaped in the US image. Once this was achieved, solutions to the problems the United States confronted in the Middle East, such as Islamist terrorism, would automatically, or at least relatively easily, emerge. Democracy was a panacea and its pursuit was tantamount to serving an exalted US interest.[10]

Many would balk at the description of neo-conservatives as idealists. However, despite the positive connotations it has acquired in common parlance, the term 'idealism' does not contain a judgment on the value or worth of the ideal in question. Rather, it describes a foreign policy conceived and conducted on the basis of ideas/ideals/ideologies, whatever these may be, as opposed to pragmatic, interest-based calculations. The description 'idealist' should not be taken to imply sincerity of belief either. There is no doubt that many neo-conservatives were hypocritical and used democracy as a façade to hide the pursuit of political and economic interests (which rested, for example, on the close association between the Bush administration and US oil companies). They also employed double-standards to excuse illegal and illiberal practices by themselves or their allies while castigating their enemies for being undemocratic. Nevertheless to interpret the neo-conservative foreign policy of the Bush administration purely in such cynical terms is to overlook its most important underlying impulse, which was the belief that spreading

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8   Alan Richards, ' "Modernity and Economic Development": The "new" American Messianism', *Middle East Policy*, 10 (3) 2003, p.70.

9   E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, 2nd edition, London: Macmillan, 1946.

10   Katerina Dalacoura, 'US Democracy Promotion in the Arab Middle East Since 9/11', *International Affairs*, 81 (5) 2005, pp. 974-5.

democracy was tantamount to securing the United States' paramount global position.

A series of policy initiatives to promote democracy in the Middle East followed the attacks of 9/11. The Bush administration claimed that its Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), of December 2002 epitomized the new approach and allocated more funds to democratic reform.[11] The Broader Middle East and North Africa Partnership Initiative (BMENA) announced in June 2004 at the G8 summit in Atlanta, Georgia included Pakistan and Afghanistan in the target 'broader' Middle East area and aimed to involve US allies as well as local partners in promoting democracy.[12] Democracy promotion was therefore supposed to become more central in diplomatic representations and pronouncements. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was justified in terms of preventing a terrorist threat against the United States and its allies but also, secondarily, democratizing the country.[13] A democratic Iraq would serve as a model for other countries and set off a 'tsunami' of reform in the region.[14]

The Impact of Democracy Promotion on the Middle East Region and the Reversal of US Policy

What was the impact of US democracy promotion policies on the Middle East post-9/11? International relations theory provides us with invaluable theoretical tools to assess it, by highlighting the tension between a cosmopolitan or universalist understanding of democracy and its promotion at an international level and a contrasting interpretation based on Gramscian notions of hegemony.

The starting point for supporters of democracy promotion in the West and in the Middle East – as in other regions – tends to be a cosmopolitan or universalist understanding of democracy. According to this view, the fundamentals

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11   Despite the furore which surrounded it, MEPI built on and in many instances replicated Clinton era democracy promotion initiatives, particularly in civil society projects.

12   International Crisis Group, *The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative: Imperilled at Birth* Middle East and North Africa Briefing June 2004, and Marina Ottaway & Thomas Carothers, *The Greater Middle East Initiative: Off to a False Start*, Carnegie Endowment Policy Report 29, March 2004.

13   For a critical discussion of the connections between democracy promotion and neo-conservative and liberal ideology as they applied to Iraq see Toby Dodge, 'Coming Face to Face with Bloody Reality: Liberal Common Sense and the Ideological Failure of the Bush Doctrine in Iraq', *International Politics*, 46 (2/3), 2009, pp. 253-75.

14   Marina Ottaway, Thomas Carothers, Amy Hawthorne, Daniel Brumberg, *Democratic Mirage in the Middle East*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Policy Brief 20, October 2002. On the Bush democracy promotion agenda in the Middle East generally see: Tamara Wittes & Sarah Yerkes, *What Price Freedom? Assessing the Bush Administration's Freedom Agenda*, Saban Centre for Middle East Policy, Analysis Paper 10, September 2006.

of democracy, as well as its underlying liberal principles, constitute part of an emerging international norm consensus and are applicable across the globe, irrespective of culture and religion and unhindered by political boundaries. More specifically in regards to the Middle East, advocates of democracy promotion oppose the view that democracy is inappropriate for Muslim societies or that it should take a different form from 'Western' democracy.

But not everyone shares the view that the impact of democracy promotion constitutes the benign diffusion of liberal norms. In the post-9/11 Middle East 'democracy' was often perceived as a Trojan horse for Western interests at the expense of local ones. Rather than a validation of common humanity across regions and civilizations, the promotion of democracy – similarly to the advocacy and imposition of neo-liberal economic reforms – was seen as part of the hegemonic project of the West and a means to perpetuate its political, economic, military and cultural domination. According to Larbi Sadiki: 'Perhaps the most negative aspect of the American promotion of democracy and human rights lies in its veiled imperialist motivation, both in the past during the height of the ideological standoff between communism and now as the United States further asserts its sole superpower status.'[15] Resting on a long-standing tradition of Third Worldism and anti-imperialism, such positions remained widespread and extremely popular in the Middle East (as well as among the European left[16]), and undermined the impact of democracy promotion policies. For example, liberal or civil society activists, even while sharing the cosmopolitan underpinnings of democracy promotion policies, would eschew open contact with US and other Western visiting or embassy officials and avoid, at least visibly, receiving material support from Western governments because it discredited them in the eyes of their fellow citizens as well as opening them to attacks from their own governments.

This perspective on democracy promotion shaped the way US policies were received in the Middle East and ultimately hindered their impact. The announcement of US policies of democracy promotion following 9/11 was greeted with profound skepticism in the region. One response was that the

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15   Larbi Sadiki, *The Search for Arab Democracy: Discourses and Counter-Discourses*, London: Hurst, 2002, p. 341.

16   David Mathieson and Richard Youngs, *Democracy Promotion and the European Left: Ambivalence Confused?* Fundación par alas Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior (FRIDE), Working Paper 29, December 2006, p. 12.

United States was being hypocritical and that the rhetoric on democracy hid underhanded and material motives – which would ultimately prevail and ensure continuous US support for Middle East dictators. This view was reinforced by the perception that, both on its own home ground, which included Guantanamo Bay, and abroad (for instance through supporting 'extraordinary rendition') the United States was sidelining civil liberties in the 'war on terror'. A second response, by the informed public and also regional governments, was of resentment at the US arrogance that it could be an agent of democracy and its interference in the internal affairs of local states. The lack of US credibility, due to its long history of involvement in the region on the side of Israeli suppression of Palestinian rights and authoritarian Middle Eastern states, came to haunt it in the post-9/11 period.[17]

US democracy promotion policies and/or the rhetoric that surrounded them did, however, set off an eager debate in the Middle East.[18] They also led to a brief and narrow opening of political space. For example, as the Mubarak regime realized it had to respond to growing US pressure for reform, it allowed some leeway for civil society and political organizations. The Kifaya ('Enough') movement, bringing together secular and Islamist protesters against the regime, emerged partly as a result of this relaxation. A desire to pander to the Americans was also a major factor in Mubarak's decision to amend article 76 of the Egyptian constitution to allow multi-party presidential elections for the first time.[19]

Despite these developments, however, the overall effect of US democracy promotion policies on the politics of the Middle East region was shallow and superficial. A number of grand conferences, such as the ones at Alexandria, Sana'a and Doha, held in 2004, brought Arab governments together with intellectuals and public figures to discuss reform. The declarations which ensued, although fervent, were too general and unspecific to be threatening to individual regimes.[20] Governments undertook a number of steps which

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17   Moncef Marzouki, "The US Project for Democracy in the Greater Middle East -Yes, But With Whom?" (Arabic), *Al-Hayat*, 23 February 2004; quoted in Gilbert Achcar, 'Fantasy of a Region that Does Not Exist: Greater Middle East: The US Plan', *Monde Diplomatique*, April 2004.

18   Amy Hawthorne, 'The New Reform Ferment', in Thomas Carothers and Marina Ottaway (eds.), *Uncharted Journey: Promoting Democracy in the Middle East*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005, pp. 57-77; Thomas Carothers, *A Better Way to Support Middle East Reform*, Carnegie Endowment Policy Brief 33, February 2005.

19   Paul Schemm, 'Grand Gesture', *Middle East International*, 745, 4 March 2005.

20   This was the criticism of Said el Naggar, among others. See Said el Naggar, 'The Alexandria Statement', *Al Wafd*, 25 April 2004 (unofficial translation from the Arabic by Robert Springborg and Ahmed Ezzelarab).

appeared substantial but were designed to deflect criticism by giving the impression of movement in the direction of reform. One example was the above mentioned constitutional amendment of the Egyptian presidential election process whose impact was to divert political debate and silence critics without permitting true pluralism in the presidential race.[21] Another was elections in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council countries to various assemblies and councils. These elections may have given the appearance of reform but were in fact extremely circumscribed events which barely touched authoritarian structures.

Even such pandering by Middle East governments to the US democracy promotion policy petered out by 2005-06. The election in December 2005 of eighty-eight Muslim Brotherhood (nominally independent) candidates to the Egyptian parliament and the electoral victory of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) in January 2006 in the Palestinian Occupied Territories brought home for the United States the fact that freer elections in the Middle East would likely mean gains for Islamist anti-Western opposition movements. Despite the 2005 national elections in Iraq, the bloodshed continued as the insurgency and inter-sectarian fighting took its toll. The perception of failure in Iraq led to US disillusionment with the democracy promotion project in the region as a whole. As the United States started to back-track from its commitment to democratic change, authoritarian Middle East regimes reversed tentative reforms and clamped down on the limited democratic openings they had allowed over the previous two to three years.[22]

The Obama Administration: Between Realism and Liberal Internationalism

Neo-conservatives were the dominant element within the Bush administration in the lead up to the Iraq war of 2003 and in the short years thereafter. However, their supremacy was constantly challenged in academic and policy circles as well as in public debate. More specifically, realist thinkers launched severe criticisms of the turn US foreign policy had taken under neo-conservative influence. They argued that a measured foreign policy in the Middle

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21 Author's interview with Hishem Kassem, Egyptian journalist and political activist, Cairo, November 2007.

22 Amira Howeidy, 'Democracy's Backlash', *Al Ahram Weekly*, http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/print/2006/785/eg3.htm 24 April 2006.

East which centred on promoting the national interest and avoided idealist crusades would be more effective in safeguarding US security. Such a policy may require collaboration with authoritarian regimes. Realist critics also warned that a rapid overhaul of Middle East politics was not only impossible but would create instability and weaken the US hand in the 'war on terror'.[23] The realist view tended to predominate in the State Department by contrast to the Pentagon's radical ideas. On an academic and public policy level, an article by Walt and Mearsheimer against the plan to invade Iraq epitomized the realist view and created much furor.[24]

As the many failures of US democracy promotion in the Middle East became apparent by 2005-6, realist views were gradually re-asserted against neo-conservative idealism in the Bush administration. This led to changes in personnel as Donald Rumsfeld lost his job as Secretary of Defense in November 2006 and Condoleezza Rice, an ambiguous figure but arguably more sympathetic to realism than neo-conservatism, became Secretary of State in January 2005. Furthermore, a subtle but unmistakeable return to the 'good governance' discourse in place of 'democracy' could be observed.[25] Democracy began to be associated, once again, with instability and war rather than being seen as a means of enhancing US security.[26] The power of democracy to defeat terrorism was questioned.[27] With such views came a reassertion of the 'culturalist' argument, in other words the view that the Middle East is culturally resistant to democracy.

The steps towards a more realist foreign policy, which were already taken by the Bush administration from the mid-2000s, meant that the arrival of the Barack Obama administration in January 2009 did not constitute such a dramatic break with the past in terms of US democracy promotion in the Middle

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23 For one such critical voice see F. Gregory Gause III, 'Can Democracy Stop Terrorism?', *Foreign Affairs*, Sept/Oct 2005; see also the remarks attributed to Gause in: *Democratizing the Middle East?* The Fares Center for Eastern Mediterranean Studies, Tufts University, Occasional Paper 2, 2006, pp. 41-1.

24   John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, 'An Unnecessary War', *Foreign Policy*, 134, 2003. For a continuation of these debates into the present time see: Joshua Muravchik, 'The Future is Neo-con' and Stephen M. Walt, 'The Shattered Kristol Ball', *National Interest online*, 3 September 2008 http://www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=19672 accessed 19-09-2008.

25 John Chipman, 'Democracy alone will not bring an end to tyranny', *Financial Times*, 29 September 2006.

26 Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder, 'Prone to Violence', *National Interest online*, 1 December 2005 http://www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=10876 accessed 18-05-2010.

27 F. Gregory Gause III, 'Democracy Alone Can't Defeat Terrorism', *International Herald Tribune*, 13-14 August 2005.

East region. The formation of the Obama Middle East policy, at least in its early phase, contained a realist streak. But Obama also arrived in office with a set of liberal internationalist principles which are part and parcel of the ideology of the mainstream of the Democratic Party. The Obama administration to some extent picked up where Clinton had left in 2000. These views were evident in Obama's speech to the Muslim world in Cairo in June 2009 which deserves to be quoted at some length:

> I know there has been controversy about the promotion of democracy in recent years, and much of this controversy is connected to the war in Iraq. So let me be clear: no system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other. That does not lessen my commitment, however, to governments that reflect the will of the people. Each nation gives life to this principle in its own way, grounded in the traditions of its own people. America does not presume to know what is best for everyone, just as we would not presume to pick the outcome of a peaceful election. But I do have an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. Those are not just American ideas, they are human rights, and that is why we will support them everywhere.[28]

Barack Obama's liberal internationalist principles attempt to steer a middle course between the Scylla of a realist abandonment of democracy and the Charybdis of promoting democracy as a neo-conservative ideal.[29] This middle course will always be problematic. A liberal internationalist approach promotes democratic principles within a universalist moral context for their own sake. However, the hard reality in international relations is that no government can ignore the national interest. The compromise between values

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28 Speech by President Barack Obama, Cairo University, Egypt, 04-06-2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09, accessed 18-05-2010.

29 Another variant of this middle way is Robin Wright's recently proposed concept of 'progressive realism', which reconciles the humanitarian aims of idealists with the powerful logic of the realists; accepts that the primary purpose of US foreign policy is to defend US interests; but also accepts some universalist values, a belief in 'progress', and the need for multilateral solutions to common problems. Robert Wright, 'In Search of a Foreign Policy', *International Herald Tribune*, 19 July 2006. See also, David Mepham, *Changing States: A Progressive Agenda for Political Reform in the Middle East*, London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 2006.

and interests will be partial and haphazard. A reconciliation of democracy promotion with US interests in the Middle East (or anywhere else) will always be a half-way house and no policy will be successful unless it takes stock of these limitations.

The starting point for balancing universalist principles and the national interest is for the United States to respect the rule of domestic and international law.[30] Improving the US record, as Obama has done, for instance by committing to closing down Guantanamo Bay and desisting from such infamous practices as 'extraordinary rendition', as well as coming down hard on the use of torture in all its forms, is a start. Michael Ignatieff's suggested balancing of civil liberties and national security – in a policy aiming for the 'lesser evil' - offers a pragmatic guide for action on these issues.[31] US and international law provides guidance in the dilemma between stability and security in US relations with allied governments in the Middle East. For example, these laws distinguish, even if imperfectly, between the selling of arms for defence, which is allowed, and for internal repression, which is not.[32] UN Security Council resolutions provide an excellent, and indeed, the only viable foundation for adjudication in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the words of Marina Ottaway of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace:

> What the United States could offer Arab countries as a quid pro quo in a serious process of promoting political reform is an agreement about the principles, international laws, and conventions that all parties are committed to respecting. Arab countries have long complained that the United States violates many international principles in its Middle East policies. Inevitably, much of the criticism centers on U.S. policies concerning Israel; for example, alleged American tolerance of Israeli transgressions of international laws regarding refugees or

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30 The United States has been criticised for ignoring international law and in particular human rights principles most trenchantly by Kenneth Roth, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch. See, for instance, Kenneth Roth, 'The Wrong Way to Combat Terrorism', *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 14 (1) 2007, pp. 263-72.

31 Michael Ignatieff, *The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in an Age of Terror*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005

32 "Traditional US arms export policy, based on US legislation and regulations, executive orders and Administration policy statements, states that US arms exports should not undermine long-term security and stability, weaken democratic movements, support military coups, escalate arms races, exacerbate existing conflicts, cause arms build-ups in unstable regions, or be used to commit human rights abuses." Rachel Stohl and Suzette Grillot, *The International Arms Trade*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006, p. 34 Despite this, a US government investigation found that the Israeli air force had used US-supplied cluster bombs against civilian targets in 2006, violating the conditions of sale, p. 50.

the conduct of occupying powers. But Arab governments also question the U.S. interpretation of the applicability of the Geneva conventions to Iraq or Guantanamo and accuse Washington of applying different standards to different countries—for example, holding President Omar Bashir accountable for killings in Sudan but seeking to bury the Goldstone report alleging Israeli war crimes during the war in Gaza or criticizing Arab countries for not holding fair elections, while rejecting the legitimacy of Hamas's victory in Palestine in an election widely deemed fair.[33]

As Ottaway implies, a consistent defence of civil liberties by the United States across the board would also provide the foundation for engaging Islamists in a political dialogue. There are no easy policy options for the United States when many Islamist movements remain banned in their respective countries. There is no obvious solution to the Hamas conundrum when the latter continues to refuse to renounce terrorism, to honour past treaties and agreements and to recognise the existence of Israel while having been, on the other hand, the democratic choice of the Palestinian majority in 2006. These are political issues as much as legal ones. However, the United States must protest when the civil liberties of Islamist terrorist suspects, and Islamists in general, are violated and not focus solely on the persecution of secular opposition forces. High rhetoric on democracy must be replaced by its consistent defence by all levels of diplomatic staff and other officials.[34]

Conclusion: Identity and Democracy in the Context of US Policy in the Middle East

Democracy promotion has been a significant element in US policy towards the Middle East since the end of the Cold War. It continued to be so, even after the passing of its peak with the neo-conservative phase in US policy following the attacks of 9/11. The debate on democracy has played a role in the relationship between the United States and Middle East in multiple ways. It has contributed to the dynamic shaping of identities between the various players which is highlighted by a constructivist approach to foreign policy and international relations.

This contribution has not always been benign or positive. The United States

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33 Marina Ottaway, *Middle East Democracy Promotion is not a One-way Street*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Brief 82, November 2009, p. 7.

34 Michelle Dunne, 'Integrating Democracy into the U.S. Policy Agenda', Carothers and Ottaway (eds.), *Uncharted Journey*, p. 220.

has often appeared in the role of the 'carrier' or vehicle of democratic values in the Middle East. Irrespective of the reality of US policy in the region – marked by support for Israeli suppression of Palestinian rights and the authoritarian practices of Arab regimes – the self-perception by a large part of US policy makers and the American public is that they are the champions of democracy and liberal values there. This self-perception is constantly reinforced by the position increasingly assumed by the Middle East – and the Islamic world more generally – as the 'Other' against which 'the West' defines itself.[35]

Generalization on such issues is always problematic because it relies on anecdotal evidence, but it seems obvious to this observer that the opposite reaction is played out in the Middle East on many levels. The view that the United States is using 'democracy' as an instrument to further its own interests leads to a sense of perpetual grievance, fuelled by the idea that the Middle East and the Islamic world more generally are invaded and 'violated' by Western culture. The perception that democracy is part and parcel of a US hegemonic project has damaged its prospects in the region. It also leads to a distancing from the United States and the values of democracy which it purports to stand for. As the Middle East and the Islamic world become increasingly defined as everything that the Western 'Other' is not, the 'clash of civilisations' becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

A return to liberal internationalist principles starting from the respect of international human rights norms is the only way for the Obama administration to break away from this impasse. The marriage between principles and the national interest will always be unsatisfactory and fractious but it is the best available. Combating terrorism and extricating itself from Iraq and Afghanistan in an honourable manner which does not violate its national interests is the US priority in the region. So is resolving its confrontation with Iran and its many state and non-state allies. Allowing the space for democracy in the pursuit of US interests in the region, while avoiding the raw pursuit of power or collapsing principles and interests in the neo-conservative fashion, is the only sensible way forward for the Obama administration.

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35   Corinna Mullin, *Political Islam and the United States' New 'Other': An Analysis of the Discourse on Political Islam (2001-2007)*, Unpublished PhD thesis, London School of Economics, 2008.

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