

Domino Democracy: Challenges to U.S. Foreign Policy in a Post-Saddam Middle East



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*M*ore than a year after the invasion of Iraq by the United States, it is still unclear exactly why the United States decided to invade in March 2003 to overthrow the Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein. In retrospect, it is obvious that many of the reasons that the United States gave were not, in fact, the main motivations for attacking Iraq. From a policy perspective, analyzing motivations may appear to represent water under the bridge. However, the motivations behind the U.S. attack were, and continue to be, closely linked not only to thinking about American policy in Iraq but to its broader policy in the Middle East as a whole. A better understanding of the thinking that shaped American policy in Iraq not only provides insights into why the U.S. government is experiencing such difficulties in achieving its policy objectives in Iraq but also whether American policy for the region is based on sound assumptions. What were the reasons why the United States invaded Iraq, and what do they tell us about the strengths and weaknesses of American foreign policy in the Middle East?

WHAT DOES THE UNITED STATES REALLY MEAN BY “DEMOCRATIZATION”?

My thesis is that the invasion of Iraq constituted the first step in a larger and audacious process of reshaping the political and economic terrain of the Middle East. I refer to this process as “domino democracy” because it envisions the transformation of Iraq into a democratic polity with open markets and a technocratically and non-ideologically oriented government—a model that the United States would like to see replicated in other Middle Eastern states, particularly Iraq’s neighbors. While no one can dispute a foreign policy objective that aims to encourage democratic governance,

the real question is what the United States means by democratization of the region and how the policy of domino democracy will affect the citizenry of countries in question. For many Middle Easterners, the stated American goal of promoting democracy in the region is viewed with deep suspicion. They point to past American support for many authoritarian regimes, including that of Saddam Hussein during the 1980s, failure to support Palestinian reformists in their efforts to create a Palestinian state based on norms of political participation and transparency, and failure to bring pressure on autocratic monarchies such as Saudi Arabia to implement democratic reforms. Many Arab and non-Arab analysts also view domino democracy as a cover for extending U.S. economic influence in the region, particularly in oil-rich states such as Iraq. In addition, large contracts were awarded in Iraq, often without a bidding process, to firms such as Halliburton, Bechtel, Parsons E&C, and WorldCom. These corporations were closely linked to Vice President Cheney and other members of the Bush administration. The contracts reinforced the view that our foreign policy was seeking to enhance American economic power in the region.

The influence of economic interests is a particularly important question because domino democracy is intimately linked to a second component of recent U.S. policy, namely the spread of market economies. While opening new markets can have many positive repercussions for the Middle East, it can also, as has been evident elsewhere, such as in Russia, Eastern Europe and China, lead to great discrepancies of wealth between economic and political elites and the populace at large. The adverse effects caused by market reforms and structural adjustments may alienate large segments of the populace, including intellectuals and the nationalistically minded middle classes, thereby providing an opening for supporters of authoritarian rule to mobilize coalitions against political and economic change.

WHY DID THE UNITED STATES INVADE IRAQ?

Before examining the inner workings of domino democracy, it is useful to examine the arguments that have been offered to explain why the United States invaded Iraq. The stated reason for the invasion was that it constituted part of a larger global war on terrorism, especially because Iraq was said to possess weapons of mass destruction that could be used in military combat. Indeed, arguments were made that Iraq could mobilize and introduce its weapons of mass destruction into combat in a very short period of time.

In retrospect, the concern that Saddam's regime had a significant military capability to use weapons of mass destruction appears to have been far-fetched. While the Iraqi regime may have possessed plans or even the capacity to produce such weapons, it did not have the stockpiles or delivery systems that would have made

these weapons systems a meaningful threat. To date, no weapons of mass destruction have been discovered despite vigorous efforts by the United States to locate these weapons systems after occupying Iraq. In light of the extensive debate that developed after the war in Iraq was officially declared to have ended in May 2003, and especially in light of the escalating American casualties, the continued problem of establishing political and economic stability in Iraq, and the ongoing debates of whether the Bush administration manipulated intelligence about Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction to justify invading the country, an answer to this question has gained significance. If the stated reason for the invasion was to remove the Ba'athist regime's weapons of mass destruction capacity, and this turned out not to be the real motivating factor, then many Americans can raise the question of whether the continuing human and material losses in Iraq serve the national interest.

Another argument that was offered to explain the invasion was that the United States coveted Iraqi oil. Many Iraqis came to this conclusion after realizing that, in addition to Saddam Hussein's Republican Palace, the United States only stationed troops outside Iraq's Ministry of Oil after having entered Baghdad in April 2003. Those who have claimed that the March–April 2003 war was influenced by concerns for Iraqi oil have focused on Iraq's position as one of the world's largest oil producers, possessing the second largest proven reserves after Saudi Arabia, and on the close ties between Vice President Cheney and other Bush administration figures and the American oil and natural gas industries.

Despite its intuitive attraction as an explanation, the desire to control Iraq's oil industry does not seem to have been the main impetus for the American invasion. It will take at least three years and probably closer to five years for Iraqi oil production to reach pre-1991 Gulf War levels. Further, much of the money that will be generated from future oil sales will need to be dedicated to reparation payments that Iraq still owes Kuwait as well as to outstanding debts owed Russia and other countries from the Iran–Iraq war of 1980–1988. Given the sensitivity of the United States to accusations, even before the invasion, that it was trying to appropriate Iraqi oil, it does not seem likely that the American government will attempt to control Iraq's oil industry. Despite the extensive advantages that they give to foreign investors, investment laws that were promulgated by the Iraqi Governing Council, the transitional government with limited powers under the United States occupation authority, specifically exempted the oil sector from privatization and foreign ownership.

Finally, the failure of the United States to cite the extensive human rights abuses of Saddam Hussein and his Ba'athist regime as factors leading to the invasion rules this out as well as a major motivation for the invasion. Despite the fact that human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch, the United Nations, the Iraqi National Congress, and INDICT have been documenting the widespread use of torture, execution, and imprisonment without trial for an extensive period of time, no U.S. administration had made this issue a core component of American foreign policy in

the Middle East. Clearly, the Ba'ath Party's abysmal human rights record, which some would argue verged on genocide, did not play a significant role in the United States' motivations for invading Iraq.

If none of these three reasons—weapons of mass destruction, oil, or human rights—were critical in leading the United States to depose the Iraqi Ba'athist regime, what did the United States hope to accomplish by toppling Saddam Hussein? The main motivation for the United States invasion of Iraq, I would argue, was the centerpiece of a bold vision to remake the political map of the Middle East. In this vision, the destruction of the Iraqi Ba'athist regime represented the first step in a process of creating democratic governments where authoritarian regimes formerly held sway and replacing inefficient and corrupt state-run public sectors with market economies.

DOMINO DEMOCRACY: THE UNDERLYING AMERICAN POLICY

I call this “domino democracy” because the United States' actions in Iraq were viewed as setting in motion a ripple effect in which neighboring Iran and Syria and possibly Saudi Arabia would feel pressured to institute the types of political and economic reforms commensurate with an American vision of the new Middle East. With the removal of Israel's two most threatening enemies, namely the Ba'athist regimes in Iraq and Syria, domino democracy would likewise have a salutary impact on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. It would send a strong message to Palestinian rejectionists, both Islamists and secularists, that their policies have no future, marginalize Palestine National Authority President Yasir Arafat once and for all, and set in motion the political forces that would replace him with a pro-Western government that was democratic and transparent.

The vision of a democratic Middle East with polities devoted to strengthening the institutions of civil society and expanding opportunities for economic growth appears attractive on its face. Few could oppose the goal of an arc of governments stretching from Palestine to Iran that functioned according to the norms of political participation, transparency, and public accountability.

Nevertheless, there are at least two questions that need to be raised in assessing the process of implementing domino democracy. First, what was the United States' vision of this new political configuration of the Middle East, and how realistic was it to assume that this goal could be achieved? Second, to what extent did the United States understand how to implement this process? Finally, depending on how this process was implemented, what could we expect the impact to be on the countries that were the target of this policy? Put differently, to what extent was the United States *genuinely committed* to the stated goal of this policy in Iraq and neighboring countries, which was to help promote democratic transitions that would provide

genuine autonomy and widespread political participation to citizens who had been freed from rule by authoritarian regimes?

As has often been argued since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the Ba'athist regime, it was clearly more difficult to win the peace than it was to win the combat phase of the war. In other words, domino democracy could not be implemented through a military strategy alone. Indeed, the very idea of establishing democratic polities grounded in strong civil societies is based on the assumption that the populace of the respective countries in question need to be actively involved in creating the transition to democracy. The problems that plagued the ostensibly democratic constitutional monarchies that Great Britain and France imposed during their colonial rule in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East following the Ottoman Empire's collapse at the end of World War I decisively demonstrated that democracy is only as strong as the participation of citizens in its daily functioning.

What, then, were the assumptions underlying the notion of domino democracy? How viable were these assumptions, and what hypotheses about the future of Iraq and its neighbors logically flowed from these assumptions? If the assumptions were flawed, what could be done to rectify these flaws so that a democratic Middle East might still become a reality? If the United States was not truly committed to the policy that it publicly espoused, or was unwilling to significantly adjust its strategic and economic interests in the region should they run counter to the American policy of democratic change, what could be done to pressure the American government to live up to its commitments?

To think through these issues, I have chosen five case studies: Iraq, Iran, Syria, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia, through which to examine the assumptions underlying the concept of domino democracy.

Before proceeding to an analysis of the individual cases, I would argue that American foreign policy in the Middle East has suffered from a number of conceptual fallacies that make the prospect of domino democracy's success highly doubtful. The first I would call the *fallacy of homologous structure*. By this, I mean that all the countries that the United States hoped to see turn toward democracy were viewed as emerging from the same historical and structural configurations and as responding to the same imperatives in their projected transition to democracy. That is, it was assumed that the populations of Iraq, Iran, Syria, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia all desired the same outcomes—namely, a transition to a democratic polity that was structured along lines much like that of the United States, with limited state interference in the economy and a dominant role for the private sector in economic growth. This fallacy, which ignored the different historical, cultural, and, hence structural configurations of the respective polities in question, was related to two derivative fallacies. One was the *presentist fallacy*, by which I mean the lack of attention to the specific histories of the individual nation-states of the Middle East, while

the other was the *fallacy of lack of sensitivity to cultural specificity*, by which I mean ignoring the importance of incorporating the impact of local cultural heritages in the future political development of those countries the United States would like to see turn to democracy.

Iran

To elucidate these two concepts, we can examine the case for democracy in Iran. Two decisive victories in sequential presidential elections by Mohammed Khatami, himself a cleric, the capturing of 75 percent of the seats in the Iranian *majlis*, or parliament, by reformers, the rejection of the Khomeini legacy by the overwhelming majority of Iranians under age twenty-five, and the ongoing student demonstrations calling for democratic reforms that have occurred in Iran all point to a country with a strong civil society and democratic leanings. The existence of a vibrant and internationally acclaimed film industry is another indicator of a strong civil society, understood here in associational terms, that undergirds democratic politics in Iran, despite the efforts of institutions created under the Khomeini regime, especially the repressive and unelected Council of Guardians, to suppress it.

However, while large numbers of Iranians reject Khomeini's stamp on the 1978–1979 Islamic Revolution, they are equally adamant about not accepting a return to the type of polity that existed under the Western-oriented regime of the former Shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. Interestingly, many of the young Islamist radicals who participated in the seizure of the American Embassy in Teheran in 1979, holding Americans hostage for 440 days, are now in the vanguard of demanding democratic reforms. Apart from the highly unfortunate characterization by the Bush administration of Iran as part of the “axis of evil,” the majority of the country desires a transition to democracy. Unfortunately, U.S. policymakers have shown little or no sensitivity to the desire of many Iranians to retain a political system in which Islamic values play an important societal role alongside a robust and pluralist democracy, a flourishing press, and creativity in intellectual and artistic expression. That the United States has made little effort to understand the role of political culture in the possible transition of specific Middle Eastern countries to democracy is yet another indicator of a “one-size-fits-all” approach to political change in the Middle East. That conservatives in the Bush administration such as Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, and Douglas Feith, who articulated the policy of domino democracy, said so little about the paradox of Iran—the quintessential example of an Islamic revolution that produced strong democratic tendencies, only kept in check by the Council of Guardians, the secret police, and the Khomeinist militia, the *Basij*—was indicative of the lack of comprehension of the larger sociopolitical forces shaping the contemporary politics of the Middle East.

Iraq

In neighboring Iraq, the role of religion in politics has differed substantially from in Iran despite the fact that the Shi'a constitute the majority of the population in both Iraq and Iran. The Iraqi *marja'ia*, or Shi'i clergy, lost much of its political power after World War I during which it assumed an important if not central role in opposing Great Britain's occupation of Iraq after it invaded the country in 1915. The *marja'ia* played a central and largely ecumenical role during the June through October 1920 Revolution by mobilizing opposition to Great Britain's refusal to create a democratic government and calling for unity among all Iraq's ethnic and confessional groups including the Jews, Christians, and Muslims. After many members of the politically minded clergy were arrested or expelled by the British during the 1920s, its role in politics was greatly diminished.

With Shi'a largely excluded from the state bureaucracy and the military by the majority Sunni-Arab-dominated Hashemite monarchy, which the British imposed through a rigged referendum in August 1921, many Shi'a became teachers, intellectuals, and political activists who turned to secular parties such as the Iraqi Communist Party, the Ahali Group, and its successor, the National Democratic Party, and even the Ba'ath Party after it was founded in Iraq in 1952.

Among the Shi'i *marja'ia*, cleavages developed in which older and more traditional leaders rejected mixing religion and politics. The rationalist tradition of Iraqi Shi'i scholarship, which characterized much of the Iraqi *marja'ia*'s writings, often was not commensurate with an activist role in politics. Further, many members of the clergy stood in competition with their Iranian colleagues who resented the greater prominence of the Iraqi Shi'i shrine cities of Karbala', al-Najaf, and al-Kathimayn.

For many members of the Shi'i *marja'ia*, mixing religion and politics signified greater influence of Iranian Shi'a in Iraq's internal affairs. On the other hand, because many Sunni Arabs identified the mixing of religion and politics with increased Shi'i influence in public life, Sunni Arabs also refrained from supporting religious-based political movements. Among the Kurds, tribal politics has always trumped religious-political movements. Thus, unlike Iran, the outcome in Iraq was the playing down of the role of religion in politics, and the lack of development of any serious religious-political movements in Iraqi politics.

While both Iran and Iraq are predominantly Shi'i countries, Shi'a in Iraq means something very different from Shi'a in Iran where the clergy have maintained a much stronger corporate sense of political identity since the late 1800s. Having played a major role in the 1906 Constitutional Revolution, the Shi'i clergy became the main focal point of opposition to the regimes of Reza Shah after 1923 and then his son, Mohammed Reza Shah, after World War II, until the latter was overthrown in 1979. Nevertheless, when faced with a secular nationalist regime led by Mohammed Mossadegh, the clergy helped the CIA and the Iranian army overthrow him in 1953 and return Mohammed Reza Shah to power.

In 1963, the Iranian clergy led a major uprising against the Shah's regime and his efforts to implement the so-called White Revolution, which had been promoted by the Kennedy administration. The weaker role of Iraq's Shi'i clergy in nationalist politics compared with the much stronger one in Iran helps explain in part the inclination of many Iranians toward incorporating Islamic norms in modern political life and discourse. In other words, in Iran the clergy has been viewed as a more vigorous political actor in protecting the national interest against foreign intrusion, compared with a more apolitical clergy in Iraq that has not played such an activist role.

The Shah's excessive cultural affinity with the West, and his lack of sensitivity to the traditions of his subjects, likewise created a strong suspicion of the motives of Western countries, especially the United States, which backed the Shah and his repressive policies and free market orientation. Although Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath Party were also extremely repressive, they always maintained much closer ties to popular and tribal culture in Iraq. While many Iraqis opposed Saddam's policies, there was never the view of the Ba'ath in Iraq that it was culturally alien in the way in which the Pahlavi monarchy was viewed as such in Iran.

Thus, the United States' lack of historical perspective fails to realize that the different pathways that have led various Middle Eastern countries to potentially engage in a transition to democracy have different roots and thus require different forms of analysis. The fact that the United States has often been responsible for thwarting democracy in the past behooves American foreign policy makers to be especially sensitive to these historical determinants when trying to promote political change. This historical backdrop requires such policymakers to realize that they need to offer concrete policies that detail the ways in which they expect to implement democracy rather than limiting themselves to broad statements in support of democratic transitions. Otherwise, United States policy runs the risk of simply being seen as replicating what are viewed as the disingenuous policies of the past—calling for democratic reforms while simultaneously supporting dictatorial regimes.

Another example of the American lack of historical perspective was the position the U.S. government took toward the reconstruction of the Iraqi economy. L. Paul Bremer, the United States interim administrator of Iraq, unequivocally called for privatization of the Iraqi economy, including the oil industry. Bremer and most American policymakers seemed unaware of the political significance to Iraqis of state control over their oil resources.

The fact that the Iraqi oil sector was under foreign control from the inception of oil production shortly before World War I, and that foreign concessionaires paid Iraq minimal royalties until the Hashimite monarchy was forced, through national pressures, to renegotiate these royalties in 1952, seemed lost on the Bush administration. As far as I know, no prominent member of the Bush administration ever ac-

knowledgeable in public the symbolic significance of the oil industry to Iraqi nationalist sensitivities. After the leader of the 1958 Revolution, General Abd al-Karim Qasim, began the process of nationalizing the oil industry in 1961, the process was finally completed by the Ba'athist regime in 1972.

Countless foreign oil experts have commented on the incredible effort that Iraq's state or public-sector oil engineers, technicians, and workers made during the period between the 1991 Gulf War and the March 2003 U.S. invasion to keep Iraqi oil flowing in relatively large quantities, despite the lack of spare parts and pressures placed upon them by the Ba'athist regime to increase output. To automatically assume that private firms will be able to produce oil more efficiently than the current state-controlled industry fails to consider the political history behind national control of Iraq's oil resources, the high level of efficiency that public employees demonstrated in keeping Iraq's oil flowing during an extremely difficult period, and the ability of public-sector managers to maintain labor peace through establishing bonds of trust with the oil workers that would not necessarily be in place should private—that is, American and other Western—firms assume control of production.

Syria

In neighboring Syria, large numbers of the educated classes are increasingly cognizant of the degree to which their own Ba'athist regime's authoritarianism and nepotism are preventing the country from reaching its economic potential, thereby causing the country to fall farther and farther behind other countries in the region in technological development and economic output. This is particularly true in relation to Syria's arch-enemy, Israel, with which it has been engaged in a protracted struggle for more than fifty years. However, Syria's neighbor to the north, Turkey, which is also pressing forward with economic reforms, might become a regional economic powerhouse, especially if it is accepted into the European Union. If neighboring Iraq is able to complete a transition to democracy and reestablish its oil industry, Syria would face neighbors with powerful economies whose citizens would enjoy much higher standards of living and greater political freedoms, highlighting still further Syria's stagnant economy and political repression. That Bashar al-Asad, the current president of Syria, headed a national organization for computer literacy before becoming president is an indicator of the extent to which the younger generation of Syrians is aware of the country's underdevelopment.

The United States does not seem to have an established plan for bringing about political change in Syria, having publicly ruled out a military invasion along the Iraqi model. American policy pronouncements indicate that the United States will continue to put pressure on Syria, especially economic pressure, in an effort

to have it soften its opposition to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, to cease hosting organizations within its borders that the United States considers to be terrorist, and to allow Syrians greater openings for free expression and criticism of the government. The American government has also given tacit blessing to congressional efforts to pass the Syria Accountability Act as another means of pressuring the Asad regime to loosen its political and economic hold on the country. This bill would monitor whether the Syrian government is making efforts to rid the country of organizations that the United States characterizes as terrorist.¹

Here again, U.S. foreign policy is wanting. U.S. policy toward Syria is indicative of another fallacy, namely the failure to recognize structural interdependence of the countries in which the United States hopes to promote democratic change. This fallacy fails to recognize the extent to which change in one country is dependent on events occurring in one or more of the other countries of the region. Hence, domino democracy, while itself reflective of a goal for the region as a whole, does not situate the major players in the process into any type of integrated model of political change. Instead, the United States seems to be applying a generalized model to all the countries without realizing that the path to reaching democratic governance differs radically in each case.

In the Syrian case, it seems clear that Hafiz al-Asad's younger son, Bashar—not his father's original choice to lead Syria—seeks to bring about meaningful political and economic change, perhaps along the lines of what Mikhail Gorbachev attempted to implement in the Soviet Union in its waning days.² However, Bashar is still surrounded by many of his father's former aides, such as Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam, who strongly oppose any reforms that might threaten their political and economic positions within Syria's state apparatus.

Ba'ath Party apparatchiks who oppose reforms possess an effective tool to stymie any change by constantly pointing to Israel's refusal to alter its settlement policies in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip or to enter into serious negotiations about returning the Golan Heights to Syria. The United States' failure to realize the extent to which change in Syria is directly linked to changes in Israeli policy toward settlements, the Palestinians, and the Golan Heights make its pronouncements about bringing political and economic change in Syria almost meaningless. Indeed, bringing more pressure to bear on Syria within the context of little or no change on the part of Israel and its policies toward the peace process only strengthens the Ba'athist hardliners who argue that Syria is being asked to make major concessions while the Israelis are making none. The implications of the notion of structural interdependence in relation to domino democracy is clear. Unless the United States goes beyond bland statements opposing continued Israeli settlement in the West Bank and Gaza, not only does it strengthen the hands of Ba'athist hardliners, but it potentially undermines the reformers such as Bashar al-Asad, who can be accused of being tools of the United States in working to bring

about change but receiving no benefits that serve Syrian national interests in return.

Palestine

Palestinian society represents another possible example of a move toward democratic governance. During extensive interviewing in the summer of 1999, just before the recent al-Aqsa *intifada*, or uprising, I was struck by the fact that virtually every conversation with Palestinians began with a litany of complaints about Yasir Arafat. These complaints centered on the extensive corruption that pervaded the Palestine National Authority and its use by Arafat to repress dissent and as his privy purse. Only later in these conversations did the conflict with Israel enter into the discussion, indicating that Palestinians viewed internal issues of democracy and transparency as of greater importance than the struggle with Israel.

Nevertheless, the virtually complete subordination of the Palestinian economy to Israel after 1993, and the *carte blanche* given by the United States and Israel to Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization in suppressing all institutions of civil society that were established by the United National Leadership after the onset of the first *intifada* in 1987, seriously undermined the possibilities for a transition to democracy. The decision by Israel to subordinate the Palestinian economy to its own financial interests helped Arafat and his PLO supporters tighten their hold on power because, in an economy that was weak and characterized by high unemployment, their control over the distribution of jobs and benefits became critical to Palestinians seeking to sustain themselves and their families.

The widespread corruption in the newly created Palestine National Authority after 1993 under Arafat's leadership, and the suppression of largely secular organizations that might challenge Arafat, namely those that were formed during the 1987–1993 *intifada*, provided a space for expanded influence of radical Islamist organizations such as Hamas. The failure of the United States to place meaningful constraints on continued Israeli settlement of the West Bank and Gaza served to increase the influence of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and other smaller Islamist organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

As terror attacks on Israel began to mount during the mid and late 1990s, Israel responded by destroying much of the Palestine National Authority's police and security infrastructure, making it even harder for the PNA to control Islamist organizations. The current American administration's decision to sever ties with Arafat was ironic, because the United States had overseen his installation in power in 1993 and supported his dismantling of those secular institutions of civil society created after the 1987 *intifada* that might have facilitated transition to democracy. In retrospect, this was a deeply flawed policy, the consequences of which were only realized later.

Saudi Arabia

The Saudi case differs dramatically from the other four cases. The most powerful monarchy in the Middle East, the Saudi regime has created great resentment by excluding from all political and economic decisionmaking the highly educated Saudis who are not members of the royal family. Often having spent considerable effort acquiring education abroad or within Saudi Arabia itself, this group resents its exclusion from participation in public life despite having made major contributions to the country's economic development. This resentment is fueled by the fact that many members of the Saudi royal family enjoy political and economic power merely due to their lineage and contribute little to the development of the country.

Given Saudi Arabia's position as the world's largest source of proven oil reserves (although that may be surpassed by Iraq in the future), its central position within the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, its strategic significance, and the large number of lucrative contracts it provides American firms, it is not difficult to understand why the United States has been reluctant to exert significant pressure on the Saudi monarchy. Indeed, of all the countries in which the United States would like to see a democratic transition, Saudi Arabia has received the least pressure to enact major political and social reforms. This is true despite the Saudi regime's policy of providing funds to radical Islamist organizations in Pakistan, Egypt, and elsewhere that adhere to Saudi Arabia's very puritanical Wahabi interpretation of Islam, in an effort to divert attention away from the monarchy's close ties to the United States and the West. Until serious pressure is brought to bear on Saudi Arabia, the one case in which the United States has significant influence, there will be little hope for reforms and the heightened probability of the greater strength of Islamist organizations in reaction to the regime's continued corruption and repression.

INTERNAL TRAJECTORIES AND EXTERNAL EVENTS

Because the structural and historical imperatives of Iran, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia are very different, I am suggesting that a transition to democratic politics in each country will not necessarily follow the same trajectory. At the same time, none of these countries can be viewed in isolation from the other, as events in one shape events in the other. We need to underline, then, that each country needs to be viewed in terms of its own internal political trajectory while realizing that its policies are simultaneously constrained by events in the region external to it. Unless United States policy in the Middle East region can grasp these two principles, it cannot expect to be successful, much less bring about significant democratic change in the region.

PREREQUISITES FOR DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS

I would like to suggest further five principles that the United States should follow as prerequisites to the implementation of democratic transitions in Iraq and the broader Middle East.

Admission of American Mistakes

First, the American government should initiate a “political cultural offensive” that seeks to win the hearts and minds of politically influential actors in the Middle East, especially the educated middle classes, the lower middle classes, and working classes that aspire to upward mobility. Key to this process is building trust among these groups, through confronting a history of very costly policy decisions by post-World War II American administrations toward Middle Eastern governments and their peoples. Specifically, the United States needs to publicly admit that many of the policies that it followed in the past in the Middle East were flawed. In 2003, President Bush acknowledged that our past policies have not brought about democratic change in the Middle East. That acknowledgment was a step in the right direction. However, we also need to recognize that many in the region view such statements with suspicion as long as they are not accompanied by a parallel recognition that United States support for authoritarian regimes was a mistake and one that it will avoid in the future.

The United States needs to especially focus on the history of American foreign policy in the countries in which it seeks to encourage development of democratic governance. Whether Nuri al-Sa’id and the Hashimite monarchy in Iraq prior to 1958 or the Takriti Ba’athist regime of Saddam Hussein during the 1980s, the shah in Iran or the monarchy in Saudi Arabia, the United States needs to realize that the educated middle classes, those most amenable to supporting democratic transitions, have a historical memory that needs to be taken seriously. The educated middle classes are justifiably skeptical about the intentions and commitments of the United States. They need to be given not only verbal assurances but the specifics of *how* the United States expects to encourage authoritarian rulers to move to democratic rule and, once a democratic transition has been made, how democratic governance will be sustained.

One example of admitting past mistakes would be our support for the Shah of Iran, whose highly repressive regime engaged in serious human-rights abuses and attempted to create an excessively Western cultural orientation for Iran that excluded most Iranians from their national Islamic heritage. The United States’ calls for democracy in the Middle East will only ring true if we acknowledge the extent to which we followed flawed policies in the past. While acknowledging flawed policies in the past

might initially provide anti-American grist for the mill, the long-term impact will be to engender greater respect for the United States in the Middle East as citizens of the region realize that we are not an arrogant superpower but rather one willing to acknowledge past mistakes and make a significant break with them.

Removal of Israeli Settlements

Second, the United States needs to act immediately to demonstrate that it is serious about finding a solution to the Israeli–Palestinian dispute. For many Middle Easterners, United States policy toward the Israeli–Palestinian dispute has heavily favored Israel, despite more recent statements supporting the creation of a Palestinian state. Unlike Middle Easterners, who possess a long historical memory, American policymakers still do not seem to have grasped the extent to which the European colonial regnum in the Middle East is still part of the region’s collective memory. While it is true, as Western analysts sometimes point out, that references to colonialism reflect a “politics of victimization,” European colonial rule had a very real and traumatic impact on large parts of the Middle East. Whether American policymakers are willing to admit it or not, many Middle Easterners view the creation of Israel as an extension of British and French colonial rule, only now under U.S. auspices.

Despite the hostility to Israel and the Israeli–American alliance, under the right circumstances I believe that a large percentage of Middle Easterners would be willing to live in peace with Israel. Among Israelis, a large percentage, sometimes a majority, have indicated in numerous public opinion polls that they would be willing to remove most if not all settlements if that would lead to a lasting peace with the Palestinians.³ To achieve this end, the United States should begin by calling for an immediate end to Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. These settlements are not in the military, economic, or political interests of either the United States or Israel. They also cause the Palestinian people great hardships, whether through the confiscation of Palestinian land to build settlements, through building so-called bypass roads around settlements that disrupt Palestinian economic and social life, or by Israel’s erecting the so-called “security fence” that ostensibly is meant to prevent further suicide bombings but which seems more designed to physically separate settlements from surrounding Palestinian towns and villages, often to the economic detriment of the latter.

An unequivocal condemnation of increased settlement activity and an articulation of consequences should it continue, such as the withdrawal of loan guarantees to the Israeli government, is central to the type of structural approach that demonstrates an understanding of the interdependence of the many impediments to creating democratic rule in the Middle East. Not only would the condemnation of settlements in the West Bank and Gaza conform to international law under which they are illegal, but it would send a message to Israel’s neighbors, whose support we seek for democratic transitions, that we have become more even-handed in our approach

to the region. Once this perception is achieved, the United States would find that groups with which it hopes to create alliances would be more sympathetic to its goals. Conversely, this policy would undermine and undercut the ability of hard-liners in Iran, Syria, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia to use a hypocritical anti-Zionism as an excuse not to enact political and economic reforms.

Creation of International Political Consensus

Third, we need to internationalize our foreign policy in the Middle East. Following this strategy would have many benefits. It would first and foremost create a policy in the region that reflects a wide international consensus. At one level, giving the United Nations, the European Union, and the Arab League, just to name three major institutions, greater voice in the formulation of United States policy in the Middle East might complicate American efforts to bring about change in the region because it would increase the number of political actors that would need to be consulted in making political decisions in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East. However, at another level, it would greatly simplify the United States' tasks. Having to take seriously views to which we may have only given lip service in the past would require a more nuanced and sophisticated foreign policy. Making the necessary concessions to internationalize American efforts in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East might yield the type of international consensus that, in the end, would make the achievement of a democratic Middle East easier by reducing the hostility that exists in many elite and educated circles toward any initiative that originates with the United States. Militarily, an internationalized foreign policy would reduce the pressures on United States forces in the region through the manpower and financial contributions made by other nations to peacekeeping missions in the region.

Development of International Economic Policy

Fourth, the United States needs to develop a more open and internationally oriented economic policy in the Middle East that does not merely privilege American firms and business interests. The most egregious example of this policy can be found in Iraq, where contracts were awarded, sometimes without competitive bidding, to large firms that had close ties to the Bush administration. As with the argument that an internationalization of our diplomatic and military efforts in the Middle East might weaken our influence in the Middle East, it could also be argued that opening economic opportunities to non-American firms might negatively affect our ability to expand our trade and economic influence in the region. However, creating a more stable political environment in the Middle East, one that could be expected to emerge with a reduced United States political, military, and economic profile in the

region, would actually benefit American firms due to the dramatic increase in business activity that would result from such stability.

As the *Arab Human Development Report* recently indicated, the Middle East, especially the Arab world, suffers from a serious lack of integration into the global information technology revolution.⁴ Only eighteen persons per 1,000 in the Arab world own or have access to a computer, while only 1.6 percent of the Arab world's population has Internet access. The publication of books in the Arab world is only 1.1 percent of the world average while the number of translated books is only 4.4 per million. These statistics compare unfavorably with most other regions of the world. While the argument that an expansion of trade necessarily brings democratic politics in its wake is often facile, there is no question that expanded commercial activity among the Arab world, the larger Middle East, and the West will foster liberalization in the region. If the level of hostility toward the United States in the Middle East—a level that many observers say is unprecedented at present—does not decrease in the coming decade, this could severely hamper the ability of American firms to benefit from trade and investment in the region.

Initiate People-to-People Exchanges

As a final principle, the United States needs to engage in a major public relations effort to convince the peoples of the Middle East that it does not oppose their aspirations for development and that it does not conform to many of the stereotypes in the region as a “godless” and morally lax country. While an attempt to engage in a major public-relations campaign, the “Shared Values” initiative, was begun by the State Department's Office of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, this effort was not successful and the director, the undersecretary for public diplomacy and a former advertising executive, Charlotte Beers, resigned in 2003. This project sought to produce television spots for Arab television, many of which were subsequently banned by local governments.

What I am suggesting is a more dynamic program in which intellectuals and political, religious, and business leaders would actually be brought to the United States from the Middle East to tour a wide variety of American public and private institutions. Similarly, large numbers of American counterparts would visit Arab and other countries of the region to participate in “town meetings” where intercultural contact could be facilitated. A dramatic initiative such as this, one that would go well beyond the electronic media, would provide the type of direct, face-to-face contact between Americans and Middle Easterners that speaks to Middle Eastern cultural norms and that would work to undermine mistrust and stereotypes.

RECOGNIZING AMERICA'S NEED TO CHANGE

In sum, the United States needs to transcend the implicit arrogance in a foreign policy that calls on others, namely those in the Middle East, to change but does not recognize this country's need to change as well. This is not a call for national self-flagellation or mea culpa, but rather an admission that our foreign policy in the Middle East has had its beneficial side but has also been based on flawed principles and assumptions. Just as the Iraqis, who watched American forces defeat Saddam's army, were reluctant to nail their flag to the U.S. mast, given our failure to support their 1991 intifada or uprising against Saddam Hussein's regime, so many Middle Easterners are going to be reluctant to become actively involved in processes of democratic transitions if they are not first convinced that the United States is committed to such transitions. If the concept of domino democracy has any meaning at all, it starts at home with the fundamental restructuring of United States foreign policy in the Middle East. The United States' own example can provide the best stimulus for positive change in the region.

NOTES

1. Legislation has been introduced in the House and in the Senate called the Syrian Accountability Act, by Senators Barbara Boxer (D-California) and Rick Santorum (R-Pennsylvania) as S. 2215, and in the House by former Representative Dick Armey (R-Texas) and Representative Eliot Engel (D-New York), H.R. 4483. This legislation would impose sanctions on Syria until the president certifies that Syria has ceased its support for terrorist groups, has withdrawn its forces from Lebanon, has halted its development of missiles and biological and chemical weapons, and is in compliance with the United Nations resolutions concerning Iraq. The proposed legislation would impose the following sanctions: (1) a ban on military and dual-use technology exports to Syria; (2) a ban on any financial assistance to United States businesses for their investments or other activities in Syria; and (3) two additional sanctions that the president must impose from a menu of six, including a ban on United States exports to Syria, a ban on United States business investment in Syria, downgrading the U.S. diplomatic representation to Syria (at present, there is an American ambassador), travel restrictions on Syrian diplomats in the United States, and others.

2. Actually, Hafiz al-Asad wanted his eldest son, Basil, who was killed in an automobile accident in 1994, to assume the presidency. Like his father, Basil had a reputation for authoritarianism and corruption.

3. See, most recently, the poll sponsored by the James A. Baker II Institute for Public Policy at Rice University, and the International Crisis Group in Washington, D.C.: "Survey: Majority of Israelis and Palestinians Support Peace Proposal," www.crisisweb.org, November 24, 2003.

4. See "Executive Summary," *Arab Human Development Report*, www.undp.org/rbas/ahdr, 3-4.

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