

**Can the US promote democracy  
in the Middle East?**

**WASHINGTON** – American military commanders in Iraq have been saying for some time that the insurgency cannot be won by military means alone. The U.S. military knows that there are limits to its capacity to counter, let alone destroy, the asymmetrical capabilities of the insurgents there. The alarming increase in the level of violence over the past month confirms their assessment.

Victory in Iraq will be achieved only when we will have created conditions whereby the incentives to recruit, be recruited and act in the insurgency will disappear. Victory will take place only when the insurgents see that their cause is either hopeless or totally wrong.

This would entail an ideological shift, a true conversion on the part of a critical mass of insurgents to the principles of secular democracy, tolerance and respect for individual liberties. Without such conversion, the ideological incentive to carry on the attacks will continue to brew and there will be no victory, as the United States and its allies clearly lack the means to identify and destroy all the insurgents and their rather large recruiting systems.

Victory should be defined as the prevailing of the ideas underlying U.S. efforts and the end of violence.

This should not be confused with the possible successful disengagement of the U.S. military from Iraq, predicated on the build-up of capable Iraqi forces that can somehow fill the void left by departing American troops. Leaving the Iraqi military in charge of an ongoing, potentially endless, fight may be politically beneficial in the U.S. domestic context replete with demands to bring the troops home. But this would not be victory. Instead of becoming a keystone of a new stable Middle East, Iraq would then be another factor of regional instability, a magnet for radicals. This would be worse than under Saddam Hussein's regime.

The United States and its allies won the Cold War because America's ability to resist Soviet military encroachments and propaganda lasted long enough to expose to a sufficient number of people living under Soviet rule the fissures, evil and rot of the system. The United States was also lucky in having at an appropriate time an unaware ally in last Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. By trying to improve a police state, he exposed its weaknesses and hastened its demise. In that contest, the West, because of its intellectual and material superiority, prevailed. But the critical factor that condemned those regimes was the open exposure of the disastrous failures of communism to the people living under it. In the end, the inability of the communist leaderships to mount a fight to defend their regimes deprived them of any residual legitimacy.

In the case of Islamic fundamentalism, we do not have on our side the record of half a century of failures of regimes; that is egregious examples that can give ammunition to moderate Muslims to speak against the ideological insanity of such social and political models. An insanity based on a demonized view of politics that is predicated – among other things – on the destruction of the alleged enemies of the true faith: the United States, its allies and its agents, such as Israel.

Since the 1980s, a theocracy has been ruling Iran. But it is a theocracy that can lubricate its otherwise inefficient mechanisms with a massive oil rent, something that shields it from the full political consequences that bad models usually provoke. The Taliban in Afghanistan provided a chilling example of what damage institutionalized fanaticism can bring about. But it was an isolated regime in an impoverished country that did not last long enough to be used as a paradigm of what will go wrong, once radical Islamist factions have a chance to govern.

The U.S. political leadership wants to end the conflict with radical Islam through political means, by pushing forward the democratization agenda, not just in Iraq and Afghanistan, but in the whole Middle East. The underlying rationale for these policies is that extreme ideologies proliferate and find adepts because those societies never had a "normal" political process based on the peaceful, open debate of ideas. Repression, authoritarianism and brutality breed factions and fanatical political movements that contemplate only violence as a means to end existing injustice.

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Open up the systems, proclaims the Bush administration, create the infrastructure for viable democracies and, over time, you will create a legitimate, disciplined forum for policy debates. In time, this process should yield the emergence and consolidation of peaceful societies. However, there are two major flaws in this reasoning that need to be addressed for this approach to have a fighting chance of ultimate success.

First, there is an inherent danger in trying to force feed this principle to people who may not be ready for it. To justify the global promotion of democracy as a "mission" somehow entrusted to America by the Almighty authorizes any paranoid reaction against this concept on the part of those who want their institutions to be based on their own religiously inspired principles.

To the extent that America, in the words of the president, claims some kind of transcendental justification for its policies, this will run counter to the goal of promoting secular democracies based on tolerance and respect for all beliefs.

Therefore this notion of 'a mission' creates an inevitable collision with those who already portray the United States in ideologically distorted form. "Who are these Americans who go around preaching and telling others what they should do"? It is this strong veneer of righteousness at the core of U.S. policies that is the primary cause of such vocal opposition to them on the part of the European allies and world opinion.

Second, we have to understand and deal with the complexities that this process entails. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice correctly affirms that, even if the outcome of recent elections in the Middle East is disappointing, this should not undermine the validity of the assumption underlying the promotion of democracy.

It may be right to embrace democracy building as the ultimate means to undermine the legitimacy of political violence as the answer to the problems of Islamic societies in transition. However, this also means that the United States for an indefinite period of time will require both the means and the will to deal with the consequences of instability in the countries where we are promoting change; including radical movements elected to power with the blessing of the voters.

Does America have the stomach and the willingness to commit resources to deal effectively with Hamas in Palestine, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, a Shiite majority government in a violence-torn Iraq and who knows what else? Will the American people have the staying power to help turn radical, non democratic, movements into responsible political forces? This administration has only two-and-a-half years left.

This enormously ambitious and complex policy has value only if the American people as a whole fully understand it and if they are unequivocally committed to it and embrace it for the long term. Thus, no matter who wins the mid-term elections in November and whoever is elected president in 2008 will have to show the world that they really believe in this policy and that they will stay the course.

Otherwise "democracy promotion" will have amounted to an unsustainable, if visionary, grand strategy, discarded by President Bush's successors because it is too costly and too complicated. The threat of terrorism will continue to be with us, as its root causes will not have been dealt with. At the same time, America's perceived righteousness will have alienated its prestige and ability to lead. That would be a disappointing prospect to contemplate.

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